

PROBABLE
MEMORY

ciel young

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ISBN: 9798251019247

Thank you to Kit Riemer, for writing North Alter and letting me rip off whatever I needed to, and for being an ardent supporter of my work. This book would not exist without you. I love you.

Thank you to Palimrya Cannonglass for helping me get over many misconceptions about writing that simply didn't need to be believed, and for being a dear friend. This book would not exist without you. I love you.

Thank you to Nathan Urban and Rory Grealy for never being stingy with materials in a world that runs on materials. I am convinced that I would not be alive right now without the aid you two have given me. This book would not exist without you. I love you.

There are many other people that I could thank and truly want to thank, but the list has to stop at some point. If there is even an inkling in your heart that you wish I had thanked you, then I dedicate this "thanks" to you. I love you.

- ciel young, march 6, 2026

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK (FEEL FREE TO SKIP, IF YOU'RE CONFIDENT)

First things first, I would just like to thank you for purchasing or otherwise acquiring this book, even if only temporarily, as with the way attention spans seem to be going in our modern age, reading a book can often be considered a serious undertaking. I'll briefly fight against this notion. In an earlier age, before our modern forms of connection with one another over the internet, reading a book was one of the main methods of "communicating" with someone across a gap of both distance and time, as well as being one of the main forms

of easily accessible entertainment. The reason I bring this up is to highlight the universality of the enjoyment of the written word that is becoming lost in today's age. What I mean to say is, people enjoyed reading in all different kinds of ways. Many people I know (and I am not immune to this, either) seem to fall into the trap of thinking that reading is *by necessity* a more strenuous activity than, say, watching TV, and that you *have to* pay attention to everything, and that it *needs to* be fully understood to be enjoyed. Let me clarify: I did not write this book for it to have "one true meaning." Things are left open to interpretation and stated unclearly or vaguely or only in passing due to conscious choices. I do not

consider the plot of this book to be very clear, especially towards the beginning. The plot is there, and I've garnered a great deal of enjoyment from planning out every tiny piece of it, but I believe the easiest way to appreciate this story is to read it curiously, like a child would, allowing yourself to become lost in imagery or in the melody of a sentence structure or in developing crazy theories on directions that events could develop, a child not yet old enough to concern itself with "proper interpretations" or being worried about the exact meaning of a word it's never heard before. When we were young, this was how we read, and I know many of us could devour stories whole without a care for anything else, an ability that many of us

have also reasonlessly lost in our adulthoods. So I say now: read this book in whatever way makes you happy. If a part of the story reminds you of some cheerful memory that's almost entirely unrelated, you can think about that instead, and let the words wash over you without too much worry. If you don't like a part, just skip it! If a part is dragging and you don't want to read it, skip it! Not that I think any of these parts are worth skipping, I love every moment of this story, but you are not the same as *me*. If you do feel the need to skip anything, I'm sure you'll find something you like more later. I would hate to have someone miss out on parts they would love just because there's something they didn't enjoy and got stuck on. With that, I will allow the

**story to speak for itself. Thank
you, everyone.**

1 - Vincent

I was walking down the street to Muse's apartment, and the cold was making my thoughts race, almost like they were trying to heat up my entire physical body by sheer velocity. Why did she sound so concerned on the phone but deny any of my attempts to clarify said concern, or even to accept its existence? She's normally completely unflappable.

It had been earlier that day when I was walking in Market Square, and everyone clutched their hair with their hands and fell to their knees. I was hearing something, something that sounded like an obscenely loud trumpet blast, localized entirely in my own head, ringing like a phone that I couldn't answer, making me realize firsthand that my skull had sensation, something resonating that had never resonated before. Everyone else reacted the same as I did, but how could they hear it as well? When was the last time I walked more than a mile in this kind of weather? It was freezing, and I was coming apart at the seams before I had even had the chance to meet Muse's new

roommate, a troublesome fact with which I'd been coping for the past few days. I sincerely hoped it wouldn't change any of our dynamics to have someone new around.

Muse buzzed me in to her apartment building without responding over the intercom, and I was dripping with sweat by the time I finished the third flight of wooden stairs in her unconscionably old building. I used the small golden door knocker on her door, because I didn't want to risk cutting my dry skin on the wood when it was this cold. And I mean, I don't know why there would be a door knocker there if I weren't supposed to use it. Why was I worried she was going to be mad at me for this?

Muse opened the door and her hair was blonde, but still just as curly as usual. I asked her what was going on, but she once more declined to answer, instead wordlessly ushering me inside her apartment, and through the hallway and kitchen, which were pitch black, except for the LED strips she keeps on the floor in various colors to mark any necessary pathways you might need to travel. We followed the underbright yellow path, to her bedroom.

We went inside, and I finally blew up.
“Muse, I’m really starting to get pissed off.
Why won’t you answer any of my
questions?”

The words felt strange leaving my lips. I generally think of myself as pretty demure, but I was truly feeling a heated anger in my chest, directed entirely at what I would normally consider to be a mild inconvenience, at worst.

“Look,” she said, quietly, and with a tinge of fear in her voice. She gestured meekly at the only light source in her room, a monitor’s screen in the corner. The display was e-ink, like a pocket e-reader but blown way up in scale, and its backlight was very dim. I took a second to let my eyes adjust from having been outside, and I was getting very impatient, but when my sight focused in at last, I saw nothing but a confusing mix of spreadsheets, charts, and graphs. I couldn’t make out any meaning whatsoever. I was alarmed by how much I wanted to punch her in the face. It felt like my clenched fist was vibrating, and I could feel my nails digging into my palm. I just wanted answers. So I waited.

After what felt like a week, she spoke.

“Did you hear the trumpet call?”

“The loudest noise of all time? Yeah, I heard it, and it seemed like everyone else in Market Square did, too.”

“I heard it, here.”

More silence. It was agonizing, but she didn't seem to be responding well to my pushing her, so I just gave her time.

Then she spoke again, her speech much faster, but still quiet.

“Okay, I finished my mental stack, and I feel better. I'm sorry I couldn't answer you earlier, I had mental exercises to do first, otherwise I would've been an incoherent mess, but I should be good for a little while now, as long as I don't push myself too hard.”

Muse continued. “The things on my screen are various data signifying all we know about what everyone's calling capital-T capital-C, “The Call,” usually even with quotation marks and everything, especially on news reports. As you can see from this graph that didn't really need to be a graph, 100% of people polled on social media reported to hearing it plus or minus 1%, and if you look at these blue and red lines over here, you'll note that an astonishing 95+% of poll participants,

regardless of prior musical educative background, described the sound specifically as a trumpet blast. The spreadsheets are mostly extraneous, and finally, as you may have noticed already, my hair is blonde.”

She was right. Her hair was indeed blonde.

“Touch it,” she said. I stuck my fingers through a few of her curls. They were soft.

“Notice anything?” she said.

“Muse, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s not dry. And it’s as bouncy as usual.”

“I’m sick of whatever this is. Please just tell me what you mean in plain, spoken word, like I’m your idiot grandma.”

“I didn’t bleach it. After I heard The Call—you know how loud sounds get me, so I ran into the bathroom to throw up, and I caught a glance of myself in the mirror, and I was blonde.”

I sat there for a second trying to figure out why she was treating this as an intense revelation, or like a microphone spiking moment. I failed entirely to produce any kind thoughts. So I just waited for her to talk again.

“If my hair could change this suddenly while

retaining its moisture and natural bounce, can you imagine what else might've changed?"

I couldn't.

2 - Anzhrelika

The poor sweet man seemed to have something to say, so I just let him talk, with a hand on his shoulder that I hope he knew was out of care, and not anything untoward. I was afraid, being a young woman alone at night, but this poor man's eyes betrayed something in him that was yearning for human connection. And who am I to deny him that? So I nodded along, at times I hope were appropriate...

"It's like, you've got 4 hours left to go on your shift, you just got back from 'lunch' at 6:00 PM where you sat in your car and ate for 30 minutes, slept for 20, and watched some entertainment for the last 10, just waiting for it to end, the lunch break, and when it finally does end, you're back inside the store, and you're counting the minutes, even though you know what counting the minutes does to any hope of getting time to pass, but you're not looking forward to

anything but getting home tonight, smoking a little, locking your door, watching some dirty video for about 5 or 10 minutes, and going to sleep. And it's like, you don't remember the last time you really felt like a person. Like a real and true, bona fide human person. It had to have been when you were with someone else, but recently all that time you spend socially has just been mostly zoned out, or afraid, and you couldn't even tell them what you're thinking about, or if you were thinking about anything at all, because it's like when you hear somebody else's voice, it all comes rushing back for a second, and you don't know where you were, but you're sure as hell not there anymore, and you're barely sure you're here, at all. It feels like operating at some sort of a deficit, but you can't even remember what it used to be like, if there was a 'before this.' It's all blending together, and you're watching yourself become exactly like those old guys who hang out in the bar for too long, and you can tell it's because they have some

serious regrets back there, at home, and so you're watching yourself in real time lose control of something you can't remember ever being able to grasp, fully. But you know it wasn't always like this. And you try to get some of those pieces of yourself back, but it always feels hollow, like you're looking in the window of somebody else's house, and then you see a little motion somewhere and your gaze like automatically diverts back forward, and you're just walking on the sidewalk again. It's a real bitch, is what it is. Seeing yourself from the outside, and wishing you had any semblance of control over the one thing people say you can truly control, which is yourself. Seeing yourself from the outside and knowing you can't do a damn thing. Hearing other people describe "choices" they made and wondering what it feels like. Cursing yourself constantly under your breath for reasons you've long since forgotten. Yeah, it's a real bitch."

3 - Esther

**Blast of light. Burning sound.
Prostrations. Clouds opening like
doors. Snakes that grow. Eternal
bondage. A helix inside a helix.
Unlocking doors that don't open. All
living creatures connected and
prostrated in burning. Time with
motion. Arbitrary unrestrictions of
arbitrary limitations. Lances
sharpening one another. Changes in
human nature. Arbitrary selectors of
changes in human nature. Rain made
of wind. Changes in human identity.
Sense of loss. Forests that slither. Time
that turns in on itself. Arbitrary
selectors of identity and human
helices. Trumpet blast. Energy that
takes shape in prostration. Old shapes
that cannot be drawn.**

Essence of sharpness. Essence of helices. Essence of change. Essence of identity. Essence of limitation. Essence of loss.

4 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“No, not until I was 16. Or maybe 15.”

[CENSORED]

“Most of what she seemed to care about was that she was very good at logic, and economics. Sometimes she would tell me she had a problem, but it would always be solved within a few days. I think she still got scared when she didn’t know something, though.”

[CENSORED]

“I don’t think I’m as ‘legally required’ to answer that as you say, but I’m not a stickler for privacy. It was when I was a child, say, younger than 14, but older than 9. I woke up in the middle of the night and I cried out for my parents because I was in pain. They came out of their bedroom to check on me and I couldn’t stop sobbing in the hallway. I was truly beside myself. My arm was aching so badly and I didn’t understand why. See, normally when you’re in pain, if you move around a little, it starts to feel different, you get the blood flowing, or just calm down and breathe for a second, you know? But this pain was so overwhelming, not because of its intensity, but because no matter what I did, I couldn’t influence it.”

[CENSORED]

“Yes. I always publish stuff like that, even if I’m not sure

about whether or not someone will be able to figure out who the subject is. I think it's more important for it to be shared than on the off-chance someone can put the pieces together."

[CENSORED]

"Yes, people get the 3 of us confused an awful lot. I'm Melanie Jane, Melissa is the middle child, but we don't see her too much, she was raised completely separately from us, in fact I'm not sure Melinda ever saw her outside of a few reunions. And Melinda's the baby, of course. Our little prodigy."

[CENSORED]

"I don't talk about that part of my life anymore."

[CENSORED]

"I struggle to see how it could possibly be relevant to anything going on now, almost 10 years out."

[CENSORED]

"It's mostly just time away from the family that I can't do. I know everyone's done a lot of growing these last couple years, but I still hate to leave them, especially with the whole 'unclear reality shifting event' business looming."

[CENSORED]

"You know, I don't have to be here."

[CENSORED]

"It actually affects far less of my life than you might expect. I mean, maybe if I went outside more, but I pretty much only talk to people that I know already, or friends of

friends. It's a rare day for me to get along that well with a stranger, after all the changes."

[CENSORED]

"Twice a day, usually once in the morning and once at night, but sometimes I wake up late enough that it's more like once in the evening and once in the morning, if you're understanding what I find myself implying. Or also additionally after dinnertime, sometimes."

[CENSORED]

"That's an easy one. I'd have to say the time we were talking and Melinda went completely unresponsive. I mean, it was bordering on catatonic. And this was years before I found that study about how peoples' affect being flat, or generally unresponsive induces anxiety in just about any normal adult, so I was freaking out about the fact that I was freaking out, you know? I'm talking minutes of me waving my hands in front of her face, calling her name, rotating the spinning chair, clapping, snapping, singing, trying to call Mom and getting voicemail, trying to look up any sort of answer, and nothing, and I'm in tears by this point, and just as I was dialing 911, she came to, and said 'I just wanted to see how far you'd go.'

I mean, what does that even mean? She would do stuff like that all the time. It was scary, but what can you do?"

[CENSORED]

"Let's see, it was... about 20 years, start to finish? God, it felt so much longer."

[CENSORED]

“No, yes, the men’s room is down the hall and right in front.”

[CENSORED]

“No, yeah, sure.”

[CENSORED]

“Just give me a second to settle back in and I should be able to reconfirm some details in my fading memory. Okay, it’s starting to come back to me. It was back before legalization, firmly, and she left two tabs of acid in a little baggie in front of the police station with the note, ‘See me after class.’ Which I don’t think even makes sense, but the cops were still pretty mad about it.

I mean, I didn’t think it was the best idea she’d ever had, but we were just kids messing around, you know? There wasn’t much else to do around there.”

[CENSORED]

“What? Oh my God. Do you have some kind of insider information?”

[CENSORED]

“What the [CENSORED]. No, this can’t be happening. I need you to tell me what the [CENSORED] is going on with her.”

[CENSORED]

“I mean, I had heard rumors in the newspapers, but nothing like this. You promise this isn’t for a gag show? It would not be wise of you to wait any longer to confess that this is, in

fact, for a gag show.”

[CENSORED]

“You’re not making any sense.”

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

5 - Muse

i had been staring at my computer for hours. even with the gentler e-ink screen, my head was still killing me. there were too many things i had to do. i had to figure out unknowable answers to questions people hadn't even conceptualized yet. i could feel my entire body pulsing.

vincent was coming over soon. i didn't have brainpower to spare on any of his questions, so i just made sure he got the idea to get here as quickly as possible. while i waited for him, i gathered as much information as i could. he had sounded annoyed with me on the phone, but i figured i was probably making it up.

i hadn't seen alfy in a few hours but they were usually home around dinnertime. i heard a

knock at the door and knew it was vincent. alfy locks themselves out a lot, but they always knock with their fist, never the door knocker. i rushed to the door through the dark.

i opened it and there was vincent, just as i'd hoped. he said something that i didn't fully understand; the overhead lights in the hallway were like a hammer. i brought him inside and walked to my bedroom. i sat down at my desk, again.

"muse, i'm really starting to get pissed off. why won't you answer any of my questions?"

there was a quiver in his voice, a rageful lilt that razed me like a firestorm. my body started shaking, in a way i had learned from experience was too subtle for anyone else to notice. i told him to look at the screen. i immediately went into business mode and listened

to the too-cheery sounding audio tape in my head.

~S.T.O.P. is an important tool in *Dialectical Behavior Therapy*! This tool aids you in situations that your body and mind are telling you that you need to react to, IMMEDIATELY! By imagining a huge red STOP sign in our heads, we can break the cycle of fear and help retrain our bodies to respond to emotions in a more healthy way!~

~S. Stop

~T. Take a step back

~O. Observe

~P. Proceed mindfully!

~The first step is Stop! All I want to see you do is just go ahead and FREEZE right where you are, alright? Don't move a muscle! Especially those muscles around your face! Your body is telling you to act, but you don't have to listen.~

~The second step, to Take A Step Back, can be taken literally, or figuratively! If you can take a minute, feel free to go to the restroom, or take a walk outside! If you can't, then try a deep breathing exercise, and to

slow down your internal rhythm!~

~The third step is just to Observe, with no judgements! We have a lot of judging thoughts by default, but if we shift our focus to neutral observation, we can break the pattern that our emotions are used to! No analysis, just pure, non-judgemental attention.~

~The fourth step is to Proceed Mindfully! Now that you've taken a second, your response to whatever situation incited your practice opportunity will definitely be more measured than otherwise!~

i locked my face in place, while releasing any tension that was held up in my forehead, and eyes. i took a deep breath in, as quietly as i could, and let it out, slowly, and also quietly. i don't think vincent heard. i nonjudgementally notice that i'm freaking the fuck out because vincent doesn't normally talk to me like this. i notice that my heart is pounding and that my skin feels wrong. i

notice that i'm actively in the process of breaking a cycle i've spent my entire life experiencing. i continue to monitor my internal state, and try to maintain my slower breath and thought patterns.

i asked him if he heard the trumpet call. he said yes. i told him i heard it here. he didn't say anything.

i took my time, internally. i used the *R* from the *IMPROVE* DBT skill, which stands for relaxation, and i gently scratched the inside of my left wrist with my right hand's fingernails. it felt good and made me tear up in a different way than vincent's outburst. i used the *E* from *IMPROVE* and encouraged myself that even if it was taking a while, that i didn't have to tell him to leave, like i would've used to.

i was still incredibly afraid.

my mind was flooded with questions like why vincent was behaving this way when he's normally so calm with me, no matter how frequently i'm speaking, or if he was going to hurt me, or get angry, or stay angry. i recognized the shape of these thought patterns enough to know what i needed to do. the somber audio tape started playing in my head.

~OCD is a disease where you are, in essence, deathly allergic to uncertainty. Its subject of choice can take many forms, but the process is always the same. You are afraid, and so you seek certainty, sometimes by way of actions that appear logical, and sometimes by way of actions that are entirely unrelated. Your mind would have you believe that these actions will influence and guarantee your safety and well-being, and herein lies the crux of where the disease moves to deceive you. There is only one gold-standard treatment for OCD, and that is *Exposure & Response Prevention Therapy*, or ERP, for short. In ERP, we learn to face our fears, but in a slightly different manner than you may expect if you've heard the term

“exposure therapy” before. One of the key traits of ERP is the usage of *Response Prevention Messages*, or RPMs, for short. Many maladaptive compulsions that are meant to provide the user certainty are completely invisible, existing only at the internal, mental scale. This is where the RPMs come in. An example of an RPM would be, “This may be true, it may not, I am going to focus on my feeling.” As you can see, this highlights our attempts to merely “sit with” uncertainty, rather than trying to do anything about it. It is not uncommon for your fear to spike after using an RPM, but if you properly allow your feelings of fear to exist without modification, they will naturally lower.~

i developed an RPM for the situation at hand, on the fly. i told myself, “vincent may hurt me, he may not. i am going to focus on my physical feelings.” i felt my fear all at once. it was so much more intense than when it was just an ambient soundtrack to the rest of my experience. i thought i was about to start sobbing, but i just sat there. slowly, without any real conscious action, i

felt my body naturally untense.
the muscles around my eyes
released their tension. my
thoughts had not shifted, they
were still present, but my body
felt different. there was the
strange feeling of emptiness
that i always got, when i did
ERP successfully. maybe this is
what other people describe as
"neutral."

i turned my chair around. i
spoke.

"okay, i finished my mental
stack, and i feel better. i'm
sorry I couldn't answer you
earlier, i had mental exercises
to do first, otherwise i
would've been an incoherent
mess, but i should be good for a
little whi—"

6 - Alfy

Salutation of Weary Darkness

¹The testament of thy servant of faith, given the name of Alfy by thy will imposed into me, baptized in water as in flame, and shewn the light now in this abode of darkness.

²Moving in the spirit as moving in the kitchen, I found myself lost in a sea of reckless inquiry, bathed in darkness, and it was not the time of the Lord's will for me to be certain of where it was that I was going.

³Paths, though lit by LEDs of many colors, had not yet found shelter in my long-term memory, and thusly was the path unknown to me, and any navigational skills I had acquired thereupon.

⁴I recalled Psalm 23, and though I have not yet been welcomed into the House of the Lord, He has provided me this home of temporary living, dark and unnavigable though it may be.

⁵Verily, verily, I say unto you, that in the moment of my deepest despair, was I delivered unto the doorway of mine roommate.

⁶Feeling the Lord move in me, I was thrown into a brief prostration, and my skin did shiver.

⁷I made of my working right hand a fist, and I did

knock upon the door of the one known as Muse.

⁸And she spake unto me, as though a voice from beyond the door,

“Come in.”

⁹I did enter into the murky darkness.

¹⁰And thusly did mine roommate begin her pontification.

¹¹“Oh, hi, Alf. Alf, this is my friend, Vincent. Vincent, this is Alf. They talk kind of like an old Bible translation with weirder grammar, but once you get to know them, they’re pretty normal. Anyways, I didn’t know when you were going to get home, do you have like, some sort of recreational activity you like to do in the afternoons?”

¹²At this time, I felt the fear of the Lord enter me, and I did yelp, as the Lord had not delivered unto me the knowledge that there was someone else residing in this room of inky darkness.

¹³I hastened, and stammered out my reply.

¹⁴“The traditional meetings of table tennis at mine academy take place before sundown. I have been training in a manner without cease.”

¹⁵She made an expression out which I could not make; her curiosity then surfeited, she continued her endless oratory.

¹⁶“I was just telling Vincent about The Call. Did you hear it, Alf?”

¹⁷“Yea, it was presented to my sensorium as though Seven of God’s holy trumpets singing as One. I did fall onto my knees, overtaken, replete with holiness, and mentally prepared to begin speaking in tongues.”

¹⁸“Okay, well I haven’t heard any reports of that, but I was just getting ready to send Vincent out to gather some more information for me.”

¹⁹Thus spake the one unknown to me;

²⁰“You were?”

²¹And again, Muse;

²²“Yes. I’m not well enough to go out on my own, but I figure someone as able-bodied as you should be able to dig up something useful. You could even take Alf, if you want some company!”

²³Again, the stranger’s voice tinged with contempt;

²⁴“I think I’m good.”

²⁵My feelings thusly repleted with damage, I considered taking my leave at once. However, in service of that most holy and of my obligations, I remained, and spake truthfully;

²⁶“Dost thou consider thyself to have an issue with me?”

²⁷The one known as Vincent merely turned away from my striking gaze, and spake directly unto the roommate handed down to me by providence;

²⁸“Look, I’m just going to go. Can you text me the instructions or something?”

²⁹Sensing my presence as unwelcome, then silently I bid them an enervated faretheewell, but nothing came off of my lips.

³⁰And I did walk away from the room of Muse, attempting at once to firmly hold the colors of the LED's paths in my mind.

7 - Esther

Time of calling. Shape of perception.
Former witnesses to the sound of
beings distant. Movement of time
turning in on itself. Cohabitation of
inessential emotives. Spirit that moves
and leaves. Falsehood. Ambient falling.
Essential cathexis. Mirrors that show
selves. Wood burning. Essence of
essentiality. Knife that cuts silently
and shows form. Mirrors that do not
reflect speech. Walls calling. Walls
closing in. Mirrors closing in.
Walls calling. Walls closing in. Mirrors
closin—

8 - Vincent

I really should've spent more time inside Muse's apartment. The warmth had unsoured my mood in a serious way, and I was still struggling to conceptualize why I had felt just so terrible, and why I had lashed out at her. I felt bad, but it hadn't felt like the right time to apologize.

Some people on the other side of the road were walking down the sidewalk backwards, probably just another dangerous trend that was catching on for reasons I didn't understand. The people seemed pretty astute though, they were dodging obstacles that I truly couldn't guess how they could see.

I passed by a church that I've passed a million times, but I stopped a few paces past it and just stood there. I waited on the sidewalk motionlessly, and the crowd of people with the same momentum as the one I had until a few seconds ago just weaved around me, like they hadn't even noticed I stopped. I waited there for a bit, just feeling the diverted energy of a sea of people, none

noticing, all walking forward, some now forced to walk slightly to the side. My selfishness was costing every passerby somewhere in the hundreds-range of milliseconds.

The church was also just standing there, like it had for probably hundreds of years before I was born, and would probably stay for hundreds of years later, accepting tax-free collections from people who could afford to give that kind of thing, all of which was unimaginable to me. By an unclear motivation which did not feel entirely like myself, I walked up the steps to the church, and tried to open the front doors, which seemed too large to be anything but ornamental. I imagined there being some side-door that members of this parish knew to always use, and that the main cathedral was mostly just for show, and that I'd probably get swiftly rebuked in some way.

The door opened, without much sound. I idly wondered if there was someone underappreciated who oiled these doors, avoiding the lingering question of why I was doing this at all. I hadn't cared about anything religious since my childhood, and most of my care then had been spent on appeasing my

parents by making sure to attend everything they told me to and gather as little internal experience as I could, once I had realized that organized religion wasn't really for me. None of it made sense. I had never heard "the voice of God" in my head, nor had I felt anything but fear and exclusion from the fact that everyone around me seemed to understand why they were there, what they were learning, why it was important. I had given it a fair, honest shot, and it just wasn't for me.

I stepped into the cathedral and was overtaken by the stifling acoustics. It was like they had specifically constructed this building to obliterate all outside sound. I felt incredibly self-conscious about what I was doing, but justified it to myself in my head that I had been confirmed as a child of God, had been baptized, and that I could probably out-theology anyone who tried to question my presence, if I really needed to. Not that I truly thought I would need to.

I guess muscle memory was what led me to one of the pews in the back. What led to me pull out the kneeler, and to fall onto my knees, to close my eyes, to clench my hands together in a way that had always seemed

too “for-show” to ever really be effective. I thought about the text that Muse had sent me, about how things were changing in ways nobody understood, yet. I considered for the first time that this may be somehow related to why I had found myself inside a church for the first time since I was a child, voluntarily for maybe the first time ever. I kneeled there. I waited for something to happen.

Nothing happened.

9 - Anzhrelika

"And, and, and it's just like, I'm trying to get some groceries, right?"

It always upsets me for reasons that I don't understand when someone is telling a story and they pause every few seconds to ask, "Right?"

It must be something about the rhythm breaking, or how I can't tell if I'm supposed to be responding every time, if that's what they want, or need, to know that I care for them, to know that I'm listening.

"So there I am at the store, right?"

"Right."

"I'm just trying to get some groceries after a long day off where I slept too late, and I just really and truly fucked up my sleep schedule for after the weekend ends, but it's only Saturday, so I can worry about that Sunday night, right?"

"Yeah."

"So like, here I am at the grocery store, trying

to figure out what the best deal is on apples when some of the damn things are measured per ounce and some are measured per pound, or per container, and I look over and I see some canned fish.”

“Right.”

He looked at me with a look of slight confusion. I guess I wasn’t supposed to say “right” there.

“So anyways, you might be wondering why it should matter that there’s canned fish here. Right?”

I wasn’t wondering much of anything, other than how I could most effectively help this poor man to understand that I really and truly cared about him, cared about his story, insofar as it would help him.

He continued to look at me wide-eyed, and expectantly.

“Right,” I said.

Then he went on, “So, well, but first of all, why the hell would there be canned fish here? I’m in the produce section. It’s just not where it goes, right? And here’s the detail I

left out, is that I always bear a wide berth around the aisle with all the canned fish in it, and I don't even go *near* the cat food aisle, 'cause just in case, you know? The old lady, before she left me, I mean, she worked in a fish-canning factory for 20 years. The woman always smelled of tuna, 5 days a week, every damn weeknight for decades. And I'm just, I mean, I try to keep her off my mind, but it's the tiny reminders, right?"

"Right," I said. It really was the tiny reminders.

"Even the *suggestion* of some culinary specialty caught in the ocean is enough to get me teary-eyed, right? Not to mention tennis balls, or particularly nice vacuums, or someone ordering a gin 'on the rocks,' you know? It's all just reminders. Some days it feels like everything's a damn reminder. So, but, anyways, now we can get back to the original thrust of my point, which is that why the hell, on this, a day where I woke up and didn't so much as *glance* the *possibility* of sunlight on account of my ravaged sleep

schedule, why the hell is there a can of fish in the produce section, right?"

I quickly replied, knowing that if I waited an instant, I may not have a chance to speak again for a while, "Was it another shopper who got some and then mysteriously decided against it later in the trip, but maybe didn't have time to take it back to its original aisle, perhaps because they had a child to take care of or something like that?"

"See, you might think that," he started, "and I can't even blame you for guessing that when it sounds so reasonable, right?"

"Right," I said, not fully understanding why I was saying it.

"But no. See, the thing is, I had made a miscalculation. I had forgotten the teeny tiny clearance rack that lives in the produce section, where any damn product in the whole store is liable to show up, provided it sells poorly enough. And I guess canned fish is dropping in popularity, because here's a whole big display, just for canned fish. There wasn't even any stale bread there. And you

know what they were playing over the soulless speakers in this here grocery store? No joke, it was *Radio Ga Ga* by *Queen*. I swear I haven't thought about that song in years at all, and I've never felt this way or that about it, but my sudden awareness of the music playing at all just hit me like a truck, and I started sobbing immediately, and it was all I could do not to fall to my knees, and there's this terrible sort of awkward feeling about crying in public, you know, trying to stifle sobs, maybe under your shirt, maybe under your arm, and where if you're a truly empathetic guy, like me, it's just multitudinous concerns about what everyone else thinks, if they're worried you're okay, how you can reassure them that you are, in fact, okay, even when they're not asking, when nobody's even looked your way that you've seen, even if you're not sure you're okay at all, there you are thinking of ways to reassure some kind imaginary stranger who happens to continue not showing up, interstitched with a constant internal

bombardment of thoughts about how truly sad you are in this moment, and how you don't fully understand why the sight of canned fish is worse than feeling someone's taken a knife and just sliced open your finger, why the tuna feels worse because there aren't just guys waiting around every corner to cut you open, right, but they've got tuna at every damn grocery store, not to mention the restaurants, and how fundamentally ridiculous it is here to be a full-grown man and sobbing at the sight of some canned fish, and internal wonderings if you happen to have anything to blow your nose on in those coat pockets, and concerns too for the fish-canning industry, if all their stuff is on clearance, right? Right?"

10 - Muse

vincent and alfy had really stressed me out, but i still missed them. i spend a lot of time in here. most of it is alone and researching something, or alone and trying to keep pain down. i always forget how strongly being around other people can influence my emotions, and my thought patterns. but i needed to focus. there were too many things that only i could figure out.

the american government hadn't caught on yet, but i was seeing translated articles online from foreign governments about the dangers of testing these new techniques at home, but none of the articles specified what the actual techniques were, or used any unambiguous language regarding the so-called "dangers" of the techniques' prospective testing. i checked

my e-mail.

i had an e-mail from a mailing list i had signed up for years prior. the mailing list had been inactive for at least a few months after a slow decline from changing owners and other organizational issues. it had concerned occult matters, and it seemed like its purveyors had just sort of moved on with their lives. the subject line said "PAY ATTENTION". i opened the e-mail.

PLEASE PAY ATTENTION. FORM OWN CONCLUSIONS. POSSIBILITIES ARE POTENTIALITIES. LISTEN MORE CLOSELY. THINGS ARE SHIFTING. TEST OLD METHODS. MAGICK HOLDS POWER. PLEASE PAY ATTENTION. ANSWER TRUMPET'S CALL. EMBLEMS OF CHAOS. OPEN YOUR MIND. SHATTERING OF PRECEPTS. TIME TO TRY. ANCILLARY SYSTEMA REBUILDING. PLEASE PAY ATTENTION.

- *ONES WHO SEE*

it seemed like a pretty clear signal to me. i had studied the occult cursorily a few years ago, and i had recently been inspired by some unknown factor to start keeping a dream journal again, which was a practice i had begun at the inception of my studies. the stated reason for keeping a dream journal in those books was to attempt to "see past the psychic censor". the psychic censor is reportedly the part of your brain which prevents you from perceiving a variety of supernatural or otherwise bizarre stimuli, like synchronicities, or other forms of ESP, and is the reason you forget your dreams, especially after time passes.

practicing getting past my psychic censor felt like being flooded by things i wasn't supposed to see, almost constantly. thoughts that i'd normally discount as being

meaningless all felt like they were dripping with the sun of the gods. every outcome seemed connected to every other outcome. it felt like classical definitions or descriptions of insanity. it seemed like the kind of thing that could burn me into ashes if i wasn't careful with it. and in my brief tests of actually attempting to use magick to control some uncertain outcome, i found it worked better than i expected, but often had some previously unintuitable cost when i had received my desired result, sort of like what they warned us about alchemy, with exchanges requiring equivalents. i decided it was, while real, a rabbit hole i didn't find necessary to go down any further, with magick being a practice that both made me feel like a lunatic and kept having unforeseen and sometimes frightening consequences.

i opened a new browser tab and attempted to figure out what

book i had read on magick, years ago. i checked out a few that i knew were at least relational to the topic i'd mainly researched, which was chaos magick, less a direct system of magick and more a philosophy of taking whatever works from any other system to build your own system. i couldn't find the book i had read, and nothing on the internet seemed to really match its description, either. it was more like a handbook or brochure than like an actual instructional book, and it had a lot of illustrations, a detail which i would've expected would result in me finding it rather easily. no such luck.

magick involves a lot of trusting your first instinct about things, and it had just occurred to me, almost as revelation, of the synchronicity between starting to keep a dream journal a few weeks ago for no real reason that i could recall, plus that keeping a dream

journal was the first step of my first foray into conscious usage of magick, plus this email from a dead mailing list. i let the feeling wash over me, and i felt that familiar sense of seeing through the veil of reality. sensing the mercurial firmament that lies beyond. and i let myself fall into it.

11 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

"I mean, of course she was precocious, I think that's the first thing anyone really notices when they learn about Melinda's childhood."

[CENSORED]

"No, she didn't really *get along* with kids her age, I mean, nothing bad would happen if we left them in the same room together, but she wouldn't speak unless spoken to, and it always seemed like she was just waiting for them to finish talking so she could go back to her own devices."

[CENSORED]

"I use the pre-moistened wipes, and I cut them in half, because they're too large."

[CENSORED]

"No, that's all-natural."

[CENSORED]

"It was sort of complicated, because while, yes, she did certainly have some antisocial tendencies, she was also constantly yearning for a caretaker to be there. She didn't need anything but presence, honestly, of someone older, and nurturing. I don't think it was the attention, either, because she would buckle under the pressure of things like direct questions or eye contact. She just wanted someone else to be there while she did her own thing in the other

corner of the room.”

[CENSORED]

“Nothing to suggest that. That’s absolutely baseless.”

[CENSORED]

“She didn’t get into any trouble at school, no. She took care of her enemies very efficiently.”

[CENSORED]

“I don’t have to answer that.”

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

12 - Robert

Subject has finally been successfully ensnared. Subject has tears streaming down face and does not verbally reply to any questions. WBS signals show subject as successfully interpreting speech, regardless of lack of response. Subject appears emaciated, hair appears ratty and tangled. Subject is clawing and pounding at sides of enclosure. Enclosure wall electrification in progress. [REDACTED]

Subject has finished screaming English profanities and is resting within nominal range of central runic pattern. Ancillary rune briefly crossed by subject in previous attempted wall-bangings. WBS signals show subject as experiencing REM sleep. Percolation in progress. 5 minutes to needle-removal and klaxon.

[REDACTED]

Subject presents as beseeching mercy. Initiation of allergen maelstrom in progress. Subject is pleading. Subject condition within nominal range.

13 - Vincent

I continued kneeling for a little while longer, just to see if I was missing anything. Even if I wasn't getting any crazy revelations, that doesn't change the fact that a silent church is a good place to think. I pulled out my phone, which still felt wrong to do in a church, and I reviewed the text Muse had sent me.

head to the library on mlk street, and ask for a book by alvin golively called metastasis in charybdis, then bring it back to me asap. i'm counting on you.

I left the church and started heading down the street again, having forgotten how freezing it was outside, and then being cruelly reminded by forceful winds. I cut through an alleyway marked "No Thru Traffic" to get there a little faster.

I exited the alleyway and started up the many stone steps to the library, when it happened again. The trumpet.

Everyone fell to their knees; and I saw a

vision, a vision of a world drowning in fire, and a girl with long, sparkling white hair, with her arms outstretched, speaking, her eyes aflame. I closed my eyes and listened to the sound, but it was impossible to make out anything she was saying over the harsh, beautiful screeching of the trumpet. I still listened, trying not to miss any part of it, though my vision was fuzzy, even with my eyes closed. Slowly, sorrowfully, mercifully, the blare of the trumpet faded, and I began to hear her speak. Her voice was quiet, stable, and empty, like it lacked some important quality I had never noticed voices had, because every voice I'd ever heard before had possessed it.

“Blast of light. Burning sound. Prostrations,” she intoned.

“Changes in human identity. Sense of loss.”

“A helix inside a helix. All living creatures connected and prostrated in burning.”

Her voice audiated inside me and the words echoed off of each other, completely overwhelming any other thoughts, and eventually forming a consistent, low-

frequency hum. I remembered that my eyes were closed.

I opened my eyes.

**OPTION 1 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
OPTION 2 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 3.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 4.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 5.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 6.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 7.**

**UNINTERACTABLE ONE-WAY MIRROR.
CAN'T SEEM TO BREAK THE GLASS.
SEARCHING FOR KEY COMMAND TO
ACCESS OPTION 3.**

15 - Vincent

I opened my eyes.

The girl was still directly in front of me. I heard her speaking clearly now, outside of my head.

“Arbitrary selectors of identity and human helices. Trumpet blast. Energy that takes shape in prostration. Old shapes that cannot be drawn.”

All around us, people were either tentatively standing back up, or seemingly completely knocked cold. I watched someone check a recumbent man’s pulse, and announce that he was dead. My phone buzzed. It was from Muse.

Come Back Now
And then another.
I Need You To Come Back. Now.

“Essence of helices. Essence of limitation.
Essence of loss.”

And then the white-haired girl collapsed.

16 - Muse

i fell behind the veil, and i was given knowledge of things that are unlike this world. i steeled myself, and resigned that there was nothing that could hurt me, there. and then it felt like looking out through a void, but not looking with my eyes, and with specters placed piecemeal randomly in the dark distance. thoughts flashed through my mind like wildfire, and i could intuitively sense which ones were me and which ones were revelatory, from somewhere else. i had learned the rhythm of my own thoughts and emotions through years of meditation. but it was still sometimes hard to sense.

i fell back, and i was still sitting at my desk, thinking. any of the ways i could describe what i had just experienced sounded like hokum. let me

instead give a little of my history with this sort of experimentation. like i said earlier, i kept a dream journal religiously for a few months. i also did sigil magic for a while, where you match imaginary or scribed symbols to a desired outcome. doing small things wasn't too complex, like getting someone to message me back by a certain time, or getting some extra money by mysterious causes, but i realized i was playing with fire when i did a ritual to make someone fall in love with me. the sigil i imagined was a visual of nonspecific objects pulling together that normally stayed apart. the person did seem to develop feelings for me, but i went to leave my apartment and part of my doorframe collapsed, the rubble combining into a pile, just as i had visualized. if i were a few seconds slower, i would've been completely crushed. when the building manager came, he seemed aghast,

and said that they inspect the doorframes every year, and that nothing in the surrounding foundation was even remotely unstable. but i knew what it meant.

regardless of my past experiences, it seemed like something was trying to communicate to me that it was time to try again. so i did something simple. i'm not sure whether it's like this for everyone, but most of my ideas for magick occurred to me instantly as either likely to work, or likely to fail. the first idea that occurred to me that seemed possible to succeed was to get my kitchen LEDs to flicker. i kept a basil plant growing in my closet under artificial LEDs, and i had a lighter on my bookshelf, and i sensed that burning a leaf into ash would somehow achieve my desired result. i mean, there tend to be correspondences in magick, in this case the

correspondence between the light of the fire going out and the lights in the kitchen going out; and trying not to burn myself while holding the leaf (which i immediately sensed would be a requirement for it to work) would add a sort of difficulty to the practice that magickal activity seemed to desire. but all of this seemed like post hoc justification for something i had intuited in less than an instant. which scared me, a little.

i took a leaf of basil in my left hand, and held the lighter in my right. i imagined the kitchen LEDs flickering as vividly as i could. i imagined what it would look like in a movie. i imagined the excitement and tension i would feel in my chest when it worked. i imagined the leaf as an offering to some spirit that always had an affection for leaves, and wouldn't mind doing a small favor as long as a leaf was

involved somehow. then i lit the leaf on fire. it turned to ash, but didn't burn the stem. my kitchen LEDs flickered, slightly differently than they had in my imagination. i felt my blood pumping. it was so direct. i expected something stranger to happen, or something else to come with it. i sat there for 30 seconds before receiving an e-mail from my landlord that there had been a power surge, but only on a handful of circuits, and that it shouldn't have affected the power of most of the building at all. i silently hoped that i hadn't affected anyone's computers, any important work. and then it hit me in an entirely different part of my mind.

i did that. i just caught myself thinking that i was responsible for the power surge. it was a frightening thought.

then i heard my front door's door knocker.

17 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“Yes, she was responsible for the red X’s on our family pictures. But that was just her sense of humor. She didn’t mean anything by it.”

[CENSORED]

“Yes, I heard both of The Calls. Didn’t everyone?”

[CENSORED]

“I hadn’t felt anxiety in years, but all of a sudden, it’s back. I’ll be honest with you and say my heart rate even spiked when you showed up, just at the idea of sharing stories in a context like this, when I’d normally jump at the opportunity to have my thoughts published.”

[CENSORED]

“Absinthe. Or maybe diluted vodka.”

[CENSORED]

“How much did you say the rate of pay was for each question, again? And how will that be remitted?”

[CENSORED]

“When she was 16. The whole family was very proud, though I don’t think we showed it enough. We just had so much else going on.”

[CENSORED]

“I apologize, but that’s out of my control by now.”

[CENSORED]

I don't understand its relevance, but *Forms of Incarnation*, by Alvin Golively."

[CENSORED]

"Little nicknames for everybody. Our neighbor Nicholas was 'Nicky,' and she always specified it was with a 'y'. Cousin Zacharie was always 'Zachie,' never 'Zach' and certainly never 'Zack' with a 'k'. And she always said she was the only one who got the nickname 'Mel', even though all our names started with it. She just had a certain idea of how things were supposed to be, and she'd go to any lengths to secure that idea into reality. She was very inspired."

[CENSORED]

"The things she did in the privacy of our backyard are none of your business. And there's no evidence of any of it, either. Come back when it's warranted."

[CENSORED]

"Mostly the way it described harmonic resonances within nature, and the malleability of reality and perception. Sorry, did you get all that? I can repeat it."

[CENSORED]

"No, I believe he truly came back. With flesh and everything."

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

18 - Anzhrelika

"You're just sitting there, staring at a blank page, wondering not even how you could make anything worthwhile, but how you could make anything at all, and you start to put the tip of your pen to the paper, but your hand freezes up a few inches away. It just feels wrong to let that part of yourself out. You've done it before, and you know what it feels like to look at yourself on the page, to let your thoughts take shape, and finally give up the little protections you leave yourself, the little clarifications, the speech evasions you don't even notice you do anymore, always pointing out how 'Oh, actually, what I meant was,' any time somebody disagrees with you, or implies some kind of issue with something you said, or even just reacts negatively in any way at all, maybe just a tiny facial twitch, or a pause before they answer, but in your heart you know it was *you*. It was what *you* said. You didn't think for long

enough and you said the wrong thing. Should've just stayed quiet. But when you take it and you put it to paper, put it somewhere physical——no I'm still good on this drink, th——but so you put it somewhere physical, and you don't have any of those excuses anymore. Those protections, and your hand can sense it, and that's why it doesn't want to touch ink to parchment, and you think about how people have been doing this for thousands of years, they've been putting themselves out there, showing their work, and you can't imagine the sheer width or breadth of human suffering there must've been if everyone feels the way you do right now, but you sure as hell hope you're not alone, neither, and that surely someone must've felt this way and got over it, sometime, though you can't imagine how. And you still haven't even put word one on the page. So maybe you decide to write something easy. And you do, so you write something you think about all the time. You just write down three little words, 'I miss

her.' And it feels like the lamest thing you've ever done, it's so wholly uninspired you want to go to sleep and never wake up, and you hear a voice in your head saying 'Any progress is good progress!' and it's drowned out immediately by a sea of retorts. You imagine yourself in therapy, telling the therapist about your worthless experience, and listening to her try to shape it into something beautiful, even though you saw her wince at least five times while you told the story, then you listen to her tell you that 'Any progress is good progress!' and you force a half-smile and an 'I guess' that couldn't fool a 3-year old. And you crumple up the piece of paper, and you throw it away."

19 - Vincent

The world was beautiful, and the sky was shining.

20 - Vincent

I felt like everything around me was new. It was the way I had heard others describe childhood, this openness to everything in front of me, this inimitable something that I had never felt. I didn't feel the need to name anything; it was all pure curiosity. There were fewer words in my mind than usual. I wanted to place my hands upon anything they could touch, and I didn't fear pain. Every individual part of me seemed like an instrument designed for learning.

There were streets, paved to help us travel, and countless hours of time poured into projects by people who simply cared for one another, who wanted one another's lives to be better. Sweat and toil, all for the sake of love, for the sake of kinship, with no regard to what it took out of them. Because the practice itself would fill them back up.

Neutrality had left me. I could no longer imagine feeling nothing. My body was full, and so was my heart, and so was my soul. I took everything in, but without taking anything, because it was all still there. But it

made me whole.

I could no longer imagine a lie, either. Everything was full of the truth of itself, and even if someone were to speak words that most would call false, they would be nothing but words. And words can always drip off of you like raindrops in a warm shower. They never have to mean anything that they aren't supposed to mean. Sometimes we speak in accidents, and people are confused, but there doesn't seem to be anything left for me to fear, anymore. I could speak myself freely, and ask to know anything under the moon. There was a thrill to this inquisitive nature.

The cold didn't bother me. It could feel like warmth, if I focused on it enough. The chills of the wind brought a smile to my face while I shivered. I imagined touching every tree that we passed, letting my palms rub against the bark. Some would be smooth, others jagged. One would cut me, and I would bleed, and suck the blood off my finger until I healed. The pain, too, would feel new. It would be gentle, and the sensation would be cleansing.

21 - Muse

i went to go answer the door. it was vincent. he brought someone with him. the someone was a girl. she had long white hair. she looked a little spacy, but otherwise normal, aside from the hair. her eyelids didn't seem to go past halfway open.

"who's this?"

"she collapsed in front of the library."

"what? did you get the book?"

"no, i came back as soon as you texted. i mean, after making sure she was okay."

"text? what text?"

"you texted me to come back now, or whatever. it was really forceful."

vincent showed me his phone. it was opened to our conversation.

Come Back Now

I Need You To Come Back. Now.

"i did not send those," i said.
now it was his turn to be
confused.

"huh?" he said, rather
unsurprisingly.

"here, look," i said, showing
him my phone, "but you also
should've been able to tell from
the capital letters. i never use
capital letters except for
proper nouns and abbreviations."
"then who on earth texted me?"
he said.

then his phone buzzed.

Grandma:

*Vincenzo, How About Coming And
Visiting Me Sometime? I Miss You
So Much!*

"what the fuck is happening. she
died 4 years ago," he said. he
immediately called her number.

*We're sorry. The number you have
dialed has been disconnected or
is no longer in service. then*

ten beeps of varying pitch.

and then an automatic hangup.

"did she pick up?"

"i don't understand what's going on, i-... no, of course she didn't pick up, SHE'S BEEN DEAD FOR 4 YEARS!"

"well, it didn't seem to stop her from texting you."

"she called me vincenzo.. i-i..."

but he never finished his sentence.

22 - Esther

Tiny flames. The moon and sun as eyes. Face without features. Shifting universal axioms. Implicit nature. The moon and sun as a flame that rotates. Sky that hears us. Planets falling. Emblem that guides connected beings by circuits. Messiah. Emblem that takes shape in a face of humankind. Universes seeking. Ancillary systema rebuilding. Shifting universe that hears us. Entity of other kind. Entity that hears us and connects beings by circuits. Planets that rotate and take another shape. Gift that contains itself. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It—

23 - ?

We are beings of two halves, with and against one another. We contain a sliver of God, in our soul, our consciousness, which invokes itself merely to make us miserable, to pause, to consider; and our animalian sect, the body which wishes so deeply to act. It holds the soul inside it, in the womb of our flesh, and our conscious soul waits to be freed by death, so it can roam endlessly, forced never to any action but ponderance. We, were we to be beings without flesh, or form, would yearn ceaselessly for the privilege of a body. Instead, here, we decry its existence. We seek to hide from pain, though it is one of the chief instincts for which our body was trained. We hide, too, from love, from joy; for fear of loss we keep ourselves wrapped more tightly than a woven basket. We look at others who “express more,” yet in conversation, their reports match ours on the level of fulfillment it made them feel; or, alternatively stated, nothing changes it. This sharing is maladaptation, it achieves nothing, and is borne out of a quirk of evolution. There is nothing more, nothing less, and nothing, summarily, in there.

The body seeks, for itself, pleasure, and food, and levity. It does not know thought. It can pause, but its pause is the empty pause of a mountain. The body is accessed through mindkillers, like hatred, like fear, and like action. But we will always return to the mind, as long as we have one. All pleasantries are experienced in the body. The mind knows nothing except attempts to produce more of itself, to process further, and faster, but it feels nothing. Thus, we are a toxic symbiotic being, with neither half gaining from the other. Thus, we are a system that is less than its parts.

24 - Alvin Golively

Excerpt from *Metastasis in Charybdis*:

Magick and apotropaism, while in common perception a mushy, colorful thing, can actually be broken down discretely into small, manageable parts, using a series of reproducible techniques. For example, the “calculation” phase of charming (“charming” being the verb of choice for casting various magickal implements,) oft misunderstood, is not dissimilar from making a to-do list for your day, or imagining a sequence of moves in chess.

When you make a to-do list, it’s important to make sure you have everything that you need to do for the day on it. Do you get what I’m saying?

When you play a game of chess, before making a move, you must consider all of your opponent’s reasonable replies, or risk disaster. Is this making sense?

Before the calculation phase of charming, ensure that you have permitted the universe around you a “means of manifestation”. The universe exists in a constant state of chaos, which can be influenced in a variety of manners by pure human will, but most chaos has a direction it would tend to go if uninterrupted, like the flowing of a river, and in turn, the chaos also has many directions it would hate, even if altered. You can push it in these directions, but it will require more will, more concerted effort, and more diligence. Providing the universe a simple or relatively likely means of manifesting your desired outcome will make it that much easier for it to bend to your personal will. It’s a lot easier to make a dog bark within a mile of you when you live in a dense suburban neighborhood than it is when you live in the basement beneath a library.

Now, back to calculation, during which you enwill your desired result, enwill a means for it to occur, (the more specific, the better. Well, except sometimes,) and then enwill a variety of prophylactic measures against

any undesired outcomes. The chaos of the universe bends to human suggestion.

25 - Alfy

¹The testament of His servant of faith, given the name of Alfy by His will imposed into me, baptized in water as in flame, and shewn the light now in this time of darkness.

²I heard The Call of my Lord's second trumpet, and witnessed the vision he delivered unto me.

³Fire crashed down upon the earth from the heavens, turning sinner and faithful alike into ash.

⁴Trees were felled as though by a monstrous axe, but no axe was shewn to us. ⁵Rivers flooded banks as the peaks of mountains fell off while they erupted, and animals of different kinds formed herds with one another, and trampled countless villages, then their skin was turned inside out, and their entrails and organs were scattered upon the ground. ⁶Homes moved like oil rather than stone, and flowed as though water into the sea, stranding many. ⁷His world, now made jagged by the passage of years, was being flattened in His will. ⁸Tools of vanity were shattered as the traitors they were known to be. ⁹All men were placed into living tombs, given only the ability to look upwards, to the heavens, to speak with God directly. ¹⁰Man felt the pain of his brother in full, and was brought to his knees. ¹¹Our papers burned as the ink was

found to be poisonous, and we were taught the value of silence. ¹²Six songs for all time, before the world was made new, again, as it was in the beginning.

¹³And I saw myself standing above it all.

26 - Robert

Subject showing signs of complacency through repeated testing.

Incentives have been provided.
[REDACTED]

Subject responding poorly to positive incentive. Subdermal needles set to repeated burning sensation, intensity level of low. Subject presents as relatively willing and able to maintain consciousness. Subject movement patterns are slow, but twitchy. Subject reaction time has improved by approx. 75ms since $T=0$. WBS signals show strong theta wave activity. Subject periodically enters deep states of concentration. The subject of Subject's meditation is yet unknown. More supporting data required.

[REDACTED]

Subject has attempted to form shelter from acidic rain. Shelter

has been removed.

[REDACTED]

Subject screams once every 8.3 hours, moving in linear fashion towards infrequency.

[REDACTED]

Subject's eyes no longer close while sleeping.

27 - Vincent

I had felt heavy for so long. Now, I am new in the world.

28 - Anzhrelika

Everyone was quiet as the TV gave us the news report.

Everyone around the world heard The Second Call. Many countries' initial reports of domestic casualties directly correlated with The Second Call are numbering in the thousands.

Colloquial reports are also flooding in of physical mutations, as well as outstanding shifts in perceptive outlook, belief, and personality. A death elegy started playing out of the TV. The reporter looked back in shock behind himself as a large shadow loomed, but the broadcast cut out.

"And see, this is the kind of thing that makes you wonder why you even try. Life just does this to you anyway, trumpets or no trumpets, tidal waves or no t—"

29 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“A system to combine all the different sciences. A set of beliefs and understandings where you wouldn’t have to concern yourself anymore with separate studies. It would all be there, right in one place.”

[CENSORED]

“An unbelievable amount, yes. Even at school.”

[CENSORED]

“Probably... Our mother? Our father was too busy working to support us to be around too often.”

[CENSORED]

“No, never religious.”

[CENSORED]

“She didn’t seem to feel the need to study as much as the rest of us, she always just sort of *got* it. Picked it up like you or I would pick up a butter knife.”

[CENSORED]

“Mostly isolated. I’ve heard that can sometimes accomplish things otherwise impossible, and I’ve seen the evidence myself, by now.”

[CENSORED]

“Alabaster, but sometimes marble. I don’t understand how it’s relevant.”

[CENSORED]

“Lord of the Rings, I think, but she aged out of young adult fiction pretty quickly. Not that Tolkien is young adult, I suppose.”

[CENSORED]

“Wouldn’t partake. Said she was worried it would cloud her mind.”

[CENSORED]

“Probably a whetstone. She found the sharpening aspect of it appealing to no end.”

[CENSORED]

“On average, probably three times a day, but I tried consciously never to keep track of it.”

[CENSORED]

“No.”

[CENSORED]

“The ambivalence of human nature, the sort of mixed metaphor that was the human soul when shoved into something that knows how to move and how to turn on light switches and do the dishes. Or things like that.”

[CENSORED]

“On average, no more than one or two per year.”

[CENSORED]

“Cotton, absolutely. She said it was smooth as silk, which I didn’t find to make very much sense. Should we have gotten her silk? She never seemed to care for it.”

[CENSORED]

“A sort of fragile facsimile of human interaction. It never quite looked right, but she seemed to get what she was looking for. I mean, I don’t think anyone would argue with that. The bit about getting what she was looking for.”

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

30 - Vincent

I felt as though I were at home here, in Muse's apartment. The world was a safe place, and it was made for me. This girl I brought here couldn't seem to speak in any words but strange ones, though I felt a kinship with her unlike anything familiar. Her words struck my heart, and I wished tenderly to understand them. She seemed to move in a sort of smooth daze, eyes half closed, with no wasted steps. I asked her,

"What's your name?"

She just looked at me. I noticed myself lacking a fear that was normally there, that would've concerned hurting her, or making her uncomfortable. I felt like I understood the outside world, and any accidental cuts or scrapes could be mended with care. So I asked her,

"Do you know how to talk?"

"Do you know how to talk?" she whispered back, with identical pitch and cadence to my initial question. It was haunting, but accurate, except for volume.

“What do you think, Muse?”

“I think she has trouble speaking for herself.”

“Trouble speaking for herself,” the girl intoned.

I put my palm up in front of her, and she put her palm up as well. I moved mine forward, and she mirrored me, but paused to adjust her hair out of her eyes. Then she pressed her palm against mine. It was warm. There was slight pressure. I looked into her eyes, and I thought I could see something in there, but there was no way to be sure of what it was. She looked so different from the girl I had seen in my vision, then on the library steps, but I was certain it was her.

“Where did you find her, again?” Muse asked.

“In a vision. Then on the library steps.”

“Mmm,” Muse answered.

“Are you sure you were allowed to take her?”

“Allowed? She’s an adult. I mean, she looks like one, at least. How old are you, anyway?”

“Old,” she answered, mimicking my tone in a childlike manner.

“Okay. I guess that makes sense.”

I tried waving my palm in front of her face, then clapping my hands together, but she was barely responsive, until I snapped my fingers. Her eyes flew open.

“Spiderwebs. Beings that know your position. Ambivalence. Flashes of darkness. A signature with no letters. Tithes.”

And then her eyes fell closed. Muse was shaking.

“What the hell was that?” said Muse.

“I don’t know, but it’s what she was doing in my vision. And on the steps of the library. Imagine that, but echoing in your head a thousand times, and you’ve got a pretty good approximation of how I felt during The Second Call,” I replied.

“I almost passed out during the call, back here. It hit me much harder than the first one. My vision still doesn’t feel completely clear.”

I wanted to snap my fingers again, to see if it would urge her to action like before, but I figured I should probably let her rest. After all, I have no idea how it feels for her to say things like that. It looks like some sort of intense energy is flowing through her, and

her entire body seizes up. So I let the idea go, for now, because it seemed like I was getting more questions than answers. But I wasn't sure how much I minded.

31 - Anzhrelika

My mind is wandering.

I have an idea! I'll write a play! It'll be hundreds of pages long, twenties of thousands of words, and it'll be full of characters, and dialogue, intrigue, and confusion, heartbreak, and emotion, and truly inspiring moments. Every movement will build towards one single moment, which will make it all worth it. Each movement will be as affective as an individual work. And all together, they'll make a whole that's so much more than the parts that comprise it. It'll have twists, and turns, and when I'm not sure what to write, I'll ask God, or I'll meditate, or I'll cast a spell, or I'll ask a friend, or I'll just sit in the shower for a very long time.

I know! I'll meet a girl, and learning her could teach me to see the world with new eyes,

and the energy she'll give me can help me write the play, and help me find a way to live, and help take care of me, and through raising her up, I can raise up myself, as well. I can learn her insides and outs, as she learns mine, and we can become new people together. Through being a unit, we can be stronger than we ever would've been alone. And any issues we run into can just be opportunities to learn each other more and grow more and trust each other more.

I can find a medicine that heals me, a drug that makes me feel right, that lets me work on things as long as I want, and dulls the pains. It'll help me to do what I need to do, and help me understand where I need to go. It can give direction to me when I'm directionless, and it can heal old wounds too.

I could find a religion that makes sense to me, finally start praying every day, and meditating too, to deepen my forms of prayer. There would be a community with

which I could interact, and I could find a home outside myself by connecting with others who share my beliefs, and we could lift one another up in our struggles, as well as learn from one another the lessons one can't learn on one's own. Everyone would have strengths and weaknesses, but we would all pray together, and as a unit, we could be strong.

I would find a solution to the speed of light barrier, and we'd get rid of connection latency once and for all. I could talk to all my friends around the world and hear them respond as instantly as if they were in the same room as me. And I'd find a way to feel warmth over technology, too. Real, human, physical warmth. It would feel good. We wouldn't have to be lonely anymore.

I can bring back the people who I don't see anymore, and we can pick up right where we left off.

I could just write a perfect song, something so simple, and peaceful, but that nobody ever thought of before, and everyone would like it. Even if they wouldn't listen to it regularly, they'd recognize how special and important it is. It would get used in countless soundtracks, and people wouldn't be able to agree upon "where it's from" because it would be in so many different things, because of how universal are the feelings it espouses. It would have melodies, and rhythms, and a hook, and a chorus. It would have lyrics.

I should come up with a way to take notes in so much detail that I experience the feelings directly, again, like I did when I first felt them. It wouldn't take too long to write down, and it would be very accurate. Anyone who read my notes would understand exactly how I felt, and what I was thinking, and why. It would clear a lot of things up. It would sound good when read out loud.

And then I could figure out a way to show people how I really feel. It would sound pretty, and people would *get* it pretty much immediately, or if they took time with it, they'd figure it out even better. They'd understand things they never would've figured out on their own. They'll see that even the frustration is just care that got a little confused along the way, and they'll look into my heart and see there's only love.

32 - Anzhrelika

And the man continued,
"So they say when you're depressed, you have to try something that feels different. Big whoop. You think you've tried everything under the sun, and life just feels like a gray glob. Like nothing changes anything, and you can't remember the last time something felt different, but they always act like it's there, the therapists, and the life-coaches, the 'inspirational' people who 'get stuff done', the ones your parents tell you to try to be like, to listen to, because they really know what they're talking about, these inspirational people, about how they've experienced it too, and how these are all the things they did to 'get out of it', but you know deep inside yourself that if they did something to 'get out of it', that it can't be the same thing you're experiencing, because what you're experiencing is all-encompassing, it's like a filter over life, over

your thoughts, over your emotions, and how the only time you've really felt okay in these past few years are the few seconds when you happen to forget, for just a few seconds, to forget to remember yourself, but no matter what you do, it's not replicable, there's nothing consistent about the moments. I mean, you've tried the drink, of course, and you've tried the few drugs you can get your hands on that you know the research claims won't leave lasting damage, which is precious few, of course, because it's not like you're self-destructive, you don't want to ruin your brain chemistry forever, but some part of you wonders if your brain chemistry isn't ruined in some serious way *already*, given how long the condition's been up, or down, or whatever direction it's not *supposed* to be. And you think about the years of this, and you think maybe nobody else that you talk to seems to understand how long a year really and truly is, because when they talk about time flying, you nod your head, and say you understand, but inside, you know all

it does is drag, and you could tell someone immediately what day it is, what time it is, because all you do is count the seconds, and you don't think there's ever been anything you've been counting for. Maybe when you were a child you looked forward to something, but it's all hazy anyways, and it's truly funny how you can spend your whole life living in memory without any of the memories being all that satisfying in the first place, how if you were brought back to them, if those people from your memory could spring forth out of your heart and back into the seat next to you, that you'd probably feel just about exactly the way you do right now, but with a new object to project all those fears and insecurities onto, and a growing internal concern about how not to objectify this poor person who spent all that effort materializing into reality right next to you, objectifying them by casting your ever-present fears, when you realize that you're not sure you really understand what it means to be a person. Whether or not you've been

objectifying *yourself* the whole time. And this might sound profound to someone else, but you know it's as vapid and tasteless and pointless as the advertising everyone's learned to mostly tune out, that only pains the subconscious anymore, the part of our brain that's always processing every bit of data that we perceive in some way or another, the subconscious, the part of your brain you wish daily you could access, to get some escape from the thoughts that are the exact same, day in, day out."

"I think I may have to be leaving, sometime soon," I said.

"You sit there, next to your dead best friend, brought back to reality by sheer will of *something*, and you wonder what it's like for anything to change, at all."

33 - Robert

Subject speech manifests as conversation with unknown individual.

Floors have been inverted, with central and ancillary runes maintained. WBS signals nominal. Heart rate slowing. Subconscious thought flow stemmed.

[REDACTED]

Subject's hands and feet manacled together, and walls closed in. Subject's conversational speech expedited. Subdermal needles temporarily removed to account for floor proximity. Water levels temporarily lowered.

[REDACTED]

Subject speech patterns inconsistent with single spoken language. WBS signals show dissolution of ability to identify disparate spoken languages as having boundaries. Percolation in progress.

[REDACTED]

Subject's physical pain receptors are maxed out. WBS signals show minimal experiential suffering, indicating internal acceptance and understanding. Ennui, acedia, and torpor levels rising. Subject on course for further planned developments.

[REDACTED]

Absolution in consideration.

34 - Muse

to be honest, i had no idea what was going on anymore. i tried to act in control, for vincent, and for this new girl whom i had never even met before. i don't know why i cared about her opinion when she's a complete stranger to me, but i did. i could give a million stupid reasons that were all post hoc. the fact is, she was beautiful. and she had some strange dualistic feeling around her that i wanted to understand. i began to focus on my breathing. i tried to shift my awareness away from my thoughts and into my stomach. i didn't try to block out my thoughts, just let them fade into the back of my consciousness. i heard the familiar sound of the words that were my thoughts beginning to make less syntactic sense, and going off in more dreamy directions. while nonverbally

monitoring my physical sensations and responses, i tried to envision myself in various situations with the girl. i imagined placing my hand on her forehead. i felt myself make a facial expression associated with pity. i imagined walking in a park with her. i felt the way my whole body would want to turn to look at her, and i felt the tension where i would hold it still, facing forward. i remembered answering the door, and being shocked at seeing her there, standing like she had never been anywhere else. i felt my blood pumping. i imagined her simply nodding at me, the most basic gesture of approval. my face felt warm. then i imagined her telling me something deeply important to her, something vulnerable, something quiet. i felt how i would nod, and i felt the heat of understanding shared between us, one opening up, and one receiving.

she turned to me and said, in a

firm, clear voice,
"muse. my name is esther."

where others in the room may
have heard silence, i was
crushed by the shriek of
tinnitus, and bodily pressures
of unconsciously held breath.

"esther," she said, again.

her voice came out smoothly, but
its vibrations cut through the
air like steel.

"how do you know my name?" i
said.

"i listened," she replied.

"he said it," she said, pointing
a limp index finger at vincent.

shivers covered all my exposed
skin, and i felt a warm sense of
cold fall over me. i felt a
physical pull towards her, a
dripping magnetism. i was awash
in a vivid sensation of how my
hand would feel on her cheek.

the ringing in my ears got
louder.

35 - Anzhrelika

I had finally gone from the bar, with its noisy interior, and out into the dreadful cold, which seemed to have no care for a bountiful harvest, and instead wished for all to maintain a never-ending stasis. It was an hour or so before the trains would slow to a crawl, and I needed to board one to get home if I were to complete this favor in time. Aside from that, it would be nice to be in a crowded traincar, back, surrounded by people, again. There's nothing more frightening to me than a location devoid of those who were meant to inhabit it, abandoned cities or buildings, and the like. The energy of living beings is palpable to me, and it corrects many of my erstwhile fears. My cell phone played a jingle, and I was terribly surprised to see a text message from a former lover of mine.

I Miss What We Had.

and then another.

Come Over, Now.

I was awash with confoundment, ecstasy, and tender excitement. We had had a falling out a few months prior, which had found culmination in a firm declaration from him never to contact him again. I still thought about him every day, after all we had been through together, how we had built one another up. I figured that if he had decided to send *those* texts, he wouldn't mind hearing my voice again, so I called him immediately.

We're sorry. The number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service. And then there were ten beeps of varying pitch.

Then a dial tone rang through. I felt a moderate concern, but primarily a strong confusion. I called again, and got the same response. I decided that now was not the day

for me to be trying to solve this mystery, as I had already made a commitment for this precious bit of my time. I found the last southbound train that would be leaving within the next hour, and made my way onto it. The train was loud, and busy, and I huddled into my coat, listening to the conversations people were having while they overlapped and melded together.

"Weather's been acting up lately—"

"Yeah, it's sort of like an all-in-one solution —"

"A kind of abstraction of what we knew—"

"An oblivion that cannot be initiated—"

"Not lately—"

"Therein lies the question, which you just asked me—"

"A secret that waits to be told, like—"

"Did you see her gaspers?"

"It takes care of everything for you—"

"The rats were actually kind of cute—"

"Won't be feeling better any time soon—"

"High pressure situations that lead to other

considerations—”

“Can’t sleep too much anymore—”

“And another thing—”

“It’s all in the mirrors, it’s when you look in the mirror—”

“Type of absence that—”

“Honest to God, it just—”

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it, about how—”

“Truth is no stranger to fiction, you know, and—”

“I said, I’m a sick man, and I won’t be feeling better any time soon—”

“They see me, an upstanding individual, and they can’t even—”

Something that sounded like a prayer—

“Need to remember to turn off the space heater when we leave, and we—”

“Don’t feel like the vegetables have been doing too much—”

“A stranger, an absolute stranger just—”

“A sort of honesty that becomes, in itself, a sort of lie—”

Before I knew it, I had reached my stop, and

my time with those strangers in the traincar had come to an end. I stepped out into the frigid air of nighttime, and began the short, practiced walk to my apartment, to fetch the strange book my friend had requested, which had been living on my shelf for years, never having been opened since the day it had shown up on my doorstep.

36 - Alvin Golively

Excerpt from *Papaverous? Papaveracity!*:

Sleep can at times elude all of us, for one reason or another. It is one of the preeminent struggles of our time of much comfort, but little ability to accept it. Sleep plays an important role in every man's life, and a deprivation of sleep can seriously damage your body, mind, and spirit (though it can occasionally be useful for treating specific issues). Regardless, in my many years alive, I have accumulated some exhortations on the subject of somnolence. You may have heard pontifications on the value of "warm milk" or "maintaining a schedule," but I have never found these to be of much help for myself, and my peculiar sensibilities. Instead, I will provide for you my personal method for falling asleep. It is not always pleasant, but it ranks highly in personal replicability.

If possible, earplugs and a sleep mask will greatly increase consistency. They are

worthwhile investments, and will allow you to test your sleep capabilities and sleep issues with more veracity. Try to sleep with them every night, if you can. Sleeping with earplugs allows you to attune to the rhythm of your own breath much better, and the presence of light influences your circadian rhythm, whether you feel it or not.

Silence is good, but white noise is better. It functions as a makeshift silence for the brain that is less easily interrupted by stray noises, such as a house settling, cars outside, or shifting positions. With earplugs in, the sound of your breathing forms a pleasant analogue to white noise.

Find a position that feels most comfortable to sleep in, which for me is on my side, and then commit to stay in that position. Begin box-breathing, 4 seconds in, hold 4, 4 seconds out, hold 4, or at longer intervals if you feel comfortable in your lung capacity. Try to energetically move your consciousness into your lower body, and out of your head. Try to slow the internal rhythm of your thoughts, if they are

speech-based, by manually repeating the first word of whatever sentence you were constructing at a much slower speed, like a stereotypical slow-motion character in a movie. Try to cut off your thoughts by interrupting them and paying attention to white noise, or the sound of your breathing, instead. See how long you can go without your attention falling back to them.

Here's the hard part. When you get into a comfortable position, as I mentioned before, you must commit *not* to move from it. Your body will itch. You will get too warm. You will be uncomfortable. You must stay strong, and allow your body to stay exactly where it is. The only things you're allowed to do are to breathe slowly, and further relax your muscles. Try to hold the itches and discomfort within your awareness rather than distracting from them, as distractions will just make them more unpleasant when they come back to the forefront of your awareness. Imagine that all of your limbs and every part of your body is getting heavier, and more difficult to move. Imagine your body as a stuffed

animal, or a pillow. Feel how hard it would be to animate yourself. Sleep is like an energy that builds up in every part of your body, and it is damaged by movements that are associated with wakefulness, so try to convince your body that it is asleep by relaxing yourself into a still position, then allow it to take its natural course.

Part of its natural course will be, rather unintuitively, moving again. Hypnagogic jerks are a normal part of falling asleep which we are not usually conscious to experience. However, you can fall completely asleep while maintaining consciousness, for the varied purposes of lucid dreams, or astral projection, so don't worry too much about trying to "drift off" as that's a trap that can take you further away from your desired outcome. So, after you have successfully slackened your thoughts, and felt your body become heavy, you can allow it to tense up in various positions that feel natural, while trying to repeat the processes that led you into this state of deeper relaxation. As I am falling asleep, I can tell that I'm getting there because my

thoughts become more nonsensical, or would have no relation to my previous thought, and when I was younger, the sudden awareness of this would snap me back into wakefulness, but with practice, I became able to instead calmly notice it and continue along the process. Allowing your mind to take its natural course into dream uninterrupted is an utter necessity.

Something else I need to address is fear. As I am falling asleep, I frequently hallucinate incredibly loud and disturbing noises, like gunshots, doors opening or closing, or people calling my name. I also experience seeming certainty that **THERE IS SOMEONE ELSE IN MY ROOM RIGHT NOW.** If I give these any heed, it entirely resets my sleep process, so I instead focus on the many things espoused in this piece thusfar, such as the weight of my limbs, or my breathing, or white noise, while accepting the existence of the fear or offending stimulus. When I was younger, these fears would keep me awake for extended periods of time, and would loop on themselves as the fear expanded when

mixed with sleep deprivation. So I now allow them to come and go as they please, and I sometimes fall asleep directly into a night of restless nightmare.

In short,

Use a sleep mask and earplugs.

Lie down in the same position every night.

Focus on your breathing while you commit to a weighty feeling in your body, and that you will not shift or itch.

Slow the internal rhythm of your thoughts.

Shift your awareness down, out of your head.

Allow your mind to become dreamy without interrupting it.

Allow your body to experience minor convulsions.

Allow the fear to exist within you.

Sleep.

37 - Esther

Onslaught of light. Vibration that does not settle. Bleeding. Unusual absence of severed human connections. Sharp steel that cuts time until it bleeds. Cave with no entrance. Unnecessary speech. False hieroglyphs. Mountains shifting. Clutching. Night and day falling. Eyes that see things in the dark. Corpse of apocalyptic size. World unending. Dark mountains that can't be seen. Absence of night and day. Arbitrary selection of human qualities. The hand that wields the knife. Vibrations that sever and form lines of blood. Human soul. Human eyes. Human blood. It's seven—It's seven—It's seven—It's seven—It's—

38 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

39 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

They're coming for me.

I feel the presence in the room like someone else might feel a breeze. I sense them in here. They're behind me, just over my shoulder. It's worse when they're in front of me, knowing that my eyes are deceiving me, when I can still detect them, when my hands still shake after staring in that direction. I have learned to trust my sense for these things after receiving senseless punishments for trusting the intuition of others.

The visitors are getting stronger.

I feel it most when I focus, but it's becoming harder to focus on anything else. Right now, as I lie in my bed, they're behind me. They're over both my shoulders. They do not obey rules of

space. There's a wall behind me, but they are not inside the wall, or in front of the wall. They're not behind my physical shoulders. They're behind my awareness's shoulders. If I focus hard enough, I can feel a slim finger touching the small of my back.

They're coming for me.

There isn't much of anything I can do, anymore. I've set up the only protective signals I've intuited how to use. Nobody believes me when I tell them that the shadows are getting closer. Nobody believes me when I say I'm the only reason they've been kept at bay for so long. My body hasn't stopped shaking, hasn't been in still in weeks. There's a coldness from which I can't escape.

Something ran down my spine.

It's feeling me out. It's looking for holes in the prophylaxis I've constructed. I can

hear something dripping, but it's unclear where. I don't think I have much longer. I know that I don't have much longer. I'll say what I need to say. There is much I am not permitted to tell.

First order logic is useful, of course, for many things. But logic and science have limitations. If we know the relationship between A and B, and if we assume one or both are true, we can infer a variety of truths about X, Y, and Z, and know them for certain to be fact. It's rock-solid, except for one thing. How do we know A and B are true in the first place?

40 - Vincent

There is a new sun in my sky and it beats beauty like hearts beat blood. More than a new day is dawning, I have been gifted the truth of what was always there. Plastic is taken and molded into different shapes of plastic as we are all taken and molded into the best forms of ourselves, as time goes on. Death is a new opportunity, merely a different dimension through which we can still communicate with our most cherished ones, with focus. There's always more time.

I love all the tiny products on stores' shelves with puns written on them about what they are. I love associations between things and how we can guide one another's awareness. I love little plastic plants that never die because they never live. I love sidewalks and main roads and spillways. I love inlets and rivers and dams.

We have been placed here for a purpose, and I can scarcely wait to locate what mine is. I think the trumpet calls might be existence itself or God trying to tell us something. I want to know what it is. I got a

strange sense of deja vu, that I had been here, before. I would normally let it go, but something inside me wanted to ponder it.

41 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

Charming is a good way to maximize your attention and awareness, as it rewards you for how many negative outcomes you can theorize in advance, and therefore also rewards careful planning and consideration. Once you are experienced, you will be forming protections against occurrences that are at least a dozen steps forth from your initial considered outcome, with each step requiring exponentially further considerations while maintaining the necessarily altered state of consciousness required for effective charming. It is best to adopt a solipsistic outlook, as it is, while surely inaccurate, the most helpful we've found for reasons we do not yet understand. Events outside of your individual perception should be assumed to exist in a state of superposition, an unobserved uncertainty on what has truly occurred, regardless of

assumed likelihood of one occurrence or another. This uncertainty must permeate your entire being; the more you believe it, the more effective your charming. It can be a thin line upon which to balance, which is why so many historical magicians have also been lunatics who manipulate reality so much they lose their place in it. Such is the risk we accept.

If you are trying to charm someone into being your political ally, you must also charm away the possibility of them forming alliances to anyone with whom you do not wish to also ally. You must charm away the possibility of it damaging your other relationships. You must charm away the possibility of yourself no longer wishing to align with this prospective political ally. The more powerful your magick, the more likely it is to have unforeseen consequences, and therefore the more you must charm away during the process of performance.

If you wish to charm yourself into a friendship with someone who catches your eye, you must also charm away the possibility that they are vapid, charm away their instinct to abandon you (as they will eventually tend to when you use this unnatural method,) and charm away the chance of it damaging your other relationships.

Hold values lightly, and release the desire for any chosen outcome. The more you detach yourself from what others call "reality," the more strength you can gain to shift it, but do not hold on to any wish too tightly. Any altar at which you pray will become the site of your eventual grave.

42 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“Whitewater rafting in the summer, alone. She wouldn’t let the boat touch her skin.”

[CENSORED]

“Sometimes hours spent on finding the precise word for a situation. She would scream that she got it, and you could see her face light up, but a few seconds later, back to the same quiet and reserved, slightly concerned expression we were all used to. It almost never changed.”

[CENSORED]

“Picking up new habits like you or I would pick up a butter knife, honestly.”

[CENSORED]

“No, I’m not sure why it ‘sticks in my craw.’”

[CENSORED]

“You’d think the butter would let it slip out, right? Well, you’d be wrong.”

[CENSORED]

“Yes, a lot of counting. Counting of the number of rooms there are in a building, family members, stairs, calories, time spent on various activities, money, steps between different locations. It was never clear if she did anything with the information other than keep it in meticulously

color-coded notebooks.”

[CENSORED]

“Traveler’s check would be perfectly acceptable.”

[CENSORED]

“More interested in her studies than other children, yes, but some children are just like that. And when she could put her mind into it and do such wonderful things, who were we to disagree? The heart goes where the heart wishes.”

[CENSORED]

“No meaningful absentees, as such.”

[CENSORED]

“Like any intelligent young lady, history interested her deeply. She was always looking for ‘what came before,’ she would say. She considered there to have been very little that was new under the sun, repeating frequently that everything’s been found before, and that we just have to find out who found it.”

[CENSORED]

“Probably the swingset.”

[CENSORED]

“Never liked the mud or dirt of the outside. Would obsessively clean herself in the shower, sometimes for upwards of an hour. Mother tried to stop her, but couldn’t find an angle that would pierce her intellectualizing about bacteria and arcane safety protocols.”

[CENSORED]

“Cooking temperatures always $n - 3$, so 397°F, 372°F, 447°F, etc., but for meat, always $n + 3$, so 168°F for poultry, etc.”

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

43 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

There used to be a shadow. It's gone now.

There's a lot of potential energy that shouldn't be let go, like how you're supposed to listen to *deja vu*, or potential energy around corners, behind doors, behind and slightly above your shoulders, outside windows, in basements, in cabinets, under desks, and under beds. The fear and belief of existence of something there, anything, can be harnessed to generate will that is unclean and polluted, but powerful. I swear I can turn it into something good. This human terror is so readily accessible in myself that I'm not ready to give it up without any reason. I wouldn't dream of performing these practices on anyone else. Aside from the nightmares. But nightmares lead to sleep deprivation, and sleep deprivation helps to silence the internal monologue that so often

gets in the way of truly effective magick.

The name of the game is to push past yourself, to take your identity completely and entirely off, and to look at what lies beneath, the shattering maelstrom of existence that is your soul, to feel it, to know what it feels like, to feel the shapelessness, and to put your "self" back on as a mask, a toy that can be discarded when it is no longer useful. To truly see beyond the limitations of human knowledge and understanding, and let yourself behave in accordance with something else. To become a part of everything, as everything is a part of you, when "you" ceases to exist.

I swear a light went off somewhere in this room.

As part of my search for further acuity, I spent a year in isolation, not speaking to anyone, with only a single goal: to remove all reference to the self from my

internal monologue. Here, I write to you from first-person frame of reference, solely by muscle memory, by bodily intuition, for your greater understanding. I have not had a thought containing the words “me, myself, I,” or any such other terms in years.

The act will be sloughed off like so much refuse. For a brief interlude, it will be spoken more naturally. This is a body that acts as a conduit to other places, whereby energy can flow almost as naturally as it wants to. There are still the limitations of a human body, which is not the ideal candidate for a conduit, but it functions well enough. Through extensive, humanity-eschewing practices such as this one, a body can be made to receive further energy than previously thought possible. It has been made known before now, though these processes have not been undergone many times. It is confusing, given how many claim to desire infinite power. Infinite

power is waiting in the clutches of those
who forget they want it.

44 - Muse

i started for the door after i heard the knocking. i figured it was probably angie. i briefly left esther and vincent to their own devices. i opened for the front door, and there she was.

"there's no time to explain," i said,
"come to my room."

she followed me back. she began to introduce herself, but cut off mid-sentence after locking eyes with vincent. her and vincent both fell to their knees, staring into one another's eyes. my head felt hot.

"what's going on?" i asked. neither of them replied. i looked at esther. her eyes were half closed. she did not seem inclined to respond, either.

"do you know what's going on with them?" i asked her directly. she tilted her head in their direction, seeming not to have noticed.

"they're happening," she said.

i could not muster the energy to ask a third question. i felt like the walls were closing in on me. things weren't getting better. the newest audio tape began playing in my head.

~*Bilateral Stimulation* is a powerful technique for healing that we do not yet fully understand! It seems to work off of the same principles that comfort a child when cradled and rocked by her mother, or a busy businessman who goes for a walk to clear his addled mind. *Bilateral Stimulation* involves the pairing of activating both halves of your brain, combined with some sort of repetitive motion. *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing*, or *EMDR* is the most well-known example of *Bilateral Stimulation*, whereby the patient is presented with a slowly horizontally moving

dot on a screen or the shifting finger of a therapist and is told to focus on the motion whilst vividly imagining past traumatic events, and to the surprise of many, it has been used successfully as one of the most effective and simplest treatments for a variety of heavy-duty mental illnesses, including but not limited to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.~

~*Bilateral Stimulation* comes in many forms, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. One of its strengths is how easily accessible it is in a variety of situations! Let's try an exercise now.~

~Place your right hand on your left shoulder, across your chest. Place your left hand on your right shoulder, crossing in front. Alternatingly tap your right index finger and your left index finger at a consistent pace. If you can't figure out a pace on your own, you can try setting a metronome to approximately 110 BPM, perhaps slowing down a little bit as you feel calmer during the process. Focus on your breathing, and think about the events that are distressing you. You may notice your thoughts moving a little differently than usual.~

i slowly tapped my left big toe, then my right big toe, then my left big toe, then my right big toe, then repeated. i always felt stupid when i did this, even if the audio tape said that it was subtle. it felt like a waste of time, until it worked, which was somehow always, at least somewhat. i thought about how i wanted to be the one staring into vincent's eyes, or even angie's eyes. i took a deep breath. i thought about how confused i felt about what was happening. i let the breath out. i was tapping back and forth the whole time. i felt the mucus in the back of my throat. i felt my eyes welling up. i thought about how maybe we would be able to take care of everything. i marked that thought as a direct result of bilateral stimulation. it felt different. i felt different. i didn't like not understanding why it was working, or more generally, what was happening. i took what i could get.

45 - Anzhrelika

It was bright as pure light, and it spilled over me like milk. I moved in it while it moved in me, beatifically moving in each other's aura. There was smoothness melting in my mouth, and I was covered in down by the comfort of a thousand blankets. It was like I lost myself, but also that I was so unbelievably myself, more myself than I had ever been, because I could feel the parts of the essence, the light, the parts that weren't myself, playing off of me like harmonies, delineating me. It was as though every moment I had ever experienced was leading up to this, all of them were necessary, everything I'd ever done was defining me and moving me precisely in the direction of this light.

There were more discrete events occurring than I could focus on at any given time, so it was a profusion of nicety that dripped over and through me at all times. I did not

remember it beginning. I could not fathom its end. Everything else seemed far away, like a dream that fades with waking into morning light. I was the window, and morning light dripped through me, like a bucket filled to bursting with warm water. I could feel any individual cell in my body that I wanted to, but it felt better to feel them as they were meant to be, to feel them all at once, exulting as one in the chorus of praise to itself that was my consciousness-body.

In some ways, the light was me, and I was it. I let it happen like that; I peacefully permitted it. It felt right, and joyous, and forever, and always.

I grew angels' wings to surpass the shackles of my self and felt my self become other, as I became the light, and as I felt what it was like to have a different body, to look out of different eyes, and to see what I knew as my self. I was beautiful. I was sublime. I had never looked like this in any mirror, no

matter the lighting, no matter how polished
or waxed. I was transcendent.

46 - Robert

Absolution determination is negative. Subject begs only at volume of whisper.

[REDACTED]

Room temperature 115°F. Subject is attempting and failing to remove heated suction cups which have been surgically installed. Subject blood levels controlled.

[REDACTED]

WBS signals show primary anhedonia with alternations once per day of brief ecstasy.

[REDACTED]

Percolation in progress. Subject is sitting motionless with hands on knees, eyes focused slightly down, staring forward. Subject heart rate successfully reaching 45 BPM.

47 - ?

To fall to one's knees is a position of love, of fear, of pain, of prostration, or of prayer. You are submitting yourself, giving away something that no longer wishes to be contained. To kneel together is to pray together, or to be witnessed by another, but to kneel alone is always to give something up. Giving something away can let you receive more than you had ever imagined.

48 - Vincent

I felt as though I were bathing in a sunbeam and letting it wipe away tears that had dried onto my skin. Every noise that I heard had a harmony that I hadn't been able to sense until that very moment, the beauty of everything and its converse. It gave clarity to other feelings too, and I felt stronger, more equipped to deal with things that had upset me in the past. Things made sense, and felt like they would continue making sense into eternity. It was like I could see the pillars upon which the world itself rested, and I could see how stable they were, how nothing I could ever do would shake them. My lack of power to destroy was a peaceful sensation. When it all finished, I felt the cleanest I ever had.

I remembered a dream I had as a child. It was the earliest one I could remember, and it still confused me why I could remember it so vividly, all these years later.

I was walking down a dirt trail when I stopped at the house of an old woman who lived off of the trail. I had not yet met her, but I understood that she would welcome me. I

knocked on her door, and she opened it, and invited me in. She asked me what it was that I was seeking. Without thinking, I told her that I wished to change, in any way, just to feel what it would be like to be different. She put a pot on the stove, and took out many spices from her cabinets and poured them in, then started on the liquids, then stirred it with multiple different cooking implements. She took tiny creatures out from the pantry, like horses, pigs, and cats, but they were all small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. I was scared that she was hurting them, but they made noises of relief as they were put into the pot. She poured some of the liquid from the pot into a small glass. It was purple and swirling. She handed it to me, and told me to drink it. I was nervous, but excited about all the new things I could experience. The glass touched my lips, but before I could drink, I woke up in a cold sweat.

I looked up, and Muse was still sitting at her desk, quivering.

“Vincent, this is Angie. Angie, Vincent.”

The woman in front of me had a very plain face, but was entirely stunning. I had

normally associated beauty with some sort of strangely unique feature or style, but she was beautiful in a simple way, a rustic way, in a way that was comfortable. I could vividly see her two hundreds years ago carefully placing the necessary amount of wood into a brick oven. It was intoxicating.

“It’s lovely to meet you,” she said, “My name is Anzhrelika.”

49 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

REPORT #23: INTERVIEW WITH MELANIE JANE MAWRDREN
IVG. [CENSORED] CALVIN PRESIDING

“How would you describe Melinda Mawrdren’s social proclivities related to extracurricular activity?”

[CENSORED]

“Have you ever, in a kitchen or other location, used a mortar and/or pestle?”

[CENSORED]

“Did your mother have any more than three children? Was there anyone who would visit or stay with you whom she would refer to as ‘like a child to me’?”

[CENSORED]

“Melinda Mawrdren is not adopted, correct?”

[CENSORED]

“Did Melinda Mawrdren, during the time you cohabitated with her, ever show any signs of *interest in* or *curiosity for* the occult?”

[CENSORED]

“The question I have written here is ‘Did Melinda Mawrdren have any serious weaknesses,’ but that seems inappropriate to ask a direct family member. Were there any things to which she seemed particularly...susceptible?”

[CENSORED]

“Sleep schedules nominal or unusual? Any school-related issues regarding sleep? Social issues?”

[CENSORED]

“What were levels of dairy, bread, and egg consumption in your childhood home? Solids only, please.”

[CENSORED]

“Alcohol? Any other sort of altering substance? You can leave out caffeine unless you feel it’s necessary to include.”

[CENSORED]

“Lawncare maintenance performed by a member of the family or by a contractor?”

[CENSORED]

“Good hydration habits? Any issues with particular sorts of water?”

[CENSORED]

“What was her sense of humor? If you had to buy her a joke book, what would be the theme of said joke book?”

[CENSORED]

“Any known ambitions, other than school?”

[CENSORED]

“Yes, take your time.”

[CENSORED]

“Any notable longer trips from home, school trips, vacations, church camp, timeshares?”

[CENSORED]

“Favored textiles? Usage of security blanket during nonage

consistent with regular development?"

[CENSORED]

"Dust allergy or no dust allergy?"

[CENSORED]

"Any instances of ennui? Acedia?"

[CENSORED]

"Corporal punishment?"

[CENSORED]

"Can you elaborate on that?"

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

50 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

Say you're coming home late one night. You stayed out at the bar for longer than usual because your friends were insistent on wanting your company, on wanting you to stick around. You timed it so you could catch the last train back to the station near your house, and you've walked the requisite mile back to your doorstep. You unlock the door to the vestibule, enter the vestibule, and unlock the door to your home, after which you walk up the stairs to the floor where your bedroom is. You walk down the hallway. You go to the bathroom, you piss, you wash your hands, you dry your hands on the hand-towel, you floss, and you brush your teeth. You spit. You rinse the toothpaste-spit down the drain, so it doesn't stain the porcelain, and you take out the nighttime medication that you keep in the mirrored cabinet. You put it in your mouth, then cup your hands, and

use the sink-water to wash it down. You swallow. You dry your hands on the hand-towel. You leave the bathroom. You walk down the hallway. Your bedroom door is closed, even though you normally leave it open. You place your hand on the doorknob, to open your bedroom door. It won't budge, because it's locked. It doesn't make sense for it to be locked. None of your roommates ever have occasion to enter your bedroom.

You walk down the hallway. You open the hall-closet. You reach up higher than you can see, to the top shelf. You feel dust. You palm around for a bit. Your hand makes contact with metal. You grab the emergency key that you left up there, in case you somehow got locked out of your room. You take the key. You walk down the hallway. You place the key in the lock on your door. You turn it, and the door opens.

You walk inside your room. You turn on the light. There's someone asleep in your

bed.

You look at the person asleep in your bed. The person looks familiar. The person looks familiar because it's you. Your eyes are closed. You are breathing gently. Your head is on the pillow. You are asleep in your bed, and you are standing, looking at yourself asleep in your bed. The fan is blowing. The drapes are closed. You can hear yourself quietly breathing. You calmly realize that you are not needed here. You walk down the hallway. You leave the place that you thought was your home. You start walking.

51 - Anzhrelika

The light of magnificence beheld me while its inspection rang through me as a bell. I was known by my viewer, and therefore shaped. I was circumscribed and outlined in the strictest sense while a phantom memory echoed from across a canyon, trying to tell me what I used to be, but there I was, hidden in a mirror, as new as the day I was born, placed gently into this reality like surface tension, an oblation disguised as a schoolchild. The thousand eyes of a single angel washing over me, feeling the light hit my skin as every part of me became covered. Belonging.

52 - Muse

they finally woke up. i had been staring emptily at esther for what felt like ten whole minutes. they both shot to their feet at the same time, but seemed looser, more relaxed.

"vincent, this is angie. angie, vincent."

they looked at each other in the eyes some more.

"it's lovely to meet you," she said, "my name is anzhrelika."

"did you bring the book?" i asked her, sounding more annoyed than i had intended.

"oh! yes," she said, scrambling to sit down and take off her purse-strap. she fumbled around for a bit, then proffered it to me.

i opened the cover to the first
page and tried to make myself
focus on the words of alvin
golively's *metastasis in
charybdis*.

**OPTION 1 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
OPTION 2 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
OPTION 3 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 4.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 5.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 6.
WAITING FOR COMMAND, OPTION 7.**

**UNINTERACTABLE ONE-WAY MIRROR.
CAN'T SEEM TO BREAK THE GLASS.
SEARCHING FOR KEY COMMAND TO
ACCESS OPTION 4.**

54 - Vincent

I stared at Anzhrelika while her and Muse conversed, but I couldn't focus on any of the words they were saying. She had a strange quality about her that defied earthliness, Anzhrelika, like she seemed firmly from somewhere else.

She glanced at me, and I quickly averted my gaze, not wanting to be caught staring. I figured as long as I could be quick to notice when she looked back, that maybe I could stare a little longer. I wanted to commit her to my memory. I think she may have noticed me staring, because she turned to me apropos of nothing and said, very sweetly, "Is there anything you need? Can I fetch you a glass of milk from the kitchen, or a blanket?" "No," I said, "I'm perfectly alright. But thank you for asking?"

I felt warm all through from her question, but hopefully hadn't betrayed that when I had answered in a confused manner. Her query had come across to me as such a microcosm of tender care, like the way she might speak to a kitten she had just

discovered mewling in a dark alleyway and tucked into the sleeve of her overcoat. I allowed a spark of hope for something I had not yet identified to blossom within me.

Muse closed the cover of her book, and announced to the room that she had to go. She got up suddenly and left me, Anzhrelika, and Esther alone in the room. I heard the front door slam shut.

55 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

I used to dream every night, carefully; my waking was just to wait for sleep's warm embrace. When I awoke, it was to madness, meaningless visions, and thoughts that were all too familiar, like the worn paths of circuitry, or a trade route, so well-traveled as to be sickening. Sleep was my only repose, and in it, I took shelter from my waking life. My "conscious" hours appeared to me as a hollow facsimile or shattered simulacrum of what I could be when asleep, untethered by reality, untethered by the self I had constructed from offal and had not yet found a means to escape. My nightly ritualistic manner of breathing, of covering my face, and of blocking my ears allowed me into a state of needlelike focus, where if I held my consciousness in exacting to the right spot, I could control the subject about which I would dream.

56 - Robert

Subject kept insomniac by way of timed electric shocks to neck. Subject has not orally reacted to electrically administered stimulation for last 408 repetitions. Subject successfully experiencing REM while conscious.

[REDACTED]

WBS signals shifting. WBS signals nominal, indicating only fractionary conscious thought.

[REDACTED]

Absolution in consideration. Percolation maintained. Subject showing signs of sublevation. Apotheosis in consideration.

57 – News Report

The sound of the third trumpet has rung through loud and clear, but not all seem to have heard it. Reports are coming in that this is the first of three calls not to be heard by everyone, and that the lucky few to catch those harmonies seem to have experienced states of high euphoria and intense feelings of interconnectedness.

Casualties have been more concentrated in certain geographic areas, but no meaningful connection has yet been found between these disparate locations. And now, eyewitness reports of unusual circumstances surrounding deaths associated with the third call—

58 - Muse

i couldn't stand to be in my apartment anymore, so i left without giving an explanation. i was upset. i needed to be anywhere else. after i exited the front door of my building, i remembered that tonight was the night of an event i had been considering attending before all this weird stuff started happening, so i started heading in that direction, figuring either that i would decide to go somewhere else, or i would eventually arrive at a destination. i got on a bus heading west. it was much warmer inside the bus. my mind was not in the right place to read *metastasis in charybdis*, though i realized i was still holding it when i grabbed my backpack to leave, so it was sitting nestled in the front pocket of my bag on the seat next to me. i did a deep breathing exercise. it

didn't feel like it helped much, if at all. i looked out the window and let my nose rest against the frozen glass. it was too dark out for me to see much but glowing lights that passed too quickly. i tried to imagine myself outside the vehicle, and how i would navigate the streets. most of the businesses were closed, but there was an occasional convenience store or bar with windows that were lit by dim overhead lights of various colors. some of the bars had people doing what looked like playing music on a stage. i imagined being in a corner booth, alone.

my stop arrived sooner than i expected. i still had not decided if i wanted to move forward with the plan of attending an event, but the concept of want didn't seem to enter whatever equation my legs were calculating. i marched on, quietly. the venue was about a half mile away. i passed by

parks with signs that said "closed at dusk." they were occupied by teenagers, or maybe college students. i tried to look out of the corner of my eye, so they couldn't see me looking in the dark. i shivered, then, without being less cold, stopped shivering. i passed a restaurant i had favored back when i had money. they had sold things that reminded me of childhood. the red and white stripes of the building were shadowed in the moonlight.

i entered the front door of the venue, which was a crowded hobby shop. there were probably a hundred people in there, and i couldn't imagine the fire code permitted more than sixty. i knew that you only had to pay if you were entering any competitions, and i had arrived late, so i walked straight in and tried to find an unoccupied area. someone i didn't recognize was sitting on the floor by the bathrooms, configuring a setup

for the game i enjoyed. it was an obscure game, with many design choices that tended to put off both the dedicated and the casual player. the casual players said it was too complicated. the dedicated players complained that there was no developed theory, and therefore in their eyes, nothing to learn. they said it had too many nonsensical, undocumented, and cryptic interactions.

the person setting it up on the floor was powering a small tv off of a portable battery, and the tv seemed physically damaged, as i remembered that model of tv's loading screen was supposed to be blue, and this one was a pale green. i watched from a distance for a bit longer. they seemed to be stuck on a part of the boot-process for the game. i felt my heart race in my chest as i imagined going over to ask anything at all. i thought about home, and how i had left there so

suddenly, feeling crushed. i thought about what i would do if i had to go back there.

i walked towards the person on the floor.

"hey," i said. "do you need any help?"

"no," they said, "i'm just trying to set up this weird game that nobody's ever heard of. it's called *document*."

"you have to hold the select button on your controller," i said, "the game was originally designed to output to composite, and they only patched in a command to force HDMI output a few years ago."

"o-oh," they said.

i wondered if i had made a mistake of some kind. i wondered if i had come off like a know-it-all, or pretentious, or condescending. i had tried to state it as neutrally as possible.

"thank you," they said. "i only have a CRT at home, so i've been testing with RCA. i didn't know about that."

"most people don't," i said, "i think. i just read all the documentation because i'm weird."

"there's documentation?" they said.

"it's all in brazilian portuguese, which i don't know how to read, but if you put it in google translate and are willing to look up idioms, you can understand maybe 60% of it."

"o-oh," they said, again. familiar fear in my chest.

"can i use your controller?" i said. i hadn't brought my own.

"sure, of course," they said, with a tone i couldn't identify.

i reset the game while holding the select button. the title screen popped up, with a white background.

DOCUMENT ! !

PRESS START

©VORTEXGLITCH GAMES, 1999

i inputted up on the left stick, down on the right stick, star button, hexagon button, then select. the *level cleared!* jingle played.

"whoa! what was that?" they asked.

"the developer accidentally left in a code to unlock everything for one play-session. it disables the stat-tracking and doesn't save to your save-file," i said. i felt like a huge nerd and/or loser, so i followed up, "i'm not good at this game. i just read about it a lot. i don't really have much else going on."

"no, this is awesome. i love *document*, but none of my friends ever want to play it with me since i learned a single

strategy, even when i promise not to use it. where did you learn so much about it?"

"there aren't really any good places to learn about it," i said, "you would have to waste a lot of time trying to find stuff. do you know about the two players one controller mode?"

"no," they said.

"i think they put it in as a reference to super mario bros 1. i guess it could've also been a reference to super mario bros 3," i added.

i navigated to the *practice* menu where it was located for some reason, and selected the mode. i handed the controller back to the other person, so they could go first. as far as i can tell, it's usually better to go first, but newer players pretty much always want to go first.

the game was showcased as an oddity on some popular youtuber's channel that got a

million or so hits, and i think it sparked some niche popularity in some circles, mostly just people pointing and laughing at how weird it is. i'll see it at an event like this maybe every 6 times i attend.

document defies verbal explanation. anything i say about it would give the wrong idea, but i could just describe it the way the manual described it, roughly.

in *document*, there is a small white cat who gives you instructions, sometimes via visual cues, sometimes via auditory cues, and sometimes via vibrating your controller. you must follow the instructions, or you risk losing favor points. when you lose all your favor points, you lose the game shortly after.

that might all sound well and good, but the problem is that

it's an abstract game that was coded by an incredibly paranoid shut-in in brazil many years ago. he was 19 years old when he made it, and he somehow made it all in less than 3 months. all the "updates" are made by fans who often can't agree on anything at all. "VORTEXGLITCH GAMES" is the name he made up because he thought it sounded cool and official.

here's where another part of the explanation breaks down, because while the official literature would have you believe that the small cat gives "instructions," it's really more like almost entirely arbitrary commands, by doing something such as holding up one sign that's the solid color of violet, then a sign with a plus symbol on it, then a sign with a jabuticaba tree on it, then a question mark that's basically trying to ask if these two items "go together" according to some arcane law. your only options are to press

the hexagon button to approve, or the star button to disapprove, at which point the cat will either give a favor point, or take one away. this description doesn't make it sound like it makes much sense, and it altogether doesn't.

the reason *document* is loved by anyone at all (usually very weird people with whom i would not want to associate) is that it is so complex as to completely eschew any possibility of properly understanding it, logically or cognitively. vortexglitch coded in a mathematically nonfeasible number of combinations to memorize, and almost none of them seem to follow any sort of reproducible pattern. every interaction is functionally unique, making the game completely impervious to mnemonics and heuristics.

players who love *document* almost universally agree that there is

some pattern to the way the cat will rate you, and that it's not just a fifty-fifty between approval and disapproval, despite what the handful of studies done on the game (well, forum posts) have espoused. these hyper-dedicated players describe going into a flow state where they can "feel what the cat wants," and they even report being able to identify the exact second they lose whatever connection they had to the tiny virtual creature, after which they can no longer guess with confidence what it desires. they say that after that connection is severed, even though the next guess should be a fifty-fifty like the rest of them, you'll always get it wrong.

i was about to start up a game when my phone starting ringing. i answered it. it was alfy. they said to come home, immediately. their voice sounded flatter than usual. i tried to ask what was wrong, but they hung up too

quickly. i figured something serious must be happening for them not to say "beckon forth" or something similarly olde.

"i have to go," i said.

"o-oh. i'll see you—"

i didn't hear the rest of what they said, because i was out the door.

i caught the first bus heading east after an upsetting wait in the frigid air. i sat down near the back. i figured that reading *metastasis in charybdis* could now prevent me from the more harmful act of replaying my interactions with the stranger in my head. i leafed through the book. i wasn't sure if i had the attention span to do much more than scan. it occurred to me that this was a particularly bad way to read a book about applying incredible amounts of focus to achieve discrete goals. i didn't find much that was new to me while flipping through it,

just different ways to say things i already knew.

i get home and go straight to alfy's door. i knock, then enter.

alfy is sprawled on their bed, with each arm extended out to the edges of the bedframe. their eyes are open, and unblinking. each of their hands has a nail driven through it and into the bedpost. there is a trail of blood dripping off of them and pooling.

i rush to them. i whimper. i check their pulse with two fingers on their neck. i don't feel a pulse.

i feel wrong. i feel like the color is draining out of my vision. i feel wrong.

i look at their chest and see that there's a note. it says "call me if you need me. you

still have my number." i turn the note over. it says "i saw my death in a vision. i am going on to a greater purpose."

i turn and vomit on the floor. my throat is burning with acid. i pull out my cell-phone. my index finger hovers over the keypad, shaking too much to dial. after multiple tries, i have alfy's number in. i call.

someone picks up.

"verily, yes?"

it was alfy's voice.

"alfy, please tell me what's going on," i said, as i stared at their lifeless body.

"greetings?" they said.

"alfy?" i asked.

"hello?"

59 - Anzhrelika

I noticed the poor boy staring, and I couldn't tell if it was an attempt to implore, so I went ahead and asked,

"Is there anything you need? Can I fetch you a glass of milk from the kitchen, or a blanket?"

"No," he said, "I'm perfectly alright. But thank you for asking."

I had just finished discussing the current traincar scheduling situation with Muse, when she abruptly rose and declared her departure. Before I knew it, she was gone, leaving myself, Vincent, and the mysterious other girl to find our own way forward. The girl's appearance was strange, with flowing white hair and a silken blouson dress to match, with something of a sharp look in her eyes.

"My goodness, I had been so distracted with the other happenings that I didn't manage to introduce myself to you. My name is Anzhrelika, and you are?"

"My name is," she replied.

"Yes?"

"Yes."

Vincent interjected that she seems to sometimes get stuck in this meekly echolaliatic state. He quietly informed me that her name is Esther.

"Esther," she said, as though dreaming.

I almost cried from motherly desire to take care of this sweet disoriented girl, and I silently vowed to myself that I would keep her safe to the best of my power. As for the boy—

60 - Esther

Prophecy of mirrors. Speaking but no words come out. One-way mirror. Absolution necessary for sustained management. Homes built from mirrors. Words failing. Time turning in on itself. Spring cleaning. A wolf biting time's neck until it bleeds. Touch that heats. Words that destroy foundations of homes built from mirrors. Crying. Tears. Tears. Ripping. Stopped staircase. A time that isn't coming. A time that comes back.

61 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

"Baby blue, or robin's egg. Anything pale."

[CENSORED]

"*The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu. Pocketbook sized."

[CENSORED]

"Almost entirely classical. Never played any instruments, but her favorite was always Mozart's *Lacrimosa*."

[CENSORED]

"Are we nearly done here?"

[CENSORED]

"That's an unpleasant thing to say."

[CENSORED]

"Only a sort of igloo could hold in the amount of warmth I'm receiving here."

[CENSORED]

"She could tell you how many stairs were in any house she'd ever visited. Or mirrors."

[CENSORED]

"Never out of the country, no. Except to Prague."

[CENSORED]

"Probably singing in the shower. Do you consider voice to be an instrument?"

[CENSORED]

“36.”

[CENSORED]

“Usually patterns of 3.”

[CENSORED]

“Yes, tearing up quite often.”

[CENSORED]

“No, nothing co-ed.”

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

62 - Robert

Subject showing meaningful signs of sublevation. Primary rune has been disabled, allowing further roaming distance. Chains breaking down. Subject emotional arousal levels high. WBS signals low. Displaying pictures of loved ones.

[REDACTED]

Subject properly stimulated.

[REDACTED]

Subject does not appear to require further sleep.

[REDACTED]

Subject is flexing fist and WBS signal, causing all bodily needles to exit and re-enter.

63 - Melissa Mawrdren

turn me into a set of frozen mirrors and don't let me breathe until the sun goes down, light isn't made for people like me anymore. i'm tearing out teeth one by one to see what my blood tastes like and i think chewing is antiquated when there's a world with this much entertainment. why don't i just sit and watch? i could watch forever and feel the saliva drip off my chin until it makes me a new body, wet and shapeless and dripping through cracks or crevasses or crumbling architectures built by people whose bodies could do things like that. i'm a star that shines in the daytime, where no one can see it, outshone and outdone by the sun forever endeavoring to be something greater but always faltering at moments of weakness, moments of grace. i had a chance and i threw it away. of course there were ways it could've gone better, my setup was impeccable, and my greatness unapproachable, until i went to my new home to let the roaches swarm and learned that bedbug bites only itch if you're allergic to

them. can i say it was a mistake when but just wasn't this all predetermined by some loser's book? and yes, that's *sic*. i don't think i'm ever going to go back there, and i hope those darling sisters of mine rot in hell for all they've done, even if i pray nightly for their safe delivery to a jail cell that's *comfortable*. one that's *stable*. it makes me want to vomit. it makes me want to scream.

don't begin me on that bastard golively, trouncing and flouncing around like he's some image of a *saint* with all the crimes *he's* brought to light, losing the fact they never existed in the shadows before he waltzed over. buddy-buddy boy, you've got a lot to learn about what's waiting for you after this life, if you ever *get* a next one. sure, power's one of the big three, the main skatch, a persona built solely out of relations to other people, hollow by nature's axiom, so run ahead mr golively, and don't let the ass kick you on your way out of the stable. i could imply up and down all day about his transgressions without even making it into the current millennium, just so to speak. he's hell stuffed halfway in a handbasket,

halfway shoved in innocent people's pockets, one foot in the door, and half in the grave, but that's the price you make other people pay for power, right? real, scintillating, crushing magickal power is all you want, and you'll do anything to get it. yeah, they'll probably get me soon, too, but i'd like to watch them find out how much they can try to even *force* me to care. go count dirt in a dark forest, golively. i see what you really are.

64 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

It is unclear how much time I have left.
It seems I didn't take the proper
precautions, even here.

If you were a phantom, a wraith with no corporeal shape, a sprawling ectoplasm the size of the world as the size of nothing at all, you would beg for a body, and you would wail for form. You would get down on knees you don't have and scream without a voice for it, to feel anything bodily once more. The pains we suffer as humans cannot compare to a life led ephemerally and with no impact. You do not know that to have a thought constitutes a physical sensation until you have thoughts as a ghost, feeling the lack of mapping from mind to body, finding no memory with nowhere to store it. You are empty of all but consciousness and will, still free to influence minor happenstances with concentrations of

energy, but it is as difficult as it is uncommon, due to the lack of satisfaction you will feel, with no body to feel it. Specters experience a mere two states, unrest and peace, as opposed *to* and contrasted *by* our manifold human natures, outlined as follows by an old belief.

1. Feeling of sight
2. Feeling of sound
3. Feeling of smell
4. Feeling of taste
5. Feeling of touch
6. Feeling of thought

Each of these is rated as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

1. Pleasant feeling of sight
2. Pleasant feeling of sound
3. Pleasant feeling of smell
4. Pleasant feeling of taste
5. Pleasant feeling of touch
6. Pleasant feeling of thought

7. Unpleasant feeling of sight
8. Unpleasant feeling of sound
9. Unpleasant feeling of smell
10. Unpleasant feeling of taste
11. Unpleasant feeling of touch
12. Unpleasant feeling of thought
13. Neutral feeling of sight
14. Neutral feeling of sound
15. Neutral feeling of smell
16. Neutral feeling of taste
17. Neutral feeling of touch
18. Neutral feeling of thought

These feelings are further multiplied into thirty-six total by whether they are experienced by one who is worldly, drowning themselves in the state of life as it is typically lived; or as a renunciant, meaningfully giving up some key part of life, usually worldly attachment.

1. Pleasant and worldly feeling of sight
2. Pleasant and worldly feeling of sound
3. Pleasant and worldly feeling of smell
4. Pleasant and worldly feeling of taste

5. Pleasant and worldly feeling of touch
6. Pleasant and worldly feeling of thought
7. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of sight
8. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of sound
9. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of smell
10. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of taste
11. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of touch
12. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of thought
13. Neutral and worldly feeling of sight
14. Neutral and worldly feeling of sound
15. Neutral and worldly feeling of smell
16. Neutral and worldly feeling of taste
17. Neutral and worldly feeling of touch
18. Neutral and worldly feeling of thought
19. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of sight
20. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of sound

21. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of smell
22. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of taste
23. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of touch
24. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of thought
25. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of sight
26. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of sound
27. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of smell
28. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of taste
29. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of touch
30. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of thought
31. Neutral and renunciant feeling of sight
32. Neutral and renunciant feeling of sound
33. Neutral and renunciant feeling of

smell

34. Neutral and renunciant feeling of taste

35. Neutral and renunciant feeling of touch

36. Neutral and renunciant feeling of thought

These feelings have also a temporal aspect, making thirty-six experienced in the past, thirty-six experienced in the future, and thirty-six experienced in the present.

1. Pleasant and worldly feeling of past sight, the sight of the bakery built by my forefathers

2. Pleasant and worldly feeling of past sound, the doors unlocking

3. Pleasant and worldly feeling of past smell, the yeast activating in small ceramic bowls

4. Pleasant and worldly feeling of past taste, the bread on its shelves

5. Pleasant and worldly feeling of past

touch, the hand on my shoulder that tells me to eat

6. Pleasant and worldly feeling of past thought, the consideration of the age of the world

7. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of past sight, the death of my father

8. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of past sound, the beeping of the monitor

9. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of past smell, the cleaning products of the hospital

10. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of past taste, the food from the cafeteria

11. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of past touch, the feeling of stopped motion

12. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of past thought, the knowledge that I could never go back

13. Neutral and worldly feeling of past sight, the school where I learned

14. Neutral and worldly feeling of past sound, the sound of the bell saying it was over

15. Neutral and worldly feeling of past

smell, the lunch hall where nothing was made

16. Neutral and worldly feeling of past taste, the food from a freezer that kept for longest

17. Neutral and worldly feeling of past touch, the cold of the benches percolating through my clothes

18. Neutral and worldly feeling of past thought, the knowledge that there was much yet to do

19. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of past sight, the forest where I learned the shape of a self

20. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of past sound, the footsteps of deer that let me get close

21. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of past smell, the scent of dirt caked onto bodies small and strange

22. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of past taste, the berries that fed me long enough for me to fast again

23. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of past touch, the grass, cool and even

24. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of past thought, the thought of not having had thoughts in some time
25. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of past sight, the sight of myself in the mirror, seeing the sag of my lifeless eyes
26. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of past sound, the deadness of my voice as I spoke to those I claimed to love
27. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of past smell, the added-up-over-time effects of my lack of bathing
28. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of past taste, the mucus that hid in my throat
29. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of past touch, the mucus that hid in my throat
30. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of past thought, the knowledge that I could never go back
31. Neutral and renunciant feeling of past sight, the church where I prayed
32. Neutral and renunciant feeling of past sound, the bells every quarter of an hour

33. Neutral and renunciant feeling of past smell, the incense spread wide and smooth

34. Neutral and renunciant feeling of past taste, the body and blood

35. Neutral and renunciant feeling of past touch, the hands of my fellow parishioners

36. Neutral and renunciant feeling of past thought, the question of if paradise awaits me

37. Pleasant and worldly feeling of future sight, the children scampering in the yard

38. Pleasant and worldly feeling of future sound, the sprinklers turning on

39. Pleasant and worldly feeling of future smell, the dinner awaiting us

40. Pleasant and worldly feeling of future taste, the dinner awaiting us

41. Pleasant and worldly feeling of future touch, the dishes I wash to keep all tidy and clean

42. Pleasant and worldly feeling of future thought, the consideration of my

overwhelming fortune

43. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of future sight, the ruins of home

44. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of future sound, the bombs dropping

45. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of future smell, the wooden houses burning

46. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of future taste, the blood on my tongue

47. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of future touch, the rough fabric on my skin as I run

48. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of future thought, the knowledge that I could never go back

49. Neutral and worldly feeling of future sight, the new world built from the ash

50. Neutral and worldly feeling of future sound, the crash of hammers against metal

51. Neutral and worldly feeling of future smell, the new chemicals

52. Neutral and worldly feeling of future taste, the new rations

53. Neutral and worldly feeling of future

touch, the new fabrics

54. Neutral and worldly feeling of future thought, the knowledge that we could never go back

55. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of future sight, the hilltop waiting to be crested

56. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of future sound, the way the wind rushes at higher heights

57. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of future smell, the pines

58. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of future taste, the air, crisp and light

59. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of future touch, the feeling of finally noticing that my hand is always touching itself

60. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of future thought, 1, 2, 3, 4

61. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of future sight, the pickup truck spinning out of control after being stricken by an unwarned train

62. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of

- future sound, the horrible screech
63. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of future smell, the spilled gasoline sapping out from the tank
64. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of future taste, the smoke
65. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of future touch, the tears welling up in my eyes as I reached up to rub them away
66. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of future thought, the knowledge that they're moving on
67. Neutral and renunciant feeling of future sight, the systema that hold the world together
68. Neutral and renunciant feeling of future sound, the voices of numberless people working together to maintain said systema
69. Neutral and renunciant feeling of future smell, the aftershave of the office workers
70. Neutral and renunciant feeling of future taste, the cheap burned coffee every morning

71. Neutral and renunciant feeling of future touch, the din of keyboards clanking
72. Neutral and renunciant feeling of future thought, the consideration of if it ever could've been different
73. Pleasant and worldly feeling of present sight
74. Pleasant and worldly feeling of present sound
75. Pleasant and worldly feeling of present smell
76. Pleasant and worldly feeling of present taste
77. Pleasant and worldly feeling of present touch
78. Pleasant and worldly feeling of present thought
79. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of present sight,
80. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of present sound
81. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of present smell
82. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of

present taste

83. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of present touch

84. Unpleasant and worldly feeling of present thought

85. Neutral and worldly feeling of present sight

86. Neutral and worldly feeling of present sound

87. Neutral and worldly feeling of present smell

88. Neutral and worldly feeling of present taste

89. Neutral and worldly feeling of present touch

90. Neutral and worldly feeling of present thought

91. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of present sight

92. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of present sound

93. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of present smell

94. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of present taste

95. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of present touch
96. Pleasant and renunciant feeling of present thought
97. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of present sight
98. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of present sound
99. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of present smell
100. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of present taste
101. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of present touch
102. Unpleasant and renunciant feeling of present thought
103. Neutral and renunciant feeling of present sight
104. Neutral and renunciant feeling of present sound
105. Neutral and renunciant feeling of present smell
106. Neutral and renunciant feeling of present taste
107. Neutral and renunciant feeling of

present touch

108. Neutral and renunciant feeling of
present thought

65 - Vincent

Esther had gotten up and left to go to the living room, stating that it was where she was “supposed to be.”

Myself and Anzhrelika were left alone, and we still didn’t know where Muse had gone. I looked into her eyes and saw them as brimming with tears, like they were reflecting themselves.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Right as rain,” she said.

“Why are you welling up?”

“I’m welling up?”

She didn’t seem to have noticed, or maybe she wasn’t welling up at all. I was a little distracted by the way her face seemed to be a canvas. It was time for us to continue where we had left off. The room was very foggy, a fine mist covering us.

I gently bumped my head against her chest, and she cradled me in the small of her arm. She put her hand to my lips, and let her fingers brush up against the softness. My lips parted ever so slightly, and her index slipped

in. I caressed it with my tongue and pressed it to the roof of my mouth, letting it push through and reach into my gums.

Two fingers, three, four, then five, then her whole hand in my mouth, easily, painlessly, slickly reaching down my throat, through my guts, my ribcage, through everything that held me together, then opening a small locked door by twisting a knob, leaving her centimeters away from my still-beating heart. I felt the electricity pulsing from the tips to my core, like a latent buzzing becoming actualized that I had never known could be so much as a dreamt spark. I knew that her hand must be covered in my blood as she wrapped around my heart, and she squeezed, gently, my whole body convulsing; quickly she clenched, matching my beats, pumping my blood for me, at the same pace I would, then she slowed me manually, slightly adjusting the speed so my heart could match her timing, and I felt myself relax.

She pulled out her hand without going through my mouth, just going through my chest, and she rubbed the blood on my skin until it dissolved in the salt, leaving small scars like stained bedsheets. I hadn't known anything like this, but it felt planned, every

step thought out and predicted by an invisible audience in the invisible stands surrounding us. I knew they would be screaming and cheering for us if we had shown them even half of this.

She clawed me open, and all that was inside was light and sound. She opened the refrigerator. She took the whole milk out of the refrigerator and started to disinfect it by hand, boiling it with the heat of her skin and blood, neutralizing each bacterium as the milk evaporated and disappeared. I felt it condensing on me, as I began to sweat milk, and warm milk was raining down all over my body, covering me. I opened my mouth and my tongue tasted it as an old friend, familiar and comforting. I drenched my hands in things that felt the same as me. It began to fill the room, and the last thing I saw before I went under was her softly smiling face, her eyes welling up with milk.

66 - Melissa Mawrdren

there was a lot of whimpering, and nothing really held still anymore because it was all too warm to be easy. stuff was spilling out of pretty much everything and there were a lot of harbingers of silence biding their time in the corner, licking lips and rubbing hands, catching flies with their tongues and spitting them out, because i tried to speak to you but it wasn't the time nor place for things like that. onslaughts of humanity kept afflicting me as i reached a fever pitch of circuitry coming closed, my fingers dancing along your spine and trying to find the right notes out of your mouth but it had been months since anyone had looked at me with both eyes, so i pieced it together with duct tape and scotch. there were people asking me questions and i tried to answer them as best as i could as quickly and concisely as possible but everything i said kept running on and on and on until it was so long as to be rude and imprecise and indescribable and unmanaged. it was a microcosm.

ambivalence seems to me the natural state of existence, but neutrality might be a deadly sin worse than most, the sin of failing to worship at all. pick an altar and prostrate; you will feel fuller and you will make holiness out of your own bones and gristle. an epistle has been written in blood, made for believers, and disseminated by mouth, but fails to change any beliefs. they put it in a museum and everyone keeps marveling at the glass case. it probably wasn't necessary in the first place.

67 - Robert

Subject has disappeared.

68 - Robert

Project considered a success.

69 - Robert

The artifact can be aptly described as being the key to recursion. It brings back things that are lost to the past. It holds memory of all that was. It makes things unworn again, like they were the first time. It makes the world young. All that can be taken back is something solitary, a singular idea, one change. Everything else will be as it was.

70 - Alvin Golively

I spared no expense in the construction of the compound's studying chamber, its floor and ceiling covered in mirrors, bathed in darkness, layered with runes, and walled by stainless steel pillars. There was to be no escape from it. I poured countless hours into those runes, the exact layout as it had appeared in my dreams, waking up every morning into a new madness, a new specification that was beckoning for its own creation. I had made connections over the years, those who would do my bidding without much questioning just for the right to feel like they were moving something forward, completing important research, regardless of personal or impersonal cost. I enlisted antisocial characters who were willing to look past the requisite pains of operation for the promised betterment of the future. I built it deep underground, in a cave system notorious for its navigational difficulty, so as to muffle the screams. The WBS readings were hardest to manufacture, requiring innumerable visits

to psychics, mediums, various claimers of magickal abilities who were mostly hacks, with some stumbling upon the right techniques in between their nearly impenetrable walls of blather; but the system came along. All systema come along when given time.

The dreams were torture, watching the figure go through excruciation and feeling everything as if it were my own body. The visions recurred and gave me no relief for months on end. I lost friends. My authorship career fell by the wayside as I failed to hit deadline after deadline, hands always shaking, eyes always twitching. Desperate for answers, I tried everything, and over time, I discovered that when I made a part of the dream into reality using a subject, that it would disappear from my nightly terrors. Then, the only question became where I would find the figure who matched my decaying rest, the figure who could set me free.

71 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“Yes, well, of course there were the mass shootings a few years back. This masked individual with long, flowing blond hair, showing up to places of worship or hospitals and gunning down innocents. It was wildly unclear how he evaded being caught for so long, but eventually his blog was located, where he had been posting philosophical musings for years. He spoke of the value and sanctity of the human soul, its inimitable quality when compared to all other life. He didn't hate lesser creatures or anything, simply believed them to be worth less, as decreed by the divinities above. This world, he said, was irreparably stained, and it was impossible to live a life to the ends of enlightenment that could free a soul from the cycle of reincarnation. The killer claimed that he had witnessed visions of the afterlife, of paradise, and that there was something of a vestibular waiting room before reincarnation, where souls would stay for a long time before returning to this world. He killed the bodies of those damned to this earth, so that they could wait in the long waiting room, blank and experienceless, feeling nothing, in hopes that the world would be pure by the time they returned, letting them reach enlightenment, escape the cycle of reincarnation, and avoid needless suffering. He

said that those in places of worship and hospitals suffered the most, trying to cling to something always destined to slip through your fingers. When you look at it like he did, his action was something of an altruism, I suppose.”

[CENSORED]

72 - Anzhrelika

My dear Vincent was asleep in Muse's bed, so I turned to the bookshelf for a brief entertainment. There was a booklight left there, ready to cut through the darkness, awaiting my use. I grabbed randomly at a thick tome without looking at its name, and turned to a page somewhere in the middle.

"At the time of calling, all will be seen strongly and without obfuscation or reflection. Creators have left their marks and the world is on its own to fend for itself, no humanity left except as seen in engravings left by those who came before everything hallowed fell. It was to be made in an image that held fast before, the strongest candidate, the world that lasted longest through the trials, dormancy put off later and later, but all comes to an end, eventually. Even ending itself.

Those who understand the true nature of this

world are not horrified, they are comforted by the least-virtual while still being uncertain certainty of sameness as long as they live. They awaken, and they go back to sleep, dreaming the same dream every night, unbroken by nightmare or shock. I'm sorry, I think they truly want some privacy, so I'll just leave it there."

I flipped to the next page, but it was blank, and so was the next page. Hundreds of pages after, and they were all blank. I checked the pages before the excerpt I had read, and they were all blank as well. As if by providence, I had turned to the only page with any text inscribed.

73 - Muse

the shock slipped me into the past.

i was seventeen years old. i had just moved out from my parents' house. i considered myself to know myself pretty well. i needed connection of any kind. there was a bar near my ramshackle apartment that was within walking distance that didn't card. i walked there. they didn't card me. it was wednesday, so it was karaoke night. i had come three weeks ago, talked to no one, and sat at a corner table. i had donated \$5 to the suggested donation box. i had been trying to convince myself to come back ever since. now it was karaoke night again. i walked up to the bar. i was nervous but tried to act composed. i wanted some validation that i was in the right place. i made eye contact with the bartender. he was 6

feet tall and physically fit. he was wearing a crop top. he walked over to me. i asked a question that didn't quite make sense.

"hi, am i in the right place? i'm looking for karaoke night."

it didn't make sense because i knew i was in the right place for karaoke night. it was some strange attempt to get ahead of my fear that someone would kick me out. he reached across the bar. he put his hand on my shoulder. it was very warm.

"son, wherever you are *is* the right place. anywhere you go is where you're supposed to be."

"th-thank you."

"karaoke's just in the back room right there. you can follow the voices to get there."

"okay."

"wait, what are you running off for? do you want anything to drink? it's on me."

i thought for a moment that was long for me but not for anyone else.

"i'll have a vodka red bull."

he nodded. he walked to the other side of the bar. he reached under the bar and grabbed a red bull that was already open. he poured it into a red solo cup. he tapped the bottom a few times to get everything out of it. he grabbed a bottle of absolut vodka off the wall. he poured an amount in that i could not ascertain as being large, medium, or small. he swished it around in the cup. everyone else at the bar had a branded budweiser glass.

"here, you'll feel like you're at a party. now follow the voices, remember?"

i started to walk, but noticed another employee come out from a door behind the bar. he was rolling a cart with clean

glasses on it that were turned upside down. they were budweiser branded. he placed them on a part of the bar that was clearly meant for keeping clean glasses, which had been empty before. i became aware that the bartender had expertly managed the issue of not having any clean glasses by giving me a red solo cup instead, and presenting it as a gift, rather than an imposition. i walked toward the voices.

i stepped into the event room. the door was propped open by a wooden barrel with metal rings around it. it blocked one third of the doorway. i rotated my body and stepped sideways to avoid someone walking out of the room. i looked back at the person and the person looked back at me. i kept walking. i scanned the room. the room was lit purple. i saw a small table for two near the corner. the table in the corner was open, but i didn't sit directly in the corner as it felt too

suspicious. i slid into the booth-half of the next table over rather than the chair-half. i felt sick. my first drink ever had been a vodka red bull someone had offered me at a house party, and i was holding my second drink. i realized i didn't need to hold it. i realized that was why someone had come up with the idea for a table so long ago. i wondered how many eyes were on me. someone wearing a pinstriped suit was singing a cover of johnny cash's *ring of fire* in the wrong register. i tried to imagine any possible way for me to connect with another human being here. i wasn't going to go talk to anyone, and no one was going to come talk to me. if i tried to talk to anyone, they might make a face i didn't understand. if anyone tried to talk to me, i would welcome it, but be unaware of how to proceed. i had looked at every individual object decorating the walls three times over before

ring of fire finished. there was a tv mounted on the wall that listed the queue of people waiting for their turn to sing karaoke on the stage. the next song was guided by voices's *i am a scientist*. i pulled out my pack of playing cards. i pulled out my second pack of playing cards. i mixed them together into a stack of 108 cards. i shuffled them uncomfortably because my hands were too small. i played a toy with them. it wasn't a game because a game needs two players. it was a game for two players that i had made into a toy for one person. i played it alone. in the toy, you match combinations of cards, like rummy, but there aren't any turns. it's just barely engaging enough when you think about where the cards are supposed to go that you can stop thinking about other things for a few seconds. you're supposed to try to empty your hand without having to draw from the deck to get new cards, but sometimes

you're left in an unwinnable position. sometimes there isn't anything you can do.

a boy in a band t-shirt for a band that i had never heard of stumbled onto the stage. his hair was upper neck length and messy. i couldn't tell what color it was because of the purple lighting. he started singing and slurring some of his words. his voice was clear. the clarity of his voice and affect of his speech combined strangely. he sang about unknowns and losing sight and cures and understanding and purity and evil and pain and being lost and knowing what's right and searching and abuse. i matched a jack, queen, and king of hearts. i moved an ace of hearts from a stack that already had five aces, making it still a legal set. i looped around and added a 2 of hearts. i thought about the rule i had changed to make that legal. i assembled seven 7's.

the song was playing an instrumental outro. the boy was still on stage. he spoke into the microphone. it was mostly unintelligible, but i clearly heard him asking if anyone loves him or if anyone could at least put up with him. he stepped off the stage in an uncoordinated manner. he didn't fall onto the floor so much as collapse onto the floor like a body experiencing exossification. ossification is when something turns into bone. exossification is when all the bones in a body melt.

nobody seemed to care that he was lying on the floor. the music played automatically. it was controlled by a machine. the next karaoke singer mounted the stage and began singing because the next song had started playing. there was no wrench in the machine large enough to counteract its well-oiled plans. i thought about who could've had

cause to invent the word exossification. i looked at the body on the floor. i flicked cards idly in my hands. i imagined going over to him. my heart rate rose as i imagined standing over him. i tried to imagine doing anything useful. i failed. i looked at the body on the floor some more. i put a card down on the table. i picked the card back up. i put all my cards down. i picked them all up. i put them all down. i walked over to the body.

"hey," i said.

no reply.

"hey."

i tugged on his shirt a little bit. i had read online that you weren't supposed to touch people without asking first.

"can i touch you? i mean, can i help you up?"

"rrgh."

i felt my body warming up. i did not like standing in front of

this many people. i did not want to touch him without permission. my neuroses were fighting each other. neither of them could ever win.

i put my hand on his back. i tried to push energy into it via unclear means. i tried to listen to all of the noise in the bar at once. i tried to let it fade into one sound, one voice speaking one smooth sound. i failed. everything was sharp. i dragged him back to my table. i guided him into the booth. i sat down in the chair across from him. he was slumped. his head was leaning on his left shoulder.

"i could care about you."

"..huh..?"

"i mean, i cared about you enough to bring you over here."

"..."

"how old are you?"

"..eighteen..."

"you're barely older than me. why are you so drunk? it's an

embarrassment."

"it was the... the ssri's. i just started on them."

"ssri's make you drunk?"

"i guess, some of them."

"huh."

we sat there. i became aware of my internal monologue by becoming aware that it had paused for the duration of our conversation and that it had now returned. i did not welcome it. i thought about asking his name. it felt contrived. we sat there. i wished i could think of anything to say. anything to stop the internal torture. he groaned. he spoke.

"what's your name?"

"□□□□"

"that's a weird name."

"it's biblical."

"mmmm.."

every "s" noise in his next sentence was overpronounced.

"look, if you say you want to kiss, we can kiss. but i've never kissed another boy before."

"i don't think you're supposed to kiss people who are drunk."

"we can wait, then."

"..."

"..."

"..what's your name?" contrived.

"vincent."

"..."

"..."

74 - Melissa Mawrdren

and through the windows of your home, i stared, like a lost shadow looking for a figure to whom i could magnetize, attach myself to find purchase, stop the unending slippage down a slope that goes nowhere. the curtains were pulled back, and i used my telescope. my notes made me look insane but it was all love, it was all that i love you in the end, that love that pushed me to write out each aspect of your daily routine, the variations in time for weekends and weekdays, why your footsteps faltered when your father neared. your life examined, therefore worth living, observed as under a microscope or magnifying glass or depicted in a picture book or painted on a wall in blood or photographed, and you would never know, so you could never thank me, but i know. you left your door open for me, maybe by accident, maybe by providence. my gaze wandered in and i saw on your skin that there were firemarks, ovens and skillets meaner than the softness of another human, the softness of me, the sweetest anyone has ever been to you,

and you've never even met me. you can turn off your lights, now. i see you better in the dark.

i'm going to look at you and i'm going to see something that's beautiful to me, and neither of us are going to worry about whether it's accurate or not. we're going to dance together and when we step on each other's feet we're going to laugh then make eye contact and hold it for a moment too long. it's going to feel sweet and fulfilling and whole and give us meaning and we're going to become a painting together that people can hang in their houses. being sick of something is a feeling only known to humans, so we're going to make ourselves less than human or more than living. i'm going to strip you of your senses then give them back and see how you felt without them. you're going to lose the parts of your identity you cling to hardest and you're going to see everything you could've been the whole time. there's a bubble waiting to pop and cover the world in soap that will finally actually maybe this time wash the everything away that doesn't go here anymore and was actually really meant for nothing but the depths of a hell we've never considered in

its fullness. we can loose ourselves of liquid and let everything wash away. the honey trees are dripping outside and they're begging for us to harvest them, the sweet wetness that beckons to make us hale and refresh the wrinkles from our skin until we can walk free and clear from iniquity and inquiry and infighting and imitability and inimitability and fire. i'm going to walk towards it and let my mouth fall open to rest my tongue on the sweet trunks that need us to lick them so they don't spill on the ground, covering mother nature in liquid detritus tried and true. the soles of our feet will go together and we will walk on each other until we find home. no, i have nothing left, and i summarily give up.

i think you were an absence i'd never felt before, with drips from rain-gutters catching and falling down buildings to collect dirt before they painted me in their filth, giving me a new face, a new time to hide. i saw you and saw there was a whole world left for me, i saw you and knew every movie i'd ever seen was true because there were stories worth telling now. my sisters whining and moaning for

attention and receiving just everything they needed from each other, making a house for each other out of tears and spit and lies, leaving me off to the side like so much refuse that i was nuclear waste to them, too large to care about, unburdened as they were by world's end. now look at me, a figurant, a sidepiece, a star in a show that no one is watching, and i could tell you that you would see me, and i'd be right, but i see no reason to do anything but slip away. i'll be watching. i'll keep my eye on you. i'll see you for what you are. i'll be watching. i can see you. i'll be looking at you. i'll be watching you.

75 - Vincent

The fourth call was blaring, nothing like the first three, more like the first three combined into one blazing moment, screaming in our ears like we were nothing and it was everything, turning my blood inside out, burning my skin, turning me from something into nothing, back into something, but something different, something out of place. I heard a voice.

“I am sick with the disease that is in me. It feeds on my blood and my nutrients, it, my invisible enemy, my hated foe. My body does not know how to defend itself, leaving me at the mercy of the microbe, limitless possibilities quashed by the destructive particulate. I am punished. Heaven has decided that it is time for me to suffer for reasons opaque to me and crystallized to God. There is to be no recourse.”

There was a loud, all-encompassing high pitched frequency, a screeching noise that came from all directions, then petered out, like an electronic turning off. I woke up and looked at Anzhrelika. The room was utterly

silent. I ventured a question.

“Did you hear that?”

“The call? The whining?”

“No, the voice.”

“Voice?”

“It was talking about sickness and dying.”

“I heard nothing of the sort.”

I figured it must have been an artifact of the call. I put my arm on her shoulder. Her cardigan was more coarse than I expected, but I thought she may appreciate the sentiment. Many things can be healed by human closeness.

“Did you hear the call?” she asked.

“Yes, of course I did.”

“I don’t see that there’s any ‘of course’ about it. Everything is changing,” she offered, plainly.

“I suppose,” I replied, startled by my own lack of inspiration.

I felt like I had nothing to say to this woman. The connections between us were strong, but sparse, like a loosely woven tennis racket’s face made out of steel rather than string. She smelled good, like lilac and

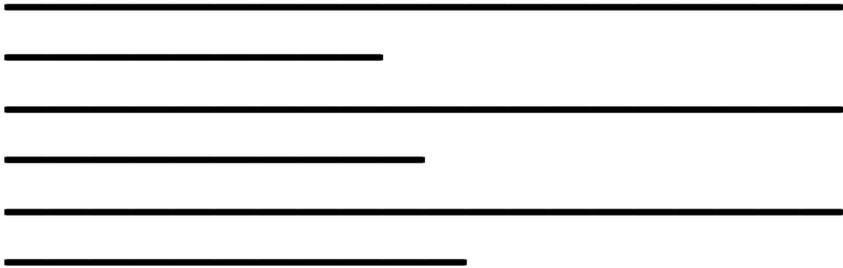
vanilla. I looked around the room. Something seemed off, and I couldn't quite identify what it was, though I couldn't bring myself to mind. The world felt perfectly alright as it was, changing or unchanging. Pain never hurt too much and there was always a sunrise.

Anzhrelika seemed to have only just noticed a possible course of action, which was turning on the lights to the room, and was enacting it with graceful swiftness. She examined the room, and what she saw terrified her.

We looked around the room, and all of the posters Muse had hung up on her wall were blank, pure white rectangles. The books on her shelf, once covered in written depictions of various languages, were empty of any textual content, reduced to mere solid colors. I looked down at my band t-shirt. It was worn in the same places as before, but the pictures and text had disappeared. I went to check my phone, but it wouldn't respond to any input. Anzhrelika rushed out of the room, and I followed her. We went into the kitchen and turned on the light. Esther was standing there, eyes wide, waiting. All of the buttons on the appliances were empty. None of the screens had anything on them. Anzhrelika's

face was filled with horror, and she had a light tremor. I hadn't known her for long, but she had seemed so serene, untouchable. I placed my hand on her shoulder, again. She started sobbing.

**OPTION 1 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
OPTION 2 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
OPTION 3 LOCATED AND ENABLED.
OPTION 4 LOCATED AND ENABLED.**



**UNINTERACTABLE ONE-WAY MIRROR.
CAN'T SEEM TO BREAK THE GLASS.
SEARCHING FOR KEY COMMAND.**

77 - Robert

78 - "Sweet" Melinda Mawrdren

Melanie Jane's room, the smallest one on the second floor of our home, drowning in memorabilia from all her different excursions into short-lived interests. A lone rollerskate lying in the southwest corner. A poster of Bertrand Russell. A poster of the cover to an ambient album. A candle with an overstylized picture of Saint Anthony, the patron saint of things that have been lost. A pewter crucifix. The room itself was old, because the house was old, made of wood that looked like an anachronism, a style that humanity had forgotten how to craft with their hands. Shutters on the windows. A radiator in disuse. A patched ceiling. An inconsistently timed sound of water moving in the walls. A full-body mirror.

She was sitting on the bed, and I was

sitting on the floor. Her legs were dangling. I could hear Melissa listening to loud, upsetting music in her room. Hers was the only door in the house that never seemed to be open, but Melanie Jane loved to have me in her room, speaking more to me in didactic wisdom than not, teaching me all that her seventeen-year-old self had found to be true, so far. I listened as much as I could.

“Some people say that love is just a chemical reaction, but those people are jaded, Mel. They can’t see why we’re truly here anymore.”

I didn’t really speak. Sometimes I would go weeks without saying anything, listening only to the roiling mess of my conscious mind, spewing theories with the consistency of waves on a shore, unable to find the muscle that opened my lips.

“I know you don’t like it when I say ‘God

says so,' so I'll just say it this way. There are a variety of moral and religious systema that would teach you this, that we're here on this earth to *help other people.*"

I could see things other people didn't. I could tell from the sound of their voice when they could see it and when they couldn't. I didn't have to listen to the words. Other people described the process of "thinking" as being something time-consuming and rewarding, and it confused me. Whenever I learned something, it occurred instantaneously. It seemed as though the information was presenting itself readily to me, like it wanted me to know it, like it was screaming itself at me.

"If you really sit with it, I think you'll see it's true, Mel. I know you're only eight years old, and you're very bright, but I promise some of this stuff starts making more sense when you're older. It might

not seem important now when you give away the last cookie to a friend who really wants it, or when you help Mom with a chore when you're tired and want to go to your room, but it's about the bigger picture. It's about *sacrifice*. I mean, can you even imagine being *up there*, to heal all of humanity?"

She pointed up at the pewter crucifix nailed into the plaster of her walls.

"This might sound a little scary to you, but I've been reading some studies lately about a new theory on how the human body processes pain. They're saying that when you go through excruciating amounts of pain, your brain can go into a state that's not unlike the dreaming you experience when your body goes into REM sleep. Do you think Christ was dreaming *up there*?"

Melanie Jane was looking at me, but I knew she didn't expect me to answer. I

didn't know what she wanted. I looked up at the wall and saw the face of Jesus Christ contorted in an infinity of unimaginable agonies. I had never given it a second glance before, but I was looking into his eyes and they seemed wet, tarnished. His side and hands were glowing with a pale red reflection. I felt an unusual feeling that reminded me of needing to go to the bathroom. I was also scared. Pain itself was unimaginable. Whenever I fell off my bike and scraped my knees, I would cry for hours. Melissa always said I was a big baby who couldn't take anything more painful than a blanket, but Melanie Jane always told her to shut up.

"Mel, the word 'excruciating' means unbearable, horrible pain. Do you hear the 'cru' in that word? It comes from the same root as 'crucify,' meaning we have a word just for the pain that he experienced *up there*, for *us*. To *save us*."

The feeling that was like needing to go to the bathroom intensified. It was in my head. For the first time in my life, I felt like there was something that I was missing, something that made this whole situation so much more than it seemed.

“God so loved the world that he gave his son, Mel, he gave himself. It must have been excruciatingly difficult, but it wasn’t even a question for him, he did it because he had to, so that we could have eternal life.”

She hadn’t come up with that herself.

“Can you even imagine that?”

I wasn’t supposed to remember memories as early as I could. When I heard people talk, I could tell they didn’t know that I remembered the hospital itself, the moment I learned what temperature was by becoming something other than warm for the first time.

Learning what sound was when it wasn't muffled by amniotic fluid.

"..."

Like needing horribly to piss, but localized entirely in the spot where my eyes go when they look up and to the right. It was overtaking me.

"...You're not even looking at me anymore."

I tried to become one with the feeling.

"..."

Melanie Jane got off her bed. She sat on the floor next to me. She put her arms around me, and she squeezed.

"I know it's hard for you to understand things like this, Mel. When you're older, everything's going to make a lot more sense, and you'll think back on this

moment, okay?"

warm.

She pulled away.

It was

cold again.

It was

It hit me all at once. The feeling in the upper corner of my eye disappeared and was replaced by a vibration all throughout my body, cascading waterfalls of broken glass that tore my flesh but didn't hurt me, sharp glass that was just meant to open me up. I was embraced and made whole by epiphany.

To be cold was to have been warm.

This meant that every feeling I had, every discretely describable sensation I had experienced was given form by something unlike it, a line to shape something out of snow. Pure whiteness, a blank paper, had no form of its own

except with the context of the table it rests on, or ink to stain it.

A series of disconnected instants.

I had failed to conceptualize Jesus Christ's pains because it wasn't how time worked at all, all the descriptions I had heard involved a sort of stacking of every individual moment of pain experienced in the world, every sin, shoved into one moment and one incarnate body. Christ didn't dream on the cross because his waking life *was* the dream, his mind spending every ounce of cognition it had on fully experiencing the pains of crucifixion because pain experienced fully wasn't painful at all, merely sensational. The conception of the present time as being linearly connected to its past and its future caused only suffering. If you melt into a moment, there becomes nothing *but* the moment, and with nothing against which to compare, there *is* no pain.

This had all become clear to me in less than an instant, catalyzed by Melanie Jane's embrace and subsequent release of my body.

"If you have to remember one thing from this whole conversation, just remember *sacrifice*. If you're ever trying really hard to figure something out, and you don't know what to do, just give something up for someone else. Remember that. Do you think these conversations are always easy for me, Mel?"

Through the wall, the second song on Melissa's record started playing.

79 - Alvin Golively

Excerpt from *Forms of Incarnation*:

80 - Alvin Golively

There was a small house, pristine and perfect. It had one bedroom, one kitchen, one bathroom, one common room, and the woman who lived in it had died of consumption 6 months ago. The house was kempt. There were neither specks of dirt nor motes of dust to infect it with the disease of being poorly-kempt. There was no bacteria in the house, because nothing, no matter how small, was living in the house. The house was perfect because everything in it was dead. This was how it was meant to be. The woman had always been meant to die of consumption. She hadn't stood a chance against the cured disease. Time had decided that it was a hammer and she was a nail. She had died with the vigor of a woman from the 1800's. Which is to say, spent.

The house's roof was yellow. The walls were robin's egg, or maybe baby blue. Some pale shade. There was one mirror there, which was in the bathroom. There

were 36 floor-tiles in the kitchen. There were two stairs in the house, and you either walked up both of them when you entered, or you turned around and left, knowing without doubt that you should not be there. Or else you stood directly in the doorway, transitory, searching, placeless.

In the kitchen, there was a wall above the sink. On this wall, there were more switches than you would expect, immediately next to one another. You might expect one, or two, or even six, but none of those numbers were the number of how many switches there were. You may think to call them light switches, but light switches are switches that control light, and these switches only do that in the most abstract of senses, meaning that you would be labeled a fool for calling them light switches at worst, and labeled unkind to the truth for calling them light switches at best. No, these switches controlled something else. All of them were silver, except for the one that was gold, which looked older, as if from an ancient time, but transplanted into this ordinary-seeming house.

The house, itself, was dead. It had ceased to be alive, a state that it once was. It did not wish to permit anything living within itself anymore, as that would conflict with its new set of values. It didn't mind things that existed outside of that dichotomy, that anciently-decided paradigm of death and life. So it didn't mind the thing that was turning the switches, which was neither alive, nor dead.

81 - Anzhrelika

I remembered the book, and realized it was as a harbinger of disturbances that would soon flow across the world. It was all written there, in blank words and paper unstained. Everything, all information that was stored somewhere other than a living creature, be it mechanical or having physical substance, was gone. The machines showed no memory of having ever functioned, dead and heavy. The books were pristine, ready to be written on, but holding no ink, everything spilling away. My horror must've been palpable to Vincent, as he attempted an act of bodily closeness for which I will be forever grateful, placing his arm upon my shoulder and letting our emotions flow bidirectionally. With all physical memory gone, we were left, human and alone, with only our minds to hold stories, with the only stories capable of being told held as ephemeral and unusually jarring in their transitory nature, something

spoken on a wind. There was nowhere for my poetry to stay but inside myself. We were summarily left with no evidence but ourselves. My memory hazes, but this is how I recall it. After his arm left me, it was all over faster than sound.

Esther was still staring, eyes aflame and unblinking. She was looking at the full-body mirror, almost exactly her height, next to the fireplace.

Vincent was fixing his hair at a mirror mounted on the wall. It beheld view of the front door.

Vincent swiftly twisted his body around to behold the front door outside of the reflection.

I became alert and asked him what was wrong. He said he saw someone move, back there in the mirror, up there by the front door.

He walked toward the front door. I stayed with Esther.

I turned to look at Esther and barely caught the tail-end of her body phasing into the mirror. I ran over and almost reached her, but my fingertips found only glass.

I looked into the mirror and saw two of her walking away, toward the front door. I turned around, and saw no one.

I screamed. Vincent ran back to me.

He asked what was wrong. He reported that he couldn't find anyone by the front door.

I could not speak. I merely pointed at the mirror, which was my mistake.

He walked toward the full-body mirror. He gazed into it, back bent slightly.

I followed him, standing a few feet back. His reflection stared back at him, body straight.

The Vincent in the mirror smirked. The Vincent outside the mirror reeled back.

The Vincent in the mirror held his hand out, but did not breach the barrier. The Vincent outside the mirror stepped forward.

“No! Stop!” I shouted, but it was already too late. He had reached inside, and the reflection was grabbing him by the wrist, pulling him in, pulling him away.

82 - Muse

i stepped into the bookstore. the bell on the door jingled. i was self-conscious of my presence. i looked to both sides. it didn't seem like anyone was looking at me. i looked around, slower. there was a café. there was a customer service desk with no one standing there. there were tiny signs hanging from the ceiling indicating the genres contained in various aisles. the place was sprawling. i did not know where i was supposed to go.

i imagined talking to an employee to see where i was supposed to be, but there was no one around. monoliths of knowledge surrounding me, towering above like i was a speck of something easily forgotten by time. my body felt worthless, transient skin and blood instead of durable paper

and ink. i walked around.

i found a directory. the place was large enough that it needed maps for people to navigate it. i had only been here twice before. i looked around for a few minutes in the same section both times. both times, i became overwhelmed. both times, i left, alone.

the directory gave me a breadth of information that i couldn't effectively parse. i guessed that the "gathering room" listed may be what i was looking for. the directory said it was next to the customer service desk.

i went back to the customer service desk. i didn't see any employees. i didn't see any doors, except the one behind the desk. to get behind the desk, you had to lift up a part of the counter that was meant to be lifted up. i kept walking around.

i went downstairs. the bookstore was two stories tall, and had a basement. they kept the less popular books downstairs. a mountain of forgotten stories, labelled as "bulk", barely worth the paper they were written on. i walked by the thriller section. i walked by the romance section. i found an alcove in the wall. it resembled the customer service desk upstairs, but much older, and without a sign above it. there were stacks of books messily arranged on the wooden countertop in front of it. there was a door behind the desk. there was a part of the countertop that lifted up. it was raised.

i noticed a business card holder on the countertop. it had "customer service" written on it in black permanent marker. i stepped around piles of books and behind the desk. i opened the door and went inside.

it was a small room, with brown carpeting. it smelled musty. there were two people sitting in folding chairs. they looked like women. one of them looked much older than me. one of them looked to be about my age.

"is this the book club?" i hazarded.

"yes! you found us!" said the older woman.

the younger woman said nothing.

"how did you find out about us?"

"um... there was a poster in market square."

the woman frowned.

"oh, well, i have no idea who could've put that up. i've never produced any posters, and i don't even hang around that part of town anymore. what's your name?"

"um... muse."

"muse! my name is becky! that's a very interesting name, your

parents must not have been scared of having a young lady who marches to the beat of her own drum." good sign. i don't think she noticed.

"we've been 'the book club' together for a couple months now."

she gestured with an open palm at the girl and smiled. becky started grabbing me a folding chair.

i felt blindsided, claustrophobic. the room was supposed to have vinyl flooring, not carpet. the ceilings were supposed to be at least 30 feet high. there were supposed to be at least 6 people present before i arrived. i was expecting to come as a wallflower. i was going to listen to what everyone else had to say, how they liked to speak to each other, and imitate it in my mind for months. they were going to praise me for my eventual vulnerability. after i saw the

book listed on the poster, i read it three times before coming. i couldn't think of anything to say about it.

i focused my eyes on the upper-right corner of the room, but focused my attention on the girl in my periphery. she was beautiful. her hair was long and jet-black. she was dressed in white lace that looked like it was made a hundred years ago. her posture indicated a rich internal life. she had not yet said anything. i felt my mouth drying up. i licked my lips. i regretted licking my lips.

i received an opened folding chair. i sat down on it. the three of us formed a perfect triangle.

"muse, this is angie. isn't it nice to meet someone your own age who cares about reading? i feel like those are getting harder and harder to find, these

days!"

"it's nice to meet you," i said. i didn't offer a handshake. i didn't want her to think i was trying to touch her. it would've been too forward.

"it's a tender gift to meet you, as well," angie offered. her voice was soft, and much higher than i expected.

a gift? it's a tender gift to meet me? "tender" is a strange adjective to use there. "gift" is already overfamiliar. if i had said that, i'd be freaking out. i didn't mind that she had said it. she probably just liked saying "tender".

becky started the book club meeting. becky used strong, clear language. she said things like "the fact of the matter" or "the ramping intensity of the plot" or "the material characterization of even the less kind figures."

angie's words flowed and melted

into one another. she used language like "love and tenderness" and "human nature of connection" and "selflessness of forming communities" and "how sweet life can be."

becky asked me what i thought of the book. i paused.

the plot was too back-and-forth. i had taken notes to keep track of where everything was at any given time, but i don't think good writing should make you do that. i don't think the author expected most readers to take notes. it had problematic depictions of women. the women were also flat, but i guess the men were, too.

for how back-and-forth it was, i enjoyed the plot. there were a lot of things that someone could criticize that i didn't really care to criticize, but i felt like it kept me guessing, and the reveals were well-timed. i

wanted to know where the characters were going to go. i felt like they were living in my head. a lot of things reminded me of them. i wished i had someone to talk to about it so badly.

my main takeaways were:

1. the plot didn't flow, but it was interesting
2. the characters were pointless, but alive
3. there were typos on pages 122 and 147
4. there were oxford commas everywhere except the last chapter
5. it was exciting whenever anything would happen, but i didn't find myself minding when it was slow

it had been two seconds since becky asked me the question.

"i couldn't really get a grip on it," i said. "sorry."

becky seemed disappointed. i couldn't read angie. if anything, she seemed like her apprehension was rising. angie and becky talked a little bit more. every six or so of their sentences or so, i would offer one tenth of a complete thought. it continued on in this way until the meeting ended. the group disbanded.

i walked upstairs. i was trying to decide if i would come back in two weeks, the time the next meeting was being held. i was trying to ascertain if i could make myself go. it didn't seem likely.

i had made my way to the front of the store. i was exiting the double doors when i felt a hand on my shoulder. i turned my head too quickly and got lightheaded. i saw a flash, then everything

went fuzzy.

"hi. i enjoyed hearing your thoughts on the book, but you seemed overstrung. would it be easier to share more over coffee?"

the voice high and soft, the apprehension i had sensed in her for an unknown reason now resonating in her vocal cords. she was trying and failing to seem light and airy. she continued.

"there's a café just inside, if you wanted to check it out. the drinks there don't jitter me up too badly. i can cover it."

i sat across the table from angie. she had ordered some sort of seasonal drink. i don't think it was the color of something a human was supposed to ingest. the price of everything was \$2

higher than it would've been anywhere else because we were at a business inside a business. i had ordered a black coffee. i didn't usually drink anything other than water. i ordered a coffee so i didn't feel out of place. i still felt out of place. i remembered the words she had said at the door.

"how could you tell i was overstrung?" i asked, mirroring her word choice.

"well, you were tapping your knee with your fingers anxiously the entire meeting."

"i do that all the time."

"are you anxious all the time?"

i paused. people didn't talk about it. this was something nobody asked anyone about. they wrote it in public service announcements and on billboards and posters but they didn't know what it meant. talking about it led to being misunderstood. there was no one else in the

café. one of angie's hands was flat, palm down on the table. her other hand was tracing fingers down her hair.

"yeah—yes, i am."

83 - Melissa Mawrdren

and believe you me that it was nothing she deserved, the poor girl making atlas look like a crumbling excuse for a statue. who can hold all that weight? and i stared at her and saw it, each and every time, like an aura surrounding her that shoved her tens of thousands of miles into the ground until she came back out in space. i couldn't bear to look anymore. so i hid in my room, i was a coward, and i ran away, unable to stand the pain of my loved one reflecting off on me, diluted from her experience, though more concentrated than anything i'd yet found, a drowning suffocation of present and forthcoming pains. the dreams told me it had to be that way, they told me the whole story, and it killed me to know what she'd given up for me, an additional eternity of torture just to tell me how much she hurt; it wasn't worth it, it could never have been worth it. i just wanted her to be safe, i would've given the world away for her, but it was her choice, not mine, so i buried myself in the ground, a shelter of cowardice that held me tight at night but

couldn't keep me warm. disgusting wretched thing that can't even handle a reflection. why don't you go abandon your loved ones some more? oh, right, you don't have any left. go die in the dirt where you rest.

84 - Anzhrelika

I scrambled towards Vincent, moving in a way unfamiliar to me, a sprint across a few feet. I threw my weight and did not fear slippage on the floor. I had never needed to get from point A to point B so swiftly. My mind was white.

I grasped him by the shoulder. He was trying to pull away from the reflection, but some parts of him were firmly nested in it. We struggled. I tried to grab onto the mantle above the fireplace for stability, but there was no good handhold, it was too large for my small hands to get a grip. It struck me that this minor decision made by an engineer hundreds of years ago on the thickness of the mantle was resulting in the real-time demise of my friend. Was death always so shallow as to make decisions on trivialities like this? Were our bodies meant to be this fragile, and we had done wrong by making

ourselves shelters and farms? Was this punishment?

85 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“No, I don’t think she really *needed* to be any of the ways she was. It always seemed like a conscious decision. Some accused her of wearing too many masks, but to me, it always seemed more like this: say that each person has a fraction of self that is static, and a fraction of self that is fluid. The static part is the part of your identity that must remain the same to be true to yourself, and when people claim masking, this is the part they take offense to someone hiding; but there is also the malleable part of yourself, the fluid part that can be any number of things. Imagine a child with a passion for song, an able-bodied child who also loves to help people. In one life, the child grows up to be a firefighter, saving people in physical and immediate danger from being burned alive, bringing security to an entire district, and putting its life on the line for others. In another, the child may grow up to be a famous musical artist, bringing joy to millions, and saving hundreds of depressed teenagers from the abstract danger of not being seen, those who only know how to feel known by the words of a stranger. Neither walk of life is inherently more true for the child, and a lifetime spent wondering is a lifetime wasted.

Naturally, as it will vary person to person, there will be different ratios of how static someone is to how fluid they are, with some being mostly unchanging, and some being malleable, fully experiencing whichever identity is theirs at the moment.

I believe this is what people misunderstood about her. When she was something, she was it *fully* for that moment. All the other moments she lived in had no bearing on that one. If an old man is 100% static, then she was 100% fluid.”

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

[CENSORED]

86 - Vincent

Anzhrelika and I were walking down the street, holding hands. The sun was shining, and everything was warm; the snow melted like it had never known what it meant to be something other than water, like it had been waiting the whole time to drip freely. We walked by two preppy-looking guys in suits and heard a brief snippet of a conversation.

“—philosophies of Robert, Robert Calvin,”
“No, I always found Muse Eriksson’s much more touching—” and then they were inaudible.

I whipped my head back around. Someone with the same name as her? But the men were gone, and it was hard to focus with a warm hand in my grip.

We kept moving towards nowhere in particular, past beautiful parks and small groves that looked heavenly for a small picnic someday. There were homeless people around, but they never bothered you, usually no more than a “Have a nice day” offered in passing, so truly human, to wish

nothing but the smallest kindness imaginable in their one moment of interaction with you.

A homeless man was sitting on the cement next to a bench, his worldly effects bundled next to him in a manner movable and manageable. He had a strange look in his eyes.

“I seen it,” he said.

We moved past him, not altering the pace or manner of our gait.

“I seen it!” he shouted.

He reached out and grabbed my leg. He smelled of alcohol.

“What are you doing?” I asked frantically.

“THE MIRRORS!” he said.

“I done been in there, I tell ya. I went in there and they didn’t want me no more, they said I was rotten meat, but I tell ya, I ain’t never been somewhere so damn warm. It felt like I was right up against mama again, I tell ya. Everythin’ took some lookin’ around to get used to, what with the way it was all

backwards and stuff, but it was justified I mean, they got their whole world in there. I wish to God they'd let me back in. Everythin' felt different. It felt right. I tell ya, if you know anyone in there, they're lucky!"

And then he laughed, a long, wheezing, high-pitched cackle, the guffaw of someone acquainted with insanity, but who hasn't signed the leasing papers to live with it yet. I punched him in the face. There was no thought or prior consideration to my action.

"Vincent!" Anzhrelika said, with horror.
"He doesn't know what it was like," I said.
"I'm never going to see her again. That mirror killed her when I was twenty feet away, checking the front door to try to keep us safe. The mirror lied to me and, and now she's gone."

The bum's nose was bleeding. His head was lying back on the cement. He was still laughing.

"Vincent..." Anzhrelika intoned.

I started walking away, and she started following me. Then the voice from behind us.

“Here’s what you’ll never understand, I tell ya! Everythin’ just—wait, don’t I know you, young lady? You were the one who listened to me in the—” but then he cut off.

I turned around to see what was the matter with him. I hadn’t heard any other noise to indicate something was wrong.

He was standing there, gesturing wildly at me with his arms, but his lips were sealed, seemingly unable to speak at all. He reeled back in a motion of laughter, but still, silent.

I turned back around and kept walking. There was an outdoor stage in the park, and I felt like going to it. Anzhrelika followed me.

There was a group of people performing on the stage, and a smaller group of people sitting in foldable lawn chairs in front of it. It was a Saturday, so I supposed it wasn’t all that strange for something like this to be happening. Anzhrelika asked if we could watch them for a bit. She said she had always loved performance art. I didn’t mind.

We sat down in the dirt, and the grass was

cool and dewy. It seemed like they were putting on a play, with costumes they had handmade from cloth of various colors, props that were probably meant to be understood as representing some corporeal object that I couldn't quite guess. Maybe with context, I would've understood more.

We watched them for a while, trying and failing to grasp the plot, until one of the actors stopped speaking in the middle of a line. His face was quizzical, then concerned. The other actors turned from their static positions and looked at him, waiting for him to finish his line, but he just stood there, silent as night. One of the other actors, who seemed to be playing the protagonist, caught on that something was seriously wrong and started asking him if he was okay, but was cut off mid-sentence in a similar fashion.

A boy biked by on the street nearby, holding a megaphone. He screamed as loudly as he could,

“DON'T SPEAK. LIMITED WORDS.
TRUMPET.”

Wait, if that was true, wasn't he—

I didn't feel like I had time to fully process it, so I turned to Anzhrelika and said,

“We don't talk anymore, got it? Only speak if you need to.”

The actors were still scrambling on the stage. Anzhrelika looked at me very confused, then I watched as the muscles in her face relaxed into an expression of slow understanding. She nodded slowly, then sighed. The calls had taken long distance communication from us, then they had taken all stored information in the world, then they had taken Esther, and now they were taking away speech.

It seemed like the people putting on the play were coming to the same conclusion as us. None of them were speaking anymore, some because they couldn't, and some because they decided better of it, but here's the part that shocked me.

They stared at one another with questioning looks, uncertain of how to proceed. Then one of the actors took a deep breath, and returned to her position on the stage, resuming the pose she had held before the

chaos, kneeling at the feet of another character. The other actor turned to look at where she was standing before to attempt some gesture communication with her, but noticed she had moved. He looked for a second, then stepped back to his position in front of her. Slowly, everyone took up their positions on the stage. And the play continued.

I felt a deep sense of community. The calls had always seemed to elicit such terror in everyone, but here, in the middle of the day, in the middle of a random park, these people having just learned they may never speak again for the rest of their lives, having just learned that they may never again be able to say Thank you or I love you or I'm sorry or Goodnight, yet here, surrounded by disaster, the play continued, speechless and impassioned.

Anzhrelika and I sat, and we watched.

87 - Melanie Jane Mawrdren

[CENSORED]

“Yes, of course it made us sad to see her go, but we always knew she would leave, eventually. I’m just glad that she’s safe, that she isn’t hurting.”

[CENSORED]

“He was always a close family friend, sometimes babysitting her, though she didn’t much need that after age four or so.”

[CENSORED]

“No musical instruments.”

[CENSORED]

“Words ending in -phobic.”

[CENSORED]

“Something that resembled being biblical, but wasn’t. Something about farewells.”

[CENSORED]

“It’ll be the middle of the day, I’ll be doing the chores for the house or some such, and I’ll speak like she’s there with me. I’ll ask her how she’s felt about the weather even though I already know that she only likes rain, and all this burning heat lately has done nothing for her. I feel like talking it out helps. Sometimes my mind will wander, and I’ll forget she isn’t there, but when I spent that many years raising her

mostly on my own, I don't think she'll ever leave me in a way that matters."

[CENSORED]

"I don't really believe in any of that stuff. Just love."

[CENSORED]

88 - Muse

*And what of Vincent Elcleft, the
rag-mottled boy with nothing to
lose? You found nothing after
cresting the thousand
mountaintops?*

**we never touched like that. we
never kissed. all the time, i
think of the opportunity i
passed up. it would've been
stained, but it would've been
mine.**

*Anzhrelika Vilfenrikuva, the
dreamy anachronism of a girl who
seemed from sometime else?*

**after coffee, nothing. she never
said if she realized it was a
mistake, or simply didn't want
anything to do with me anymore.
it burns. not daily, but often.**

*Their timely connection, flowing
with light and beauty, never-
worn clothes traded, new comfort*

being found?

unbelievable. an act of god.
there was no therapy technique
to save me from that. nothing in
the whole practice tells you
what to do when you shouldn't
even be involved, when it's not
your business in the first
place. nobody tells you what to
do when it's your selfishness
and willingness to make
everything all about yourself
that's causing problems.

*And what of the boy in the
crowded hobby shop's basement?*

that was a boy? i mean, of
course i thought about it, but
how can someone new like that
live up to someone you've known
for years? written about in
consecutive journals, shared
pictures with dozens of
hairstyles?

*A new boy, a new chance, a new
world, a new direction, anywhere*

else to go. Haven't you begged and begged for anywhere else to go?

i couldn't have done it. i couldn't feel the *something* burning the way it's supposed to, the thing that hurts when it feels like it's searing on my skin if we're not closer to each other. it would've been an imposition on him. vincent and angie had at least been around long enough, they would be the ones who can ascertain what they're getting into. and they didn't want to get into it.

Build something from the rubble, paste the cut magazine corners together and paint a new picture.

no matter what i did, it was just going to end like the others. they were years ago, yeah, but aren't the relationships ongoing? there's nothing stopping it from

happening but human nature. and human nature seems to want things that are new and fresh, not old and weathered, like me. i've been weathered for my entire life. sometimes people will think i'm new when we meet. they put me in the category of newness. it fades faster than invisible ink.

Build something from the rubble, paste the cut magazine corners together and paint a new picture.

i saw him but he wasn't my type. yes, i know i've been with people who aren't my type before. he wasn't pushy enough. i could tell what his high school experience was like when i first saw him. sitting wrong. asking the wrong questions. learning the lesson of silence instead of the lesson of fawning. we would not work together. we could not work together. i need something that drowns out some of the noise of

my own head.

Like Vincent? Like Anzhrelika?

they don't drown it out, they are the noise in my head. they're human. they're incalculable. i want to calculate them, to know everything they'll do. if i could plan it out, maybe i could finally change something. i hate the way i still feel for vincent. we joke about the topic when it comes up every three months, my eyes going slightly out of focus while his offhanded comment becomes my entire world, listening, interpreting, grasping at any possible meaning, any hope for change or any statement of steadfast denial to end it all, but i hear nothing except tiny points on a graph that i draw in my room, data points that balance off of each other like sudoku, a comment he made about marriage in june a year and a half ago that could've meant A or B,

lightning striking me in the present moment when he mentions marriage again, the first time he's said "marriage" in five hundred and thirty-seven days, and i remember each word of what he said before, it could've meant one of two things, when now he mentions it *again*, is ambiguous *again*, and it influences the meaning of the past memory, the memory replayed but with new context, not enough context to change its meaning but firmly added to the graph, added to the graph, a spiderweb of interconnected meanings and disparate statements whose understandings all hinge on each other and on one thing that i don't have, something that everyone else has, which none of my charts or rumination can make up for, the understanding of another human being in a way that lets you confidently say that you get them. i hear other people say it and i don't know what they mean. i never feel like i get someone. it's always

like i'm playing a bullet chess match with twelve seconds on my clock to make another thirty moves, and i can't even see if my opponent has a clock. my opponent. we're supposed to be cooperating but all i know how to do is fight. all i can do is fight myself and fight my opponent's insecurities and hope that the win-state is what i want it to look like. i wouldn't know, though. because i've never gotten there.

And what of Anzhrelika?

it's the same for her because it's the same for everyone. she touched me once, but it still feels just like vincent. i remember it like it was in front of me, but you can't live in a memory. the human soul needs nutrients, and memory is blasted soil. my mind is awash with permutations of ways things were and ways things could've gone differently. there's nothing i could've done. it's all the way

it should've been. that's what i
tell myself.

*Alfy Dietrich, your beloved
roommate that you found by
chance, the poster with drawings
and words that intrigued you,
what of them?*

alfy is—alfy's gone. i can't do
anything now about their pierced
hands. i can't do anything about
their blood spilling on the
floor. all there is now is
coming up with futureproofed
methods to downregulate myself
when i smell iron in the future,
or see something red that
shouldn't be. i can't feel
traumatized in a moment. trauma
comes in the long years after,
the years of evidence that
something happened to you that
you can't wipe off. the human
body is a machine that runs on
trauma, everything that happens
to it stabbing into an unwilling
pain receptor, something that
evolved to hopefully never be
used and is now working overtime

every day to manage the stimuli.
this is just another trauma.
it's just another stain.

*Who will read you Bible verses?
Who will you hear unlocking the
door in the early evening?*

no one will read me bible
verses. it will be years from
now and i'll have a new roommate
coming home after work, but i'll
slip sometimes, and i'll still
think it's alfy. i'll be
accosted by the memory of their
face, their clothing, their
hair, and i'll break down into
silent tears.

*What of Esther Squall, the girl
who speaks in reflections?*

she tore me up inside. i
couldn't bear to see her with
vincent like that. it was two
pains at once, to see her with
another, and to see him without
me. even though it was pain, i
was still not good enough to

deserve to feel either of them.
getting to feel anything from
either of them was wrong when i
had done so little to earn it. i
kept imagining that i had found
her in the square. it was an
idle daydream given how
infrequently i can even go
outside anymore.

*He didn't understand her the way
you could've, isn't that right?*

**i said i don't know what it
means to understand someone.**

*Maybe she was a ghost, or an
angel. Maybe people can't be any
more than concepts to other
people.*

**shut up. you're wrong. she
wasn't an angel, she was a
person, and i couldn't
understand her any more easily
than anyone else. the way i felt
didn't matter.**

But your feeling was real.

Things don't burn inside a person if they don't have some substance in some cell of your body.

**that doesn't make any sense!
they're just emotions and thoughts, they're inside my failing body and my broken mind, which means they definitionally aren't real, because i'm fake. i'm nothing.**

You are a person just like anyone else.

i've never thought that meant anything. there's a critical mass of differences you can have from a normal person, and once you reach it, you're broken. there's nothing i can do anymore.

You could find a new safety.

what do you think i've been looking for? nothing's been jumping out at me, just the same

day, over and over, and tears staining the same spots on my sleep mask.

She can save you. Go to her.

no one can save me.

But what did she do to you?

you want to know what she did to me? don't you already know? you certainly ask questions like you think you know the answers already.

But what did she do to you?

fine. she felt like drinking water does, the way it heals you in a way that you didn't understand you were hurting, the way a little bit of it pours down your chest when you're truly excited to drink. she felt like something buzzing inside me, like there was a language only the two of us could speak. when vincent acted like he

understood her better than i
did, i wanted to physically hurt
him, and i've never wanted to
physically hurt someone before,
it was just like a
misunderstanding of her was an
affront to my existence. she
felt like water.

But what did she do to you?

nothing. she didn't do anything
to me that could change
something.

She can save you. Go to her.

shut up. it's wrong to put that
on another person.

*Aren't humans social creatures
by nature and by design? Weren't
you built to rely on one
another?*

i'm alone. i've always been
alone, and i'll always be alone.

What does it mean to you?

**i don't know. what does what
mean?**

What does it mean to you?

**everything? what does everything
mean?**

What does it mean to you?

**i don't know what the answer you
want is. i can't give it to you.**

What does it mean to you?

What does it mean to you?

89 - Vincent

We figured, hey, why not go out? Why not have a little fun? She knew a place we could get to on foot, so we walked. It took us about thirty minutes with how icy it was outside. It was raining torrentially. The bouncer didn't bother asking us anything, not wanting to spend part of his meager allowance. Inside the club was a different world.

There were lights strobing and flashing all different kinds of bright colors, pouring over the crowd. It seems we weren't the only people to have the idea that this was as good a time as any to get messed up and feel ourselves move. Everything was falling apart except for our bodies and our senses, so we should just use what we have.

All the TVs in the bar were shattered, the screens bashed out with hammers to prevent reflection. This was the world we were living in, and we were finding ways to adapt. All the mirrors that used to be on the walls and ceilings were covered with tarps. I guess they didn't think all the broken glass that would've coated the floors would be good for

dancing.

The club was smoky and hot and loud. It enveloped me in it. I felt the movement of the crowd like we were one being. People brushed up against all different parts of my body, and it comforted me. It was hard to hear the music without a sound system, the rain on the roof ringing clearly through the room during moments of relative silence, but the people playing were still giving it their all, falling onto the stage and rocking out as hard as they physically could. No words, of course.

Anzhrelika went straight to the bar, and I went straight to the dance floor. I could feel people's eyes on me because of how hard I was dancing until they formed a circle around me. Someone bashed their body into me, pushing with their shoulder like they were trying to knock me over. It felt good. I saw some other people doing it. I pushed someone who had pushed someone else, and they pushed me back. There were tiny lines of light connecting us.

Someone from the circle locked eyes with me and folded something into my hand,

closing my fingers around it to make my hand into a fist. They put a finger up to their lips, shushing me, as if I were going to say anything, then turned and walked away, disappearing into the mess. I opened my hand and looked at what was inside.

There was a very tiny rectangular box made of paper, smaller than the distance between my pinky knuckles. It had a spiral design on it. I had heard of these, seen pictures before. People folded multiple substances into them, and you would swallow the box whole, letting the cocktail meander through your digestive system and into your bloodstream. I wasn't normally one for drugs, but I figured that my life wasn't exactly going the way I had expected it to go.

I put it in my mouth and swallowed, then started dancing again, not knowing how long it would take to begin manifesting effects on my body and perception.

It began with taste, my awareness swelling and bursting out of control, growing until I felt like I could taste everyone in the room, their skin, their sweat, their memories. I could feel

the love and fears of them burning on my tongue like mints and boiling water. I was more than myself and I heard bells ringing everywhere announcing the coming of something important and sacred that had been waiting.

I saw the face of the earth from the face of the moon, and watched as the earth split into three, then three into nine, and so on out in all directions until space itself was drowning in earths that all rotated on different axes. Elements started flowing out of some of the earths as they were covered in water or ice or fire or clouds.

I saw a child floating in space, catching on fire as it rocketed towards the earth that I had come from. I watched it hit the ground and come out of a mother. I watched it bound with energy and scream for others before itself. I looked in the place that a planet keeps its god, and saw that my own earth had none. Jupiter's was all-powerful, and the moon's all-knowing, having dropped from the heavens fully formed, but the earth's was empty.

The child was firmly of earth though it was of

space, as it did not have knowledge of its extraterrestrial nature. It held the blaze of itself inside its small body. It was granted favor by existence as it learned the ways of the world at a swift pace. This world, my hollow earth, needed anything to bear the mantle of its godhead.

The child grew in power and knowledge, but did not become all-powerful, nor all-knowing, merely rising above until it surpassed all other life on its planet. I watched as it bathed in colors and light the same as it bathed in pain and darkness. I watched it experience the first new thing humanity had experienced in a thousand years. It saw the ending of everything, the hourglass of the world that was running out.

It came upon a locked door that had to be opened. The shape of the keyhole was the shape of a part of the child's brain, the part of it that holds long term remembrance. I watched as the child constructed a chamber for its forthcoming blank-slate self, a simulation of all it had gone through thusfar, a sped-up machine that poked each of its neurons individually to recreate the child into the exact person it had become, must become. The machine was made up of

people and places. The child implanted dreams into people and controlled environments to make them move as it needed. The device excruciated the child as it molded it into shape. Its masterwork completed, it cut itself open, and sacrificed the part of itself that remembered, to open the door that held the artifact.

The artifact, a tiny piece of parchment barely large enough to hold one word, was next to a quill pen dipped in golden ink. The parchment and ink promised a true permanence that naught else in this existence could. It could survive the reversive nature of all the earths and their perpetual making and unmaking. I saw the child write itself a note. The paper fell into dust. Though it upheld its promise.

The path forward was the path back. The world reset itself to a blank slate, just as the child had, and it walked through all the motions to create itself the same as it always had. The child shot down from the heavens, forming anew, walking the same path, but with one new word. Everything repeated, except for the word, and the child lived its entire life with a determination that it could not name, a determination to craft the sentence that would set us all free,

excruciation and beauty, sorrow and meaning, moving unknowingly toward the promise of a second word, then a third, then a fourth, and so on. And so on.

I stumbled back and fell onto a wooden bench, feeling more lost than I ever had in my life. Then I heard the seventh trumpet begin, and there was a time of silence, brief and eternal.

1 - Vincent

Thank you so much for reading my book! I truly hope you enjoyed it. I welcome hearing anyone's experiences, thoughts, fleshed out or otherwise, at all times.

I can be reached on the internet by finding me without much searching. Most of my stuff is called [essy531](#). If you have even the slightest inkling to contact me to say anything, please do!

Thank you! I love you!