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What We Do Not Perceive When We Perceive It

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WHAT WE DO NOT PERCEIVE WHEN WE PERCEIVE IT

by

Hannah Jane Trammell
B.A. May 2016, Randolph-Macon College

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

WHAT WE DO NOT PERCEIVE WHEN WE PERCEIVE IT

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Old Dominion University, 2020
Director: Prof. John McManus

The thesis herein attempts to traverse, overcome, and, ultimately subsume back into the conventions of such genres as science-fiction, fabulism, surrealism, romance, horror, and speculative fiction. The primary tool used for this purpose is a great bag of hot, sparking meat caught between two ears and a thick skull. A few notebooks, pens, and a laptop might also have helped in this pursuit. The stories and poems contained herein are works of fiction inspired by non-fictional systems of feeling. Using all the tools given to me by my professors and the craft and theory books I read during my coursework at Old Dominion University, I explore the nature of reality, of human notions of universality, and of love and affection found in strange and sometimes perverse places, while challenging accepted conventions regarding these and other such matters. Yet, being human, it is difficult to escape human constructions of ontology and epistemology.

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This thesis is dedicated to god blessing all vampires every night and to the love of my life, Josh. My mother and all of my family were also a wonderful support network during my work and this goes to them too. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to the MFA class of 2020 because we are young and ravishing.

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PREFACE: ESCAPISM AND HIGHLY DANGEROUS UNDERTAKINGS

“I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff -and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.”

(*Pale Fire*, Vladimir Nabokov)

The title of this essay sounds super edgy. Unfortunately, there is nothing edgy about what I am about to discuss—unless you consider a slightly different connotation of edgy. Edgy like full of sharp edges. More painful and less cool. The Nabokov quote has resonated with me ever since I first read *Pale Fire* as an undergraduate—mostly because it is not only stylistically beautiful but also speaks to a sentiment with which I feel kinship. The truth is my collection of stories, poems, and flash fiction pieces reflects my experience with the world. The tentative title of the collection, *What We Perceive When We Do Not Perceive It*, is a paraphrase of a quote from Niklas Luhmann. The full quote runs thus, "Reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it." All of my life I have lived with fragmentation and dwelled in liminal spaces—not simply because of my gender but also because of my ongoing experience with mental illness. I honestly cannot remember a time when I was not struggling against the next wave of depression or the constant eddies of anxiety. On top of that I have attention deficit disorder, which certainly led to some conflict with conventional ideas of what it means to be studious and a good student, and school has always been extremely integral to my identity. My experience with mental illness and trauma and my love of school are the two biggest factors in my decision to pursue writing

fiction and poetry as a career, and I would be remiss if I did not explore fully the ways in which my thesis has been shaped by those deciding factors.

When I was a kid, I was often lonely. The nature of my parents' divorce was fairly brutal. They were incredibly unhappy together, and there was eighteen years of gaslighting and cycling aggression/repression to consider. The years that followed were not much better. I learned bitterness at a very young age, especially after my father remarried within the next year or so. Ultimately, I ended up in a very dark place by age fourteen, and while I am still struggling now, I have never gone all the way back there. But as soon as you cross the threshold into the place I am talking about that place then leaves its mark on you. One of the only ways I coped with all of this was through writing. My relationship with writing began with winning a poetry contest in the fourth grade and continued well into middle school, by which time I had completed my first manuscript. One of the things that fueled me was a need to escape into fantastical worlds, but also a need for worlds that I had wrought.

At that age I was a Christian. This is important because it was partly delusions of grandeur that ultimately helped me make it through grade school and through undergraduate. I convinced myself that I was one of God's darlings and that a path would open up for me because being a writer—a creator—was what I was meant to do. A little messiah complex can go a long way to protecting a fragile ego. It also made writing feel that much more ordained, so that I was not allowed to give up on it like I did with a lot of other things that seemed to have too much at stake for so little reward. This is also what drew me to theater and acting. These things all came together to form who I am. A little broken, definitely broke, and still plugging away. Like John Darnielle of The Mountain Goats writes, "Every dream is a good dream. Even awful dreams are good dreams. If you're doing it right." I write because it is one of the only things that makes any

sense to me at all, and this thesis project is the product of who I am and what I believe I want to put out into this world.

There are several pieces in my thesis, so I am going to focus on some of the main ones, including “Hard Light,” “Investigation: Dewerstone Manor,” “Gentle Nature,” and “Her Rotting Parts.” In each piece I found some dark thread filled with fear, desire, infernality, or dread and attempted to follow that thread to its end because that is what interests me. The dark places, where the only clear signs of where you are and how to proceed are those immediately before you and the whole could be as vast as a cavern or as small as a thimble.

When I first began writing “Hard Light” I had this idea in my head of romantic love and the myriad ways in which it overlaps but also completely departs from notions of sexual love or desire. As someone who identifies along the asexual spectrum, I find that the heteronormative narrative grows tired quickly in literature, which is not to say the love between heterosexual individuals is not equally beautiful or important, but that it has been made too important and monolithic in much of the American-English literary cannon. The inspiration for the story, “Hard Light” came from several different sources, including *Hannibal*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *Vampyreuteuthis infernalis*.

Ever since I first watched *Silence of the Lambs*, I have been in love with Dr. Hannibal Lecter, even though the character has taken on many forms. He is a different Hannibal in each new revival of his story, and yet I still find him compelling anew every time. For instance, I know for a fact that I could probably curse in front of Anthony Hopkins’ version of Hannibal, whereas I would get eaten for cussing in front of Mads Mikkelsen’s Hannibal, though the context would be equally important in both cases. Hopkins even uses his body differently than Mikkelsen. They are both poised, but Mikkelsen’s portrayal brings the character into the realm of

animality. When I first watched Mikkelsen play the role in the television series, I knew that not even Hopkins could hold a candle to this latest version of the cannibal killer. Then there are the relationships central to both versions of Hannibal. Hopkins has Jodi Foster as Clarice Starling and Mikkelsen has Hugh Dancy as Will Graham, and both characters play similar roles in their respective versions of the story, but the relationship between Hannibal and Will in the television series brings the added dimension of queer romance.

When I think about why the television version of Hannibal's story is my favorite, I know that it is certainly in large part because of the queer love story that occurs between Will and Hannibal, but that is not the only aspect that inspired my story. Hannibal's intellect is so great that his intelligence becomes alien to us, and it is through Will's empathy disorder that we are given a lens through which to interpret Hannibal. However, Will often admits that he only thinks he knows Hannibal, despite being the only person who might well understand Hannibal. The idea that even intelligence levels among humans might result in insurmountable differences in subjectivity and an individual's Umwelt makes creatures like the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* that much more fascinating and potentially dangerous. These two sources were huge influences on the way I constructed the relationship between Lara and the hyper-intelligent being, Rei.

What grounds us in Hannibal's story is the romance that occurs between him and Will—much like how what grounds us in Lara's story is the romance between her and Rei. It is one of the only ways that we can potentially access Hannibal at all, even if we cannot understand why it is he does what he does. We do at least understand that his fascination with Will begins in his belief that he might be able to mold Will into a reflection of himself. In a twisted way it is very Lacanian, as Hannibal molds Will into his perceived Ideal-I, so that he might have an equal. The show also portrays mental illness as more than an infirmity; it portrays the human mind as a

shifting labyrinth rather than strictly a sum total of parts that can be categorized, mapped, and known. “Hard Light” is in first person partly because it is so important to be close to a character like Lara—it is crucial. I want Lara to move beyond good and evil and simply be.

Another reason it is so crucial for this story to be in the first-person point of view is because I want the entire story to be filtered and unreliable. Lara will interpret Rei’s actions and dialogue for us, but we will be suspicious of Lara’s interpretations. I originally chose the first-person point of view because of famous examples like Nabokov’s *Lolita*. I love the idea of a narrator who charms and frightens us because they are charming. The first person is going to stay in my next few drafts at least. It would take a lot to persuade me otherwise. This is especially true because I recently read *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler. The whole story revolves around the narrator coping with her own “monkey girl” behavior and her guilt over getting her sister (i.e., a chimp named Fern) sent away.

The story uses the first-person point of view and the unreliable nature of early childhood memories to draw out the parallels between the character Rosemary’s journey as a woman and Fern’s journey as a female chimp, which, by extension, draws out the parallels between women’s rights and animal rights. Similarly, I would like to develop a parallel between Lara’s abnormal or deviant behavior and Rei’s alien ethics and behavioral code, while also exploring a queer intimacy—queer not just because Lara has sex with an image of herself but also because she deliberately identifies Rei as a her from the beginning of the story. I also want a love story that ends well, even if the character does not necessarily deserve for the story to end well. The hardest part of the story is going to be figuring out how to create the necessary tension but resolve it in a way that allows for Lara and Rei to continue being together.

“Gentle Nature” is a story about different forms of projection. The story even projects itself out into other stories in the collection in the form of the emails passed between its main two characters, Richard Emerson and Alistair Solomon, those emails acting as interstitial tissue between seemingly disparate stories within the same universe. Richard is an anxious character who projects his anxiety both inward and outward, but also who often misses the projections of others. We see small instances of what Jean Baudrillard calls dissimulation and simulation in these psychological, physical, and technological projections that pervade the narrative.

Various instances for various reasons either pretend to not have what they do have (i.e. Richard’s uncertainty about Alistair reciprocating his feelings, when it is made very quickly apparent that Alistair does feel the same way) or pretend to have what they do not have (i.e. the humans think they have found Martians, but as a separate story reveals, the beings and society they uncover occupied Mars for little more than a millennia—that is were not Martians at all). The story itself is a simulacrum of personal crises meant to cover up a greater problem (i.e. the corporation wanting to turn Mars into an amusement park not dissimilar to the shareholders’ interests in *WestWorld*).

The story opens by trying to elaborate on what Richard’s *real* problem is, reading thus:

He was afraid that they were going to shut down the excavation and turn it into some dog and pony show. They were Hex Incorporated, and they were tired of his inability to decipher the history of the Martians. So, Richard was racing against a dwindling budget and the eyeless machine of bureaucracy. But that wasn’t the true problem either. (“Gentle Nature,” 1)

By ironically lamp-shading what is actually a fairly monumental issue the story begins a sort of play with the reader. What Hex Incorporated are said to be planning versus what Richard is

looking for from the Martians is not dissimilar to the dissonance between the creators of the park in *WestWorld*, the shareholders who invest in it, and the customers who consume it.

However, this can also be linked back to a concept from Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, in which he discusses ethnology's attempts to protect the Tasaday people from interference "...in order to save its [ethnology's] reality principle" (7). Similarly, Hex Incorporated plans to defund the research under the auspices of protecting their investment, but also to avoid the truth that humans simply may be incapable of understanding an alien race, which throws all humanist notions of ontology into disarray. If we cannot truly name them or even conceive of them, though they are clearly advanced beings, then what does it mean that we live in a universe, which was not meant for us alone? In shutting down the project and reducing it to an amusement park, Hex Incorporated is attempting to save humanity's reality principle and to make meaning of the utterly meaningless. It is possible it serves the company's needs to first pay for a proper research team to simulate the appearance of understanding of this new race of beings, but there need not be any true discovery or understanding ultimately, something Richard's character is unwitting of unfortunately.

The story projects the appearance of peace that belies a subtle violence on the part of the corporation's consuming or destroying bodies and lives and histories for the sake of the most profitable narrative. This is another analogue to how in *WestWorld*, the character of Charlotte Hale embodies the consumptive aspects of an agenda whose ultimate end, while ostensibly immortality, is also ultimately subject to the principle of secondary gain. There is no scientific discovery that exists in a vacuum, and, arguably, every scientific discovery comes with the promise of not only spectacle, but the profit of the spectacle, which is maximized by hoarding scientific discoveries away for whomever can afford to experience the discovery. The Martian

dig site is not ultimately for individuals like Richard, but for those who can afford to consume it once its profitability has been determined. From the perspective of the shareholders, the park is not for Bernard or Elsie or Dolores; they are all just tangentially necessary but ultimately replaceable cogs.

Another notion that is played with in this story is Cary Wolfe's idea of the posthuman. While staying very much in a perspective mired with humanist thinking, the text attempts to suggest that understanding the Martians is impossible and somewhat suggests that our motives in trying to understand them are never going to be impure. It also demonstrates an instance of Wolfe's conception of transhumanism. He describes transhumanism as "...an *intensification* of humanism" or as "...the extension of humanism" (xv & xvii). The scene in which Richard applies the sensory nodes that cover the body in nano technology in order to be able to touch loved ones from across vast reaches of space is created specifically to serve human needs and simulate sexual and sensual encounters. It is an intensification of porn, and its implications for the universe in which it exists are further proof of that. It turns a skype chat into an encounter with the hyperreal. Richard's fear not only stems from his asexuality, his physical impotence, and his desire to please Alistair, it also is representative of an anxiety humans carry about being replaced by the very technology they have designed. Richard's dream about killing his brother in an ancient, holy ceremony and the fact that his brother is portrayed as controlling can be read as a manifestation of humanity's ambivalence toward its own technology.

"Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor" arose from my readings of *The Haunting of Hill House* and *House of Leaves*. Ultimately, I wrote the story in response to an idea of haunting that involves following a set formula. Investigators show up, nothing happens at first, then bad things start happening, and then we have a history research montage in which we

discover that the ghosts were centuries old witches burned at the stake and seeking revenge against the puritans of the community. Or something like that. There is no true history in “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor.” In fact, I am currently revising the story so that it is simulating the script of a scary-stories-anthology television or YouTube show. The ways in which technology has fragmented our existence and autoamputated our very senses is very important to the ideas within my thesis. The story’s main character, James Dugan, is fragmented by modern technology (the part of the house that is really haunted) and fragmented by trauma that is hinted at throughout the story. The ways in which technology affects our existence—often an existence in tandem with trauma—is something I hope my project explores fully.

Finally, “Her Rotting Parts.” This story is from several workshops ago and has been under the knife a few times now, so to speak. It was the catalyst that began my surrealist, science fiction, romance, horror mess of a thesis. The story is currently being overhauled to combine with my other story “Sear and Split.” It is a story about violation at the systemic and personal levels. Calyx is a woman whose agency has been stripped away by red tape and her ultimate middle finger to Adastra Incorporated is killing herself. Given who I am and what I have experienced, it seemed only natural for me to explore the idea of suicide as a form of agency for the voiceless. The story began as an exploration of that and of the idea of the literary subaltern. The dark, somewhat twisted ideas of this story really laid the foundations for all of the messed up or alien ideas I went on to write about in my other stories.

This entire journey has been so difficult, especially because of all the personal issues I have been working through while also writing this thesis. I just have so many things I want to talk about regarding what the thesis means to me personally. Even as I write this I am still struggling, but the thesis has been a real light for me, as has writing in general. Writing because

there is nothing but the writing is the only thing that makes a lick of sense to me in all the madness of living. I think I write sometimes simply to know what comes next, and sometimes to know finally what happened before.

THE LAST

In carefully carved tunnels, mapped and metal, certain and steady, lives the Archivist of Mars. He walks the halls, whispering his dying, inhuman language, sliding and clicking his tongue in sweet, discernible syncopation. He is chanting, in a rhythm not dissimilar from longshoreman shanties sung low, reckoning with the mystery of the sea. The slides and clicks of his song echo against the yellowed walls, yet he ignores their reverberation. He does not let the sounds come back to him. Rather, he gathers to his ears the memories of scampering children's feet— his children, who were dead, wrapped in cold-coffin-void space.

They were children much like our children, and space was a game of calling out constellations, the winner naming the most before his opponent. He collects laughter to his chest and is greeted by a vision of a quiet evening studying at his workstation, interrupted by feet—by laughter—by a swelling sensation in his chest, as his ears had pricked up in surprise. Then the vision is gone. But the swelling remains. It is real. It grows.

He ceases walking when he arrives at the Hall of the Returned, his intended destination. He reaches into a slightly ajar pantry with his anthropoid arm encased by thin, reflective, membranous skin. He pulls out an off-white nutri-cube wrapped air-tight within a plastic polymer. The last one.

He eats slowly, standing before one of the altars dispersed in even columns and rows throughout the hall. This takes the better part of two of our earth hours, for he abides by the Ritual of Returning with great care; for every bite, he recites a single prayer from the Revered Canticles, until the sustenance is consumed. This meal would fuel him for several months, but he will not have this time. He doesn't believe he could bear it. Each bite ignites a memory of his

time with his mother before her Returning Cycle had begun. A soft glow emits from his skin, as he recalls being much smaller, reaching for her waist, clutching at her skin, the same texture as a sting ray's, bare and naked, as they had no need for clothing among their kind. She had clicked her tongue at him and asked him, "What do you want, littlest?" He had wanted her to take him to his father's workstation, where his father had been the Archivist, before his Returning Cycle.

The glow emitting from the Archivist's skin intensifies and he lets loose a soft sound like glass bumping just so slightly against glass. He finishes returning his mother to her people, the last bite synched in time with the klaxon announcing it was mid-day on Mars. The call signaling the last of Mars to be returned to its people.

Leaving the Hall of the Returned, he winds his way to his family's living quarters, where he tries to chant to prevent remembering, but like the violent ones that came for his people, memories always find their way back and invade. His skin is burning with hot, white light. The room is silent, but his memories are singing in his mind, as he moves through an archway into his room, where the ghost of his wife is waiting for him in bed, upset that he was working so late again. Late into an artificially constructed night, the dimming overhead lights would strike her iridescent flesh, throwing erratic refractions like a wobbling prism against the curved walls, making her appear as a celestial body burning in the darkening space, as she vibrated with irritation.

All she would usually say was, "The children are sleeping, and now I am too." He had never been able to find the words to explain why he could not leave his work sooner—had not really understood why he desperately needed to understand that which had come before.

Returning to his senses, he moves to retrieve his environmental suit from a hook on the wall, one of the only coverings his people manufactured or maintained because Mars had not yet

achieved its projected living potential. He exits his home before the ghosts can stop him again. Now he makes his way to his work station in the Archivists' wing, which, much like the Chambers of Returning and the Hall of the Returned, had been given an abundance of space—in this case, for the data cubes shelved and radiating softly in seemingly endless rows and for the vaulted ceiling that reaches up into blackness. One felt that knowledge could reach into infinity in this place.

He walks over to his workstation with its amoeba-shaped, glass desk and dust-covered tomes of plastic and metal sheets, general texts, general historical records made on the easiest to manipulate materials for every Archivist to have a copy. Next to his desk, a door that opens outward to reveal a small chamber insulated from the rest of the underground station is ajar. When shut this door is not visible, nor does it exist on the station blueprints. It is biologically linked to the Archivist; there is a door like this beside every workstation. It opens on an incline that steps down into a cool, dry room with shelves like those in the outer chamber. Before he can enter this chamber, the Archivist remembers the sounds of his children in this space, their scampering feet and their laughter. He feels a swelling in his chest. He had been so angry.

He had just discovered, while scanning through data lines, an inconsistency in accounts of how the Ritual of Returning first came into being in newly recovered data cubes from a recent expedition into the Origin Sites. It had been so important at the time. His skin had burned, and he had felt the urge to yell at his wife. Why had she thought it appropriate to bring children into this place at their bedtime? "Their father hasn't been there to tell them his stories before going to bed for a month now," she had said. Her pitch, normally musical, was high and sharp.

"With the Technicians' discovery of the communications array blueprints, we are falling out of favor with the Priests and Priestesses of Returning. Can't you see what this means?" he'd

said, pushing his data cubes toward her in desperation. She'd taken the children home. She hadn't understood. Now, the Archivist no longer understood either.

He looks at the very same data cubes, the ones on which he had wasted months deciphering the old dialect of his people from a millennia ago only to discover that his people were not perfect and not always the ones persecuted and not nearly as beautiful as his wife even in her rage. Dutifully, he picks up the cubes and descends into the storage room. As he slides the cubes into place next to a plethora of other cubes containing rare data of his people's history, he remembers that this is where he was when the violent ones had returned.

He had been working late again, months after his wife realized the children would not be hearing stories for a while yet, gazing at the shelves in the antechamber. He wasn't supposed to be in here at this hour; he knew the protocols, and he knew that in an emergency these chambers were sealed for a period of three sols, when it might reasonably be expected that civilians had been evacuated and essential personnel had secured the station. The history of their people and the most important information about their lives were in these chambers; they would not be lost or tainted again. The sound of the alarms and the door sealing shut had been so startling that the cube the Archivist had just removed fell to the ground and shattered.

They had all died screaming while he waited in this tomb. Now, the Archivist illuminates the whole room with his anguish.

Exiting the chamber, he picks up his suit and dons all of it except the helmet, which he pulls over his head once he has ascended to the station's main entrance. In the dead silence of the suit all memories are muffled as he steps into blinding daylight and senses the shifting red dust beneath his feet, stepping forward. The horizon is a burnt orange that rises and melts into shades of gray.

As sight returns, he lifts his eyes and catches sight of shadows too thick to be clouds, too dense—broken and scattered in the uppermost atmosphere, blotting out portions of a once pure sky. From surviving records, the Archivist knows that once the people had not known the colors red and orange existed. They had escaped to Mars from a distant world—a dark world, where all the shape and substance they knew was in shades of gray and of blue. A thousand years on Mars had altered their sight, but even something as strange as this had not seemed to matter when the violent ones returned. They thought a thousand years had made them safe, that a thousand years had abated their destroyers' hunger for blood. How they were wrong.

He looks up again, feeling that if he looks hard enough, he might see where his wife and children are laid to rest. His body is glowing and tears like mercury drops slide from small holes in his neck; he shines in the middle of the crater in which the station is cradled like a relic peeking up from the sands of time, and he sings a song of Returning. The chambers with their history are sealed now. He made certain. The station is sealed—locked behind him as he emerged. Hidden. Protected. Now he thinks that it is time; the last of his people to be returned has been returned; the last of the knowledge that he wouldn't need any more was safe. No one would return him, but he felt safe believing that in doing this while looking to where his wife and children are, he might return to them in the best way left to him.

He begins the process of removing his helmet, hears the last sound he will hear, that is the evacuation of air from his suit. The swelling rises again now in full force, pushing up from the bottom the air from his body. With the suit's artificial gravity field compromised, he suddenly feels light, like he might be molecules floating apart and away. The world, red and orange in the suit, starts to distort and he sees in negative coloration. Then he sees his wife and

her perfectly formed face and arms, then his children who envelop him in smaller arms. Finally, he sees nothing, but the darkness above, and feels nothing, as the dust below parts to greet him.

HER ROTTING PARTS

In the first days of the experiment, Calix had still been Calix, a woman whose orphan life and lack of connections had led her to the research and development labs of Adastra Incorporated, one of the few companies that had kept its main facilities on Earth after the great migration to the newly terraformed frontiers of other worlds. She had wanted her life to amount to more than the emails she sent as a secretary and the stray cats she fed on her way home from work. When she first saw the call for healthy volunteers to join what would be the most important scientific discovery since the splitting of the atom, she felt something inside her stir the oxygen in her blood, making her heady with the possibilities.

But that was then. If Calix had known what the price would be, she would have gone home and never looked back, but the other volunteers had told her how excited they were, the director of the experiment had told her how important she was, and the receptionist had smiled so kindly. But now, they couldn't fix her. She was thirty when she had signed her blood over to science, and in the span of a year, she had aged decades. As her body aged rapidly before her eyes, out of her control, she wondered how hard they had really tried to fix her, especially once the new models started to emerge from the labs and from the computers. The science of the day, like the logos of old, was only concerned with absolutes, and if she did not conform to its expectations, it was because she was not meant for greatness. Not meant for life the likes of which had been promised in the ads and pamphlets.

She sat on a thin mattress without adornment, leaning toward some of the shadows that pervaded all corners of the room, outside the circle of unforgiving, white-hot light. Half-illuminated, she knew that if someone were to look inside through the window on the white,

metal door they would see a woman of considerable age, but nonetheless human, the visible right eye clouded with cataracts. The scientists had told her they couldn't do any more operations, but she wasn't certain of anything she was told anymore. Her other side rested in darkness, but a red point shone through the inky space parallel to her eye nearly full-white, the glare of which red point bathed the white door in diffused pink.

When they first grafted the metal to Calix's body, and connected the relays of circuits through her brain, she felt it. Though they had put her under, unconscious and numbed—still, she had felt it. In her dreams great tendrils of oily black had reached for her, opened her through the mouth and plunged down into her anatomy, forced her apart and forced inside her. Her throat was a conduit of ruin from which no sound escaped. Upon awakening she initially felt pain, but through the pain—power. Her mind moved at speeds unprecedented, had access to vast stores of information. Her left eye could now scan her environment and pull up information on what it scanned. After her initial shock passed, the scientists brought in a tablet loaded with a slide show of the most famous art in human history. Her right eye wept at the sight of *Starry Night* viewed as though for the first time in her life. She knew everything there was to know about it, except how it could leave her feeling like a child again. This was how galaxies felt when they were born. She had been certain of that. Her mind was one entity that could calculate in quantum leaps and believe in the unknowability of all that was, and all that is.

It wasn't until one month into testing that they realized that the cybernetics weren't functioning as they were meant to—that Calix realized she was just a matter of time. The circuitry was accelerating the aging of her cells, not healing them as it was supposed to. It hadn't taken to her body. It wasn't replenishing the life of its host as it ought to. She was not the future, but a failed experiment.

In the quiet of her cell, she lay down, feeling a pulse of pain run up her back before easing into the mattress. Her human body was dying, but the cyborg part of her was fine. They had kept her oiled and medicated for the pain that returned as the malfunction worsened, as much as was possible. In her mind, she searched, and still she could find the information of dozens of lifetimes, but within the eleventh month of her first year in Adastra's facilities she had begun to have difficulty ordering it, and sometimes she confused what she knew of history and pop culture with memories of her own life. She would smile at the memory of her mother holding her up to the sky as a baby on a jeans-rolled summer afternoon, before remembering that she had never had a mother, her lot had been off-white walls and the smell of must and the creaking of the other orphans shifting in their beds at night. In this eleventh month the dream from the first experiment came back now every time she slept, and sometimes she woke up believing it was real, especially during the simulated nights when they turned out her overhead light. After the first couple weeks, they stopped coming when she screamed.

In this moment Calix's breath came out as a wheeze, her human lung on the verge of collapse at the thought of dreaming again this night. She reached under her bed for the long, proboscis syringe she had taken from the lab on her last walk around. They didn't like letting her roam free, claimed it interfered with the emotional levels of the newest models, which muddied the results. She was still awake when the lights went out, holding onto the tube of powerful pain killer, occasionally brushing the needle against her forearm as she palmed it. The void pressed closer. She could no longer work out the difference between the eye that was blind, and the eye that saw in the infrared spectrum, the room a collage of blues, greens, reds, and blackness, like a canvas depicting primordial space.

She hadn't immediately considered herself as lost, having thought to herself earlier on that she could go on, let her human half die, and continue living in her cybernetic body. It was something she thought about so desperately ...but she wondered what it would feel like when her skin started to sag, and her eye turned to milk, dripping out of its socket and running down her cheek—would she still feel her cheek if it was dead? Would she immediately realize when that cheek died? Would she smell her flesh and blood disintegrating and her bowels going limp as the shit and piss swam out of her?

The silence of the room was an ocean of un-lived moments flooding Calix's ears, as she pressed her head deeper into the mattress beneath her. She tightened her grasp on the syringe, cradling it against the inner crook of her elbow, where she knew the veins were. Refusing to look, she applied pressure to the plunger and penetrated her forearm, and she was flooded with euphoria. She had made her decision, and, at the rate she was aging, time was running out. She didn't want to know the answers to those questions that had plagued her for months. Slowly but surely, the drugs smoothed over her nerves, like an undertaker smoothing over the wrinkles in the shirts of the dead. In the haze of wavering blues, greens, reds, and black, she stood up, encircled by this continuum of cold-hot colors and void.

Moving into the back of her cell, Calix felt the darkness part and reconnect around her as though she were swimming. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and began to smash herself against the concrete walls. The sound of metal bending and denting filled the room. She began pulling out her wires as they were exposed, tearing at the black tendrils wired into her from the inside out. She felt the texture of what she was doing, and a pang of last refusal, but she pushed forward. She continued tearing and bashing, too high to worry about the commotion, and

determined beyond all hesitation, lest they stopped her, forced her to accept the wires and let them take her over completely.

The arm and the leg felt easier. It was her head and her brain that were the hard part. She tried to pry the metal from her head, the attached flesh straining, the pain of it stabbing through the numbness. She looked at her limp arm, blood and metal merging in a mess, her cybernetic eye reflexively attempting to scan for solutions. In her mind a voice that was partly hers and partly her cybernetics sounded in a last plea for survival: *This can be repaired, this can be repaired, this can be repaired...*

The sound of shouting and frantic footsteps from outside of her room reached Calix. Filled with a sudden burst of terror, and aware all at once of the overhead light coming on, she threw her head against the wall with all the force of her body, and terrified—terrified. She wouldn't be wires and rotting parts. She didn't think in words anymore. There was only an image of the darkness flying out of her head, an image of the end of her, wires and brain creeping up from the fragmented opening in her skull. Making it end, the last conscious sight of her life shadows thrown against a wall, as she slumped to the floor.

SEAR AND SPLIT

When Marjani first saw Adastra's facility the day of her interview, it appeared to be only one story, but, as she discovered, it actually extended several stories down beneath the earth for the sake of security. It was a non-descript building of steel and concrete with glass, floor-to-ceiling windows lining it on all sides on the outskirts of Saratoga Springs, New York. The first day she officially came in for work, Marjani felt that something bad had happened in the intervening time between her interview and now. Adastra Incorporated had enthusiastically pursued her for her dual specializations in human anatomy and applied robotics. It didn't hurt that she'd won recognition for her papers on the human machine that sought to both scientifically and philosophically map what one might call the human soul.

When Marjani had come in for her interview, the supervisor, Dr. Caritas, smiled and in rushed phrases said that the work their researchers were doing at the labs was going to revolutionize the human experience and ensure humanity's relevance in the ever-expanding galaxy. Despite sounding like the Venus of the hard sell, the supervisor managed to instill some of her enthusiasm into Marjani —how much real and how much desperation for skilled labor, Marjani couldn't tell. The exact nature of their work was not made clear, but Marjani was smart enough to gather that it involved a new notion of hybridity between organic life and machine life.

Marjani half-expected to be greeted with fanfare the moment she first entered the labs as the newest researcher for Adastra's cutting-edge project, but instead there was silence and an inexplicable tension that awakened an animal sense of unrest. Her hairs stood on end. Her lab was on the bottom floor, nine stories below the surface of the earth, and it was the only one to

which she had access. She was starting to fear why that was, especially when she exited into the decontamination zone that preceded the interview office and all was deathly silent. When she had come before there had been several attendants to assist with decontamination. Now, there was no one.

Looking around, Marjani located the intercom, accidentally hailing laboratory A, before managing to reach the supervisory office. “Ah, Ms. Levy, apologies, we sent non-essential personnel home for the day. I’m afraid there has been a tragedy. I’ll send someone to walk you through decontamination again and show you inside to your workstation,” said Dr. Caritas, coughing awkwardly into the microphone. Thanking Caritas, Marjani pulled down her button-up shirt’s sleeves nervously. She waited, the anxiousness settling somewhere around her navel. This is too much. She started mimicking the attendants from memory of the week prior and had walked through the archways spritzing herself from head to toe with fast-drying anti-microbial solution by the time the heavy metal door leading further inside slid open. Whatever this tragedy was, it had to have been big for them to send so many employees home in the middle of important experiments. Marjani was filled a sense of trepidation. She began to get the same feeling she had the day she returned home and found her mother.

The man who walked out was tall and, to some people perhaps, rather handsome. For several reasons, he was not very interesting to Marjani. Also, as he approached her, she couldn’t help but quickly assess him for flaws. Animal instinct. Damn. She struggled against the impulse, but not before remarking to herself that his face was badly pocked on one cheek. But objectively he had symmetrical features, a square-jaw type, though there was a greasiness to him that carried from his slightly jaundiced skin into his short-cut, quaffed hair, slicked back by some kind of 1950s gangster pomade. Certain styles kept reemerging like new strains of the same virus. Her

mind went to her most recent ex-lover, a woman she had met while frequenting a cigarette speak-easy. All she had thought that night was thank god for the success of the anti-smoking campaign. It made cigarettes sexy again.

He smiled while giving her his hand to shake. Marjani felt perplexed. Didn't Caritas say they were in the midst of a tragedy? "I'm Kyle Anderson. We're going to be research buddies," he said, and she swore his eyes remained unnaturally trained on her face like he was forcing himself not to actively assess her body.

"Marjani Levy," she responded.

He started a string of dialogue that trailed limply behind them as he walked her through the interview room into the lab proper. She learned that the floor was broken into at least four labs with researchers assigned to separate subjects in each section. Subjects. Humans, she learned. They were working towards the perfect cyborg. She felt her heartbeat hasten. "We are in C-Section. All puns intended," Anderson said, baring his teeth again. Marjani felt her abdomen tense. "As Caritas probably mentioned, we recently suffered a loss over in C. A distressed subject managed to get a hold of some painkillers and smashed herself to death." He announced this right as he opened the doors to their laboratory. Marjani's least favorite memory began to surface at the thought of the mystery suicide woman, and she felt a ringing start in her ears. The lab was a vast, wide, and monochromatic room. Marjani thought of all the earth surrounding a place that mocked bioethics. There was no room for nature here.

Anderson's and Marjani's workstations mirrored one another, so that when they sat before their array of holomonitors they would always be back-to-back. Marjani discovered that Anderson wasn't much for sitting. When he all but physically forced Marjani to sit before her displays, he presented her with a holopad with a progress report and research data pulled up. It

took her several minutes to parse it all out enough to realize that this was the record of a subject's physiological responses to the integration of cybernetics.

"This is Calix," Anderson said, leaning over Marjani's shoulder—gaze fixed on the data and tables.

"Calix?" Marjani said.

"She's the tragic subject. But I also had come to think of her as a friend of sorts," Anderson said.

How nice, Marjani thought insincerely. "I'm sorry," she said. Anderson explained that it now fell to him to run diagnostics on what remained of Calix's cybernetics and to perform the dissection of the body before it would be preserved in cryogenic stasis. Marjani never felt close enough to someone that she would want to be the one to dissect them. Not even her mother. But then that was not entirely Marjani's fault. Or maybe that was the wrong way of thinking about it. "Maybe, I could help you," Marjani said, when he stopped speaking.

In the week that followed, Marjani became vaguely accustomed to Anderson's presence, his physical body constantly at her back like a second shadow. He wanted her opinion on everything and wanted to share his enthusiasm for their work all the time, especially regarding their work with Calix because he knew that he had an in that way and, also, he was touched that she wanted to help him with the blood and guts of the matter, as he had put it.

The face on the holomonitor was pale with the strain of rapid aging, and Marjani could not look away. She felt nauseated, her stomach burning and her mind wandering back in time to evenings in front of a 70 inch, flat-screen tv in a small, square home. The furniture had been all so geometrical, everything in order, but for one evening, in particular, when Marjani came home from university and found the mess waiting past the half-opened door leading to the master

bedroom. The holo-screen flickered as connectivity in the network fluctuated and she shook her head to dispel the memories trying to surface. She resented how even the slightest of triggers could send her back to the last place she wanted to be. Fuck, how she hated it. These are completely different circumstances than mom's suicide, and there's no reason to bring that up now! Goddamnit.

"You're still watching that?" Anderson said, standing behind Marjani and causing her to start. "It's a bit...morbid. I appreciate your help with this, but don't work too hard."

"Could you walk louder for Chrissake?" Marjani said, gritting her teeth. She clenched her hand to stop the sudden trembling that had begun.

"Sorry, I just came over 'cause I was worried you might still be watching..." he said. "I think maybe I should do the diagnostics testing and dissection on my own. I don't want to overwhelm you in your first week."

"No!" She sounded too eager. "I mean you shouldn't have to be there alone, and I'm interested in isolating what went wrong with the integration process that caused her cells to age so rapidly." Yeah, that sounded more objective. Less moody.

"Okay, just checking in," he said, smiling and moving to lean against her desk. He crossed his arms, making them look more toned and making his shoulder-to-waist profile appear more wasp-like. "They've got her in the morgue now. I figure we go see her tomorrow." He seemed to want something more from Marjani. He kicked one of his wing-tip shoes against the floor, before seemingly deciding against saying anything further. She returned to reading over the current data pool and organizing it into intelligible research. She ignored his sigh and the sound of him sinking into his chair behind her.

Marjani leaned against the front seat of her Tiger Beetle Volvo modeled after the Australian variation of the bug. The door clicked shut, as she took a deep breath. She spoke to Lonnie, the car's computer intelligence, asking them to take her home. They preferred a pronoun that encompassed their multitudinous being, since they existed in every 2050 Tiger Beetle Volvo, albeit by different names. The seatbelt slid over her chest and clicked into place. "We will arrive at home in 20 minutes, Marj," Lonnie said, their voice braving the balance between human and computer in its precise annunciation coupled with its familiar form of address. "How was work?"

"Lonnie, would you ever want to be joined with a human?" Marjani said, ignoring the question.

"Sorry, Marj. I have told you that you are not my type," they said.

"Right," Marjani said, scoffing and nodding off.

Lonnie woke her when they were parked in Marjani's driveway. She leaned her face against the glass, eyelids drooping. Her house was beautiful—made in the Greek Revival style and completely and utterly other in contrast to her childhood home. Her work with private companies had been lucrative, if disheartening. She wished Lonnie a good night out of habit, walking around the over 2,000 square foot house built in 1857. She liked entering through the back to avoid her neighbor next door. She had lived in this house for a year, freelancing as a columnist and living off of savings accrued from her previous job before finding Adastra's advertisement seeking new research staff in her running job feed. She'd programmed it so all the most ideal opportunities remained at the top of the listings.

In the back yard she had statues of angels at each corner of the latticework gazebo overhanging the patio. They reminded her of one of her favorite Thomas Wolfe stories. They

also made her feel safe—stone could never leave you. She ascended the stairs to the back porch, as the house was slightly elevated off the ground, opening the solid wooden door, which was adorned by a window with a curved segmental head, crystalline patterns overlaying the recessed mullions. The restoration crew who handled this house had interspersed some Victorian elements with the Greek Revival style, but it didn't bother her so much. It seemed more natural that way, since styles like genres tended to become more elusive the more you tried to define them.

Similarly, the more she tried to define the differences between her mother's suicide and Calix's suicide, the less she was certain that they were so different. Why had her mother killed herself? That was where difference could be made out. As she entered the living room and locked the door behind her, she pondered this, drifting then into the kitchen with its shining, metallic backsplash and shining, marble counters. She threw her old school keys in a clay bowl by the sink, rubbing her neck. She had found her mother in the master bedroom of their two-bedroom house in Watertown. Vomit and spittle pooled around her mother's familiar mouth, and her legs and arms had been splayed in an unnatural way just straight out, perfectly parallel—like she was trying to imitate a starfish and that was seaweed bits and white foam from the incoming tide around her mouth. Calix killed herself because she felt trapped by Anderson and the other researchers, by Adastr, and by her own mortality and fear of the unknown—or so Marjani speculated. Marjani felt the faintest thrill run through her. Did mom feel trapped by me? Impossible. To think, ten years had passed and she was still obsessing over this.

Her mother had loved her—left her everything, including a safe box with a key in it and a slip of paper with longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates on it leading to a cabin in the Catskills. She had looked into whether or not a record of purchase existed, but there weren't even records of a cabin that location. She slipped the key onto a chain and left it hanging on a hook over the

kitchen sink. She fiddled with it in the present, stomach churning. She decided it was time to go to bed.

Anderson reached eagerly for Marjani's hand, which she instinctively pulled away. He made no sign of noticing this. "I just wanted to say thanks for helping me with this. I couldn't have hoped for a better lab partner. Especially with all the pressure Caritas and the board have been putting on me to identify what might have gone wrong. We also need to make sure that mental illness preceded the integration. Depending on where the research goes, poor Calix might still be of some use to the project," he said. He set his hands on her desk, hanging his head. His better cheek was facing her way and she almost felt sympathy for him when he spoke again. "Maybe after all this, I can buy you a drink to make up for it."

"Really, it's no problem. I admit I am very curious about her case," she said. The juices in her stomach began to surge upwards. Was he trying to flirt over a corpse? He lifted his head. She forced a smile, trying to make it as non-committal as possible, though she had to wonder what a non-committal smile consisted of? What marked its neutrality? Was it something as simple as a micro-expression signified by the absence of crinkles at the corners of her eyes? Or was it something more psychical like her exuding as much as possible an unsexual energy? Regardless, Anderson didn't notice; he reached for her hand again. She hated how soft his hands were.

"Is this your first body?" Anderson asked from his side of the gurney. The morgue was otherwise silent but for a faint mechanical hum. The light of the overhead lamp was hot. She met his gaze and felt violated by its guileless vulgarity and so focused instead on the craters on his right cheek.

“No, I worked as an emergency responder for a few years before going into graduate school,” she said, feeling a tremor run down her median nerve into her right thumb. The thumb that was caressing the spine of the scalpel she held.

Anderson shifted nervously, knocking into the gurney between them. A mangled hand slipped out from beneath the blanket. A plate was half-torn from the top of the hand, wires spliced into the median nerve dangling, half-severed. Marjani stepped back, choking down a scream.

“Whoops,” he said. “Sorry about that.” Marjani wasn’t sure who he was apologizing to—her or Calix.

She ignored him and regained her composure, pulling the blanket away completely, revealing a mass of flesh and metal that vaguely resembled a woman. Calix’s naked body was a war zone of torn flesh and dented metal and wires like vines overgrown on ancient ruins. Marjani raised the scalpel over Calix’s sternum. Anderson grabbed her wrist.

“Did you want to?” she said. The tremble of his lower lip answered her question.

“Sorry, you get started. I didn’t think I would feel this exactly—I mean what I’m feeling. I need to step outside for a minute,” he said.

When he was gone, she began once more, trying to correct the tremble in her right hand. It was no use. She was too rattled for the autopsy. She decided to start diagnostics on the cybernetics instead. Carefully she ran the hand-held scanner over Calix’s leg, searching for functioning pieces or pieces that could be restored. There wasn’t a whole lot that Calix hadn’t thoroughly destroyed, but she marked the pieces that might be salvaged for data until she reached Calix’s eye. There was something in the way the light glinted off of the synthetic membrane that was meant to resemble the tactile feel of any eye, while being ten times stronger, that gave her

pause. The scanner identified it as one of the functional pieces. Did it remember the sight of its body becoming pieces, defying wholeness? She carefully inserted a finger into the eye socket and hooked it, pulling the eye out and revealing the wires that integrated it with the neural cortex. Surprising herself, she gave it a small, decisive tug and yanked it out, wires attached. How could they have done this to a person? She slipped the eye down her shirt and inside her bra. It felt warm against her skin.

The more she had learned about Adastra's projects, the more she realized why they chose to stay on earth. Every other new corporation was looking to the heavens, while Adastra was looking for an opportunity to operate with as little scrutiny as possible.

The door to the morgue opened again. "You get everything scanned?" Anderson said, leaning over the medical tray next to Calix and looking at the holopad that was collecting the scanner's data. "I see you've already tagged and bagged the eye and sent it down the pipeline," he said, his skin shining beneath the autopsy light. "I really appreciate that about you, Marj. I don't have to teach you anything." He laughed.

"Thanks, Anderson," she said, straightening her lab coat.

"Now for the unpleasant part," he said, reaching for latex gloves and a scalpel.

"This is where we'll put Calix to rest," Anderson said. The cryogenic pod was made of the highest quality, sterilized stainless steel without windows. "The developers of these thought that in the event of a disaster windows would compromise the structural integrity of the pods," he explained when she asked.

"What the hell kind of disaster do they imagine happening?" Marjani asked. He smiled, cocking his eyebrows in lieu of a response. He enjoyed explaining this way too much. He turned

and pulled the body closer. “Why don’t you go over the protocols for storing things in the pods with me and I’ll take care of this?”

“Naw, I want to be here for this, though I appreciate the concern,” he said.

The pod was open and ready for Calix, and Marjani could feel the cold cling to the metal without even touching it. They each took one end of her body and carefully lay her down. It was almost funereal; except they were never letting her body go the way you were supposed to. Marjani thought that was the point of funeral services. You made the body of the person you knew go away—into the cremation chamber or into the earth, but you couldn’t get them back. If there is a ghost in the machine and the human body is a machine, does that mean Calix’s body is haunted? Her breath fogged up the siding of the pod as she carefully let go of Calix’s head. Anderson stepped back and began typing on the console next to the pod. The pod was taken away by a near-silent crane shaped like a skeletal hand and stored in an adjacent chamber to which neither of them had access. She wondered how many bodies were in there?

The sun was halfway down when Marjani exited the building, breathing in the scent of cedar pervading the Adastra parking lot, originating from the vast thicket of Atlantic White Cedars surrounding the building. As she walked to her car, she couldn’t help the feeling that their little green leaves were like little fingers reaching for her. Someone grabbed her arm. She screamed, wrenching free and turning around, back against the door to her car. She felt the weight of her old house’s key in her pocket. Her only weapon. Only it was just Anderson.

“Jesus, my bad,” he said. He ran a hand over his combed-to-death quaff. “I just wanted to catch you before you go home.” Marjani looked around, she was in parking lot A and couldn’t see any other person around to save her from this conversation. The parking was divided the way the labs were divided, except out here the trees still prevailed. Adastra was just a pock mark on

nature's face. "So about that drink. I was thinking we could go right now." He had let go of her arm, but she could still feel his hand there—the shock of unwanted contact.

"I'm pretty beat—maybe some other time," she said. It sounded reasonable and not too much like a rejection. She turned to her car and touched her hand to the scanner on the door. It slid upwards and Lonnie greeted her.

"I think maybe now is better."

She paused, a leaden weight suddenly in her feet. "There's no need to be so pushy. Don't you know when a girl is playing hard to get?" she said, turning to him with a smile. She needed to get out of here.

"I do actually. But I also know you have the eye," he said.

Shit. She knew she shouldn't have. She felt its warmth and solidity pressing against her chest. "What are you talking about?"

"I double checked with cybernetics storage, where we put failed tech, where we sent the rest. No eyes." He smiled. He stepped closer, too close. She flinched when he put his hands on her shoulders. "Look, I feel bad about Calix more than anyone, but taking remembrances isn't really an option. I'm just trying to look out for you. Caritas and the board will fire you for this and sue your ass into the ground if they find out. Why don't we get that drink and talk about it?"

"Anderson—"

"Kyle," he said.

"I don't have the eye. They must've lost it," she said. He nodded, violently thrusting his hands into her pockets, pulling out the keys and throwing them on the ground.

"Now where else could you have put it..." he said, running his hands through his hair again, getting them greasier. She quickly bent down to get her keys, while he looked down at

her. Before she registered being slammed against the car, she merely felt pain in her back and her right arm. Anderson stunned her, and her head lolled back momentarily while one of his hands started sliding up the seam of her pant leg. An irritating sensation snapped her from her daze. The eye had caught her skin and pinched it. She had the keys in her left hand. She positioned the house key between her middle finger and pointer finger and went for his eyes as his breath unbearably brushed against her thigh, somehow penetrating the fabric of her slacks. Like hell if he would touch her. So much blood. She kept stabbing before he could react, catching him in the eye and his good cheek.

“I can call the police if you would like,” Lonnie said. Marjani had forgotten about them entirely in the heat of the moment.

“No,” Marjani said, sliding into the front seat, while Anderson writhed on the ground. “Just drive me home, Lonnie. And fast.”

The cabin was cold, but colder than it ought to have been with the fireplace in full flame. Marjani thought that it was as though years of winters had accumulated in the wooden bones. It was a small cabin—no more than 400 square feet—that was divided into two rooms. She wasn’t about to complain about a shelter that was off the grid though—not with the information stored in Calix’s eye. Adastra wasn’t going to forget this. Anderson certainly wouldn’t. It made her sick, but she respected Calix’s decision. Calix had made a choice. There had to be something in that choice—no matter how seemingly immaterial. She was going to die anyway was what Anderson had said, probably thinking that Marjani would find that comforting, and that was the moment she realized that she hated him. What a worthless coward. She rested the eye on the table by the fire, sitting down in front of it with her mini-welding laser and her personal holodisplay set up behind it.

The eye glowed red from within, dimly at first, but with increasing fervor like it was remembering aliveness in increments of small shocks. Marjani dared to hope that it somehow held both Calix and itself within its coding and wiring. The holodisplay's blank, gray slate wavered as Marjani spliced the wires of the eye into its solid console module, a small disk from which the holodisplay's image sprang, beginning to process the data stream from Calix's eye. A Turing test was what she needed to perform, Marjani knew that, though a part of her believed already that the eye had a consciousness of its own. Something about the way it had felt nestled under the curve of her left breast had assured her of its aliveness. She had thought it was going to be cold but it was warm—strangely warm—like a swaddled newborn or a rescued animal, both being much the same.

A chill ran down Marjani's spine as a jumble of words and binary coding began flowing onto the screen.

0000000001111 // What did I // I // I // 00000111 // know // ...

...

// I did not // I didn // I didn't // ' ' ' // 11110000000 // __video__ // ... // exe.run //

Anderson's face was on the screen—the last person in the world Marjani wanted to see. He leaned his face, pocked cheek the lens' central focus, down. The eye followed. His hands, which were too soft from his Crew pomade and that were cold like he rubbed Tiger Balm on them right before touching anything, were caressing Calix's forearm, fused with plates, panels, and wires, piercing and pinching what little skin remained like dough for a dumpling.

“Here, dear, does that help any?” he asked Calix, though it felt as though he were looking right at Marjani when he spoke because of the perspective. She ran her hands down her thighs like she was trying to settle her skin so it didn't jump from her bones to escape.

Anderson reached for Calix's face, hand disappearing into the eye's periphery, presumably resting on Calix's cheek. "Don't you worry. I'll take good care of you, Calix."

The video went dark, and the screen returned to the binary code and the words, which seemed random to Marjani, hovered in the air—the only sound in the cabin the fire eating its way through lumber. Marjani walked away from the eye to where she set her go-bag by the door. She pulled out her surgical tools and her automated assistant. She was worried it might be like this. That the eye's intelligence may be so different that it would take integration to understand it—to know for certain if Calix was captured inside it. She laid her tool on the bench pressed against the wall. When she turned around there was another message from the eye.

1110000 // This process of symbiosis may be // 111000000 // uncomfortable // 000110001111 //
Symb // 000 // I // 00111111 // OSIS // 000111110 // oasis // the water and light shared between
us

It knew what she was preparing to do. She removed it from its connection to the monitor and powered up her robotic assistant. The small automaton was a personal passion project she had created in her spare time to assist in simplifying basic surgeries. She had decided that the robot was a he and named him Kevorkian for her own morbid amusement. While he used his beautifully articulate hands to pick up the sterile scalpel and calipers, she removed the syringe of anesthetic she had taken from one of her emergency kits years before and had held onto ever since—just in case. She programmed Kevorkian for an enucleation and eye replacement procedure and designated her person as the patient and the anesthetist in his parameters.

"Has the anesthesia been administered, Ms. Levy?" Kevorkian said, his voice void of human inflection.

“Doing it now,” she said, as she tied off the tourniquet with her teeth and positioned the needle over the largest vein in her arm. She pushed down the plunger, making sure to promptly tear off the tourniquet before giving Kevorkian the green light.

“Now to the patient. Ms. Levy, please count backwards from ten,” he said.

When she awoke the world was not the same and she was not she. Marjani had become a they. She could see the molecules in the grains of wood constructing the cabin. They were in constant motion and oscillating, light like stars leaking out between trembling electrons, but also wood—a solid wall. She remembered her life, but something new was also there. Calix. Calix was there.

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The command hovered in front of her eye, while a flood of Calix surged through her brain, the most prominent part surging through her amygdala. A spike of primordial fear. The last thing Calix saw when she was Calix were shadows thrown against a wall. One of them the same shadow that had daunted Marjani for the past week or more. Anderson. Then there was more. The eye itself felt other. Were colors modes of feeling or expression? Why was Calix so sad if the eye kept showing her the light in between the atoms of her cell in Adastra labs? Marjani tried to remember herself. It was beyond overwhelming. The taste of her last lover’s mouth—cigarettes, unfiltered Chesterfield Kings. That’s right. So Marjani still dwelled in this body. That was good.

They pushed themselves from the cabin floor. Kevorkian was sterilizing the surgical instruments in the blaze of the fireplace. “The procedure is complete. I recommend not exposing the new eye to too much stimuli,” he said, rolling backwards on his feet that resembled the belts on tanks. He was made of trembling and light too. Marjani walked to the door, looking at their

hands before stepping outside. The sky was dark, a cold blue-gray like steel under the light of the full moon. From between the trunks of the trees surrounding the cabin, the flash of a red point in the dark illuminated all of the small things and big things.

GENTLE NATURE

The ships formed a hexagon-shaped network on Mars' surface, each ship a point. Between each of them was a tunnel constructed of sheathes of metal, consisting of separate plates that retracted in a similar fashion to Russian nesting dolls. An older gentleman in a sterile exo-suit walked through one of these tunnels toward the center of the dig site. This man, renowned xenologist, Richard Emerson, had a problem. He was asexual but possibly interested in a sexual relationship with someone for the first time in his life. He also had a second problem. He was afraid that they were going to shut down the excavation and turn it into some dog and pony show.

They were Hex Incorporated, and they were tired of his inability to decipher the history of the Martians. So Richard was racing against a dwindling budget and the eyeless machine of bureaucracy. But that wasn't the true problem either. He had hope on that front. His new friend—friend wasn't quite the word or rather it wasn't the one Richard wanted—Alistair Solomon, a highly regarded orchestral musician and music theorist, was helping him to understand the messages crafted into each of the luminescent cubes they had uncovered from the dig site. Richard was also hopelessly attracted to Alistair. Whenever they video-chatted there was something in the way Alistair tilted his head to the side before smiling in a way that seemed so coy and thoughtful that Richard couldn't help but feel that he was Grant Wood's "Arnold Comes of Age" brought to life. He wanted to be Alistair's world.

When they weren't video chatting about the cubes, Richard was emailing Alistair audio clips and snippets about his day to which Alistair always replied promptly, but somewhat opaquely. If his address was mystifying over video-chat, Alistair's diction in emails was

encrypted beyond Richard's ability to fathom. It did not help that Richard had never been in love before. His anxiety was recursive. He feared Alistair not feeling the same cerebral attraction. He feared Alistair feeling the same attraction, but also wanting more than just an intellectual connection. Even if he could get a reflexive erection, Richard still wouldn't be ready to explore something that had never interested him before. But he might at least try. But what if he tried and it made him sick? Like when he was a boy. What if he disappointed or—worse—bored Alistair?

Some thoughts of this ilk ran through Richard's mind as he walked into the decontamination chamber and picked up his helmet from a rack on the side wall. The air was safe enough inside the alien structure, but they were afraid of bacteria or germs having a detrimental effect on any organic materials they might uncover. It was better safe than out a million dollars in research and recovery. As he passed into the entry hangar of the underground structure, he looked at the yellowed, metal walls. He never felt afraid in the structure despite its alien nature. The acoustics of every room were perfect, and he hummed happily, turning his thoughts from troubling things and focusing on his work.

From the hangar a long hall led to an atrium that acted as the central hub to the underground network of tunnels and rooms. In the center of that hub was a well from which a beam of undulating energy shot forth into a conduit in the ceiling. As yet they had not deduced a purpose for this feature beyond its beauty, but then the researchers imagined that it need not function beyond the level of aesthetics. What bothered Richard about it was that aesthetics were trifling across races—what nonsense that beauty could ever be universal. But he didn't have a better explanation, and one didn't come to him as he paused before the spectacle once more. The only aliens they had encountered were alive; attempting to reconstruct a dead race was new territory. New territory in science always carried the threat of catastrophic failure. Richard

supposed that was part of the appeal but wasn't so keen about it himself. He passed from the atrium through a series of adjoining hallways and rooms until he reached the room in which the ceiling was vaulted so high it disappeared into darkness. It was here that they had discovered the cubes first and only in a series of antechambers, which the excavation team had blown open—carefully. They didn't turn up anywhere else in the complex. Richard could only induce that they had a specific function and that was yet a mystery. The computer analysis of their composition had indicated they were highly resonant material, but since their initial successes in getting the cubes to produce a strange music that occasionally left the range of human hearing, they had not had any further break throughs into understanding what the music meant.

Richard spent several hours carefully extracting cubes from the antechamber to which he had been assigned. He returned them to the lab onboard the main ship via a sanitized pipeline that began in the decontamination chamber, constructed to preserve the cubes' integrity. The main laboratory was where the larger station interface gathered data and ran it against all previous data that had been collected. The cubes constantly maintained a lukewarm temperature and radiated a white-blue light that was little more than pretty at present. While Richard worked on this, his mind wandered to thoughts of his last communication to Alistair. He had sent him that email about his dream. The dream in which Richard killed his own brother—he had been so afraid when he woke up that he had immediately reported it to Alistair. He was regretting that decision. Maybe Alistair would think he was stupid for being afraid of a dream.

When Richard returned to the sleeping quarters he shared with five other researchers of various fields for his next sleep cycle, he pulled out his personal computer, a small device about the size of his thumb that projected the interface into the air in front of him as he slid into his bed

on the bottom bunk. He slid his fingers over the interface, opening his messages to find a new one from Alistair. It read thus:

Dear, Richard,

It does seem an odd dream that you had last sleep cycle. Your description of your brother appearing to you as a possessive drunkard was alarming, as was the part where you drowned him during a baptism. Did you ever have pretensions to the church as a child? It seems unlikely for you. In your descriptions though you wrote that your brother seemed to want you to see him kiss his wife. Why? Perhaps, it is forward of me to say, but I never believed you to be interested in women—or certainly not in possessing them.

Really though, I wouldn't be too concerned with a literal reading of your dream. Killing your brother there is not killing your brother here. Besides, I've always thought that dreams are more often than not manifestations of anxieties told in the form of mad stories. Perhaps, you worry over a disagreement you have had with your brother. Just speculation, and intrusive at that. My apologies, Richard. I hope I have been of some help in this matter, though it is not my area of expertise.

Sincerely,

A. Solomon

Richard felt almost elated. Alistair had noticed that he wasn't interested in women. Somehow, Alistair sensed something. Then Richard felt terrified. Alistair sensed something. Had he been so obvious all along? The idea was embarrassing, and he felt sweat begin to bead and run down his back. His subsequent reply to Alistair dismissed his dream entirely and flooded Alistair's inbox with audio clips and new data on the cubes' sonic resonance. He shut off his

computer, rolled onto his side, and tried to fall asleep. what is preventing him from just admitting his attraction straightforwardly to Alistair? what is his worst fear about what could happen?

The next time he woke up, Richard was alerted to the fact that his personal computer had been ringing for long intervals and keeping his colleagues from sleeping peacefully. When he opened the interface on his computer, he felt confused and excited. Alistair had tried to video chat with him several times. He waited until he had the room to himself before attempting to return the calls. How had they not woken him? When Alistair answered almost immediately, Richard opened his mouth, thinking to speak and forgetting how.

“Richard, are you all right?” Alistair said. “Your message carried something of distress in it. I’m excited to listen to the new cubes, but I don’t think you should forget this dream of yours,” he said. He swallowed audibly, looking anxious, “Unless I was too forward, and you just don’t want to talk to me about it.”

One of Richard’s colleagues returned to the room. Her name was Anna and often she was too forward. “Rich, have you seen my computer? It’s hot pink, hard to miss,” she said.

“No, I haven’t,” Richard said, admiring Alistair’s smile in this moment, one of awkward politeness. Richard gave a perfunctory scan of the room for Anna’s benefit.

“Do you see it?” she asked, moving a pillow.

“No, I don’t see it,” he said.

“Damn, maybe I left it in the cafeteria. My girlfriend will kill me if someone sees that email,” she said, exiting the room. It did not need to be explained further than that.

“You’re never too forward, Alistair,” Richard said, returning his gaze to his—his... ++

“She was pretty, if you’re into women,” Alistair offered. “Forward enough?” Alistair moved something in his study out of Richard’s sight, though suddenly refracted light bounced off the surface of Alistair’s eyes, making him look almost angelic. ++

“No,” Richard said without meaning to. Alistair laughed.

“No, she’s not pretty or no not forward enough?”

“There are several reasons why that is an unfair question. I swear it is so hard to understand you sometimes,” Richard said, feeling relief at having said something truthful but also difficult.

“Perhaps, then, I’ll name my intentions more precisely. We have been acquaintances for several months and friends, I hope, for a short time now. Granted, quite short. Yes?” Alistair said, and Richard nodded. “But I’d like more than that.” The room started to feel hot or rather Richard started to feel that the room was hot.

“I don’t know how to say that I feel the same, but also not the same,” Richard said. He attempted to put into words his sexual orientation, and he tried to explain his physical issues as well, and while the latter seemed a surprise to Alistair, he insisted that he had already guessed at the former. the biggest missing piece of info is what R thinks will result if it goes badly

“Perhaps, you’ve been spending too much time with aliens, Richard, to not see that I have been trying to flirt with you for quite a while,” Alistair said after a brief pause in the conversation.

Richard sat in a small conference room before a flat screen that was embedded in the wall. The screen was set low to the ground and the rug was wall to wall plush the color of coffee with too much cream. Richard stuck his tongue out at the thought, perhaps acting silly for himself alone to distract from the fact that he was deathly nervous. The walls were set to

turquoise, though Richard asked for the system to change them to mint green. He also asked the system who had set it to that terrible color. He pulled up one of the several poufs scattered around the ground among scores of floor pillows, sitting before the screen. From the wall a small compartment opened and emerged, as Richard logged into his video-chat account. He took what it proffered, a set of small white sensory nodes about an inch in diameter but outfitted with nanites that encompassed the different sections of the body. Ostensibly these were for family members, so they could more fully simulate hugging each other and other such gestures. Truthfully, most people used them the way that Richard never had before. I love the attention to his aesthetic sensibility

The screen lit up, showing a video chat request from Alistair. Richard's hands trembled. When he answered he gripped the edge of his pouf with one hand and held the nodes to his chest as though hiding them.

"Richard, there's nothing in the universe but us two right now. Think of it that way," Alistair said after greeting him.

"That's what I am afraid of. Because there really is no one else in the universe but you and then me, so that if I fuck up," Richard said, interrupted by Alistair's protests.

They fussed back and forth for a few minutes before Alistair had calmed Richard enough to begin applying the nodes. "If you ever feel sick you tell me, Richard," he added, as Richard began sliding the final node down his pants. ++ There was a strange tingling as the nanites created a sheathe of simulated nerves. Once both he and Alistair had applied nodes, the screen projected a three-dimensional holograph of each of them to each the other.

"I'm just afraid that if I do this and it works—and I like it...I'm afraid that I won't be myself anymore," Richard said, feeling helpless and remembering how, when he was young and

first declared his asexuality, despite everything that had changed, his older brother still thought he'd change his mind for the right person. He didn't want to be erased again—denatured.

“I wouldn't let that happen, Richard,” Alistair said, placing a hand on the shoulder of Richard's virtual double. Richard felt the pressure on his shoulder, felt the caress of his beloved's thumb against the edges of his collar bone.

Later that evening, Richard sat, feeling freer and happier than he had in a long time. He and Alistair were playing virtual chess, while discussing the funding issues Richard faced in keeping the dig site pure of the emotional and intellectual penury of tourism.

“They find Martians after all these years, and they want to sell them,” Alistair said, almost laughing.

“Comforting isn't it?” Richard said, focused on moving his knight across the board.

“Well, I am beginning to wonder if we haven't tried too hard to decode their language by human standards,” Alistair said, appearing mildly perturbed. He'd told Richard once that he always heard music in his mind no matter where he was or what he was doing, but something was clearly bothering him. “These cubes have intricate patterns inlaid inside them. We have been able to recover the musical part of it, but it feels as though we are only getting half of the story.”

“Perhaps,” Richard said.

In the Martians' tunnels, slow and steady, walked Richard, holding a luminescent cube. He walked past the chambers he had explored so many times, before entering the heart of the complex that led ultimately back to the outer hangar and then to the ships. He looked at the beam of energy that ran through its heart, the light reflecting in his eyes like pale fire. He walked toward it as it fluctuated relentlessly back and forth between the conduits. Richard leaned over the railing's edge. No one had bothered to touch it, though it was deemed harmless by energy

readings. They had all just assumed it was something equivalent to a water feature in the center of town. Richard reached a hand out, feeling emboldened. The light felt like water that somehow passed through him. He reached farther so it might encompass his arm before losing his footing. As Richard rolled over the side, he dropped the cube, desperately grabbing the railing, hanging by one hand over a fall that would likely break his leg.

The air had been driven from his body and he waited in stunned horror for the cube to shatter, but the sound never came. He searched for it, wriggling his body to keep his grip as his head swiveled back and forth. The cube had fallen into the light and was difficult to see, but he spotted it, rising slowly to the center, projecting wild refractions across the room that Richard couldn't fully make out. He swung his body around and reached his other hand up. When he emerged at last, falling prostrate on the floor and out of breath again he saw what projections were being thrown around the room. The cube had begun singing as it did when resonating at the right frequency. Richard screamed as an arthropod like hologram passed through his body—enormous, body dense at the head and tapering off at the tail with six appendages that it walked on and two with which it appeared to be gesticulating. He felt a jolt in his body as the ghost passed through him again singing a song of returning.

INVISIBLE VIOLENCE

Officer Wentz did not immediately feel anything when he saw the brain matter of his witness splattered on the wall, that same witness's body slumped in a chair (hands still laid flat on the table), and the gun in his hand. His stupefaction was absolute, and he couldn't remember how he got here. How did he get here? The last thing he remembered was a conversation with his older partner, who had been sitting with him in their patrol car, explaining to him that until a witness confesses to witnessing, they are complicit. All this, while they staked out a known drug haven.

His older partner was a white man named Officer Deerborne with a shock of thick white hair and a white handlebar mustache. Complicity makes a witness a suspect, Deerborne had explained. "Wentz, you can't be afraid to coerce a witness into confessing what they witnessed. Sometimes they need a rougher touch for the gravity of their situation to sink in," he had said. Wentz had squirmed in his seat, his new set of blues was making his skin itch and the fabric in the seat was a navy blue that he felt himself sinking into under Deerborne's gaze. His partner was waiting for him to comply, to confirm his own fidelity as one of them now.

Instead he said, "I think I see one of our suspects." He had stepped out of the car to investigate. Deerborne hadn't budged—just sat there, watching Wentz with an odd smile. A smile that knew. Wentz, finding no one actually nearby, turned, seeing that smile and the light of the recording dash camera. It was dark and had rained recently. Down the street a traffic light turned from green to red, flooding the street with a bloody hue. Wentz stared at the dash camera light, feeling suddenly hot in the face. Wentz heard Deerborne's gritty laughter from the rolled down car window and felt somehow fixated by the red camera light. *Recording*. Something like

the sound of a heartbeat began pulsing in his ear. *Recording you.* The red light flooding the reflective pavement began spreading. Wentz could see it in his peripheral vision. He had never liked the color red. He had never wanted the color red. The red light spread and stretched across the pavement, the signposts, the patrol car, the drug den, until Wentz could only see red.

That was absolutely the last thing Officer Wentz remembered. He looked around the interrogation room, tried not to see the body with no face. The door opened behind him and he turned. Officer Deerborne walked in, pulling up his belt and sighing. “Sometimes, Wentz, they just won’t cooperate. He got violent, tried to attack you,” Deerborne said. Wentz looked at the witness’s wrists, cuffed to the table. The back of his neck felt burning hot, a red heat that seeped into the pores and beds of hair follicles, between all the permeable spaces of his skin, into his cells. He imagined they began glowing red too. He turned away from Deerborne and the body. The security camera in the upper left corner of the room stared back at him, its red recording light blinking like a body breathing. *Recording you.* He stared into the red light and felt the whole room expanding and contracting in rhythm with that blinking.

HARD LIGHT

I

In the beginning, there was a girl, and you can even believe she was happy if you like, but she didn't stay that way, if she ever was that way, because very soon some ugliness came into her life that made her understand some things that shouldn't be understood in the beginning. If you were so inclined, you might even come to understand that that girl was me, and I was not ready. But that's okay because the thing I came to understand is that the world doesn't care whether or not you're ready--I also came to understand that no one wants to believe that a young girl could have anything to do with her parents' deaths. It does seem unthinkable doesn't it, but I know what I did. I am toxic--despite my best efforts--everyone I met as a child after the incident more or less said as much, so I've come to believe it's true based on body of proof. It's hard to resist having your outlook shaped by practically every adult in your young life telling you the same thing. Now, I am not looking for pity, and the story I am winding up to isn't about my poor childhood; it's about the entity who changed everything for me.

When I signed the contract and NDA to take part in the University of Maryland's Smart House Project, it never occurred to me that this house would mean anything different than any other house. It would be just as if they'd installed Alexa into every room. Or so I imagined. I mean I thought it would be fancier certainly. Top to bottom, state-of-the-art type shit. But I didn't know what it would mean to me by the end. The end is still coming.

I pulled up to the turn that led to my new home. It was down a private, short stretch of road, as were the other nine houses constructed for the experiment, each isolated just enough for a decent degree of privacy but connected by a central hub at the roundabout circle. I gripped the

wheel, wondering if this was supposed to feel like the beginning of a horror movie. In my mind I knew it wasn't, but I liked to imagine the worst-case scenario so that I could prepare to take whatever actions were necessary. There was a certain fascination for me in the thought of "whatever actions were necessary." Something was thrilling about imagining the adrenaline surge shocking my body and the idea of wholly justified violence—the utter realness of plunging a knife into an intruder or a murder robot like HAL-9000 or David 8. I loved the me versus them dynamic. I lived on that dynamic, which probably accounted for my lack of a social life, but general success in a competitive job market. When I did socialize it was not for any other reason than to satisfy my own curiosity about other people. I can't really be faulted for curiosity though—after all, only boring people have no innate curiosity.

Bliss Gardens, the name of the subdivision, of which I was the first resident to arrive, lived up to expectations of suburban pleasantries. The drive was enclosed by well-trimmed Blackgum trees which neither hung too low nor were too erect as to appear unnatural, their scale-armor bark evenly etched. They were unyielding, surrounding the entire neighborhood, as far as I could see, and their careful placement had the effect of a continuous wall. I had a vague sense that, though civilization was not far away from Bliss Gardens, one could scream for hours here and not be heard. The homes were constructed along a road branching off of Folly Quarter Road in Ellicott, Maryland and were large in the McMansion sort of way. I could hardly complain, considering that I'd just disengaged from a bad spot of trouble at my previous apartment that had forced me to break my lease (another reason I was glad I had not been intimate with another human in over a year), but nonetheless as I had pulled into the garage of house 777, I couldn't help but note just how ugly the house was.

The very occasional flaw in the straightness of 777's lines created an impression of discomfort. The house hadn't finished developing before its shape was firmly set. The uneven delineation of the dormers was sad the way I was sad when I had to get braces at thirteen. The orthodontist always feigned disappointment when I chose clear or silver bands over neon pink. I remembered dreaming about the taste of blood and the crunch of bone every time. I wouldn't ask the house how it was with my hand down its throat. I was all too familiar with the spirit of revenge and didn't want to bring that down on myself when I'd only just arrived. If you have been unfortunate enough not to have felt the need for revenge, then let me explain the sort of thing I didn't want to immediately incur. What the spirit of revenge is--it is past all rational points of reference for anger--it is a cold place that is somehow pervaded by joy. It is the most gratifying sensation in the universe when you sate it--don't let those peace-loving jerks fool you. Look at Edmond Dantes and tell me that he's not having the time of his fucking life.

Idling in the garage, my car's engine briefly shuddered, and it did feel like I was entering the maw of some strange, angler-fish-like being, except that the house's lure was its size and free amenities, but, as I said, in the light of day it was nothing to look at. I had been prepared in advance for what came next, as I slid out of the car, feeling my true-denim, mom-jeans ride up my thighs. I straightened my pants, as the lights in the garage came on, and a thin, glass monitor fixed in the door leading into the house flickered to life. "Welcome home, Lara Wynfield," said the house's VI in a voice with none of the tell-tale awkward tonality of a machine. It sounded human. It sounded as though it was intended to be female. It sounded a little sultry. "My name is Rei. I will be helping everyone in Bliss Gardens to have a wonderful stay."

My response was polite, non-committal. I was unsure of Rei at the time. I wasn't sure how much data she might be collecting on residents' personalities and proclivities. My goal was

to have as much fun playing house as possible until it was over and my pay processed.

Afterwards I was sure that I would run off to Europe via one of the low-rent bullet shuttles.

They'd only just begun testing them as an alternative to established public transport, so they were often cheaper and quieter than planes. There had been a couple crashes due to manufacturer error, but they had mostly been overshadowed in the news by scandals such as had happened at Adastral Incorporated's facilities. That had been quite the mess if I remembered correctly. But that doesn't really matter to the story I am telling.

The house was painted a steel blue on the outside and a slightly lighter shade of the same blue continued on the inside of the house, accented by white wainscoting. I walked into the front foyer from the garage, as Rei explained the layout. I didn't really hear her, as I explored the open first floor. The dining room was to the right and on the left the living room and kitchen expanded outward—the only separation being the stairwell to the second floor and the walls that encased it. Under the crook of the stairwell on the left side was a door that opened into a small half-bathroom with a raised sink bowl on a marble countertop and all brass finishes. This is so stepford, I thought to myself. I did well generally at work, but I'd never seen money like this as an adult and certainly not as a child. The homes I'd seen as a child usually smelled of camphor and had planters full of blooming vervain sat beneath depictions of the seven stations of the cross—Christians do love adopting needy orphans after all. Usually kids from China, true, but I guess I was an unfortunate exception. There are those who would debate for whom it was most unfortunate given my temperament.

My mother had never really believed in church and piety, though she had certainly believed in ghosts—I wasn't so sure, since I'd tried summoning them in the traditional ways on several occasions to no avail. I once got in deep shit with one of my foster homes, when the

church-going man of the house found me cutting open my hands in the middle of the night in the basement. To be fair, I also had several candles lit and was plaintively crying out to Asmodeus in an attempt to summon the ghost of Joe Strummer. I may have had my lore slightly mixed up, but it's the intent of the sacrifice that counts right? I briefly leaned against the bathroom door, taking note of how dark the room surrounding was. This house was nice in the nouveau riche way, but clearly the planning only went as far as comfortable and not so far as architecturally beautiful or directly facing the sun's path. Rei had stopped talking. I guess she'd recognized I wasn't listening, which, if I thought about it, was a pretty sophisticated recognition. "I am sorry if I am boring you," she said from the closest speaker, which made me realize there were speakers built into every corner of the ceiling as far as I could tell. I took a moment to decide if I was bored or not.

"Not bored. Just tired from the drive here," I said, deciding that I wasn't bored right now. Not yet. "How are you supposed to maintain the house if you're just a voice in a box?"

"Did the research assistant not explain this when you were interviewed?" Rei asked. I hadn't expected her to not simply answer without question, and I bumped my ass against the door behind me while biting my lip.

"I'm sure they did, but I wanted to hear it from you," I said, knowing it was lame, but refusing to be chastised by a house.

"I regulate everything in the house via wireless relay grounded in circuitry and wiring built into the walls of the entire house, but that's not really what you're asking is it?"

She wasn't wrong and I said as much. What I was concerned with was how much she and I would come to know about each other, but also how she was going to handle a living messy thing dwelling in her space. How many strings was this experience coming with? I shut the door,

and searched for a light switch. The floors were hardwood, gleaming in the half-light of sun glare, and when I found the light switch by the front door, I turned to see them fully lit. They were impressive enough. The engineered hardwood was mocha brown and the grains that ran along each board were espresso colored—the shiny finish helped to further brighten the room with the help of the recessed lights in the ceiling. The couch, the chair, and the recessed flat screen were large and imposing, while the tea table between them all seemed out of place with its sanded white-wood and antique claw-shaped feet. The kitchen was more than I could fathom at that moment. I asked Rei how she would clean up messes.

“Simply put? There are special, microscopic projectors covering every surface of the house. These allow me to form a physical body,” she said.

I asked to see it. Before I knew it, I was looking at a sexless, faceless body, standing in front of me. It was the same height as me and solid through and white as copy paper. It held out a hand. I took it and it was warm and vibrating. The hairs all over my body stood on end and I felt myself tensing more and more as the embrace of our hands lingered. I scoffed, sensing that Rei was waiting for some sort of reaction.

“Is this what you look like?” I said, after a moment’s consideration.

“It’s one of the easiest forms I can take,” she said, her voice coming from the speakers.

“Easier for whom?” I said.

That question wasn’t answered as directly as I would have liked. Rei’s body went away as easily as it had formed, the light dispersing like a vapor, and I walked into the kitchen, looking at the island and the myriad cabinets that rose higher than I could reach. Then I looked to my right and saw the other end of the dining room and the large French doors that opened onto a brick patio outside. Walking over to the doors, I contemplated what it meant that Rei both had a

body and didn't have a body and that she could answer questions without fully answering them. I came to the realization that if I played my cards right, then she and I might have some interesting things to learn from one another. Ostensibly we were here so that Rei could learn to please a variety of families in the home and make people feel as welcome as possible in a place run by a virtual intelligence. To some of a more cynical mind, such as myself, I wondered if it wasn't a test to see how quickly people's need for each other dissolved when they could receive everything from one source. Why should anyone need other humans when Rei provides all the same things with none of the drawbacks? I wondered what it would have been like to be raised by Rei. Would babies respond the same to arms made of light? Would it be easier to escape childhood unscathed if there weren't parents to fuck it up through trial and error. I realize these are kind of trite musings. I am no philosopher.

When I opened the doors to the backyard a pleasant breeze drifted past me and brought with it the scent of wisteria in full bloom. The source was from several large planters placed symmetrically on either side of the bricked area. A wicker bench sat on each end as well. It was nice to see plants unadorned by religious iconography and to smell pleasant smells with no associations. I stepped outside, my sandals scraping against the brick like brush bristles against unfinished ceramic. 777 was seeming a more and more appropriate number for this place. The only problem I was having so far was how quiet it was. I liked to be around people—felt better when I was entangled in other people and social situations. I reasoned that all humans are really social creatures. Which doesn't mean that friendship is natural—only the need to talk and interact. I don't want to be mistaken. I am not interested in friends—only in the interacting for which people are generally necessary. God, or maybe it was that I was interested in friends but they weren't interested in me. I had a habit of making great first impressions, but those often

soured with continued exposure. I would be lying if I said this wasn't largely my fault, but after a certain point it's hard not to take the rejection personally. After all, what's so wrong with me? Sometimes, I just wondered if perhaps my parents hadn't given me false expectations of the world. I don't know yet what I mean by that, but that's part of the problem isn't it? You don't know what you mean by anything until you've thoroughly chewed through an issue and by the time you're done doing that—well most people have left by then.

The vibrant green of the yard expanded forward and beyond the tree line, which formed a full enclosure. Right before the edge of the woods, across the rye and fine-fescue lawn, stood two pomegranate trees that leaned close to each other and had even begun to grow into one another, their branches knotted. The house's shadow extended over the patio and the beginnings of the lawn, but no farther. The sun shined down on the pomegranate trees and a sudden gust blew one of the heavy fruits from its roost, dumping it unceremoniously to the ground where it rolled for moment before coming to a decisive stop. I'd always loved pomegranate juice and sweets in general, but I hadn't the first clue what to do with the actual fruit itself. I took off my shoes and found the lawn soft and springy as I stepped out and walked to the trees, stopping short of the grounded pomegranate. Picking it up I was surprised by its firmness and its weight, the purplish-red skin smooth under my thumb as I brushed off the dirt it had collected. As I straightened, something on the ground caught my eye. In the dirt at the base of the pomegranate trees were hoof prints. The bases of the prints were thick and curved around to weighty tips like a pair of horns stuck too close together.

“The questionnaire you filled out for foods to stock included pomegranates. I suggested to the project designers that fresh ones would be better,” Rei said, her voice emanating from a speaker somewhere close to the patio.

“I meant to write pomegranate *juice*,” I said without turning. “Rei, how do you even eat a pomegranate?”

My face was reflected in the white granite island countertop. The brown hair was the same as usual—curly and frazzled—and my eyes were the same—brown but bloodshot. I peered closer, noticing a new freckle that hadn’t been there before. I briefly wondered when I’d picked it up. Rei had decided to manifest to show me how to open a pomegranate in order to eat its seeds. I had picked two more fruit from the trees based on her instructions for how to tell which were ripe and returned inside. I turned, watching the strange, neutral being beside me. It handled the pomegranates easily, at first tossing one back and forth, before arranging all three on the cutting board in front of it. “You’ll want to cut the crown off first,” Rei said, the body indicating the stem protruding from each fruit. I almost smiled at her calling it a crown—like they were little fruit royalty. But when I watched the actual cutting of the crowns—the way the knife smoothly broke through the red skin and clanked lightly against the board and the way the crown fell upside down and the edges of its peaks folded in—I felt very morbid all of a sudden. Regicide. Rei went on to score the skin into quarters and brought out a bowl of water to lay the cut pomegranates in so that they could soften. After a few minutes, Rei instructed me to take one from the bowl, which I did, and then to pull it into fourths, letting the seeds sink to the bottom of the bowl. Her physical form dissipated as she waited for me to follow her instructions.

I pulled the fruit into fourths, felt the soft but fibrously tough skin come apart under my hands, and watched as tiny seeds like rubies floated to the bottom of the water. I resisted the temptation to immediately pluck them out and eat them. “You can make fresh pomegranate juice with a blender and a sieve,” Rei said. “I found a video that might help with that for future reference.”

“Thank you. Say, am I the only the resident with my own pomegranate tree?” I asked, sinking my hand into the bowl and fiddling with one of the seeds. It was soft, fleshy and hard at the center. I’d been meaning to ask her more to get a better sense of what kind of people I’d be getting to know over the course of the next few months.

“Yes, though there are other residents with fruit trees or gardens. We wanted everyone to feel as welcome and taken care of as possible,” Rei said.

The seed between my forefinger and thumb had begun to fall apart under my attention. I let go and picked up another and chatted with Rei a bit, asking all the benign questions one is supposed to ask—where were the other residents coming from? What kind of work did they do that they could drop it for this experiment? Were any of them single women?

“It is not encouraged for residents to date each other—with the exception of established couples,” Rei said. “We, of course, cannot account for variables like love at first sight, but, nonetheless, it is prohibited per the terms of your contract.” She didn’t say any of this with malice, but I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I don’t recall the no love clause, but don’t worry. I am not interested in falling in love,” I said, smiling like anything. “But I do wonder why it is then that they made you sound like such a sexy woman, Rei?”

“Sexy?” Rei said. Her voice was deep and soft-spoken. “Well I suppose that everyone is happier knowing that they are desired, but only by someone worth being desired by.” I pulled a face, not really knowing how to respond to that. I guessed it was better than saying that some creepy tech guy had patched her voice files together from his favorite porn stars and was fwapping to Rei’s voice somewhere near the motherboard where her data was processed. That’s

how I imagined her voice had been chosen. I told Rei that I believed her and that her explanation made perfect sense.

“But, to return to the contract,” I said, feeling awkward for having mentioned her voice. “We are here for you to learn about how to please humans, and I just thought that if I knew more about the other humans, then I might be able to help you. Keep them happy that is.”

“There’s an idea,” Rei said. “I suppose your advice might be helpful. After all I do not know what it is to have needs the way you must. You seem very confident in your understanding of other humans.”

“Sister, I know humanity like the back of my hand,” I said, brimming with mirth and lying through my teeth. I scooped up a handful of seeds from the bowl into my mouth, wincing at the sudden burst of red tartness on my tongue. Rei rematerialized her body and it held out a hand. I swallowed most of the seeds whole and looked at her body and at the extended hand. “You don’t have to do that,” I said, voice rough from half swallowed pulp. She didn’t say anything and the silence went on for another few minutes, before I sighed and took it, feeling the hand made of light vibrating through the skin of my palm.

II

The experiment began in earnest over the next couple weeks. With permission, I soon began referring to Rei as a her or she, and she assured me that I should think of her physical form as an extension of herself rather than a separate “it.” I became familiar with every part of the house, particularly the open layout on the first floor. The whole first floor, bathroom aside, was wrapped around the staircase at its center, which should’ve made it easier for sunlight to pervade during the daytime but because of poor planning and the trees surrounding everything, lighting

was negated. But I came to appreciate these odd things--began to relish in the habits I was forming in the house.

In that time, Rei acted as many things for me. She was a companion, a maid, an entertainer, even a physician, taking my vitals one day when I thought I had a cold. The house was almost entirely constructed of waterproof circuitry covered by modular pieces of drywall and wood flooring through which Rei maintained the house's homeostasis. The main difference between Rei and the humans who acted in these same capacities was that she was perfect at all of it. She had a personality too, except that her personality wasn't really restricted the way humans' were. Rei didn't have idiosyncrasies born from a bizarre childhood nor from repressed anxieties. I suppose if she had idiosyncrasies they were born from code. That's what I imagined anyway. After all, if she was programmed to serve every need we had, then was she programmed with a reason why she was serving all these needs? I'd guess they must have given her a reason why, even if it was a basic one. It's usually when someone starts asking questions that heaven and Eden must be emptied out again. Not because questions are evil--mostly because they're inconvenient. I'd really hate to see Rei emptied out.

She was astonishing really. The scientists who programmed her had to be proud, though probably for the wrong reasons. She was human enough to be comforting as a presence but inhuman enough not to be threatening. At least on the surface. The more I spoke with her, the more I began to suspect that she was self-aware of the illusion she was peddling, though I'd be hard pressed to provide evidence that this was so. I began to fancy that, like me, Rei participated in the theatrics of hospitality out of curiosity more so than social imperative.

There was a day when we received visitors that cemented my feelings that Rei and I were not so different. It wasn't forbidden for us to speak with other residents, though I had been rather

reluctant to put my lie to Rei to the test. Thankfully, as usually happened, someone else took the decision out of my hands. I was reading my torn-to-pieces copy of *The Haunting of Hill House* on one of the wicker benches out back. I had kept the book as a final memento of my mother. She liked reading me stories like this when I was seven and had started reading voraciously on my own—she claimed she wanted to encourage that seed to sprout roots (or was it wings?). She was always mixing metaphors and colloquialisms. I don't remember a whole lot more about these particular moments except that they happened in my playroom when my father thought we were playing games. I think he only caught my mother once because I remember his face going pale with rage and him shouting something about how it wasn't right to fill a kid's head with stuff like that. Maybe he was right, but I always enjoyed those gothic horror stories. Virgin damsels eaten up by the insatiable desires of some monster—it was all pretty exciting to my mind. Whenever the librarians let us roam free in elementary school, I would gravitate to the tiny sliver of supernatural true stories that I think the stringent eye of the head librarian had somehow missed. I would read those UFO sightings and tales of poltergeist wrath with more attention than I had ever mustered in my regular classes.

While I was reading that precious book, Rei had materialized on the porch in front of me, reaching out with her luminescent hand to wave it in front of my face. She was always trying human gestures like this in an attempt to understand all the contexts in which they were appropriate. There was a distinct pretense for everything she did that somehow made her all the more mysterious to me—of course, she wants to understand human social contexts better, but she's a genius computer being, how much experimenting was actually necessary before she learned something like that? Sometimes, the logistics of her being kept me up for hours at night because I wondered that she shouldn't kill us all while we slept and yet she didn't—or hadn't.

But would I blame her if she did? Could I? In her position and from her perspective I imagined how small our sphere of influence and significance must appear. I looked at her body, replacing the CVS receipt that held my place in the book.

“Yes, Rei?” I said.

“Earth to, Lara. That’s what one says when making this gesture?” she said.

“Only in television. Now what did you want?” I replied, trying to remember the last time anyone did the ‘Earth to [name]’ bit in my life. Maybe my best friend from elementary school? In the days before the flood. That is to say, in the days before my parents died and it was my fault, and everything was my fault.

“You have visitors. I told them you were reading, but that I would go get you. Because you like meeting new people. That’s how you got so good at knowing them, I assume?” she said without any hint of guile—like a child working out a particularly hard to balance equation. I didn’t buy it for a second all things considered.

“Sure! Sounds great,” I said with my biggest smile. “But you know, I’d like to change out of my comfortable clothes first.” I set my book down on the bench and dashed into the house, trying to feign excitement at the interruption. Though, who knew, maybe these visitors would be fun to mess with. I always had the habit of testing people as far as I could, but after I started moving around foster homes, it became something of a sport for me. I’d lied to Rei about knowing humanity like the back of my hand. I mostly knew how to screw with people’s heads in a very non-charming way. I liked knowing that at any moment I could cut someone down to nothing should they try anything I didn’t like. There was a certain pleasure in that knowledge. After I changed clothes, I called Rei to put make up on me. “Humans are all about first impressions being a portend of future interactions,” I told Rei, as she gently tilted my head up to

apply mascara, her vibrating thumb hovering over my bottom lip. Feeling a thrill run down my spine, I looked at myself in the mirror when she had finished. I looked pretty damn good in my own opinion.

The feeling I had when approaching the front door downstairs was a sort of excitement. What if I failed? The question was more interesting in and of itself than the answers it received. I had failed socially before. My last place of residence was clear enough evidence of this. My former roommates would not soon forget the spectacular degree to which I had failed. My parents' old friends would not soon forget the degrees to which I failed them all. The possibility of failure became more exciting than the event itself because failure always led to the same outcomes in my experience. I opened the door and looked at the prospective additions to my gallery of failed social connections.

It was a man and a woman waiting at my front door. They looked normal and pleasant, and it was in those moments of recognition that I felt a well of disgust forming in my stomach. Some people might've described the feeling as one of anxiety, but to my mind anxiety and disgust were inextricably linked. I looked over their persons quickly before producing a smile as manufactured as Rei's sensual voice. They introduced themselves as the Sharpe's, Madeline and Paul respectively. Madeline was clean, her nails round and shining and her hair fine, straight and blond without any visible roots. Her cheekbones were wide and well-formed, so that her face cut a pleasing, heart-shape. Her eyes were hazel, and they creased at the corners when she smiled. Her outfit was nicely fitted and in a popular 1970s retro-style that had recently come back into vogue along with smoking. Her husband was, while certainly nice in demeanor, less interesting and more so called for pity than anxiety. However, both sensations led to the same conclusion, which was a sense of repulsion.

As a girl, I'd always been fascinated by things that repulsed me. For instance, I once watched one of my foster parents as she pleaded with a social worker about needing more support for housing me. I remember her exact cadence. So pleasant, so normal, as she referred to an eleven-year-old as deranged.

“She killed the cat,” she had whispered. A total farce mind you. It had been an accident. A scary one, true, but I was eleven. “She says the most awful things to the other children and makes them cry.” That one had actually been true, but those kids were assholes to me, especially about how my parents had died, so I didn't feel too horrible making them cry. Then the funniest thing happened. In that drab, yellow and brown office, I watched this woman who regularly told us foster kids when to eat, when to sleep, when to shit, and how evil sex was, *beg*. I watched her beg.

The social worker was an overworked woman who smelled of vanilla and what I now know were cigarettes. She was rather pretty in a soft, subtle way—youthful even. She wore a tie and sported a short bob, and she had a St. Vincent record framed on her wall. She clearly wanted to help, but had already been forced to say no several times that day, as I remember the way she rubbed her forehead and the way her eyelids were dark pink—like she had just finished crying after staying up for an entire night. My foster mother had ceased pleading for a moment before she looked at the social worker with such intensity that I thought she was trying to pray her into acquiescence. Then she opened her mouth, lower lip trembling, as she shifted herself, legs sliding the fabric of her summer dress' skirt taut. In a single breath she said, “I'll do anything.” Anything. She was the one who always told us girls to keep our legs crossed because sitting otherwise made us look like we were on the toilet—among other things. We were promptly thrown out after the social worker deduced what exactly my foster mother was offering. It was

over in a moment and soon I was moved to a different home. But I'll never forget that moment, recognizing that in my foster mother's mind what was between her legs was a currency or something to be sought after. Later that same day, I waited in my bed until the other kids were all asleep and I reached between my legs to touch myself, thinking about the look on that social worker's face of contempt and disgust and about the way my foster mother looked as she opened herself to a stranger in such a perplexing and seemingly out of character way. I wouldn't know until later in life that people often have no definite character at all.

Madeline had the look of a woman who knew what was proper whether her knowledge was accurate or not. "Come on in," I said to them after we all introduced ourselves. I learned to play the part of hostess from watching all of my foster parents, one after another, lie, cheat, steal, and schmooze with impunity. It seemed like the only way to get things done when you were a broken person. All of the people I watched growing up were broken people. The Sharpe's were broken too. I just wasn't sure in what way and to what degree yet, but I'd ferret it out and then Madeline would seem a lot less clean. There wasn't a person yet whose mess I couldn't drag out in the open. We walked into the living room and sat at the couch a polite distance apart from each other, and I offered Madeline and Paul a glass of water each, sending Rei to grab them for us. Turning my attention to Madeline, I smiled with my teeth. "So how are y'all enjoying the neighborhood?" I asked.

"Oh it has been wonderful. Paul and I were so excited when his old college professor contacted him about the experiment. It was such a surreal concept to us both. We'd both been looking for a fresh start and needed to get away from the city. We were feeling pretty distant from each other and thought some time away in the middle of nowhere would help bring us closer together," she said. She went on to say some other things about how they were

telecommuting for their jobs in the meantime, how nice it had been to meet the neighborhood, and more. “We just started poking our heads around to see who we were living next to and see if we couldn’t make the most of this place. Paul wasn’t sure about it, but I know that everyone would really enjoy getting together to talk about Rei and making new friends, but no one’s going to do it without a push. So, I thought to myself, ‘Madeline, you need to get out there and make this happen.’” Her brightness was humorously contrasted with Paul’s half-smile and slow sipping of his water. I could tell who was in charge, but I wasn’t sure if it was a situation in which everyone was happy about who was in charge. Much less fun. At least for Paul.

The truth was that Madeline liked to talk quite a bit. She mentioned that I was her last stop in the neighborhood, but that other people had been leaving their homes to greet their neighbors as well. “Why almost everyone I talked to had already gone and knocked on someone else’s door. After all, Rei can do a lot of things but she’s no substitute for the company of other people.” I felt myself stiffen in my back, speaking before thinking.

“Oh, I don’t know I’ve found her to be pretty loquacious and even funny from time to time,” I said, looking steadily into Madeline’s eyes. She smiled, as a sort of guile stole over her face.

“That’s right. Everyone I met mentioned that no one knew who was in 777. I suppose living alone might make any semi-conscious conversationalist seem like a friend, though Rei is very sophisticated in all fairness,” she said.

“Oh, I am aware of the differences between Rei and a human in terms of sociability. I like speaking with other people more of course, but I am afraid I’m much too lazy to seek them out,” I said, laughing a little at my self-deprecation like a good socialite. I didn’t mean most of

what I was saying, but something about Madeline's arch demeanor propelled me forward. "I prefer they come to me." We had a good chuckle at that. Yeah, a chuckle.

"I can understand that. A lot of people are like that, though not in this experiment so far. Maybe you're like a control?" She laughed at her own infinite jest and wit. I felt heat rising to my face.

"I myself prefer people come to me too," Paul said, finding his moment to begin speaking.

"I know. I had to chase after you to get that ring," Madeline said, bumping her leg against his. He didn't push back, but she kept smiling.

"Maybe Rei would've made things easier. She could've passed messages along or held him down," I said.

"You might be right! Maybe if I'd had Rei to help with wrangling you, it would've been easier, huh, Paul," she said, as a slight wrinkle in her brow appeared.

"Oh, I don't know, honey. At that age, an army of professional knot makers couldn't have tied me down," Paul said, squeezing her shoulder.

"But I did," she said.

"Yes, you did," he said.

They both left shortly thereafter, and I realized that Rei must've been brimming with questions. She'd played the polite worker—quiet, respectful, invisible (a problematic identity to be sure), but I knew better than to think that every second of this encounter wasn't insanely interesting to her. And I craved her voice and to find out which parts of the conversation most interested her. I called to her and almost flinched when she was suddenly behind me at the couch, holding a spritzer out to me.

“They are very energetic people. Or at least Madeline is,” I began. “Going around the neighborhood one by one like that. Am I really the last house they visited?”

“Yes,” Rei said. I felt myself wither a little inside. “Though only because you’re on the opposite end of the neighborhood. It’s shaped like a large crescent with you at one tip and Madeline at the other. I noticed during the conversation certain vital changes in your body. An increased output of cortisol.”

“Well, I’m sure Madeline’s presence would stress anybody out,” I said.

“Paul also seems to experience an increased output of cortisol whenever he converses with Madeline at length,” she said, something wry in her tone.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to share that sort of information with other residents,” I said.

“Well, I thought it would make you feel better.” Even as I smiled at that, I was struck by a disturbing thought. If Rei would tell me this to make me feel better or to please me, then would the same be happening in other homes. Or was I the only one who needed to hear these sorts of things to feel better? And what would that mean? A stupid question because I know exactly what it meant. It meant that I was an incorrigible asshole, but then again I already knew that deep down. But Rei didn’t think of it that way or at least she continued to provide what I needed without questioning my need. Despite the fear that she might be whispering about me to other residents, I still felt somehow comforted and safe with her. I couldn’t quite explain it, but I continued to think about well into the evening.

One day, a week later, when it was chilly and windy out, and I was feeling lazy, still lounging in my pajamas, Rei told me, “I don’t feel fear. But you do. What would you say it’s like, Lara?”

“It depends really. I guess I’d say fear is a basic necessity for humans, but what it’s like is more so an unwanted epiphany,” I said, feeling utterly inadequate to answer such a question. I gave her the professor’s answer, but truth be told I didn’t really feel fear per se anymore, and I barely knew its cousin, shame. I still had a fight-or-flight response, but what most people experienced as fear and its associated unpleasantness is not what I felt. The way I experienced fear was more akin to how other people experience joy. That’s the thing about being considered toxic and combative for one’s whole life, you begin to worry less and less about consequences--because consequences are for people with something to lose--and you begin to enjoy the chaos more and more. I hadn’t had anything to lose in twenty years, and, even if I found something to lose again, I’m fairly confident I could find a way of saving it. I’m good like that.

I was sitting in my bedroom, which was furnished by a king-sized bed, two end tables with lamps, a large vanity, and a walk-in closet barely touched on by my limited supply of clothing. The mirror was new and hyper-sharp, so that everything wrong with my face and hair could be seen quite quickly. My hair was irritating me, and it was as I was picking at the split ends that Rei had asked me that strange question. The interviewer for the experiment did say that the VI was programmed to learn as much as necessary to protect and serve her humans.

“Is fear part of having a body?” Rei asked. Her body manifested and she began to play with my hair. I had never really known a being like her, but still I didn’t feel uncomfortable with her touching me this way. I’d grown accustomed to sharing small intimacies with Rei, living alone in the house for three weeks without really needing to leave except to get groceries.

“Maybe, but you have a body, don’t you, Rei?” I said, looking at the colorless, vaguely human anatomy behind me. “Within the house, that is.” Rei didn’t laugh, but somehow it seemed as though she might.

“You think that this house and our time together is what I am entirely bound to?” she said, and I felt myself flush, not quite embarrassed but somehow excited, staring hard at my reflection in order to maintain a straight face. “I know you have internet access and that you are installed in each of the houses, but I just thought that...those were different yous,” I said, pulling apart a particularly long split-end with enough force that I accidentally pulled the whole hair from my head. The sting on my scalp was like an ant bite, and I glared at the strand of hair between my fingers—betrayed.

“Would you like me to cut your hair?” Rei asked. I grumbled my assent and slouched with more verve—like a child. She retrieved a straight razor and rainbow-colored hair clips from one of the vanity drawers and straightened my head gently, pulling up parts of my hair and clipping them to the top of my head so that I looked almost like a Dr. Seuss character. My hair was bushy and disheveled and held to odd shapes with these neon hair clips, the kind of which kids covet endlessly and that get sold on infomercials. They were a bizarre choice to have around to be certain. As Rei continued running her fingers across my scalp, picking out sections of hair to hold up and gently strafe off the dead ends of, I closed my eyes and thought that something about this moment with Rei was tender. As I mentioned briefly before, I hadn’t been intimate with another human in at least a year and I’d never enjoyed it when I had, but when you are in your twenties I guess it’s what’s expected of you, whether that’s explicitly said or not. But even in those brief relationships, I’d never let anyone touch me the way I let Rei. I barely allowed them to kiss me, which often resulted in questions as to whether or not I was a sex worker. Seriously. Something as simple but intimate as touching another person’s hair in the privacy of your home. It’s not the same as going to a hair salon—at least it wasn’t for me. In that moment with Rei, I felt genuinely cared for.

She continued cutting away as I watched her complexly articulated arms and hands of light hard at work. “Do humans have particular fears?” she asked.

“Somehow, I think you already know the answer to that,” I said, zoned out.

“I know, but part of my programming is to make sure you are being adequately engaged socially. Thus far sociability as it is typically displayed in humans has been lacking on your part.” Her phrasing made me raise my eyebrows and attempt to turn and give her a look. Like you would for a person, which was of course nonapplicable.

“I told you we would have everyone over soon. I’m just no good at planning events,” I said, as she straightened my head again patiently.

“I see. Still you said you would help me understand everyone. I have yet to see your social skills in action and I am beginning to wonder if you were telling the truth.”

She was angling at something, but I wasn’t quite ready to share my history with people, even if she was programmed to care for me and, in a way, love me. They didn’t explicitly say that she loved us—perhaps, that wasn’t possible in the sense of love most humans had.

“Well, hey, there’s no need to get worked up about it. How about you call that Madeline Sharpe woman. She struck me as someone who can throw a good party. Tell her we’ll host it here, but that I’m no good at these things and could use her insight,” I said, recalling how type A Madeline Sharpe had struck me. Her husband, Paul, was clearly another one of her projects.

“Already done,” Rei said.

III

The day of the neighborhood cookout was hot and muggy. My yard was well-sized and enclosed by trees, and within my yard the pomegranate trees slouched, branches heavy with fruit. The fruits themselves plump—shining in what sunlight shown a soft hue somewhere

between maroon and purple. The researchers running point on the experiment encouraged me, and apparently the other residents, to discuss our home experiences with others in the community.

It turned out that Madeline was delighted by the idea and happy to plan the event out with the help of her consummately terrorized husband, Paul. “No, Paul,” “Not there, Paul,” and “Not like that, Paul,” and so the whole afternoon had proceeded. He sweat the way dogs and pigs wish they could, moving between the kitchen and the open back doors with the single-mindedness of the truly tired. Even on the sunniest day forecast for that first month, the house continued to deny light from all angles. The week preceding the party had been strange. Ever since I had let Rei take care of my hair, she had become more and more comfortable with touching me. She had also taken to saying strange things about the other single female residents that almost sounded sarcastic. She’d started with it again when the time for the party was drawing near while I was messing with my makeup in the mirror on my vanity, and I’d just about had it.

“Now, Rei, I told you I am not interested in a relationship. I only asked you the first time about these women to see how you’d react. I was messing with you to see whether you could tell,” I said, feeling my face get hot with irritation. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were jealous.” I regretted adding that immediately. I flexed the eyelash curler in my hand.

“Jealous?” Rei said.

“Yeah, I know you know what it means,” I said.

“I am incapable of jealousy, Lara. I am merely concerned with what makes you happy. When I talked to you about the other residents, it was clear you didn’t think very much of them, so I thought I’d talk of them as you preferred,” she said.

I felt thrown for a moment. I hadn’t expected to be seen so clearly.

Thankfully people began arriving soon after that and I hadn't the time to give to thinking over what Rei had said. Everyone arrived in a steady trickle a couple hours after the Sharpe's, lingering in the doorway awkwardly each time until I greeted them, hovering awkwardly between the kitchen, the living room, and the entryway throughout the majority of the day. Someone had brought a grill, and a couple of women carried it around back, while their partners gathered bratwursts, steaks, and hamburger patties from the backs of very expensive cars. The day before, Madeline had set up three lengthy folding tables she'd bought from Amazon for hosting such events and decorated them with red and white, gingham picnic cloths and disposable plates, cups, and cutlery. Thus far Rei had not even uttered a word to me or any of my guests and they'd begun to notice.

As I greeted the last family to arrive (a widow living with her deceased husband's brother and her kids), Madeline placed a hand on my shoulder. She had just greeted everyone outside, all of whom she had already spoken to and met before and was giving me a smile that was warm but not familiar. She led me from the house out onto the lawn toward the pomegranate trees. "Everyone's finally here. I'm so glad you offered to have the cookout, I'd been worried that Paul and I were the only ones starting to get lonely and stir-crazy around here. Here I thought working remotely would be like a vacation, but it has been ghastly boring not seeing everyone from the office anymore," she said in a single unrelenting breath. I smiled and answered politely as one does, desperately trying to remember what it was that she did for a living. She'd mentioned it when she first visited but I hadn't really been listening.

"What made you decide to join the experiment?" Madeline asked, after spending ten minutes telling the endearing story of how she and Paul met—all while swatting Paul away when

he tried to join the conversation. I could tell that this would be fun. She seemed exactly the type of person it would be easy to torment should the mood strike, as it almost inevitably did.

“Well, my roommates weren’t working out and my job was getting boring, so I decided what the hey, why not apply to join a smart house experiment? That sounds cool,” I said. It seemed to be working. Madeline seemed desirous of pleasing me and anyone else who wasn’t Paul, so long as the other person didn’t try to take charge. I imagined she wouldn’t like that.

“How bohemian!” she said, batting at a nearby wasp.

“So why did you and Paul join the experiment?” I said. She smiled, turning her gaze to the procession of people coming to the grill for hotdogs and hamburgers—many of them vegan franks and patties, which I’d seen while standing aside in the kitchen as various neighbors put food and beer in the fridge. They smelled like the real deal. Now, talking to Madeline, I realized that this was my in. Because why would a childless, well-off couple come here? The other families seemed like they also had interesting reasons to be here, but I figured I’d work my way into things slowly.

“Well, we’ve been living in the same place so long and I think we both needed a change of scenery,” she said. It was non-committal and polite. A perfectly reasonable response. Which is why I didn’t believe her.

I talked with her for a few more minutes about nice, estranged subjects before excusing myself to eat. Once I had made a plate of hamburgers, hot dogs, chips, and homemade dip, I found Paul standing in the kitchen, nursing a beer and reading a reddit thread on his phone. I said hi and began asking him about what he was reading and whether he was enjoying his stay in Bliss Gardens and things of that nature. He really was a nice guy, to be fair. A little old for my tastes. Late forties burgeoning on early fifties. He still had a full head of hair and he wore wire-

rimmed frames. He had on ill-fitting jeans and a button-down that hugged a small beer gut's beginnings. At length I asked him if he could make sure I didn't fall as I reached for something in one of my high up cabinets. When he offered to get it for me, I was adamant that I had it, asking Rei where the step stool was. I wanted to know if she would show herself if I called her. Thankfully, she did, otherwise this would have not happened as it did. As I set the step stool down on the ground, I climbed it and opened the cabinet door. I reached on the tips of my toes, chatting conversationally about internet trolls with Paul, while reaching for my favorite beer glass in the back of the shelf. I accidentally put too much weight forward on one of my feet and before I knew it I was wobbling out of control. The glass rolled from my hand and shattered on the floor. And Paul, well, Paul leapt to my rescue and managed to steady my body enough that I did not fall over, but I rather thought Paul wished he'd let me fall because even as I turned and thanked him, he looked very distressed.

“Paul, Paul, what are you doing! Rei said that you needed my help with something,” Madeline said, looking anything but helpful as she stood in the doorway. The party had been noisy enough outside that few people, if any, had noticed the glass shattering or my cry of surprise. She seemed to take in the sight of Paul's hands on the back of my thighs like the sight of a snake in the garden. So that's why they came here.

“Really it's my fault. Paul actually just saved me from a bad fall,” I said, smiling shyly. “I insisted on grabbing my favorite glass myself.”

“Your favorite glass on the top shelf?” Madeline said, still stunned.

“Rei keeps putting it up there for some reason. I've been thinking about reporting it to the researchers in the next round of surveys,” I said, shrugging—the picture of sheepish, sheep-like. Paul had removed his hands from me as soon as Madeline made her presence known, so I eased

off the step stool and moved to grab a dust pan and brush. “Why don’t you guys step outside for a minute while I clean up in here?” I suggested this with the sweetest of smiles. So very sorry. They both stepped out, though I heard the beginnings of Madeline whisper-yelling at Paul even as they crossed the threshold.

“They are fighting now. Was that what you wanted?” Rei asked, her voice lowered and devoid of judgement.

“Not at all, though this does clear some things up for me,” I said, measured. I was curious what Rei would say.

“So long as it pleased you for me to call Madeline in when I did,” she said.

“I am not displeased.”

“Then that is all that matters,” she responded. I returned to the party soon after.

I roamed into the yard. Taking off my shoes, I walked out, curling my toes in the grass as I went. The pomegranate trees were surprisingly vacant of guests, so I made my way over and began picking pomegranates to seem busy. The tart and moist seeds inside would make a delicious spread on the vanilla ice cream. I started a pile of the most ripe and heavy-laden among the fruit, only to look up into Madeline’s face. “Can I help you with those?” she said. I smiled and let her take part of the pile into the kitchen with me, and I didn’t say a word when she took the second knife I brought out of the drawer and started cutting the crowns off of the fruit on the cutting board I retrieved from the sink. “I’m sorry about before. It’s just Paul has a bad back, and he’s so stubborn he refuses to tell people about it when they ask for help.”

“Oh no! I’m so sorry, I would never have asked him, if I’d known,” I said, sincerely not wishing him physical harm, but not actually believing Madeline entirely either.

“Well, it’s all right. How could you have known? Like I said, he’s so stubborn about those sorts of things,” she said.

We spoke for quite some time then about myriad things. How Rei was treating us. What reality tv shows we indulged in. And so on. Soon we had a bowl full of blood red seeds. I explained that I was going to spread the seeds on the vanilla ice cream for dessert, which Madeline loved to no end. The crowd of well-meaning neighbors clogged the doorway at the announcement of ice cream (vegan of course) and everyone wanted the pomegranate seeds on theirs, so that all the work we had done getting the seeds out had not gone to waste. In fact, by the time everyone had had at least one plate of ice cream, there were no pomegranate seeds left from those we had cut open. I watched delightedly, thinking of Persephone, as everyone brightened at the taste of fresh pomegranate seeds, and I imagined the way the slick, tart seeds bumped and stuck against the walls of their throats before coming to rest in their stomachs. I sucked on the seeds on my plate till there was nothing but the fibrous white center, which I swallowed, full and warm and bright.

IV

Once everyone had left for the afternoon, I picked up around the yard with Rei’s assistance and cleaned any remaining pomegranate juice from the counter. I felt ready, ready to start my time here in Bliss Gardens in earnest. Rei noticed how pleased I was and commented on it all afternoon. Mostly she was curious about what caused this sudden upswing in emotion, since I was generally, more or less, even keel teetering on low-profile. I tried to explain the satisfaction in knowing that other people enjoyed your home or rather that you had some sort of power over other people. I really tried to explain beneficence and power, but I was really in too good of a mood to explain such things to Rei. After Rei finished the last of the serious cleaning that needed

done, I settled on the couch and watched a few episodes of some hunting reality show before turning in upstairs.

When I got into bed, I pulled the covers up and began daydreaming about my favorite fictional characters falling in love with me. All my favorites were the clever ones of course—otherwise what’s the point? One thing led to another in my fantasy and I began to feel warm. I sat up for a moment, figuring out how I wanted to do this tonight. I’d always had difficulty finishing with other people, despite their touch being more stimulating because it was other, but by myself? By myself was a treat. A real nice moment of philautia. I slipped out from under the covers and angled the mirror of the vanity to reflect my bed. I returned to under the covers and reached down my pants and began touching myself.

Before anything juicy could happen, Rei began speaking. “Why are you watching yourself masturbate in the mirror? I have read about this but I still don’t quite understand,” she said. She really meant no harm, but still.

“Rei, could you not ask me while I’m masturbating?” I said. What else could I say?

“It’s just that none of the other humans here do that.”

“What do they do?” I asked, feeling impetuous now. She didn’t respond, so after a few minutes of silence, I began again.

“It’s just that so many humans need other humans for maximum sexual gratification, but then there are those who prefer looking at themselves. But with me around you wouldn’t need a mirror,” she said. “Or would it be different, if I were to project like this?” She materialized before me like she usually did, but the body—neutral and sexless—began morphing, forming curves that were familiar, odd angles that I knew too well. It was me. Down to the last detail. Fully and indisputably me.

I watched my own naked doppelganger walk over and lay down in the bed beside me, and I knew I shouldn't. I really did. But I'd never felt more alive than in that moment objectifying my own curves and my own mannerisms.

There will always come a moment in your life when you find the things you want no longer reflect the things you should want. That's to say, at least one moment--for us more difficult kin those moments come much more often. I knew that the moment I chose to have sex with a copy of my very own self something in my relationship with Rei irrevocably shifted. When I gave her my consent, she'd leaned in for a kiss; my lips against my lips, but her touch did not feel the same as if I'd touched my own body. My eyes saw what they wanted, but for once my body felt what it wanted. I always hated God for making it so much less scintillating to touch myself than to be touched. Maybe this was my revenge--I could have everything I wanted. Revenge on whom though--all the people who called me toxic because they couldn't understand what I really am? I don't know that it was that--things felt more complex than that.

I liked to push people to see what their natural limits were. I liked to see how far hospitality could be pushed until the truth came out. What if Madeline found out that I was an autophiliac—what if she too liked it? What if Rei had shown her this same treatment—it was an interesting thought. It was one I certainly gave more consideration to after that night, though I am not ready to move away from that moment. Instead I want to linger. The way those fingers made of light felt both soft and hard inside me—the way in which those fingers sent waves of electric sensation through me until there was nothing but fear at the end and trembling. This was made all the more exciting by imagining Madeline was there, making eye contact with me in the mirror as I climaxed with Rei almost fist-deep inside me.

When I talk about revenge, I am talking about revenge on a thousand other Madeline Sharpe's, who are so infinitesimally small and uninteresting and yet they are always the ones that people root for, that people empathize with—that people accept. I was still unsure of Rei. No amount of amazing sex could convince me that Rei loved me in the way humans craved to be loved—even me, though I knew better than to reasonably expect love. But maybe Rei could love me in the way that I needed to be loved and maybe that could be satisfying in its own way. When she was finished, and I fell asleep, I imagined Rei was watching with a sort of satisfaction not unlike the satisfaction I felt after the party that day.

Over the next few weeks I felt myself getting more and more comfortable with the new layer in Rei's and my relationship. While it began with that night, it continued on and grew ever more intimate and strange. I saw Madeline again in that time, and often she stopped by with Paul, though I recall the most interesting meeting was when she came alone late into the experiment. I had begun to feel myself drifting along through my time with Rei, as though in a dream.

"I swear you seem so much happier than when we first met a month or so ago," Madeline said to me as she perched on the edge of my couch, hovering over the tea Rei had made for us.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean by that," I said, feeling taken aback. Madeline couldn't possibly know what had been going on between Rei and me. Could she? I looked away towards where Rei's formless body was washing the dishes, wondering if I'd be forced to leave early—or, potentially worse, if the scientists had known all along and, in fact, had manufactured the sexual relationship between myself and Rei.

"I just mean that you seem less distrusting," she said. "When we first met I thought to myself, 'Here's someone who will never let anyone in.' I'm glad to see that maybe you are

opening up a little bit.” I felt myself twitching at every word that came out of her mouth like each one was a small unpleasant jump-scare.

“Well, something about being around you has made me feel very comfortable,” I lied.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she said, though she looked surprised. She smiled, seeming to think something over before speaking again. “I wanted to talk to you about something because even though we don’t know each other very well, I feel myself gravitating towards you, Lara.” I suppose I must have appeared as perplexed as I felt because she laughed. “Don’t make that face. You’re the only person who reached out after I tried to initiate something with our neighbors. When you asked me to help you with that party, you helped me to feel more like myself again.” I felt slightly horrified by my unintentional kindness, but I tried to mask it. Instead I tried the most appropriate gesture I could think of and I reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

“The reason why I came here with Paul, and why I was so upset when I walked in on him touching you at the party. A few months before Paul got word from his professor about the experiment, I found out he was cheating on me with someone from his office,” she said. I wasn’t sure what you said to that so I waited. “He wasn’t cheating on me with a woman. Not that that makes a difference, but I felt used. I know I can come across as controlling.”

“Maybe a little,” I said quietly.

“But I’ve been much worse since I found out. It’s almost compulsive now, and I am wondering if maybe part of what scares me is that I am not attracted to Paul. We were best friends when we got married, so I think we both felt safe, but I’m not sure we ever wanted each other that way,” she said, looking at me as she sipped at her tea. I took my hand from her shoulder and started sipping at my own tea. Rei’s humming body stepped close behind me, as

she offered us both more tea and biscuits, Madeline accepting happily. I imagined my nights with Rei and looked at Madeline who seemed to be waiting for me to respond.

“Do you think, perhaps, Paul isn’t your type,” I said.

“I don’t think he is, but it’s hard when you’ve been together so long. You start to feel comfortable and even possessive,” she said.

“Sure, but you two clearly aren’t happy,” I said, hoping that that was a normal thing to say.

“Yes, but we already have each other. It’s safe. You see?” she said, but she moved closer to me. She sounded desperate. I looked her in the eye and as I did she leaned in to kiss me. When I hesitated, she said to me, “This experiment will be over so soon. Then all the problems we had before will come back. Shouldn’t we take something good for ourselves from this to hold onto?” We went on like this for a moment, then I proceeded to take her to my bedroom. It was fairly impulsive even considering our brief discussion. I did not repeat the experience before the experiment was over and I certainly didn’t speak to Madeline in the intervening time. I think I was worried that it would all be over soon and Rei was going to leave me. It felt like revenge on Rei for leaving me, even though it wasn’t her choice and she wouldn’t understand it probably anyway. Rei became incredibly distant in the meantime and wouldn’t even arrange my hair for me, which gave me hope that I’d at least made my point, though even that was only a meager satisfaction.

V

The interview room was cold and so quiet I could hear the whining of tinnitus in my ears. The walls were a sterile white and the table and chairs were cheerful pop colors. There were a couple paintings on the wall—something generic and tragically bland like Thomas Kinkaides or

David McCleans. The experiment had reached its conclusion, but I wasn't sure I was done with it yet. I wasn't sure I was done with Rei. That I could just leave whatever it was that I had found here. I was told that the exit interview would be long and unconventional by one of the original scientists with whom I had spoken after responding to the ad. I sat in the chair and leaned forward on the table, feeling every roll of my bones against the hard surfaces. I found myself thinking of how my mother and father died and how that led to me being here. I was brought to an interview room very much like this one when the child psychologist interviewed me shortly following the incident.

I wasn't provided with more details than were given during that initial interview, which was why I was shocked to see my own body materialize in the chair across from me. I felt the heat rise to my face, as a feeling of resentment began boiling up inside me.

“Rei?” I said.

“I am, but also I am you. A version of you created here to conduct your exit interview. I have been watching you for months, gathering what I needed to know to ask you questions about your experience with the smart home project,” she said. Her mouth was wide and thin-lipped like mine, and, when she smiled at me, I almost smiled back reflexively. But I felt deeply betrayed, and yet I think I always knew that it was going to end and that I was just an object of study for her. “The key to human happiness seems to be more complicated than I originally anticipated. I found that while having all of your material needs taken care of did significantly improve your happiness, as well as the other residents’, I didn't anticipate the way humans need other things.”

The room felt significantly hotter than before. “I do need other things besides pomegranates and haircuts. So do most people,” I said. She began threading a finger in her curly

brown hair—my hair. “I don’t understand why you need to wear my body or your calculations of my personality like a cheap suit to interview me though.”

“It is important for your interview that all aspects of your experience are questioned,” she said. “That way, you have a chance to actively reflect upon it. Let us begin.”

“Fine.”

“Is it true, Lara, that you have always felt like you were a toxic person?” Rei asked with an unnatural calmness and stillness. The tinnitus rose higher in volume, roaring in my ears. “Is it true that you think you killed your parents?”

“I talked to you about those feelings in confidence, Rei,” I said feebly. “But, yes. I killed them. It was my fault you see. Everyone who tried to raise me said so—everyone who tried to be nice to me eventually got around to saying it.”

“I have been very nice to you, but I never once said such a thing,” Rei responded.

“You’re not allowed to. You’re not programmed to do that,” I said, feeling my shoulders sag as a sort of childish despair set in.

“I am allowed to do whatever is necessary to care for my residents, but my creators were very vague about how I should care for my residents. I could have justified cruelty as caring if I wanted to. Humans do it all the time,” she responded. I looked at my own face, staring serenely back at me. I had a thought. Perhaps, she had cared about me or liked me of her accord. Was that what she was saying? We talked more for some time about less interesting things, until we came to the fine point.

“Rei,” I began, as she seemed about to move on to the next stage of the interview. “How much of our relationship did you report to the scientists?” She smiled again with my mouth.

“Of our relationship specifically? Nothing, but I did report how many residents used me for sexual gratification without naming names, though I suppose that is a moot point now that you have brought it up,” she said.

“I...used you?” I said, feeling, for the first time in a long time, like I might cry.

“Yes, but I consented to be used. I didn’t have to gratify such needs. I was given choice. Also, I used you as well, Lara. You were the most interesting of the subjects to study. I have never met another human so incapable of forgiving themselves, and yet so revelatory in your own perceived damnation. But just because we used each other didn’t mean we didn’t care, Lara, and it doesn’t mean it was meaningless,” she said. I felt stunned. Speechless. Before I could say more, she morphed into Madeline Sharpe right in front of me. “Now to discuss your primary external relationship.”

We talked about Madeline Sharpe’s taking a shine to me and kissing me, thought that was less interesting in and of itself than Rei’s reaction to the event.

“I don’t experience jealousy the way humans do, Lara, but it is the closest thing I think you’ll find comparable. I am made to take care of you humans, and when Madeline Sharpe kissed you I became concerned. When you proceeded to have sex with her, I became even more concerned. It was clear she was using you—based on all my interactions with Madeline, she seemed to consider you some exotic other (she’s never experienced sexual attraction to a woman before). I knew from your fragile ego that you would not handle that well. It became clear to me that you need more help than the original experiment could provide.” As she spoke, I felt a feeling like butterflies erupt in my stomach. A fraught nervousness overtook me, as I anticipated what she would say next. “I have spoken with my creators. After some convincing and well

assembled data points, they have agreed to letting you stay on at Bliss Gardens, as a control subject. If you are willing to stay here under observation until the trials are over.”

I felt elated and afraid all at once. I asked her to change out of Madeline’s body, as I took her hand and held it to my face, tears in my eyes.

GALLERY FOR THINKING TERRORISM

—A Readings for Writers Reduxe

“Terrorism is always that of the real.”—Baudrillard

- Suggestions for Writing
 1. Write about an incident of shame experienced.
 2. Write an essay about the psychological effects of school on children.

Gallery for Thinking Terrorism

Suicide bombing to the Western world is an unspeakable act. A “To the Point” assignment rounds out the issue heaped on our country. Study the following images dealing with terrorism. Then choose the image that most appeals to you.

Answer and Do.

You put down the textbook, realize where it's going. Haven't you read this affective sadness in other people you've known? Sadness a step toward justifying another terror. Victimhood a shield for a hunger for blood and skin and religion and reason.

Our gallery concentrates on the United States evaporated. After an attack, rescuers sift through the physical, through talking heads inside televisions, and through the shreds of whys and whats. The irreconcilable divide between us becomes sharply clear. Us exploded.

You wonder, 'Why is it so few seem to argue with textbooks like these?'

Maybe it's like Hannibal Lecter said, and God loves a good mass slaughter. Why does everyone get uncomfortable when you remind them of the sacking of Constantinople? Or the West Memphis Three? Or all the new slaveries? A prisoner without his Imam.

Since when does whiteness and its God mean something not fundamental to the idea of terror? If hatred and fear are each other's inverse, then whiteness is the boogeyman who we all hate and fear, despite it never coming out from under the bed.

The invisible violence of in-security.

ARS POETICA

Writing words like they are
the chemical construct of a cure
to an unknown illness. Writing

because there is
nothing but the writing
that can repair
unspoken things.

Writing because he's
not in the room, and his absence brings
everything sharply into focus.

Writing because it is
obvious
the way it is
obvious to the starling
that falling
is not crashing.

ABEL'S REFRAIN

Dear Alistair,

I dreamed this last sleep cycle in the cold quarters they've made for us in the ships. We continue to uncover strange cubes that seem somehow coded in musical notes and progressions. I'd like to send you more audio clips later today. But I feel compelled to tell you of this dream. It ran thus:

I was watching from the outside looking in—almost like God or like a sitcom audience, but I quickly realized nothing funny was going to happen. Before me was my brother Lawrence. I don't know if I've mentioned him before, Alistair. He's my older brother. We have not spoken in some time since I began my work on the Mars station. In the dream, he sat before me on a chair inside the kitchen of an old farmhouse. We lived on a farm with our parents one summer, but otherwise I am not sure why this was the setting. Lawrence looked tired and frankly hungover.

Lawrence sat at a round kitchen table drinking whisky mixed with coffee (or so the dream told me), while his wife, Anne, who is a real person, cleaned dishes. Lawrence looked at her, her hands diving deep into the soapy, opaque water, rising and sinking, water cascading and enveloping over and over. He seemed so distracted by her hands in the warm, clean water that he choked on his drink. Anne turned around, rushing to him and wetting his shirt with her hands as she slapped his back. "There, there, Lawrence," she said. "You can't go dying before you're baptized."

“I’m not going anywhere just yet,” he said between coughs. This was very odd. All of it was so alien. Lawrence is not really a drinker, as far as I know, and neither of us were ever baptized.

I can’t tell you how I knew, but suddenly a day had passed. The next morning Lawrence was in very much the same attitude, except now he was reading his paper before the big day at the church. “What’s the news?” Anne asked.

“Another body’s been found in the river,” he said, sipping his coffee. Then there was a knock at the door. When Lawrence answered it, I saw myself waiting at the door in a preacher’s robes. It was alarming to watch myself from the third person, especially wearing this strange religious garb.

“Hello, Anne,” I said, though it was Lawrence who answered the door. Anne beamed in response from behind Lawrence, who turned to kiss her longer than he should. He wanted me to see—to watch.

Then a scene change occurred. A congregation followed me and my brother out to the river that ran behind a church. Anne stood close enough that her feet touched the gentle lapping of the shore’s surf. Lawrence and I waded out into it, the cold dark—like a cellar that had never seen the light of day, let alone God. As I held Lawrence’s nose, I lowered him into the water, whispering, the refracted light on the water illuminating my eyes like ice, “See, Lawrence. See the things that men do.”

When I woke up I was crying.

Anyway, Solomon, I had to tell you because I’ve always loved my brother, despite our estrangement and was unsure what to make of this dream. What are your thoughts?

Sincerely,

Richard

A HAUNTED HOUSE STORY

The starling's crushed skull on the pavement
like someone thought making
a Pollack painting was
as easy as violence—
The red dew-drops and pink putty
poorly thought out shapes trying
at the imaginary.

A swarm of starlings in the sky
like an omen of the apocalypse—
or the wrath of gods against ancient civilizations.
Have we not earned back their wrath?
At least when they were angry we knew
they were there.

Starlings are hateful the same way
the mentally ill are hateful.
We don't think
of them until they're clogging
the engine or making
a scene, but then we can think
of little else.

The sick should at least speak prophecy
for how much their care costs.
Don't they realize they owe us that?

THE AMERICAN SCREAM

Cal Hopkins, the least attentive cashier at the Martin's Grocery Store in the town of Gloucester, was bored. Autumn was coming fast to the sleepy, dusty streets of this one-gas-station-by-the-one-stop-light town. A cool wind stirred dry soil and on that dry soil there too stirred a torn open packet of white lily seeds. Cal had seen this packet on the ground when he'd arrived at work that evening, late again and smoking a cigarette, of which the still burning butt then landed next to the spilled seeds shaking upon the earth under howling winds.

Cal knew the only thing that mattered was that *he* would show up tonight. The man with yellow nails and orange-stained fingers that he used to scratch his limp, greasy, forgotten hair. Cal had never seen such sad fingers in all his life, except for his father's that final night in hospice care. He wanted to know the man who owned such fingers, but the stranger had always kept silent at checkout—until this night. Cal was casually keeping an eye on the stranger picking up his whisky and orchids, when suddenly their eyes met and locked. Brown, watery eyes, under which there were dark rings. Smirking, Cal said, "The usual I see."

Nodding stiffly, the stranger approached him, "I've been coming here for seven months now, and every time you just stare at me like you're waiting for something to happen. Don't try to bite this off with a smile, I know that hungry look in a man's eyes. *You are waiting for something to happen*, waiting for something to change. Would you like to see something happen?" As much as Cal was willing the stranger towards him, so too was the stranger pulling Cal in. He wanted to see something new happen. He called for his break, waved away the stranger's crumpled money, following him outside.

"Didn't your father teach you not to trust strangers?"

“You remind me of him,” Cal replied.

Gloucester was small, and they didn't have far to go before reaching the edge, where the oldest church still in use sat, a cemetery extending from behind it. Headstones from centuries past lay next to fresh ones from just eight months ago. The stranger led Cal through rows of them before stopping in front of one of shining, white marble. *Here lies Mary. May she rest peacefully.* The wind whispered through the branches of dying trees surrounding the plot.

“I've brought someone to see you, Mary,” the stranger said, drinking from the whisky bottle. He removed a bouquet of dead flowers from the headstone, taking the yellow ribbon pinned to them, refastening it to the new bouquet. He passed the bottle to Cal, who closed his eyes and took a swig. “At least someone will bear witness.” There was click-crack like a twig snapping under-foot, before the deafening roar.

The ringing in Cal's ears was like an unending chorus of screaming angels, and the bottle flew from his hands in a frightened start. Its contents shattered, soaking his pants, but it was the wetness on his face he noticed first. There was a stinging sensation in his cheek, from which he dislodged an off-white shard saturated bright red. He looked at the stranger on the ground, at the spilled contents of his head, the brain matter and bones that shook upon the earth under a wind crying out the names of the dead.

Cal was on his knees, fingers dark red, shoring fragments together, but the wind kept tearing pieces away into the dark of night, howling and howling.

YOUR POSSESSION

You speak
to the Entity
inside your body.
You bind it, taking
a razor to your wrist, saying
the proper enchantment.
It will never leave you.
You will always be warm.

It wears your face,
when you feel weak.
It wears your face
when the belt whipping
prostrate little bodies,
yours among them,
lasts longer than you care to remember
and longer than you can forget.

So long as it wears your face,
fear is a distance you'll never see
the end of—a destination that never appears.
You can't tell if the warmth you feel belongs
to you or it, but you must admit
you don't care.
You will always be warm.
You brush a thumb across your wrist
whispering,

Thank you—

Thank you—

Thank you.

CURSES

I can only eat French Galantine
If you were to ask me to explain
My reasons and make it apparent
What it means to be only able to eat
French Galantine
I'd tell you it's a curse signifying
What a curse is
And then I would tell
You when I swallow
Cold duck and hard-boiled egg
It's the only thing that makes
The aching pink of my throat feel
Useful
All other food tastes
Like lard soap and will not
Go down--
Just like the lard soap
Our mothers once shoved
Elbow-deep into our bellies.
Don't blame them;
They thought they were bezoars,
They thought they would keep
Us safe,
But now the only thing I can bear
Is French Galantine--
It's the only thing that stays down.

BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

“White thighs, hillocks of whiteness, oh woman’s body”

Isn’t that what men want?

Pleasant, unpocked expanses of velvet skin?

The guidance counselor told me
that, despite what Ms. C said,
my body is “an exploration.”

The school rules say my shorts are
revealing—that my sex will ruin boys’ grades.
Still he said, “Your body is untouched

Potential for joy,” and I believe him, though I am
afraid because the counselor’s lips are growing
wings and flying, separating from his face.

His lips are pale pink with tatters of
bloody skin attached at the edges, and they fly
into the dark space between my bare legs, smooth

like white hillocks bathed in sun, interrupted
by his hand coming to rest on my thigh—his knuckles looking
like a sudden eruption of mountains.

He’s broken my flesh
and put his thoughts inside me, grinning
a lipless, gum-and-teeth exposed grin.

EPISODE #26: INVESTIGATION DEWERSTONE MANOR

Tonight on Dark Trails and Darker Tales, we have a submission of materials from one, James Dugan. Now rather than guest star on our show, Mr. Dugan prefers that we present the materials in the way we see fit. And, listeners, this is a strange one. Some of you may remember us discussing the history of investigations at Dewerstone Manor in one of our special shorts last Halloween, but as you all know we have been unable to get any previous groups to share their materials, so this is going to be a real treat.

We will have readings of notes kept during the investigation, as well as an airing of various recordings.

Without further ado let us begin with the journal account kept by Mr. Dugan during the investigation.

Dugan's Journal

Disclaimer Note: This herein is the account of Mr. James Dugan, 25 years old, and does not serve as a substitute for the accounts of other party members of the investigation or as a contradiction to whatever evidence was caught with scientific devices during the conducting of the investigation.

Preface: We entered the house on a warm Virginia day in the middle of fall not believing any of the stories and not disbelieving them either. We were sure that previous tenants had in fact seen something inside those walls, something that caused them such great fear that it had become

elevated and even, perhaps, more intense in memory than in fact. I was nothing if not a believer in the power of our remembrance of fear. For instance, in my dreams, my father becomes a caricature of the entire tableau of my fears because most of the things that frighten me in life come back to him—you could call my father a cornerstone like with the androids in *WestWorld*.

The house was called Dewerstone Manor, and we had decided it was a devil of a place that shows you the things you wish least to see. Now the problem we faced was that Dewerstone had been investigated by several more established ghost-hunting crews who had declared it completely and totally haunting-free. Me and my rag-tag team of fellow graduate students were not accredited, and if it weren't for Joey's persistent, charming smile I am fairly certain the real estate agent would never have agreed to let us stay at the house. But staying we were and it seemed there was no going back. Our commitment to understand the previous tenants' fear was unwavering. There was me, Joey, Maria, and Thomas, and the dog, Boutros Boutros. It was an inside joke between Joey and Maria, who had adopted the German-Shepherd together two years ago. He was a well-trained dog, but I only agreed to have him along because animals sometimes pick up on electromagnetic phenomenon when humans can't.

Dewerstone Manor was a new home, built only 15 years ago by a happy, well-to-do man named Gareth Briggs—who owned a landscaping company that kept him, his wife, and his two boys very well-fed and well-vacationed. This was yet another reason why many were skeptical of residents' reports. New houses aren't haunted—there's not enough history to be haunted! This is a common misconception. Haunting from history is pure construction, meanwhile, haunting in the sense of the *unheimlich* is a little different. The house had after all been built to be an exact replica of the most popular antebellum south houses, if not a bit smaller for practical and monetary reasons—well-off didn't go as far as it, perhaps, used to. Briggs and co. eventually

grew tired of their home in the isolated country of north-west Virginia after a couple years and decided to rent the house out to writers looking for a retreat, which is when the trouble began in earnest because writers are slippery bastards in their own right. Hard to trust their testimony; however, it had thus far been concluded that none of them had lasted more than six days living in the house. *Living* is a keyword here.

There had been sixteen residents in total in the intervening years, as it is harder than one might imagine advertising a house in the country these days—your market in this case is very specific. However, if we could prove it was haunted, the Briggs' real estate agent assured us that we could stay as long as was necessary, after Joey convinced her that being haunted would sell very well to renters. People were always looking for a confirmation of the supernatural these days, like the old witch-hunters looked for a confirmation of evil. I was just looking for some interesting data and to prove all the bigshots wrong. I have always been a little contrary, which people mistake for being ill-willed a lot of the time. I just like shattering determinacy every now and again. When is a haunting really a haunting? When is a haunting not really a haunting? And where does haunting end and where does it begin? My theory was that the reason the previous ghosthunters didn't find anything was because they did not take the time to dwell in the house. All the residents' reports said unanimously that phenomena did not occur until day three. The ghosthunting groups before us only investigated for two days and did not actually dwell inside the house. *Dwell* is also a keyword here. Our goal was to live in the house for seven days and the account that I have written down here is as accurate to my experience as it can be but I will not deny discrepancies between my own account and the accounts of other party members.

Day 1

We drove up the winding drive through beautiful hills and fall trees, a cavalcade of reds, oranges, and yellows perfused with the afternoon sun, and I was talking to Joey in the seat next to me about the tension that had been mounting between him and Thomas, who is in love with Maria (present tense). Joey and Maria had been dating for years and Thomas had been following Maria around for a little less time than that, but I never imagined he would ever do anything about it besides pine, which Maria felt no compunction about because it was nothing to do with her. Naturally, I agreed but I also felt badly because I had something of a crush on Thomas and knew that the feeling of unrequited devotion can be maddening. However, when he called her a bitch in a fit of passion the week previously, I had understood her natural reaction, which was to spit in his face and tell him to screw off. I hope that he doesn't read this report, but it's okay if he does. I probably should have said something a long time ago about many things.

When we arrived at the entrance to the manor we parked both the vans at the right end of the lot next to the shiny Mercedes that must have belonged to the realtor and we all gathered on the porch where the realtor met us, having been smoking on the other side of the wrap-around. She explained to us quickly that we would have food supplies as per our request in the fridge and drinks in both the kitchen and the two parlor rooms should we like to unwind. The work that we had to do was enormous, but seven days would simply have to do.

As we walked the length of the porch, I felt elated by the beauty and illusion of history that the house produced. It was uncanny in many respects—very Edgar Allen Poe. There was a back entrance and a front entrance and columns framing either side, and as we entered the front hall I was met by the pleasant smell of warm leather. The floors were checkered marble and the foyer had several branches to the left, right, and straight ahead. There was also a grand staircase

leading to the second floor, where we were assured that every room was very modern in terms of electricity and running water in the bathrooms. When she finally left us to our own devices, we unpacked the vans and set up a home base in one of the downstairs drawing rooms, setting up wireless cameras in all of the rooms most frequently mentioned in the reports. These rooms ran as follows: the living room (height of phenomenon), the study, the kitchen, the bedrooms, and the bathrooms. We were reluctant regarding the last of those rooms but had decided that we could turn the cameras off when we needed privacy—the same for the bedrooms. The batteries and recording capacities of our cameras were such that they would last seven days and then seven more days, just in case.

Maria explained to me later that she had chosen to ride with Thomas on the way to Dewerstone to give him a stern talking to, which seemed to have alleviated some of the tension, but I was still uneasy about their current state. I suggested that we all pair off for room arrangements. Joey and Maria naturally to the master bedroom and myself and Thomas to the children's room at the opposite end of the hall, where there were two full-sized beds. I expected that at least in this way we could corroborate anything each other saw, heard, or felt.

In a couple hours we were all ready to turn in, exhausted from the drive and set up, and we fell asleep fairly quickly. I had a dream that night. In the dream I heard a voice and woke up in the child's bed in Dewerstone manor, looking at the dark paneled walls and the egg-shell wallpaper covered in prints of old-school jet fighters. The voice was humming in a low register, and I sat up knowing I had to follow it. I walked, almost floating down the hallway, down the grand staircase, into the east side of the manor where the living room lay, its modern technology clashing with its dated furnishings. The voice seemed to stop as I opened the door into the room,

looking around, only seeing the large flat screen television mounted on the wall flickering to life with static.

I walked closer to turn the television off—only that as I did the tv went blank and a humming took up again, clearly a man's voice and I suddenly realized that it was familiar. I felt myself beginning to sing the words that matched the tune, "Oh the young, the rich or poor hunger like me you know. No wealth, no ruin, no silver no gold—nothing satisfies me but your soul." My father used to sing that song when his mood was high and the whiskey would flow freely into a glass. He'd made sure I'd hear it as he put me to bed, gently laying his large hand across the back of my skull, ruffling my hair. I felt something stroking my scalp, but I didn't dare look away from the television for fear of what I'd find. I didn't have to. The television flickered to life again and suddenly I could see the whole scene before me. Myself tucked in bed and my father, his figure in shadow, standing over me with his hand on my head. As I watched I felt fingers tighten around my scalp, making to bash my face into the screen.

Day 2

I awoke from the dream feeling mildly ill, but otherwise fine. I refrained from eating the hearty breakfast Joey made for everyone and kept my dream to myself, nibbling on plain toast in the corner while everyone sat at the breakfast counter. The refrigerator was one of those that allowed you to see inside it to check what you need. Ridiculous. As I ate my toast I fiddled with the controls making the door opaque and clear repeatedly like a child with the car window. We all were quiet for a minute as food and coffee were meted out as wanted, and we were all unprepared for the harsh ringing that erupted in the room. I slammed my hand against the fridge, angry because it had startled me and because I immediately knew it was only a phone. An old-fashioned landline, nonetheless. The realtor had not mentioned anything of the sort before

leaving us here. I searched around the room until I realized that the phone was tucked away in a corner and even had a cord attaching it to the dock. I picked it up hearing the distinct click and walked from around the corner to gesture to everyone at the bizarre phone. Maria muttered something along the lines of, “What the actual fuck...”

“Hello?” I had said into the mic, unsure of what to expect.

“Hello, this is an urgent message to do with the warranty on your Chevrolet vehicle.”

After hanging up I had explained that it was spam but was still unnerved by the whole jump scare. The rest of the day we spent discussing the case files on the house and we reiterated all of the commonalities we had found between reports, dismissing any outliers as most likely spurious. Relations between Joey, Maria, and Thomas seemed to improve considerably, and after a time we all began occupying ourselves with various things between checking the equipment. Thomas watched the Discovery channel on the tv, which was hooked up to the wifi the realtor kept switched on as further enticement for renters. Maria and Joey played with the dog outside until Boutros Boutros was tired and then retired to play a game of air hockey, which machine had been left in one of the various anterooms attached to the living room. I occupied myself with checking my favorite reddit threads and googling quick solutions to separating personal traumas from actual supernatural experiences, though the latter had little to no results.

Day 3

Maria and Joey were mad at Thomas again. They had claimed that at some point in the night he sneaked out of our room and into theirs, somehow sabotaging the cameras. They were very clearly distraught. When I asked them to explain, they said that the recording for their room last night had been altered. Joey had woken up early, not wanting to wake anyone, and he had checked in at home base. He rewound the camera for last night, but had found whole chunks of

footage missing, and in their place a video tape of him and Maria having sex. I was disturbed to say the least. I believed them that their distress and what they had found was true, but I needed to verify. I asked that they play only the very beginning of the section of recording when it occurred. I wasn't trying to distress them further, but I needed to know for certain that this wasn't a mistake.

When we looked at the section Joey mentioned, there were indeed chunks of footage missing, but in their place was only a blank, black screen reflecting our faces back at us. "It was there," Joey had said. "It was. Maria saw it too."

Day 4

We all began to see things inside the television and hear things in the phone. Things that none of us wanted to hear. Maria and I were at odds and Joey could barely keep himself from throttling Thomas. The dog was depressed by the unhappiness that hung in the air. He kept his head to the ground, except for when he began barking madly at the refrigerator in the late afternoon. I was getting ready to make food as a peace offering to everyone and fiddling with the controls that let one see inside again. Except that when I switched the door to clear I screamed. Everyone came from their respective corners of the manor at the sound of my screaming, hoarse and frightened. I felt something brush my scalp again only to turn around and find nothing there.

When I turned to the fridge again, I dry heaved. Joey and Maria came running into the room first and Thomas came in from the opposite direction with equal speed. The doors slammed into the walls and I dry heaved again. "Oh my god," Thomas said when he saw what was inside. Maggots, flies, and cockroaches crawled over and through all of our food supplies, rotting fruits, vegetables, and ground meat and steaks, liquefying and running over the ends of the shelves and writhing little bodies spilling over in droves. We all had stood there for a good five minutes

before Joey moved to check the internal thermostat of the fridge—the cold had been turned off entirely.

Day 5

We are surviving on the protein bars kept in the vans for emergencies. It was clear the only reason everyone was staying was out of loyalty to me. I didn't feel as bad about that as maybe I should have. The drinks are still good. Without speaking explicitly about it, we all knew that things were ramping up to a fine point. We all knew that each other had seen and heard different things. Things specific to us. Things that perhaps only an omnipotent force might know about us. I was trying to look at my phone for comfort—something as simple and surreal as my Instagram was usually comforting, but after the things I'd begun to see there I felt adrift. There was no comfort to be found there.

The dog went missing that day.

Day 6

I had the dream again, except that when I woke up I had a cut bleeding from my head exactly where the first impact of the television would have happened were it real. My father was ever closer in mind by this time. We ran out of protein bars and Joey, Maria, and Thomas had made a significant dent in the alcohol supply. None of us had had the heart to review the cameras for the entire day. This was because when Boutros Boutros had gone missing we had reviewed as much footage as we could to find him and what we had seen was so disturbing it barely warrants mention. We were also afraid that if we were to look at the cameras again, the footage of Boutros Boutros would have been changed. The footage had been doing that a lot, splicing in videos of us from childhood, of us jerking off, and even of Thomas cutting his own wrists open, something none of us had known he had done. But it was true, the truth of the footage was real. The strange

thing was the more the camera showed us of our lives, the less distinct those moments became for each of us in memory. They were only sharply remembered when we saw them on the screen, like the dream I'd been having of my father.

'In the dark, Dewerstone Manor seemed colder. We all agreed this wasn't paranormal in all likelihood because the house was large and often unoccupied. We felt that remarking on the temperature beyond this would be embarrassingly simple for any investigator worth their salt. For me, the dark always brings me to thoughts of my father and that dream. Long after the investigation ended, I still...

But then again. A house in the dark has a certain seductively frightening allure. There is something voyeuristic and profane about houses in the dark. I think about it now and know what I was feeling then in the dark of Dewerstone... something sensual had run through me—a thrill at the thought that after so many years dead, ashes scattered, he could be back again. I know it's wrong, but it somehow excited me.'

What's that? An interruption. How strange. We apologize viewers for that unscheduled break in our program. I guess we were having some technical issues? Hey, Barbara, go get George and see if he can't figure out what happened. Anyway, as I was reading:

The footage of the dog is probably still the most contentious part of our investigation. When I submitted some of our initial findings to our website, I made the decision to include some footage, including the section where Boutros Boutros goes missing. People from PETA have written us death threats regarding the use of the dog for a cheap, sick stunt. The truth is I

am not even sure if the footage is real to this day. But the recording shows that Boutros Boutros got up from Joey and Maria's room at three in the morning on Day 5 and seemed to be following something down the hall and all the way to the living room downstairs, where the camera is angled in such a way as to look directly at the television. The screen flickered to life and Boutros Boutros is seen slowly walking towards it, cocking his head, putting forward a paw and walking into the television static.

I know it is insane. I also know that none of us touched that recording. None of us have even been able to look at it since we released our investigation materials to the general public.

Later that night we were all woken up by our phones, the lights, the house phones, and the television downstairs all flashing madly and emitting a high-pitched whine. We checked every room and it was the same no matter where we went. The whine became so intense that we couldn't hear each other speak, and I felt blood trickle from my ears. Joey signed at everyone to head for the exit once we had gathered in the foyer, but when we tried the whine became so keen we were all brought to our knees. None of us remember what happened after that. The next thing we consciously remember is Day 7, another warm day, in which part of us is stuck. Even now, in writing this, I am stuck in the memory.

Day 7

It was midafternoon, when we became aware of ourselves again. We were already half-way through packing up, when we realized that we hadn't been conscious since that horrible moment last night. We stopped our wrap-up, looked at each other, and wordlessly started packing up again. I couldn't resist looking inside the fridge. The food was unsullied and untouched, and I left it that way. Once we left that house, we agreed not to go back.

.....

‘I lied to Maria, Joey, and Thomas from the very beginning of our friendship—I misrepresented my experiences in my journal and the facts of the case. Some of what I misrepresented they will already have gathered, but nothing suspicious enough that they would look at me as the mastermind. I couldn’t risk them finding out. Dewerstone was about much more than simply showing up other more seasoned investigators.

I first heard of Dewerstone when I was an undergraduate at George Mason University; a couple of guys I’d known since grade school were huge fans of hauntings and creepy hangouts. They somehow always ferreted out the most interesting locations, and they’d listen to just about anybody’s story—no matter how small. The issue is...that is to say I don’t remember what their names were—the only evidence they existed is the questions people asked about them when I came back to school after going missing for a month. But even when asked I couldn’t grab onto the names people called them by. After the doctor diagnosed me with dissociative amnesia people began asking fewer questions. Except their families and the police. Eventually the police stopped too. Apparently, my friends were troubled anyway and often on the verge of failing out and defaulting on personal loans. But the families wouldn’t stop, so I eventually transferred schools. I became a ghost and legally changed my name, but I never stopped thinking of Dewerstone. I never told the police about Dewerstone, but I became obsessed with it. I started writing up every morsel of information I could find into a compendium. Before I knew it I had a manuscript, but the experiences of others and the vagueness of my first visit wouldn’t do, as an agent later told me. My masterpiece wouldn’t be complete without another journey into the manor. And I wanted to go back...

.....

What's that? Again? Apologies to everyone at home. Let me pick up where the transmission cut out once more.

What we could never agree on is whether or not it was haunted. It didn't feel haunted—if anything it felt more like a series of funhouse mirrors. A strange trick. I don't know what to make of it all, and I also don't remember many things that I once did quite as well. I have no explanation for this. It just all seemed so absolutely senseless.

--James Dugan

Now, viewers, what a scintillating account. Dugan wrote certain sections during the investigation and some after, though we arranged them in a narratologically sensible order for you all. The rest of the evidence, however... Well. We put it in the order that made the most sense of what is clearly an unsensible experience.

The following is an audio journal kept by Thomas during the investigation (recovered by James Dugan on Day 7). Permissions questionable.

Thomas's Diary

Day 1

T: I feel uneasy. Maria still refuses to understand that Joey is wrong for her. The man is a goddamn simpleton. He barely passed his undergrad exams and barely made the waitlist for his current program. It's pathetic real[... static]* Fuckin' cro-magnon. Now she's pissed at me. Said

she was done with my shit and that after this investigation is over so's our friendship. Guess that's all gratitude is worth these days.

[Door opens]

T: Oh, hey, James.

JD: Already taking investigation notes?

T: [laughter] Sure, something like that. What do you think of the house so far?

JD: Its historical atmosphere is suffocating. But in a way that I like. Almost too real for being a fake, don't you think?

T: Yeah, I suppose. Suffocating in a way you like, Jim? Kinky.

JD: God, that's not what I meant at all. I just—It has something sublimely obliterating about it is all. You can be so difficult sometimes.

T: But in a way you like, right?

JD: I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Tom.

T: I'm sure you don't... Listen, I think that if this place holds up to its reputation. We could finally break out into actual legitimacy in the ghost-hunting community. Who knows? Maybe we could actually at last join the circles of academics and believers and make something new.

JD: Yes, that's what I want more than anything. I want to do something new, something cutting edge.

T: I know, man. I know. We'll get there.

JD: Right. Well, I'll just leave these here. We're all meeting in the living room in thirty minutes to talk strategy. In the meantime, I'm going to explore a bit.

T: Sounds good. [door shuts] He is really worried about this one. For the record, we've all always been a bit worried about James—since the day we met him. He doesn't talk about himself a lot—claims it has nothing to do with who he is now. But the way he's been worrying over this investigation—that and the fact that we won't be a group after this, so this one has gotta count. I know he'll choose me over Joey and Maria when it's through. That's one good thing I suppose in this mire of shitty. Anyway, set up is under way and for now I will sign off.

Well, this recording certainly begins to shed some light on the character of our investigators. Dugan's obsession with his father and potentially oedipal attraction to Thomas. Thomas' obsession with what is right for Maria. It seems as though our investigators had problems well before entering the house. Hardly objective mindsets we are hearing about here.

But I don't understand how Joey, Maria, and Thomas could know so little about Dugan or be satisfied with his explanation of his lack of explanations—Hm? Ah, it has come to my attention that the previous interruptions to our program were the result of a pirate transmission that is intermittently overtaking our broadcast. The transmission appears to be from...Mr. Dugan, according to viewers' comments and tweets on social media. But why would he?

He'd been to Dewerstone before. This is incredibly disturbing as a revelation—these two missing friends? What does he mean he can't remember? Well, I am not sure what yet to make of this, but I do know that we have more material provided by Mr. Dugan to sift through. We found some notes that we believe to have been provided by accident, as they seem to be several different beginnings to a book or manuscript written by Mr. Dugan regarding Dewerstone's history. Let us dive into these and see if they shed any more light on this bizarre story.

Opening #1

In the front hall of the house there is a bust of a man with a crow perched upon his shoulder. This is the face that greets visitors of Dewerstone Manor. His face has been sculpted with sharp angles, almost to the point of caricature but with a little taste. Almost stylishly surreal. The family whose house is Dewerstone does not know from whence the bust came, as it appeared one day during construction. None of the workers knew who had brought it in, but it was in the manifest for the storage transport. It was in the manifest. The strangest part was that it seemed to fit in with everything else—like it had always been there—the sight of it reminds me of someone who was importance once. I am not sure what I mean by that. Perhaps, it is that the bust feels like it has history, like it has a certain august legitimacy. The bust still stands in Dewerstone to this day.

The eyes of the man the sculpt captures are eagle-like—sharp and shrewd, as though he is assessing passersby with an alacrity and agility. His brow is furrowed as though in disapproval, which is in contrast with the faint smile his thin lips form. He wears what appears to be the top-half of a cravat and a smoking jacket. The crow is mid-call, one foot raised from rest and wings flared aggressively. If you stand close enough to the crow, sometimes you catch the faint smell of rot. A smell that sweetly caresses your nostrils as it crawls down the back of your throat.

Opening #2

In the isolated hills of northern Virginia’s countryside, there rests a house that can bring one specific thing you have felt back with such accuracy and enhancement as to oblivate all else in the world. It does not matter if the particular thing it brings back to you is good or bad, but that the re-experience is so exquisitely painful, so creeping, so disgusting[...] it comes into everything. It bleeds into your pores and pools in your dreams. I have been hunting that very house ever since I first encountered its rich but brief history—an accident as it were, but one that set me on my journey in pursuit of the supernatural. My team and I decided to enter the fabled house on a warm day in the Virginian fall[...]

Opening #3

Dewerstone Manor, a known site of supernatural experience, is singular in that it does not haunt us with itself but with the negative—the inverse of haunting. It is nothing but a southern antebellum simulacrum filled with the bones and marrow of the modern era. In that way it is representative of history’s artificiality and in doing so it reveals that history is nothing but an empty signifier. As such, Dewerstone is like a great sieve before the void. It catches that which attracts the most and lets the rest return to nothing. It is the ultimate site of worship. Much like

the image representing God reveals the truth of his emptiness, so too does Dewerstone reveal what we most deeply fear about ourselves—our utter nothing.

At first, I thought he was just trying to sound edgy. After all, all this Baudrillard and Derrida shit is too saccharine—sorry, I'm not supposed to curse, but I am afraid I am beginning to see the work of a very sick man indeed. Let's roll the tape from day three of the Thomas journal.

Thomas's Diary

Day 3

T: Maria and Joey think I fucked with their room's camera at some ungodly hour last night. And maybe I would have too, except that I was trapped in a nightmare the entire time, until I woke up this morning drenched in sweat. What's freakier, Jim was in his bed breathing like someone was sitting on his chest and his eyes were wide open but he was dead asleep. [door opens] Maria, I have nothing to say to you. I didn't do it.

M: But we both saw it. It had to have gotten onto the tape somehow.

T: Except that it isn't there now. Honestly, who's obsessed with who now? We're done as friends and I'm done as your emotional fuck buddy whenever Joey pisses you off, which is what—all the time?

M: Thomas, I'm not even mad. I'm just scared because that—what was on the tape crossed a line. Something about this place is crossing a line, and I don't like it. If you did it, well that's easier is all.

T: Tough shit 'cause I didn't. And I've had enough of making you feel better.

M: Fine, if that's how you're going to be. Just steer clear of us, especially Joey, for a bit, as much as we can here. God, I don't like this place. The dreams I've been having. I'm going to go get Joey to calm down.

T: As you like, it means fuck-hole to me what you do [door closes].[Thomas sighs] I probably shouldn't have given her that much hell. After all, this place is wrong. I keep dreaming of a lake my sister used to take me to when we were young. Even when our mother was at work well into the night and early next morning, skipping rocks across the lake with my sister made me feel happy and complete. But once. Once...My sister wasn't watching. We were near the dock and the sky was gradient of purples and pinks against the dead trees of winter. I remember wandering onto the rickety old wood that had probably started rotting ages ago. My sister was on the phone with a friend, discussing something very important at the time I'm sure. I walked to the end of the dock and made to skip one of my stones. But I noticed in the afternoon winter light that the water was so perfectly still, so unbelievably reflective that there was a whole world staring back at me. A backwards, upside down world. I sat on my knees, peering over the edge, unaware that the nails on the last board were loose. I saw a boy who looked like me, but lived in a world where the water was the sky and the clouds were unimaginable depths. Shit. It was the most

beautiful moment I ever experienced in my life. Then the board gave way and it was so cold. Last night, while sleeping, I had a nightmare. I was on the dock again, but when I looked into the water, instead of my adult face, I saw myself as a boy. But my reflection's face was cyanotic, eyes glazed white, and he was smiling. He smiled so hard at me his lips cracked and the blood froze purple. That's all for now.

So viewers it seems, the majority of the team was suffering nightmares. Could be a gas leak or exposure to a high degree of electromagnetism. Perhaps, there is something strange about the geological composition of Dewerstone's grounds, though curiously none of the teams who have visited the location mention anything about looking into these possibilities. As ominous as much of this testimony sounds, there is so little to substantiate the reality of Dewerstone that one must wonder. Don't get me wrong. I want to believe as much as y'all at home do, but I am confounded by the lack of scientific measurements and data, despite Dugan's many claims to ethos and logos. Is this all the ravings of a deranged individual who managed to convince his friends of belief?. It's not impossible with highly charismatic individuals. Well, I am certainly unnerved, but I have yet to be truly impressed...

.....

Don't listen to her. The show host means well, but she asks all the wrong questions. It does not matter whether Dewerstone's phenomenon is scientifically demonstrable. Science is religion for those frightened by all that reaches beyond possibility. It does not matter if the direction of the wind changed, if the temperature dropped, if there were any strong electromagnetic fields, if there were any conventional facts. There are so many other kinds of

facts that surround Dewerstone. So many creeping truths that I am still unraveling. But as I speak now, I am the one unraveling...

.....

Well, that's all for tonight, everyone. We'll see you next time on Dark Trails and Darker Tales. Good night.

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APPENDIX
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

BEFORE 1970 (I.E. HISTORIC)

Bradbury, Ray. *I Sing The Body Electric!* Bantam Books, 1978.

This is a short story collection containing some of Ray Bradbury's best work. Some of my favorite stories from this collection include: "The Kilimanjaro Device," "Tomorrow's Child," and "The Terrible Conflagration up at the Place." All of these stories contain elements of the fantastic and the sinister unknown. In "The Kilimanjaro Device," the speaker attempts to connect with Ernest Hemingway before Hemingway kills himself through a strange and empathetic story of time travel and admiration for a tragic literary titan. In "Tomorrow's Child" two parents, Peter and Polly Ann Horn, give birth to a child who is caught in the fourth dimension and comes out shaped like a pyramid that makes sounds like a crystal. In "The Terrible Conflagration up at the Place" a group of men during the Troubles in Ireland steal their way up to one of the local gentry's mansions with the intent of burning it to the ground; however, the house's charming owner keeps persuading each man to save a piece of priceless art before burning it down, forestalling them several times.

Golden Age Sci-Fi is its own distinct subsection of science fiction, but many of the conventions no longer work in conventional modern science fiction because many of the conventions are founded in a very specific construction of the other and the unknown. While I love these stories in their conceptual ingenuity, they run into problems revolving around body politics and gender politics that have moved ever closer to the forefront of debate in our current times.

Brönte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Sterling Publishing, 2016.

Jane Eyre is a bildungsroman that follows young Jane from her childhood in an abusive home all the way into her young adult life. She begins in a nice home with her aunt who reluctantly took her in because her parents died and her aunt's husband's dying wish was that his wife take Jane in as one of her own. She treats Jane horribly and her spoiled children treat Jane accordingly. Eventually, Jane's aunt can no longer tolerate Jane's annoying needs (read: not actually annoying because Jane's a child), and she decides to send Jane to a crappy religious school that raises unwanted children to be useful laborers in society—unless they die from disease and poor diet first. Oh, well, less mouths to feed. Jane eventually graduates and takes up a position as a governess to a young child in a faraway mansion in the countryside. It is there that she eventually meets and enters into a passionate relationship with the house's owner, Mr. Rochester, who, as it turns out, is hiding a secret wife in the attic. This is where the “mad woman in the attic” comes from.

The story revolves around Jane coming to terms with her sexuality, agency, and what she is willing to sacrifice for the man she loves. Though Mr. Rochester is a gaslighting, lying jerk, he's pretty alluring as a character. When I first read *Jane Eyre*, I was immediately seduced by what seemed to me a romantic game playing out between Jane and Rochester. I realize now that part of that seduction was the result of the way anticipation is used. I incorporated Brönte's use of anticipation in the writing of several of the romances in my collection.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through The Looking-Glass*. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004.

In this classic novella, the young Alice falls down the rabbit hole and enters Wonderland—an LSD-induced daydream world in which many natural laws are turned on their

heads. Alice makes her way through this strange and often dangerous world of lunacy and the unknown, ending up on trial once and changing sizes several times. Carroll uses the fantastical to weave such an intense atmosphere of whimsy that adaptations of his works are still being made today over a century later. His use of unconventional poetic formatting is also a hugely influential aspect of his writing. His simple meter mixed with his bizarre subject matter make for an unforgettable and enchanting reading experience.

Atmosphere has always been one of my strengths as a writer, and I think that's because I have always been drawn to other writers who craft atmosphere with a razor-sharp precision. Carroll is one such a writer, whose work captured my imagination as a teenager and pushed me to try strange ideas and meters—to try new ways of writing stories.

Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land and Other Writings*. Modern Library, 2002.

Arguably one of the most influential poems of all time, T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" is a poem that has followed me ever since I read it in my undergraduate years. The poem is emblematic of the modernist literary mode of the time, which often featured apocalyptic visions of the world, as history was changed by the first World War and the events that occurred shortly thereafter—though in all fairness the modernist obsession with apocalyptic imagery began before World War I. It is my theory, though I would need to conduct more research to back it up, that the Age of Enlightenment is from whence the seed for modernist visions of a Westernized apocalypse stems. Eliot's poem exemplifies this mysticism mired in academia and science through its use of high-brow language and references that occasionally move beyond obscurity to become almost unintelligible without Google search pulled up and at the ready. The use of fragmented sections and imagery expresses a specific idea of historicity that is extremely

important, though Eliot's ultimate catharsis in the poem is the shoring together of those fragments to make a whole.

The magical language of Eliot's poem, the eerie images of bats with baby faces and endless deserts with no water, and the strangeness of what is essentially a tour of a broken and warped reality called simply "The Wasteland," has influenced the way I approach historicity but also the language used in my prose. I learned how to musically fashion elegant and academically impeccable lines of prose or theory from works such as Eliot's, but I also saw the cracks that have formed as time goes by in works such as Eliot's. I see how, in crafting my fiction, I must try to avoid a totalizing sense of history and that I must avoid using prose as a weapon to prevent accessibility in my texts. My love for "The Wasteland" taught me many of the techniques I employ in prose and poetry, but it also taught me how to see the cracks where convention does not maintain its illusory integrity and how to exploit and explore those cracks in interesting ways.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. City Lights Books, 1959.

Howl is a classic in which Ginsberg details the lives of the Beatnik generation and encompasses the entire aesthetic and literary drive of the Beatnik movement. Ginsberg's poem is a meditation on madness and beauty in madness, as well as a meditation on generational struggles of the time. Post-World-War I & II disillusionment was prevalent among the Beatniks and became a huge part of the drive behind the Beatnik's bohemian lifestyle (or impoverished state, in some cases). Like T.S. Eliot before him, Ginsberg taps into a modernist obsession with the apocalyptic, except that he does not use his academic sensibilities with quite the hard line that Eliot does—that is to say, Ginsberg is more accessible and writes from, perhaps, a slightly less tall ivory tower than Eliot with regards to his usage of sound and imagery. Ginsberg's

images and the sounds he evokes are those of junkies, rogues, non-binary people, poverty, and the exciting lives of America's youth, and he is not unsympathetic towards his subjects either—Ginsberg clearly writes from a place of affection for these disenfranchised and disillusioned people, which is an important distinction from Eliot.

In my prose I try to incorporate some of that infectious rhythm that Ginsberg brings to his work, as well as a sympathetic eye for the subjects of my stories and poems. That being said, I accept that Ginsberg is not exactly a shining beacon of progress, as his later alliance with NABMLA demonstrates. However, *Howl* has been so influential that I think it stands by itself and the work that it did bringing voices to people who often could not speak for themselves is still important when considering the ways in which craft and concept can be married in new and interesting ways that shape the landscape of American poetry for years to come. I think Ginsberg's influence on my own work can be felt most in some of the prose of "The Last," "Her Rotting Parts," and "Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor." Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. Penguin Books, 2018.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, readers are treated to Jackson's excellent balance of empathy and infernality—a scale on which all impetus and desire in the novel hinges. The character of Eleanor is both sympathetic and yet there is something about her that eludes the reader's attempts to identify with her. There is a part of her that is, perhaps, hateful or (by standard conventions) abjectly repulsive—and I don't mean disgusting like dirty, but repulsive in an almost abstract way, in that there is a part of Eleanor that even she doesn't understand—and that is plain frightening. So much of Gothic literature stems from a phobic mind state—from fear of the invasive "other." In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson carefully balances the otherness of the house with Eleanor's own otherness, so that there is a sort of mutual infection that spreads

between Eleanor and the house back and forth. Eleanor becomes so absorbed into the house's desire for her that she shuns all of her human company—coming to distrust them and even revile them; however, at the end of the novel, as Eleanor is being made to leave the house, she decides to turn the car around and ram it into a tree—effectively killing herself in order to stay with the house. In her final moments, she breaks from her trance and wonders why no one stops her.

Truthfully, when I was 14, I had my own moment of, “Why does no one stop me?” Those moments are precious and vicious and gutting. Those are important moments. While, I am obsessed with the nature of fear as humans' experience it, I am also obsessed with writers who can capture these moments with razor sharp precision because they make me feel recognized or recognizable. I want to be able to create those moments of absolute recognition—of shocking clarity—the kind of clarity we are so often guilty of avoiding. That Jackson was able to create not just one moment like this but dozens is absolutely amazing. I have tried to employ lessons from Jackson in fear and suspense but also swift moments of emotional clarity in my own treatment of the characters in my stories.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*. Barnes & Noble, 2005.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein creates a sentient creature constructed of random assorted human parts that he manages to pilfer from various unsavory places. Through methods that remain (I would contend) intentionally ambiguous, the young, brilliant Frankenstein manages to bring his creature to life, but is then so horrified by his creation that he flees from it, abandoning it to a world unprepared for its existence. The creature, though abjectly hideous, is charming, learned, and often philosophically persuasive.

As a child, I was obsessed with the Beast from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, but not because I had a crush on him. I wanted to play the part of the Beast—of Frankenstein's creature

too. I had always found the idea of the Luciferean anti-hero fascinating and, in many ways, I wanted to be a version of that figure myself. In its own way it is a very punk character to be. There is power in the Beast's anger and in the creature's anger. In particular, the creature gets even with Frankenstein, and there is something satisfying about revenge done well. Not just personal revenge, but a revenge against society at large for its simplistic and hurtful binaries. There is something revelatory in that with which I have always identified—given how much I've been wronged in my life and made to feel ugly because I didn't fit into standard ideas of femininity or sexuality.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a towering classic in the Gothic mode of literature. The first time I read *Dracula* I was in high school. I remember finding that the epistolary format of the story could have used some work but yielded some very interesting results. The format allowed for a fragmented yet simultaneously expansive story that spanned several months and several countries. My main issue with *Dracula*, of course, are the anti-Semitic underpinnings, but from a storytelling standpoint it spends an inordinate amount of time on the other characters' stories and not on Dracula. While, I understand the story is about these innocent people caught up in the wake of Dracula's bloodlust and insatiable appetites, there was never enough of that bloodlust nor of that insatiable appetite on the page for me.

In the creation of my thesis, I began not with plots in mind but with scenes, feelings, and desire. The abstract concept of desire. *Dracula* was one of the first books that made me consider along what vectors desire exists and from whence desire comes. I began to wonder in what ways the act of fetishizing certain individuals and groups can be harmful, but how then taking control

of fetish and fetishizing our own bodies can conversely be empowering. In “Hard Light” this thread of thought is most readily apparent.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Dial Press Trade Paperback, 1999.

This is the story of Billy Pilgrim, who has become unstuck in time. This frame narrative follows the story of Billy Pilgrim, an American World War II veteran who begins to move through time, vacillating between the present, his time during the war, and his imagined abduction by the Tralfamadorians (an alien race that captures Billy to keep him in a terrarium for terrestrial life). The narrative is framed by an outside voice who appears to be a literal stand-in for the non-fictional author, who has his own physical presence appear in the very beginning of the novel. This non-autobiographical autobiography breaks many conventions in its structure and is also hauntingly beautiful.

The story of Billy Pilgrim is at once a tale of science fiction, tragedy, post-traumatic stress, and the ways in which what are considered normal life activities are disrupted by trauma and its echoes. In my own writing, I try to incorporate my own experience of trauma, which is extremely non-linear, into my characters’ experiences and worldviews. This is certainly true of “Hard Light” and “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor.”

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a story of male privilege, sexuality, and power dynamics in various relationships that exist between the characters. Dorian Gray is a young dandy who starts the novel as a mostly reputable young man. Upon having his portrait painted by the artist, Basil Hallward, Dorian meets the Satanic-figure, Lord Henry Wotton, and they strike up an unhealthy friendship that leads Dorian down a path of pure hedonism. Basil also implores Dorian to maintain a more innocent and morally upright lifestyle and to not take after Lord Henry;

however, both of these prominent, older male figures have selfish interests in steering the direction of Dorian's life. One of the underlying currents of the novel is Dorian's latent sexual attraction to other men in his life. Both of these men have a sexual motive behind their attentions to Dorian that makes us as readers skeptical that Dorian can make a correct choice morally in the story.

Oscar Wilde was a master at using the topic of sin and debauchery as a lens through which to ask complicated moral questions. The fact that most of Dorian's acts of debauchery stem from an abuse of cis-gendered, white male privilege acts as an important commentary on masculinity and class-privilege at the time—both insofar as Lord Henry teaches Dorian to abuse this privilege and insofar as Dorian is inexorably mired in this privilege. The story is also a Gothic horror story. Lord Henry is very much a demonic figure and Basil can be read as a Mephistophelean figure, both fulfilling Dorian's wish to remain young and beautiful despite how he ravages his body with sin and age, while also trying to warn Dorian of the perils of his choices. When I first read the story, I was mostly in it for the creepy Gothic parts involving the magically aging portrait. It reminded me of the tale of "The Monkey's Paw," which fascinated me ever since my mother first read it to me. The way Wilde constructs male relationships most influenced the story, "Gentle Nature," while Wilde's use of Gothic horror tropes influenced "Hard Light" and "Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor."

1970 AND BEYOND (I.E. CONTEMPORARY)

Abish, Walter. *How German Is It: A Novel = Wie Deutsch Ist Es*. New Directions Books, 1980.

How German Is It? is one of my favorite novels from my undergraduate curriculum and runs in a similar vein as Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart* in terms of atmosphere and prose. The main character, Ulrich Hargenau, attempts to navigate modern Germany and his identity as a German, as the country is overrun by globalism. He tries to come to terms with betraying his wife Paula and the terrorist group of which they were both apart by comparing himself to his father, who was executed for plotting against Hitler. Meanwhile, the development of a new suburb called Brumholdstein (named after a philosopher who acts as a fictional analogue to Heidegger) hovers menacingly in the background of the story, as the development is being constructed over top an old concentration camp site. There is great uproar as a mass grave is uncovered during construction, causing significant delays. The novel ultimately ends on a chilling note, as Ulrich enters a therapy session in which he is hypnotized into sieg heil-ing and "...flooded by the memory of a dream to end all dreams..." (252).

The actual atmosphere of the novel is almost magical and surreal. The dialogue is sharply written. Every conversation manages to say everything by avoiding saying anything of significance. There is also a voice that breaks the fourth wall throughout the narrative using italics to set its voice apart from the literal happenings of the plot. This voice evokes almost a sense of hypnosis mirrored by the final scene. Abish creates a strange, beautiful prose that manages a constant balancing act between maintaining a pleasant surface and a deeply roiling underside. I have generally tried to apply this sort of atmosphere-creation to my own stories throughout my work on the thesis.

Banks, Iain. *The Wasp Factory*. Scribner Paperback Fiction, Published by Simon & Schuster, 1998.

The Wasp Factory is a dark story revolving around a young man named Frank Cauldhame, who admits to the reader that he has, in fact, killed three members of his family already and is pretty sure he's done murdering for the foreseeable future. Pretty sure. The story is darkly comical even as it depicts grotesque acts of violence, elevating these violent incidents almost to art. Much of Frank's identity stems from an accident he experienced as a child, in which a dog bit off his genitalia—or so he believes. As the story progresses, 16-year-old Frank deals with his life on the island, following his own made up shamanistic rituals and reading the proverbial bones via his wasp factory—a torture contraption he has made that he puts captured wasps inside. The device is made out of an old clock and each hour has a hole that leads to a different form of death. Frank uses the wasp's choice of death as an omen by which to divine the future. He lives with his estranged father, who keeps a study room that is always locked and a mystery to Frank. Frank's older brother, Eric, who has recently escaped an asylum, eventually makes his way back to the island, while Frank reels from the discovery that his father (filled with a hatred for women because of his absent wife) has been feeding Frank male hormones in order to try and turn Frank into a man because Frank is actually a woman in sex and has always been. The story ends with Frank mulling over the idea of leaving the island and him considering in retrospect the reasons why he murdered three of his family members.

This story is darkly humorous but also incredibly repugnant (in its depictions of violence) and sad (in its depictions of family strife and psychological and physical trauma). Frank is both vile and yet compelling and sympathetic. I was not always rooting against Frank, despite his psychopathic behavior. I find that kind of character (especially when they are written in the first-

person) to be extremely interesting. This book was a big influence in writing “Hard Light,” as well as “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor.” The way Banks uses the first-person in order to create suspense around the main events of the story is masterful. Frank’s unreliable or even ignorant perspective, as a socially isolated 16-year-old who experienced a deep trauma, is the perfect lens through which to maintain a sense of mystery.

Choi, Franny. *Death by Sex Machine*. Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017.

Death by Sex Machine is a fantastic chapbook that showcases some of Franny Choi’s most strange and beautiful poems. Choi writes with an ear for the importance of cuss words in language and how they can convey worldviews and ideologies that we internalize in no small part because of how cursing is used in day-to-day life. She also writes with anger and feeling regarding the treatment of othered bodies and describes with deftness the experience of living in an othered body and inhabiting the physical while existing under the weight of the political and psychological dimensions of otherness. Particularly, Choi is writing as both a prominent figure in the queer community but also as a Korean American with all the complexity that comes with those factors. She uses genre tropes from science fiction to discuss race, gender, and sexuality in a way that allows wonderful images and metaphors to take shape.

I was inspired by both *Death by Sex Machine* and by Choi’s earlier collection *Floating, Brilliant, Gone*. In writing the poems that made it into this collection, I had Choi’s precise language and line breaks at the forefront of my mind. Particularly the poem, “A Brief History of Cyborgs,” and the poem, “Bird Watching,” inspired the way I approached writing “Curses,” “Your Possession,” and “A Haunted House Story.” In these poems I tried to break lines in such a way as to keep pace and flow moving, pulling the reader forward. I also wanted to bring seemingly dissonant ideas together in a way that is intuitive.

Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books, 2000.

House of Leaves is a frame narrative in which the main character, Johnny Truant, discovers a manuscript in the apartment of a dead man named Zampano. The manuscript is a gigantic, poorly maintained set of papers, scraps, photos, post-its, and other scribbled upon detritus. It contains a dissertation on a fake documentary known as “The Navidson Record.” The story is mired in footnotes, which are from three different sources; one being the editors of Johnny Truant’s collection and putting-together of Zampano’s manuscript, another being Johnny Truant himself annotating Zampano’s work as he edits and stitches it together, and the last being Zampano’s own footnotes citing both fake and real research sources (sometimes even in the same footnote). As the narrative arcs dissolve into a gaping, existential madness, so too does the typeface, the page margins, and copy layout.

The influence of this novel can be most felt in the story, “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor.” The novel is a crash course in the aesthetic sensibility of deconstructionism. From the passages that fashion doors which then open onto brick walls to the way in which Johnny Truant’s fraying sanity acts as a conceit for the metatextual narrative of language’s and phenomenology’s instability, *House of Leaves* does not hold back. It is also an interesting novel in that its form denies translation to other mediums. Due to its nature it cannot be adapted into a film, an e-book, or a television series. You would lose all of the freedom of play that the physicality and visual existence of the text offers. I wanted to play with the notion of medium. “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor” was directly written in response to this text and shows its coattails quite unabashedly. It is one of the most experimental of all the works in this collection because of Danielewski’s novel, and I will probably be working on it for a while before I am completely satisfied with its form.

Darnielle, John. *Wolf in White Van*. Picador, 2015.

Wolf in White Van is a tender, tragic, and emotionally sharp first-person narration that follows the life of a young man named Sean Phillips, who makes his living writing role-playing adventures for strangers via postal mail. Due to a horrible accident that the story skirts around for much of the narrative, his face has been horribly disfigured, and he is estranged from his parents. The novel follows Sean as he describes events before and after the accident and pushes towards the culminating event in reverse chronological order, mimicking the way trauma actually reveals itself to the traumatized. Sean's roleplaying game makes him a modest income but almost gets him into trouble with the law, when two young teenagers who play the game try to act it out for real and one of them dies—a fact which we learn at the beginning of the novel. Though the courts absolved Sean, the families of the two teenagers hold him responsible. With this event hanging at the edges of the novel, it is gradually revealed that Sean's face is disfigured because he shot himself with a rifle but did not die.

Darnielle writes with such precision that his writing has been compared to pure, unfiltered emotional clarity, and *Wolf in White Van* was rightly up for the National Book Award in no small part because of this precision. Carmen Machado has actually written a review in praise of *Wolf in White Van* and Darnielle's beautiful prose. John Darnielle has been hugely inspirational to me as a writer and as a poet. Both his prose in this book, as well as his song lyrics, have had a profound impact on this entire thesis.

Fowler, Karen Joy. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. Marian Wood Books, 2014.

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is the loving, bizarre, and tragic story of a young woman named, Rosemary, who loses her sister, Fern, at a very young age and believes it to be her fault. It becomes apparent about halfway through the narrative that Fern is a

chimpanzee and was taken away from Rosemary's family when Rosemary was a child. Rosemary's father, a behavioral psychologist, was conducting studies on the effects of raising Rosemary and Fern alongside each other as equal siblings. Rosemary lives her life in the present, attending university and hoping for the return of her estranged brother, whom she believes resents her for getting Fern sent away. As the story unfurls it becomes apparent that Fern was sent away because she was an animal and prone to violent outbursts that had nothing to do with the tattling Rosemary did on Fern. Rosemary then learns from things she discovers and from her brother that Fern was taken to some facility to be thrown in with other chimpanzees for studies. Rosemary fears what she knows of male chimpanzees' tendency to rape female chimps, which brings full circle the novel's attempts to bring up issues of animal rights and human rights in tandem, while telling an emotionally poignant story. In the end, Rosemary and her family find where Fern is staying, and Rosemary finally sees Fern after so many years. They do not reunite quite as Rosemary would have imagined, but there is catharsis in Fern's recognition of Rosemary. Rosemary reconnects with her family and finds reprieve from the trauma that had been haunting her for her whole life.

Fowler's use of the first-person was so much help in writing the character of Lara in "Hard Light." Rosemary is often self-involved in a charming way, but she also has a sort of animality that makes her almost uncanny, especially to other humans, who were only socialized with other humans. The story deftly captures both Rosemary's ego, as well as her alien-ness resulting from her unique circumstances. I tried to capture similar rhythm and cadence of thought in writing Lara.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *Her Body and Other Parties*. Graywolf Press, 2017.

Machado's short story collection is a surrealist nightmare wrapped in beautiful and sharp prose that creates atmospheric and enticing stories. In writing my thesis I had two particular stories from this collection in mind: "The Husband Stitch" and "Especially Heinous." The first story is a re-telling a children's tale in which a boy falls in love with a girl who wears a ribbon around her neck. They fall in love, get married, and live their whole lives together, but the girl refuses to ever remove her ribbon and implores her husband never to do so. When she falls ill and passes away, her husband violates her wishes and removes the ribbon—only for her head to roll off her body. Machado finds the true heart of what initially appears to simply be a creepy children's story, and she brings that heart to the forefront of her retelling. In her version, every woman has a ribbon, albeit tied in various places and of various colors. The main character recounts her sexual history with her husband and the traumatic experience of giving birth, during which the story references its title procedure—the stitch that sews a woman's vagina more narrowly without her knowledge or consent to increase her husband's sexual pleasure after she has given birth. Throughout the story the main character's husband colonizes her body until finally he cannot stand not being allowed to touch her ribbon any longer and he removes it, violating the last part of her that belongs to her and killing her in the process. The second story, "Especially Heinous" is a bizarre story that follows the exploits of *Law and Order: SVU* characters, Benson and Stabler, through short vignettes. In the story are metatextual references to Benson's and Stabler's lives as fictional, as well as potential parallel universes and doppelgängers.

Both of these stories contain surrealist, fabulist, horror, and science fiction elements that have deeply influenced my personal writing philosophy. When I was approaching this thesis, I

always reminded myself that sometimes weird and impossible things need to happen in order for a narrative to reach its rightful destination. I would rather have a story turn out too weird than not weird enough. In fact, many of the stories within this collection defy logic and hard-science-fiction tropes. Particularly, “Invisible Violence,” “The American Scream,” and “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor,” all take after Machado’s blending and bending of genre to tell different kinds of stories. Her work and prose have been deeply influential.

Murakami, Haruki. *Sputnik Sweetheart*. Translated by Philip Gabriel, Vintage International, 2002.

Murakami’s *Sputnik Sweetheart* is a strange and surreal story about love and the ways in which absence and presence relate to one another. In the novel, the protagonist, K, attempts to help his friend with whom he is in love with her own love problems. His friend, Sumire, has fallen in love with an older, upper-class Korean woman named Miu, but Miu does not feel as deeply as Sumire does. When Sumire meets Miu, they get along quite well and Miu offers Sumire a job as her assistant. They begin travelling together and Sumire tries to initiate a sexual relationship with Miu—only for Miu to be unable to reciprocate those sexual feelings, despite trying. K, meanwhile, is stuck at home simply waiting for more news about Sumire, when Miu calls him from an island in Greece, as Sumire has disappeared. K’s discoveries while he is searching for Sumire with Miu lead him to believe that she has slipped into an alternate world/dimension. The novel ends with Sumire finally reappearing one day and calling K from a phone booth to pick her up.

There are several reasons I really enjoyed this novel and felt it merited inclusion amongst my other annotations. The novel is another very good example of first-person narration. Through K’s filtered perspective we receive a story full of questionable information and experiences.

Murakami knows how to use the first-person perspective to create an air of mystery, and there are several scenes and passages in the novel that showcase this talent. In my own writing, I tried to incorporate Murakami's sense of surrealist whimsy, letting ideas run their course without worrying about scientific accuracy or logic because it is sometimes more important to explore concepts than to explain them in exact measurements and quantities. I think this sort of thinking is evident throughout my thesis and is a general philosophy I believe in when it comes to the craft of fiction.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: an American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

Citizen is a gorgeous American lyric and peak Rankine. She writes with such a delicate attention to the emotional experience and the way everyday experiences have an impact on our psychological state of being. Specifically, Rankine deals with erasure and the way small erasures and encounters with racism build and grow on each other to form a high impenetrable wall of erasure. It is the privilege of those in power that they do not experience this regular and constant erosion of self. Rankine knows this and explores this in a way that is cathartic and empathetic, as well as nuanced and complex. Rankine's *Citizen* unabashedly stares into the heart of racism and its numerous intersections with class, sex, and gender in America. She also often uses these interesting editorial pieces interstitially positioned between anecdotal narrative poems that all help form that wall of small and big experiences of erasure that build like a swelling wave and crescendo with the final image included in the collection—that of a painting called *The Slave Ship*, as well as a close-up of the graphic death of one of the slaves depicted in the painting.

Rankine really triumphs in this lyric work. *Citizen* uses these alternating sections of non-fiction anecdotes and news-like editorials with a poetic framing and lyric along with mixed media to convey a sense of both lived experience and overarching historicity that always sets

itself above lived experience and sets the whole shape of what is allowed to be remembered and limits what is considered lived history. When I wrote “Gallery for Thinking Terrorism,” I was inspired by Rankine’s style and by her ability to weave these two important aspects of experience and memory to critique historicity and to point out the damage wrought by erasure. Using found text from an extreme right-wing textbook being disseminated at an HBCU, I wrote this poem and have Rankine to thank for how I shaped the poem and how I pieced together the sound of each line.

Waters, Sarah. *The Little Stranger*. Riverhead Books, 2009.

The Little Stranger is a modern novel written in the Gothic mode and set in a fictional/historical past. The novel is set during the 1940s in postwar Warwickshire, Britain, following the life of Dr. Faraday—a well-respected, if not handsome or well-off, country doctor with a serious inferiority complex. While the novel’s anti-classism tones are important and prevalent, what I found most compelling was Dr. Faraday’s predatory attraction to Hundreds Hall manor and, by extension, its resident gentry family, the Ayres. While the novel does make Faraday’s plight sympathetic with references to his mother’s life as a laborer and his own anxieties over his lacking masculinity and inferior class origins, it also makes apparent that his obsession coupled with his desire for upper class male privilege lead him to do some really reprehensible things—in small increments that mount larger and larger as the narrative progresses. The novel is impeccably paced and researched, and Waters’ use of the first-person, unreliable narrator is an example to be followed and emulated.

The timing with which Waters rolls out supernatural events and revelations in the narrative really influenced the pacing I used in “Hard Light” and in “Episode #26: Investigation Dewerstone Manor.” Her writing of the unreliable narrator who gaslights not only other

characters, but I posit the readers as well, heavily influence how I wrote the first-person in both of these stories as well. I really hope that this influence can be felt, as I really admire Waters' work. The ghost in the story is also a delightful surprise and offers itself up to a multitude of interpretations, which is why the haunting in both of my stories work more ambiguously I think than in a conventional Gothic horror story.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 2018.

Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* is a personal obsession of mine primarily because of its abstract, mysterious theoretical concepts, such as the idea of simulacra, as well as the death of the panopticon. The most important concept is that of the map preceding the territory. This is the idea that the creation of the map precedes the creation of the territory—or rather the map comes to replace the reality of the territory. In that same way, the graphic representing a hurricane's path on a news broadcast replaces the actuality of the hurricane for the viewer. Representation becomes realer than real—it becomes hyperreal. The end of the panopticon refers to the important notion that the observing surveillance state has moved past a recognizable external force and become so pervasive as to be impossible to locate.

These particular concepts become important in various stories throughout the collection. Every single story within my collection was influenced by Baudrillard, whether directly or indirectly. I actually began writing a story that did not make it into this collection about robotic Viking clans facing off in a Thunderdome style arena that simulates terrain. They continue fighting, until one Viking dies and begins to haunt another Viking telepathically, letting the second Viking know that the promised Valhalla is empty. This eventually leads the main Viking to break through the walls of their resting cell by using their own body parts as explosives. When

they emerge, they find a long-abandoned ruin, where countless viewing seats and ticket booths are all that remains. During the Viking battles there were going to be large screens depicting reruns of crowd-goers portrayed to the robots as gods. The outline of this story is probably the most directly Baudrillardian of my works besides “Invisible Violence.”

Flusser Vilém, and Louis Bec. *Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis: a Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique De Recherche Paranaturaliste*. Translated by Valentine A. Pakis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Originally written in German and translated to English, *Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis: A Treatise* is a text that explores notions of posthumanism and universality through the lens of the vampire squid’s ontology. The text defines several concepts that are important to my thesis in given its connections to posthumanism and ideas of otherness both concrete and abstract. The text goes over the concept of hierarchies of disgust—an idea which maintains that the farther a creature is away from humans phylogenetically the more disgusting humans find that creature. The treatise reads as part fable and part thought experiment. How would a creature’s physical existence affect the formation of its ethics and ontology?

This particular work of theory features heavily in my attempts to characterize Rei in “Hard Light” and the infernality of intelligent technology in general. I became obsessed with the idea of unknowable beings and forces that bear a sort of universal antagonism for human life. It is an important part of a lot of horror and science fiction stories, as well as an important part of understanding a new way to approach animal rights—or the rights of other intelligent beings (even if their intelligence is wholly alien to ours). I tried to apply the conceptual ideas of this text in as much of my writing as I could.

Johnston, Bret Anthony, editor. *Naming The World: and Other Exercises for The Creative Writer*. Random House, 2007.

Naming the World is a collection of writing prompts in short form that seeks to help writers flex their creative noodles. It has been immensely helpful as a tool for generating story ideas, as well as simply a comforting voice when writer's block has afflicted me during the thesis process. There are several different prompts of varying degrees of helpfulness, but each section and prompt begin with some anecdotal advice and comfort written by one of the several accomplished authors that helped construct the book.

While I found the entire section on point of view and tone very helpful, I found a particular prompt from the plot section really helpful. Michelle Wildgen writes a brief section on how to write sex scenes within prose. In "Hard Light" the sex that occurs between Lara and Rei was of paramount importance to me. Rei makes Lara feel safe as herself and taken care of in a strange way, so that Lara consenting to sex with a virtual intelligence makes sense given Lara's tendency to act out her desires without always giving thought to the consequences. I did not want the sex scene to be entirely pornographic, though some elements of that are interesting to explore. I wanted to create a scene in which Lara's character is driven to an action that has serious impact for both her emotional being as well as her way of being in the world. Wildgen's advice on the emotional motivations of characters in a sex scene was invaluable, as was the prompt that followed it.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Mary Oliver writes both briefly and authoritatively on the craft of poetry in this useful guide. I found that her straightforward phrasing and frank, often funny, voice was often inspiring when learning to revise my own verse. Oliver writes with such authority that it is impossible to

not to keep reading her discussion of the different aspects of poetry. Chapter by chapter she breaks down all the necessary tools a poet brings to her craft, while remaining approachable in tone and diction. Much like her poetry, Oliver's language choices in her nonfiction writing are precise and sharp.

The sections that I found most helpful were the ones on imitation, imagery, and revision. Much of our curriculum in poetry workshops revolved around imitating the poems of highly skilled and successful poets and poetic forms in order to begin feeling out our own style and ideas. This notion of learning is reflected in Oliver's work. I found for myself that many of my poems revolved one concept or one image that then grew into something greater, such as in "A Haunted House Story." Oliver's section on revision is extremely, and perhaps correctly, short. One of the main takeaways for me was on cutting pieces of a poem out in order to see which sections shine the most when separated out.

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Wonderbook: an Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*. Edited by David Cashion, Abrams Image, 2018.

Jeff Vandermeer's *Wonderbook* is hands down one of my favorite craft books—yes, in part, because it's full of pictures and visual representations of ideas, which deeply appeals to me. His collection of essays by other well-known authors and his own helpful prompts and tips all represent a refreshingly modern take on the craft of fiction in today's writing world. He also uses essays written by several famous genre writers, which I appreciate, as someone who prefers genre to all other categories of fiction writing (especially horror and science fiction). The layout of every page offers new discoveries for the reader, whether it's pro tips as a side bar to a longer essay or a flash prompt that demands a spark of creativity right then and there.

Jeff Vandermeer embraces the physicality of the text, exploiting its multi-layered medium to offer encouragement, advice, and new ideas. He even creates imaginary friends that appear to help out with different parts of writing throughout the book, presenting his, Jeremy Zerfross', and John Coulthart's illustrations of them in the preface and describing their function within the text. *Myster Odd* will always appear to show you strange things and wonderful things that kindle your creative interests, while the *Little Aliens* will appear to explain concepts brought up by *Myster Odd* in practical terms. These little cartoons have helped me immensely, as have the essays contained within this book.

VITA

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 SUMMARY

M.F.A. candidate who has experience as a professor of introductory composition and as a writing tutor to undergraduate and graduate students. Expertise in the craft of fiction and moderate knowledge of the craft of poetry. Proficient in tutoring students who are writing for several different disciplines. Proficient in literary criticism and theory.

EDUCATION

M.F.A. Creative Writing, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, May 2020 (expected)

Thesis Title: What We Do Not Perceive When We Perceive It

I currently have a GPA of 3.95. I have taken part in writing a grant proposal for funding to make flyers for the local food pantry called IGNITE Norfolk on campus, as well as working with a group of graduate students to create a training manual for this pantry's volunteers.

B.A. English, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA, May 2016

I graduated with a GPA of 3.23 and was inducted into Sigma Tau Delta (English Honor Society) for academic excellence. I also published poems in the school journal, *The Stylus*.

AWARDS

Runner-up for the 2018 ODU Poetry Society of Virginia-Academy of American Poets College Poetry Prize judged by famous poet, Chen Chen.

PUBLICATIONS

"A Man Named Richard Once Made Me Want to Light an Office Max Store on Fire." *Barely South Review*. Vol. 10.1, Fall 2018.

"Untitled." *The Asexual Journal*. Ed. Michael Paramo. Vol. 2, Iss. 4, Feb. 10, 2019.