

Final submission for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Creative Writing (MACW)

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This document consists of two (2) parts:

<b>Part A:</b> Thesis (Creative Work)	page ii
<b>Part B:</b> Portfolio	page 68

# **PART A: THESIS**

## **Red and Other Short Stories**

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# Contents

The Thoughts .....	1
Ogre.....	2
The Prophet .....	6
The Mercenary .....	10
The Teacher .....	24
Frankie .....	27
The Other Father .....	31
The Proper Patch.....	36
Red .....	43
The Mistakes .....	65

## **The Thoughts**

*The thoughts appeared that winter. They clung to the ceiling and the windows, like sticky velcro balloons. They attached to everything. They felt furry, like the hairs on the back of my neck. They didn't do much but get in the way, float around, and stick to things.*

(To be continued...)

## Ogre

Daddy always used to say two things to me. The first was “My daughter, I’ll come back for you.” He said this whenever he went away. Whenever he’d go to work in the rice fields and leave me with Aunt Miko. And those other times too, just before he’d go with the other children, leave me with my toys.

I wanted to go with them, asked him if I could, but he never let me. Only them. He took them by the hand, down the passage and to the door that I’m not allowed to open. There were many other children. Brown and white, boys and girls, all different, but the rest was the same.

He would bring them to our house, the one right at the end of the village, and let me talk with them. I would play with them, eat soup with them. And then he would kiss my cheek and say “I’ll come back for you”, before leading my friend off to that room. I would wait patiently, sometimes for hours, but Daddy always kept his word. Those friends didn’t come back, but Daddy always did.

The second thing that Daddy said to me would always come afterward. He would come from that room, back to where I was waiting, and lie down next to me. I would stop playing with my toys, and I would let him rest his head on my lap. And then, he would start crying.

It was always the same. He would cry like a great, big baby, and I would feel so sad for him. Would want to take care of him, like a mother, because I don’t think Daddy ever had a mother, and I don’t think I did either. So I would stroke his hair and let him dry his tears on my dress. He always liked that. And then he would say that thing. “So sweet”, he would say, and then “I’ll save you.” Over and over, “So sweet, so sweet. I’ll save you, I’ll save you.”

I think I would make a good mother, because afterwards, Daddy would always stop crying. He would get up, smile at me, and go to bed. I liked these times, because I could stay up as long as I liked afterwards. It made me feel like an adult, and it made me so proud to cheer him up. I am only nine now, but I am sure I would make a good mother.

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I haven’t seen Daddy for over a week now, not since everyone came to take him away. They left their work in the fields and came to our house. You know it’s our house because it’s the one right at the end of the village, just at the edge of the woods.

They came in looking for Daddy, found him asleep in his bed. They came in looking for their children, found something in the room I’m not allowed to open. I told them that they weren’t allowed, that only Daddy could go in there, but they went in anyway. They didn’t even let me see what was inside.

I don't know what they found in there, but they were very angry after that. Dragged Daddy out of his bed, all the way to the front door. Didn't stop even though I cried and cried. But Daddy said it was okay. Before they took him away, he got to kiss my cheek, smiled and said "My daughter, I will come back for you". Then there was a lot of shouting. And then, they took me to stay with Aunt Miko.

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They say that Daddy is back. They say that he is in our house, the one at the end of the village, but they won't let me go and see him. Aunt Miko keeps me inside most of the time, never lets me out of her sight. She looks worried; they all do. Sometimes people come to visit, to bring rice for Miko and me, and I ask them what's wrong.

They tell me that Daddy is a *youkai*, an *Oni*. That he came back because he was still hungry. I don't know what those words mean, but I ask them where he came back from. Weren't they the ones who took him? And what's wrong with being hungry? They never answer those questions, just whisper and leave and go off to hang more charms. Little wooden statues of Buddah, thick sticks of incense, white pieces of paper with prayers written on them. There are a lot around my house. I can see them from Aunt Miko's place, flapping in the breeze.

Sometimes I ask her why she won't let me leave. She says it's because Daddy might hurt me. I tell her that's silly. I know what Daddy said to me, and I tell her. I know that all he wants is my company. Daddy can be a great, big baby, I tell her. He is probably very sad right now. He probably needs me.

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I am going to see Daddy. I waited until Aunt Miko was asleep, and then jumped out the window, ran all the way back to my house. I'm not wearing shoes, so I don't make any noise, just the swishing of my dress as I run. It's very quiet now and everything is very dark, but that's alright. I know the way back to my house. It's the one at the end of the village, at the edge of the woods.

I have gone inside now, past the flapping pieces of paper with prayers on them, past the many eyes of Buddah that watch me. The house is dark inside and everything smells of incense. It is a nice smell, and I wonder if Daddy likes it too. I decide that I will ask him when I see him, and I hurry down the passage to where I know I will find him. The room I was never allowed into is open now, just a little, and I can see candlelight coming from inside.

I stop, wonder if I'll be scolded. But then I decide, no, it's already open and he definitely wants to see me. So I straighten my dress and slide the door all the way. At the end of the room, sitting cross-legged next to a candle, Daddy is waiting for me.

It is a nice room, very clean. Very simple too, no incense or little statues. Just a single candle and a straw mat with a table on it. A single plate, a bowl, a pair of chopsticks. Daddy sits across the

table from me, but his hands look too big to use any of these things. All of him is bigger now, lumpier, especially his belly. A fat, round pot. It looks very soft.

His skin is all red too, though maybe that's just the candlelight. I don't know why my Daddy looks like this now, but his face is still the same. He is smiling at me, and his cheeks are quivering and it looks like he might cry. He is a great, big baby and all I want is to cheer him up. "My daughter" he says, "I came back for you."

I move to sit across from him, respectful, still afraid I might be scolded. But he smiles again, pats the ground beside him. His hands are so big now. I cross the room and sit cross-legged, let him lay his head on my lap. "Where did you go, Daddy?" I ask him. He doesn't answer. His head is so heavy across my legs, but I do not move. "Why do you look like this, Daddy? What did they do to you?" Still, he does not answer, but now I can hear him crying.

I stroke his hair, do my best to comfort him. "They put a lot of incense in our house," I try, "do you like it?" He doesn't reply, but he turns his head up to look at me and I see that he is smiling, crying tears of joy. In that moment, I am so proud to be his daughter. "So sweet", he says, and I keep stroking his hair. Happy. Content. "So sweet" he says, as he kisses my thigh, "I saved you for last."

*The thoughts hung from the ceiling, bunched together like grapes. Occasionally one swelled and its weight sent it plopping down, squelching on the floor tiles. One rolled under my bed. I considered retrieving it, but didn't fancy it sticking to my fingers. As long as they didn't get in the way, I decided.*



## The Prophet

As usual, his stench precedes him. It wafts up from outside, through my open window and into my bedroom. It is that smell I hate most of all. Though he hounds and humiliates me, though his words writhe in my ears, it is the smell that I cannot escape. It stinks of poverty. It stinks of death. It stinks of my mistakes. It's getting stronger now, and in a moment, the screaming will start.

It never really stopped, not truly, not since the day the prophet first appeared in town. In *my town*. His stench pervaded the plaza, yet the people did not flee. He smelled like them, as filthy and indigent as the rest of the peasantry. Not as compliant though. Not as fearful. He began to rally them against me, calling into question my virtue, my piety. A pig he called me, a gluttonous tyrant. Though few listened to him then, this slander could not be allowed. I resolved to make an example of the prophet.

He was put in stocks and beaten, punished in the town square. Not once did he cease to decry me, the whip cracks across his back a sharp punctuation to his preaching. "The truth cannot be killed", he cried to the assembled crowd. Though the flagellation could not silence him, the punishment was deemed sufficient and he was released, sent dripping and gibbering into the streets. I had thought the matter resolved, but that night, the punishment stocks were taken, ripped from their posts in the town square.

The prophet reappeared the very next day, wearing them about his neck. His head bowed beneath the weight. Though the burden bent his spine, he bore it willingly, and the common folk took notice. Again, he told them of my sins. He told them of God's great plan for them, and of His punishment for me. With the cuts on his back still weeping, he led a protest through the streets, the people's cries reaching all the way to the windows of my residence. I called for my enforcers, and my torturers.

Once the rabble had been quelled, the prophet was once more brought before them, shackled and bound. Not wishing to make a martyr of him, I instead had his eyes put out; a fitting punishment for one who claimed to see the truth. It drew a crowd, the mob as easily placated by bloodshed as they were by promises. They gasped to see the jellied orbs plucked free, threaded together and strung about the prophet's neck. They laughed as he was released, kicked and prodded to wander blind across the cobblestones. Yet still, he would not be silenced; his howls merely blended with the sound of his sermons. As I watched, people peeled off from the crowd and began to follow him.

He returned a week later, holding his eyes in his hands. He swung them this way and that, thrust them into peoples' faces. He still carried the stocks, the wounds across his back left untreated, yet the weeping sores were not enough to deter the faithful. A ragged band followed him, masochists and flagellants, impressed by his inhuman endurance. Seeking to be like him, they

trailed in his wake, whipping the flesh off their own shoulders, echoing his accusations. And yet, none helped to guide the prophet. Though he bore no blind man's cane, he walked always at the front of his flock.

I decided then that he had to die. He and his hideous band had taken to persecuting me more directly, gathering as close to my residence as they dared. At all hours of the day, mingled shrieks and scriptures writhed in my ears, the air outside thick with the smell of blood. I had begun to lose sleep, lose focus. People complained that the prophet was bad for business, powerful people, demanding that I do something.

I could not be seen to persecute him further, as suffering only gained him followers, and so gold was my weapon of choice, moving the sweaty palms of the indigent against him. Plucked from whatever hovel he slept in, they drowned the prophet in the town channel, amid the trash and shit disposed of down there. With the stocks still heavy on his back, I am told he sank easily.

A week passed without incident and eventually, calm returned to the town. A blessing, for all had been affected by the prophet's blight, their affairs disrupted by his rabble rousing, yet their ire had turned on me. I resolved then to host a lavish dinner at my residence, a party, as much to soothe my ragged nerves as to assuage my allies. Make a display of my opulence and a tacit promise that the problem had been resolved. Wealth and power. The church and the merchants valued such things, as did I, at least back then. And so delicacies were spread and guards were posted. Wigs were powdered and wine oozed between the pursed lips of my patrons, down their chalk-white faces. The evening progressed perfectly and for a time, I believed I was free.

And then that stench crawled back into my nostrils, just as its bearer had surely crawled free from the channel. With his wounds infected from the filth, the smell was beyond description. Guests retched across the canapés. Guards scattered before the sight that lurched into the banquet hall. Dripping, waterlogged, he raised his bloated hands to the heavens and declared my sins for all to hear. The cost of my title. What I had taken from the faith, and what I had taken from my father.

How he knew these things, I cannot say, nor how he survived. I know only that I called for my enforcers, and had the prophet hacked to pieces on the spot. As my guests fled in revulsion, the prophet's parts were disposed of in the pig pens.

I was disgraced, decried by all. The clergy deemed me cursed, began to petition higher authorities for my removal. Worse, the townsfolk became uncontrollable. Despite the prophet's destruction, sightings of his resurrection from the river had inspired an uprising. Amid whispers of the immortal holy man, the word "usurper" was on every pair of lips.

The flagellants, zealous followers of the prophet, marshalled the common folk against me, guided their fury with whip crack and holy word alike. My enforcers and torturers were no

deterrent and soon, the defections began. I was left with little choice but to sequester myself in my study and await the inevitable.

My most loyal manservant abandoned me today. Before he left, he told me that the prophet had returned. That his form was both terrible and glorious, a testament made manifest. I asked him what he meant, pressed him for details, but he told me only that soon, I would see it for myself. I begged him to stay but he departed soon after, left me to begin the process of barricading the doors.

Hours have passed since then and I am alone, waiting for what, I do not know. Though of course, I do. Whether out of repentance or simple fear, I write this account. Perhaps it will bring me peace. Perhaps I simply want someone to know what happened. Either way, time is short. The sun sinks along with my hopes and already, a foul odour is carried on the breeze.

As usual, the prophet's stench precedes him, though now there is more. A shuffling, as of many objects rolling across the cobblestones. A gurgling, rasping, the first utterances of a split-tongue sermon. I know that in a moment, the screaming will begin, but it is slower this time. It struggles, the flesh gradually gathered into a shape that can form words. I will not hear it, do not intend to wait.

I know now that the truth cannot be killed. Even so, I won't confront it. I do not want to hear. Do not want to see. Do not want to *smell*. I find the straight razor, lying ready upon my table. Test its sharpness against my thumb. There is not much time left, but one question remains. Where should I start?

*I stumbled over them in the night. They lay right in the middle of the floor, blending in with the shadows. The big ones were certainly a nuisance, but the little ones I hated most – too small to notice until I tripped over them. They would squish messily between my toes, or pop under my hands as I grabbed furniture for support.*

## The Mercenary

The taking of a life in trade is something I am well familiar with. I understand it. This manhunt, this group of strangers – we are tools, hands to act in another's stead. If we are slaughtered, it is of no consequence. Our employer's coffers are plentiful, and villains like us are equally so. This I know from the many rubies which he spread before us, and from the fact that we are being sent to kill our own kind.

We are to suppress the brigands that have invaded his lands, led by a man supposedly as strange as he is dangerous. Reports are sparse, as those who encounter the bandits are rarely left alive. Survivors speak of a monster, a towering freak who eats his victims. A few members of our party paled at this description, but I am unconcerned. Whatever savage these woodlands hold, my blades and bombs will make quick work of it.

What concerns me more is how little our employer has told us of the problem, how willing he is to pay. An assassination mission, this is what he claims. It is why only six of us have been hired, so as not to draw unwanted attention. Still, no amount of coin can quiet my doubts.

Villain that I am, I would not accept such a task were it not for my father. His passing compels me to seek glory for his memory and riches for his burial. That is my people's way, we of the heavy axe and flaming powders. Of the long chains that bind us to our marks, and bind our spirits together thereafter. That is what I have been taught and that is how I shall abide. My father's teachings have kept me alive thus far.

I will not drink with the others, not tonight, though I have been invited. Not with them dressed as they are, unarmed and unarmoured. That is not who they truly are, and they know that as well as I. Tomorrow, when we carry packs and steel, then I shall meet them in earnest. And once our contract is complete, I will drink with those who still live.

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By daylight, as we gather at the edge of town, I see the true shapes and faces of my companions. Colder. Heavier. Wrapped in the iron that is both our protection and our profession. That is all we have in common, for they are as strange and lethal a group as I have ever seen.

The archer catches my eye first, for her weapon is a powerful one, a heavy crossbow which she hoists with both hands. She is strong, that much is clear, her full-body garb only confirming this. It is unusual to see a woman in plate mail, doubly so, in this line of work. But that is of no consequence. She names herself as Bertilda, and I accept her. So long as she knows how to shoot.

Her partner, Berrick, stands close at hand. He is clad in the same thick armour, but brandishes a mace instead. He stinks of whiskey, his scarred face and heavy steps betraying a military

background. Doubtless where he found his habit. The strength of his grip tells me that he is used to giving orders. The look in his eyes tells me that he doubts us all. I share his cynicism, pray that he will be sober enough to swing his weapon.

Tobias leads our party, the only one beside myself to not visit the tavern last night. While he carries a pistol and a baton, his real weapon is the great beast which accompanies him. A mastiff the size of a young ox, the war dog is more heavily armoured than its owner. Tobias himself has the look of an enforcer. Inscrutable beneath a thick beard, he says very little but watches everything. I am certain that our employer sent this pair to monitor our progress, and correct it if necessary.

Our fourth member introduces himself as Serav, offers me a limp hand from beneath the folds of his crimson robe. I take it reluctantly. The presence of a mage among us is unsettling, the stink of sorcery wafting off him unmistakeable, though he tries to hide it with strong perfume. Still I smell the blood, the coppery tang of the things he has killed to buy his powers. His robe hides much, but I mark well what of his gear I can see; discern pouches and small, wooden cages, the inevitable curved dagger strapped to his belt, carried by all of his kind. More than our mission, this man puts me on guard. Though I am forced to work with him, I refuse to trust him.

Last of all is Jesselin, rising late from her downy nest at the inn. So ornate is her leather suit that I would have thought her a noble, were it not for the obvious signs of wear: inexpert stitching here and there, mismatched patches and faded fabrics. The smell of upturned earth clings to her, laced with lavender soap from the inn. I suspect that these are the only clothes she owns, though I note the dozens of knives strung about her waist and over her shoulders, yet more tools secreted in the folds of the great cloak she wears. She greets me easily enough, but I am unsure what to make of her. Weathered as they are, her vestiges of luxury offend me. Yet her smile is thin and her grip is strong, and these things give me faith.

The others ask of the canisters and sachets I carry, about the long chain wrapped around my arm, the sharp hook at its end. They have never seen such tools, and so I tell them that they are the weapons of my country. It is the simplest answer, and we haven't the time for stories. I sense other questions as well, the ones they do not speak aloud. Of my dark skin and dark eyes. Of the scars upon my face, inflicted not by battle, but by ritual. Though I wait, the words never reach their lips, my companions asking only my name instead. I give them the one that I have chosen for this mission.

It is two days' ride to the edge of the woods. Our maps will take us that far, but from there, the beast's nose will be our guide. The forest is dense, and so we are to leave our horses with a man who will be waiting for us. Then we will be on foot, and our hunt will be in earnest.

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It is the second day of our quest and as yet, there has been no cause for killing. On route we spoke to those travellers and villagers we encountered, pressed them for information. All had heard of the bandit threat, most had lost a friend or loved one to their blades, or bullets. The latter was useful to know; our employer had not informed us that the enemy possessed firearms. We must now change our tactics, be ready to kill those who wield pistols or muskets first. Never give them a clean shot, never give them time to reload.

Serav seemed unnerved by this revelation, babbled something about the fragility of his garments, the need for others to protect him. His magics can stifle archers and deaden sword blows, as my people well know, but is fruitless against the sulphur and fire of the fusiliers. This is why his kind have become a rarity, gunned down by the inevitable advance of the metalworks, the furnace craft of foreigners. Ever hungry, it is a steel-toothed mouth that devoured its birthplace, swallowed the sea in search of more to eat. I could tell Serav that I understand, tell him that those same teeth chewed up my homeland as surely as his, but it would be a lie. Should bullets shred every mage under the sun, I would not mourn.

As for news of the bandit leader, all had a different story. Some spoke of a man small and feral, with fangs like knives, while others claimed that he was lumbering and brutish, greater in size than the tallest men. None could agree, save to say that the bandits are merciless, that they mutilate their victims. They attack at night, leaving no soul alive and no body whole.

Berrick, clearly a man of the people, vowed on the honour of his regiment to slay the creature. He brandished his shield, showed the emblazoned insignia to all who would look. Many were grateful. Some even wept. That Berrick should bask in the adoration of the indigent is unsightly. It betrays his true nature as a glory-seeker, one doomed to die, and die foolishly. I spared them this truth. Let them harvest what little hope they can, let him give them that. It is rare to see a mercenary give a man anything.

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It is the eve of our third day and we have made it to the edge of the forest, set up camp and chosen the order of our sentry shifts. Berrick and Bertilda will take first watch. Their plate mail and heavy weaponry should deter any opportunistic attackers. Once in the forest, I fear such weighty equipment will prove a liability, but for now, I am glad of their protection. Tobias and his beast will guard us through the witching hours, and I will rise before first light.

As the sun crawls its way down, makes its nightly voyage to the underworld, we sit around the fire. Bertilda hums as she re-strings her crossbow. Berrick warms his blood with whiskey, courage for the night, it trickles down his chin. Tobias offers more words to his dog than to us, feeds it strips of dried meat while we are given mere scraps of syllables. Grunts and barks. I do not begrudge him this. Like me, he is wise not to make friends among mercenaries. Unlike him, I save my rations for myself.

Serav, cur that he is, will not join us. He sits some distance off, wrings the necks of the rats he has brought in a box with him. He chants all the while, offers their blood to the heathen gods that infuse his fingers with curses. Where he will find fresh sacrifices once the rats have run out is a question that passes wordlessly among us all. We are glad to see that he does not approach once his ritual ends. Simply rolls in his blanket and curls off to sleep.

I had hoped our evening to be blessedly without conversation, but Jesselin coaxes words from me. She tells me that she was nobility once; that she took up bounty hunting for the excitement. By way of proof, she shows me the many treasures which adorn her ears and fingers. Jewels that sparkle in stark contrast to her motley garb. Gifted or inherited, earned in our trade or robbed from the dead, I do not care. I tell her that only a fool would leave behind a royal's luxury willingly, and she must be a great one indeed to bring her riches into battle.

She laughs and spins a dagger on her fingertip, asks if opulence offends me. If some loathing of gold is why I wear rough leathers and wield brutal tools, or if my people are simply savages. On another night, in another place, such an insult would be cause for bloodshed, but not now. Arrogance merely draws death closer to a man, or a woman, tells it where and how to find you. It will find her too, in time, so I need not waste my blade, or my words. I do not tell her of my craft, or of my origin, only that ugliness is a more effective defence in the wild than beauty, before bidding her a good night.

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Our employer's man arrived shortly after my watch ended, to collect the horses we were loaned for the journey. A time and place were agreed upon to rendezvous; a week from now, we will meet here to collect our rides and rewards alike. He departed soon after, leaving us with a crate of supplies. As we broke camp, we took inventory.

Our provisions should last for little more than a week. Dried fruit and nuts. Salted bread and hard cheese. Strips of some desiccated meat I cannot identify. Jesselin complained bitterly over the standard of our victuals, but they will sustain us. What concerns me more is what we will hunt should they run out. The woods here are strange, unnatural. Their shapes are twisted in a fashion that I have only seen where mages have been at work. In places where the earth is poisoned. What game we find may well be worse than starvation.

Our other supplies are sparse, but essential. Thick rope and shovels. Rough tools to hack our way past obstacles. A sack of medical equipment, with little more than coarse thread and bandages, bottles of spirits to disinfect wounds and dull the pain. The scars which lace my body remember their sting well.

As we set out in search of our quarry, I offer a prayer to my father and the spirits of those who came before me. I pray for their strength, for it to fill my heart and guide my hands, mutter the words beneath my breath as we walk. A parting in the foliage beckons, the mouth of a tomb, and



I ask one more thing. That it will be the tomb of my enemies, but if it is to be mine as well, that my people lift me free of its branches, not let my spirit remain trapped among the trees.

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We encountered the first of the bandits just before nightfall, as we were setting up camp. Ten of them, all told, though their numbers meant nothing. They are unaccustomed to prey which fights back, for they were clumsy, brutish in their tactics.

Tobias' war dog sensed their approach even before they charged at us, crashed their way through the undergrowth. Six men with crude blades, more butcher knives than swords, and another four with short bows. The quartet did not last long. The hound was among them in moments, tearing at their legs, while its master picked one off with pistol fire. Jesselin's throwing knives did the rest, cut them down quicker than they could knock arrows.

The other six broke against Berrick and Bertilda's plate mail, their weapons barely making a dent in the thick armour. Despite this, they fought with a ferocity I have not seen in brigands, and their blades slipped between the sheets of metal. Serav's spells arrested their limbs before our companions could be overwhelmed, the stench of magic suffusing the air as our foes were gripped by invisible hands. One tried to flee, but my chain ensnared his legs and dragged him back.

We tried to torture him for information. Jesselin's blades were put to deft purpose on his belly, but he simply babbled, screamed with laughter. He claimed that he did not fear death, spouted nonsense about divine vengeance, a glorious rebirth for him and his fellows. Perhaps we face not raiders, but a cult of some kind? Regardless, when it became clear that he would tell us nothing of our target, we gave him to Serav.

While Berrick and Bertilda's wounds were bandaged, the mage slit our prisoner's throat, cupped the blood in his hands and took to chanting. I refused to watch more than that. Helped the others gather the bodies so they could be dumped beyond the perimeter of our camp.

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As we picked over the bodies for valuables, Tobias noted their appearance. Though dressed in little more than rough leathers, they all wore bones. Crude helmets fashioned from the skulls of animals; deer, horse, cow and pig. Necklaces of teeth, bracelets of finger bones.

Bertilda seemed disturbed by our encounter, unsettled to find that men should don the remains of the dead so willingly. A ridiculous anxiety for a soldier to harbour, though it troubles me more to find that my companions share it. I thought to tell them of the hill tribes of my homeland, those that my people have fought since before I was born. Their warriors also bear trinkets fashioned from the dead, believe that a fighter's strength can be preserved in his parts, recaptured if worn. I

decided against it, for it would give them no comfort, nor would they understand. Likely it would only make them distrustful, suspect me of similar savagery.

Jesselin could tell that I was troubled, needled me with questions, though I did not confide in her. Did not share that what disturbed me was not what our foes wore, but how they fought. Poorly armed, so courageous as to be stupid. Yet theirs was the strength of desperation, a zeal verging on madness. Only in slaves and fanatics have I seen this before, those who fear punishment and those who welcome death. What master's lash could be more terrible than the end we bring?

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I have taken an earlier watch than the one given to me, relieved Tobias and his beast of sentry duty. He was glad of it though truly, I could not sleep. I am haunted by the same dream that has plagued me since I accepted this contract, my father's face in a lake of muck, swimming up to meet me.

He tells me that he has woken up to warn me. That he cannot help me. That where I go, even the spirits of our people cannot help me. I ask him why, beg him to stay, but his head tilts back into the mud. The gash across his throat gapes at me, a ragged mouth where none should be, yawning before swallowing swamp water.

I hear Jesselin stir nearby, feel her eyes on me where I sit. A mad thought occurs to me and I think of joining her, speaking with her. The comfort of human speech in the night. Of sharing with someone, anyone, the truth of what frightens me. I do not indulge the idea for more than a moment, make no move to abandon my watch, and after a short time, I hear the sounds of her sleeping. So I wait, and below my breath, I pray.

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We pressed deeper into the woods soon after daybreak, discovered a trail that will lead us to our target. Tobias' hound sniffed out a track of well-trodden earth, a strip of clarity amid the tangle of the forest. This must be the route used by the brigands, for no sane man would conduct trade out here. It is fortunate that we found it, for I fear that even my skills would not serve me in this place. The canopy is impenetrable, casting our journey in a perpetual twilight. Serav babbles ceaselessly about the aura of this place, and any attempt at merriment made by the others quickly withers in the gloom. My people taught me to track beasts and men alike, but here I feel as though the forest itself is a predator.

My suspicions of sorcery have only deepened with our progress, every new mile revealing that the life here is unnatural. Mushrooms of such size I have never seen before, big as a man's head, yet they are everywhere, dotting tree trunks and swarming across rocks. They glow faintly blue, like stars in the murk, or hundreds of eyes to mark our passing. Even the vegetation seems

warped, wrapped around itself, entwined in incestuous patterns. What birds or rodents we have glimpsed since our arrival were all starved, sickly in their aspect.

The bandit leader we hunt must surely be a magician, for something drains the life from this place. That must be why our employer saw fit to hire Serav. One heathen sent to kill another. I am glad of my own tools, the bombs which adorn my bandolier, canisters of fire and shrapnel. These things are death to a mage, as they are to any other man. Should our enemy be what I fear, I will have need of them, and should Serav prove treacherous, my need will be greater still.

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It is the eve of our third day in these woods, and already we have suffered another attack. Fewer men this time, but better trained, they struck with nightfall. Gunmen in the trees, faces shrouded by hoods, they wore the skulls of large birds, squatted like vultures. Only the war hound saved us from complete ambush, for even I did not detect their presence before one of our number was dead.

Bullets found Bertilda's neck, tore the song she hummed from her throat. Serav was luckier, merely struck in the shoulder. I watched as Berrick fell to his knees, dropped his weapons and howled at the sky. I saw the craven mage begin to panic, crawl on all fours to cower in the undergrowth.

Though our group was thrown into disarray, the rest of us rallied after that first volley. Pistol fire and throwing knives found their marks, and my chains dragged our enemies down from where they perched, down to where my axe could meet them.

Others appeared moments after, only three men but more formidable than the last. Brutes in black leather, they wielded bull whips and heavy blades, bore the skulls of beasts upon their heads and shoulders. I hurled a bomb into their group, sent blazing shards to tear their flesh, but they were undeterred. Though parts of them hung in tatters, entrails pulled from beneath their armour, still they charged. Never have I seen a man do this, and for the first time since my training, I felt fear.

I braced for their attack, but Berrick rose to meet them. Fought like a man possessed. Whips and knives raked his body but his armour held, and his mace found their heads. The battle was over in moments, leaving us once more with no answers, nothing to do but dispose of the dead.

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There will be no rest this night, as none can sleep for fear of ambush. Tobias and his hound will guard us, but I have also taken up the watch. My senses are dulled from lack of sleep, but in truth, I fear seeing my father's face behind my eyes.

Berrick is inconsolable, will not let us treat his wounds. He weeps ceaselessly over Bertilda's body, cries that his injuries are the punishment he must bear for her death. Tobias tried to minister to him, but was viciously rebuffed, avoided a blow from Berrick's mace by a hair.

I understand a soldier's grief, a husband's loss, but as mercenaries, death is part of our way. It must be accepted. That he cannot is proof of his weakness. For now, I have found a bottle among our provisions, offered it to him if only that he may cease his wailing. We cannot afford another attack. If this is the cause that he has chosen to die for, so be it, but I will not join him.

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I wake to the sound of shovel strokes. I know not how or when I slept, only that I did and that it was mercifully dreamless. Berrick has set about the grim work of burying his wife, and though the others stand nearby, it is clear that he has refused their help.

I am certain that his injuries have gone untreated, for he staggers with the work. For all his heroism of the night before, I fear we can no longer rely on him in combat. The loss of two warriors will make our task that much harder, but provided we can find the bandit camp, and soon, we still stand a chance.

As we stow our provisions, make ready to move, Tobias takes me aside. He tells me that we have lost our way, the ambush of last night throwing us off the trail. It seems impossible, and yet he speaks the truth. By daylight I see that the path has disappeared, as though swallowed by the forest.

Berrick has finished his task and we resume our march, guided by Tobias' hound. The beast's nose is our best hope now, for we have not the provisions to scour these woodlands in search of our mark. As we walk, I offer another prayer to my people. That Bertilda's soul finds its way free of this poisoned place, and that so too does mine.

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It has been two days since the ambush and we seem no closer to our goal. Tobias leads us through an endless tangle, our blades hacking through the strange flora that defines this place. Our boots snag on serpentine vines and I fear that we are being led astray, though what cause would our employer's man have to see us dead?

We have encountered no further bandits, and while this has spared us from unnecessary bloodshed, it has also denied us of leads. The provisions will not sustain us indefinitely, and since we pressed deeper into the woods, I have seen nothing edible. Nothing but the ever-present blue mushrooms, undoubtedly poisonous. Save those we fought, I have seen no living creature either.

Serav's mutterings about enchantment have grown more frequent, though no mage is strong enough to curse an entire forest, of this I am certain. The sacrifices alone that would be necessary... I cannot think of it. Nor have we met any magi since our journey began, only brutes and assassins, though what compels them to fight with such ferocity still troubles me.

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We have pitched camp once more, in a clearing which, by my estimate, must be close to the centre of the woods. As Tobias works to light the fire, Jesselin finds me. She confides in me that she has been seeing things. Shapes among the trees, bodies locked in bark. She tells me that she recognized the men who attacked us; that beneath their masks they wore the faces of those she had loved, and those she had killed. I assure her that such things are impossible, that stress and fatigue deceive her. In truth, I am afraid.

Berrick and Serav have taken up watch, and Tobias is already sleeping, his dog close at hand. Though it lies flat, the prick of its ears tells me that it is still awake, is likely used to guarding its master through the night. I take some comfort in that. Allow myself to believe that if we are to be ambushed again, the hound will sense our attackers before their bullets reach us.

My body aches with fatigue, yet refuses to relax. Leaves me staring into the gap in the canopy, searching the night sky for constellations that I know, any reminders of home. I recognize none of them.

Perhaps it is for fear that sleep eludes me, though I have never known the dread of men to keep me from rest. It is more than that. A flicker at the edge of the campfire's light, a scratching at the edge of my sanity. A suggestion that from the murk, faces may swim up to meet me. Perhaps, like Jesselin, those of lovers and victims alike. Or perhaps, my father's.

Jesselin is not sleeping either. I see the firelight reflected in her eyes, see that she does not move as I approach her. Stretch my bedroll out at her side, lay down with my back turned to hers. No words pass between us, but after a time, I feel her shift closer. Feel the warmth of her back pressed against my own, and at last, feel myself slip from consciousness.

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Smoke. We woke to the smell of our provisions burning. A pyre blazed a short way from where we camped, the flames destroying our packs and food supplies. Jesselin was up in moments, already armed while I still fumbled for my axe, sleep having dulled my senses. What we found was not bandits, but treachery.

Serav knelt near the bonfire, dagger clutched in both hands as he drove it into Berrick's body. It was plain that the soldier was long since dead, but Serav continued to hack at the corpse. Upon his head, the mage had balanced the skull of some woodland beast, freshly slain, for it still

dripped with gore. Above the roar of the flames could be heard Serav's chanting, a garbled litany in a foreign tongue. Tobias and his hound lay nearby, eyes wide and paralyzed. The next intended victims.

As we approached, Serav seemed to come to his senses, ceased chanting and instead turned his eyes to us. Fear crossed his face and he began to speak, to stammer something, but I would not let him hex us. My axe carved his face before he could begin.

Jesselin and I worked till morning after that. Salvaged what we could. Tobias could not move till after dawn, watched silently as we dug a grave for Berrick. The soldier was buried with his arms and armour, as befits the honour he still had. The mage we tossed on the pyre.

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We have made the choice to abandon our mission. Serav's treachery left us with only scraps to eat and no compass to guide us. We have perhaps enough fresh water to last a few days, but if we do not find our way back before then, we will surely starve.

Tobias has not spoken since the incident, not truly. Whatever curse was placed upon him is strong indeed, for his movements are sluggish and his gaze is far away. He struggles to form words, gives up halfway through, nodding or shaking his head in reply to our questions.

His hound seems to have recovered fully, at least. It whines and nuzzles its owner in sympathy, though he hasn't even the focus to pet the poor beast. I do not think that he can guide us, but we must try. We have no choice.

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Our retreat is uneventful, though our progress seems by luck alone. Striking out in the direction we best remember, I strain to recognize landmarks. None are familiar and yet, I feel somehow that we are going the right way.

Jesselin has become distracted, erratic, must be kept close at hand, for she strays from the group. Twice I have found her, a few metres into the undergrowth, standing and regarding the trees in silence, running her hands over the bark. The expression she wore as she did this was one I cannot fathom.

The day wears on but I find it difficult to track the passing of hours. Begin to fear that the air itself is poison, spores from the mushrooms perhaps, clouding our minds. Tobias walks as though in a dream, able to follow his dog but little more. I bring water to his lips, for he forgets to drink.

Jesselin whispers that we should abandon him, that a scout dog is no good when its master has lost his mind. She tells me that this place has already claimed Tobias; that we should give him to the forest lest it take us too.

I tell her that we have no sorcery to fear now that Serav is dead. I do not tell her that just before I killed him, he looked down at Berrick's corpse as though seeing it for the first time.

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We have retraced our steps as far as Bertilda's grave, made the journey in only a day, though it took us two when we were outbound. The forest allowing us to return here, or pulling us back. The mound lies undisturbed, but appears freshly dug, the imprints of Berrick's knees still visible in the soil, as if he had been here just moments ago. Time feels out of joint in this place, arrested at the moment of dying. A breath held in and never exhaled.

We found a place to shelter, some small distance away. As we lack the provisions to cook or start a campfire, we instead huddle inside the hollow of a great, dead tree. Its girth is enormous, enough for the three of us, while the hound rests outside, our only protection during the night.

Tobias sits slumped in a corner, his expression vacant. Jesselin and I lean against the opposite wall, shoulders pressed together, though she sits with her knees drawn up to her chest. Clutches them and says nothing, eats nothing. I am at a loss for what to do, simply chew the scraps that I find in my pockets.

It is almost nightfall and I cannot bring myself to rest, but I soon realize that somehow, Jesselin has already fallen asleep. Arms unfolding and head sliding closer to mine as her body relaxes. In spite of myself, I welcome it. Embrace her as best I can without waking her, wish that I could surrender to exhaustion so easily. That I could follow to wherever she has gone.

I know that fear motivates me. Cowardice, perhaps. Makes me ignore my father's teachings and cling to companionship instead. Whatever power holds sway here, it is greater than any I have encountered. When I remain still, I can feel it. Creeping into the gaps between my bones, cold fingers seeking my spirit.

I am no longer certain that Serav was a traitor, or that bandits were ever our enemy. I know only that our employer sent us as a test, our bodies cast as pebbles to ripple across an endless lake. Perhaps, he sent us as an offering. To what, I do not know.

The sun's light has almost fled, and so I pray, offer the safety of our souls up to my ancestors. My father's words sit as stones within my skull, his face painted behind my eyes, but still I try. Silently recite the litanies I was taught. I hear Jesselin's breathing begin to slow, repeat the words to her rhythm.

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I am alone. My companions have forsaken me as surely as the ancestors must have, for no power but madness holds sway in this place. I gather my wits and check my weapons by moonlight, the one mercy left to me now, before I descend into the cave and darkness takes me.

Tobias has lost his mind. The yelps of his dog drew me from slumber, woke me to find the others vanished. I fumbled in their direction, back toward Bertilda's resting place. There I found our former guide, crouched on hands and knees, hacking the head off his beloved hound.

I hid myself and watched, saw him peel off skin and empty out gore, lift and then reverently place the dog's skull upon his own. A hollow gaze, still red and sticky, it bore witness as he began to chant, the same words that I heard Serav recite two nights ago.

Others joined him, as though peeled free from the trees themselves, men like those we had fought before. All bore the bones of animals. All joined Tobias in that hideous ritual. Before I fled, I saw several fall to the dirt and begin clawing at Bertilda's grave.

I have nothing left to do but search for Jesselin. Scraps of clothing led me this far, bits of her caught on thorny branches as she ran. They brought me here, to this cave, a stone-lipped mouth in the ground. It is a wretched retreat, Jesselin's last attempt at refuge, but it will be mine as well.

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Though for a time I am able to stand, soon the passage narrows and I must move in a crouch, press sightless into the dark. Stale air presses close and wet against my skin, dampens my clothes with the slime of things I cannot see.

I cannot tell for how long I do this, though I follow Jesselin's trail. She has buried her daggers into the walls and floor at regular intervals, marking the route back to the surface. I pause to feel each as I pass, run my fingers over the hilts, looking for a trace of warmth, a reminder of life. A sign that I am not alone down here.

I try my tinderbox, bring scraps of cloth from my pockets up against the sparks, but nothing catches. The only light I have now is the mushrooms, the same blue orbs which pepper the forest. They grow freely down here, emit a constant and hazy glow, faint beacons to light the way. They bring me to a yet narrower passage, one in which I am forced to drop to hands and knees, crush dozens with my passing. I drag my limbs through dirt and mulch, a thick slurry beneath my body.

The tunnel is deep, twisting its way incessantly into the earth. In places I must crawl on my belly, pull myself forward and trust in Jesselin's markers, blades shining blue in the dark. In some part of my mind, I question why I am doing this. Why I am still trying. No answer comes, only compulsion. An urge that I have never known and yet feel as though I have suppressed all my life. And so I crawl. An idiot creature digging through the earth's intestines, seeking its mate.

I struggle to remember a life before this, before the burrowing, but I do feel as though I near the end of my search. Sense that the cave is widening gradually. Drips from the ceiling and greater masses of the mushrooms hinting at the presence of water down here. That is surely where I will find Jesselin.



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The tunnel disgorges me at last, excrement of a man, I slide free from mud and then, into water. It laps at my knees, the shallows of a lake too deep to fathom. A great cavern beneath the forest, half sunken and vast beyond imagining. Every surface throbs with the light of the mushrooms, dense and fleshy. The walls pulse as though alive.

I wade deeper into the expanse, trail my fingers through the sheen upon the water's surface. Tranquil blue, reflected luminescence. My fears and needs dissolve with the dirt from my skin, and for the first time since beginning this journey, I am at peace. Swimming in a sunless sky.

I am compelled to drink. To cup my hands in the water and taste the same rapture that Jesselin must surely have found. My arms plunge deep into the underground sea, come together and embrace. A weight fills them, heavy with purpose, and I draw to the surface the body of my mate.

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My father's face swims up to meet me, wraps Jesselin's arms around me. Naked and serene. A soft touch and warm lips as they draw me down.

More swim nearby, eyes closed and blissful, hands to hold and welcome me. Berrick and Bertilda, even Serav. Those I have loved. Those I have killed. Those who raised me and taught me, and those I have called my companions.

I allow myself to sink, do so without fear, as now at last, I understand. No one should fear death in this forest, for he does not walk here. Cannot find us as we fall, as we merge, are swallowed and made anew. We all dissolve here, in the stomach of the world.

No, not a stomach but a womb. A rebirth promised. Our eyes in glowing blue throughout the woodlands. Our bodies wrapped in bark.

Some will walk again, help to find the others. But we will all watch, and we will all wait. And when their flesh rests against our soil, we will welcome them.

*In my haste to clean up, I sent the thoughts ricocheting all over the place, making more of a mess than before. Better to leave things as they were. Of course, I drew the line at leaving them in the kitchen sink. I refused to have them near my food.*

*Hot water sent the big thoughts wobbling to safety, but some of the tiny ones got melted and flushed right down the drain. Very satisfying. Just those little squeaks they made unsettled me.*

# The Teacher

My teacher is looking at me. His eyes find me where I sit, huddled in the corner of the classroom, at a desk in the back row. I hide there from the jeers and teeth and spit of the others, but I cannot hide from him. Wherever I go, he soon finds me. Wraps me in his gaze, fills me with his secrets.

Scratches at the chalkboard. A voice droning away the minutes. The others fidget, snicker, launch projectiles. I feel a ball clatter against my body, hear stage whispers hissed at me from two desks across, but I have long since learned to endure this. And now that I am his, I do not care. My teacher is looking at me, and I revel in it.

A hunger beyond words, that is what I feel when he looks at me. A desire to drink all of creation's secrets, every drop of what can be known. Most of all, my teacher craves the secrets I keep, takes one from me every day. He teases them from beneath my skin, slips them deeply between his lips. I surrender to this, allow myself to dissolve.

And yet I do not disappear. My teacher remakes me, builds me up again. For every secret he takes, he rewards me with a new one, things that the others do not know. Things that perhaps, no one should know. I long for more, but not now. Not yet. The others are still here and they cannot know. Do not *deserve* to know. I do not tell my parents either. I like the feel of what he has planted beneath my skin.

The others do not see me, not really, and what they do see, they despise. Even now, as the lesson continues, they grow bored, start to torture me. A wad of spit. A little stone. A few words sharpened to cut. All hiss toward me. But I know that they will all disappear, these pains and these people, and soon. My teacher has promised me this.

I believe him, because he knows their secrets too. I close my eyes and recall what he told me. Of how Jimmy, who spits, lusts for his sister. Of how Davey, who pokes, still cries for his dad. Of how Sally, who swears, cries on the toilet. He shows me these things to give me power over the others, to show me that I am different, distinct. If I let him in, he will give me more.

That is what he promises me every day. After school, when I am before him, letting him explore my mind, my body. He makes such promises. Shows me incredible things. But really, only his gaze matters. To be seen as something worthy, something wanted. I feel myself change beneath him, but I welcome it.

I remember how he found me, hiding then as I hide now, from the others. Then I had chosen the library, looked for the shielding of thick, wooden shelves. Tried to find a hiding place between sheets of paper. It was there, among the books right at the back. Older, untouched, every one resting beneath a blanket of dust. I thought I might stay there, crawl beneath a layer of grey and sleep, but he found me. Or perhaps I found him?

I knew he was there when my fingers touched the cover, found a book heavier than the rest, buried deeper. I felt his weight press close as I cracked the spine, heard his voice as I saw the contents. Words and shapes that I did not understand, though I know my letters. A book meant for adults, no doubt, not for me, but my teacher did not scold me. He told me then as he tells me now. That if I like, and if I am good, he will help me understand.

The others have left the classroom now, gone home to their secrets, or hidden outside to wait for me. Let them wait. I will still be here. I will still be learning. A man on the other side of the classroom puts down his chalk and straightens his glasses, crosses the floor to where I sit. He asks if I will be staying late, as usual. Like always, I nod and like always, he complies.

He pats my head and tells me not to stay out too late. To lock up the class and leave the keys under the mat. Again I nod and at last, he leaves me. The door clicks shut and still I sit. Waiting, ready. Just me and my teacher.

I feel his gaze from just beyond the windows, from just beyond my sight. An approach from the corner of my vision, a presence taking shape. For a moment, I simply enjoy being alone with him, being desired. The glass between us is nothing, as is the distance between his home and here. Such things are meaningless to him, as permeable as my body.

I will hear his voice in a moment, but I know that his form is already here. I know what I will see when I turn to the window, turn my head and look. When I meet the gaze of a thousand, thousand eyes, great as suns. The black of his pupils the gaps between stars.

I feel his lesson begin, the insistent pressure against my skin. Coaxing out my secrets, replacing them with his. I know that soon, as always, I will no longer be able to speak. And so, like always, I ask him my one question. His name.

That is the last secret of all, he says, remaking me where I sit, rebuilding me in some other place. Language has left me and so I stop trying, let myself be wanted by something so much more than me. For now, he says, I am to call him my teacher, and be ready to learn.

*Guests pointed out the big ones and expressed concern that one might hurt me, or clog my plumbing. “You can’t live like this, it’s only going to get worse!” Some made light and flounced about giggling, batted the thoughts with cushions, encouraging me to do the same. Others said that I was going about things all wrong; I shouldn’t try to remove them, I should befriend them! “They’re actually rather cute,” someone said. “A bit damp and dark for sure, but look how fluffy they are!”*

*Another came equipped with trash bags, a dust-pan and broom, and a can-do attitude. “Pests,” she called them, “and very inconvenient!” I watched from the couch while she went room to room, vigorously sweeping the blobs into bags. A day later, they were all back. When I phoned my mom about the situation, she just said, “I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think it is, dear.”*

## Frankie

Frankie used to say to me “I wish you could see yourself”. Today he screamed it at the whole class, a few minutes before he started climbing the walls, like a spider. He still had the regular number of arms and legs though. Just looked like they got much longer. And bonier. Joints in places where there shouldn’t be any. It looked like it hurt him to move.

That’s the last thing I saw before I bolted out of Miss Campbell’s class. Ran like hell, soon as he jumped at her. Now that I’ve got a chance to catch my breath, I need to do something. Call someone, or find a weapon. Should be doing that right now, probably, but it’s hard to think. To do anything ‘cept sit here, listen to the sounds from outside, try to figure out what’s biting at my brain. Missing something important. Like if I knew what it was, I could stop all of this.

Spiderfuck. That was it. Tim came up with it, barked it out in the middle of biology class, when Frank kept poking at the tarantula we were supposed to dissect. “Why are ya finger blastin’ that spider, ya Spiderfuck?” he’d yelled. Dumb as hell, now I think about it, but hilarious at the time. The name stuck and Frankie turned inward, retreated into himself. That was what he always did. Until today, when he turned outward. Inside out, face first, like a sock.

It started with the teeth, or actually, the gums. They peeled back and wrapped around his face, before all the rest did the same. Saw it happen. How the teeth didn’t change at all. That’s what made it so horrible. That little Frankie’s mouth is chewing on people right now. Five-foot-four Frankie, braces and all, noshing away. Eating his way through the student body. Shaking his head so as to tear better.

I wonder what the reports will say, the police write-ups. Will they describe how we were caught in the sports hall? Will they find the footprints and know that I only got out, got to this locker, because Tim decided to stay behind? I hope they will. I hope they’ll tell his parents that before anything else.

The sounds are still out there, but not too close, just echoing down the passages. Crashing. Desks shifted and doors broken down. Shoes slapping the tiles. I should just leave. Throw open the locker and run like hell. Hope he doesn’t hear me and hope to God they haven’t bolted the doors yet. But he might, and they probably have, and I’m just sitting here, trying to figure out what Frankie meant back then. As if it’s the answer to this mess.

Like maybe it can explain how he’s still moving. Leaving wet, Frank-shaped imprints everywhere. Mostly red, but streaked with the colours of stuff that should still be inside him.

I remember that one time, when we had to get up and tell the class what we most wanted to be. “An exercise in total honesty”, Miss Campbell had called it, but most of us had just fucked around. Stammered for five minutes before giving up, or cracked a bad joke and sauntered back

to our seats. Tim had just said that he wanted to be famous, didn't care how or for what, just that his name got known. That seems pretty funny now, actually.

But Frankie hadn't done any of that. Just got up there and stood for a long time, head down and thinking before he said "Not what I've always been". The teacher had prompted him, asked him again what he really wanted to be.

Poor Miss Campbell, she didn't deserve it. Really tried to help Frankie, get him to speak up. Would single him out in class when she told us about our potential. She felt she got him, I think. Knew what he needed. But I don't think even she understood when he said, "More like everyone else". That part seems really important, though I still don't know what the hell he meant. Did Frankie imagine himself this way? Did he want this?

He never really spoke before. Just a few words before he'd shove down the rest and wrap around them, curl into himself. Only now, he doesn't speak at all. Just howls. Screams. Makes noises a bit like he's trying to form words, but can't. I wonder if those sounds are what he buried before. What he's letting out now.

I'm still not sure why I'm thinking all this. Trying to figure Frankie's life story instead of just making a break for the exit. I think maybe it's because I'm looking for a way out. Like maybe if I know how someone can become something like that, it will help.

An awful thought occurs. That maybe he's eating us to try and become more like us. But that doesn't make any sense, and the thought is quickly replaced by another. A question. Why would a boy will himself into a monster? And then another. What apology can I scrape together when he finds me?

What I should do about all those times that Frankie told me he wished I could see myself. When he would ball his fists at his sides and say those few words so seriously, then just start shaking all over, like he might explode.

He only used to do that when we really pushed him, didn't let him crawl off and curl into himself. Like he really wanted to hit me, but knew he couldn't, so he just shook instead. I used to think it was hilarious, started looking forward to it. One time he even pissed himself, when we had him cornered. Of course, that meant we had to do it even more.

This locker smells like piss, I've just realized, though I'm not sure why. I'm not sure of a lot of things right now. It's hard to concentrate with all the noise coming from outside.

I should be trying to make a plan, I know. The sounds are getting closer and I'm trying to remember what parents and teachers told me I was supposed to do in an emergency. But somehow, all of that is gone, replaced by the breath I've just realized I'm holding in, so hard it hurts. Replaced by the shape that I can now see through the locker slats, slithering down the passage.

It's paused right outside my hiding place. Turned its head to where I'm wedged. I think to close my eyes, as if just looking at it will somehow give me away. But I can't. The lids are pinned open, the truth of Frankie's transformation burning itself into the soft, dark space at the back of my brain.

Without skin, it looks vulnerable. Without a voice, its mouth is used only to hurt. It's crawling slower now, dragging itself across the tiles. Doesn't stay long, just creeps away to find whoever else is left, but it feels like a long time before I remember to breathe out. To let go of the air I sucked in at the moment of understanding.

The locker door is open now, pushed wide when I sank to my knees. Cheeks already wet before I pressed my face into my hands. I do not know if Frankie is coming back. Do not know what I'd say or do if he did, but I know that it doesn't matter. He would certainly find me. Certainly hurt me, but I feel about that the same way that Frankie must have felt, backed into a corner.

A resignation. Because that's just how it is. That's just how it is and what you feel in a moment like that is something less like fear and more like pity.

And so I won't try to leave, because I get it now. I know what Frankie made himself, and why. What he wanted to show us. Show me. I can see it now. I really can.



*I went to the bar to try to escape the damn things, but I found a thought floating in my beer, like something left in a toilet bowl.*

*That night I woke up with them on my face, heavy against my lips, my eyelids, my nostrils. I gasped and swatted them away, but one got past and lodged itself in my throat. I spent an hour hunched and retching over the toilet. The thought washed out on a flood of alcohol and fast food.*

*I tried to go back to bed, but when I turned on the light, I saw the ceiling was thick with them, poised to splatter on my face. So I stayed up drinking coffee almost till morning, washing the taste from my throat.*

*I slept on the couch after that, the blankets pulled tight over my head to keep the thoughts from getting in. But still I felt them thumping against the bedding and rolling across my body.*

## The Other Father

I have to save my daughter. Have to get her back from *him*, the man who thinks he is her father. He is a sick man, as deranged as those who gave my child to him. Why they let him take her, I do not know, but I know that she must be suffering. The thought causes me physical pain, a grinding ache among my ribs, but I will endure this. Grit my teeth and clench my hands and go to find her.

It is only a matter of time before I reach him, the usurper. I know where he is. The city, the street, the house, the very room where he is keeping her. The same one where I tucked her in and sang to her each night. He'll have her in that place, in *my house*, gifted to him along with my daughter. I do not care about the home; I only want my child back. If he will not return her, I will make him.

I am going there by car, have taken a cab to do so. The driver seems apprehensive, though I do not know why. I sit beside him, in the front passenger seat, and endure the passage of time. The state of simply waiting, when every part of me strains to act. After more than an hour, I try to make conversation, but he does not reply, barely nods in response. Won't even meet my eyes, simply staring straight ahead, gripping the wheel with both hands. Now and then he casts a sidelong glance in my direction, just for a second, as though afraid I might catch him looking.

I try to put him at ease. Smile, tell him that I do not mind the broken glass on the passenger seat, barely even feel it. That only makes him grip the wheel harder, so I try something else. I tell him about my daughter, about how I am going to rescue her. I tell him that a terrible man has taken her, and that if I do not get there soon, she will be kept from me forever. I urge him to hurry. He nods, accelerates, still staring straight ahead. Drops of liquid roll down his forehead, I notice. Over his cheeks. Good, he understands. He empathizes.

I lean into my seat, watch grey-slate buildings slide by as I reminisce. I tell him how fragile she is, how sickly. How long I cared for her, and how long we were kept apart. Memories bring the pain back, hot barbs in my belly, and again I endure, one hand keeping pressure on my abdomen. I do not have to do this for long. We have arrived.

I climb out on the street corner, wave my thanks to him through the broken glass of the passenger window. Again, he simply nods, before speeding off. As he leaves, I see him speaking rapidly into the radio on his dash. I feel a little betrayed, but it doesn't matter. I can't expect him to truly understand.

I walk to my former home, to the high, black fence that surrounds it. The false father probably thinks that it will keep me out, that the spikes atop its length will deter me. After a moment of consideration, my fingers find purchase and I vault over, arms carrying me up and through the air, landing upon the manicured lawn.

I land heavily, grunt from the impact, my body immediately telling me that the exertion was too much. I feel a grinding down deep, in some part of my abdomen I cannot name. Double over, force it down, wait for my limbs to allow me to stand once more. Anyone could see me kneeling here, paralysed, an intruder in suburbia, though there was a time that my presence was routine, even welcomed. Now I hold my breath and watch the curtains of the second-floor windows for any sign of movement.

None comes, and at last I am able to stand. Walk, though I know I don't have long. I will not be able to leap the fence again. Getting this far has left me wounded, though I have strength enough to do what I have to.

I approach the front door, my footfalls leaving deep marks in the lawn. Produce the key I had secreted away, swallowed down when I was taken away, regurgitated now. It only takes a moment to retrieve it from my insides, and even wet, it clicks into place. The false father, I note bitterly, did not bother to change the locks.

The inside of my home is just as I left it; quiet, orderly, domestic. Dark wood floors and clean white walls. There are no sounds to be heard, no lights turned on, though I am certain I am not alone. I make a quick internal check of the time; early evening, my daughter's treatment time. All the house's power will have been diverted to her machines, I realize. To cycle her blood, to stretch her limbs.

Straining into the apparent silence, the rhythmic hum of their work can be heard upstairs. The man who thinks he is her father must be continuing her care, though this only makes me angrier. There is no love in him, no compassion. He is keeping her alive to play with her, to prolong her torture. Soon baby, soon, I will make him go away. I am only a few metres from your room now.

As I move deeper into the house, toward the stairs, I cast my gaze over the mantelpiece. See that every photo of me has been replaced, supplanted by his. My little girl, frozen in time, forced to sit and grimace beside him. A mockery. My arm sweeps across the surface, sends wood and glass crashing to the floor. There is no response from upstairs, but he must know now that I am here. Good, let him be afraid.

I grip the bannister for support, take measured steps. The pain in my stomach has worsened, making it difficult to stand straight, but my outburst has refocused me. Solidified what strength I have left in the places that are important. My legs, my arms, my hands.

At the top of the stairs, I am met by another obstacle. A security gate, iron bars with a digital lock fastened to the wall. An electric eye swivels to regard me dispassionately, fixes me with a gaze that I spent years learning to hate. The same kind used on my cell. The same emotionless jailor that I had been staring at only this morning.

The false father must have had it installed. Not content that only I be locked up, he turned my home into a prison. Confined my daughter to the second floor, trapped for even those few hours in which she can leave her bed.

My anger knows no words. I grip the bars and bend, pull the gate towards me, my feet braced against the floor. The metal twists in my hands, the lock screams in electronic urgency, a frantic beeping as I rip it from the wall. With a howl, I break its housing. Splinter the wood and break the eye, leave the gate hanging by its hinges.

Too much. Far too much. I stagger, drop to one knee on the staircase. Hug myself as I try to suppress waves of sensation, coursing through me, furious. Bandaged wounds indignant at being opened up again. Something hot and sticky drips from beneath the fabric, droplets that gleam black against the floor.

I crawl the rest of the way up, round the corner on all fours. Into the passage and past my bedroom, toward hers, at the very end. Dig my fingers into the carpet as I go, dragging my knees to the thrumming rhythm of the life support machines. So close now. The knowledge gives me strength, allows me to hoist my body a little, lift my gaze. To see the false father, look up just as he brings a hammer down on my head.

I do not feel the impact. Not really. Though it registers, it is lost amid the constant wash of signals issuing from my stomach. A dull thud and I am looking at the floor. A muffled knock at the base of my neck, and I can feel the carpet against my cheek. He strikes me, again and again, and my vision goes dark. Then returns. On and off, black and white, switching with the rhythm of his blows.

I keep looking at the carpet. See its pink and fluffy tassels, the reason that my daughter chose it. I see where spots of dirt cling to the fibres, left by the traipsing of a man's shoes. I see those shoes close to my face, pulling back to kick me. I reach for them.

My hands find purchase, wrap around his ankle. Now he is beneath me, and my hands are on his face. Fingers grip, scratch at the soft spots, find his eyes. He struggles, clutches at my arms, trying to push them away. He doesn't quite manage.

A wet pop, a splash of red, someone screaming. His arm swinging up and a hammer blow to the side of my head. The world blinks out for a moment. When it returns, I see him crawling, one hand clutching the side of his face, the other turning the handle to my daughter's room. The door is open, and I drag myself toward her.

I see her now, propped up in bed, irrigated with tubes. Up her nose, in her arms, coiling around her neck. Though she is mid-treatment, her eyes are wide, staring at us as we crawl into the room. False father and true, trailing the watercolours of our love behind us. She does not speak,

just looks at me in disbelief. She must be in pain. He must be hurting her, mishandling the treatment. Only I know how to help her.

Yes baby, it's me. I'm here now. Everything is okay. I tell her this as I approach, standing slowly, strengthened just by the sight of her. My every limb protests at the movement, but I won't stop. She is right there, waving at me, mouthing something that I cannot quite make out. Pointing. I look to the side, see the usurper, standing by the bedside table. He raises an arm, brandishes what he has retrieved from there, points a remote at me and presses the switch that will end my life.

I feel the click, sense its echoes tingling through my nerve endings, sending a command to seize up my insides. A cruel device, buried deep. A built-in failsafe to shut me down. I feel my body tense, but I do not die. He presses again, harder this time, aiming straight at my stomach. Again, that awful shuddering, but still I live.

I watch as he begins to understand, notices the wires dangling from my midriff. As he sees the wound for what it is, realizes what I gouged out to get here. I watch as he begins to panic, grabs the phone beside my daughter's bed, hands shaking as he tries to dial.

I hear myself laugh, a sound I did not know I could make. A single hoarse bark to punctuate my lurch forward. And then my fingers are against his throat, and his one eye is staring at me as he tries to speak. No words escape my grip, but I understand him still. He doesn't believe it, didn't think I could do it. But I would do anything for my child; a real father would know that.

I am with her now, one arm around her. She cannot speak either, but still I understand her, know what she needs. The man lying on the floor nearby, the man who thought he was her father, thought he knew, but only I do. My daughter's eyes seem to confirm this, fixed on his body, on the kill switch at his fingers. She cannot believe he would do such a thing, try to take me away from her. I pet her hair, smiling, crooning. It's okay now baby, it's all okay, and slowly, her eyes meet mine. Seated as I am on the side of the bed, I draw her closer to me. She makes a sound, a feeble protest, but again I hush her. Stroke her cheek, begin to detach her from the machines all around.

Tubes pop free and monitors flicker. Liquids drip on the bedroom tiles and air escapes with a gradual hiss. All these things that he thought she needed, all these machines. She needs none of them. Just me. Soon the connections are broken, and at last she is free. Carefully, I pull her onto my lap and let her head rest against my shoulder, the circuits below my skin thrumming in response, giving off a gentle heat, designed to soothe.

She does not move but I can hear her, crying softly. There, there sweetheart, it's alright. I'm here now. I hug her a bit tighter, press her face against me. Rub her back, rock to and fro as I speak. In the distance, I can hear the sound of approaching sirens. She must be so scared, is still crying, so I hug her a little tighter. And then a little more.

*It was hopeless. Short of burning the bed and stripping the walls, there would be no getting rid of them. I contemplated selling the house, locking up and handing over the chaos to someone else. But who would want it? I briefly considered leaving the gas on and lighting a match.*

*Instead, I decided to attend a writing course at the local library.*

## The Proper Patch

They are back. Jessie and Molly. Wife and daughter. I open the front door, guide them inside, throwing my arms around them both. It is a long time before I can bring myself to let go. They seem surprised. “This isn’t like you, Dave”, says Jessie. And then, from Molly, “Dad, why are you crying?”

But my tears are joyful ones, and I just shake my head. Sniff deeply as I regain my composure, smile to assuage them both. “It’s nothing”, I say, “I just missed you both so much”. They wouldn’t have known, I realize, how I felt when they were away. For them, it must have felt only a short time.

It’s alright though. They’ve accepted my answer. Molly has already thrown her Barbie bag down into a corner of the hallway (an old reflex, never outgrown) and stomped upstairs to her room. Off to play with her toys, or her pet hamster. Some things haven’t changed, I note inwardly, and feel a familiar, warm contentment spread through me. Jessie is still regarding me with a quizzical look, the same one she gave me when I first asked her out. The same one she’d find a reason to give me each day; something between surprise and amusement. I realize now how little I appreciated that. How happy I am to see it again.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Dave?” she asks. I nod, smile and press her to me tightly once more, only breaking the embrace once she’s begun to laugh, squirm and playfully push me away. I oblige her, stoop to lift her travel bags and take them upstairs, Jessie in tow. “How was your holiday? Did you and Molly have a good time?” I put it to her as we reach the landing. She laughs again, opens her mouth as if to answer, then stops. Frowns. Furrows her brow as though thinking hard. “I... you know, now that you ask, I’m not quite sure”, she says. “Fine, I suppose. Yes. I’m sure Molly and I had a lovely time.”

I don’t press her further; I’m just happy that she’s back. Better that we settle into the old routines again. The rhythm of life we had together, not so long ago. I help her unpack, watch her take her clothes from the cases and begin to slip them one by one into their proper places. As she does so, I admire her shape. The fall of her hair. The beauty and grace she exudes in performing even simple tasks. Another thing that I missed. Perhaps never noticed before, only came to crave in her absence.

“And what have you been up to, darling?” she asks, hanging her coat, walking back to the bed to collect another garment to be tidied away. For a moment, I go blank. My reverie broken, unsure how to answer. “Oh, you know. Work mostly. Keeping busy...” And then a shriek from down the passage cuts me short, makes both our heads snap to the doorway. My daughter screaming.

My footfalls are thunder on the floorboards. My breathing a crash in my ears. In the ten seconds that it takes me to reach her room, a thousand horrors have already played out behind my eyes.

Door thrown open, I am searching for her. Calling her name. Expecting to see her crumpled somewhere, crying. Bleeding.

But Molly is unhurt. Shaken it seems, standing a few feet from her hamster cage, regarding it with disgust. I kneel beside her, hug her close for the second time that day, asking what's wrong. "Jonesie is all wrong!" she cries, pointing at the furry creature among the wood chips. "He's all wrong!" I open the cage door, scoop up the hamster and bring it closer to us. Molly recoils. "What's the matter with him?" I ask her, "Show me." "His patch is wrong! His pretty patch. It's supposed to be on his eye but now it's on his back!" She jabs a finger at the brown blotch of fur on the hamster's back, demands an answer.

"No sweetie", I begin, bringing the animal up closer to her face. "Jonesie has always had a patch on his back. Don't you remember?" She opens her mouth as if to protest, then swallows, looks consternated. Still frowning, she allows me to place the pet into her hand. I stroke down its back, soothe the frightened creature. After a few moments, Molly begins to do the same. The panic, barely kept in my chest until now, begins to fade, and I allow myself to breathe. Give my daughter a kiss on the forehead and rise to leave the room. Jessie, I realize, did not come with me to check.

I go back to our bedroom, to tell my wife what happened. Perhaps to hold her. To kiss her. Slide back into the normality I have been wanting so much. I find her paused halfway to the closet, standing perfectly straight, perfectly still, dresses still hanging over one arm. Staring into space, paused in mid action. I position myself in front of her, take her by the arms and shake her gently. Watch her come to her senses. "Honey," I ask "what's the matter?"

A long pause. The slow parting of lips, pupils coming into focus, finding mine. "Oh Dave, I don't know", she says at last. "I just feel so strange all of a sudden. A horrible headache, Dave. It's making it hard for me to think." She turns around, puts the dresses back into the travel case, folding them neatly. She completes her task and walks back toward me. Or toward the closet behind me, but I catch her before she takes anything from inside. "You're just tired, babe. The trip must have taken it out of you. C'mon, let's go downstairs. I'll make you some tea."

One arm looped around hers, I guide Jessie from the bedroom and toward the stairs. Down the hall, I can hear Molly humming to herself, singing the words of a nonsense rhyme about her hamster. The only lyric is "Jonesie" and derivatives thereof. Nonsense words that she arranges in an order only she understands, but which she's told me in the past is very important. That's good. She's happy again. Calm. Jessie clings to me for support, finds the bannister with her other hand. Descends the stairs like a woman thrice her age.

In the kitchen now, as the kettle boils, she tells me "I don't know what came over me". Rubbing her forehead with one hand, brows furrowed and eyes shut. "Molly's scream just... went right through me. Instant migraine." I crumble a sedative into her cup. Add a teabag and boiling water. Stir deliberately. She's still sitting with her eyes clenched shut as I place the mug before her, take



a seat across from her. With some difficulty, I manage to pry the fingers of her free hand apart, weave them through my own.

We sit like that for what feels like a long time. Hands clasped, not saying anything. She sips her tea, eyes open now but gaze still far away. I give her hand a squeeze, try to coax words from her. To bring my wife back from wherever she's gone. She meets me with that same quizzical gaze, her half-smile, only now there is something else there. Uncertainty, as of one looking at something they don't quite recognize.

The look doesn't last though, and something like a smile settles back onto her face. "So Dave, you were telling me about what you've been up to..." she starts, but is again interrupted. Molly yelling from upstairs, calling for me. No fear in her voice this time, just a demand. That I bring her Barbie bag from where she tossed it. Normally I wouldn't indulge her, but right now it is important that she stay happy. That she accept being here. Accept me.

I give Jessie a kiss on the cheek before I leave the kitchen, tell her I'll be right back. She mumbles something in reply. Takes another sip of her tea but doesn't look at me. Only stares straight ahead, at the glass cabinet containing our silverware. As long as she is calm, I think. I can't face a fight.

Scooping up Molly's backpack, I trek to her bedroom, find her lying on the floor this time, surrounded by papers. Her drawings, taken down from the walls. Most of the space is taken up by crayons and pencils, and she lies on her belly among them, scribbling at one picture after another. Adding new details to old figures. Adding spots to depictions of her hamster. "What are you doing, sweetie?" I ask softly, picking my way around the papers, careful not to agitate her. "Working stuff out" she replies, "Need to make it look right. Did you bring my bag?"

I kneel nearby, hand her the rucksack. She fishes inside, pulls out her pencil case, snapping it open to retrieve a pair of scissors. Pink, with green flowers on the handle. Then sets about snipping figures free from her drawings, discarding the offcuts to one side. "What do you say, Molly?" I prompt her, to which she looks confused for a moment, then after some hesitation "Thanks". "Thanks who?" I ask again, but she doesn't reply this time, just keeps cutting. I watch her for a few minutes after leaving the room. Mostly, she's cutting herself out of family drawings.

I return downstairs to where Jessie sits. Only now she's standing, inches from that glass cabinet, staring intently at her own reflection. One hand is raised and she alternates between touching the image she sees and her own face. Poking at her cheeks. Tugging at the corners of her mouth. It is not until I touch her that she seems to notice me.

I say nothing, just pull her close. Squeeze. Nuzzle her neck. Try to convey with my body that everything will be okay. That there is love here, if she will have it. That she is safe here, with me. She is like a plank in my arms. Perhaps she remembers how she felt before. Why she took

Molly away in the first place. I can't bear the thought of her leaving again, and so I hug her tighter.

For what feels like hours, we stand there unmoving. Only the ticking of the wall clock giving any sense of time. Eventually, she says my name. "Dave... could you get Molly for me? I feel like..." she trails off here, her gaze again drawn to the cabinet behind me. "I feel like there's something I need to tell her." I nod my assent, kiss her on the cheek once more, and once more ascend the stairs.

On the landing, I can still hear Molly at work. Scissors busily snipping. In a moment, I think, I will go to her. But first, to the bedroom. Slide open the bedside dresser drawer, retrieve what I need. Another bottle of pills, and something else. Stuffed down into my pockets, but not too deep. Close enough to retrieve quickly, if needs be. If it comes to that. We are so close now, back to being where we once were, but just in case. Just in case.

Now, to Molly's room. I can hear her talking to herself from down the hall, fussing over some detail of what she's working on. That is good. She will be calm and happy. Compliant. Able to help her mother regain her senses, I know it. Staying occupied will help them banish the bad memories, help them acclimatise quicker. This is what I think as I round the corner to her room, find her cutting up the hamster.

She's peeled the brown patch of skin off its back, placed it wetly over the creature's eye. Held it in place with glue, the thick, white putty used for craft projects. It's been pushed out around the edges, smeared across the fur as she turns Jonesie over in her hands, examines him from every angle. Mutters over and over, "Wrong, it's still wrong. Doesn't fit..."

I retrieve the bottle of sedatives from my pocket. Kneel beside her. Wet paper against my knees. I can still fix this. Salvage it. "Sweetie" I start, pouring pills into my cupped hand, "What's the matter?" Molly looks at me. Eyes huge, mouth slack. I realize that she is no longer blinking. "It's wrong, dad. The patch is wrong. Look." She points at her handiwork, and I see that she's still holding the scissors.

Gently, I pry her fingers apart. Take the scissors and place them on the floor, but leave the still-twitching Jonesie in her hands. Can't risk upsetting her. Into her gaping mouth I start to deposit pills. Two, three, four... Hand cupped under her chin to help her swallow. She mutters between mouthfuls. "The patch is wrong. It doesn't fit. It doesn't fit, the patch is wrong..." a record on repeat.

Maybe once she's sedated, I think. Maybe I can try again. Bring her back to where she belongs. I am already planning it out in my head, listing the adjustments I'll make, to my behaviour, to her environment... when a crash comes from downstairs. No. Please. Not so soon. I place Molly among the debris, carefully but quickly, so as not to damage her head. Then turn and hurry, and hope that I am fast enough.

When I reach the kitchen, I see that I was not. Or perhaps, just in time, because Jessie is still breathing. Still capable of speech. Not for long, probably, because the glass is lodged in her neck. In one of her eyes. In her scalp, from where she put her head through the cabinet.

“Dave” she says, one eye rolling to look up at me from the floor, “Where’s Molly?” I kneel beside her now, hold her like this while I still can, less for her sake than my own. “We have to go” she says, in that same determined voice she used back then. “I’m going, Dave. We’re going. We don’t belong here.” Like Molly, she repeats this, loops her words even as her ability to form them fades. Like then, I say nothing. Just nod my assent and wait for her to finish. Wait for her to go. No tears then and no tears now.

When I am sure it is over, I lie her flat on the kitchen floor. Go upstairs to collect my sleeping daughter. With each step, I catalogue the possible causes of this failure. Their separation, certainly. They were far more stable when together, had a better sense of where they were. Who they were.

I am certain that it was nothing I said, or did. My routine is too well rehearsed by now. Maybe the sedative was too strong? Or not strong enough. The glass perhaps? A reflection could have done it, I realize. The sense of self needs more time to settle before any kind of real introspection can take place. But still, such a violent response. Doubtless it was triggered, despite my attempt to minimise any reminders of the accident... Ah. Molly’s scream. That must have been it. Would’ve caused an instinctive response. Started the regression.

At the sight of Molly lying on the floor, a familiar calm washes over me. The psyche’s defence against a trauma suffered one times too many. A hundred times too many. She is brain dead, no doubt, but at least she is alive. Undamaged. I need only wipe the slate clean, restore from backup. Jessie, unfortunately, will likely have to be regrown.

Back down the stairs now, Molly in my arms, I think of how little I held her original. How many more times I must try before I can truly have my daughter back. My throat feels thick with words unsaid, a desire to fill the empty house with sound, now that it is silent yet again. Despite this, I cannot cry. Have tricked my brain too thoroughly, through endless practice, to replace horror with a sense of purpose. No tears when it’s time to try again. Save those for the reunion, as I always do.

Hours later, with the mess cleaned up, the cables firmly attached, and their memories loading on my monitor, I check my progress log. Play back the recording from the home’s cameras, noting down the time before malfunction. Self-destruction. Three hours. The longest thus far. I file away every salient detail under my patch notes, save it under Version 128.3. A little closer. A better build each time, that’s what matters.

My daughter’s eyes flicker as I work, as though she agrees. Can’t wait to wake up. This reminds me to make a note in the section detailing reboot protocols. The elements that need to be in place

to ensure a smooth transition back into life. Into my life. “Keep subjects together in early stages. Limit availability of sharp-edged objects, or subjects’ access to reflective surfaces.” A long moment, another thought. A final note in the margins. “When subjects are returned to rooms, ensure that hamster has the proper patch.”

*In the seminar room at the library, a small thought got into my sock. I fidgeted self-consciously before noticing that the other attendees had thoughts of their own. There were differences in colour and texture, but they were unmistakably the same wretched blobs. A woman with a pinched face and glasses lined up a trio on the table before her, each the size of a golf ball. A shy teenager in a hoodie held a spiky one on his lap, while an especially miserable looking man bowed his head beneath the weight of a single colossal thought squatting on the back of his neck. I gawked until my reverie was broken by the appearance of the lecturer: a published author I had never heard of.*

*Tall and balding, he spread his arms in an expansive gesture, welcoming us. "Thank you all for coming today! I hope I can help you to turn what ails you, into what serves you." He strode from one end of the room to the other, frowning and grinning and waving his hands.*

*Then, to my excitement, he reached into his tweed jacket and produced a thought, cupped in his palm. It looked a little deflated, throbbed weakly, but made no attempt to drift off. "This one is almost used up," he said, "but I can still get some juice out of it. Best way to remove 'em is to use 'em!" His voice took on an evangelical tone. "The trick is to be gentle, coax out the sap and be careful not to pop them – we all know how unpleasant that can be..." Much muttered agreement from the audience. From another pocket he produced an old-fashioned writing quill. He stroked the thought with the feathery end, then prodded it delicately with the nib. The thought began to tremble and sweat.*

*With a flourish, our instructor dipped his quill into the exudation in his palm and brought it up to a flipchart. Cursive lines appeared with deft motions of his hand. "I miss you. Need you. I still think about..." A pause, the quill was dipped again, and brought back to the page.*

*This continued, a rhythmic dipping and writing, a poem scratching itself into existence before our eyes. It took up a whole sheet of paper before the thought dried up and expired. No squeaking death rattle or balloon pop, just a soft sigh and a crumbling to whitish dust.*

*The lecturer brushed off his fingers. "Now you try", he said.*

## Red

The commsbox on my wrist bleeps at me, flashes green light that resolves at a touch to the face of my boss: Auntie Phage. Black hair pulled back from her sharp face so tightly that it looks painted on, she gives me the same look she always does. The one that you give a child who you hope is listening, hope will understand if you explain things patiently enough. “Red, sweetie” she says, “Be a dear and finish up whatever you’re doing there, then come and collect another batch. There are some clients who’ll need their fix this evening.”

“What about B33?” I demand, “It’s only four hours till this cycle’s over, plus he’s ‘sposed to handle night shifts.” Phage’s expression hardens, saying without words that she expects obedience. After a long moment, she replies, “Can’t reach him. His comms are off, so he’s probably skimming from the batch that he was meant to deliver. But that’s for me to worry about. You get done in Central, then get your pretty head down here to do as you’re told.” With that, she disappears from the commsbox screen, leaving me to conclude business with the man seated at a table nearby.

I hold out a hand, crook my fingers expectantly. He doesn’t seem to notice at first, his first hit already setting in, dreams starting to encroach on waking vision. He’s entered that annoying stage where he has nothing worthwhile to say, but wants to talk anyway. It’s hard to reason with them when they get like this, the high just starting to kick in. Soon, he’ll be staring at the walls, drooling his way through most of the night. But until the crystals truly take hold, he’ll chatter at anyone willing to listen, even if that’s just the table. I guess the brain likes the sound of its own voice. Unfortunately for him, Auntie Phage doesn’t pay me enough to keep junkies company.

I should’ve got the payment from him first, before he started using, but Auntie’s call distracted me. As soon as the stasis capsule was on the table, he’d cracked it open and started his prep. Now he’s a mess. May have already been high before I got here, come to think of it. Fortunately, clearing my throat and repeating the hand gesture gets him to pay attention, and with some reluctance he rummages in the filthy jumpsuit he wears, produces a square of metal and plastic and drops it in my palm. I plug the credit chip into my commsbox, have it check the amount. Quite a bit. He’s given up enough Fed credits to have the synth-chefs build his meals for a week. I look around the room, wonder if he has any spare or if he plans to live off crystal till payday. It doesn’t take me long to remember that it’s not my problem, and the chip disappears into the many folds of my red cloak, the adaptive fabric instantly crafting and then sealing a pocket around it.

Mentally, I try to plan out the next ten hours. When I’ll get the chance to eat and sleep, now that I’m filling in for B33. Bastard. Off in dreamland and leaving me to look after his contacts. I raise my hood, hurry to stash the now-emptied capsule in my cloak. In the background, the man continues to babble, heating another spoonful of the drug before he loses all motor coordination. That he’s already halfway to being catatonic doesn’t seem to register; he’s too busy recounting

some episode from his life story, how he came here and why. It's a story I've heard plenty of times before, from plenty of mouths, and if I had any interest in him before, I have even less now. Ignoring him, I make to leave, but he reaches out from where he's seated, grabs my wrist. "Please, Red" he says, "Just wait a second. I just need..." He trails off mid-sentence, simply stares at me, though he doesn't let go.

The man's pupils are dilated, enormous. Irises flecked with the same red of the crystal powder he's just injected. Whether it's the substance that compels him or something else, I don't care. Others have tried to keep me in the past (I'm something pretty rare around here), but I refuse to stay in this city, not for much longer anyway. So like all the others, I rebuff him. My cloak shivers against my body, ripples and flows, ready to lash out and defend me if it senses that I'm in distress. But it doesn't come to that. I remind him who I work for, turn my wrist to show him the commsbox screen, where a record of who called me still flashes. That's enough to make him loosen his grip, slump back into his chair. Auntie Phage's name carries that much weight. Once I'm out the door, I sigh in relief that he still had the presence of mind to recognize it.

I despise violence; stupid and pointless, it accomplishes nothing. Not everyone thinks that way though, so Auntie made sure I had the cloak. One of the nicest things anyone's ever done for me, though that's not saying much. Even so, it wasn't for free. Auntie doesn't do gifts, only debts.

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Auntie Phage is what they call her, one of the few people in the colony who gets to be called by a name and not a number. I know she likes it, because we're the same in that way. Somebodies among the nobodies. Stronger than them. Definitely stronger than most around here, she earned her name by being one of the first to land on this rock. The mining complex of Lupus, a moon a long way from anything half decent, it's where people come to pay their debts, but it's where she prospered. Most folks here work for the Federation, either as part of the garrison or as one of the vendors that keep everyone supplied with what they need to live. But if you're not a soldier or a merchant, you're probably a debt slave, harvesting the red crystals that are this place's namesake, or working in the factories that process them. Auntie Phage is none of those things, and neither am I. She runs a different sort of business, and I try my best to help her with that.

B33 helps too, when he's not busy tripping on the stuff he's supposed to peddle. Though he's been at it for longer, he's gotten lazy, doesn't know how lucky he is to have this gig. Finding paid work in a penal colony isn't easy, and Auntie pays well, even has connections with the higher-ups at the garrison. Says she'll put me in contact with them if I keep doing a good job. People who can get folks rich, or get them off this moon... But that luxury also carries consequences, as B33 will soon find out. As I found out years ago, before I started working for her. It doesn't matter that we're related. Her title means the same thing for me as it does for everyone else; Auntie will look after you, so long as you behave.

I leave the shack and head toward the hub of this dome, the business centre of Lupus Central. I'm set to meet another client there, empty my cloak of powder capsules before getting another load. After that, I'll head to the settlement's outskirts, take a ground shuttle to Auntie's place so I can pick up the slack for B33.

As I walk, I pass the same old nothing. Scores of cinderblock constructs, varied in size but uniform in misery. The same sad storefronts and grey-faced prefabs that I grew up with, have spent the last nineteen years hating as much as I know how to hate anything. I don't feel it as much anymore though, with the same temper tantrum heat I used to. Lupus has that way of working on you. All the dull, disgusting sameness of it settles across your body, a second skin that you can't quite peel off no matter how hard you try, so you eventually stop trying. I saw that skin on dad when he was still around, and I see it on everyone else now. I wrap my cloak tight around my body (the only thing I wear above the waist, the only thing I *need* to wear), and feel its fibres respond, bind themselves more closely to me, exuding warmth and little tingles of pleasure. This is the skin I choose instead.

What exactly the Feds use the Lupus crystals for, I don't know. In fact, few people here do, only that there's always a demand. For glue, some say. A super adhesive for repairing starships on the fly. For medicine, say others. A way to mend bones and knit flesh real quick. Both seem likely to me, seeing as the crystal sticks things together so well. Crawls over everything out there, too slow to see but fast enough that you can't deny it. Makes these really tall spikes, sharp and wide, like teeth to chew up anything in their path. That's why it's called Lupus, because it hunts other matter. Seeks it out and eats it up, just like an animal we used to have on our home world, whenever that was. Auntie says it was doing that even before we got here, came along and started cutting the pillars. Spreading the dust everywhere, making new forests of red. Everyone knows that at least, that titbit of history, even if they aren't sure what off-mooners use the stuff for.

Folks here mostly shoot it up. Stick it in their arms and legs and let the crystals crawl through their brains instead, give themselves back the dreams that they gave up on when they came here. It doesn't seem to work on us the same way it does on rocks and metal though, at least not if you use it right. You don't want to breathe it in; then you just get sick, will need a shiny new augment before your lungs turn hard. That's why the Feds built the life domes, so no matter what they did to the moon outside, it wouldn't affect us in here. It's probably also why they don't want people taking the powder, but I haven't seen the capsules kill anyone yet. They'll make you stupid, sure, and leave you aching for more of the stuff. Dumb and hungry, but not dead. Even that takes a long time though, and most of my clients are too busy enjoying the dreams to feel themselves slipping.

Occasionally, a voice will hail me from a window, "Hey, Red", or a shape in an alleyway will nod in my direction. I nod in return, or greet them by their barcodes. This place started as a prison, and while not everyone is a convict anymore, most folks still don't have names. Not



proper ones anyway. Some of them even call their kids like that, A89 or Z27, so it's hard to tell who was shipped out by the Federation and who was born here, like me. I suppose it doesn't matter though. We're all stuck on Lupus regardless. Nothing to do but work and live and dream, or try to leave. Not many can though. Must be why Auntie and me do such good business; most folks can't afford a shuttle, but they can afford a hit.

I've memorized the barcodes of those likely to buy, and don't bother with the others. This has been necessary, a part of doing good business. If the product doesn't move, I don't get paid. Don't get out. But before now, before I was able to think about my ambitions, making sure that Auntie stayed happy also meant that I got to eat. One day I'll go someplace where I'll be known for more than the colour of my cloak and the crimson powder I carry. Maybe I'll learn some real names there, of folks who aren't just sleepwalking.

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As I walk, another series of flashes and beeps come from my wrist. Auntie is calling again, and as I tap the screen, she pops into view. She's wearing another face that I recognize, the one where she's trying very hard not to show that something's upset her. It would be pretty convincing if I hadn't seen it so many times before. When I lived with her, and in times since, when me or one of the other carriers screwed up. Auntie gets stern, Auntie gets mean, but she doesn't get angry, at least not on the outside. It's very important to her that people never see the cracks.

"Red, honey," she squeezes out through pursed lips, "a few boys of mine told me that they'd seen B33 hanging around Crystal Dreams. I asked if they'd mind... picking him up for me, but somehow he's got them spooked. I'm sure that the tech I loaned him isn't *that bad*, but still. They say he's... acting funny." I say nothing, just nod to indicate that I'm listening. Head down and hood up, the commsbox is practically under my nose as I walk. Better that way. I prefer others not hearing my business, especially not with a Federation patrol stamping its way down the other end of the street.

The soldiers pass by without incident, as they usually do. Most wouldn't bother with someone my size and age anyway, and with the cloak I'm wearing, they'd never find what I'm carrying, even if they searched me. Still, caution is a habit by now, and Auntie seems to realize what happened, because she picks right back up the second I raise my head a little. "Anyhow. Be a dear and see if you can find him whilst you're over there. Tell him to get his ass sober and over to my place. We need to have a bit of a chat." Internally, I recoil. I suppose my face shows it, because before I can open my mouth to protest, Auntie is already talking again. "Oh don't give me that look! He won't dare give you any trouble if he knows what's good for him, and besides, you've got that fancy cloak of yours. Now run along and be sure to stop by later. Got plenty more capsules for you!" On that note, she disappears, leaving me stunned.

I can't believe that Auntie would ask me to do this kind of strong-arm work, when she knows how I feel about fighting. She's got men hired for just this kind of thing. Could even drop a line to some of her friends at the Fed garrison, but no, she wants me to do it. Find a grown man who's probably half out of his mind on crystal powder, then tell him to get up and go get fired. Hope that he'll listen, or at least that whatever tech Auntie gave him isn't as good as mine. She has to be testing me. There's no other answer. Wants to see that I deserve the gifts she's given me. That I'm strong enough to take over B33's work, his share of the profits. On that score, I couldn't be happier, though it's not like my feelings count for much either way. Auntie Phage is calling in an old debt.

I jam my hands into the pockets that form at my cloak's sides, stomp my way toward the town square and *Crystal Dreams*. I can feel the tingle of the fabric's semi-sentient proteins against my fingers, recognizing their owner. Their twin. Their daughter. Auntie's gift to a baby whose ma died in childbirth, my swaddling cloth, sibling and surrogate all in one. Made from a bit of ma before they disposed of her, and a bit of me before I even knew to miss her. It's grown up with me, protected me. Grown bigger off my blood over the years, taking only tiny bits at a time. No-one else can wear it, and no-one else can feed it either, seeing as it's attached by a cord to my belly. Still, if I let Auntie down, she'll take it from me just the same.

The fibres feel my distress and start sending warmth across my skin, pumping endorphins into my blood. Trying to cheer me up. It works. Soon I'm looking at the brighter side of things. I was going to *Crystal Dreams* anyway, and so long as I don't screw up, I can expect more help from Auntie. Maybe a date with one of those Federation contacts of hers, or at least more work. That's good too. More work means more credits. A better chance to get off Lupus before I end up stuck here, harvesting crystals till my hands turn hard and my face becomes as dry and hopeless as everyone else's.

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After another ten minutes or so of trekking, the neon sign of *Crystal Dreams* comes into view. Here I'll drop off the last of Auntie's deliveries and perhaps, find B33. In spite of myself, I hope that he's already moved on. Double glass doors hiss open, letting me into a place much cleaner and comfier than most you'll find on Lupus. Bigger than most too, as much a club as it is a bar, though it also offers other excitements upstairs, if you know who to ask. Three stories tall and wide as several prefabs, it's had a long time to grow into what it is now. Auntie used to own it, got it built when Lupus was first founded. Convinced the Feds that even a prison camp needed a bit of entertainment for the troops. That debt slaves who wasted their earnings on drink and dames would spend more time on the moon, more of their lives cutting crystals. They had agreed, and after a time, Auntie had sold the place and got the credits she needed to start her new business. Thrice as much money in it, she'd told me once, and only half the hassle.

A long bar takes up most of the ground floor, stretching from one end of the room to the other. Various droids occupy the back side of it, human shape but cut in half, they're strapped at the waist to rails that run the bar's length, gliding back and forth to serve customers. The rest of the space is taken up by tables. Brown and shiny, the establishment's only human barkeep told me once that they were supposed to look like something called "wood". I nod at him as I enter and he does so in return. A round, bald man with a little moustache, he's more of a droid conductor than anything else, but has been here as long as I can remember. He raises his eyebrows to ask a question and when I nod again, he beckons me closer, slides a sheet of interlocked credit chips across the counter.

My cloak flows like liquid, scoops up and secrets away the payment, before bringing the pods up from its recesses and into my waiting hands. One by one, I hand them over, watch him check each in turn. Inspect it for cracks, making sure that the contents are still dormant. Even after Auntie has prepared the crystals, the powder can still wake up, start trying to spread again, so it has to be kept at a certain temperature. Heat is what the cutters use to break the pillars, and heat is what keeps the stuff quiet until a client gets to melt it. Put it into their warm blood, where the dust dissolves into dreams. Once the barkeep is satisfied, I ask him where I can find B33. His face pales but he says nothing, just jerks his head toward the stairs in the far wall.

On my way upstairs, I pass numerous Federation grunts, helmets off and las-rifles strapped to their backs, all drinking. One floor up, I find even more of them, only now they've ditched most of their equipment, mingled with the common folk. Some stagger around, babbling ecstatic nonsense, harassing the few waitresses that are trying their best to weave through them. Others lounge on the cushions that dot the floor, stare at the walls as though they were the most beautiful thing imaginable. Every pair of eyes is red-flecked, visions refracted through glass. The current owner of *Crystal Dreams* (whoever they are) has kept up a proud tradition started by Auntie, of paying a few people a lot of credits to make sure that this kind of behaviour gets overlooked.

I work my way through the crowd, dodging around the patrons. Whenever one gets too close, my cloak gives them a small, barely perceptible push, helping me clear a path. At the back of the room, lounging on a particularly large stack of cushions, I can see B33.

If everything wrong with Lupus were stuffed into a single person, it would be B33. Skinny and scab-faced, he looks diseased. Even wraps himself in what I think are bandages, though it's hard to tell with all the layers of scraps he wears. I don't think he ever removes clothes, just adds more on top. He's cloaked too, though his is nothing like mine, nothing special about the fabric itself, it's just meant to hide what's underneath: the capsules he carries for Auntie, and the weapons he carries for himself. No idea what those are, only that Auntie wouldn't let someone carry her product unless he could defend himself.

Still, that's not what I hate about him. He's far from being the only dirty, dangerous person on Lupus. It's his attitude, sour and spiteful, as if all the city's ugliness had been sucked under his skin, crowded out most of what makes a person. He's clearly in a haze, head back and arms around himself, sort of twitching while he stares at the ceiling. Nearby, I can pick out a few of Auntie's boys watching him from a not-so-discreet distance, some of the only sober people on this floor, I can identify them by how straight and still they're standing. As I draw closer, B33 jerks, raises his gaze to meet mine.

"Auntie's favourite come to find me, I see," he drawls, doesn't even bother to get up from where he's lying. "Whaddya want? Did she send you to check up on me? Get back the stuffs that she gave me huh? Or maybe..." he trails off there, doesn't continue but starts licking his teeth instead, running his tongue incessantly over the ones right at the front. Another side effect of the crystal; use too much and your gums start to itch.

His eyes are redder than I've ever seen anyone's, bloodshot and swollen, I have yet to see him blink. He might actually have taken all of Auntie's last shipment. How he's still able to speak right now, I don't know, but I stand firm, fists balled in the pockets of my cloak for reassurance. I can feel the fabric already starting to ripple, to pump adrenaline into me. "Phage said that she wants to see you," I finally reply, "She needs to talk. Tried getting a line on the commsbox but couldn't reach you..." B33 snarls and pushes himself half upright.

"That's cos I smashed the damn thing," he waves one hand in the air, displaying the ruined gadget still strapped to his wrist. The skin there is an ugly red, presumably where exposed wires have burned it. "I don't need that bitch popping up every ten seconds to lecture me," he continues, "You can tell her that if she wants me, she can come see me herself. And if she thinks she's gettin' any of this shit back, then she can... she can shove it right... right... nnnnaahhh." B33 doesn't complete his rant, instead brings a hand up to the side of his head, clutches his skull and winces. As I watch, he digs his nails into the skin, drags them down as though he's trying to claw something out. Droplets rise quickly to the surface and he brings his hand up to his face now, examines the wet fingers.Laughs as though his own blood were hilarious.

I can see one of Auntie's thugs flinch nearby, and behind him, someone else. Probably a patron that's noticed the argument, got curious and come for free entertainment. I can feel my heart pounding, sending strength to the cloak, preparing it to shield me if necessary. Still, I press him. "You were supposed to handle tonight's shift," I say, trying to inject some strength into my voice, "Now Auntie's got me filling in, picking up your slack..."

I don't get to finish my sentence. B33 has sprung up from the floor, leapt at me. Strapped to his other hand is something long and sharp. Several things, in fact. A claw of some kind, probably vibro-steel, the same kind of heat blades used to cut crystal... All of this runs through my head as I instinctively shrink. Courage evaporated, I duck down and away, balled up in my cloak, back to my attacker and eyes squeezed shut while I wait for the fabric to do its work.

I remember the few times that it's happened, how I didn't feel much. The garment's proteins at once flowing and turning hard as stone, a sharp-edged shell with a hundred spikes. A hundred whips, flailing to protect the frightened creature inside.

There is the crunch of a heavy weight making contact with a soft object. A bang as something collides with the wall, followed by a scream, and then the predictable stampede of many feet moving simultaneously. After a few moments, the cloak unfurls, apparently no longer sensing any danger.

When I open my eyes, I see B33 flat on his back, knocked out but still intact. Not flayed to pieces, like I expected. Three of Auntie's boys have already grabbed him, are hoisting him up and binding his hands and feet. As I try to figure out what happened, a hand rests heavy on my shoulder, followed by a familiar voice. "Hey, Red. I hoped I'd find ya here."

I turn and look up at the face of Slab, towering over a metre above me. If there is anyone on Lupus that I am glad is not my enemy, it would be him. Each of his hands is nearly the size of my head, their power evident from the cracked paint on the wall, flecks of plaster falling in a rough imprint of B33's body. Slab smiles at me with a face that's all meat, muscles in his neck and forehead arranging themselves along with the rest. After a moment, I manage to smile back.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, "And what do you mean you hoped you'd find me?" Slab's demeanour immediately turns sheepish, and he holds up both hands in deference. "Ahh no, Red. Ya know what I mean. Was jus' havin' a drink downstairs when I saw ya come in, but ya didn't notice me. So I thought I'd come up here and then I saw..." he trails off there, scratches his head, makes vague gesticulations with his thick fingers to indicate the events that just transpired. I regard him for a long moment, narrowing my eyes. "Slab... you know how I feel about you following me."

His charade melts in a second and he hangs his head. A giant in stature, a child in nature. "Fine. I saw ya about a mile back, just after I got done with work for the cycle. I just missed ya, is all," he admits, "Besides, looked like ya could use the help jus' now..." Auntie's goons have got B33 to the stairs by now, though they're having some trouble; he's woken up and is thrashing.

"I was handling myself just fine," I lie, and Slab's expression confirms his scepticism. Still, I don't want to encourage him. Caught him tailing me a couple times over the past year, ducking behind pillars or trying to blend in with the crowd as though he weren't enormous. Whenever I caught him, he'd turn bright red, then pretend to just be about his business. Scared the slag out of me until I realized what an idiot he was, too thick to put words to his feelings, let alone do me any harm.

Some folks on Lupus are born odd. Parents got just a bit of unprocessed crystal in their blood, but that's enough for the baby to come out wrong. Sometimes they're thin as a pipe, but real smart. Other times, big and dumb, like Slab. I've seen a few other kinds too, but the pattern's

always the same. One thing in trade for another. Sometimes, the baby comes out just fine, but the mother dies instead. Slab got lucky, I'd say, and I got lucky that he turned out as sweet as he did.

"Alright, I guess you did good back there," I concede, watching Slab's face light up with real joy; not an expression you see often around here. "Have a drink with me, Red," he says, then starts to pout when I open my mouth to protest. "C'mon, just one," he insists, and finally, I nod. "Alright, but I'll need to give Auntie Phage a call first, let her know what happened. Wait for me downstairs." Slab gives something like a gleeful snort, then stomps back toward the stairwell.

As he turns, I can see that he brought his vibro-cutter with him, kept it strapped to his back even though he's off duty. Thick as my torso and just as long, it's a mercy that he didn't think to use that thing on B33; it only looks blunt until the blade is turned on, starts vibrating fast enough to heat up. Come to think of it, if I saw B33's tech right, it's lucky that Slab showed up when he did; that claw would have cut right through my cloak, through my bones. I feel the fabric give an empathetic shudder, try not to imagine such things and instead start tapping at my commsbox, calling Auntie.

Impatience is etched on her features and I wince, even before she snaps at me. "Well? Did you find him?" I nod and tell her what happened, that B33 had gone off his head, smashed his commsbox and attacked me, but that she could expect her boys to bring him back all bundled up soon. Something resembling satisfaction, even pride, showed on Phage's face, though she hid it quickly. "Wonderful news, Red darling. I'm pleased that you didn't let things get messy." I don't bother to correct her, just accept the compliment. "I trust that you've already finished up with the barkeep, and that I'll see you before the night cycle." With that, she disappears again, leaving me to compose myself and go downstairs. As much a reward for Slab as a tonic for my nerves, I need a drink.

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Downstairs, I find Slab already halfway through his second glass. He's drinking the same acrid, clear liquid that most folks on Lupus do. Looks like water but tastes how I imagine cleaning acid would, yet some people (soldiers especially) swill their glasses and sip the stuff, scrunch up their faces and claim that it's an acquired taste. Maybe I'm just uncultured, but until I get the chance to taste what other Fed colonies have to offer, I take the stuff with about ten squirts of sweetener before I'll drink a drop.

I swing my legs onto a bench across from Slab, grab a plastic bottle and start squeezing flavourant into the glass he's already got for me. Slab takes the stuff neat and can drink copious amounts of it, something to do with his size, I imagine. He's as tall on his backside as most men are standing. Still, I respect that he never gets crazy when he's drunk, and he never judges the way I prefer to drink.

“Isn’t it a bit early to be hitting it that hard?” I rib him. “Been up twelve hours already,” he replies, “Think I’ve earned this one.” For a few minutes, we don’t speak, just sit and let the liquor do its work. Slab is first to break the silence.

“So, what was up with B33?” he asks, downing the rest of his glass, waving one huge hand at the barkeep for another. The bald man waddles over, deposits another two drinks on our table. He indicates with a wink that it’s intended to be my reward, presumably for getting rid of B33. “I don’t know,” I reply at last, “I’ve never seen him like that, not even when a client screwed him over. He’d just get mean, hurt them for a while.” I shudder at the recollection. Taking a long gulp, I continue. “But today he was acting crazy, like some kind of...” I struggle to find a comparison, can’t think of any except the creatures I saw on the edufeds as a child. “Well, he wasn’t acting right, even for a mad bastard like him.”

“It’s them crystals, Red. Ya know how they make folks,” Slab replies, finishing his drink with a sigh and setting the glass down hard for emphasis. “Feds are clampin’ down hard on it lately. All kinds of new checks and rules at the site... somethin’s got ‘em spooked.” I sip my liquor, let him continue. “Some of the cutter boys are freaked out too. Told me that folks are gettin’ sick, that the Feds are shipping ‘em off-moon, throwing ‘em into space!” He pauses, spreads his arms to be dramatic, then goes on. “I dunno about that, but either way...” Slab jerks his head up at the ceiling, indicating the floor above, “They’ll probably shut all this down pretty soon. A good thing if ya ask me, with what just happened.”

I shake my head. “No, it don’t work like that. Crystal might make you grabby, or talk too much, but pretty soon you’re just a lump. I’ve seen folks piss themselves they’re so busy staring at nothing. But I’ve never seen crystal make someone violent, not even a lot of it, and B33 was on a *lot*.” Slab frowns, the meat making great trenches in his brow. “I dunno, Red. Even if it wasn’t the crystals, ya shouldn’t have to deal with pieces of slag like that. Shouldn’t be mixed up in the whole business, if ya ask me.” He has a point about B33, but as for Auntie’s employment, I have no choice. I tell him so and remind him that, while I carry the powder, I don’t touch the stuff myself. He nods approvingly at this, but predictably makes the same offer he always does.

“I could help ya, Red. Make a better life than what Auntie’s got ya doin’. We could build that, together.” As always, his sincerity is charming, the earnestness of a child swearing that it’ll protect something. I don’t doubt him there; it would take a small army to bring down Slab. But just like his name, Slab won’t budge. He had the chance to leave Lupus, worked in the forests till he’d earned a proper name, but still chose to stay. This moon has everything he needs: hard work and hard tack, and me. Except I’m not staying. Slab is probably the nicest person on this rock (at least to me), but his idea of a better life is dull, domestic. Hopeless.

“You helped me plenty already,” I say, finishing my drink and standing up. After a moment, I add, “Thank you for that. I mean it.” Slab reaches out, stops me with a hand on my shoulder. Pointing to the commsbox on his wrist, he says simply, “If ya need anything. *Anything*,” then

lets me go. I look back once as I leave *Crystal Dreams*, see him sitting with his head down, turning his glass round and around in his hands.

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It doesn't take me long to reach the border of Lupus Central, find a path through the cinderblocks to a shuttle station at the edge of the life dome. It does, however, take a while to find a shuttle willing to ferry me to Auntie's place. That's always the problem with doing her deliveries, the fact that she lives miles outside the city. Got her own miniature dome just so she can live in the middle of a crystal forest like some kind of mad hermit. She says it's important to be close to the source of her product, and far from the Feds, but the truth is that she just likes living alone. I think she might have had a husband once, but she certainly doesn't now. Won't share her space with anyone for long.

My mind is elsewhere as the ground shuttle finally takes off, a big metal box kept afloat by hover tracks; can't afford to spend too much time on the ground, grinding through crystal dust, if you want to keep something working on Lupus. Federation troopers below wave neon beacons to signal my departure, and a segment of the dome slides open, releases me into a desert of red and grey.

The shuttle has at least fifty benches, but I sit alone in the travel compartment, bumping along with atmospheric eddies that shake the cabin. Folks don't go this route very often, especially not so close to nightfall, when the temperature outside the domes plummets. This shuttle only agreed to take me because the driver plans to dock at another settlement until the next cycle. With no one to talk to, I look out the window, back at the hemisphere of Lupus Central.

A ghetto under glass, all those ugly blocks with a shiny bubble above. It wasn't always like that, I hear. Auntie tells me that you used to only need a shelter and some supplements, a re-breather when you were cutting crystal pillars, so the dust didn't get into your lungs. But it's not like that anymore. The harvesting changed things, filled the sky with poison, tore up what was there and put down new things. Factories and processing plants. Prefab homes and businesses. The garrison that squats in the middle of it all. After a while, we needed the life domes, she told me. Can't live outside them, not for long. Not much does though, except some plants and bugs, and the crystals. Those are everywhere.

I close my eyes and try to imagine what it must have been like. If Lupus was ever a place that I could have loved. I give up quickly. This is all I've seen, and I can't imagine much more than what the edufeds have shown me. Even those didn't give me much to go by. Instead, I tap at the commsbox to call Auntie. I realize now that I dawdled too long with Slab, and again at the shuttle station. Now nightfall isn't far off, and I won't be able to find transport back to Central. She'll have to let me stay till morning.



Auntie Phage's face appears on the screen. She looks agitated, tired. Lips drawn thin and eyes sunken. When she speaks, there is a savage edge to her voice. "Yes, Red, what is it? Why are you calling me?" I'm taken aback, start to stammer. "I just wanted to confirm that I'm heading over... and umm, that I'll be there soon." "Why did you feel the need to call me just to say that?" she snaps, "You know the passcodes to my dome. Just come in and collect the capsules when you arrive." "Well, Auntie, that's just the thing" I continue, "the cycle's almost over and uh... the shuttles will stop running soon. I'll probably have to stay the night." Her eyes widen, lips curling as though she intends to curse me, but instead she pauses, considers this. "Yes... that's fine," she says, "Not much you can do about that, and I suppose that today has been... extenuating."

In spite of myself, I almost smile at her. It's not like Auntie to make concessions, especially when they're liable to cost her credits. Then a thought occurs to me. "What about B33?" Auntie waves a hand dismissively. "My boys brought him back and I reclaimed what was mine. A good thing too. The man was completely off his head, could barely communicate. He even tried to bite me! Imagine that." My face must show my shock, because Auntie laughs, an unsettling sound for how little humour is in it.

"So... what did you do with him?" I ask eventually. "Oh, we tossed him outside the dome. Into the wild, where he belongs." I consider this for a moment. B33 wandering the desert, insane and starving. The temperature drop should kill him, I realize. I hope. "Alright then," I say, "See you soon," and end the conversation with a tap. Squeeze my eyes shut and pull the cloak tight around me, wait for the flow of endorphins to start.

Soon, pillars of red are sweeping past my window, the shuttle weaving its way into the crystal forest. The spikes are taller here, have existed for longer. As the growth site nearest to Central, it's never been cleared entirely, so they can send cutters every year or so to make a haul, rather than rely on forests further off. Deeper into the mass of spikes is a dome like the one covering the city – Auntie's personal habitat.

As I approach the compound, I'm struck as always, by its size. Enough room to house a score of people, yet she lives alone. Shares the space with only the machines she uses for production, and the ones she uses to keep herself alive. I don't know how many augments she's gotten over the years, but I know it's plenty. They've kept her going since before Lupus was settled, at least, but they take maintenance. Recharging and refitting. Part of the house is just for that, machines to make sure she doesn't fall apart. That's all she cares about, I think. The business is just a way to make sure she can afford to keep doing so.

I saw those machines when I lived there, before I was old enough to take care of myself. Six or seven, I think she said it was, though I just remember it as the time after Dad's lungs stopped working. The time before Auntie found a use for me. She was warmer then; I remember that too. The heat of her hand when she took me from Dad's prefab in Central, back to the room that I'd

occupy for the next eternity. How she would untangle me from the cloak before I learned to wear it properly, or brush my hair and tell me how pretty I was, how much like my Ma.

I think Auntie still missed her back then, was still looking for Ma in me. It was only later that she told me what the cloak was made of. To think that she'd consider taking it away from me, even now... it doesn't seem right. But then, Auntie isn't warm anymore, hasn't been in a long time.

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The shuttle arrives at last, touching the red earth with barely a sound. A green light flickers on, accompanied by a dull tone, indicating that I'm expected to leave. I retrieve my re-breather from the depths of my cloak, fasten it over my nose and mouth. Then, goggles for my eyes. The rest is quickly sealed up by my cloak, adhering to me like a second skin. My feet crunch on the sand, countless tiny shards, and I cast my eyes about as the shuttle becomes airborne again.

I'm half expecting to see B33 lurch into view, a broken and bloody shape peeled free from behind a pillar. But the forest is silent, not even wind to disturb the particles. If I stand still, I imagine I can hear the crystals growing, congealing, climbing upward.

Approaching the air lock of Auntie's dome, I see two security drones swing toward me. Turrets with emotionless eyes, they track me as I reach the outer door, press my hand to a waiting plate, giving the security system my identity. The cloak's skin peels back just long enough for me to do this. After a moment, the plate is sucked away, replaced with a keypad, indicating that so far, I've been accepted.

I punch in the code that Auntie gave me, the same one I've had for years. The keys flash red in unison, then back to neutral, but nothing else happens. I try again, but again, the same response, the air lock staying firmly shut. A moment of panic as the guns swivel down to stare at me, but I calm myself. They won't fire unless I loiter for more than ten minutes, I know that. Or unless I get the code wrong one more time.

Unsheathing my wrist from the cloak's dermis, I call Auntie on the commsbox for the umpteenth time today. She's probably just changed the codes, being extra careful after things went wrong with B33. Must be. The screen remains in neutral, gently flashing green as I wait for her to answer. Nearby, I imagine I can see a shape moving among the crystal pillars.

Still no answer, my pulse starting to rise as over a minute ticks down. My cloak can't shield me from the turrets; it's only meat and thread, and las fire would rip through it in seconds. I could take cover behind the pillars, maybe, but for how long? Until nightfall brings cold deep enough to crack my bones? Until B33 finds me again? My cloak can't protect against him either, not while staying air-tight. Auntie is still not answering, and I consider calling Slab. Get him to bring one of the cutter team's trucks out to collect me. From somewhere not too far away, I can hear the sound of crunching. Footsteps in the sand.

Running comes to mind. Away from the turrets. Away from what can only be B33, deranged and desperate to find shelter – I don't want to imagine what he'll do if he finds me. I give up on Auntie and start walking rapidly away from the airlock, putting through a call to Slab. And then, finally, she answers.

"Red?" she asks, "Is that you?" She sounds far away, the voice of someone struggling to surface from sleep. "Yes it's me!" I practically screech into the commsbox, "Open the door before your bloody turrets blast me!" My urgency seems to rattle her awake, her image shifting on the screen as she fiddles with something I can't see. Behind me, the air lock hisses open and I sprint for it, only allowing myself to breathe once I'm through the double doors, behind the thick glass of the dome.

Still panting, I turn and scan the forest for any sign of B33, find nothing. Fear is soon replaced by anger and after a moment, I bring the commsbox back up to my face, glare at Auntie's image. "Why did you change the codes?" I demand, "Could've warned me before..." I stop short as I notice her expression. Her eyes are huge, bloodshot and staring.

"Auntie... your eyes..." I say, and with visible effort, she blinks. "Oh that? Nothing to worry about, dear. Just had to refresh them, get one of my chambers to recharge the ocular modules. You know, the better to see you with." She laughs, the sound coming out slightly hysterical. I struggle to remember whether Auntie ever got vision augments, but can't recall. I suppose she must have.

"Well you could've at least..." I begin, but Auntie turns her head away, ignores me, more interested in something off-screen. "Yes, yes," she says at last, "I'm doing some maintenance right now, actually. Just wait a little. In your old room, perhaps..." then cuts the call. Quietly seething, I make my way inside.

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The home is the same as always: sterile, cold. Shades of white on every surface, broken up only by large mirrors set into the walls, at least one per room. Auntie likes to admire the body she's built for herself. The one exception is my old room where I made sure not to have any. Got Auntie to reprogram the walls so that they'd shift, make me a window instead.

Same goes for my prefab back in Central, the box that I got when I couldn't stand to live with her anymore and used some of the credits I'd earned to get my own place. But still, no mirrors. Lupus may be ugly, but I'd rather look at that ugliness than spend all day staring at my reflection. Auntie and I are alike in some ways, but not in this. I don't need to see myself to know that I'm somebody.

The door slides open at a touch, still recognizes my hand print. Mine and mine only – I made sure of that, needed a sanctuary sometimes. It's not much different now, only cleaner. A sterile

box with a bed and storage unit. The floor-to-ceiling cylinder of the synth-chef and across from that, the blank rectangle of the edufeed, its screen turned off and cables tucked away for now. A side door leads to a hygiene chamber, but that's it. Everything is white and featureless, no sign that anyone had ever lived here except for two shallow imprints, one on the mattress and another on the floor, near the edufeed. I stand in the doorway, trying to remember the last time I did anything meaningful in this room.

All I get are fragments. Memories chopped up and mixed with recollections of manufactured meals (hot, dry, tasteless) and an education poured into my head through a tube. The properties of Lupus crystal. Auntie's warm hand through my hair. The Federation's history of conquest. Dad's lungs turned to stone. The latest off-moon fashions. My cloak coiling around me at night, whispering to me. A diagram of *Canis lupus*, the colony's proud predecessor. Auntie's cold hand against my face: shaped like a human's hand, coloured like one, but cool and smooth as glass. "What's wrong?" she'd asked, when she found me crying, when something in my head told me that I should see an absence in my living unit, though it had all I needed to stay alive. "I understand," she'd said, "You think you need him."

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It must be time now. She has to be finished with her augment re-fits, so I leave those thoughts behind in the white box. Close the door with another touch on the security pad and head toward the basement. The floor below surface level is where Auntie keeps the crushers and refiners needed to process the crystals, turn them into something a little less like poison. It's also where she keeps the maintenance chambers, away from the rest of the home. Anything impure or imperfect kept well out of sight. There's a security door here too, at the bottom of the stairs, another camera regarding me as I approach. Fortunately, this lock is open and slides away to let me into Auntie's workshop.

Dark down here, and hot. Everything smells of chemicals, the air recycled and sterilized, it bites at your nose. The passage straight and long, I walk past pipes and thrumming machinery for what feels like a long time. Here and there are vats of red liquid: superheated Lupus crystals. Tables and conveyor belts are set at regular intervals, droids fused to workstations, packing and processing. Even now, they unnerve me. The dull glow of their eyes in the dark, the spidery shape of their limbs. Not at all like those back in the bar – friendly, inoffensive puppets – these aren't meant to be seen. Kept underground, only a child wandering where she's not supposed to go would find them. I hurry past, fixing my eyes ahead, and try to ignore the old horror of being watched by things that move but aren't alive.

The apparatus at last gives way to a cleaner space, the passage widening out into a circular room of polished steel. Pods and chairs and data banks around its circumference, man-sized capsules that hold and change their occupants, fix them while they sleep. A droid-manned surgery table

stands in the centre, dormant, for now. Every surface is spotless. Every device built for the same purpose: to make a person perfect. Auntie's beauty chamber.

She stands near the far wall, her back to me, partly shrouded by the steam from a large cylinder nearby. Clouds of vapour hiss from its innards, presumably having just released her from maintenance. I try to recall the purpose of that particular machine and seem to remember that it cycles her blood. Auntie herself wears only a dressing gown, though it is more of a robe. Loose and flowing, the white fabric covers all but her head, concealing even her hands and feet. She's noticed me by now and glides across the floor toward me, smiling. Her eyes, I notice, are still bloodshot.

"Red, sweetie," she croons, drawing closer, "you don't know how happy I am to see you." I start to form a response, some way to spite her perhaps, or thank her, or turn the conversation to our trade, what rewards I can expect. But none of that comes out. What does is, "Auntie, are you sure you're alright?"

She's almost crossed the room now, gives that same discordant laugh from before and says, "Yes, honey, yes, I'm fine. Just need a little more help..." I take one step back, then two. Towards the door, though I don't know why. But she's already in front of me, right there, and she is tall and thin and perfect and oh so old, and I am small and so very young.

A hand on my shoulder now. Hard and heavy, as I remember it, but something else too. Warm. Hot. Feverish. "You've been a good girl, Red," she says, trailing her hand down my neck, over my chest, down to my belly. Something sharp pricks my skin and the cloak has begun to ripple across my back. "Auntie just needs one more thing from you..." The words reach me as her fingers pinch the cord at my navel. She's smiling at me now, and I can see that her gums are bleeding.

A question forms on my lips, is expelled on a tide of air as Auntie Phage tears at my stomach, tries to rip the cloak's tether from its root. Hideous pain, my guts unwound, my knees meeting the hard floor. The fabric reacting before I can think, lashing out to defend me. Auntie recoils, lets go in time to dodge the tendril that's snaked out toward her, sliced through her gown before retracting. I try to stand, find that I cannot, but realize that my abdomen is still intact. Pain lending me clarity now, filtering the world back to me through sharp edges, clear enough to see her rise, fabric slipping to the floor, revealing her naked body.

She is a patchwork, plates of plastic and chrome interspersed with older, still living flesh. The augmented bits are clean, immortal, holding her in the shape of a woman many years younger. But the skin is inflamed, with rashes and visible veins. Dark purple bruising. It is worst close to her neck, the puckered wound of a bite mark, its edges pulsing and dotted with small, red crystals.

“Red, baby, please,” she says, stepping forward, “Your Auntie is very sick. Just needs a little help. A little bit of something still healthy...” She gropes for me as I scrabble backwards, somehow regain my feet and put distance between us. Concentrating now, willing the cloak to defend me. The fabric expands, stretches out to attack her, but stops short. Tendrils curling at the tips and retreating, even as she advances. The proteins send signals to me that feel like fear. The horror of infection.

I think to speak, open my mouth to make an appeal to reason, to family. Yet even as I watch, crystals begin to crawl over her teeth. And so, I run.

Out of the beauty chamber, back through the refinery, my cloak clinging tight and hot to my breast like a scared animal, and Auntie’s bare feet slapping the steel behind me. Up the stairs and to the security lock, watch it slide open and count the seconds till I can squeeze through, shove myself between door and wall just as she slams into it. Hear her howl in frustration as I reach the foyer, moments left to make a plan.

Escape the dome. Out the front door and into the desert and hope that my cloak can keep me warm through the night cycle. No. The security will be back on, keeping me trapped as Auntie splays my flesh across the glass. To my room then. Round the corner with head pounding and still the sound of feet on the tiles just seconds behind. Slap my palm against the lock pad and step inside even before the door has fully slid open and then... Auntie’s hands around my arm, nails digging into my skin.

I hear myself screaming, feel myself kicking, trying to yank my arm free, even as crystalline fingers lacerate it. Long ribbons of red pulled all the way down from the elbow. Something catches, pulls free as Auntie tumbles backwards. The commsbox.

My hand finds the security pad on the reverse wall, smears across its surface, sends the door hissing shut even as she reaches out, crushing her limb as it closes. The sound is like breaking glass.

I hear Auntie’s howling as though from far away, muffled by the thick door, drowned out by the sound of my own blood pumping. The cloak does its best to protect me. Flows down my shoulders and wraps tight around my forearm, compressing the torn flesh. Pumping adrenaline and sugars into me.

A voice, soft and feminine, whispers that I’m going into shock; that I need to call for help while I still can. Instinctively, I raise my arm, realize that the commsbox has been ripped away and is lying on the other side of the door, with Auntie. My arm falls back to the floor, and my head with it.

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Time passes. Consciousness trickles across the clean tiles. I am aware of walking, or maybe crawling, to the bed. To the window beside it. Looking out through the layers of glass and seeing Lupus under the night cycle. Far off lights from Central, a glimmering dome. A forest of teeth between us, red turned to black under the stars. In my blood, those same teeth gnaw at me.

It does not hurt. Or maybe, it is that the pain doesn't belong to me, is only felt by parts that I'm leaving behind. I drift, and I dream. Of being held. Of being whispered to. Of being warm.

Then, heat. Heat that rolls in waves through the room, melting everything. No, just the door, sheets of white crinkling and scorching. The whining, popping hiss of plastics. A single, great finger of fire smearing the entrance, reducing it to slag. A vibro-cutter. Struggling to sit up, unable to feel half my body. Seeing a mountain stoop to enter, a figure wrapped in heavy insulation. "Red," it says, and then, "No..." Draws closer, cutter still on, heat unbearable. Collapsing back onto the bed even as a hand pushes me down, watching the blade rise to the ceiling. "I'm so sorry" are the words I think I hear, and then everything is fire. White. Searing. Red. Black.

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White, again. A light shone into my eyes. When at last it recedes, it is replaced by a face that I do not know, clean and concerned. "Miss... Red?" it asks. I find the strength to nod. Air passes between my lips, an attempt at words, but no speech emerges. The face pulls away and my world expands, revealing a place I do not recognize. Quiet, curtained. Sounds of distant activity as from behind closed doors and down long passages. The only familiar feature is the giant seated at my bedside, face scrunched up and wringing his hands in worry. Slab.

The doctor speaks again. I know he's a doctor now, have recognized the insignia on his coat and realized that I must be in the garrison's med ward, back at Central. Nowhere else makes sense. "We've run... quite a lot of tests on you, Miss Red, and it seems the Lupus prions did not manage to completely substitute your base proteins. Remarkable, really, given the amount that had already been transmitted." My face must register incomprehension, because he sighs, holds up a translucent vial for me to see. Inside is a strip of meat. Across it, tiny crystals swarm.

"An infection. You're not the first we've seen in here, but you are one of the few in which we've seen Lupus crystals behave like this. We've known about the effects on the respiratory system for some time now, of course, and its properties as an addictive hallucinogen, but these cases of aggression and cellular decomposition are much more recent. Previously unheard of." I struggle to piece together what he's saying, scraps of meaning absorbed with the steady drip of fluids from an IV bag.

"Typically, these symptoms only manifest in those who heavily consume Lupus as a narcotic. The refinement process cannot hope to eliminate the prions responsible for the crystal's growth." He casts an eye in my direction before continuing. "Though in your case, and that of Madame

Phage, it seems that transmission can be far more... direct.” The doctor has found his stride now and is set to continue when Slab interrupts him. Predictably, he wants to know if I’ll be alright. “Yes, she will live,” he answers with visible irritation, “though she will undoubtedly require a prosthetic. Expensive, those.” It is then that I realize my arm is missing.

Something in the back of my brain insists that I should panic, a little girl screaming at the top of her lungs. But she sounds very far away, muffled by cloth, and moving more than my head feels like an impossible effort. I let softness envelop me. Don’t fight it.

The doctor is talking to Slab now. “Your cauterization helped, I suppose. Slowed the rate of infection. But her symbiote is the real reason. Filtered her blood... Very rare, those things. An adaptive placenta! Incredible. And not *technically* illegal I believe...” His voice fades in and out of hearing, but I become aware once more of my cloak. A soft pulsing at my navel, slow and weak. Without looking, I know that it’s shrivelled. Injured. A ball of red curled up on my belly. I wonder how much of it died to keep me alive.

I fall into sleep for a time, but wake to the sound of conversation. The doctor has his back to me and talks animatedly to someone in uniform. I catch snippets like “mass recall” and “epidemic”, alongside Auntie’s name and “cybernetics fetish”. Occasionally they cast glances in my direction, but eventually wander off, leaving me alone. My mouth is so dry, but there is no-one in my curtained box to ask for water. I let my head fall back, blink, stare at the ceiling. Try to count the tiles embedded there. Lose track and start again. After a while, the sound of footsteps. And then, Slab’s face looms above mine, worry etched into every feature. “I’m so sorry, Red,” he says.

I don’t reply, and he takes that as his queue to continue. “It’s just that there were those things all the way up ya arm, and I didn’t know what to do so I just... I’m just, I’m so sorry,” he concludes, hanging his head. I try speech again. Carefully roll air in my throat and squeeze it out through my lips in a way that will make sound. “How did...?” is as far as I get, but it’s enough for him to understand.

“Heard there was some loon wanderin’ outside the forest near night cycle. Thought it mighta been one of the boys, so I went to check. Took a truck and insu-suit, but found that piece of work B33 near your Auntie’s. He was actin’ crazy, just screamin’ and swingin’ at me. Had to defend maself.” He pauses, runs a thick hand over the stubble on his chin. “After that... I thought I should check on ya.”

I take a moment to process this, try to imagine how B33 could possibly have survived the cold, even for a few hours. How the crystal had rearranged his body to do that. What parts it had strengthened, and what parts it had shut down. I give up quickly, try to speak again instead. This time, it’s a little easier. “What about Auntie?”



Slab averts his eyes, stays quiet. “Please, Slab...” I prompt him, and he sighs. “Found her outside ya room, on the floor. She was... broken, Red. Like B33, ‘cept much worse. It seemed like the right thing to do.” I look at him in silence for a long moment, watch him open his mouth as if to speak again. But I have already closed my eyes.

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We do not speak further, and sleep takes me back before long. I awake at intervals, unsure of which face will greet me each time I regain consciousness. Sometimes a nurse, checking the machines that surround me, or placing a warm tray of food on my chest. Other times, Slab, saying nothing, just sitting and watching me. Or the man in uniform, asking for answers to questions that I don’t understand. Mostly, the doctor, poking at the fleshy lump curled against my stomach. His probing elicits weak shocks from it, small pulses of warmth that flow through the umbilical cord, up and into me.

Time passes and I dream. Auntie’s face floating in blackness. B33’s. The faces of every addict I ever fed. Red eyes, by the thousand. Bodies locked in crystal, dreaming of their deaths. Until I awake.

Slab sits by my bedside, as I realize he must have done every day since I’ve been here. As I realize he must have paid for my treatment. “How did you get the credits, Slab,” I ask him outright, “for all of this?” He perks up, unclasps his hands and regards me seriously. “From ya Auntie’s place,” he answers, “Found ‘em upstairs. Sheets and sheets of credits. More than I can carry, and I can carry a lot.” A hot surge cuts through my head, the voice of that little girl again, telling me I should be angry at this, outraged. Until I realize how ridiculous that is. “Thank you,” I say instead, and he beams at me.

“That’s not all I got ya!” he continues, rubbing his hands together eagerly. “I spoke to the doc and he says we can get ya an augment. A fix for uuh... for ya arm. ‘Course we’ll have to go off-moon for that...” I feel my eyes widen. Desires belonging to another lifetime rushing back all at once. I consider this for a moment, trying not to show excitement. “We?” I ask, to which Slab responds simply, “Of course.”

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I cannot sleep this night, the last I’ll ever spend on Lupus. Our shuttle is booked for early in the next cycle, bound for a colony the name of which I cannot pronounce, and do not care that I can’t. Instead, I lie awake, right hand resting on my stomach, on the warm mass nestled there. It’s started to grow again, excreted the crystals’ toxins, replacing its form with tiny sips from my bloodstream. I nurture it now, as I did throughout my life, only this time, consciously. I will it to live and be strong, as it once did for me, long before I can remember.

Sleep does come eventually, a warm and total darkness, unbroken by colour. Yet within that darkness, I am not alone. Another is there with me, and I feel her encompassing everything. Holding me, loving me, and giving me a name.

*“Just squeeze the juices into your inkwells and dip your pens. You may need to give your thoughts a bit of petting beforehand, or a little prodding, but be gentle with them. Be patient.”*

*The woman seated across from me began to stroke her row of thoughts with the back of her pen, while the sad man heaved the sack off his neck and stoically kneaded its folds. I reached down to my ankle and found a leach-like thought attached there. Gently, I prized it off and placed it in front of me. A few taps with my quill and it began to quiver, then ooze. I dipped my pen into the liquid. The page filled, the ink dried, the thought shrank, and was gone.*

## The Mistakes

We've made camp inside a head we found, deep in the forest. It's big enough for all of us, provided we make clever use of the compartments. Lots of those around, of all sizes. Getting to some of them will be difficult, as the railing has started to fall apart in places, but that's alright. We can shelter on the main deck for now, and there's enough wood around for us to rig up some bridges. The cabins will need work. Scooping out wires or wrenching open blast doors always takes time, but refuge in here is preferable to our chances outside. The hull is thick, mostly intact; we could make a life here.

The preparation will take time. Time and harvesting. For that we need daylight and greater numbers, the others who will come once they have salvaged whatever can be carried from our last settlement. Daylight will come much sooner. It is great Geth's gift to us, to those who persist, but still we must wait. The ash and shadows are thick beyond the hull of this head, and so we draw close, seek warmth in pressed-together bodies.

We speak in low clicks, pass the time with stories. Of clever Kuld, who could find food wherever he walked, led his kin free of famine. Of the Soil Queen who sustains us, and of Geth who lights our labours. We tell the little ones what we know, and what they must always remember. And as the skull of our shelter echoes from the gale outside, we tell them of the mistakes.

The mistakes are easy to see. The big ones, that is. You might not notice the bits of fiberglass and steel scattered across the soil, or the struts and wires that jut out of the ocean. You wouldn't miss the whales, might not realize that no more than twenty species of bird are still to be found. But these are the small mistakes.

Some of them are more obvious, but you could still miss them, if you didn't know where to look. Geth has shown them to us, revealed them as we toil beneath his warm gaze. The places where we should not go. Lifeless lakes and bone-white forests, deserts where it rains only ash. The holes in the sky.

The Soil Queen helps us remember, lets us trace the places where her belly was gouged and her eyes cut out, the scars that cross continents. It is important that we do not forget what happened. That is because all of these little mistakes tend to go unnoticed. But not the big ones; those you can't miss.

No-one knows just how many of them there were, yet you can see them from just about anywhere, such is their size. They make convenient landmarks. One of them is lying just off the coast, head and hands still visible above the waves. Another is clinging to the mountain range north of here, its face smashed against the rocks and its fingers lodged much deeper, having gouged out tunnels on either side. There's a settlement somewhere up at the top there, we know, and the mistake must have been trying to reach it. It can't have made it though, with its body

snapped in half. Everything below the waist is lost, but that's not unusual; most of the mistakes are in pieces. We are thankful for this one, the head in which we now shelter.

We will wait here until the others arrive. They shouldn't have trouble finding us, though they are weeks away, judging by the strength of our signal. Fortunately, the path is clear, marked out by the mistakes. An arm and a leg flank the trail away from our former settlement, making a great arch as they lean against one another. We told the others to follow the coastline until they see the mistake bathing in the ocean, and from there to head north, toward the one with its face buried in the mountain. Once they reach the forest, they will see our head looming above the trees. It will be easy enough to convene.

When there are more of us, the work will go quickly. We can begin the building, the planting, the breeding. Our scouts are searching the forest for the rest of this mistake; an arm might serve as a nursery for plants, while a torso could house hundreds. There are dangers, but we reassure the young ones. We can deal with the little mistakes, find food wherever we walk. There is less, yes, but still enough. Enough warm places to hide, enough grasses to chew, water to sip, slowly and carefully, and only where it runs clear.

We can turn our eyes from the little mistakes. In fact, we barely have to. The Soil Queen has begun to erase them, bury them deep and scab them over with new green, new blood and new shapes whose hooves and paws press the broken glass and metal down into soft, fresh dirt.

The rain fills up footprints made by the mistakes, Geth's tears, creating new lakes. The forest regains its colour, wraps its roots around the giants and pulls them apart, drinks their metals back into itself. The holes in the sky will close too, now that the mistakes no longer claw at the clouds. In time perhaps, even the birds will come back.

But not man. Man made his mistakes and all the world now lives inside them. We navigate by their broken limbs, watch the waves wash through their rib cages. We take mankind's mistakes and change them, build our nests inside their heads. Our mandibles re-shape the metal. Our antennae caress the ancient control panels.

We are what's left, since man went away. Larger now, as big as he, or bigger. The young ones hold up old bones against their chitin for comparison. Yet we can never be bigger than man's mistakes, never let him commit the same errors. We watch now, with our many eyes, watch for the return of man to the places he once walked. The graveyards of giants, steel corpses waiting to be rebuilt, revived.

Though we live within them now, man made them in his image. They look like him, so we think it is fitting that they are all broken now. And should man return to make the same mistakes, we will break him too.

*I went home to my study and cleared a space on my desk, brushing aside the amoeboid orbs that had gathered there. I slapped down a stack of blank paper, and the thoughts throughout the house seemed to quiver as one.*

*I started with a tiny one, close at hand – I would get to the larger ones in due course. I had plenty of paper, and plenty of time. Rolling the little thought slowly between thumb and forefinger, I let it droop into the inkwell the lecturer had given me. I dipped my pen and began to write.*

END

## **PART B: PORTFOLIO**

# Creative Writing Portfolio

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing (MACW)

Rhodes University

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## Contents

Introduction.....	70
Book Reviews .....	72
Strange Influences - Inviting the Aliens of Inspiration and Banishing the Demons of Doubt .....	76
Reflective Journals.....	88
The Holy Chore of Writing.....	89
The Writer and His Audience .....	92
Finding My Voice .....	98
The Nature of Horror .....	102
Key Techniques .....	108
Writing in the Community Assignment.....	111
External Reader's Report.....	118



## Introduction

This portfolio serves as a collection of critical documents produced during the Masters in Creative Writing course through Rhodes University. It includes various works, both formal and informal, which served to structure my development during the programme and which now serve as record of that growth. These pieces have not been arranged in strictly chronological order, but in a sequence which might best showcase the trajectory of my learning. Here follows a short description of each of the included documents.

The book reviews are brief takes on texts which I had read by that point of the course, specifically those five which I had found to be most noteworthy or relevant to my research. This exercise served a two-fold purpose, at once allowing students to organize their thoughts about influential readings, and giving them the opportunity to practice an editorial style of writing, a skill that any aspirant author would do well to learn.

The included essay served as a major milestone for the course, a dissertation geared toward critical self-analysis, with a view to locating and better understanding one's position and trajectory as a writer. Much of this pertained to identifying influential voices among theorists and fellow authors, though students were also encouraged to compare these ideas both to one another and to their own work. As such, the piece has something of a conversational tone, despite the more formal format, being as much about introspection as academic discourse.

The reflective journals section serves as something of a research history, being a compilation of insights gleaned from the bi-monthly musings which students produced throughout the course. While the source materials were diverse in nature and relatively informal in tone, the collection included in this portfolio aims to formalize these writings somewhat. While the original documents' contemplative style has been preserved to a degree, the information taken therefrom has been organized under distinct themes, providing a record of watershed moments which I underwent during the programme, including the texts and tasks that catalysed them.

The writing in the community assignment is a write-up dedicated to a group-work assignment conducted toward the end of the course's first year. Students were tasked with collaboratively running writing workshops for the public, choosing a specific audience (at any level of education) and then crafting a short programme for said audience. Students were further required to conduct these programmes personally and record their results, both in terms of their workshops' efficacy and the intention behind their pedagogical choices.

The reader's feedback section is a short, contemplative document written in response to input received from an external critical reader, one who provided a thorough review of the creative writing in my draft thesis. With this being a Masters in creative writing, my thesis was not a formal dissertation but rather a collection of short stories, these making up the bulk of my work in this course. Regardless, they were subject to critical review; as such, an unpacking of the

feedback received is necessary. This covers my feelings about the review, both positive and negative, as well as planned revisions to the collection before final submission.

I have arranged the above-mentioned documents in the order which I feel best represents my trajectory as a writer, beginning with the book reviews and introspective essay, as they cover much of the theoretical ground which I re-tread in the compiled journals that follow. I conclude with the community project write-up and reader feedback sections, as they reflect a more mature attitude and were produced at a later point in the course, chronologically speaking.

## Book Reviews

**My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me** – Various authors; edited by Kate Bernheimer

I had anticipated reading this collection since before the course began, and was not disappointed when I finally got my hands on it. Here we find a genuine celebration of the fairytales and folk stories of old, coupled with a willingness to deploy their characters and themes in surprising, disturbing and thought-provoking ways. Rumpelstiltskin leads a quiet life of melancholy after his tantrum left him torn in half. The Bremen Town musicians are a collection of the dead and damned, and the child-hunting Erl King stalks the pleasant lawns of a Waldorf school.

Anyone with an interest in mythology and folklore will naturally gravitate toward this book, but one needn't be a fan of fairytale to enjoy it. Rather than a simple grab bag of myth-inspired stories, this collection is a tribute to the influence which folklore has had upon our lives and our worlds, and how it continues to do so. We feel as though we are at a show, a grand play featuring characters beloved from childhood, here to draw us anew into the wondrous lands they inhabit. Indeed, the opening piece of this compilation takes exactly that as its premise, setting the tone for the reader's journey.

Featuring the unique voices of over thirty writers, this collection is exceptionally diverse, showcasing work as varied in length, style and tone as the boundless well of symbolism from which it draws. There is truly something for everyone here, from experimental pieces to humorous renditions of classic tales. What's more, each author provides an addendum to their submission, giving readers the chance to better grasp and appreciate the works and of course, discover new writers too.

The highest praise I can offer this collection is that it recaptures the magic of our most ancient stories, not simply re-establishing the figures of fairytale in our modern world, but reminding us that they never left.

**The Apocalypse Reader** – Various authors; edited by Justin Taylor

Apocalypse, the tearing of the veil to reveal truth, is every author's preoccupation. What writer has not contemplated the end of everything? The end of the world they've written, the end of their protagonist's dreams, youth or ten-part epics. As authors, we are fundamentally concerned with endings, ways in which it might all come apart, or resolve itself anew into something beautiful. We dig with our words, trying to uncover something more essential, more vital, from the topics we mine. We are all in search of some apocalypse, big or small, and for that I consider this collection essential reading.

The highest praise I can offer is that I read it from cover to cover. A compilation of short stories which I had intended to only browse instead carried me through its various works with alarming ease. Each new piece presented a fresh take on collapse, on meaning found when it all falls down. From a snide take on the cliché zombie apocalypse, to characters who find revelations within themselves as they break apart their bodies, relationships and realities, this collection gives the reader plentiful insights into how we might be our own undoing, and our own saviours.

It is also a celebration of the short story as a format, pulling the reader into one tableau after another while the author digs for what lies deeper. This is not always a comfortable experience, but no matter the tone, each piece is affecting, and offers the reader a nugget of truth. Be it gold, diamond or dross, these stories give us something to take back and contemplate after.

### **Dreams of Amputation – Gary J. Shipley**

Not since Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have I encountered such a harrowing vision of the future. As the book's title implies, this is an examination of humanity, its norms, its tropes, its hopes and fears and of course, its flesh. Coupling cynical social commentary and extraordinarily morbid sci-fi, *Dreams of Amputation* couches its philosophy within a world gone mad.

But what distinguishes this from any other dystopian sci-fi? For me, it has been the contemporary nature of this nightmare, its awareness of how our own wants, our own fleshy urges, may be our undoing. It knows that we as a species are less likely to face domination at the hands of an evil government than we are to craft our own downfall through consumerism, tech obsession and media voyeurism. As Facebook and reality TV have at once made us ever more interconnected and yet supremely self-absorbed, this author asks at what point we stop. When are we truly desensitized? When does pretence fall away and the viewing public admit that what it truly craves is snuff and perversion, novelty at all costs? What kills art?

Here the author does not re-tread the tired ground of questioning what constitutes oppression, what societal system might save or damn us all. Rather, he examines whether humanity itself, these bodies from which our every thing stems, is what we actually want. The ghouls and mutants of this dystopia do not simply take up space in a sci-fi setting, but present the reader with various warped outlooks on the world, each unique in its awfulness. Is it better to live out one's life in a box, or abandon humanity altogether? Become a beast or become flesh-less lines of code? We are asked again and again from where we derive meaning and what, ultimately, makes us happy.

Make no mistake, this is not light reading. Shipley's style is often physically uncomfortable, and his premise is certainly so. The writing flows from richly poetic to stark and terrifying, getting under one's skin and sticking in the brain. However, for all the horror which this grim vision of the future offers, it is not horror for its own sake. The questions which this work asks, and its willingness to look humankind in the eyes and keep looking, make it a strong entry on my top 5

list. Fascinating in its philosophies, this book is a thought-provoking ride for those willing to endure its imagery.

### **Bad Brains – Kathe Koja**

Easily the most affecting piece I've read all year, Kathe Koja's *Bad Brains* is an incredible bit of horror writing. For those whom the word 'horror' denotes fanged beasts chasing the hapless down darkened hallways, think again. As its title implies, this book excels at creeping beneath the reader's skin, finding a way to occupy those familiar spaces in our hearts and heads and gradually pollute them, to make us feel unsafe where once we felt most at home.

Neither a simple slasher story, nor a gorefest crafted to revolt the reader, this is an exercise in plumbing that most frightening concept of all: madness. To be cut off from the conventional, marooned from one's fellow man, as language, rationality and all the senses give way to things we cannot understand. What might we see when we lose our minds? What might we learn? When fear and pain are inescapable, do we seek salvation through friends and medicine, or down the paths that only our sick eyes can see?

Koja gets her reader intimately acquainted with her protagonist, making his every agony our own. It is impossible not to be affected by this piece; indeed, should not all horror aspire to haunt its audience long after the proverbial campfire has died? If nothing else, this is a case study for authors on how to craft a sympathetic main character, an example of how genuine feeling might be conveyed when horror has largely become the province of film.

Readers will come away with a newfound appreciation for the sane, and a strange curiosity of what lies behind our established lives. What creeps below our conversations, our relationships, and what hides just outside the corners of sight? As the only book to ever make me fear the colour of silver, I have to recommend *Bad Brains*.

### **Extremities – Kathe Koja**

For those wanting a taste of dark fantasy without making a book-length commitment, Kathe Koja again makes my top 5 list with her collection of short stories, *Extremities*. Appropriately titled, each of these pieces finds an edge and leads the reader along it, holding one's attention with some truly imaginative premises. A faith healer makes morbid art in solitude, a man is haunted by the song of dying pigs, and a woman merges with her garden rather than leave her home behind.

While the stories vary in length and tone, each takes the germ of a concept and explodes it, reaching for those extremities at which humanity, politeness and sanity give way to the magical

and the macabre. Would you invade a neighbour's home to satisfy your lust? Would you abandon civilization if you found you could fly?

A defining feature of Kojé's style is her ability to make the reader complicit in the stories she weaves, her protagonists not merely relatable, but powerfully human. In their every neurosis and desire, she captures fragments of the lives we ourselves have led. Her words strongly evoke the senses, strengthening our ties to these characters, making us feel the bizarre twists they undergo. Readers are treated to one engrossing scenario after another, each a tale of the ordinary infused with the strange. As unhappy marriages, supernatural invasions and unspoken wants are explored, we start to find the weird and the wonderful in our own lives.

Fans of horror will obviously find plenty of their favourite fare in this collection, but those simply looking for well-crafted fiction will too, as not every piece herein is equally ghoulish. Should nothing else be said of *Extremities*, it transports its reader, and what more can one ask of fantasy?

## Strange Influences - Inviting the Aliens of Inspiration and Banishing the Demons of Doubt

As I begin this essay, I am reminded of one of my earliest fantasy influences, Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*<sup>1</sup>. The protagonist Ged, apprentice mage and amateur necromancer<sup>2</sup>, seeks to dazzle his fellow scholars by calling up the dead. Predictably, this is a terrible idea, as he unwittingly conjures a *gebbeth*, a hungry shadow that seeks to hollow him out and wear his skin. Only after a book's worth of running from his problems does he recognize the demon for what it is: the Jungian Shadow, a concept I shall explain in due course. For now, suffice it to say that it is the embodiment of his own failings, all the things he doesn't like to admit; his negative self, he needs it as much as he fears it. Fortunately, our young wizard confronts the Shadow, names it with his own name and absorbs its power for his own. But as I call up the various voices in my course reader (dead or otherwise), all my literary demons come with them.

This metaphor, if you will permit it, seems appropriate, as I have always wished to be a wizard, and I have always had great confidence in my critical voice. I had thought that the task of locating myself amid the choir of authorial voices would be a simple one, picking and choosing scholars that explained my aesthetic or confirmed what I already thought. Commanding the dead, as it were. But as this course has challenged me, I have found myself beset by three furies: self-doubt, stylistic convention and most awful of all, sloth. Few people and certainly no artists can claim to have never felt the loathsome caress of these creatures.

The first voice that I invoke in combating them is that of Simone Weil as she writes "If the 'I' is the only thing we truly own, we must destroy it"<sup>3</sup>. These were her words in *Gravity and Grace*, invoked anew by Chris Kraus in his essay titled *Hunger-Technology-Emotion*<sup>4</sup>. I consider them to not only be impactful in their own right, but to be the lynchpin which holds this essay together, as I try to articulate my sense of writerly purpose, my attempts at expounding upon the voices which came before me. What do I think a writer's task is, and how do I imagine he should go about it? Wherefrom his inspiration, and in what guise should he present his thoughts?

Taking my queue from Weil, I can begin by making the observation that the "I" in my case is all too often a paralyzed one. It seems only fitting then that in my unpacking of Weil's imperative, my necromantic channelling of her voice and others, I re-shape myself, vanquish my literary fears by calling them up in turn. Forgive me, dear reader, for the fits of colourful prose that will emerge during this ritual. Dry academe may at times prove too sterile a mode of expression, as the voices of Alissa Nutting, Kathe Koja and above all, Garcia Lorca, bay for blood, and the old influences of H.P. Lovecraft and Carl Jung insist I give a nod of due deference to the great unknown. In short, as Chris Kraus notes in his analysis of Weil, she wrote to find out what she thought; so too do I. Hopefully, by the end, I will have a clearer sense of who I am as a writer.

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin, U. K: *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1968

<sup>2</sup> A death magician, one who speaks to the dead.

<sup>3</sup> I am certainly twisting the quote a little here, but will be exploring this vein properly throughout this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Kraus, C: *Hunger-Technology-Emotion*, 2004, pg.77

Why then, should I wish to destroy myself? Chris Kraus would say that the destruction need not be immediate and total, but rather that “it is necessary to carve out little pieces of yourself to let the aliens come in.”<sup>5</sup> This is a complex metaphor, one which I hope to adequately unpack over the course of this essay. To begin with, we can identify the aliens as being in one sense the voices of authors and literary critics past and present. The aspirant author must be willing to be influenced by others, explore their methodologies in practice. Be willing to experiment.

Why then, the carving? Alissa Nutting lays further groundwork here as she locates an author’s mettle within the realm of brutal honesty. Her essay entitled *Our Wrong Parts* measures the writer’s worth by their willingness to be broken down, exposed and voluntarily embarrassed. To have the skeletons come tumbling out of their closet as they reveal “the things you’d hide beneath the bed before company comes over”<sup>6</sup>. For Nutting, if a piece is uncomfortable for the author to read aloud, it carries something irrefutably human, and therefore worth saying. She claims that “writing should be a sacrifice, and feel like one... The price, the sacrifice, is our own edifications: our ego, our image, our pride.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Lara Glenum writes: “Cling belligerently to your unsightly protuberances and excesses. Take things too far.”<sup>8</sup>

Ann Lauterbach echoes this sentiment by drawing an etymological link between the words ‘experience’ and ‘experiment’, noting that the implication is one of both attempt and peril. She promotes “a sense of unfettered play”<sup>9</sup>, a willingness to not be circumscribed by one’s comfort zones, noting that even a failed attempt is useful for future efforts. The writer may not succeed in conveying his intended meaning, no matter how achingly honest its essence, but he must try all the same. He must “risk annihilation”<sup>10</sup> as Glenum would say. Lauterbach cautions that “Those who view form as static and reified are doomed to repetition, historical as well as personal.”<sup>11</sup> Considering my personal terror of producing forgettable work, this seems an imperative I cannot afford to ignore. While I will return to the stylistic aspect of this advice in due course, musings on how writing should be crafted, I focus for now on where it should come from. What I might infuse my work with in order to banish the demon of self-doubt.

It would seem that speaking from where it hurts lends a certain credence to one’s work, an authenticity of expression. Kraus links the destruction of the ‘I’ to the production of sincere storytelling, an “emotional transparency that occurs when someone else is listening to you.”<sup>12</sup> In showcasing the squishy bits of our psyches, we invoke a kind of blunt empathy, instilling legitimacy in our works as the audience resonates with recognized shames and pains; human stuff for humans. Turning the critical gaze inward does not immediately provide all the answers though, as there seems a corresponding imperative here to have suffered enough, lived an interesting enough life to have something worth saying. One might imagine that writing was

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<sup>5</sup> Kraus, C: *Hunger-Technology-Emotion*, 2004, pg.76

<sup>6</sup> Nutting, A: *Our Wrong Parts*, 2015, pg.244

<sup>7</sup> Nutting, A, *Our Wrong Parts*, 2015, pg.245

<sup>8</sup> Glenum, L: *Language Is the Site of Our Collective Infection*, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Lauterbach, A: *Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental*, 2005

<sup>10</sup> Glenum, L: *Language Is the Site of Our Collective Infection*, 2010

<sup>11</sup> Lauterbach, A: *Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental*, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Kraus, C: *Hunger-Technology-Emotion*, 2004, pg.77



reserved for those of a certain social stature, a particular genius or exceptional passion, whose stories we should therefore feel privileged to read. Of course, this is not the case, but this anxiety is not a unique affliction. Hearing a peer give a recital at the *Uhambo Collective* music and poetry evening<sup>13</sup>, she spoke of this creative dearth, referring to herself as “a bard of the bland”. My colleague Graham Dukas<sup>14</sup> expressed this same sentiment in his essay *In Search of a Personal Architecture of Writing* with the words, “How do I use a life of such distinct ordinariness to build a credible narrative?”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps then, the fault lies in the sense that the writer should be digging for finished products to present to the reader, profound outlooks held up like gems to be appreciated; “See what nuggets of wisdom the pressures of my life have produced!” Rather, the emphasis should be on what life *feels* like, how its every moment is translated through our senses. The commonly given advice for writers to evoke the senses, not merely describe a scene but make it tangible, is a ready example here, but it is more complex than that. Basil Bunting promotes a rapturous approach to writing, saying that:

“Poetry is seeking to make not meaning, but beauty... lies in relating to one another of the lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and challenging, which the hearer feels rather than understands, lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose.”<sup>16</sup>

While I do not agree with this implied distinction between prose and poetry as being more or less suitable media for conveying feeling, I certainly do agree with a similar urging by Charles Baudelaire that the artist must be intoxicated by life.

“You must get drunk... That is your sole imperative... And sometimes, while on the steps of a palace, or on the green grass beside a marsh, in the morning solitude of your room, you snap out of it, your drunkenness has worn off entirely, then ask the wind, ask an ocean wave, a star, a bird, a clock, every evanescent thing, everything that flies, that groans, that rolls, that sings, that speaks, ask them what time it is, and the wind, the wave, the star, the clock will tell you, it’s time to get drunk.”<sup>17</sup>

Taken together, these quotes speak of the ephemeral sensations which drift in and out of a writer’s mind, fleeting inspirations drawn from any experience imaginable. To capture how it feels when one pulls on a cigarette, hears the rain on the roof, or thrills at a lover’s touch. To return briefly to Kraus’ *Aliens*, one might also think of these in such terms, as outside forces which, if allowed in, promote writing; however, considering that these can come from either within or without, this may be over-stretching his metaphor. Regardless, what is useful here is this philosophy’s contrast to Nutting, Glenum and the like; the realisation that while I can name a thousand moments that have inspired angst in me, my writing career need not be a protracted ode to life as a rather awkward, rather sticky sensation. Any artistic emanation may carry a core of authenticity, provided the artist has injected a little of himself into its creation.

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<sup>13</sup> An Afro-centric showcasing of largely local talent that I recently had the privilege of attending.

<sup>14</sup> If you will permit this reference, I found his words to be a particularly fitting summary of my own feelings.

<sup>15</sup> Dukas, G: *In Search of a Personal Architecture of Writing*, 2018

<sup>16</sup> Bunting, B: *The Poet’s Point of View*, 1977

<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire, C: *Be Drunk*, 1821-1867

The depths of suffering do make for powerful material though. On that note, I must now devote some time to invoking the spirit of Federico Garcia Lorca and the terrible spectre he brings with him, that of the *duende*. For Lorca, the *duende* is “the very substance of art”<sup>18</sup>, a capricious and cruel energy that wells up within the artist, is “roused from the furthest habitations of the blood”<sup>19</sup>, not theirs to control but theirs to wrestle with, this struggle producing what he considers to be true artistic expression. It is difficult to define, Lorca deferring mid-essay to Goethe who described it as “A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.”<sup>20</sup> Fundamentally, it is a source of inspiration, and Lorca is at pains to expound thereon, drawing a sharp distinction between the *duende*, the Muse and the Angel, these latter figures being elaborate metaphors for aesthetic beauty and stylistic brilliance, respectively. He explains that the Muse dictates and the Angel dazzles, classifying them as forces affecting the artist from outside his being. I might liken them to the various genre tropes which compel me, and to my ability to turn a phrase. Both are the product of study, but a cursory glance at the dozens of forgotten fantasies which line the shelves of second-hand bookstores reveals how little cool concepts and clever phrases amount to without substance. Indeed, in citing Manuel Torre’s criticism of a singer, Lorca notes that one may have a voice and understand style, but will never succeed without *duende*.

The *duende* then, is the creative wellspring from which truly resonant material may be drawn, and a dark well it is indeed. Lorca likens it to “the roots that cling to the mire that we all know”<sup>21</sup>, saying that it is defined by “dark sounds” and “won’t appear if he can’t see the possibility of death”<sup>22</sup>. He references the great poetry of Spain, showing how some of its most powerful exemplars infused their work with an energy both beautiful and macabre, often derived from the very moment of dying. *Duende* seems to me to be an acute awareness of our own mortality, this awareness filling the artist with a lusty appreciation for existence. It is something of a synthesis between Baudelaire’s drunken raptures and Nutting’s shameful truths, the painful beauty of being alive, ripped out and poured onto a page.

*Duende* is not merely content to be appreciated by the artist though; it wishes to fight with him. It is at once the subject of art and the driving force behind it. Kathe Koja, in her horror novel *Bad Brains*, gives it unholy life as “the silver thing”<sup>23</sup>, an amorphous entity which haunts her protagonist Austin, a painter resigned to his own artistic stagnation. It appears after he suffers a head injury, appropriately welling up from inside and tormenting him with hideous visions. However, it also inspires him to take up his work once more, his final, desperate attempt at an exorcism taking the form of a feverish period of painting. It has been said that an artist should suffer for their art, and Lorca would agree, noting that the *duende* “burns the blood like powdered sand... rejects all the sweet geometry we understand... shatters styles and makes

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<sup>18</sup> Lorca, F. G: *Theory and Function of the Duende*, 1933, pg.1

<sup>19</sup> Pg.2

<sup>20</sup> Pg.1

<sup>21</sup> Pg.1

<sup>22</sup> Pg. 5

<sup>23</sup> It is referred to as such for the majority of the novel, though in the final chapters it is outright named as the *duende*, identified by a witchdoctor which the protagonist visits.

Goya... paint with his knees and fists in terrible bitumen blacks”<sup>24</sup>, as poor Austin does quite literally. Koja’s novel provides us with a potent description of what it might be like to wrestle with this energy, and there are clear parallels here with Lorca’s writing.

“...to cross the border where the air itself is glass burned black... not only live and die for your art but become it, go past it, eat it bloody and alive and make it over to devour again and again like Cronus eating his children, ignoring their screams because what is is what must be and in all the rooms in the house of art there is only one altar, one half-seen silver priest and one demand”.<sup>25</sup>

The demand, of course, is pain. That Austin ultimately dies for his art is something of which Lorca would undoubtedly approve.

This imagery is distinctly Lovecraftian, referencing vast truths so unknowable, so far beyond the fragile mortal mind, that to glimpse them is to go mad<sup>26</sup>. While the literal aliens that H.P. Lovecraft lets in are certainly terrifying, much of the fear which pervades his work stems from the sense of just how small, ignorant and vulnerable we are. Fear and madness then are sources of inspiration, *true* inspiration, for when seeing existence as the great, strange and frankly terrifying state that it is, how can we not lose it a little? As we contemplate creation, we resort to fevered outpourings as we try to nail down just how we feel and why. I find a simple and pleasing encapsulation of this idea in Joel Matlou’s words as he writes “The life of a man is very heavy in his bones and his future is a deep unknown grave.”<sup>27</sup> These words resonate with me, and while one may be tempted to dismiss this as simple navel gazing, these voices suggest I might tap into such anxieties, go a little mad in my writing.

There is also something distinctly Jungian about these ideas, an echo of the theory of collective unconscious<sup>28</sup>, that deepest pool in which swim humanity’s collected attempts at codifying life, symbols drowned in sleep, trying to make sense of why we’re alive<sup>29</sup>. An even stronger association is the Jungian Shadow. Product of our personal unconscious, it is the undeveloped negative to our polaroid personality, all that we dislike and deny about ourselves shoved down into the dark while we wear our more palatable traits as surface masks to the world. More than simply a collection of all our less-than-desirable qualities, it is also a repository of energies and passions that we might turn to great purpose, should we only be courageous enough to master them. Denying the Jungian Shadow is harmful, as Le Guin’s recounting of a fairy tale told by Hans Christian Andersen aptly illustrates.

A man, longing to enter the brightly-lit home of a beautiful woman, encourages his shadow to enter instead of him. The shadow detaches itself, abandoning him and entering the house. After several years, the man meets it once more, now transformed into a cruel and ruthless individual

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<sup>24</sup> Pg. 2

<sup>25</sup> Koja, Kathe, *Bad Brains*, 1992

<sup>26</sup> Particularly the reference to alien geometry, and the fact that *duende* is at once a thing of horror on a cosmic scale, but also inextricably tied to our humanity. Lovecraft trucked not only in un-nameable things from outer space, but terrible truths hidden beneath the outward appearances of our world.

<sup>27</sup> Matlou, Joël, *Man Against Himself*, 1991

<sup>28</sup> This is far too large a concept to adequately treat within the confines of this essay, but considering my use of the Jungian Shadow and the fact that *duende* taps into something primal in us all, I felt it worth mentioning.

<sup>29</sup> A recommended source is: Jung, C.G: *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959

who quickly dominates him. The man is made subservient to it, the shadow of his shadow, and it ultimately has him executed. Le Guin interprets the brightly-lit home as the “House of Poetry”, the entering of which may be understood to symbolise the achieving of creative potential. She goes on to explain that:

“The man is all that is civilized... The Shadow is the man’s thwarted selfishness, his unadmitted desires, the swearwords he never spoke, the murders he didn’t commit... the dark side of his soul, the unadmitted, the inadmissible. And what Andersen is saying is that this monster is an integral part of the man and cannot be denied - not if the man wants to enter the House of Poetry.”<sup>30</sup>

This quote draws clear parallels with Nutting’s ideas and with Kojka’s “house of art”, cementing for me the idea that as a writer, I cannot deny my uglier side.

To round off this particular exploration, I tentatively name *duende* as the shade of all these things: personal fears, shames and desires; collectively felt and terror-inspiring existentialism; and the agonies we feel while grappling with these things. Lorca refers to it as a ‘daemon’, and herein lies a truth of its nature. For it is not a demon of Christian iconography tasked to torment me, but a primal spirit of the same ilk as those found in ancient Greek mythology. For all the anguish that it may inspire, the *duende* is not here to punish, but to galvanize. Greatest Alien of them all, it demands much sacrifice, but provided I can endure the process of cutting out little bits of myself, I am certain to produce meaningful writing.

Here now, we see self-doubt slink away in defeat at last. So long as I always bring something of myself to the table, whether it be private agonies or personal pleasures, I will always have something interesting to say. I may disguise these things, give them as traits to the characters I write, but I must not balk at using them. But while the *gebbeth* of self-doubt has shambled off, my dogged adherence to aesthetics now looms large.

This second demon, that of stylistic convention, is more insidious than his younger brother, questioning not what I wish to write about, but I how I go about writing it. The fear here is being cliché, reproducing genre tropes and the hero’s journey<sup>31</sup>, my work consigned to the dusty shelves of obscurity.

There is truth to this, as fantasy for me has always been synonymous with escapism, a space where life’s frustrations and limitations melt away and all my personal power trips are located. It is the “comforting art”<sup>32</sup> of which Lauterbach speaks, and if I invoked other voices when discussing my work, it was only to confirm my sense of aesthetics. Indeed, aesthetics were what I primarily trucked in, focusing on theories of myth and symbolism, detailed unpackings of my motifs to prove just how gosh darn clever I was. Camille Roy will not let me have this, noting that mainstream fiction:

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<sup>30</sup> Le Guin, U. K: *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1980

<sup>31</sup> Also known as the ‘monomyth’, this idea was most famously explored by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is a common narrative structure with its roots in mythology and folklore, and while archetypal, it is also very predictable.

<sup>32</sup> Lauterbach, A: *Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental*, 2005

“...assumes a position not too close, not too far away... an entire social horizon, which is speckled with white individuals who maintain distance from one another and from social ‘problems’... where there is no discomfort around racism because only white people are present.”<sup>33</sup>

This is the neatest coup de grace ever delivered, a clean deathblow to my aesthetic sensibilities as the “sword and sorcery”<sup>34</sup> style of fantasy which I felt so steeped in is stripped bare, shown up as a pleasant fantasy designed for a particular audience. It is free of any tension save the contrived conflicts injected by the author. Such stories are enjoyable to be sure, but defined as they are by genre tropes, they “deal in something as low as feeling”<sup>35</sup>, pandering to the audience’s desire for escapism, but typically trotting out little more than the tired monomyth in the process.

This kind of self-imposed distance from the worlds I create is a particularly egregious sin, considering Bettina Judd’s insistence that “writing is attached to the body”<sup>36</sup>. This body is both one’s literal flesh and one’s social body, in the sense that we are products of our cultural environments. She continues by saying that “race is implicit in everyone’s work, especially when the race is white”<sup>37</sup>, and argues that one cannot write about any profound topic without also simultaneously writing about and through the lens of one’s race. Her words hound me, for as a white male in South Africa, I had imagined that my views were less legitimate, any attempt at invoking the blood-soaked history of my country doomed to being disingenuous. Better then, to assume a sexless, colourless voice and craft stories removed from the ugly realities of the world. However, in so doing, not only do I deny myself the body-based inspiration and authenticity discussed earlier, but I also fall prey to predictable forms. I return to Lauterbach’s advice to experiment, for she rejects these neat, cause-and-effect narratives and urges me to celebrate the fragment in which I live, to not be intimidated by “multiple perspectives, disparate vocabularies”<sup>38</sup>, but to embrace the new structures of meaning I might find while expressing my own world views. I needn’t toss out the proverbial baby with the bathwater here, but I must be willing to try new things, “retain the curiosity of youth without sacrificing the digested experience of maturity”<sup>39</sup>.

This mirrors Brian Evenson’s quest to challenge prevalent social norms and destabilize entrenched literary tropes. A ready example of this is his work in portraying violence, neither characterizing it as a moustache-twirling villain nor wallowing in abject depravity for its own sake. Rather, he conveys it as a “basic and irrecoverable act”<sup>40</sup>, with neither glamour nor gore to distract from the gravity of bloodshed. But instead of simply presenting his readership with this truth from the outset, pointing them to the gaping hole in the floor, he prefers to whip the carpet out from under them, the void revealed as the audience falls. He expounds upon what he

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<sup>33</sup> Roy, C: *Experimentalism*, 2004, pg. 174

<sup>34</sup> A term in popular culture denoting generic high-fantasy fiction, defined by its Tolkien-inspired aesthetic.

<sup>35</sup> Roy, C: *Experimentalism*, 2004, pg. 176

<sup>36</sup> Judd, B: *Writing About Race*, 2015

<sup>37</sup> As above.

<sup>38</sup> Lauterbach, A: *Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental*, 2005

<sup>39</sup> As above.

<sup>40</sup> Evenson, B: *Altmann’s Tongue: Stories and a Novella*, 2002

considers to be genuinely subversive (and by extension, genuinely meaningful) writing, theorizing that one should “make some effort to depict a surface before you disrupt it, if you are to get readers to experience that disruption in more than just an intellectual way.”<sup>41</sup> He goes on to say that he is compelled to thereby create writing which “destabilizes the reader gradually but profoundly, in a way that he or she can neither prepare for in advance nor recuperate from afterward”<sup>42</sup>.

To elaborate, I read this as Evenson saying that genre tropes are fine and well, but merely inserting Merlin into one’s narrative is not enough, even if one sticks him on a spaceship and gives him a laser sword. Even if one uses his dramatic death scene to pose some profound, philosophical musing on the nature of morality. No, no matter how novel the concepts the author has devised, he must use them with purpose, don them like the masks of theatre (or the drag queen dresses of which Camille Roy speaks<sup>43</sup>) and beguile his audience into a space where something more meaningful may be accomplished.

This trickery is essential, as the audience will not come along for the ride otherwise; they do not wish to be told that their favourite power trips are trite. They’re here for the sex, the spaceships and the wizards, for as Evenson explains, “traditional mimetic representation has a certain safety to it”<sup>44</sup>, familiar tropes always at risk of being merely comforting art. They can either damn my work to cliché or handily disarm my audience before delivering a stunning blow of meaning, an insight which they may never have come to on their own, and one which, as Evenson notes, they may even resent.

I once lauded a particular video game for doing just this, without grasping why I found it so brilliant. *Bastion*<sup>45</sup>, a post-apocalyptic, steampunk Western by Supergiant Games, suckers you into its world with a sexy aesthetic and plenty of bullets, only to deliver crushing social commentary once you are fully immersed. What the audience wholeheartedly embraces as a noble, gun-slinging quest is revealed to be fraught with cruelty, racial issues and destructive ignorance, leaving the player deeply and lastingly affected because they never saw it coming<sup>46</sup>.

The lesson then is that genre tropes must be employed as grease for the wheels of my writing machine, placating the reader’s preconceptions even as I undermine them, digging toward the “succulent interiors” of which Camille Roy speaks. These are the spaces in which sincere commentary might be made, where social evils may be lampooned, human nature examined, and of course, where the author’s own wrong parts (in the terms discussed earlier) are laid bare. These squishy bits of our psyches are very much succulent interiors in this sense, serving as the starting point for writing that can have real impact and social relevance. Weil echoes this with

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<sup>41</sup> Evenson, B: *The Crazy Party Guy, or, A Disruption of Smooth Surfaces*, 2015

<sup>42</sup> As above.

<sup>43</sup> Roy thinks of genre tropes as loose garments that an author might pull over their work to lend it the outward traits of that style. Experimental authors using genre tropes are therefore compared to drag queens.

<sup>44</sup> Evenson, B: *Altmann’s Tongue: Stories and a Novella*, 2002

<sup>45</sup> Supergiant Games: *Bastion*, 2011

<sup>46</sup> That this is an interactive experience makes it especially effective, the player’s agency doubling down on the guilt factor. The same can’t quite be accomplished in simple prose, but the example still stands.

the words “The body is a lever for salvation... But in what way? What is the right way to use it?”<sup>47</sup>

The question then is what shape my projects should take. What dig site should I turn my writing machine to? What wall of oppression or preconception should I begin chipping away at? Roy offers some parting wisdom, explaining that “writing grinds itself into what’s familiar yet unbearable. Add mobility to that and voila, narrative.”<sup>48</sup> A handy formula indeed, even containing a tip of the hat to *duende*. If I think of “mobility” as simply the character and story arcs I devise, then all that remains is that I sit down and spend some time thinking about what makes me angry. Therein lies my project.

As the demon of stylistic convention now shrivels and dies, I am left only with the snivelling brat that is sloth, the drawn-out whine of “I don’t wanna!” It goes without saying that successful writers all graft for their art, and that if I wish to build a career on the backs of my words, I will have to work hard. How then, to vanquish procrastination? I might begin by recapturing some of my original motivation for the whole affair, restoring some confidence in the tropes that I have learned. Robert Silverberg, in his afterword to the short story *Flies*, compares the tale’s theme of psychic vampirism with a story he wrote several years prior, a horror about widespread cannibalism in New York. He muses that this is “a healthy progression of morbidity”, continuing by saying that:

“Every writer returns to his own obsessions when given a free hand, and every situation he invents, no matter how grotesque, says something about the nature of human relationships. If I seem to be saying that we devour each other, literally or figuratively... so be it. ‘People need people.’ To devour, if nothing else.”<sup>49</sup>

Considering that I presently imagine myself as a fledgling horror writer, this is invaluable insight. After receiving such chastisement through the voices of my course reader, I might have been fooled into thinking that there was no value in my favourite themes. Not so. After all, Koja expressed the *duende*, while another favourite author of mine, Lauren Beukes, tackled racial and economic discrimination in her novel *Zoo City*<sup>50</sup>, in the South African context no less! She did so by writing about criminals gifted with super powers from spirit animals, a concept that is entirely up my alley. Lara Glenum also notes that, as a maker, I will inevitably write according to my “own spasms and blindness”<sup>51</sup>. In short, I am allowed to have my own obsessions.

Dambudzo Marechera acknowledges the paralysis I have felt, confessing that he too doubted the existence of any originality in himself. Having undergone a protracted “apprenticeship” under various literary influences, he came to the conclusion that “Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer’s task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it.”<sup>52</sup> He further

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<sup>47</sup> Kraus, Chris, *Hunger-Technology-Emotion*, 2004, pg.77

<sup>48</sup> Roy, Camille: *Experimentalism*, 2004, pg. 179

<sup>49</sup> Silverberg, Robert: “Flies”, in *Dangerous Visions*, Eds. Ellison, Harlan, 1967

<sup>50</sup> Beukes, Lauren: *Zoo City*, 2011

<sup>51</sup> Glenum, L: *Language Is the Site of Our Collective Infection*, 2010. She does however, insist that the writer not agonize over every turn of phrase and instead look for a raw mode of expression.

<sup>52</sup> Marechera, D: *Beneath Reality There is Always Fantasy*, 1986

invokes the voice of Sinyavsky who claimed that “A writer’s life is a journey, it *has* to be a journey, it has a fate”<sup>53</sup>. I draw double inspiration from these words, an apprentice mage tasked with uncovering the magic in the mundane, translating everyday joys and pains into compelling fantasies. If I had not found my courage by now, then viewing this fledgling career as a journey might at last muster it. What fantasy buff when given a quest, however daunting, can help but get a little excited?

To add a dash of paladin zeal to this quest, I find further purpose in the words of Harlan Ellison as he writes “...the chief commodity a writer has to sell is his courage. And if he has none, he is more than a coward. He is a sellout and a fink and a heretic, because writing is a holy chore”<sup>54</sup>. With holy purpose then, I bring my sword down and put the last of my demons to rest.

In closing, I am reminded of my undergrad course on creative writing under the inimitable Ron Irwin. In our first lesson, he announced to the class that there were no more than five stories in all creation. That since it was impossible to create something truly unique, what mattered was what we put *into* our writing. I had assumed that, in the absence of original narrative, what mattered was how I dressed up the ideas I re-used; however, Irwin’s “into” should have alerted me to the need for an authentic core, not an outer bedazzlement. I should have gone in search of *duende* and other Aliens of inspiration, only bothering to dress up my story once I had a decent story to begin with. To wrap up this tortured metaphor of spirits and demons, writing then is not a static space, a corpse upon which authors might spray some air freshener and arrange a few flowers as they pick through its guts. Instead it lopes through the graveyard with terrible purpose, animated by voices past and present and soon I hope, by mine.

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<sup>53</sup> As above.

<sup>54</sup> Ellison, H: *Dangerous Visions*, 1967, pg.188



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## **Reflective Journals**

The information in this section is largely derived from the reflective journals written throughout the course, bi-monthly documents intended to catalogue the learning process. While these necessarily included discussion pertaining to course materials, peer feedback groups, assignments and independent readings, this section of the portfolio has largely done away with such material, focusing instead on challenges faced and insights gleaned. This is both for the sake of brevity and to distil the essence of the reflective journals: a record of my critical trajectory and growth as a writer.

With this in mind, I have chosen to group the material into five distinct themes, cherry picking relevant extracts from the journals and documenting the growth I underwent in each category. There will necessarily be a degree of overlap between these categories, in terms of works referenced and concepts explored, as the source materials were not self-contained exercises but rather, a record of ongoing development. I have however, attempted to order the categories in a logical fashion, beginning with more foundational concepts and ending with the more nuanced. Furthermore, as the original journals were more informal in nature, I have arranged the extracts therefrom in bullet lists, roughly in chronological order. Introductions have been added to indicate the overarching elements of each category, while conclusions briefly recap the major learnings in each instance.

## The Holy Chore of Writing

This category pertains simply to the writing process, i.e. the act of being a writer and working with one's material. The producing of new material, the editing of existing material, and the techniques employed in both. As implied by the category title, the insights grouped here relate as much to the headspace which one should have as a writer as to the mechanical process. Writing is a craft and being an author, a job. As such, these extracts pertain to the refinements I underwent in this regard.

- The writing of these journals feels like a simple, but profoundly impactful tool. Just being forced, as it were, to sit down and catalogue my thoughts, to 'compost' them as Paul Mason would say, is having a positive effect. It is drawing together many disparate elements of learning into something cohesive.
- We have been urged to "normalize" writing, to make it a routine rather than a sporadic exercise only spurred on by sudden inspiration. What's more, to find inspiration in the everyday, see what tales one might extract from mundane scenarios. These adjustments seem essential, as my desire to write still stems mostly from the escapism of magical concepts, and I have yet to establish a solid writing routine. To this point, I have noted the impact of simply carrying a notebook with me. I have been astonished to find how often interesting tidbits are paraded in front of one each day, the world giving the prospective author all manner of scenes worth recording. Similarly, the number of random thoughts that occur to one but are quickly forgotten, are now captured for later perusal.
- Free writing is an incredible tool. I have always struggled with writer's block, and this seems to be the antidote. A writing prompt and a time limit. At once picking a direction and denying my brain the space for cogitation allowed the words to simply flow out from a reservoir I didn't know I had.
- Recently, I produced a piece which a supervisor felt contained only one "truly good" paragraph, the rest being apparently too raw and potentially melodramatic. This I think, was a fair assessment, as I received similar feedback on past writings during our recent contact week. A lecturer took his red pen to a 16-line poem of mine, and the 6 lines left were a complete and rather beautiful piece. Another noted that my most recent attempt at horror writing was tending toward purple prose, emphasizing the importance of not re-stating an image lest its impact be lost. It seems that much of my recent work has had a case of first-draft-itis. For every ten lines I write, it seems that only one or two are workable, yet to my eyes, every word is carefully chosen and placed.

While this confirms the importance of critical feedback (one is inevitably too close to one's own work to be objective), I have also heard the writing process compared to building a sandcastle, with the initial phases being a great piling up of sand, much of which will be swept aside in later construction. I had been pleased with the rate at which I piled up sand, but have been disheartened to discover just how much sifting is required after the fact. It has however, been interesting to note that during the editing process, it is often one's very first emanations that are the best and most beautifully crafted. That initial image or turn of phrase from which an entire piece might spring is typically the most authentic, original and interesting in its composition, an insight which my lecturers' criticism only confirms. It seems then, that one must make such fragments the cornerstones of one's stories, or at least be willing to pile up a lot of sand, not imagine that the very first effort will be the best.

- Our recent assignment to write of Eros, of unbridled passion, proved difficult. After several drafts in which I tried to speak of past trysts, only to watch my prose slip into the realm of cheap erotica, I gave up and got angry at a piece of paper. What emerged from those twenty minutes of free writing was a strange tribute to ardor, partly a rejection of writing about it at all, and partly an acknowledgement that it had been special indeed. I got mixed feedback on this one, but most agreed that I'd captured something at least, frustration at some point giving way to an expression of what it felt like to be in love. It seems then, that once the hump of doubt is crested, pouring one's heart onto paper is still the truest method of producing good writing, "good" in this sense being synonymous with "genuine". Artifice can arrest progress; if one is unsure how to say something, perhaps it is better to just do away with the frills.
- Several voices have asserted the same sentiment: that self-editing is dangerous. A guest lecturer advised us to decide what our writing goals and dreams are, and then forget about them for the time being. To write for ourselves rather than any imagined audience, lest we stifle the creative process. Similarly, my supervisor has urged me to "shut up and channel" when in the early stages of writing a piece; to be a conduit for whatever piece is coming through me, rather than worry what its nature is, or what it will look like in the end. Write first, edit later!
- Harlan Ellison, in his running editorial commentary on *Dangerous Visions*, refers to writing as "a holy chore", and decries the would-be writer who lacks in motivation. As such, I have attempted to make writing exactly that, a daily task that must be done regardless of inclination.

- We were given a quote by Ursula Le Guinn, asserting that as writers we are “free, the freest person who ever lived. Freedom is what you have bought with your loneliness”. This crystallized something in me, and had great personal relevance, making it clear that writing would be neither quick nor easy, yet also imparting a sense of purpose. I relish the freedom that being an author grants me, and feel ready for whatever long vigil the mantle demands of me.

My key learnings in this category were that writing is as much the product of routine as inspiration, habit informing the creative process alongside talent. The writer must be open to the inspirations all around him and ready to record them, as well as to those which bubble up from within. Yet even in the absence of creative gems, the serious author must be able to produce new content, writing being a “holy chore” or lonely vigil rather than an occasional, whimsical exercise. One must also be able to separate the writing and editing processes, lest self-judgement stifle content generation. Though much of the material which one produces will undoubtedly not be used in final drafts, the writer’s first task is to channel the stories that come through him, and only after to refine them.

## The Writer and His Audience

While the writing experience differs for every author, I believe that it is always underpinned by a common experience: that of wanting to convey information and capture emotion. The author wishes to preserve and transmit an idea, a feeling, and even the most introspective of writings exhibits this. Even when one ostensibly writes solely for oneself, there is an imagined audience present.

This category details insights in this vein, building on the previous one; how the writer not only generates and edits new material, but how this process is informed by the reader (intended or otherwise). Moreover, it includes discussion around what the writer's imperative might be, i.e. what and how he *should* be writing. Who does the writer think they are writing for? How does this affect what they write?

- Horror and fantasy spring easily to my fingertips, but it seems that sincere expression does not. I can generally muster some nugget of lived experience to embellish upon, a feeling that I shape and disguise when crafting fiction, but when asked to produce distilled sincerity, actual desire, I am paralyzed.
- Tasked with emulating a handful of specific styles, I had an unexpected revelation. Copying Beckett's free-flow style proved to be far less challenging than I had feared it would be. Ironically, the formulaic Hollywood style of writing caused me much greater anxiety in its construction. I agonized over crafting exciting hooks and ensuring that the rising action I wrote lead up to said hooks properly, while Beckett allowed me to enter a trance and simply go forward. It has been said that Beckett was a self-indulgent writer, or at least one who wrote with little concern for a piece's reception. More mainstream storytelling of course, has favourable reception as its primary goal. With this in mind, I found that being given free reign to write what I like, actively not caring what my audience thought about it, was really enjoyable. Much as our early free writing exercises uncorked some dam in my brain, aping Beckett had a similar effect.
- A guest lecturer advised us to "write towards pain, write through it and into it". I found this an interesting and galvanizing bit of advice. Writers are often told to write what they know, but this has added focus to that imperative. There are a thousand pockets of discomfort in my memory that might be tapped for inspiration.

This ties in with Lorca's treatise on the *duende*, an inclusion in our reading list which blew me away. His urging that one find art in the essential human condition of being alive and breathing and fragile seemed to me like words of prophecy I had long needed to

hear. I had last seen duende as “the silver thing” crawling out of a poor painter’s ears and nostrils in Kathe Koja’s horror novel *Bad Brains*, inspiration characterized as an amorphous, Lovecraftian nightmare that will get you to do your best work even if it kills you. While I doubt I will need to lose my mind to find my art, it does seem unavoidable that I will have to suffer. No matter how original the concepts I deploy, nor how well I write them, if there isn’t a core of authenticity, I am doomed to mediocrity.

I can’t help but wonder whether the only difference between angsty teenage poetry and duende-infused glory is the relative depth of the pain pools from which they draw their inspiration. Not the shallow pond of woe-is-me but the bottomless terror of being alive, the raw-throated howl of which Lorca speaks, roared up from the chasm upon whose cusp the artist wrestles the silver daemon of authentic expression. I am presented with a source of boundless but as yet undirected energy, my own traumas a battery sufficient to power a life’s worth of work.

- After some months of free writing, I have discovered how much more easily ideas flow when writing in the first person as opposed to the third. The ability to simply let feelings, actions and statements stand without need for qualifiers or much context is liberating. Similarly, I am able to spill plentiful scenes onto the paper without as much thought for a clever narrative thread or interesting setting. What’s more, speaking in first person inevitably prompts one to speak from personal experience, automatically infusing the writing with a degree of real emotion. This first- versus third-person problem is an interesting one. I have long agonized over semantics in the face of trying to produce a well-crafted story, something which I’ve long associated with epics told in the third person. Yet the construction of such stories is no mean feat, and failure to do so inspires doubt. Finding that this simple narrative paradigm shift produced such an ease of writing was tremendously reassuring. It turns out I can exhale creative emanations if only I let myself.
- In the wake of our recent essays focused on self-analysis, I can say one thing for certain: that when I write from where it hurts, effective (and affective) writing emerges. When my uncomfortable feelings and bodily pains are tapped, something authentic comes out. I had thought that this kind of writing was to be avoided at all costs. Talk about pain on a universal level, talk about art that transcends pain, but by God do not wallow in your own misery! Yet it seems that even beyond deliberately melancholic writing, some degree of one’s human experience must necessarily infuse one’s writing. As far as human experience goes, pain is one of the easier wellsprings to access and channel.

Several critical voices confirm this. Bettina Judd for instance, tells me that not only is my flesh inescapable, but that all the thoughts and feelings it inspires are too. That writers



who seek to separate their voice from their bodies (both their actual flesh and all the societal ramifications thereof, race, gender, sexuality, the social body) ultimately fail. That we write not only what is around us, but also what is within us. They do at least, agree that every object, every thing, is useful as a potential source of inspiration. Unfortunately, it seems that the catalysts for our most honest and potent writing will inevitably be those squishy, nasty bits of ourselves that we'd rather not air. Some critical voices say that this exhibitionism is the whole point of writing. Simone Weil's "emotional transparency", Alissa Nutting's "wrong parts", these things interest me and scare the hell out of me.

- Our task of "writing to heal" was surprising. We were to keep entirely personal journals for a week, and vent daily to "the healer within". I noticed that I felt enthusiastic to write, simply because I knew that this work was not to be shown to anybody and consequently could suspend self-judgment. I needn't worry about the quality of my work when nobody would ever read it! As a result, I was eager to put my ideas to paper, for no matter how perverse or deranged my thoughts, the healer would listen.

That being said, with this unrestricted honesty in play, a certain sense of shame crept in too. The healer was not the only audience, as my brain conjured ghosts who read over my shoulder. There was an inescapable feeling of needing to justify myself, explain what I wrote and in some cases, apologize for it. If a statement made was at all complex, I could not let it stand just so, heavy with symbolism or nuance that only I could fully grasp. No, I had to unpack it and make sure that the reader could really get my meaning, despite the fact that there was no other physical reader! This was a surreal experience for me, and led to several insights.

For one thing, any writer will readily speak of their inner critic, always their harshest detractor. I have long been familiar with him, but this exercise revealed that he is not alone. He is part of a cohort of imagined voices, some attributable to real-world acquaintances and others more like ethical principles made manifest. They read what I write, no matter what, and while the Healer smiles and accepts, the others all have comments to make. A peanut gallery unsatisfied with anything less than full disclosure. Virtually everyone in my feedback group expressed a similar sentiment, writing of the discomfort of dredging up old feelings to be re-examined. It occurred to me then that they doubtless had ghostly readers of their own. I realized that the unease stemmed from doing something counterintuitive as a writer. We are gods, in a sense, with full creative control over our writing. To write ourselves in an unfavourable light, a coward in our own kingdom, is therefore massively uncomfortable.

- For all the authorial meat that my body and my existence and my environment might provide, unless this material is carefully crafted into a tool with which something might be accomplished, the whole exercise of sweating and blushing before an audience seems little more than an elaborate act of exhibitionism, a convoluted ode to life being rather painful and rather sticky. If as Judd insists, I am bound to my body, must write out from both the flesh that holds me and the space that made me, then what should I be writing about?

Ann Lauterbach says that I should celebrate being a fragment, find how my shard of lived experience hangs in the mobile of meaning, how it connects to the truths of others. But she also says that writing should be purposeful, not narcissistic. The writer should craft text that functions as a bridge, a hinge between things (theory and practice, pain and healing etc.), with the affecting quality of writing being what makes this bridging of the gap possible in the first place. For Lauterbach, the writer also has something of a social responsibility, bridging gaps to right various wrongs, but with all that being said, what cause should I be turning my talent to?

- I am becoming increasingly certain that my difficulties stem from a desire to be both adept with words and emotionally affecting. However, it goes without saying that a well-turned phrase is not necessarily an affecting one, with blunter and simpler arrangements often making a more pronounced impact. The format of “and then” often tends to come off as dry, and I have (mistakenly or otherwise) come to associate this more with third-person narrations and traditional storytelling than the raw, emotionally charged works to which this course has exposed me. This has led me to agonize over the crafting of my short stories, for fear that they will not be compelling. Yet *Tarot Tales* by Rachel Pollack presented me with several pieces that, while not very emotionally affecting, were nonetheless interesting due to the strength of their plot. Despite being more akin to fairy tales in their format, I was held as a reader from beginning to end. I recall that prior to doing this course, I worried about such things less, had faith in the power of my slightly purple prose, and simply wanted to crank out a story sufficient to bring a premise to its conclusion. Perhaps I should rediscover that mindset and do so again.
- Camille Roy’s theories have provided me with a handy formula for crafting narrative: the familiar + the unbearable + mobility. Voila! Narrative is born. The first two parts of this formula make complete sense to me, echoing aforementioned voices in their insistence that I write from my body and my environment. Mobility in this sense is, I imagine, simple narrative action, things happening to characters as they experience the familiar and the unbearable. Roy gives me further guidance here as she refers to the tropes of genre fiction and certain narrative techniques (intimacy, autobiography and direct address) as clothing that a drag queen might don, masks to be worn to elicit predictable

responses. The fear that horror evokes, the sympathy of a sob-story autobiography or the arousal of erotica, all are merely means to an end, a bit of window dressing to get the audience to engage with what lies beneath. She uses the analogy of pornography here, noting that what we fear (total immersion and surrender to our urges) is also what we desire, and porn helps to get us there through its mode of representation; we are watching it, not living it, engaging gradually but inevitably.

This was reassuring for me to read, as it offered a compromise between the flights of fantasy which I naturally feel given to, and the more profound work which several critical voices insist I should make my focus. The former being used to trick, as it were, the reader into engaging with the latter. If I understand Roy correctly, then tropes are safe to use provided they do not comprise the soul of one's work; they must grease the gears of the writing machine as it digs toward something deeper. This is what one, as the author, *actually wanted* to show the reader, but they only came along for the ride because there were wizards and porn available.

- Allowing myself to write fantasy once more has been liberating. Part of my recent feeling of paralysis stemmed from the sense that what I "should" be producing was more artful, more authentic and ultimately, more insightful. In practical terms, this just meant that I felt obliged to produce veiled and oblique bits of pseudo-poetry, which made the whole process feel contrived.

While learning to write more from personal experience and less from contrived fantasy scenarios has been helpful, poetry did not feel like my creative direction, and prose-length navel gazing often proved introspective to a fault. Such writing came easily, but was rarely what I found most compelling. The solution was partly to package personal experiences within fantasy tropes, give the reader relatable characters and authentic emotions no matter what bizarre setting I was exploring. However, I eventually returned to Samuel Beckett's lesson from the start of the course: to write for myself first and my audience second.

My major learnings in this category revolved around the authorial head-space, the writer not simply as a producer of words but an artist subject to his audience's criticism. I discovered that an audience is inescapable, a gallery of imagined critics present at even the most private of writings. Some of these voices are helpful, prompt one to produce especially powerful, emotionally charged work. Others can arrest the creative process. Real-world critical voices offer their own solutions and their own imperatives, though largely agree that objectively good writing always contains a kernel of genuine human experience. I found that writing in the first person offered a shortcut to accessing this creative space, but that overly introspective writing ran the

risk of being overwrought rather than emotionally resonant. Ultimately, I found that the author should write first and foremost for themselves, both in terms of style and content, and trust more in what compels them than what an audience (real or imagined) might have to say about it.

## Finding My Voice

Every author has their own voice, their own tongue, going far beyond the language in which they write but extending also to their stylistic decisions, subject matter and indeed, theoretical focus. Put simply, every writer has something that they want to say, and their own ideas about how best to say it. While some acclaimed authors have managed to develop multiple writing voices, a major focus of this course was in guiding participants to discover their own, their first.

This category then contains key insights gleaned in the processing of finding mine, deciding both what I wanted to write about and how I might do so. This necessarily involved a great deal of learning by example, and as such, this section refers to some works which I found particularly influential.

- The short stories contained in Brian Allen Carr's *The Shape of Every Monster Yet to Come* have been a case study in creating impact for one's reader. The very first story in the collection is half an A4 page at most, yet it horrified me with its implied ending. A boy is sent by his mother to root around the garden and find a stick for her to beat him with. He finds a flower instead and presents it to her as a peace offering. She declares that she will use her fists instead. The stark cruelty of this tableau is striking and made me consider how much less effective the piece would have been were it spun out any further. We do not need to spell out the act of the abuse for the scene's impact to be felt. The efficacy of Carr's stories, this one included, is heightened by the brevity of his language. Words are not wasted, concepts are rarely elaborated upon nor scenes described in great detail. The most salient element of a setting is noted, and then the action moves on. If there are multiple points of interest, they are stated and then left to stand; the themes are not drawn out into extended metaphors. This is the chalk to my cheese, as extended metaphors are a device I employ far too regularly, I suspect.

I fear that my writing tends more toward artifice than art; I'd like it to have an emotional impact, not simply be acknowledged as a collection of well-turned phrases. With this in mind, trimming down seems to be of paramount importance. Attempting to self-edit when writing early drafts is a mistake that has paralysed me in the past, and so self-indulgent lines will get their chance to be vented during the first draft or two, but I must be willing to discard them. Given time to rest, a piece's weaker lines should more readily present themselves, as one is no longer quite so close to the writing.

It is also worth noting that, considering my interest in fantasy and horror, a punchier style would serve me well. In previous journals I noted that the unknown was frightening while the known was not, and that the more the author left to the reader's imagination,

the more they would fill in the blanks with their own nightmares. As such, learning to imply the true depth of horror rather than rub my audience's nose in it should be my next step. Carr's writing may therefore, teach me two techniques rather than one!

- *Zombie Sharks with Metal Teeth* by Stephen Graham Jones has been the greatest read of recent memory, inspiring me to create more short stories, unburden myself of the urge to fill in every blank. Instead, I'd like to just create interesting concepts and scenarios and see where they take me, providing what details are needed for the story to function and ditching the rest. Jones' compilation is one big showcase of the above, able to effectively deliver on a number of wonderful sci-fi premises without sweating the small stuff.

I was most struck by "The Sea of Intranquility". This tale features giant crabs, lobsters and shrimp living on man-made lakes on the moon. What's more, these creatures serve as giant databanks storing human souls downloaded from dying hosts. This piece is stuffed with such wonderfully weird concepts, but steers carefully around any hard science fiction attempts at explaining the mechanics of its madness. Why do shrimp grow to the size of blimps when in low gravity? Because. There is plenty of authorial 'hand waving' in this one, with things allowed to be the way they are for the sake of telling a great story; however, rather than come off as childish or ridiculous, it manages to be on the serious side of things and even make quite profound social commentary.

This is all attributable to the author's clever choice of a classic noir private eye as narrator. A grizzled flatfoot would neither know nor concern himself with the science behind giant space shrimp, and so the narrative logic is allowed to stand without issue. Similarly, grand world-building elements (which I might have thought important to at least hint at some pages before they become relevant) are simply circumvented in a few lines. One such example being that earth in this story has a planetary defence system to protect against space bandits. However, when a lobster the size of a plane grows wings and flies from the moon back to terra firma, it smashes its way through this defence grid. Why? Because it wasn't designed to stop giant lobsters from space. It is never mentioned again, yet the story would undoubtedly be weaker were it not mentioned at all. All of this is possible because the narrator is believable in what he chooses to speak about in detail and what he chooses to gloss over; it fits his character. This is such an elegant solution to the problem that I found myself completely immersed rather than having to suspend my disbelief every few minutes.

I feel I have a newfound appreciation for the importance of the narrator. Much of what I wrote in my most recent assignment felt permissible, even profound, because I wrote with a voice that suited the subject matter, gave it authenticity. Neither omniscient third person nor the author's own angst, the narrator was a character. Similarly, much of what

takes place with Jones' giant space lobsters is only convincing because the narrator is well crafted. I am struck by how many pieces of memory I have stored indefinitely, and how many fun ideas I have tucked away in the proverbial trunk, all gathering dust because I hadn't thought of an appropriate framework to slot them into. I think I might simply write many of these things now, with far less concern for whether or not they fit into a grand narrative or say anything particularly meaningful. Do they entertain? Do they prompt interesting lines of thought? If so, they should be probably be given the chance to occupy some page space; the only question is what voice I can best conjure up to speak them.

- *Altmann's Tongue* by Brian Evenson has been a watershed reading for me, redefining my thinking in terms of the kind of writing I'd like to do, both in terms of style and subject matter. I had previously only been able to vaguely refer to my preferred genre as horror or fantasy, feeling that if one were to venture to the darker corners of the human psyche, one had best do so through more magical means. Yet here, Evenson appals me without a single zombie or alien in the mix. I had also previously maintained that creative writing should have a meaning or message of some kind, that conveying emotion alone was self-indulgent. I see now that disturbing material need not always be paired with fear or social commentary. It can simply be allowed to stand on its own, as so many of Evenson's stories do.

Each is a little tableau of madness, a window into one of the many self-made hells which humans construct for themselves. One might view "The Father Unblinking" as a portrayal of grief so profound that it cannot be analysed, justified or storified; a girl is dead and her father buries her and the sun keeps shining and the world keeps turning, heedless of the loss. "The Cat Killers" shows us that, try as we might, we cannot be complicit in bloodshed and remain morally aloof from it. They utterly resist closure (and in some cases, resist comprehension too) but this is okay. They all succeed in unsettling me, teaching me that I can go to dark places in my writing without revealing a monster waiting behind the bushes, or uncorking a dystopian zeitgeist from its bottle. While Evenson's stories do tread into these territories, they do so with restraint, and without being self-conscious, content to present their strangeness and have the reader make of it what they will. I feel I can learn from this, let my ideas stand without the need for quite so many qualifiers, or quite so much window dressing.

Evenson also provided further insight into what makes a good narrator. In "The Munich Window", he tells a dark story of child abuse, but finds its true punch not in the emotional weight of its theme, but in the strength of its narrator. The abuser speaks throughout, the story defined by his endless justifications, rationalizations and generally warped takes on the world around him. Most importantly, he abides only by his own

internal logic, fiercely denying any guilt or personal flaw to such an extent that no other character is ever given their own direct speech. It is all one man's highly biased story of murder and abuse, and it is captivating. We know he is a monster, yet we are fascinated by how he explains his innocence. In short, the man's monstrousness is best appreciated from behind his own eyes; part of what makes a good narrator then is to really get inside that voice and tell the story through their logic, their lens and sense of self.

- I believe I have found my voice, at long last. While matters such as first and third-person narration are still an issue, I have a much clearer sense of what my stories should contain and where my strengths lie. The key lies in narrative *drive*, a willingness to move a series of events forward instead of being bogged down in set-up or self-analysis. It need not make sense, start at A or end at Z, it should simply move forward. Similarly, a bizarre or morbid idea need not be made obscure or artful in order to be 'allowed'; I can simply write it, however I please. My colleague Graham's writings were exemplary in this regard, with severed heads and chewed fingers aplenty, all written in a very matter-of-fact manner. Horror, science fiction and general fantasy it is then, though with a focus not on weaving an epic narrative so much as simply executing a concept. Many an idea that I might have discarded for lack of a grander plot can now be a stand-alone story; merely having a good idea and delivering it in a compelling fashion is enough. Having spent much of the course worrying and wondering about what I "should" be writing, I now know that I can write of a hundred Red Riding Hoods and have a hundred wolves devour them.

My key learnings in this category pertained largely to stylistic format and focus, drawing inspiration from existing authors to build my own brand of fiction. Short stories and shorter sentences were found to be useful in preserving pace and emotional impact, while the narrator's voice proved an important factor in terms of both launching stories and sustaining them. The purpose of my stories was found to lie neither in social commentary nor self-exploration, but rather in the unpacking of interesting concepts, ideas which excited me. Narrative drive was crucial. A piece should not slip into purple prose or overstay its welcome, simply deliver on its most compelling elements and then be content to stand as such, having depicted what it set out to show, but not striving to make an impact beyond that.



## The Nature of Horror

Horror was a major theme for me throughout this course, tying in with my existing interest in fantasy fiction, as well as providing an avenue for exploring some of the more uncomfortable sources of inspiration discussed in previous categories. I found that I could couch my own anxieties in the subject matter of fear, and portray authentic human behaviour by putting characters in horrifying situations.

The nature of horror, however, was a running struggle to define and refine. My goal was not necessarily to keep my reader awake at night, but to unsettle them. To present them with something dissonant and disturbing, and thereby hopefully reveal an authentic core of commentary. As the process of finding my stylistic voice also included finding something worth saying, horror provided a convenient trapdoor to the sordid depths of human nature.

- I was deeply affected by my reading of *Bad Brains*, by Kathe Koja. The author's ability to permeate me with her protagonist's misery was really quite frightful, and I felt a genuine desperation while reading. I noted that this was achieved by making the protagonist a relatable one, balancing his supernatural encounters with more mundane miseries. I wanted the character of Austen to be okay, to get well, to be loved again, and every misfortune visited upon him by either his peers or the horror which inhabited him was felt more keenly than the last. There was less need for the monster alone to carry the narrative, as one might imagine would be the case with any ghost story or scary movie. Instead, a sympathetic character both helped to maintain interest and heighten the horror.

The monster itself was however, very effective. I was pleased to see the nature of the "silver thing" which haunted Austen become increasingly Lovecraftian as the story progressed, no slasher or werewolf but something implacable, inescapable and wholly bizarre, Koja constantly blurs the lines between the supernatural and the scientific. The reader is never sure whether Austen is actually haunted or merely suffering the dementia induced by a head injury. I paid particular attention to how the author writes of incomprehensible foes and the alien worlds they creep out of. I found these to be some of the most evocative sections of the novel, and really enjoyed the images they conjured, noting that a useful technique in painting such imagery is to simply dive into it rather than try to carefully approach it.

I was struck by how fear stems less from gore, teeth and claws, than the utterly incomprehensible. The unknown is scarier than anything understandable, no matter how grim the latter may be. I wonder how, in my own writing, I will deploy monsters in such a way as to make them genuinely unsettling. One technique I did pick up was inviting

imagination over outright stating what is seen. For example, to refer to the silver creature's mouth in great detail would make it understandable, but to refer to it as "no human mouth at all" made my brain conjure a thousand horrid images.

Perhaps most impressively, the novel made me question whether an out-and-out monster is even necessary! I was especially affected by a scene toward the beginning, in which Austen wakes up hospitalized and attempts to talk to his nurse. She can understand him, but he hears her words as gibberish. This was profoundly disturbing, as he is suddenly cut off from that most basic ability, to make oneself understood by other people, and is reduced to pleading for help with gestures. I am now very interested in how I can create dis-ease in my reader not with external threats but with internal suffering. Where do our comfort zones lie, and how can I upset and defile them?

- If I've learned anything by this point, it is that the unknown inspires fear, and is the gateway to horror. Capturing this in writing is undeniably a challenge though. Harlan Ellison laments the limitations of the medium in *Dangerous Visions*, in the afterword to his own submission for the compilation. He argues that there *must* be a way to accomplish the same things in writing as in film (directly comparing the two), and feels that he must find it, given his interest in morbid fantasy. I realize that my old habit of explicitly describing the monsters I've written about is partly an attempt to compensate for the lack of visuals and plucking violins.
- This week's reading has found me engrossed in Gary J. Shipley's *Dreams of Amputation*, easily one of the most uncomfortable books I've read in recent memory. This discomfort is more than a result of harrowing subject matter, but a byproduct of Shipley's writing style. It feels hostile from the outset, at times depriving the reader of logical, connecting tissue with which to piece together a scene, and at other times bombarding them with one hideous graphic after another. If writing can be said to feel like having wires stuck in one's brain, this would be it.

Despite this, the narrative does indeed unfold and carry one forward through the fever dream. There is a strange satisfaction in figuring it out, gaining an understanding of this nightmare future despite the sometimes cryptic style. While I remain unconvinced that any author should make their audience work too hard for understanding, this book has prompted me to use less reliable narrators in my own work, spell out scenarios a little less. A touch of confusion can work well to draw the reader in.

In general, however, I feel the text gets too caught up in its own graphic portrayals of gore and violence, giving the reader a new nightmare to ponder every two or three pages. By the point that it takes the reader to a *literal hell dimension*, the horrors on display

there have half the impact they might otherwise. We have been de-sensitized already. Though I do not believe *Dreams of Amputation* aspires to haunt the reader as a ghost story might, it certainly wishes to make an impact; to this end, the author has overreached. This has crystallized for me the importance of saying just enough to get the imagination going, and then letting the reader take over from there. This goes double for heavy topics and horrific imagery; capture the essence of what's awful, and let your audience paint the blood spatters for themselves.

- *Neuropath* by R. Scott Bakker is utterly engrossing, giving me much to work with. I noted several techniques which the author employs near the beginning of the novel, describing a video in which a captive porn star speaks to her captor and torturer.

For one, the all-caps voice used by the off-screen killer, as well as their stilted sentences and child-like syntax. So different is this from conventional dialogue that it lends the mystery man a distinctly alien quality, enhancing his menace. The speaker is presumably human, but the reader's mind paints him as a monster, for he speaks like one. This point interests me, as I previously held that fictional monsters should probably never speak, for that humanizes them and makes them less scary. Just as giving them recognizable qualities or indeed, showing them at all, removes some of the frightening mystery, bestowing them with language removes much of the fear factor. It implies that one might have a conversation with them, reason with them. Certainly, evil humans can be frightening, as the threat of rape or any kind of cruelty is an effective device for creating tension in narrative, but it's a different kind of fear. We fear for the protagonist, not for ourselves once the bedroom lights are turned out. Here however, the addition of speech did nothing to lessen the horror; if anything, it only galvanized the imagination.

I also noted how the author handles themes of gore and cruelty, the video scene in particular cleverly hooking the reader by showing them just enough, making them wait for a final grim revelation (the porn star's head sawn open). In terms of my own writing, I know that I typically like to use a hook at the start of my paragraphs, a strong central image which I expound upon, as I can be assured that the reader is already interested. This has led me to often start with the most disturbing element of a scenario, rather than keep anything in the wings. This video scene is clever for precisely the opposite reason, tantalizing me, then disturbing me once I'm invested. When it comes to gore, it seems less really is more.

In the same vein as *Bad Brains*, *Neuropath* also showcased the efficacy of disrupting the reader's comfort zone over simply scaring them. What more sacred space is there than the brain? This novel explores that question by using a lunatic neurosurgeon as its central antagonist, inviting the reader to consider a host of uncomfortable concepts. Can madness

be imposed upon someone? Can suffering be made to feel like pleasure? The violation which the villain represents is so complete that one constantly dreads his arrival, fearing not the familiar threats of pain and death, but the deeper horrors of enslavement and loss of self. I must then consider not only what my monsters look like and how they behave, but also what they represent.

- I recently finished Brian Evenson's *Dead Space Martyr*, a sci-fi horror work derived from a videogame franchise. The world of this fiction certainly contains worthwhile ideas, from flesh-eating mutant zombies to an alien transmitter which affects human minds, but the games suffered from a grotesque excess of horror. Given my newfound philosophy of less is more, I was curious whether or not Evenson would fall into the same trap. I feel that while he did not fall per se, he did stumble, as much of the suspense and tension from the first half of the book is lost in favour of wanton carnage toward the end. This bloody section has its redeeming features, bringing a hell-scape into reality as the walls literally start turning into flesh, but I was struck by the diminishing efficacy of introducing one monster after another.

To elaborate, the first creatures to appear are defined by their scythe-like arms and jawless humanoid faces, lurching along to dismember their prey. This is an effectively horrific image and one that befits the book's ominous build-up (talk of nightmares beyond imagining, a devil unleashed etc.). However, once these creatures have been established as a threat, the focus is largely taken off them, with the protagonist handily dispatching a dozen or so. Paired with this is the fact that more time is spent describing the other monstrosities which appear, while the scythe beasts are relegated to cannon fodder. I think this is a shame, as their initial appearance in-text is met with some genuinely chilling lines like "Oh God... they sprouted swords!" I recall my own early attempts at horror, defined by constant escalation, reeling from one nightmare to the next, yet here I read exactly that and am left cold.

I also took issue with the central protagonist, Michael Altmann, whose motivations are unrelatable and whose personality is cliché. I was particularly struck by his statement that he would "find out what was going on, even if it killed him", this after sensing a little secrecy around an issue he had barely any investment in. Painted as a scientist whose only discernible care in life is his girlfriend, it felt incongruous that he should later become a fearless man of action and ultimately, a noble martyr. I think that on a stylistic level, this choice reduced the horror factor for me. It's hard to remain disturbed and fearful as a reader when the protagonist clearly has no fear. I felt a far greater sense of empathy with the minor characters who suffered troubling visions, burgeoning madness or simple terror when confronted by the monsters.

Again I find a parallel in my own writing, recalling the tough-as-nails protagonists I paired with my fictional monsters, and the lack of empathy which my peers felt when reading about them. *Dead Space Martyr* and other texts have taught me that a human response is relatable, and a base response is fear. Given my desire to write believable horror, I should bear this in mind; making characters strong in the face of evil can remove all suspense if mishandled, whereas making characters vulnerable keeps the reader reading.

- *Altmann's Tongue* showed a starkly different approach to portraying violence. I found that scenes such as the starving man in "The Blank", the sewing shut of eyelids in "Hebe kills Jarry" and the death by bees featured in "Stung" left a lasting impression that mutated beasts could not. While both texts take the body as the origin of horror, *Altmann's Tongue* evokes the senses more strongly, forcing one to imagine how such perversions must feel; the scratchiness of stitched eyelids, or the bilious wasting away of starvation. While the monsters of *Dead Space Martyr* are hideous perversions of the human body, their mutations are not evoked much beyond visual description, and so they disturb one less.

By contrast, *Dead Space Martyr* builds up to its mutant invasion with several scenes of men driven mad by visions, and the slow-burn effect of these scenes was something I found highly effective. Particularly the first of these scenes, within a submarine, was so wonderfully claustrophobic that I took notes on how to build up tension from it. The final punch of this scene is not the appearance of a demon, but a man's decision to open his own veins so that he may paint the walls.

Such self-harm is chilling, and reminiscent of *Publishers Weekly's* review of *Altmann's Tongue*, in which "demented protagonists" are referred to and wherein the reviewer comments that "they [the stories] are told in such a compelling fashion that one reads not to understand but merely to witness". Ironically, it would seem that smaller violations of the human body stick in the memory longer than the complete subversion thereof. As such, I should not look to deploy a lot of horror in my own writing, but rather just enough, considering carefully what events lead up to it and how best to evoke the senses to get under the reader's skin at that point.

My main insights in this category all related to gaining a better understanding of horror, what constitutes it and what causes it, narratively speaking. Subtlety was the core learning here. In realizing that the unknown is scarier than the known, I learned to give the reader just enough information; their imagination will inevitably conjure far worse than anything I could write. The same principle applies to depicting violence, the principle of "less is more" both preserving

shock value and leaving a more lasting impact than excesses of gore. Narrative pacing and relatable characters were also found to be crucial for maintaining a reader's investment in a plot, giving them people to care about and mysteries to uncover. Most importantly, I learned that horror should do more than frighten or disgust, but should strive to unsettle the reader at a deeper level, an effect best accomplished by taking that which is familiar and twisting it somehow. If the author can successfully invade his reader's comfort zone, he has succeeded in writing horror.

## Key Techniques

As stated in the first category, writing is a craft, and one which the author must hone. Having covered sources of inspiration, methods of content production and theoretical underpinnings, this final category simply lists those techniques which I found useful in my writing. The tricks, as it were, employed by other authors in crafting their stories, as well as those which were particularly relevant to me.

- This week we played with punctuation, and I had a small epiphany. Being forced to consciously think about how word usage creates or arrests motion was very impactful, and had me consider the style that I use to convey any given scene. I had the happy accident of finding a style I really liked: short, punchy lines and paragraphs which feed the reader bits of intense imagery. This works well for the kind of horror writing I can see myself doing, as it creates dramatic tension. Similarly, I can speed up or slow down the ‘breathing’ of the reader, as it were, with longer or shorter sentences.
- I was particularly struck by the concept of consecution in this seminar, and would like to explore it further. The idea of creating a self-starting engine with one’s writing by ensuring that each line flows from its predecessor and into its successor appeals to me. This prompted a more natural flow of association with my writing, whereas previously I felt paralyzed in trying to artfully weave a text. Now I can focus more on what ideas string together naturally, and the writing flows.
- This week’s task to write entirely within one setting proved to be an interesting exercise, as it removed a pressure I have always felt while writing, namely to move location in order to advance narrative. With this out of the equation, I was intrigued by how much interest I could extract from a single scenario. The details of a single room began driving the story, and a far greater weight was placed on dialogue and internal monologue. This is a double-edged sword for my own writing; by this I refer specifically to my desire to write fantasy. The trope of questing about has doubtless coloured my own sense of how one should go about creating a story. I feel compelled to stuff interesting locations into a narrative, but neither wish to gloss over sections of story nor write a ten-book epic to satisfy my desire for thoroughness. Having discovered that I can infuse a single location with enormous relevance and advance a story well without moving, this fear is alleviated. However, there is now the newfound concern of making sure that if I introduce an area, it be relevant or not be introduced at all!
- Kathe Koja is amazing. I have finished reading *Extremities* and her style has already begun to influence my own. I found two techniques of hers especially exciting. First off,

the power of ‘oh’. More than many a word I have seen used for emphasis, this one strikes me as particularly potent, inviting the reader to say it aloud and participate in it, to some extent creating for themselves the emotional impact of any given scene. Simply by reading the word, one immediately attributes one’s own remembered experience to the scene being described. The sex, the fear, the sadness... all of it sees Koja’s ‘oh’ deployed to great effect, cutting down the need for endless descriptive paragraphs yet still capturing great power.

The second technique I noted is one I wish to start using immediately, namely to flow into dialogue mid-sentence. Koja will often describe the features of a scene and then make a bit of speech almost a physical feature thereof. Lines such as “...as they lay side by side in the deep four-poster, princess bed draped in lace and gauze and “Don’t ever buy me a ring,” she said”. These avoid the need to mechanically shift from descriptive text to dialogue, and also infuse a space with the essence of what a character has said. One jumps straight into the juicy stuff without fluff and moreover, one creates a truly tangible mood, a character’s words carrying the weight of their surroundings rather than existing in a stylistic vacuum. In light of this, I plan to start weaving dialogue into my scenes more naturally.

- I have been immersed in the *Little Deaths* collection of short stories, and noted two particularly interesting things in the story “Lover Doll”, by Wayne Allen Sallee. For one, the author’s use of intermissions, as it were, to break up paragraphs, sections of real-time narrative in italics that splice up the reminiscing which comprises the bulk of the story. I am moving more toward such episodic writing in my own work, and tried a little of it in my most recent assignment. I had previously felt compelled to set up any scene before going into it. My characters could not, for instance, go to a restaurant; they had to drive there first, and something had to happen on the drive. I have since realized the efficacy of just jumping right in, scene hopping of sorts, as it both keeps up the pace for the reader and means that one needn’t waste time writing fluff. Using these intermissions presents me with further potential in this regard, as it means I can tell two stories at once, and potentially do so in different narrative styles, or through the voices of different characters.
- In reading *Altmann’s Tongue* by Brian Evenson, I noted that the writing was tight in focus and careful in its construction. His short stories often begin with a deliberately strong line. The girl is dead, Altmann has been shot, the daughter has committed suicide, and the cats are going to be killed. These things are stated frankly and immediately, and the reader is immediately invested. I have come to appreciate the value of a strong starting sentence, and aim to implement this trick in my own writing.



- I have learned the value of brevity and with it, understatement. Of the recent pieces I have produced that were deemed effective by my peers, they all shared a few common traits. A punchline was delivered and the story was ended soon after; some revelation was made and then, with that impact being essentially the core of the piece, it necessarily wrapped up quickly. Moreover, since said punchline was often a sticky end for the protagonist (or someone in the plot at any rate), these pieces did well to end on the *implication* of the awfulness to come rather than spelling it out for the reader. Not only was this found to be more disturbing (the reader readily imagines things far worse than I could ever write), but more subtle, avoiding the pitfall of heavy-handed text that might belabour an otherwise good idea. With both of these in mind, I have necessarily tended more towards shorter pieces, between a thousand or two thousand words. This has not only been a weight off my shoulders, it has been a rediscovery of the fun of writing. A macabre idea may be spun out for as long as it needs to be, and then I move on to the next one.
  
- I now care far less about leaving elements of a story unexplained, or unrelated to the central theme. By way of example, a story by Katherine Ong Muslim featured a boy regarding a kite in a neighbour's backyard. This object was utterly unrelated to the story at large, neither symbolically relevant nor mentioned more than once throughout. I find this nothing short of mind-blowing, having laboured under the misconception that any element in a story should have relevance or not be included at all. Checkov's Gun taken to its extreme, I strived to make everything either a call back or call forward, and inevitably ended up with purple prose. I am far happier now to introduce a bit of scenery or backstory into my narrative and leave it there, focusing instead on telling my core story.

My key learnings in this section were naturally diverse, but largely pertained to matters of pacing and setting. I learned that one need not agonize over every element of a story's world, nor how the characters traverse it. Window dressing is permissible, as is scene hopping, provided the story retains its pace. Conversely, a story's setting need not change at all for it to be effective. More important were the techniques of drawing a reader into one's story with arresting openers, and concluding on powerful enders. A story should neither ask its reader to stick around till it gets interesting, nor continue overlong after its climax, a principle which applies as much to individual paragraphs as to the piece as a whole.

## Writing in the Community Assignment

The goal of my Writing in the Community assignment was to empower workshop participants, and to do so in a two-fold manner. Students needed to receive basic training, as it were, in the process and techniques of creative writing, but this was not enough. It was also vital that they be given a sense of their own authorial freedom, inspired to write what they wished, however they wished to do so. With this in mind, and given the tight time constraints of the project, it seemed most appropriate to focus on a high school-level audience, which might benefit from compact and straight-forward lessons.

I completed my assignment alongside Leigh-Anne Gouws, whose assistance was invaluable throughout. We made the decision to draw learners from Paterson High School in Port Elizabeth, her old alma mater, focusing particularly on Grade 10 and 11 students who were already members of an existing creative writing club. Ms Rachel Burns, a visiting librarian from the USA and the organizer of said club, provided oversight during our workshop sessions. Several factors informed our choice of audience.

For one, the aforementioned time constraints and goals of the assignment meant that teachings had to be easily and quickly delivered, limiting the potential materials which we could draw from to quite simple concepts. The age group of our intended audience was therefore appropriate in this regard; young minds would likely benefit most from these ideas and would not be expecting especially complex or intellectually challenging input from us, merely guidance. It was also fortunate that these learners were already part of a writing-oriented club, meaning that we could assume a baseline of skill to build upon, rather than having to teach creativity from first principles. We could also expect a degree of actual motivation; our audience was not being convinced to write, but were present because they wanted to improve.

The nature of the school was another factor, being relatively underprivileged and drawing its student body from a largely African and Cape Malay demographic. Leigh-Anne and I had decided early in our planning phase that we wished to challenge a prevalent misconception (commonly held by those for whom English is neither a mother tongue, nor even a preferred one) that “proper” writing necessitates correct English language use, of the calibre which one might expect to be taught in high school. But even beyond that, the perception persists of good writing being equated to “fancy” English usage, rather than simple creative expression. As such, we wished to take writing down to brass tacks, re-establish it as a highly personal process and as pure an art form as any other, one which should be seen as a vehicle for genuine emanation of self, not an elaborate dance constrained by hegemonic principles. In short, learners needed to be shown that they could write their own stories in their own languages.

These goals could be distilled down to two ideas which we wished to convey, and which informed our choice of methods and materials:

1. Writing is easy (at least, initial strides can be) and need not be a full-length novel
2. We all have something worth writing about

This not an arbitrary selection of topics but rather an articulation of the ideas which might form the core of a writer, distil its essence as it were. Each of the above has not only been a key learning in our own MACW course, but can be quickly and easily taught within the scope of a day-long workshop. This is partly due to the fact that both listed points have a readily available exercise or example which we attempted to draw from.

1. Timed free writing suspends self-doubt and gets across the idea that writing should be regular rather than necessarily inspired. It also gives the learners an actionable method of beginning their writing careers.
2. Fragmentary writing, particularly of an autobiographical nature, allows for interesting tableaux to be created without the concerns of working within a novel-length framework. It is also relevant to the aforementioned cultural concerns around English usage.

Considering that most learners would likely hold the misconception that writing is only worthwhile if it is a great undertaking, we aimed to use these points to reshape their thinking and inspire more regular writing. We also wished to convey some other basic ideas (or rather, dispel other demons that tend to plague the aspirant writer), including matters such as authenticity, honesty, use of vernacular and memoir versus fiction. Again, our approach was less focused on wishing to impart new information to learners so much as to challenge existing misconceptions, and our methods and dialogue were not as academic in nature as the tone of this report may imply.

We had considered emphasizing the above points by viewing them through the lens of an early MACW learning, namely “Write about your pain; write through it and toward it”<sup>55</sup>. The rationale here was that writing what one knows or about one’s pain is easier than devising an entirely fictional world, and cements the idea that one need not have lived an exceptional life to make great writing. We had thought to give learners a sense of what creative direction they might pursue, and encourage them to view writing as a therapeutic process rather than a high art form reserved for an imagined elite. However, in light of the high school context, we opted against it due to potential ethical concerns, and for fear that skeletons might tumble out of closets and turn an ostensibly fun atmosphere into one more akin to group therapy. It was nonetheless interesting to note that, without any prompting from either myself or Leigh-Anne, many students instinctively followed this principle when producing free writing work in our classes.

To segue into our choice of tools and lesson plans, we chose to structure our workshops largely around free writing, viewing active participation by learners as far preferable to simple listening and note-taking. Such was the emphasis we placed on this idea that we began with free writing,

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<sup>55</sup> A neat summary provided to us toward the beginning of the course, suggesting a ready source of inspiration and correspondingly, authentic expression.

moving from introductions right into the activity. This both served to reinforce the idea that participants were here as writers, not merely passive listeners, and to establish the nature of the workshop as exactly that, an interactive process which would ultimately result in improved writing.

To elaborate on this point, we had learners engage in free writing throughout the two workshops which we held, beginning with a simple prompt of “Today I saw...” and later providing prompts related to whatever topic had just been discussed. This not only served to cement in learners any lessons delivered, giving them a chance at application while the idea was still top-of-mind, but also instilled a sense of progress in them, with free writing becoming progressively easier as the workshop continued.

We asked participants how they felt after the first such session and were almost universally told that it “was hard”, or that they “didn’t know what to write”. The fact that learners were only given a minute in which to put something down on paper intimidated many of them, though their relief was palpable upon hearing that our expectations as workshop hosts were not high, and that nobody was looking for brilliant writing out of such exercises. The idea or trick, as it were, behind free writing had to be explained early in the first session, emphasizing that this was a means of suspending self-doubt and simply kick-starting the creative process. This assuaged most of the learners, though it was still very evident to what extent the idea of writing as a performative process was engrained in them.

The idea that they were being judged on their technical skill or artistic brilliance had to be dispelled at the outset; we were at pains to ensure that learners understood this to be a learning exercise rather than a test. Once they had grasped this concept, however, they began to visibly enjoy it, eager to demonstrate their unique abilities each time they were given an opportunity to do so. The short time limit on such exercises meant that these did not feel like work, but rather, like fun. Leigh-Anne and I in fact extended the time limit on several occasions without informing the learners, taking note of how readily they continued writing and pointing out to them afterward how the exercise gets one right into the mode of creative thinking.

We also provided learners with a chance to read their work after each such exercise, giving them direct praise or constructive feedback once they had done so. We were careful to give each student a point of praise and to avoid holding up the writing of any one of them as an example to the others. We did not wish to create feelings of inferiority in any of the participants, as after all, a core goal of our workshop was to get across the message that everyone has something worth writing about. The purpose of these rapid-fire feedback sessions was to point out how free writing could produce valuable material, even when conducted in very short bursts. It was also to give learners a sense of being worthy, active participants in the process with much to offer, not simply present to have knowledge dropped upon them.

This loop of learning and writing provided a fantastic framework for both sessions, as students became increasingly confident, internalized free writing as a valuable tool, and seemed to retain our other various insights more easily. One of said insights was that of fragmentary writing being a useful format for authors across the board, affording one the opportunity to simply pour ideas and scenes onto a page and loosely tie them together without necessarily needing a clever plot or defined start and end points. We of course, used free writing to demonstrate this too, revealing toward the end of the workshop how several pieces of seemingly unrelated free writing could be stuck together to form a single piece of sorts.

Learners were asked to do a two-minute-long piece on each of the five senses, given a prompt for each that was somewhat oblique in its phrasing and not being told beforehand that they would be joining these fragments at the end. It was interesting to note that while some learners picked up the thread and produced a series of related fragments (senses all evoked within the same scenario for instance), others had each segment be entirely self-contained. Regardless of which tack the learner took, our feedback to them pointed out the ways in which their piece worked, noting how it either created a single, intense moment in time, or a series of images woven into a dream-like or memory-based narrative. The intention here was to have a sort of “aha!” moment, whereby learners were shown how easily a piece can be put together and also how useful even a collection of fragments could be. Students were encouraged to show their sense-based piece to others, friends and family, and were visibly delighted upon hearing that they were “all authors now”. Given that these works were all typically two pages long or so, this felt like a not insubstantial achievement for them. I feel that, if nothing else, this particular exercise achieved the stated goal of empowering participants and demonstrating that the core of writing need not be difficult.

Beyond this focus on free writing, our workshop sessions followed a read-and-tell format, whereby Leigh-Anne and myself presented some of our own writings to the class and discussed them afterward. These pieces were chosen to support or demonstrate the principles that we had in mind to begin with, focusing largely on matters of voice, narrative structure and culture.

We began with my piece *Thirsty*, as it takes horror-themed inspiration from plants and bad weather, uses a choppy sentence structure, and in a few places, employs made-up words. This was used as an example of how one can spin unconventional narratives and need not feel constrained by formal styles of writing. It was also an example of how a mundane scenario (listening to the rain outside) could result in something fantastical through the writing process. Learners were encouraged to not shy away from made-up onomatopoeic words (e.g. “amblescratch”) or giving free reign to their imaginations. It was emphasized that writing should be a routine part of their lives and take inspiration from the mundane moments therein, rather than only begin after elaborate planning and forethought. “Just write and see where it takes you” was the message behind this piece.

Leigh-Anne’s *Skief in Belhar* was chosen as our next piece, being particularly relevant to the class as it is largely written in Cape Malay vernacular and employs a gossiping “auntie” as a

major narrator. Moreover, it takes real-world issues as its focus, spinning the narrative of a young homosexual grappling with the ramifications of his sexuality amidst a conservative, intolerant cultural setting. The lessons behind this piece were two-fold: it was shown that real-world issues are both worth writing about and all the more affecting for their underlying reality; and that one can happily write in languages other than English, or chop and change parts of English, when telling a story. Learners were subsequently asked to do a two-part free writing exercise, telling a story first in English and afterward as their auntie might have told it, or as they might tell it to a friend. The contrast in ease of writing was immediately apparent, and remarked upon by learners. When sharing their work, laughter was frequent, as the participants felt connected to the stories being shared by one another. We remarked on this and drove home the message that authenticity lies as much in language as in content. English is a choice, not the golden standard. If as writers, they felt that a story could only truly be expressed in a certain vernacular, they should not be afraid to do so.

Our second workshop session began with Leigh-Anne's *Shadenaar*, a piece which proved particularly popular with the class due to its setting in a local community neighbouring the school. This was an example of fragmentary, biographical writing, a series of moments and settings, disparate memories and themes strung together only by the sense that they all emanated from the same authentic voice. This piece reinforced some of the ideas which had already been covered, but also provided an opportunity to discuss emotional resonance. Having already been made familiar with the idea of authenticity in language, Leigh-Anne's piece again used local vernacular to cement this and lend genuine flavour to the scenes she describes. However, unlike her first piece which was clearly the story of another, this was autobiographical, or at least *read like it was*. Learners were asked whether they thought the story was "real" or not, with most of them answering that they believed it was. When asked why they thought so, they generally agreed that it "felt true". Their surprise upon hearing that it was a blend of truth and fiction was noteworthy; they had not thought that such writing was "allowed", feeling that pieces should either be one or the other. This was visibly a paradigm-shifting moment for many of them, as it conveyed the idea that they could draw inspiration from their lived experiences without necessarily being on-the-nose honest (a prospect which mortifies grown adults, let alone high school students). It also demonstrated that emotional resonance could be manufactured, and had a great deal to do with framing. In other words, if just enough reality were woven into a fantasy, it could lend said fantasy the veneer of truth. "What does it matter if a story is true or not? If it feels real, it can have an impact on readers. What do you want your reader to feel?" This was the thrust of our lesson based upon *Shadenaar*. Students were encouraged to consider what stories of their own they might tell in such a way, couching reality within fantasy. Many of them were visibly excited at the prospect.

We concluded with my piece *Ink Like Tar*, a final example of fragmentary writing and memoir, only in this case, more ambiguous in its character denominations and more meandering in its flow, tying moments together through the theme of smoking. Students were again asked what

they thought of said piece, which fragments affected them and why. At this point, they anticipated the work being a blend of reality and fantasy, and were even able to articulate why certain fragments had an emotional impact on them, likening them to memories of their own, or saying that the narrator “sounded sincere”. I took this as evidence of the workshop’s success up until this point. What confused the class however, was what the story “was all about”, neither having a clear message to it nor expressing the socio-cultural struggles of an identifiable group. Our answer to them was that it was simply an expression of self, a collection of ideas that needed to be put on paper for the author’s own satisfaction. That the piece wasn’t seeking to convey a message or moral, or even tell a story per se, but express a feeling. We felt that this idea was best saved for the end of the final workshop, driving home the lesson that writing does not have to obey any more rules than painting for instance. If a work on canvas can be content to simply express a moment of emotion, so too can writing. Learners were encouraged to view their own writing as such, a canvas upon which they might express anything they wished; a theme and an emotion are enough.

We concluded our workshop by giving the learners a questionnaire to fill out, asking simple questions as to whether they enjoyed the sessions and would want us to come back. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, both written and verbal, with several learners telling us in person that they felt better equipped to write or more inspired to do so as a result of our lessons. A few learners asked if we would be coming back at a later date, expressing that they found our teaching style more easily applicable and more revelatory than their creative writing club activities to date.

To return to the stated goals of this workshop, namely that of empowering learners to write more freely and showing them also how they might write more regularly, I feel that we largely succeeded. The cultural bugbear of writing being equated with high-level English is a difficult one to shift; however, I do feel that we made some progress in this regard, encouraging learners to write in their own voices and draw from their own lived experiences. During those sections in which learners read out their free writing, it was evident that those with greater English proficiency were seen as successful relative to their peers; however, there were several occasions on which simpler, more authentic pieces were met with equal or greater approval. I was pleased to note this, as it evidenced a shift toward more genuine writing, rather than the style and format engrained by their high school curriculum.

We certainly unseated the common notion that writing need be a full-length novel, a brilliant fantasy or a meticulously planned epic. Learners seemed quite comfortable with and capable of producing pieces based on their everyday lives or common scenarios (drawn from our writing prompts). In this regard, I definitely feel that free writing was well established as a useful writer’s tool, as learners affirmed this in response to our questioning them. Several of them also commented thereon during informal discussions afterward. While some certainly took to the process more than others, all participants felt that they had benefited from the learning, and all were proud to have produced the quantity of writing that they had by the end of the sessions.

I feel that the workshop was a great success, providing participants with an easily applicable tool, a workable format by way of example, and the chance to try out new modes of expression. Even if not all of our insights were retained by the learners, free writing certainly was, and several students were vocal about how the classes had shifted their perceptions. Ultimately, it was a privilege to work with such an eager and receptive class, as well as a chance to crystallize my own understanding of several concepts by teaching them. If the few hours I spent at Paterson High School galvanize the next generation of writers, I am happy indeed.



## External Reader's Report

I can begin by saying that the feedback received in the external reader's report was both very helpful and very favourable, thorough in nature and generally complementary in tone. Overall, the reader's critical review determined my collection of short stories to be praiseworthy and not in need of any major revisions, either in terms of style or content. There were however, several pieces of specific advice and criticism provided, giving me direction on how I might further polish my pieces. I have included my thoughts on these suggestions below, and have organised my responses in the same fashion as the feedback was delivered: on a story-by-story basis.

Beginning with the longest piece in my collection, "Red", I was thrilled to find that the reader considered it my strongest submission, praising both the narrative flow and direction. While they noted that it was more comparable to mainstream science fiction than especially experimental writing, they also emphasized that they found the piece compelling, allowing themselves to be swept up by the story's atmosphere rather than feel the need to critique it at every turn. I found this feedback highly encouraging, as my creative direction has never been toward the experimental but rather, the entertaining. That an unbiased party found my writing a joy to read confirms that I have, at least in part, found my authorial voice.

Further to this point, the reader also commented on the brevity and careful pacing of the other pieces in my collection, noting that slow reveals and withheld information were common features throughout. They deemed these techniques to be effective, both in terms of keeping the audience interested and preserving narrative impact. Considering that I had felt a good deal of anxiety around these stylistic choices, as well as the desire to make a distinct impact on my reader, such feedback is greatly reassuring, reinforcing my confidence in my chosen style and subject matter.

The reader considered "Ogre" to be largely praiseworthy, but did question my choice of a first-person narrator, given the fact that the speaker is strongly implied to die by the end of the piece, raising the question of how they might still manage to relate their story. While they qualified this input by stating that it was likely subjective feedback (bothering them in particular, while a different reader may have been more forgiving on this point), I still consider it a useful insight. I confess that I have yet to come up with a way that I might revise the piece in light of this criticism, neither wanting to shift to a third-person perspective and lose the strong narrative voice, nor lean on a device such as a suicide note or witness. However, I may be able to tweak the flow of events and the manner in which they are related to create a greater sense of ambiguity, thereby avoiding the need for a strict logical consistency.

In their feedback on "The Prophet", the reader noted the piece's strong underlying message, praising its thematic relevance, which I found encouraging. They did however, note some tonal dissonance in terms of how the narrator relates a specific section of events. Upon re-reading the

story, I find myself agreeing with this criticism and will look to tweak both the cadence of the paragraph in question and the word choice therein.

A review of “The Mercenary” provided me with the most substantial criticism, noting that while the piece is generally effective in its tone, concept and character progression, it suffers from some stylistic issues. In places, the sentences were found to be too short and choppy. While this had been a deliberate choice on my part, intending to strengthen the protagonist’s narrative voice, it appears that I overdid it, instead disrupting the flow of the story. The reader identified points throughout the text at which either word choice or punctuation might be tweaked to achieve a better effect. I welcome this feedback, as I found the writing of this story to be both difficult and protracted, undergoing many revisions. That it has managed to deliver on its core premise and succeed in its chosen style is something I celebrate, and implementing suggested edits will likely only strengthen the piece.

The reader had little to say about either “The Teacher” or “Frankie”, simply noting that their premises were effective and the emotional punches which they delivered did not feel contrived. I do not consider the relative absence of feedback on these pieces to be an issue, given that I had felt a degree of anxiety about both and therefore expected damning criticism. Telling two horror stories within a high school setting had felt like a risk in the works’ creation, and it is affirming to see them well received.

Input on “The Other Father” was similarly encouraging, as it had been another piece which I feared would be found lacking in either its premise or its execution. While I had expected the piece’s deliberately ambiguous style to draw criticism, it was instead found to be the essence of the story, not a weakness but a source of curiosity for the reader.

“The Proper Patch” was also praised on stylistic grounds, the reader noting the efficacy of the inclusion of small details, as well as the deliberately slow reveal of information. I had expected the reception of this piece to be positive, given that pre-submission feedback on it had been good and the piece’s production felt very natural, not forced. Still, it was pleasing to see this confirmed, as the story is one of the better examples of the authorial voice which I discovered during the course and wish to develop further.

Feedback on “The Mistakes” was brief, noting the strength of the premise but pointing out that when dealing with themes of environmental disaster, I would do well to read around my topic. In this case, the plausibility of giant, mutated ants was put into question by the fact that they existed in a post-apocalyptic setting, whereas contemporary science indicates that such creatures would no more likely survive Armageddon than would humans. While a minor criticism, I still find this feedback useful, as I identified my lack of general scientific knowledge as a weakness in my attempts at crafting science fiction. I am therefore reminded to strengthen the imaginative with the factual wherever possible.

All in all, the external reader's report has been massively affirming for me, building confidence in my chosen style and subject matter while also providing actionable feedback on how I might polish my stories before final submission.

END