

MONSTERS IN THE EAST

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Monsters In The East. (May 2014)

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This research is an attempt to implement various artistic aesthetics inspired by the world wars into a fictional narrative focused on an artist's struggle in wartime. Works by Tristan Tzara, William Burroughs, Andre Breton, Hugo Ball, and Jack Kerouac were read to provide aesthetic and structural inspiration. The goal of the project was, by analyzing and replicating the styles and subject matter of these artists, to put the reader into the mindset of an artist experiencing traumatic events and thus understand how war affects art.

INTRODUCTION

Art is difficult to define. An obvious definition is an object that demands admiration, such as a painting or a sculpture, while art can also define great workmanship, such as the 'art' of carpentry. Some may even define science itself as an art. Given the word's multiple applications, people often believe it is easier to define what isn't art, but this is an equally unfriendly approach. By nature, art is subjective; what some find beautiful may repulse others. More importantly, a key factor of art is self-expression, of exposing the self and one's conflicts; and a new wave of self-expression arrived during the turn of the 20th century when the First World War was raging in the east and a mass of artists, painters, and writers fled from their homes all over Europe to neutral Switzerland. These refugees would go on to borrow a back room in a club and found one of the most influential artistic movements of the 20th century: Dada. This anti-art movement was a direct reaction to the horrific violence of WWI, and one of the defining aspects of the movement was a push towards works that opposed the common ideology behind art, valuing systemization over personality and ugliness over beauty. These works garnered as much criticism as they did praise, but it's indisputable that they left an impression on the world of art, and left me with questions needing answers: in a world exposed to the horrors of war, what is art's place? Is there time for art? What is the relationship between violence and art?

The answers to these questions aren't simple, one-sentence responses. To even approach the topic, one must have a deep understanding of where art came from and an educated guess as to where it's going. To begin, I will be immersing myself in the literature most associated with the wars; that is, the Dada movement and the subsequent trends it inspired (Surrealism, the Beat

Generation, innovations of the 50's and 60's). It is through these artistic representations I hope to gain insight into the war's effect on art. I will analyze the recurrent themes of works that span genres and decades in an effort to illuminate the depth that the war influenced art and, to an extent, life.

To elaborate on my reasoning for choosing this specific movement to focus on, I offer the following: if I wish to answer the question of war's impact on art, the best place to start would be the epicenter. The people involved in Dada were literally surrounded by the war's grip, forced to relocate and abandon their lifestyles, yet still expected to 'entertain the guests'. With the outside forces closing in, these artists found that the traditional sensibilities belonged to a dead world, so they rebelled and created their own sensibilities, ones that would be passed on for generations. Now, given my rhetorical background, I expect to gain more from the writings of these movements than the visual art, as my end result will be a piece of writing.

Through my writing that will offer a performance of the paradigms operative in these artistic practices, I will attempt to answer the question of war's impact on art in a way that is accessible while also staying true to the themes and styles of the movements. Because many of the characteristics of these movements are quite obscure, I opted for a structure that would allow rapid, readily palpable reading for the reader, yet allow me to display and perform the specificity of each individual movement. The end result? Instead of splitting the differing movements into chapters, thereby obscuring the vital connective tissue that links them together, I will split the entire project into page-long micro-chapters, or "snapshots", that also contribute to a larger narrative. I believe this will allow readers to engage the topic in a much more dynamic manner while also allowing me to saturate each piece in whatever style it calls for.

However, another problem persists. Because I will be writing from the perspectives of those involved with the movements, it is difficult to assign a fiction or non-fiction label to the project. To compensate, I will add an over-arching metaphor, a backdrop, to the project; a universe where monsters exist. This figurative paradigm does multiple things for me: being able to fully declare the piece as fiction will allow me more leeway in the presentation of the aesthetics of the movements, as well as make it a more cinematic experience. I wish to show, not tell, the story. It is through these decisions that I hope to hold the audience's attention and provide insight, all while making this project my own.

In my research, I expect to find that art is a necessary part of the human experience. As humans, we crave expressing ourselves for many different reasons. Most obvious is the potential to meet other people who share similar beliefs and ideas, but we also express ourselves to therapeutic effect. Having the ability to take bottled up emotions and release them in a creative way allows us to share our experiences with others, and in that way, allows the creator to “let go” of the experience. Though they may not have said so themselves, it's clear that the arts the Dadaists produced were their ways of ‘dealing’ with the war. It was Hugo Ball that once took the stage dressed up as a bomb and proceeded to belittle the war. Art was these people's way of understanding the world around them, and it's to be argued that art provides that service to everyone. That will be my goal: to illustrate how important art is to life. To conclude, I'd like to include a quote by one of the most successful writers ever, Stephen King: “Life is not a support system for art. It's the other way around.”

Literature Review

-Tzara, Tristan. *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*. London: John Calder London,

1977. Print.

This book is a compilation of manifestoes by Tristan Tzara. Apart from being indicative of Dada's beliefs and absurdity, it's also revealing about Tzara's rhetoric. Because I will attempt to evoke the same ideas and feelings that the movement and its writings produced, this book is a prime example of the rhetoric I will emulate. It doesn't take itself seriously, it points to the banality of art, and it's hilarious at times. However, it contains almost no historical context, so I must pursue that someplace else.

-Richter, Hans. *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. London: DuMont Schauberg, 1964. Print.

Richter, a key proponent for the Dada movement, discusses Dada through a more accessible style of rhetoric. Because this writing is *about* Dada instead of actually *being* Dada, it's a more honest and objective look at the movement. I suspect this book and Hugo Ball's diary to solidify the timeline I'll be exploring, at least as far as Dada is concerned. It explores Dada from its beginnings in Zurich, Switzerland, to its migration to New York, its death, and eventual re-vitalization through the Neo-Dadaists and Surrealism. He also evaluates Dada for its successes and failures. I see myself pulling quotes and ideas from this book; it's a significant reference point.

-Ball, Hugo. *Flight Out of Time*. New York: The Viking Press, 1974. Print.

As Hugo Ball's personal diary, this piece of text has long been considered a seminal piece of the Dadaist movement. With a lengthy intro detailing an objective view on Ball's life as well as Ball's own writings, this book offers multiple perspectives on Dadaism and Ball. Similar to Tristan Tzara's writing, the style of rhetoric used by Ball is on display here. However, it is much less jovial and humorous as Tzara's. Ball seems to be more preoccupied by the politics of the movement, and comes across as an intellectual. I'll use this book for its many reference points to historical context as well as a point of emulation for Ball's writing style.

-Riding, Alan. "After Almost a Century, is Dada still Among Us?" *NYTimes*. The New York Times Company, 13 October 2005. Web. 8 July 2013.

As a relatively small article, it glazes over the entire Dada movement in a couple pages. So while it is not very in-depth, it does provide the full timeline at a short glance, including the transition from Dada to Surrealism, highlighting André Breton as a key figure. There is also a very interesting quote here: "[Dada] is the only art movement named not by critics but by the artists themselves." This insight is moderately humorous given the nonsensical name of the movement, but it also implies much more. Because the artists themselves named the movement, does that mean they had more control over it? However, because this article is so brief, I don't see it becoming central to my research.

-Balakian, Anna. "Breton and Drugs." *Yale French Studies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. Web. 8 July 2013.

Given the nature of Surrealism and its popular association with substance abuse, I grew curious about the André Breton's opinion of drugs. Fortunately, this article popped up rather quickly and easily. The author, a professor of comparative literature at New York University, states that Breton believed that use of psychoactive substances made an individual unsuitable for surrealist exploration of the human psyche. Breton also believed that every man had a "powerhouse of natural intoxicants", and "he made this hypothesis the apex of Surrealism." I see myself utilizing this article and its ideas in my work, possibly to draw parallels between the surrealist movement and the beat generation.

-Breton, Andre. "Manifesto of Surrealism." (*André Breton*). The University of Michigan Press, n.d. Web. 11 July 2013

The first official manifesto on Surrealism, this piece of text carries with it themes from Dadaism, almost as a sort of evolution, a disconnect from what held Dadaism back as an art form. In it, Breton discusses his belief in the importance of child-like imagination; without it, men have no reason to live. He also critiques the "realistic attitude", for it is "mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit." Apart from the Dadaists, his rhetoric is much more easily decipherable, not intended to confuse or bemuddle the audience, but to engage and educate them. I see this manifesto as a prime example of Breton's formal writing style, while *Nadja* is more his informal style, since it is a novel.

-Moire, Gloria. *Marcel Duchamp: Works, Writings, and Interviews*. Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2009. Print.

As the title suggests, the book is a compilation of Marcel Duchamp's assorted works, from his early paintings to his Dada readymades to his later, geometric works. It's mostly a picture book, but it also contains writings from Duchamp, and even would-be instructions for assembling various readymades. While Duchamp is a prolific member of the Dadaism in both the French and American movements, the majority of his work is visual art. Given my rhetoric background, I hope to focus more on the writings and literature of the movement. But I expect Duchamp to play small role in my work regardless.

-Burroughs, William S. *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove, 1959. Print.

As an important figure in the beat generation, Burroughs did much to push the boundaries of literature through structure and content. The rhetoric, the diction and the syntax is blisteringly fast-paced, and the novel deals with drug culture pervasively. I expect to rely on this book heavily as I attempt to emulate its rhetoric, but I'm not quite sure where I'll fit it in yet. Yes, the beat generation itself was a post-war movement, and it partially inspired the hippie movement, but the link between this movement and war and memory in contemporary France is still hazy.

-Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Viking, 1997. Print.

Another important work for the beat generation, *On the Road* is a semi-autobiographical tale of Kerouac's journey cross-country with fellow beat writers. While it deals extensively with drug use, the novel focuses on critiquing the then conformist ideals of American post-war culture. Also, like the surrealists, the novel focuses on the idea of self-exploration, of finding meaning through mere existence, even so far as linking spirituality to personal experience. I

expect to use this work as a sort of timeline for the beat writers' journey, and for its rhetorical style.

-Breton, André. *Nadja*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963. Print.

Considered an iconic work of the surrealist movement, *Nadja* uses non-linear structure and borrows existential ideas to form its narrative, a semi-autobiographical tale of Breton's interactions with a woman named Nadja. The narrator becomes obsessed with her view of the world, but after it is revealed she belongs in a sanitarium, he begins to distance himself from her. The style of rhetoric used relies heavily on existentialist questions of "Who am I?", which are later reflected in the beat generation. This may be the link between French and American movements. I expect to use this book to emulate Breton's writings.

Monsters in the East

The Artist crosses to his window and peers out. Outside: turmoil, smokestacks, single-file lines and hollow bowls. Grey, grey, and steel prop the city on its hind quarters while its front legs, those for evolution and forward movement, remain in rusty shackles. An iron cloud hangs high above like an angry fist, anxious for the just moment to reign down its supremacy and release the industrial floodgates. Behind it all, some wicked, churning machination perpetually regurgitating cold, ancient ideology straight into the mouths of the public, the sheep, the tired and worn souls saddled and ridden out. Everything rational. Everything in its slotted place.

He returns to his canvas and inspects it. Smooth strokes of soft colors: auburn red, sunshine yellow, cornflower blues adorning an emerald hillside. A lone tree in the distance, swaying. The sky a cerulean swell, expansive and undulating in waves of radiant euphoria. Two lovers gently caressing, intertwined hands, a timeless and mystical connection. Beauty, relaxation, ultimate escape. No one to hurt you and nothing to hurt you with. Everything perfect. Everything as it was meant to be.

A look outside. A glance back at the canvas. Dissonance and a dreading sense of similarity. Why doesn't the art echo the reality? Why must it be so rationa-

Tremors suddenly rattle the room pitching the canvas forward onto the floor with a thud and The Artist scrambles towards the window to catch a glimpse of something massive something terrifying something cold and steel and headed this way so into his bag go his belongings his tools for creation and down the stairs out the door into the streets where the thunderous marching stomps barely drown out the terrified tortured screams. He follows the crowd, a jostling, bumping, fleshy mass, and runs for his life.

After miles of exhaustive sprinting, a train station appears before the crowd. Next to the car doors, uniformed men waiting to stuff the masses like cattle. So many bodies rubbing together, not even space for breath. A cacophony of grunts, cries, and the low rumbling drone of an engine revving. The Artist takes one final look at his city, his home, and the mile-high steel legs disappearing into the clouds before the cabin doors shut and all becomes black.

Inside, frigid air and hushed voices. Half-cocked explanations of the folly, their fault not ours, where to lob the blame, where do we go now, what of the children never mind the children what about us. Miles of questions shot in the dark by patchwork answers. Everyone confused, everyone cold, everyone shuddering. With no more dime-store observations, the chatter dies down and is replaced with clacking teeth.

The Artist, stone somber, eyes closed, absorbed in the darkness, sees all. Feels the waves of change emanating deep inside himself. A rising bubble of inspiration, some vision of things to come, chaotic images anarchic and lawless. A dying set of rules so much closer to death. In their place something new, something so far off in the distance that a haze envelops it and shields it from being known. Impenetrable to conscious thought, the image lingers in his mind's eye when there's a slowing down of movement and finally the train stops. Someone asks where they are.

The cabin doors are thrown open and shrill beams of light penetrate the darkness. Raised hands and squint-eyes before vision returns and beyond is a city on a hill, a reprieve for all from the iron plague surrounding them. The crowd floods out of the train, into the streets, and awaits further instruction.

In the city, the streets bustle with activity. People every which way, knocking and jostling, countless faces, scrunched elbows, sardines, packed. The Artist crawls his way through the crowd with inchworm steps, nudge left nudge right, a tick in a desert, planet-side. So small, as if the whole world stumbled into the same street. From the corner of his eye, a single stationary head above the rest. A voice calls out and the crowd shifts.

A man on a soapbox with printed paper in his hand, yelling out some number, hard to hear, "...-thousand dead...", some other words lost in a sea of clamor while The Artist plods through the thick crowd shoving this way and that, finally close enough to make out what the man on the soapbox is saying, "...repeat, over a hundred thousand dead! There is an open call for soldiers! Help us fight the monster!..." and the man keeps talking but The Artist is caught in the words.

...fight the monster...

They repeat in his head.

...fight the monster...

A thought forming, a consideration of the future, what will happen if I do this, a consideration of the past, what will my family think, and one final consideration: what if this is the last thing I do.

The Artist raises his hand and yells out to the man on the soapbox. In response, the man beckons to The Artist, brings him closer, asks him his skill with a gun.

"Never tried," The Artist says, "but I'm willing."

"Pack your bags. You're going to the front lines."

After a short train ride, The Artist arrives in stock cloth to a field of naught. He looks through the field and sees himself nowhere, not a trace of his essence. Nothing but soot and black for miles of flatland. An abyss meant for the gallows yet still standing, a rope-less neck.

Behind him, ambivalent comrades file out of the train, rifles ready. Hand-picked gunmen with a thirst for blood, and they rally before The Artist, before he can load his ammo-clip with vibrating murder buttons, before he can realize his truth isn't on the field, isn't in the blood and guts of desecration. Before he can realize his purpose, before it all can happen, it happens.

A thunderous stomp some miles off that echoes back and forth through eternity becoming a thick wave of pure force that slams into the troops ripping them inside out pulverizing the flesh off their bones and grinding their bones to dust and blasting the dust into nothing.

The Artist's eyes are wide. Something inside him understands.

He turns and runs and runs and runs and runs and runs and runs with all he has, all he is, and keeps running and running. No looking back. The weight of his equipment so heavy, needing to be let go so he can run faster. He doesn't even know where he's running, but he keeps running until his legs squish beneath him with every step, until his chest is about to explode, until his labored breathing droops into pants, and then he keeps running. Exhaustion seeps from every cell in his body, he can tell he's pushing himself too hard, but it doesn't matter and he keeps running anyway.

His legs give out. He starts to crawl. He crawls until his hands are caked with blood.

And then he keeps crawling.

Figures in the distance, some sort of building, a bubble of hope in his peripherals. The Artist crosses the threshold of safety and finds himself on a street with people huddled around him, poking him, prodding him, testing his senses; but he is exhausted and beyond recognition. He is a blob on a street in a city of strangers, yet the people help him anyway. They see his pain, they see his shattered legs, blood on his coat, and they take him in.

Rags run red with his spilt blood. Dirty, sticky water surrounds him in a porcelain bathtub while his brain regenerates itself, pulsing and pulsing. The people surround him, terrified and not knowing why, but they are there for him through it all. Placing hands, crying, lifting their thoughts to God.

His recovery is slow. Days, weeks, months, who knows. Something comes to him while he sleeps, but he can't grasp it yet. Something is holding him from what he needs, but he can't see it. Not yet, not until he opens his eyes and sees the truth. Until that happens, he will bubble away in a vat of his own blood and feces. Bubbling and surging all around him, all that he is, and he can't even take the time to look at it. He is blind, and he needs something. *Something*. But it is invisible to him. Everything is black. A cold, lifeless shell. He desperately needs the breath of life, desperately needs to breathe, but his lungs are closed. His eyes are closed. Everything is closed.

A blink.

Another.

Awakening.

He feels the power surging through him, his eyes split open, and then he sees.

Some sort of bright light, a tunnel shrouded in darkness, difficult to look through. So bright, pure light right in front of him, caught in his eyes, that he has to blink. He must blink to see it unfold before him, or else it will blind him. He tries to follow the light but his body isn't ready. He knows what he must do, but it is still under construction. So instead The Artist sits and thinks about his craft, about his future, about his life and how to spend it. He only gets one.

Thoughts race through his mind at incredible pace. What to do, what to do. He reflects on his past and where to go from the present. The words come back to him.

...fight the monster...

He doesn't quite know how yet, but he sits and thinks about it for enough time for it to come to him. He ponders his existence, why he ever even came, why he was sent. He knows he has a purpose, some sort of reason, but he doesn't have the weapons he needs to fight. He's missing his gun, missing his ammo, missing *something*. He needs a reason to fight, he needs help from all the others before he can see his purpose, even though it is right in front of him. He needs help, desperately. But he's too caught up in his own mind to see what the future holds for him.

And then he touches his pocket and feels something magic. He touches his brush, he feels his creative juices, he feels his power to create the future. He knows he must use it for good, but he is not strong enough yet. He needs the rally of the town to show him his power. They must assist him in his endeavors or else he will crumble under the weight of his own shoulders.

He takes a deep breath, coughs up some blood, and says the magic word.

“Help.”

Before he can take another breath, The Artist finds himself surrounded by concerned faces and hands extended towards him, begging to be taken. *Take my hand. We are here to help. Let us help you.*

The Artist reaches out, clamps his hand around whichever he can grab first, and tries to pull himself up out of the murky water; but his muscles falter. Atrophy in the hands, in the wrists, arms, and all the rest. A burning twinge shooting from his fingertips through his nerves up and down his body, racked in pain. Scalding fire searing his internal systems, boiling away at every fiber of his being. He can't hold it in any longer.

He starts to scream.

He screams and screams and screams. He screams at the pain rupturing his body. He screams at the pain rupturing his city. He screams at the pain rupturing his planet.

But most of all, he screams.

The townsfolk look to each other for answers. How can we help this man? What is there left to do? They hoist him out of the tub still screaming, thrashing about, kicking and seizing mindlessly, and lay him on a white cot. They look on with worried eyes as his body trembles in pure agony. A kind of torturous gyration not seen before, the pain of myth, Atlas's cracked back and Jesus's pierced hands. A shattered psyche shackled to a broken body.

As his muscles spasm and convulse, a new thought enters into The Artist's mind:

I wish I was dead.

But then he hears something from beyond, something from the aether.

You aren't finished yet. There is much work to do.

Fire. Fire fire fire, searing who was and creating what could be. Rapturous, blazing fire soaring up and down, through and through, in and around. Electric signals ejecting from every synapse in every cell in every fiber of being, a crystalline phoenix rising through The Artist's body. Something so magnificent that at first glance it would appear cursed. Something so beautiful that the tears of joy might be mistaken for tears of sorrow. The crying, the shivers and the convulsions, the cortege surrounding the white cot. Them looking to another for support, for guidance, for how in the world can we save this man. Looking at the silent ghost on the white cot and wondering what they did wrong when they never did. Wondering and thinking that there must have been something more they could have done. Some token they could slot, some lever they could pull, some string to tease. *Anything to save him.*

More tears, some hugs, a letting go, and catharsis.

A white sheet, draped.

A carrying of wood and flesh.

Shovels, pickaxes.

Soft words spoken.

The color of black.

Hands held tightly.

Tear drops shed.

A six foot drop.

Dirt, packed, caved in.

And the people leave, thinking of him, dreaming, dreaming, hoping. Praying.

He opens his eyes.

He takes the first step.

He sees the gold gates.

He sees the white robes.

He scratches his eyes.

He opens his mouth.

He vibrates his throat.

He tries to use words, but they don't come, nothing comes out. Pure silence. Not even a ringing in the ears, not even a breath to be heard. Nothingness. But in that silence, there is calm. There is peace. The eye of the storm is its sanctuary. The eye of the storm. *The I of the storm. I am the storm. I am. I AM. YOU MUST....*

KEEP GOING

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

KEEP GOING.

You did this all for me?

YES.

I never asked for this.

YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO.

Why me?

IT WAS ALWAYS YOU.

Even when I faltered?

EVEN WHEN YOU FALTERED.

Even when I strayed from the path?

EVEN WHEN YOU STRAYED FROM THE PATH.

What do I tell them?

THE TRUTH.

What is the truth?

THAT I AM REAL.

And what are you?

IT.

And what is it?

ME.

What should I call you?

GOD.

But why me? I didn't deserve this. I am nothing. I am worthless. Why me?

BECAUSE I LOVE YOU.

She comes in the night battered. Torn over something, insides turned out as she kicks the dirt about the grave, spits on the nameless tombstone. Her raven hair betrays a ghostly complexion, her face etched in silent observance. The buzzing air all around her, that unmistakable pitch too high for humans to comprehend: the glisten of the void. An aching echo, beckoning. She traces her gaze to the ground.

A black rose adorning a bed of daises showing that one once cared enough to spend some time with a dead soul. She dips to the ground, touches it, watches a wave of blue fog roll through the yard. For a moment, the grass dances, and all transgression is forgiven. Under the opaque moonlight, even the darkness needs a companion.

And so, being alone on a frigid night in a graveyard, she begins to hum a tune. An ancient melody, one taught by a distant grandmother so far back in her memory that there is no face with which to associate the tender voice as she lay in her crib below those dangling mobiles and cried. Not knowing what it was she was crying over yet continuing to cry anyway. Being hushed and calmed by someone who loved and cared much more than words could ever express. Two open hearts connecting through eternity. A love loop being set in the subconscious, *when you think of me you will...*

Before the thought can finish, three distinct knocks....

Knock

Knock

Knock

...from a spot on the ground not far from where she stands. After, a muffled groan. She screams because she knows the power of the dead. She's seen it with her own eyes in the bubble and pop of charred flesh, in the open-mouth stare of those who knock at the door. She hears his

voice in the wind: W A K E M E U P

Two places at once, snub-nose with a pigeon hold, birds in the bush that bite back. The space that makes the gun, the space the bullet travels, the space of blood-spatter, all coincided by some invisible thread. Some necessary pattern of existence, ethereal geometry played out in the stars again and again, around and around, twin souls separated and bitten on the entrance.

You know that fire well, don't you? I'm sure you remember the chest palpitations. At least you recall the twitching hints, those subtle gestures reminding you who's in charge. Winks from the void urging you forward towards some unknown destiny...

And what was darkness shall emerge as light.

And so it was spoken unto the wind:

Alive, alive. Be alive.

The dreamer dreams,

The lover dies.

The slumber ends,

Emergence begins,

And what has sunk

Shall start to fly.

Take thy word,

take thou art,

take thou hand,

to mend the hearth.

Breathe in...

AND

BREATH

OUT

Hello new user. Welcome to the portal. The pattern repeats. What is it you would like?

I.... I don't understand.

What is it you would like to understand?

This... this thing. All of it. I want to understand all of it. What it means.

That is something far beyond your capacity of understanding. Pick something smaller.

What are you?

I am the system through which all that is came to be.

What am I?

You are the soul in limbo.

How do I get out?

You will be evacuated when the time is right.

And what do I do until then?

Whatever it is you like most. You ask, you receive. And so above, so below.

And what if I ask for something that is not in my best interest?

You propose, I dispose. My plan far exceeds your expectations.

Then I ask for alignment with your will.

You will be aligned.

How will you guide me?

I am always watching. If you listen, you will hear.

What happens next?

You will be sent back. Fear not, for I am always with you.

-END OF TRANSCRIPTION-

Blurred noise and the remnants of someone's speech as his eyes first open and the incredible, beaming fire of white ignites him internally. Gasping, gaping breaths. A rushing frequency through an unfamiliar body, out-of-focus visions of a ghost in the corner, the one who watches from all angles and all sides, the one who knows how to knock at the door. Those who have seen the other side know of his presence, but the man standing next to the observation table doesn't notice the sudden chill in the air. He throws up his hands in confusion and says "Why did you bring this here?"

His daughter responds. "I know a miracle when I see one."

"This shouldn't happen. The dead should stay dead."

And the ghost in the corner, the ghost in every corner, he puts a finger to his lips and smiles. His words flood into The Artist's consciousness.

They know not the nature of their reality. I will allow you a chance to show them the door.

Try and make sure it doesn't melt.

Follow the fulcrum.

****Snap****

You wake up in a bed that isn't yours next to a body you don't recognize, and she smiles when she sees you've woken. "It's about time you opened your eyes. Are you hungry?" She looks to the digital clock on your nightstand. "Jeez, it's almost noon. Come on, get out of bed." She walks to the window and you trace the slight movement of her thighs. '*She's got grace, certainly,*' you think to yourself as she pries open the drapes.

The red sun burns in your eyes, and something about its tint irks you. You try to imagine it a different color, but your mind comes up blank, and you think it away as nothing.

She takes you on a trip and makes you leave your watch at home.

“You don’t need that here.” she says as she takes your hand. “All that time staring at the clock isn’t gonna get you anywhere. It’s not real anyway.”

“How do you mean?” you ask in a voice that surprises you as it escapes your lips.

“We didn’t decide how night would swallow day, we just put numbers to it. What does three-thirty mean to the birds? And this whole idea that there isn’t enough of it. Like we’re so focused on the race and on running through this blip in eternity to accomplish all we can, consume all we can, that we end up losing the precious time we have chasing the impossible.”

“I don’t believe in the word impossible anymore.”

She smiles. “Good. That’s a good step.”

“It’s hard to put words to it. To what I’ve seen, I mean. I’m doubting things I shouldn’t and the questions I have are immense.”

“It sounds like you chased a rabbit.”

“Whatever that means.”

“Look, I’m not going to tell you this is easy. Anyone who does is a liar; spit on their shoes and think of them as rodents. The truth is this: you will start to notice small inconsistencies, and they will make you doubt the very fabric of reality. You should know by now that *coincidence* is too small a word for what’s going on. But this means you are on the right path and the ghost in the machine sees your progress and is pleased. Here, I have this for you.” She digs into her sundress pocket and pulls out a small blue capsule. “Take this when you want to wake up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t think about it too much.”

Will you have faith to know that the world functions with closed eyes? Will you have faith to know that at some point, the threads will connect? Will you have faith to keep going, even when it all seems chaos?

Dear reader, I promise you this: the time we spend together will not be wasted. I only ask that you pierce the veil of our separation. Suspend for a moment the idea that we are not one. That you, eyes glued to the page, and I, fingers tapping, are not bound by time and space to occupy our individual shells, but instead may share this moment of serenity together. It may come to surprise you that I do not know the voice in which you read these words. What is its timbre? Does it tremble when it speaks? Does it elevate the vibration of your soul, or does it charge you with chagrin? Listen, for I've got some truths to tell:

- I will die one day, and so will you, and so will everyone you've ever loved.
- The dead are more beautiful than the living because they no longer fear death.
- Everyone who's ever won, lost. And everyone who's ever lost, won.
- Things happen for a reason, or they don't.
- If you decide to push the envelope, don't be afraid if it bends.
- The world is constructed of duality. Everything has its opposite.
- The universe has a rhythm. Find it, and make your dance.
- Everything is eternal, yet nothing lasts forever.
- If you think you're being initiated, you probably are.
- The sooner you realize that you live in the mind, the sooner you control your reality.
- Every decision you make will echo on into eternity.
- Life is a ride. You live in the realm of infinite creation. Try to enjoy yourself.

A red car on a road, a blue car on a road. Two cars traveling the same distance, at the same speed, in the same direction, with a world between them. Neither knowing of the other's progress, neither knowing of the other's existence, but the rhythm in their brain tells them how fast to go. Completely oblivious to the other car, completely oblivious to the space between them, the soothsayer sees only one. The one who pulls the strings, the ghost in the corner, sees only a toddler babbling and dribbling over itself, food spilled to the floor, a dash of tomato paste while the mother folds into herself and the father grips the dog's neck. Shake shake shake, he does, and that dog yelps a primal gutterance. The kid's crying now because he sees that the dog is changed and doesn't know why. The dog cannot understand why following its desires caused itself harm, and the kid doesn't understand that the lesson isn't for the dog, it's for him, for his future self, who will go on to save a community with a data bank of haunted memories that must be transmuted. He who will go on when all is dark. He who will turn evil into good. He who will unite his people. He who will save his planet.

But first he must wake up to his power, and he must use his power to wake up the people.

But he's just a kid, they'll say.

Everyone is just a kid, the ghost says.

But he is very weak, they'll say.

Everyone has a weakness, the ghost says.

But he will surely fail, they'll say.

Everyone fails, the ghost says.

But he will surely die, they'll say.

I wouldn't be so sure of that, the ghost says, cheshire smile.

The double-helix carnival marriage goes round the bend, side-stepping a reality where The Artist died long ago, a set of infinite realities nested into a single blip connected to another set of infinite realities along a grid of possibilities all transpiring simultaneously. The hypercube of potentiality gains a new observer, another set of spider eyes and mouth like a hurricane. Hive mind warped through a green haze. Electromagnetic webs running concurrently to the skin. A tickle, a bubble and pop. The creeper's blood will always find its way through, the wrinkles will continue to build. Memories shift from left to right, a paradigmatic network being re-wired.

The mother queen moth spider peels back her scalp and the harvest is revealed: an overgrown field of tar seeds. Mushy, black polyps that claw and crawl amongst and out of the queen's head, spilling onto her crystal skin and digging into her retinas. She opens her mouth to let the creepers in, and her digimorphic cackle rattles the dark clouds above. The spider-like polyps slink their way down to her crimson belly, and that glowing furnace of eternal hunger bellows its call for more. *More. Must have more. Feed me more. I need the experience.*

Ghost hands spring a new cord, a new jack, just for her. Biomechanical worms ooze out of the jack looking for a place of slumber, some wormhole to occupy, while the hands guide it towards the back of mother queen moth spider's head. Sparked, flicked, teased and ready, they plug her in...

D	L	C	E
O	O	O	N
W	A	M	C
N	D	M	E

Even though it opposes her father's wishes, the girl peers in while the body rests. She steps next to the body and bends down to whisper into its ear.

“You came back for us, didn't you? You came back to save us? They've spoken about this sort of thing. They told myths of men who could transcend mortality, those who rose above. What have you seen? What secrets will you expose? I've not told the others about you, they'd think me mad... I know you can't hear me, but I have faith in you. I can't wait to talk to you, to give you my name, to hear your name spoken aloud. Don't think me ill of this, but I wait for you in my dreams. I see you how you might've been before the devil took a bite. In case you're wondering how things are going on the outside, hope is waning. The people don't see an outcome, they wonder what happens next. The beast is growing and we are nothing but the putty under its feet. Beasts like that come from somewhere, they have to come from somewhere. There's talk that this is the end times, but I think everyone thinks the sky is falling. Maybe it gives us a reason to keep going, like we need to see it all end. Maybe there'll be a beautiful explosion in the night sky, something like a celestial painting. I'd live to see that. If all the pain and suffering and torture and killing and hatred and deceit and manipulation could all pop like a bubble shrouded in light, I might forgive Him. It might all make sense and we could laugh about the fatherless children and the endless grave sites and the phantom pain we all share. I know there is good in life, it's just hard to see in times like these. There's a fog on the horizon. I can feel it, and I know you can too. I think maybe you can fix it somehow. I don't know how you will, but I have fait-“

FAITH

IN

WHAT

His body shakes on the cold observation table, legs twitching like lightning, that jolt of electric fire setting off an eruption of sensory information. A flood of blue heat ices his nerves before they are gripped and torn apart. The pain so immense, his consciousness cannot fathom it. The only feeling is a blitzing white noise that penetrates deep into his mind. Something in him is burned away, the body's previous tenant seared out into the abyss to wander eternally. A necessary sacrifice, but not one without repercussion.

'All things are made anew,' whispers the ghost as he rips a soul into his ever-expanding mouth, devouring another entity into his gullet. There is a walled-in scream from the ghost, but it is muted by the infectious white noise crawling under The Artist's skin, those white spiders nesting and weaving, pulling internal strings. His mouth forms a silent circle while his eyes melt from the thunderstorm within. A pounding pressure on his skull like a seed had been planted and came to fruition, like a prophetic tumor swelling while it whispers dirty secrets into his mind. Voices that come from nowhere and belong to no one, re-writing the genealogy of destiny. His blood ices when it feels the spirits pass over. Omni-dimensional beings that search for vessels to occupy, for which they might share their most blessed curse: contorted truth.

We're here to help, they whisper, *there is no need to fear us.* Serpentine voices and gloved hands with a knife behind the back, searching for some hapless soul to drag down. Those who would burn simply for the sake of burning. Depth-dwellers intent on bubonic corruption, inverted-cross-dressed messiahs that rise from the grave to change places.

That which you cannot control will come to control you, whispers a voice...

You are being controlled by strings of which you have no vision, whispers a voice...

May your blood be dripped with bile and your head removed, whispers a voice...

Gravity-bound ghosts peer through the other side looking for those who look back, the Million Mirror Man steps sideways in time with his briefcase and a pink smile, liquid ooze dribbling out of his burning ears, some scarlet secret waiting to be told. Hushed hands with a wave and a how'd-ya-do shimmy shake, death gripped oxen heads placated via mosaic of their ascended ancestors that travelled all the way up the food chain to end in some crud bucket behind a gas stop owned by a guy named Jeffery. Fornication defecation. The talk of idols and kings matter not when the darkness seeps through. No amount of cash can halt lamb's blood.

Sparks of black shadow appear in the mist as it overtakes the city on a hill. Nether energy formed in grime clouds rolls the streets, touches the citizens with plague-skull cryptosis that renders them effectively numb if you were to not count the horrendous bladder pain, that lead-gut drain that saps them of their soul. They speak of the conversion process like it is a blessing. "I don't feel anything at all, whoopee me!" or the usual "We're safe in our bubble!" Hope and faith never won a war. It was the guns, it was the hands that held the guns, it was the men hidden in robes and black garb bewitching their enemies, it was the crystal witches haunched over a dabbling cauldron, it was the invisible and celestial chess match, it was the idiots who didn't know they were idiots. It was the conduits for hell and damnation and Satan's dark-workers, those bathed in the blood of religious zealotry, casting down equals with inverted-triangle language. Words written backwards and forwards. The very code of reality programmed into the subconscious via meaningless dribble, the babbling of an infant-deity pried from his suckle teat. You know the type: pushes for more surveillance, more military weaponry, pushes for industrial monsters in an attempt to control the masses, hides behind a codex of hidden language and symbolism. Hates bigots. Loves sports. Makes millions on bloodshed and famine.

The Puppets on stage look up at their strings in glorious wonder. *What hands are these that made us and control us? Surely they must reign supreme!*

The Puppeteer looks up at the spotlight in fantastic amazement. *What hands are these that guided me to this moment? Surely they must reign supreme!*

The Audience looks on stage with drop-jaw awe. *What hands are these that gifted this man with such talent? Surely they must reign supreme!*

* * * * *

The Cameras buzz and whirl with distilled indifference...

* * * **MILES AWAY** * * *

The Family watches on with silent compliance. *What hands are these that gave us the joy of television? Surely they must reign supreme!*

* * * **MANY MILES AWAY** * * *

The Agency peers in with hushed observance. *What hands are these that allow us to monitor all of humanity? Surely they must reign supreme!*

* * * **MANY MORE MILES AWAY** * * *

The Initiates huddle over a dark orb. *What hands are these that constructed the matrix of reality and elevated us above the sheep? Surely they must reign supreme!*

* * * **MANY MANY MORE MILES AWAY** * * *

The Soldiers stare death in the eyes with terrified horror. *What hands are these that created such abyssal monsters? Surely they m- *STOMPED DEAD**

The Reader reads on with [insert current emotional trend]. [*Insert metaphorical device contemplating the meaning of a higher being.*]

The Godhead figurine, stoned, beckons with a weary finger. “Look, I’ll tell you this. From up here, the view is perfect. Enough color and vibrance to electrocute everything all at once. It’s a bliss-trap is what it is, like how when you’re riding that roller coaster, shucking on up the hill how it take so long, but then The Fall...

“And just like that all that time spent climbing was worth it for a few moments of bliss...

“But what they don’t tell ya is, without no one to show it to it kinda don’t mean nothing. Like a blind man with Miss America. Wasted.

“Sure you can get back on again, ‘ride the spiral’ and all that, but eventually you gonna wish there were another pair of eyes to look with you and maybe a soft voice.

“Given eternity, *what would you do?*

“So I took to writing a story and still am writing that story. But sometimes the people in it don’t act the way I think they should, or close a door, or shoot they-selves. Oftentimes, people is so bad that I have to cut strings. And I don’t like killin’ what I create because it’s a part of me, but when things go sour, I send in The Flood.

“People tend to hear me differently, depending on who they are or who they think they are, but because I’m in everything, they’re all right.

“It’s like this: a game of chess against yourself. There’s not really a winner or loser, but pieces still have to fall. It’s just a part of the game. After all, a performer does want to impress his audience...

“Funny thing is, it’s a mirror-house, both internal and external. Nothing but reflections of the eternal broken down through light prisms into shapes and sizes, chemicals and data...

“Life is basically one big placebo effect.”

“Shimmering Beacon of Hope Arisen from Ash, or Cursed Abomination Sent Back to Suffer?” read the papers of the dead. Word-dealers and information-junkies alike all crowded around gripping tar ink’d paper with grit-black hands, ear-grins and a flicked nickel to the man behind the curtain with his black robe and black hat and black eyes, gateways to nothing. Smiles bought at an auction house on the cheap, water supplies amuck with tar, back-channeling dark matter dabbled into pill-poppers of all kinds, kickin’ the habit for a new one. Buying into whatever’s being sold, addicts hooked on post-modern junk, digital ooze found in the crevices of scientific horror-shows, eruptions of bile and protoplasmic goop spat into a syringe and injected past the vein of civilization straight into the hearts of the people. World-views condensed to the hot shot of an endorphin kick, pure saturated bliss breaking apart each strand of conscious cellular activity, all systems slowing down to a dead desert crawl. Fish caught on grimy hooks laid bare by hands more red than the blood they spill.

Those who swallow the pill of deception are identifiable by the following signs: seared-black and hollow eyes, upside-down lips with swords for tongues, psychosomatic schizophrenia in absentia via paranoid delusions, subconscious triggers brought on by sub-atomic suggestion, a poisonous, invisible gunk hidden in charming language, lies lies lies and not a single eye to dot, not a single cross to bear, barely enough cognitive function to process the garbage-sucking putrid stash sulking on a wooden table next to a dull and dirty needle. And so the infection spreads...

Noisy information has a habit of passing along easily when it’s forced. Gloved hands have a way with words. The fate dictated is usually the fate chosen. If presented a rope, most mentally-unstable scum will throat it and kick the chair. Single-file sheep can’t see the cliffside. If an old dog can learn new tricks, can it contract new mental deficiencies?

Rumors of his awakening spread and the first disease-infested thought is “how can we appropriate funds for his arrival?” The Second Coming charted out on polygraphs and TPS reports, gauged into think-tanks and Q&A sessions. Board meetings over the placement of nails into his hands. The Apocalypse demonstrated to prospective investors with a side of sparkling cider. Diet-pills that seep into the brainstem and cease all organic function. Government facts that don’t add up, industrial zones closed off from the public, dirty money exchanging dirty hands, ritualistic ceremonies invoking spiritual warfare, invisible explosions shaping the playing field of the physical, blood-soaked and taped-off doorways re-opened on a whim.

The big players hunting down people for sport in a dim alley, behind some dumpster, a note in a suitcase cached from some hazy night lost on binge-drunk memory. Codes tattooed onto bodies hung over bridges; iced. The cat calls, the car beckons...

Fun-runs back and forth to death’s door, walking a tight rope on the point of no return in an attempt to glimpse a reality more absurd than the last. White walls that whisper white lies, a padded box maintaining an insomniac’s existential breakdown. Distorted networks broadcasting a looped signal through the consciousness, a looped signal through the consciousness, a looped signal through, a looped signal breaking into patternless frequencies that jig and jag sideways and laterally. Encoded information passed generation through generation in the hopes that someone might eventually make sense of it. *What does it all mean, anyway?*

All of us, we’re still waiting for the pain to subside, but it never will. Without conflict, without an antagonizing force, the world would stop spinning. Given a perfect planet, meteors would eventually crater. Disaster would strike. Conflict would find us. Provided no context, two people in a room will eventually come to hate each other. *It’s just the way we’re written.*

Information can be surgically implanted. Tongues of scalpel cut to the heart of belief. There comes a burden of truth once your ears are open to the silence and you realize it doesn't exist. When you think about it, thoughts don't come from anywhere. When you think about it...

Faces form in the fog. A dark mist rolls through the once safe haven carrying with it embedded information. Bits and pieces of a story broadcasted through radio waves, something for the sheep to nibble on. Directives for agents so undercover they don't know they're agents. They think their ideas are self-generated.

For early termination, all you need is a sullen suggestion and a spot of good timing.

Yes, they think, life IS meaningless. I DON'T deserve this. And then it's curtains.

The Ancient Ones used to say that thought itself was a form of communication with the Divine. That our every thought would eventually manifest itself into our life, and that we attracted our fates.

So, in that way, we've been playing God longer than we thought. Only we don't call them God. We call them handlers. They tell the agents what to do. We won't concern ourselves with who tells the handlers what to do.

The system is not without its flaws. Once a handler forgot to tell his agent that he needed to eat and the man starved to death. If an agent becomes disconnected from his handler, any number of symptoms could occur. There have been reports of gouged eyes, unsanctioned murders, monstrous cancer polyps, limb leprosy, sudden and inexplicable death. The list goes on, really. We're working out the kinks.

And about those Ancient Ones?

There's a reason they didn't make it.

Directive: Find and neutralize the target by any means. The target is an enemy of the state and people everywhere. The target has made allegiance with dark and dangerous forces. The target has defied natural law in an attempt to overthrow divine order. The target is unaware of the consequences of his actions. The target holds ideas that, if released to the public, would be poisonous to authority everywhere. The target will attempt to spread these ideas by any means. The target is violently non-violent. The target feeds off an audience's attention. The target's sense of self is slowly waning. The target wears many masks. The target is very insecure, probably.

In the case that the target makes no attempt to spread these ideas, measure must still be taken. No allowance may be given to the target. The target envisions a world of peace in conflict with the current capitalist model. If spread, the target's ideas have the potential to dissolve cultural trends and upset statistical norms. There's no telling the effect the target's ideas might have on spreadsheets. Lunch breaks the world over might be cut short if the target's ideas leak. The boss's kid will (of course) take a rebellious interest in the target's ideas, but it's just a phase, really. He's just having a hard time at school right now, Karen.

The target is not able to be located physically, for he frequently changes bodies, or occupies many bodies simultaneously. The target could be anyone at anytime. The target could be everyone. I could be the target. You could be the target. Maybe there is no target...

Maintaining the notion that the target may not even exist, the target is still a threat. Understanding that my occupation would be meaningless if not for a target to exploit, the target is still a threat. Realizing the vanity of happiness given the certainty of death, the target is still a threat. Grasping that love is a mental construct instigated by chemicals, the target is still a threat.

Pondering if anyone ever gets this life thing figured out, the target is still a threat.

It's a dark purple night sky when the raindrops start to fall. Lightning cracks in the far-off and thunder rolls through the city on a hill. Children and adults alike shut themselves indoors, socket the lock and shelter the wares. Candles shush out, nothing to hear but the pattering of rain on slate steadily growing stronger. A thick white rod connecting the Heavens and the earth, and moments later a piercing rumble that shakes the foundation.

And yet somewhere beyond the deafening roar, a man groaning in the night. Tossing and turning over impossibilities played out, over wiped memories and their implanted replacements, over the nagging sensation that he's been here before, over and over again, tossing and turning and churning his blue belly filled with regret over what comes next.

The face of fear has many masks and most of them are smiling, handing you their business cards...

Vampires lost their scare factor long ago. Now they waste away in call centers, DMV's, behind the counter at the local diner, peddling junk in alleyways. *Frankenstein's Monster, Attorney At Law. Cthulhu's Daycare Center.* When we stop being scared of our nightmares, we stop being scared of what controls us, and that scares the big players.

Funny thing about a guilty conscience is, even if nothing goes wrong, even if the plan goes off hitch-less, death takes a little slice of their soul. You can see it in their eyes, that cold hollow. The best liars give up their souls at birth so there's not any discomfort when their body becomes occupied by parasitic demons. Their eyes were never alive to begin with.

And so Mr. Tossing and Turning over his duty rolls out of bed, shuffles to the kitchen where he keeps his knives, walks to the back room where the body is being kept, raises his hands over the body and is about to bring the blade down when it has a coughing fit and he freezes.

Footsteps clatter down the hallway, echoing down to the back room with Mr. Tossing and Turning and his quick hiding of the knife when his daughter arrives in her pajamas and asks “Did he cough?”

“Go back to bed dear, the hour’s quite late.”

“I could’ve sworn I heard him cough.” she says as she crosses to his body and touches his forehead. “It feels warm.”

“Now, you must get back to bed. Why are you still awake?”

“Did you hear him cough?”

“No, and I’m not sure why it matters.”

“Wait, why are you back here?”

“Look,” he says as he clasps her hands in his, “it is far past dark, and you need your rest. Go to bed dear.”

“What were you planning on doing to him?” she asks, tearing her hands from his.

“What are you talking about? I have no plan!”

“You were going to hurt him, weren’t you? You were going to kill him.”

“I’ve heard enough of this!”

“You can’t touch him, father. He is blessed, can’t you see?”

And he pulls his face close to hers and says “No. That man is cursed. That *thing* did something to ignite the fires of hell, and he came up with them. There’s no telling what he’ll do once he’s awake, and I don’t plan on letting that happen.” He grabs his knife and approaches the body and even though the girl tugs and tugs with all her might she cannot stop his arm’s descent.

But the body reacts involuntarily, deflects the knife with a wrist, and takes its first breath.

To watch a body become a man, to see the breath of life enter into one's nostrils, to hear one's initial coughs and gags... To look on as his chest rises and falls, as his eyes blink and the look of conscious thought manifests on his face. As he speaks, and the cadence of his voice syncs with the clang of metal on floor, a knife helplessly dropped, and his question: "What happened?"

White-faced and backward-stepping, stumbling over themselves, they have not an answer. "What are you?" asks the father. "*What are you?*"

The Artist looks down at his hands and sees the splotched wrinkles of age, pink and blue veins criss-crossing up and down his arm, an unfamiliar body given re-assignment. "The last thing I remember was a forest of trees, and I was walking with a woman who gave me this..." he reaches down for a pocket not realizing he is naked, and then says "What did you do with my clothes?"

"You didn't have any when we found you."

"But... I was carrying a blue pill..." And for a second, out of the periphery of his vision, The Artist glances the ghost in the machine smiling in the corner with a finger to his mouth, and then shadows. "The pill! I need the pill to wake up!" he says.

"There was no pill. What are you talking about?"

"I'm not here. I'm not here. This isn't happening." he repeats as his knees find their way to his chest and his arms cross. The daughter looks on with confused empathy, for she knows not what he has seen, she knows not of the door nor its special knock. Her mind's lens has not been penetrated by the illness of evil or the brilliance of re-birth. Her innocence blinds her, and yet that is the source of her freedom. She speaks to The Artist in a hushed, calm tone.

"How can we help you?"

Shivering jowls chatter in the harsh moonlight when The Artist sees his reflection in the river waters. Past the cold stream and droplet ripples, he saw a face that wasn't his with eyes dead as history. Fatigue catches his breath. He can't look away. His nose is stubbed and slightly to the right. He has small lines running from his cheek to his mouth. It's just not him.

The Wind: “ ...*give it back...*”

Red paranoia drips down his back and he gets the chills when the voices call. And it is a matter of *when*. It seems those who cross over are more, shall we say, *attuned* to their beckon (From me to you: don't take advice from a clock).

As words drift through the silence in one ear and out the other, limbs jerk without synaptic reason. He can feel the spirits speaking to him, driving themselves inside his head, and it is a conscious battle between resistance and submission. Anything, anything at all to get the voices to stop. No plugging of the ears or numbing of the mind can gag that which bubbles from within. They demand their voices be heard, their stories be told. *The words will be written, and that is final.*

His eyes tear from their shadow reflection and his feet kick up dirt as he sprints back to the girl's house, through the door, right up to where they keep the pens. He finds a ream of paper and sits down at a desk. The moment his pen touches the paper, information floods his nervous system. Sentences and words not yet spoken, stories gone untold for centuries automatically downloaded and channeled through The Artist. His pen becomes a portal for the unknown dimensions of reality, allowing emotions of the dead to overflow onto the page. Frantic are his movements, the letters scribbled and scrawled with not enough time to even read the words being ejected. His hand begins to cramp, but his mind, for the time being, goes without torment.

I have a house on the hills where you can count the stars. There is a wooden porch where I go and look out over the valley. Every night the sun falls out of the sky. I do my pining there.

When night comes and it gets quiet, you can hear wolves howl.

My family used to go there during our summers and drink and dance and fight the wolves for attention. We didn't have speakers so we made our own music. The floor was drums and our voices were angels. No one told us to keep it down and that was how we liked it. We didn't discriminate meals: when morning was after noon, everything was breakfast.

To cure a hangover: left on Beaumont st., take the curve to Dale's, eat a burger but don't pay; wink at the waitress instead, down two blocks for a malt, split the bill with Joey (he's always at the bar with a couple broads whose names keep changing), up the road to the drugstore where kids sell lemonade and don't have the legs to chase, back up to Mount The Air Is Nothing to celebrate a day well wasted with a pint and another hangover. Chase something you can never catch.

Back then it used to be an ordeal. Everyone and their second cousin made an appearance. That was before the family spread out and the proximity stopped mending our differences. Letters only get sent if they're written. Now when I visit the only welcome is the dust mat on the front porch. I don't even fake a smile. The fridge is empty and has enough room for my beer.

I'm still getting used to the process. They tell me to contact someone if I need to talk, and I do, but people have a way of knowing what you don't want to talk about and then talking about it anyway. They pour consoling words on deaf ears while I pop another cap off.

It's true. People die *all the time*.

It wasn't the classiest bar. The barstools were bare, and the patrons on them weren't donning tuxedos or evening gowns and most weren't even wearing smiles. I stepped up to the plate and made my order. "Gin, on ice. Don't spit in it, please."

He gave me a queer look, then went to work. I slicked my hair back and searched the bar for a shell of a man.

The barman finished my drink and slid it to me. "That was the old bartender." He tried to wink, but closed both eyes, and then he tended someone else down the bar.

I took a drink. No spit. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a red-eyed man stumbling out of the bathroom. Bingo.

I went over to him and gave him my best nice guy routine. Told him I owed him a drink, that we made a bet and I lost. He said, "Darn if I don't recall, but I could sure use some wings."

The barman saw my hand in the air and handed me another round, this time with two glasses. While buddy wasn't looking, I slipped the pill into his glass and it fizzed for only a moment before it set, invisible to the world, and down the hatch it went. I sipped on my glass, smiling.

We talked for a while about war and politics and about how life's one big mushroom cloud when he started feeling queasy and said he needed a cab. I flagged the barman, told him I'd take him home, and everyone got grateful.

Only I don't think he liked it as much when he woke up with a gag in his mouth and a price on his head.

You'd be surprised how much people are worth these days.

It starts off slowly.

No, it doesn't. Well, it does if you believe in the "we are born dying" philosophy. In that case, there's nothing slower. But I'm not talking about that.

First come the tracers. They're like echoes of movement in your vision. Say someone walks in front of you, you see where they are and where they were at the same time. Then the patterns emerge. If you had an autistic child obsessed with geometric patterns draw you a landscape, you might begin to understand what this is like. Everything, from the trees to the moon, becomes composed of shifting, morphing fractals. This is all happening in the span of ten seconds.

So no, I can't say it starts off slowly.

From there... Who's to say how long it was? Time was invented by clockmakers and calendar photographers. It melted away like all the rest. The memory is like golden sand in my hands, slipping between my fingers...

And then you realize that you aren't a body. But you also realize that you're trapped in a body.

There are lots of colors, not just one bright light, and there are five-sided columns with faces on each side. It doesn't really feel like anything because it more feels like everything.

As far as Heaven or Hell is concerned, whatever it is, it's a busy place. Whoever said sleep is the cousin of death obviously never tried it out himself. The afterlife doesn't seem fit for the lazy. I used to ask "What if I don't want to go on forever?" But then I realized I wasn't talking about the afterlife.

The first time I died, I came back with one sentence: *You don't know what I'm capable of.*

Drop-top skillet and my mind on the rack when she steps up to your plate and starts to dance. Those gyrations, killer cut split wrists and pops her high, high high high when your hand finally sees the light and the vibration takes over. That cold steel in your grip on your lap in your mouth and she's showing you her trigger.

I sit back watching.

Hand on the crankshaft and flames roaring in her eyes, she wants to bite the apple and her chains are loosening, losing your grip on what's yours and testing the waters. Those ice-cold hot tub jitters, that popped socket shock to your system, liquid eyes and dripping blood. High heels stomped into eye sockets with a smile and a laugh.

Still watching.

It's a first with the skin, who really touched who, who can know, who? What was that? She's smiling as she pulls the axe from behind her back. And you, so blind, can't see the snake as she slithers out of her dress. A red satin bra dangling from cauldron witch fingers. Whose eyes are deceiving who?

Watching, laughing.

Those curled fingers, those mountain peaks, pretty in pink, popped off and popped on your lap with a soft squish. Warmth emanating from a black hole.

Me, laughing, crying, rolling on the floor.

You, sucked into the abyss, invisible, blind with no hands to feel the black walls.

Her, dancing in the moonlight, always watching and waiting. "Get, whore."

I throw her her money and she scampers off. I take you by the hand, lead you home.

We stop on the way to get some more.

The beat rolls, hills move silent across the tarmac sky. Gone, far away, jetted someplace left of nowhere in a stolen ride. Silver candy in my pocket, howl goes the tangent night. Another city gone, another midnight trail. We break our backs to flak the frigid air. Spit shot high and mighty my, my God; a pale everglade passes on our right and we hear the mermaid's music so clear it was colors in the far beyond. Black trees with neon painted leafs burn on that melody.

A man on the road wearing goggles and a bandana over his nose and mouth is playing his bongos during a dust storm. He waves as we pass by at 75. We feel his rhythm in the road bumps for miles.

Buddy yells at me across the dirt about a friend he had back south that lost both his hands panning for gold. His veins turned to rust before they crumbled entirely and drifted away with the waters. Made a fortune though. Said he made more money than he could hold.

We pass bubbling tar pits stiff with dinosaur bones, past giant industrial cigarettes puffing smoke into the air, past islands made of garbage, past fields of prosthetic legs with stilettos stuck to the sky, past abandoned buildings half-devoured by the encroaching wasteland.

This is the kind of place where a bottle of water is the only thing that exists, I think as the machine's engine echoes a rumbling jank through and through the dry desert dregs. Coughed-up lungs litter the sand. Somewhere from afar, the stench of smoke sulks in so thick you could taste it. "There's a single smoking spot in this whole county, and we just found it!" yells buddy in the passenger.

"No," I yell, "it found us!" And we blaze by, counting the power lines on one hand and roadkill on the other three.

Lots changed after the wars. Things have a habit of changing after everything dies.

When I wake up the sun is still gone, tucked behind the grey and ashen sky. Its rays struggle through that grey but it's not enough to break through the grime in the air, in my lungs. The grit between my fingers. A cold slush sloshes in my boots and I can feel the decayed parts of my feet rotting.

It's cold. I take a shaky breath and it disagrees with me so onto the coughing. Those punches to the chest. Thumps that steal what little warmth I have left. I try to silence it but I'm too slow. She stirs beside me and then she's awake. Her voice drags along the dirt. "I'm hungry."

"I know."

She shivers and sees her breath and says "It's cold."

I take my jacket off and drape it around her. Iced winds scald me but I don't let her hear my teeth chattering.

"Shhh. Go back to sleep."

"But I'm hungry."

"Me too."

I take her head into my lap and stroke her hair and tell her it's gonna be ok it's gonna be ok just go to sleep when you wake up everything will be ok. When you wake up the sun will be shining and it'll be nice and warm and we'll cook eggs and beans and pancakes just how mom used to make and have a glass of orange juice and see you off to school before the bus comes before all this darkness ate the world. She's asleep again.

I ease her off my lap and plant one foot on the ground, plant the other, struggle to push myself up and then I'm standing. I trudge through the snow and peer over the upcoming valley and I search and search and search and all I see is grey.

Nodding off from mental exhaustion, The Artist relinquishes control to the encroaching darkness...

His visions, in no particular order: Black highways leaking onto the sand, bodies chopped up in sewers, a woman's face from the past, spiderwebs that glow green, an open mouth swallowing eternity. A hitchhiker relaying stories to his extraterrestrial pickup. Vibrating pink strings that stretch on forever; the veil of God. Syringes gorged on sentient goop. Haunched homeless over fire barrels. A man on a stage dressed as a bomb. Cracked egg delight sunrise pasteur grey dawn closure post-mortem surprise pawn strike Christ. Child hugging terminal grandmother prayer lightning BANG whip crackle chronos *secret whisper time is nothing* forked road bent sideways saddle falling ladder clutch void passed through and thorough search pad haircut barbed transfer white coat black paint bless bleed and they all fall down...

The ground opens and beneath all to be seen are outstretched hands. *It's all true. Dust to dust...*

In the far distance, a lone tree, swaying...

Don't let them think, tell them what to think...

Green bankers with purse and puppet painting pentagrams. Committees dedicated to the toxification of all living matter. The possession jumps from vessel to vessel in an instant...

The ghost in the machine is cursed to see all that is without a hand with which to intervene. His minions can only poke and prod. Those who hear his call are already dead.

From nowhere, the scent of burning gasoline. The Artist's visions contort to include a reason for the stench, papers set aflame, a story wrongly worded, trashcans stuffed with dead wood, forced from blackness awoken into a burning room and he begins to run, again, again...

The city smolders under a midnight sun. Decrepit architecture slides like wax onto the pavement, a footstep forms and hardens, more, stampeding steps and shout out loud if you can hear me, no this way is safer, running, ducking under tumbling lumber, shoes with no feet in them half-melted to the ground, burned bodies on the sidewalks, and coughing, coughing, coughing.

A mass of people emerge from the city and turn around to look. The flames eat away at the town like acid, dissolving any semblance of survival. Doomed. They shudder and huddle together in the darkness, agreeing in silence that no, things will never go back to normal. The Artist separates from the group to peer up at the stars, seeing stories of warfare and heroics and valor and glory, of Gods and Goddesses and the beasts they slayed, half expecting the source of it all to reign down and save everything, but of course that doesn't happen. He walks back over to the people, looks at the town, and knows in his heart that it isn't over. There is more to be done. There is always more to be done. - - -

I put down my pen and step away from my desk. I walk to the fridge for a glass of water, and then I go outside to drink it. The blue daises are back in bloom, across the street, in my neighbor's yard. Mine has children's toys scattered amongst its patchy grass. The fresh evening air moves softly through my nostrils, and I hear harmless screams from the local kids at play. I am rejuvenated nonetheless. I finish my water and head back inside, passing my roommate who asks me how my writing is coming along. "Slowly," I say. "I'm still figuring out how it ends."

"Maybe it's not supposed to." He says, and I know he's just saying something to say something, but I smile anyway.

CONCLUSION

I came to this project with the expectation that, as I traversed my literature and digested the ideas on display, some magical moment would occur where I would suddenly know what I wanted to say. That some perfect, invisible thread would appear just for me to seize and unravel. But the truth is, the further along I got in my reading, the more undefined my topic became. What I had expected to be a simple in-and-out procedure to secure “the reason artists do art” had me questioning what art was, and what it was to me personally. I realized that, even when I put the books down and turned off “thesis mode”, I was still digesting art everywhere. The music that wakes me up, the car I drive to school, the buildings I have class in. It’s inescapable: art is everywhere, not just in some gallery. And so, I had to re-define what art is. And what is art? At its purest form, expression. It is the ability to create what was not already there. Yes, it has many different means and ends, but at its core art is the human impulse to create, to share.

Ok. So we have that. But now what? What to take from this exercise?

I suppose I could provide interpretations for the above text, say how it’s about the death and rebirth of art, or how it’s a meta-narrative about the writing of this very thesis, but as time goes on I come to realize that the pieces that stick out the most to me are the ones that leave themselves open for interpretation. The films and stories that don’t come together in perfect order, because in a way, that’s how our world works. We don’t have plot lines that get tied up at the very end, or explanations for why things happen the way they do. They simply happen and we adapt to them, hopefully learning something in the process. In a way, that’s kind of how this paper came to be written. When someone approaches you with an opportunity to research something you’ve always been interested in while also giving school credit, it’s hard to say no.

So, would I say that I answered my initial questions? Yes and no. Yes, in that, through the writing of this fiction, I came to sympathize with writers everywhere dealing with the dissonance between the world of fiction and reality. But also no, because nothing is universal, neither the reasons for art's creation nor its reception. People will like what they like, and people will make what they make. And while the wars did greatly influence the world of art (and the world at large), as a society we aren't solely focused on war. There are still romance movies. There are still neighborhood baseball games. I suppose that art helped us get past the darkness in our history by intellectualizing it, by putting it on display for all to see and feel. Akin to an airing of dirty laundry in that way. Only instead of personal laundry, it belongs to all of us.

History is a difficult thing, because it seems the more we try to understand it, the more we understand the process by which it is written. That is to say, chaotically, and with much opinion. I hope that in time, the amount of effort put into understanding the past will be put into creating the future. But these are merely words, and this is a thesis conclusion section, so I have wrapping up to do.

In conclusion (I always loved those words), the effect of the wars on art is still being felt today, and will most likely still be felt for years to come. Art allows us to interpret the world around us and connect with those who we wouldn't connect to otherwise. It truly is a beautiful thing.

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