


Allotropes

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 4-5-17

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Date

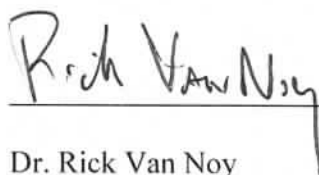
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*For Catelin*

## Acknowledgments

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## Contents

I: Delenda Est	5
0: The Medusa	25
II: Cassandra Laughs Too	32
0: The Abyss	52
III: Phosphenes	57
IV: Pareidolia	70
V: Hiraeth	77
VI: Markov State	82
VII: Bit-Shift Register	97
Afterward	114
Bibliography	131



Each of these lives is the right one. Every path is the right path. Everything could have been anything else and it would have just as much meaning.

—*Alan Watts*

## I: Delenda Est

Jim introduced them to the game six years ago. When they were kids, really. And ever since, Nate and Aaron had done their best to beat him at it. The tradition was older than Elise and Jim's marriage. She'd never take that away from him. She thought once he'd give it all away for her.

"What's it called?" Elise hated the game.

"You know what it's called," Jim said.

"I can never say it right." She hated that he had something like this.

"Casus Belli. It's Latin—'an act of war.'"

Elise watched as Jim unfurled a map across the kitchen table. He smoothed the folds with the palms of his hands. He'd made it himself. Every location rendered in perfect detail. Each line drawn out with a nib-pen. Black and red ink. He'd used cold-press paper and stained it sepia with teabags. Burned the edges. It was systematically ruined until perfect.

"Map looks nice." Elise had showed him how. She was the artist. She didn't expect it to look so nice. Jim always ignored her expertise. But with this he'd followed her advice to the letter. It looked real. Something you'd see in a museum.

Jim didn't answer her. He centered the map under the kitchen light. When it was just so he placed a heavy die at each corner. Elise picked up one of the dice and rolled it across the map. Jim snatched it before it landed on a clean facing.

"You said you didn't want to play." Jim leaned on the table and turned to her. He'd make this face at her. Purse his lips and shift his eyes to the ceiling. She thought it was cute

before she learned to translate it: *I love you but you're pissing me off.*

"I *don't* want to play." Elise hated that face now. She hated that her husband could put so much effort into something so fleeting. It was a game—little figures and dice and him a grown man. He'd take off work and set aside a weekend a month to play it. Aaron and Nate did the same and Elise hated them. She hated that once a month Aaron and Nate took over her home. They stole her house and her quiet and her husband. But that wasn't true. Jim gave himself to it. To them. To this stupid game.

"Okay then," Jim said. "Then let *us* play."

"I just don't understand it. What's the point?" she asked.

"The point is to conquer, Elise." Jim threw a handful of dice across the table. He smiled at the result. It meant nothing to her. She'd seen empires forged by snake-eyes and armies routed by boxcars.

"How? It's just a bunch of little figures and dice." Elise tried to disguise her curiosity. She'd played before. Before they were married. She didn't understand it then. She didn't hate it then either.

"Look, you've played before." Jim motioned to his miniature infantry line. "Each player plays a general from history—I'm Marcus Atilius Regulus, Aaron is Xanthippus, and Nate is Hiero II." He said the names like they were family members. As though she'd remember them from her wedding. Their wedding.

"Each player has an army," Jim continued, "and you fight it out—"

"But they don't *actually* fight—you just roll dice!" She laughed.

“Yeah, and the hat token in Monopoly doesn’t *actually* buy Boardwalk,” Jim said. *I love you but you’re pissing me off.* “It’s a game and it’s fun and you said you didn’t want to play.”

“I don’t.”

The doorbell rang.

“That’s them!” Jim shot up from the table.

Elise stayed in the kitchen. Her husband’s toys were all set in rank and file. They were little Romans. Painted soldiers all posed like they were in the fray of some important battle. She looked for the two she’d painted for him. She couldn’t find them among the others. Faceless among all the faces. He left the rulebook in his empty chair. It was open. There were numbers and charts. Words she didn’t understand. The opposite page was a splash-frame of Julius Caesar. Beneath it, a quote.

**“IN WAR, EVENTS OF IMPORTANCE ARE THE RESULT OF TRIVIAL CAUSES.”**

Just like the game, she thought. No matter what you “conquer,” it all goes back in the box. She could hear Jim answering the door.

“Fellas! Welcome—welcome.” Jim held the door open and let Nate and Aaron pass into the kitchen. They each wore backpacks and carried stacked boxes they kept in place under their chins. They set their things down carefully. The kitchen looked like an army camp now.

“Hey, guys.” Elise hated Nate and Aaron.

“Elise! How are you?” Nate was Jim’s best man at their wedding. Whenever he could, he’d speak only in movie quotes. At their wedding Nate explained to the DJ “I’m The Dude—so that’s what you call me. That or His Dudeness or Duder or el Duderino if you’re not into the

whole brevity thing.” Jim would laugh. He always seemed to know the movie.

“Elise!” Aaron shouted. “How’s the painting game going?” Aaron was their officiant. She thought she’d like him when Jim told her he was a minister but an interfaith minister. When Jim first introduced them, Aaron told her, “excommunicates, homos, trans, I’ll marry anyone the church won’t.” And then he laughed.

He had a life before her, Elise knew. And she couldn’t be a part of it. Never would be.

She could feel their heavy footfalls in bare feet. Like encroaching cavalry.

“Take a look at that map, fellas,” he said. Aaron and Nate were careful not to touch anything. They didn’t pick up the twenty-sided dice. They didn’t move it from the light. How’d they know not to touch it?

“This is fucking unbelievable!” Aaron said.

“Really ties the room together.”

“Yup—don’t mind the sepia—it’s all going to be red by the end of this.” Jim smiled. Aaron and Nate scoffed. She didn’t think people really did that.

“Red like...blood?” she asked.

The three of them turned.

“No. Like Rome,” Jim answered. As if it were obvious.

Jim offered each of them a beer. They accepted and began unpacking their things. Jim stayed with his coffee.

Elise watched as Aaron and Nate opened their respective kits. Egg crate foam swaddled hundreds of little toy soldiers. They had rulers and protractors and dice. Their backpacks were

stuffed with books marked *Casus Belli*.

“Didn’t you guys bring any clothes?” Elise asked. Nate set a miniature chariot on the table and moved it slightly to the left.

“Clothes?” He moved it back, deciding it was fine where it was. Aaron answered in a way the other two seemed to accept readily.

“What for?” he asked. “Are we going out?” He pulled a foam sheet from his box and looked to Elise, confused as the other two. When she ignored his question he returned to his case, revealing whatever the foam was protecting. “Oh! Did I send you guys the pictures of this?” he asked. It was a miniature war-elephant complete with a turret and archers. He held it under the light for them to examine. Jim and Nate marveled at it.

“Finally finished her,” Jim said excitedly.

“Ol’ Ruth,” Nate smiled, “son of a bitch. This little lady has been the death of empires.”

Elise peered over their shoulders as they crowded around what was, evidently, Aaron’s masterwork. She’d heard of Ruth but only at Jim’s insistence. Aaron explained that she was named after some girl he was dating. “Highest civilian honor,” he said.

“Shit—you even painted the archer’s eyes?” Jim was stunned.

“How long did that take?” Nate, impressed.

“Not too long, actually.” Aaron was lying. She could tell just by looking at it. It took days. He must have used triple zero brushes. At least three layers of undercoats. Another twenty in highlighting. All under that magnifying headlamp that mimicked natural light. He mentioned it to her once. “Presents colors as they would be seen in ‘real life.’” She never used one. Her

colors *were* in real life.

“Elise—look at this.” Jim offered the elephant to her. When she tried to take it he reminded her to only *look* at it.

“A lot of detail.” And there really was. He’s an artist but not like me, she thought. He could paint these little toys and do his little comics but not in the way she could paint murals and portraits. She actually got paid for her work—had people appreciate it and buy it and commission it. This was just a toy.

Nate used a straightedge to position his spearmen in a perfect line. When they were ordered to his liking, he drew out a roster he’d made detailing the statistics of his varied units.

“Jim—did you decide on a campaign?” Aaron bent to the table so as to see Nate’s army at eye level.

“Yessir,” Jim said. “Sicilian.”

“Which war?”

“First one.”

Nate laughed. “This aggression will not stand, man.”

“You fuckers are done, son.” Aaron motioned to his prized elephant. “Baby Ruth, doesn’t give a singular fuck.”

Elise looked at her one more time. She was marvelous on the table, lording over all those faceless faces. They drove their pewter spears through her sides, stuck her with a thousand arrows, and still she marched forward. It towered over the other armies. Fierce and proud. And dangerous.

“What’s the naval operation?”

“Late—I’m using Corvus. Delenda est, bitches.”

Nate and Aaron groaned. That meant something to them.

“Alright,” Elise said. “I’ll leave you boys to it.” She filled a mason jar with water at the tap.

“You working on your painting, baby?” Jim didn’t look up from the table. Too busy scouting enemy deployment.

“Yeah. You boys have fun.” She left for the sunroom.



It was ordered chaos. The walls were papered with sketches and measurements. A six-foot canvas dominated each corner of the room. All in various stages of completion. She set down the mason jar and portioned out mineral spirits and liquid. She cut the spirits with water. H.P. Lovecraft watched her.

She’d been working on him since Jim showed her the author’s photo. He had a face so strange it needed to be painted. Shaped like a pickle jar. That Hapsburg jaw line. She’d never read his work but under her husband’s advice; she’d incorporated writhing tentacles into the background to eat up the negative space. She’d painted them pink. Jim told her they should be green. They were still pink. She turned on her music and stared back at Lovecraft for a while. She dipped her fingers in the mason jar and smoothed the bristles of her brush absentmindedly. It was ox hair. Strong and yet soft. She could see every brush stroke she’d make. Every hue she’d blend. Every second it would take to make it perfect. Cobalt blue. Fast light yellow.



A jaundiced green. Something old and ruined before its time.

She set her old step-ladder before Lovecraft and climbed to the top, but she stopped before she could touch the canvas. She could hear them over the music. She straddled the top step and turned away from Lovecraft. She looked down at the step between her legs and painted distraught little smiley's on the wooden step. Pareidolia. Rendered in a jaundiced green.



They'd been playing for four hours. The war was already being won. Elise wandered into the kitchen using a bag of chips as her excuse.

"Fucking right!" Jim howled in victory. "Run, you little bitches!"

Aaron groaned as the dice left his hand. They failed him miserably. "Did you win, baby?" She watched her twenty-six year old husband do his best Heisman pose as Aaron sank in his seat.

"Fucking right, I did!" Jim said.

"Yup!" Nate did his best not to laugh at Aaron's misery. "Aaron's line folded and broke under one cavalry element—*one!*—turned and smashed into that lovely elephant of his and that's all she wrote."

They were just toys and dice. How could they know all that from a three and a one? What did it matter? It all goes back in the box, anyhow.

"So is the game over?" She hoped it was. Though she knew better. Jim punched the air and praised Mars Victricis. Aaron answered for him.

"Not even close," Aaron said. "Lilybaeum and Messana are still mine and Nate over here

devoted his *entire* season to what he calls a ‘consolidation of the ground forces.’”

“I told you, man—it’s a defensive posture,” Nate said.

“It’s a *weak-ass* posture.” Aaron laughed. “Some tyrant you are.”

“This isn’t ‘Nam. There are rules.”

The three of them laughed.



She closed the French doors behind her. Mr. Lovecraft was still staring at her. She’d fixed his jawline and added a delicate sheen to his pipe. The tentacles were still pink. She was deciding whether or not she liked them pink. The more she thought about it, the more she realized they should be green.

The boys were still laughing and she could hear them through the glass. She turned her music up to fifteen before deciding it should be an even number.

**14.**

“*One* cavalry element? Come on, Aaron!”

“They’re new recruits, that’s all—the Sacred Band is on their way from Utica.”

“Good luck with that sea voyage. Corvus is on the prow!”

**12.**



Two in the morning and the war still raged. True to his word, Aaron had rallied and put Rome on the back-foot, and Nate had seized the opportunity to abandon his weak-ass posturing.

It was still just dice and paper. Right?

“I’m going to bed.” Elise leaned on Jim’s shoulder. He reeked of cigarettes and coffee. Better than the Jim Beam. Elise looked on as he rolled another handful of dice. They scattered across the table, dancing over the Mediterranean Basin.

“Okay, baby.” Jim was thoughtful. He collected the dice and examined his empire. Elise couldn’t help wonder what he was considering. She saw that Aaron and Nate were likewise thoughtful. It was just paper and pen. Some dice. And what were really just toys. Pareidolia.

“Are you winning?” She tried to find something on the table that would answer that for her.

“Eh...” Jim said. “I’m not losing—put it that way.” He was so serious. Nervous almost. Aaron and Nate were on edge, chewing on pens and thumbing through books and leaflets. She imagined their terror. *Who’s he coming for next? Where will Rome turn? Greece or Carthage?*

“Are Aaron and Nate on a team?” she asked. Jim ignored her. Aaron and Nate looked up. The thought hadn’t occurred to them.

“We should be, shouldn’t we?” Nate said, turning to Aaron.

“It’s the only way, really. Neither of us can break him alone.”

“Oh, thank you!” Jim turned to his wife. “Thank you for that—I thought you didn’t to play.want

“I don’t.”

“Then *don’t*—stop fraternizing with the enemy and go to bed.” *I love you but you’re pissing me off.* Good, she thought. She kissed him on the cheek and watched him roll one more

pack of dice before heading to bed. As she ascended the steps, she could hear her husband forsake the gods that once loved him.

“I’m going to paint this fucking map red. With or without Mars’ help.”

Nate and Aaron laughed.



Elise woke early. She made her way down the stairs to find them at it again. Or were they still at it?

“Have you guys been to bed yet?” She wandered past the war and towards the coffee maker. The coffee was fresh.

“No—not at all.” Aaron sipped on his own coffee, tapping his fingers against the porcelain.

“How do you play that game *all* night?” Elise poured herself a cup and brought it to her lips. She didn’t expect an answer from them. They were too involved. She took her kitchen into account. It was a war zone. The miniatures were piled on every available surface. Field hospitals. The walls had succumbed to still more maps and notes detailing the game. Dice littered the floor. They’d gone rogue when someone had thrown them across the kitchen in a fit of despair.

The boys looked like old men. Bags under their eyes. Heads hung low in exhaustion. Aaron leaned into the table. He might be winning by the look of him.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Well, thanks to your sage advice,” Aaron said, “Rome lies in *ashes* and Carthage is on

the rise.” Aaron exhibited the kind of energy that comes with an all-nighter. An engine burning up the last of its fuel before sputtering to a dead stop. The last ditch effort of a metabolism run dry.

“You *burnt* Rome?” Elise asked.

“Yes, he did.” *I love you but you’re pissing me off.* “And it’s your fault, Elise.” She sauntered to her husband’s side and rubbed his back.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” She loved that he was miserable. Something so pointless and he was so worked up. It all goes back in the box, honey. She watched as Aaron took up his elephant and placed it at the gates of Syracuse. Jim and Nate bowed their heads in resignation.

“In the immortal words of Darth Vader...” Aaron smiled. “...All too easy.” Elise watched Nate and Jim despair. It was the absolute power of arithmetic playing before them. She saw the savage delight in Aaron and the woe and fear in her husband. But not in Nate. Nate examined his notes before standing and drawing up a handful of dice.

“Fucking amateurs.” Nate reached into his box and revealed another figurine, this one painted gold.

“This is Sparta! Bitch.” Nate placed the figure before Aaron’s elephant. Jim howled in shock and Aaron sank back into his seat, beseeching someone named “fucking Astarte.”

“What does that mean?” She wanted it to end. She couldn’t understand how there was still hope. How there was still time. How anyone could see something other than futility at the siege of Syracuse.

“Baby—it’s the Spartans—the three-hundred, you know?”

“Oh.” She knew the movie. She knew that the three-hundred were an immovable object. She knew that no matter what came for them, they would never yield. They would die where they stood.

“Are you going to finish your painting today?” Jim actually looked at her when he asked.

“What? Yeah. I think so.” The mighty three-hundred would hold Syracuse against the war-elephants, against the Sacred Band—against a million men if they had to.

They were staring at her.

“What?” she asked.

“Everything okay?” Jim asked.

“Nothing—yeah, I’m fine. Are you three going to sleep today?” After the war her husband would come back to her a different man. Jaundiced. Ruined by time. He’d be lost after this. “Will you guys take a nap at least? I’ll wake you up.”

The idea washed over them. They all realized at once how tired they were.

“That’s a good idea, actually.” Jim knew what she meant.

“Syracuse isn’t going anywhere.” Aaron set his dice down.

“No, it’s not, sir,” Nate scoffed. She didn’t think people actually did that. “No, it’s not.” The boys laughed.



Nate and Aaron slept on the couch together. They were too tired to be concerned with which parts touched. Jim stayed in the kitchen with Elise.

“I know it’s a mess, but I’ll clean it up.” He was hoping they’d have the conversation

after his friends had left. Elise was angrier with herself than she was with Jim. Why should she be mad at him for having such close friends? What was the harm in him playing a stupid game? He could be doing far worse. He *had* done far worse. Now that he was sober, what did she have to complain about?

“I just—I don’t understand why it’s always at *our* place. Have it at Aaron and Nate’s—they live together, don’t they? It would be easier *there*.”

“It’s tradition—the winner always hosts the next one. Plus there’s more space here and would you really let me disappear for a weekend?”

“I don’t care! Why would I care?” She would though. She knew it, too. Elise didn’t like the idea of him leaving if he didn’t have to. *That’s it, isn’t it? You don’t want to lose him to something else.*

“Whatever—I’m going to lie down. Wake me in a couple hours, please.”

Jim kissed her and left the kitchen. Elise sat at the table and sipped her coffee. It wasn’t as fresh as she thought it was. *Burnt. Must have been left on too long.*



Mr. Lovecraft was such a strange looking man. She stared at him and the photo. The painting. Back to the photo. She’d mastered it. It was exactly him in every way. It wasn’t her fault he was shaped so strange. Her eyes followed the pipe, snaking through his face and fading into the tentacles eating up the background. Repulsive. Phallic and sticky things that looked as if they’d tongue anyone who drew too close. And they were still pink.

“Wow! Lovecraft?” Aaron asked.

“Yup. That’s him,” Elise said. She turned from the portrait and sat atop the ladder again. Aaron was looking straight through her. He shuffled closer to the painting, gawking at it, his mouth slightly open.

“Unbelievable, Elise—really. It’s exactly him.” They smiled at one another.

“Thanks.”

“Is it done?”

“Not yet. I have to paint the tentacles.”

“What?” Aaron looked genuinely concerned. “You can’t! They look perfect!”

“Jim told me they should be green.”

“Fuck that—keep ‘em pink.”

Elise smiled. “Yeah—I just want it to be accurate, you know.”

Aaron examined the painting in the way he examined his army placements. He seemed to be disentangling it with his eyes. Divining a mystery and careful not to touch it. He measured each brush stroke and fingerprint buried in the layers of all that pink paint.

“Accurate,” he huffed. “We’re talking about Cthulhu here. If anything, he’d be angry that you *tried* to paint him accurately.”

“What?”

“Takes Lovecraft two pages to describe snow and water. Then Cthulhu shows up and he says it’s ‘indescribable.’ Pink, green—we’re talking a color out of space, here.” Aaron smiled but never took his eyes off Lovecraft. “You paint it how *you* want it.”

“I’ll go wake up Jim. Is Nate awake?” She climbed down from her ladder. She felt too



close to Aaron. She caught Aaron's reflection in the panes of the French doors. Blurry little proportions of him.

"Oh—hey, Elise," he said to the painting. She watched his reflection never turn to see her never turn to see him. "Thanks for putting us up, by the way." He stepped backward and turned his head, like folks did in galleries when they couldn't understand a piece but pretended otherwise. "I know we're a pain in the ass," he said.

"I feel like there was more to that sentence," Elise said.

"Nope. We're a pain in the ass. So thanks."

Elise smiled again and left Aaron to his vigil for the elder things. That's what she called them anyway. She could never say the name right. *Cthulhu*.

She passed Nate on her way upstairs. He lay on the couch, his face occulted by a heavy looking book titled The Tyrants of Syracuse. She could hear him muttering the words aloud to himself, slow and steady.

"You're awake then?" she asked.

"Meh. Kind of," he said, throwing down the book. "Hey, why don't you ever play with us?"

"With you guys? No way." Elise stopped midway up the stairs.

"Why not? We could teach you."

"No. I don't think so. I'll leave the battles to the men."

"Oh, don't give me that!" Nate said. "There's plenty of women generals. Boudicca, Wu Zetian, Queen Dido..." Nate was counting them on his fingers until he realized he only knew

three. “Well, there’s not many, but the few there are were more badass than most of the men. Boudicca burnt Londinium *to the ground!*”

“Londinium?”

“London. Joan of Arc! There’s another one—she was the only one man enough to lead the French. Dido *built* Carthage.”

“Good for her.” Elise ascended the stairs. Boudicca. She smiled. Joan of Arc. Dido.

“Hey, baby.” Jim was awake in the same way Nate was. She flopped on the bed next to him and kissed him. “Your boyfriends are awake.”

“Cool—cool. Did you finish your painting yet?”

“Did you finish your war yet? Don’t rush me.” They smiled.

She always woke first. She’d lie next to him while he slept and watch the sunlight paint his face. He’d wake and smile. “You’re a creep,” he’d say and she’d smile too.

But she couldn’t see him that way anymore. He doesn’t see me anymore, she thought. And she knew why. He’d thrown out his old ways for her. He’d given himself to her. So much that there was nothing left of the drunken, stupid rake she’d married. He was something else now. No longer fierce and proud. No longer dangerous.

She wanted him to touch her.

“What are you up to?” Jim said.

She saw the thing she’d built and lamented it. Golem. Carved and stitched and stapled together. Naked flesh filled up with hunger and electricity. She wanted to hurt. She wanted struggle. She wanted bruises on her thighs.

“Baby, not now.”

She wanted him to notice her. If it meant she was just a thing to him—she wanted to be his. She wanted be used and thrown away, but used. Wanted.

“Elise—come on. The guys are downstairs.”

“Fine.” And she knew she was.



She couldn't work on it anymore. It was finished whether she liked it or not. She smiled to herself. It always seemed to end that way and she rather liked the idea once. An artist had no say in the matter. A piece was done when *it* decided it was done. A subject with no object. No control. Nothing to control.

Mr. Lovecraft watched her clean her ox hair brushes. The tentacles behind him seemed to squirm and fight against themselves. They were green now. He was right, she thought. She hated him for that.

The kitchen was obliterated. A war had claimed the lives of thousands and set Sicily ablaze. The map was posted on the wall now. The statues and armies and navies had all been removed. It was dominated by purple flag-pins. Jim stared at the map with his arms folded behind his head. He glared at it in disbelief. Nate and Aaron were packing their belongings.

“Who won?” Elise asked.

“Carthage,” he said. He turned and smiled at her.

“That's right!” Aaron said.

“Meh.” Nate shrugged. “That's why there were three Punic Wars.”

Elise stood by Jim and was careful not to touch him. “So it’s over?” she asked.

*I love you. “For now.” But you’re pissing me off. “Carthage and Rome are mortal enemies.”*

Jim followed Aaron and Nate to the door. Elise waved from the kitchen.

“You guys take it easy,” Jim said.

“The Dude abides.”

Elise looked at the map posted to the wall. It would never end, she thought. *Sicily has fallen, but there’s still Italy. Africa. Spain. There was always more. It would never be enough. Nothing ever ends.*

Jim dragged back into the kitchen.

“I can’t believe they beat me,” he said.

“First time for everything,” Elise said.

Jim stared at the map posted to the wall. He braced against it. Examined every detail. She could see him working it out in his head. The magnitude of it. The great fall of a greater dynasty.

“Nah,” he said. “That’s not it.”

Is he really still thinking about this, Elise thought. *It’s over—you lost.* And they’re gone.

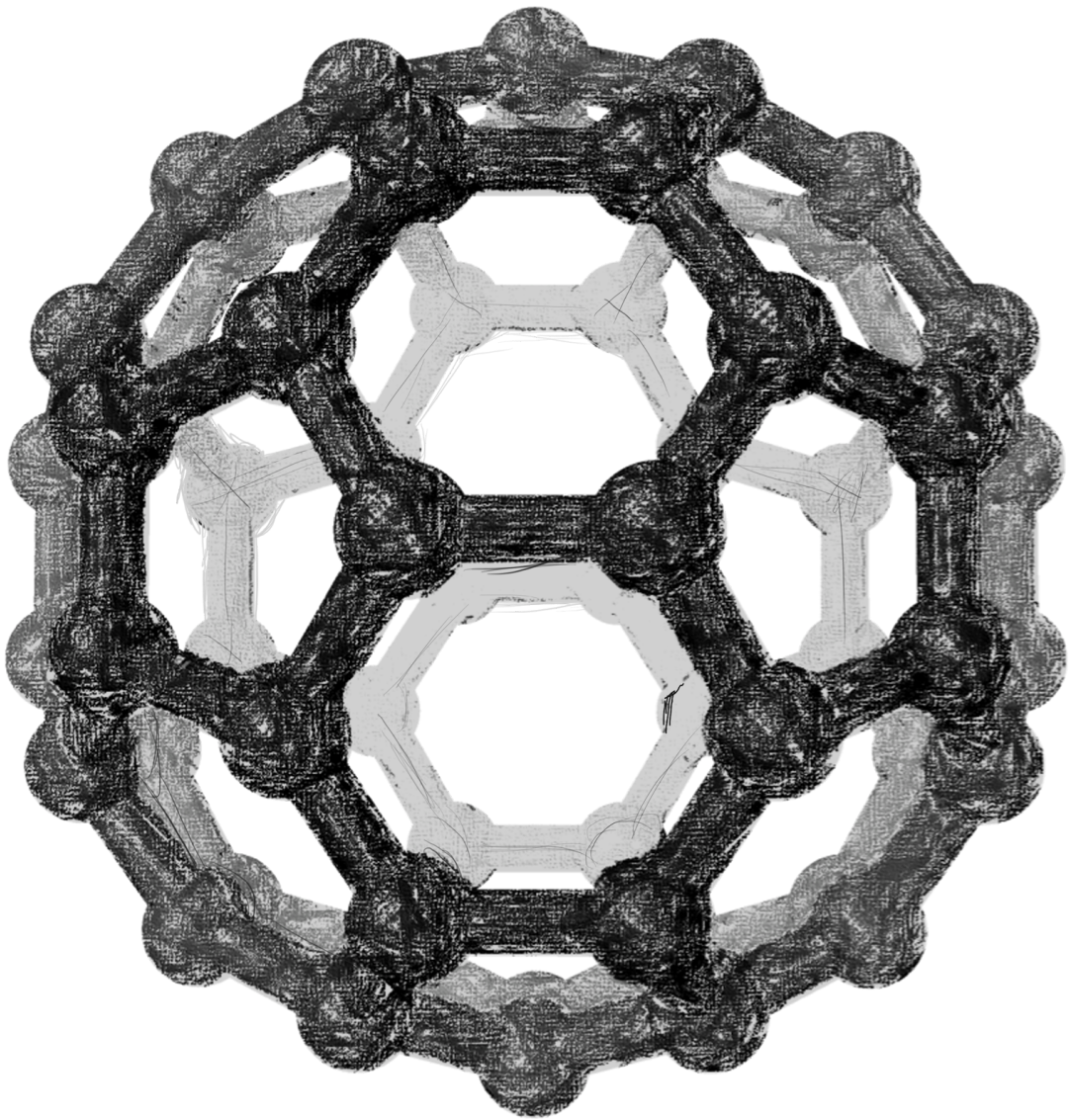
“You’re weakest at the cusp of victory,” he said. He was referencing something. Elise wondered if he understood it. She couldn’t look at him anymore.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she said. Outside, the summer was swollen with lightning. The worm-eaten pines reached up to the clouds with crone-thin fingers, and Elise wondered if

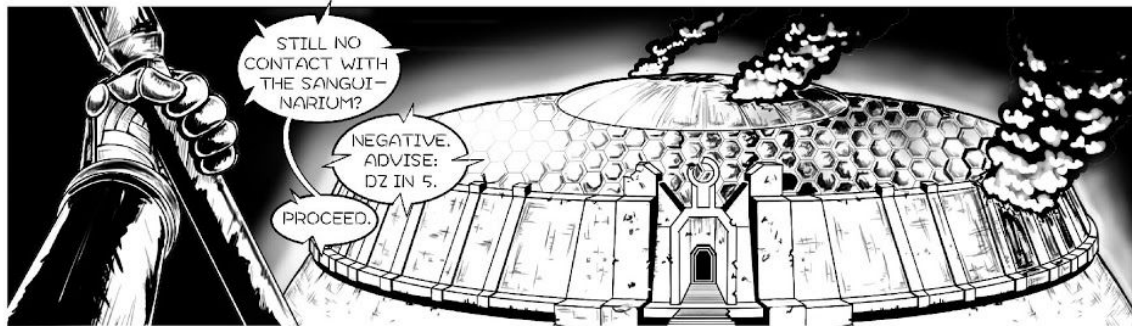
they were begging or daring the lightning to touch them.

“It does once you’ve lost something.”

0: The Medusa



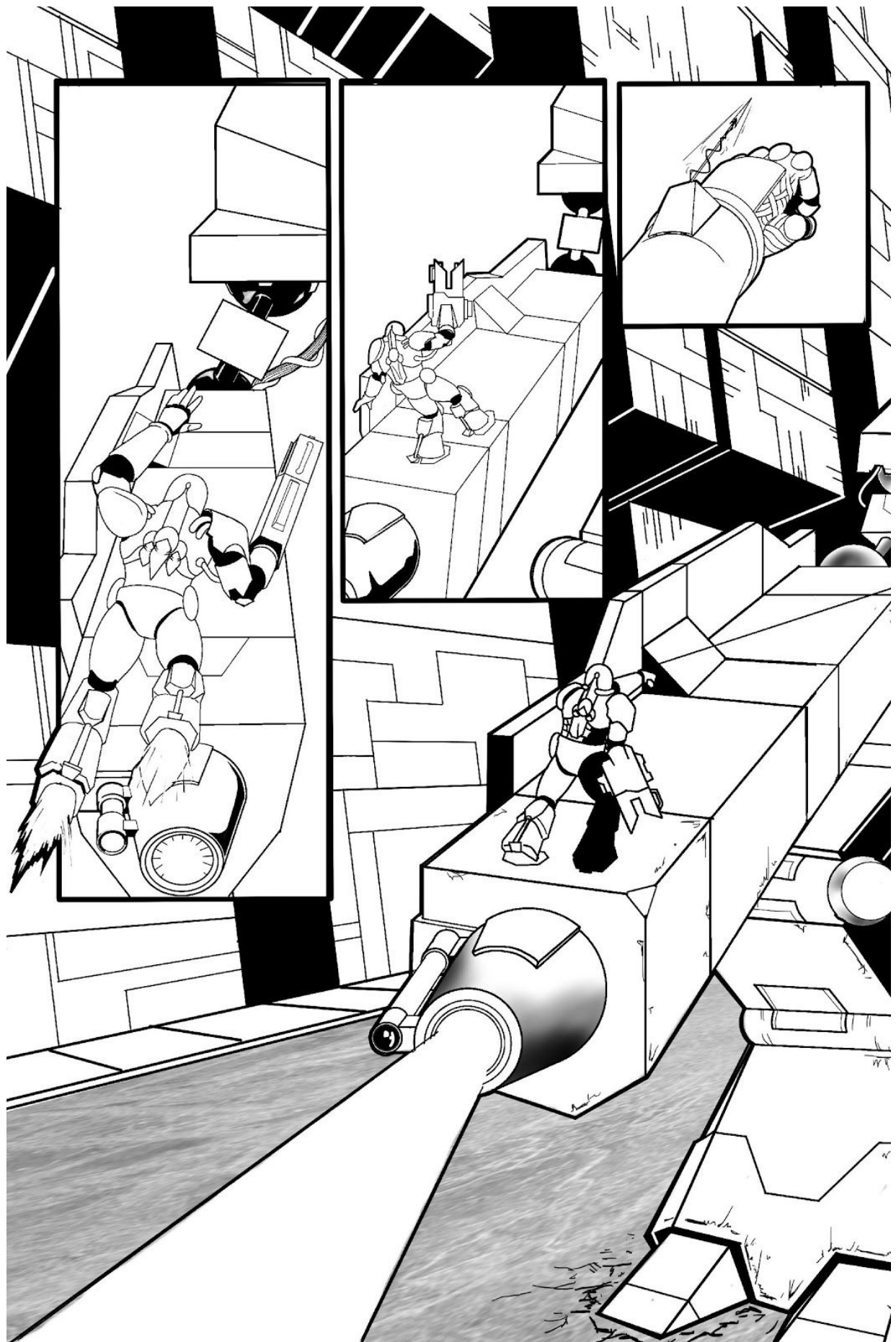


















ENNEAS,  
HAILING  
DIANA...

PILOT IS DEAD.  
WHAT'S YOUR POINT,  
6174?

READING YOU,  
CAPTAIN...

YOU WANT  
TO WEAR  
THIS THING?

CAPTAIN,  
THIS THING  
IS STILL  
INTACT.

HE'S DEAD.  
I'M NOT.

ENEMY GIVES  
ME A GIFT, I'LL NOT  
THROW IT OUT.

Art & Design

## II: Cassandra Laughs Too

All the talk about moving in together, all those months were faster than the move itself. Ruth initiated it by accident. Slipped up once and said “when” instead of “if,” and Aaron liked the way the word sounded. The night before the furniture arrived, the two filled an empty apartment with words like “ours” instead of “yours.” An alien vocabulary for the two of them. The first night was sweaty and dark. Aaron’s battery-powered lanterns set in the corners. Ruth’s heavy quilt spread across the hardwood.

“This thing is hideous,” Aaron said with a mouthful of pizza. It tasted the way the air smelled: packing dust. He had ordered it special for Ruth.

“My grandmother made this for me,” Ruth said painfully. Her cheeks were full of pizza, and Aaron tried his best to take her seriously. “She stitched this for me on her deathbed, Aaron.” Her chewing filled the silence, and at length, the *clop-schlop* of it gave her away. She burst into laughter.

“I bought it at flea-market,” she confessed.

“What’d you do with the body?”

Ruth stared at him.

“The body it came with,” Aaron said. “Only reason someone would buy this thing would be to store a dead body before hurling it into the sea.”

Ruth dragged a finger across the cheese-less pizza and wiped the tasteless sauce on his

forehead.

“It’s pretty, you dick!”

“*You’re* pretty.” He said it with the cadence of insult. She kissed him with more sound than lips. Ruth’s eyes wandered across the room. The lantern’s white halo made the ceiling seem vaulted and cathedral like.

“Is this your—the studio then?” she asked.

“Good a place as any—you want to put your books in here?”

“In here, with you?”

“Where else, Charles?” That was his pet name for Ruth. She couldn’t remember when it started, but she knew what he meant by it. He always called her Charles when he thought she was being stupid.

“Are you crying, pretty lady?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Ruth snorted, sucking back the tears with noticeable hitches in her shoulders. She sneezed: packing dust.

“Because you don’t like my grandma’s quilt!” Aaron laughed and Ruth felt the lie in her chest. She lied to herself: she wasn’t ready to be honest. He can’t know, she thought. Not yet. *I*

*don't even know anymore. It was hard work forgetting it all.* She'd lie to him then. Cover that broken body and hurl it into the wine dark sea.

"We can put your horses in here, too," Aaron offered.

"I have a lot of them," Ruth said. She filled the room with bookshelves in her mind. *Two—maybe three. Literature on the window side. Graphic novels by the door. Breyer mares running across the top.* Anything to keep her mind occupied.



Ruth battled the stairs one at a time. Each arm was laced through the ringlets of awkwardly weighted bags, and she leveraged each step by swinging them as a counterweight. No reason to make the trip more than once, she thought. Her knees and elbows knocked against the walls. "Shit. Damn it."

"Do you need help?" Aaron asked. He waited for her at the top of the stairs. Aaron always asked if he could help.

"Nope—I got it." And Ruth always refused. She kissed him on the stair landing and shuffled past him, careful not to bend her haul. She dragged her collection behind her like the wake of a ship, unloading it on the bed with a pronounced grunt.

"What all did you buy?" Aaron asked. "We haven't even unpacked the kitchen yet."

"You've got pencil all over your face." She ignored his hovering, and began to unpack

her things methodically.

Aaron rubbed his face, looked at his fingers, and then rubbed his face again.

“What are you doing?” he asked, holding open the door that wanted to close behind her. Ruth placed a thick sheet of cardboard across her grandma’s quilt. She pulled a pair of scissors from the bag before deciding the cardboard lay slightly crooked. She reset it. And again. As she emptied the bags she ticked items off her list.

~~cardboard, scissors, aluminum foil, tape~~

She’d told him it was her system. Kept her sane, she said. If she didn’t write it down, meant it never happened.

“Do you have any Xacto blades?” Ruth asked.

“Yeah.” Aaron hurried back to the studio to find them and Ruth followed after him when he took too long to come back. The path through the kitchen was choked with boxes marked: ~~tack, boots, old pictures~~. She managed the path perfectly. Huntress. When she found him in the studio, he was reexamining his sketches.

“You think she’ll make out okay?” he asked, pointing to vitruvian diagrams of Ruth’s characters. The studio walls were papered with more of them. All characters and creatures Ruth had conjured that meant something once. Enneas was her favorite one so far, and she hung from every surface—pinned to the wall like a specimen. Portraits. Exploded view of her armor. He’d seen right through her, she realized. Read her words and turned it into something real. *It was*



*always real. It was just mine. Only mine.* The ink was still drying on the Bristol board: **Part 1:**  
**The Medusa.**

“Xacto blades?”

“Shit—sorry.” He rifled through pencil cups and ink washes for a fresh blade. She found the list she’d forgotten. Left it underfoot of a model elephant he’d named Ruth. He never played anymore, and she wondered what happened to all the soldiers that marched with her once.

*new meter, test strips, glucose—cherry*

“Here you go.” Aaron handed her the blade, point first. “Are you sure I can’t help?” Ruth took the blade carelessly and hurried back to the bedroom, tripping on a box marked: **Nimrod’s Arrows.**

“Alright—what are you doing, Charles?” Aaron was watching her from the door frame, careful not to cross the threshold. Ruth struck down another item on her list.

~~xacto blades~~

“J’ewel’ll shee.” She used her teeth to cut a length of tape. Aaron watched her for a minute, curious. Maybe concerned.

“Maybe try the blade instead of your teeth?” The words came out laced with laughter. Something like doubt. She measured a length of cardboard in her mind. Used her wingspan to compare the tape with the cardboard.

“Do you want a tape measure, Charles?”

“No! Now go—it’s a surprise,” she said. Aaron raised his hands as a sign of surrender. He left without a word, but they shared a smile before she closed the door in his face. He spoke through it.

“You’re not wallpapering are you? If you’re wallpapering, might I advise against yellow?”

Ruth laughed.

“Fuck off,” she said.



Ruth covered his eyes with her hands. They were shaking at the edges of her fingers.

“Annnddd...open!” She tore her hands away from his eyes and sat on her grandma’s quilt.

“It’s a camera obscura...” she whispered. The bedroom was dark, the windows blocked out by the wide sheet of cardboard. She had taped it over the window, foiled the edges where the light bled through, and cut a pinhole through the center. All the light of creation flooded through it. The university skyline was cast across the high spaces of the bedroom. Upside down. Filtered through the dull light of the evening sun. Like stained glass.

“Isn’t it awesome?” Ruth asked. She pressed her palms together and squeezed her hands

between her knees. She was close to giggling.

“You turned our bedroom into a camera obscura...” Aaron was startled.

“Don’t you like it?”

“I love it, Charles.”

Ruth stood to kiss him. She hated the smoking but loved when he tasted like it. *We’ll look like a Picasso when we fuck, now. The clock tower fits his face. But he’s hard to kiss in this light.* Her lips fell on the *XII* that folded around his. He was waiting there for her. She gripped a tuft of his hair, forcing his head down but he was already moving that way. Ruth shuddered. *Yes.*



Ruth thought the drug store harnessed some sanitary white light that oddly made her feel sick. A dingy, humming thing that managed to complement the medicinal smell in the air. She skirted the cashier—*don’t have time to talk with Marge* . Always too friendly, she thought.

Straight to the pharmacy where Derrick—*no, Dominic? D...something—D something* always used her name to say hello.

“Ruth—back again,” D something said. She looked for a nametag but D something didn’t wear one. Had a sticker instead that read “Ask me about Flu-Shots.” She wondered what she’d wear if a sticker had to sum up her occupation . *Ask me about literature. Ask me about*

*French. No. I don't remember enough of it. Ask me about the patriarchy.*

*"Hey...you. I called about my prescription?" Ask me about comics. Fuck it—ask me about Cthulhu. Oh—no! Horses! Ask me about horses!*

*"Yes, ma'am. I'm getting it now. Be just a minute."*

*"Okay." Ask me about accountability. Fuck, I need to eat.*

*TP, shampoo—little bottles*

*pens—blue, black, red*

*glucose—cherry flavor.*

*Peppermints for Sophie ♥*

Ruth rounded the aisles, stopping at the "As Seen On TV" products. She grimaced at the knee straps and elbow straps and those back straps that Shaq used to sell. Knock-off sodas. Knock-off candy. Peppermints for Sophie ♥. Cheap toys. *Wonder if Aaron needs this for his game. I'll wait.* Christmas lights. *For his studio! He'll hate them—basic bitch. Who cares. Ask me about yoga pants and pumpkin spiced lattes and neck scarfs.*

She ran her fingers along the magazines, noticing they transitioned into dime novels about Amish women fucking faceless cowboys. *Ask me about metonymy.*

She was too close to the register by now. Marge could probably see her, and then she'd be trapped in another polite conversation. She leered over the aisle toward the register. Marge

wasn't working today. They'd hired someone. He didn't say anything. She didn't know how long he'd been watching her.

He was stone. Just watching her. There was no guilt in him at all. He'd forced it all inside her.

*Sixteen again. Fingers raked and ripped. Desperate, clumsy things. No—I said no. No! Don't! Helpless. The stars from the bed of a truck. Blurred. The rise up and down. Up and down. Six times. Sick—Sickening—Sickened—just waiting for it to be over. Six times, up and down, up and down. Finished—drive home—silent. And I kissed him after.*

“Customer pick up.”

*Wounded. You should have known.*

“Customer pick up.”

*Stupid girl. Broken.*



Aaron was bent over his drafting table, lost in his work. His pen scratched and clawed across a woman's face. She was terrified of something he hadn't drawn yet. Something lurking just beyond the edges of the Bristol board. Ruth knew what it was. She wrote it. And she wasn't sure she understood it like she once did.

*It's cliché—what the hell was I thinking? I can't end it with a ticking clock. Might as well*

*be a mirror catalogue: scars, cellulite, hand graces protruding belly—nothing but metonymy. Nothing but a body—cliché. He’s staring at me. What’s he thinking?*

“What are you thinking?” Ruth asked.

“Nothing.” Aaron told her once that a man’s natural state of thought is nothing. Blank. Void.

“I believe that.” Ruth turned away from him. Cold.

He said a woman’s mind was like all the stars in that void. A matrix of gravity and light. Bending and folding around the edges of time. Ruth said she’d love to think as he does—not thinking. *What would that be like? Lonely, I bet. Cold. Silent. Like the sea, maybe. I’d drown in all that nothing.*

“I don’t know,” Ruth said, pacing. “Ending the chapter with a ticking clock?” She clicked her thumbnail against her mug. Arrhythmic at first. He looked back to his drawing and gingerly stabbed at all those horrified faces rendered in grayscale. The pen fell from his hand, rolling along the surface of the drafting table. *Ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky*. The guard caught it before it could hit the floor. *Ticky-ticky-ticky-kloc*.

*Cliché.*

She heard the groan from his stool as he stood and the shuffle of socks past a tower of stacked boxes. Already her boxes were becoming furniture. *The important bits are done at least: the books have a home.*

Press-wood bookshelves filled her studio and made her collection look grand. All alphabetized by author. Organized by genre. She filled them with all her favorite stories about women swooning on the moors. Dying of broken hearts. Each of them were beaten and scarred with Ruth's consistent margin notes:

metonymy

victim "fallen woman" = antonomasia

fucking Patriarchy

uxorious—no feminine equivalent

Mad women in the attic. Blighted stars all. And Ruth loved them all for what they were: cliché. *Cliché cliché cliché*. As she looked around his studio, she wasn't sure what that word meant anymore. *Stuffed in boxes like coffins. Tombstones shackle the soul in place.*

*Cliché isn't something we're tired of. It's something we're tired of hearing.*

*Once victim, always victim. That's the law.*

Aaron staggered back into the studio sipping loudly from a mug. He set his cup down atop a box labeled **Hail Satan**. He nudged the box. It breathed out heavy, clanking noises.

"What's even in here?" Ruth heard him but was far away. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Far away. He sipped his coffee again. She clamped the book shut.

"Anyway—the clock—I think we need to change it," she said.

He watched her lips fold under her teeth, listened to her fingers play atonal music against her ceramic mug. She was somewhere out in the universe; lost in space in search of Hesperia. *He told me it was like watching stars being born. But it's like a crashing wave. Up and down. Up and down. Rise again. Fall again. But I'd drown in all that nothing.*

“Why?” Aaron asked.

“Why what?”

“Why no clock?” He wriggled past the boxes on his way to his desk and touched Ruth’s hips as he passed her. He didn’t notice her flinch.

“Because, it’s cliché and—I don’t know—Enneas shouldn’t be dictated by time.” *Some days you just can't get rid of a bomb* . “I feel like she’s better than that.” Aaron sipped his coffee again.

“Aaron—you’re drinking your coffee *at* me.” He turned on his stool without a word. They sat in silence, their pens screaming in chorus with one another. Aaron crossed through more failed panels. Ruth:

*Read: Lit Crit chapters 6,7 Tess chapter: 14*

*Revise: Ennead Part II (clock doesn't work)*

*Doctor: new meter, test strips, pump*

“I don’t know,” Ruth said. She was answering something else in her mind. Some new



doubt, some new question that no one had asked her. *She's not supposed to be just another blighted star. She's not a victim—you're not supposed to say victim—she's a survivor.* “I don’t want—I don’t want this to be just another story.”

Aaron turned. Ruth hadn’t moved from the window. She was watching her toes wriggle in her gladiator sandals. *Like the lumbering dead rising from the wine dark banks of Styx.*

“So—no clock then.” She heard him but it was white noise. Like waves crashing. *He can’t swim. He never learned how. I think I’d drown in all that nothing. Better to stay on shore with all the old men missing limbs and the widows missing... Widows walk the widow’s walk.*

“I don’t know—no—I don’t know.”

Feed Sophie ♥

Aaron sighed and scrubbed his greasy fingers through his hair. “You’re the writer,” he said, resigned. His smile was bruised with gray and black fingerprints, his face streaked in a way that resembled war paint. *War with something leviathan. Something you could destroy but never defeat.* Ruth licked her fingers and scrubbed at the war paint. Her fingers were calloused from all the needle pricks, her palms clammy. She kissed him and sat atop a box facing her bookshelves. She’d marked it: *The ghosts of dead gods*. Aaron cut a new page of Bristol board to shape. The cutting and biting of the blade stretched out across their silence. *I’d like a garden, I think.*

store: seeds: Azalea, Anemone, ~~sage~~, Violets.

“What if we keep the clock?” Aaron asked. “We just give it a twist. Something the reader doesn’t expect.”

“Yeah.” *It just didn’t work. Too cliché. She’s supposed to be a warrior—a strong woman—strongwoman—master of her own destiny. The world isn’t something that happens to her—it’s something she owns, something she can control. God! It’s fucking hot.*

Ruth couldn't read her list anymore.

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“Did you hear me?” Aaron was mouthing the edges of his pen. He was desperate for a cigarette. *So weak that he can’t go five minutes—*

“Ruth?”

“What?”

“When was the last time you ate?”

“I ate already.”

“When was it?”

"I don't remember." *I don't need him.*

“Let’s get you some food. Where’s your meter?”

*“I said I’m fine.” I do need him. I need him—what does that mean? I hate that—I hate that I need him.*

Ruth stood immobile, watching the autumn scatter the summer to the winds. Her eyes couldn’t settle on one aspect of her reflection. She watched as Aaron took up her fingers and pressed a needle to them.

*His hands are filthy. Schtick. I don’t feel them anymore. Too many sticks. I don’t even have fingerprints anymore. All those ridges and valleys, all that DNA coding, all that physiology slaughtered—death by a thousand cuts.*

“Heh!” She stood petrified, laughing at her own reflection. *Cliché.*

*No fingerprint left. Might as well have never had them at all. Born as no one. As nothing at all. Jane Doe.*

“You know, Aaron, I think I’d drown in all that nothing.”

Deet-deet-deet. Deet-deet-deet. Deet-deet-deet.

“Jesus, Ruth. Come on—in the kitchen—let’s go.”

*It must be low.*

“Fine—wait here then.”

*He worries too much. Uxorious. There’s no male equivalent.*

“Come on—I need you to eat this.” *It tastes horrible.*

“No, no—the whole thing, Ruth. Ruth—the whole thing—come on. Goddamn it. Ruth? Can you understand me? Do you know where you are?”

*It's all just white noise. I can hear it. Like the ocean. I can see it but it's all fog. Fog on the ocean. Leviathan deep. The widow walks the widow's walk. Chiasmus. He always worries too much.*

“Uxorious.”



Ruth could smell her own sweat. It cut along the sticky ridges of her chest as water cuts through a vale. She sucked on another glucose packet: orange flavor; a sad, synthetic thing brewed up by chemists who must have only ever *read* about oranges. Her face burned and she couldn't know if it was from the seizure or embarrassment.

“I'm so sorry, Aaron.” She could feel tears in her eyes. Embarrassment then.

“What are you sorry about, pretty lady?” He pressed a cold compress to her chest. The shock of it hurt in her mind.

“I don't know—I'm really sorry.” *It shouldn't have happened. I should have seen it coming. Stupid. I hate that I have to care about it. I hate that it's part of me.*

“Do you want to sleep?”

“No.” *It's alien—not alien—it's me—it's my body and my body has betrayed me. Just*

*something else in me that's betrayed me. I don't even have fingerprints for fuck sake—hacked off and sold—no—stolen.*

“Why are you crying? It's okay, pretty lady. Everything's okay.”

“I feel...broken!” Ruth said. The words came forced, well known but never said.

“You're not broken, Ruth. You have diabetes. Lots of people have diabetes. It's nothing to be ashamed of—“

“Not just fucking diabetes, Aaron!”

“What then?”

“I just...I hate that I have no control. I don't even own my own body.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don't fucking get it.”

“Tell me, then!”

“I don't want your help, Aaron.” *I'm not going to be your burden.* “I'm not a damsel for you to rescue.”

“I'm sorry—I just wanted to—”

“Don't. It's my problem.”

“No—it's *our* problem, Ruth. You're not broken, pretty lady.”

“You don’t know...”

“Know what?”

*Like a wave. Up and down. Up and down.*



The evening was cut-up and scattered across the clouds. Purple and blue bruises. Orange and pink wounds at the edges. The moon just watched it all from the far side of the green hills. The university’s horses grazed up there.

Ruth fed them three times a week. Vacation, she called it. Aaron hated it when she’d do it at night. Said it was dangerous. *Dangerous was lying in bed just waiting to feel it all again. Sixteen again.* And all that skyline hanging upside down above her. Cathedral light and that mote of packing dust that mimicked sunbeams. *Just like the oranges—life for someone who only read about it. Jane Doe.*

She rounded the rings and parked by the tack room. The horses all knew her car and trotted down the hills in a blur of painted light. Like a mistake someone had tried to color over. Palimpsests. All braying and crying. She shook off the tears and turned off the engine.

“Hello, ponies,” she whispered. Chaucer forced Socrates and Biscuit to yield. He poked his dumb grey face through the fence and waited for Ruth to bring him the peppermint candies he wasn’t supposed to eat.

She offered him a peppermint, and when he took it she pressed her face against his, blowing hot air against his muzzle. The candy cracked and popped in his toothy mouth.

*Never made sense to me: Horses the children of Poseidon. Horses don't swim and Poseidon doesn't ride. Athena might have been better. No. Fuck her—poor Medusa. Artemis. The only real goddess if ever there was one. Ask me about man-made religion.*

“Sophie Girl!” Ruth called. She never came right away. Ruth always had to find her in her stall where she waited impatiently. She couldn't walk anymore. *Feet all gone from Cushing's. Only half a paddock now, too. All boxed in and she finds a smaller box to hide herself in.*

“Hi, Sophie Girl!” Ruth breathed against Sophie's face. Sophie snorted in reply and Ruth chuckled at her stubbornness. She was old and tired. Unwilling to admit she was happy to see Ruth. If for no other reason than to be fed. *Ask me about nothing at all.*

~~Feed Sophie~~ ♥

“It's very good to see you again, Ms. Sophie.” *At least she's not lying down again. Wish I could ride her. Feet are already at an 8—she'll be lame at 10. I can't ride her. I can't even take her around the ring anymore. She'll be lame soon.*

“Not lame—you're not lame, are you Ms. Sophie?” Ruth began to braid Sophie's mane before deciding she didn't have time to do it all, and it was all or nothing.

Ruth threw a flake of timothy hay into the feeder and Sophie reached out her neck and

picked at it with a mouth that was all incisors now. *I'll give you two flakes—you've earned it. Since you can't even graze anymore.*

Ruth ran her hands down Sophie's back, touching her dock as she left her behind to feed. She walked the perimeter of Sophie's paddock, kicking over clumps of dirt where the harrow chains had ripped out the grass that once grew there.

Ruth balanced herself on the rotten planks of the fence and read while the light lasted.

#### ~~Foss~~ chapter: 14

The familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself.

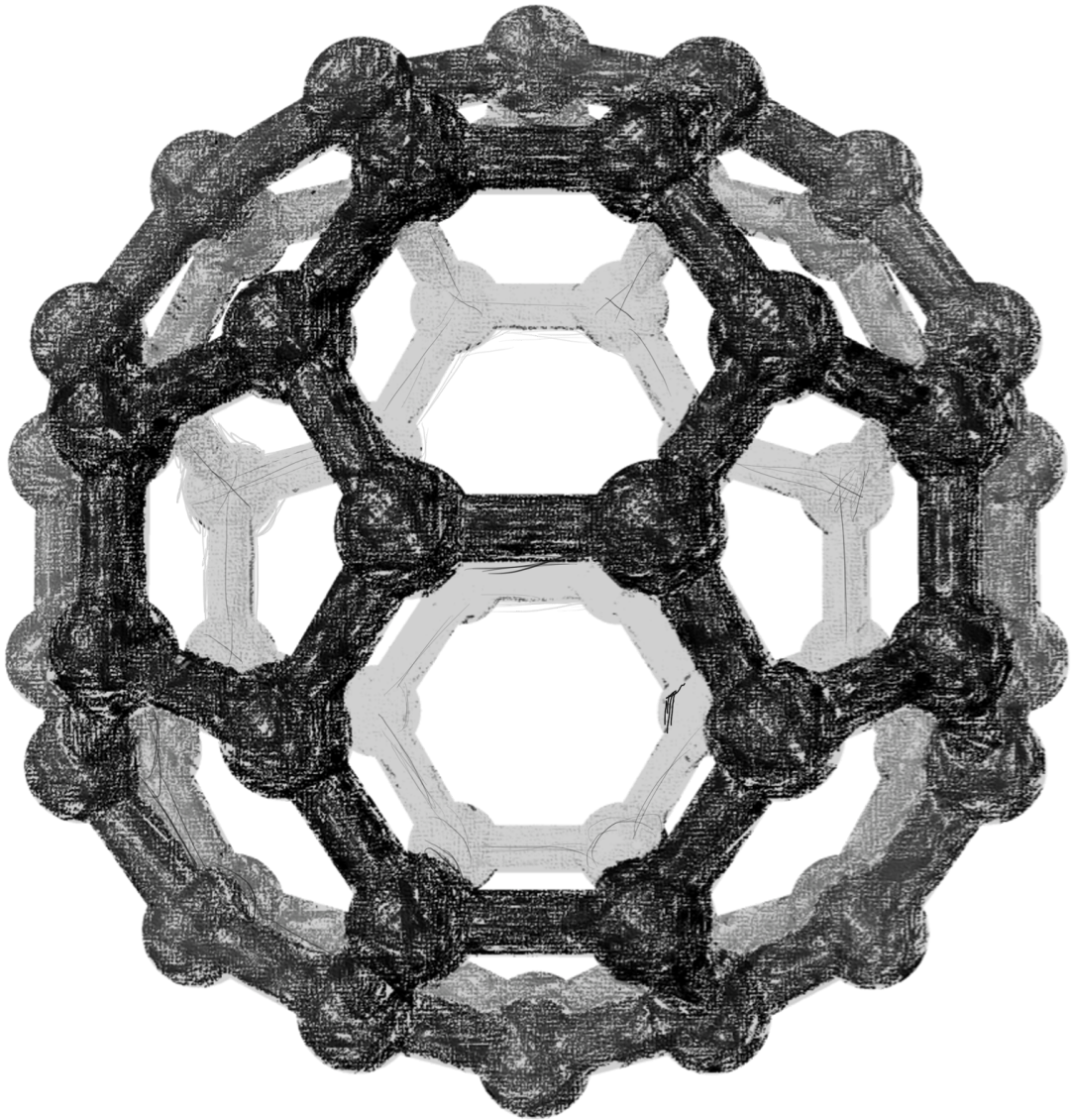
The night metastasized and Ruth began her walk back to Sophie's stall. She passed the tractor that had scoured Sophie's field. The harrow was up-righted and the chains hung over the fence like a gallows. Thick hanks of grass clung to the rusted loops. Ruth watched Sophie turn out and walk into the evening with careful steps. Her withers hitched with each step, her legs bowed out. Sophie laid down before the harrow and snorted in the dust. She craned her neck and pecked out the bits of grass that clung to the chains.

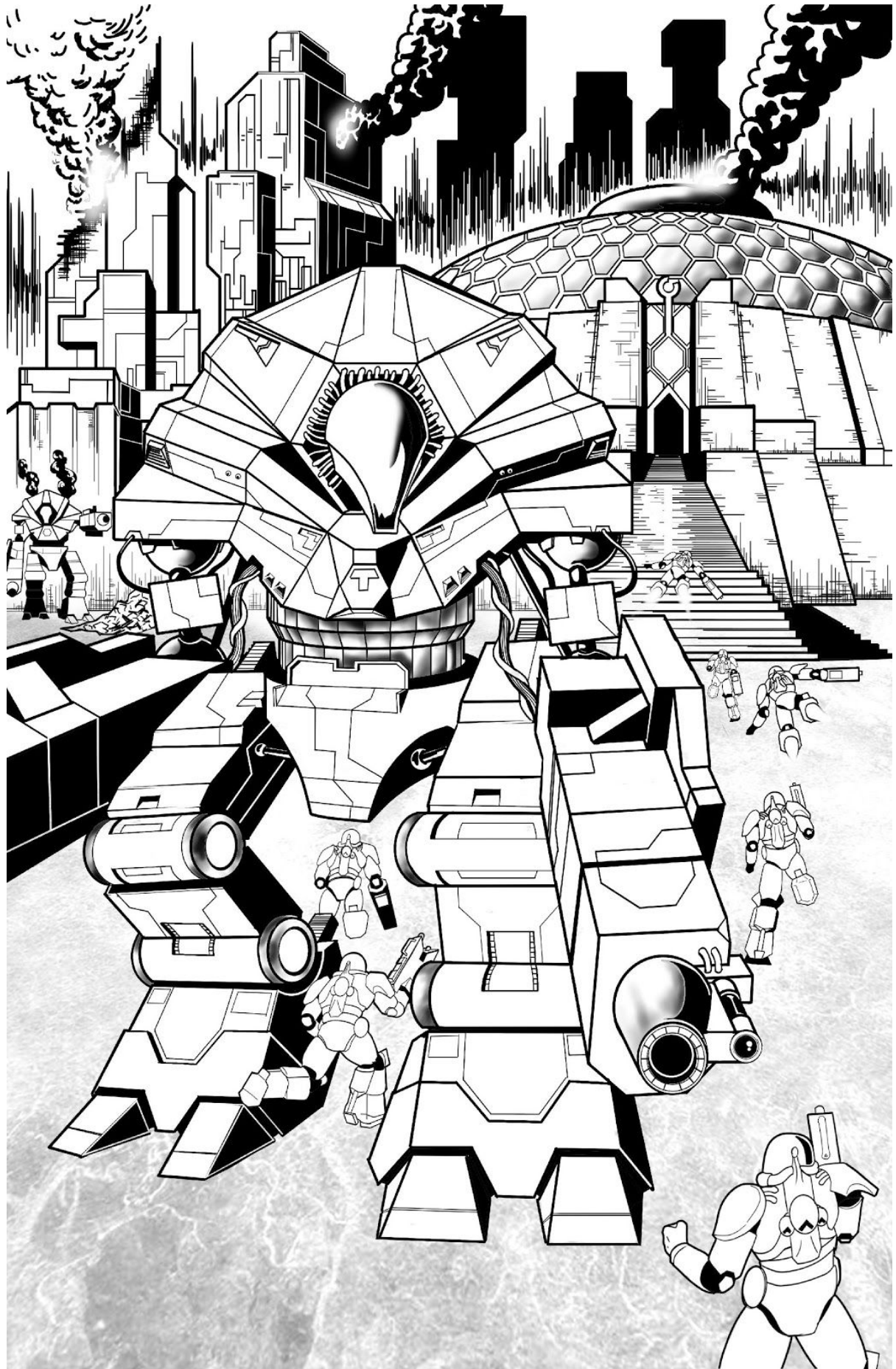
Ruth knelt beside Sophie and brushed her forelock out of her eyes.

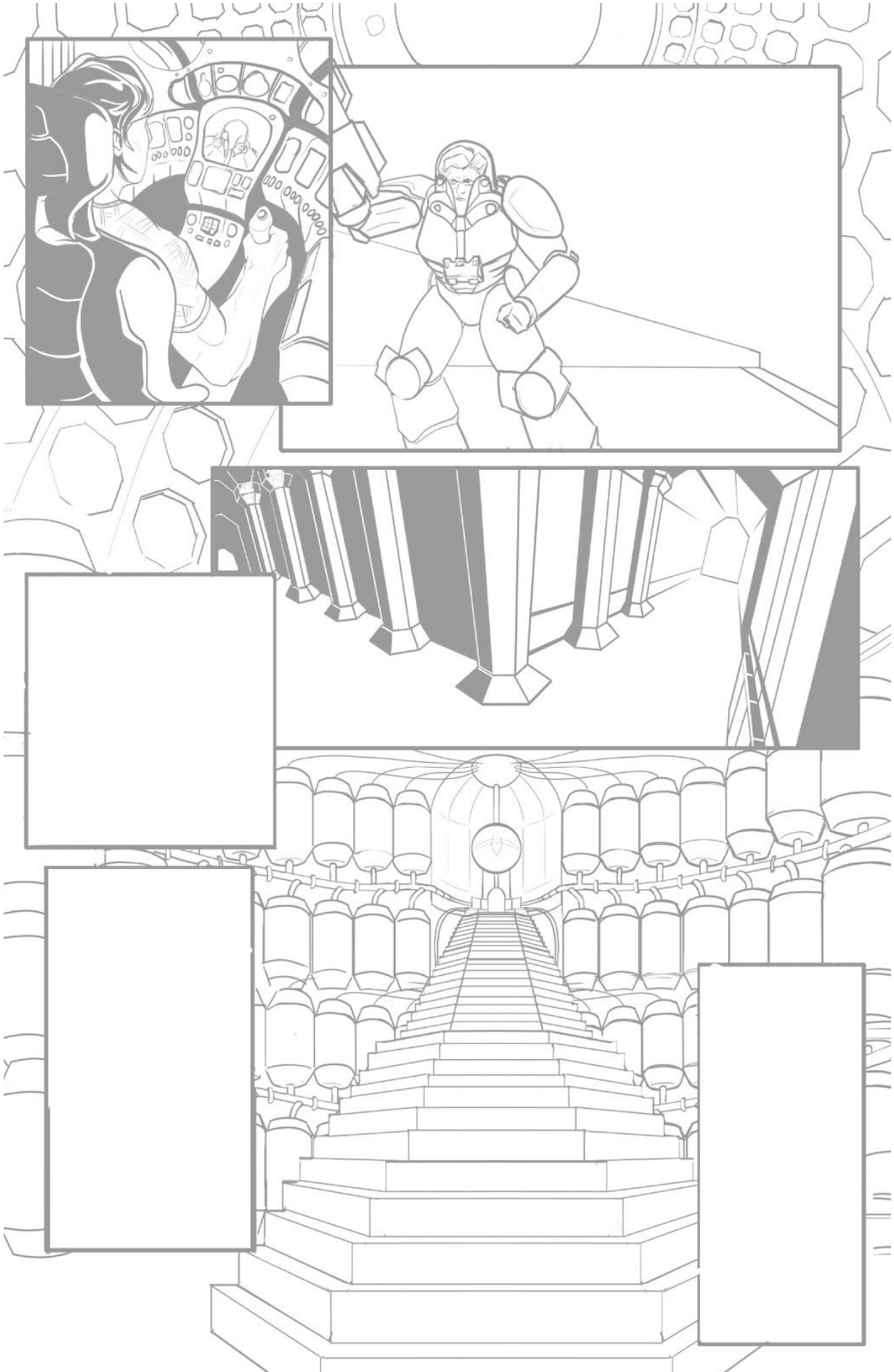
"I know, Ms. Sophie," she said. "I know."

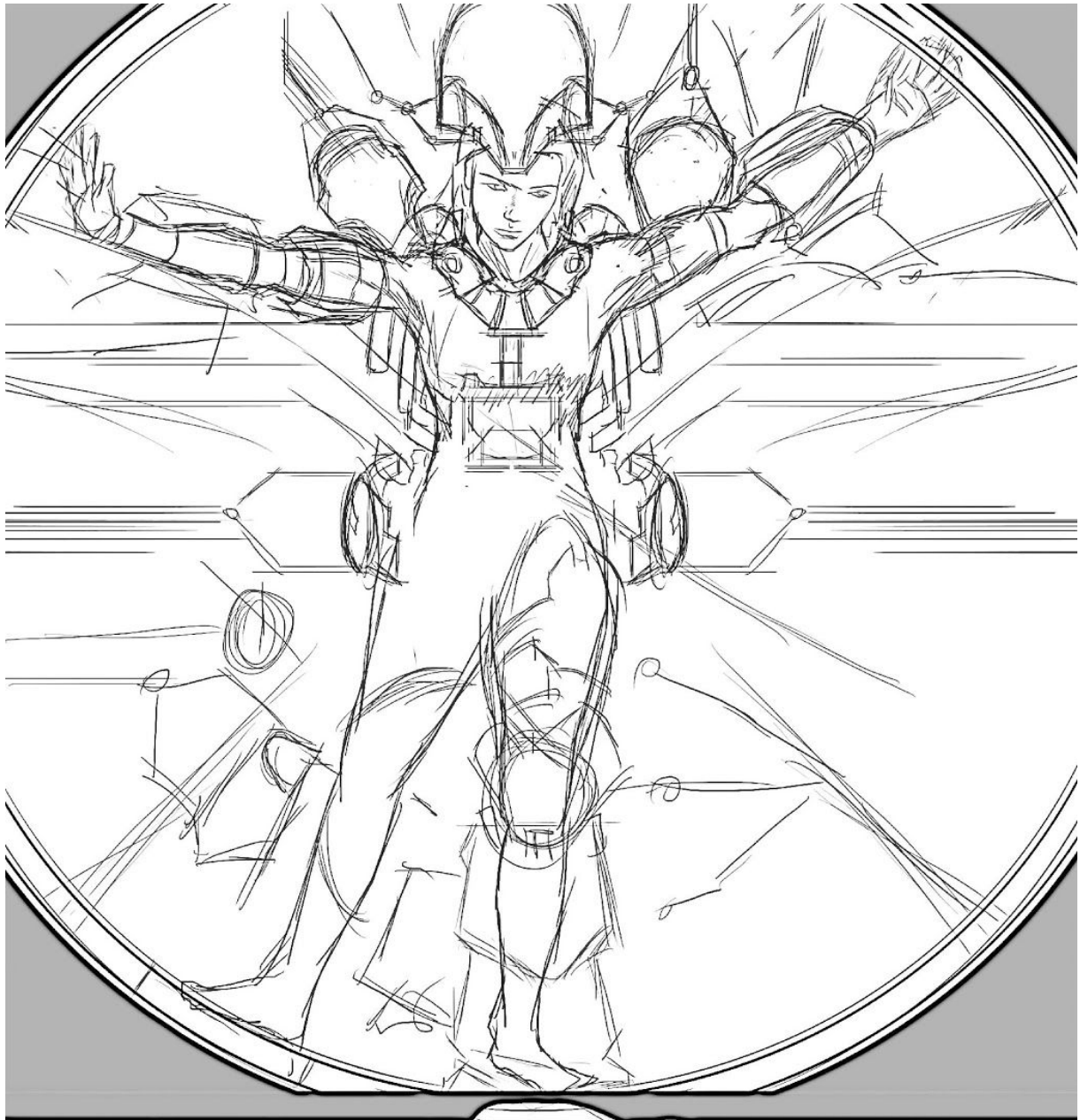


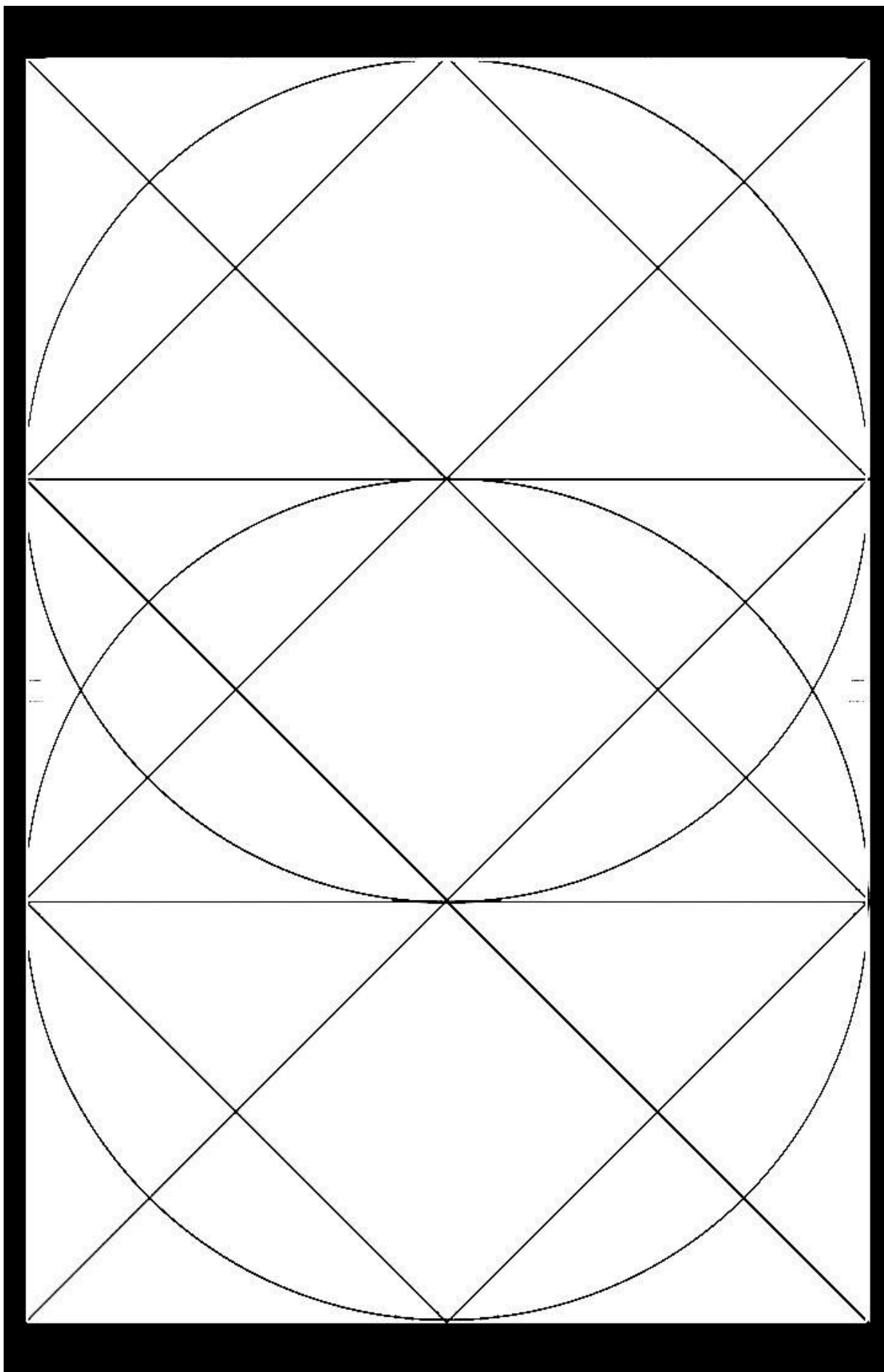
0: The Abyss











### III: Phosphenes

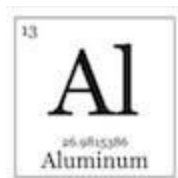
Brennan began those mornings before his alarm. He found he needed it less and less after turning forty. And after forty-five, he found he woke up a good half-hour before it. He never used it though—the time. It was his and he watched it fade as the morning sharpened through the blinds. He used the last six minutes of his night to watch his belly rise and fall, sloughing off the grey sheets as a snake writhes out of its old skin. *Inexorable*. He was hardly conscious of his toes wriggling under the covers, hypnotized by the friction of wool socks on two-hundred thread count sheets.

His alarm was a cello sonatina—something generic he couldn't recognize anymore and when it played he rubbed his eyes as if it had woken him just the same as it once did.

His father had perfected morning. Drilled it into Brennan: “tempus fugit so use it,” he'd say. Shit, shave, shower: ten minutes. Two eggs, poached: three minutes. Two English muffins: thirty seconds. Cheese. American. Cheese. American. The cheese melted while the coffee brewed. The toaster popped when the eggs were done. That part always made his father jump. Said, “It sounded like Panama,” but he never explained that. Then he'd say, “The trick to poached eggs isn't the speed of the swirl, but the constancy of it. Too much and the yolk goes rogue. Too little and the yolk won't run the way you want it to.” *Stagnation*.

Brennan stirred the briny water and the copper pot sang like a spouting bowl. Aluminum was too industrial.





He'd read recently that it was linked to Alzheimer's. *But what isn't? Triskaidekaphobia. Melts at: 1,085°C. No—that's copper...damn it. Google. Melting point of Aliminum (did you mean aluminum?)...660.3°C—that's right—god, I'm losing—Kaklink! Sounds like Panama.*

Brennan sat across from a pair of pressed slacks he'd draped over a chair-back just as he always did. He never wore them until after breakfast. *"Keeps the crease, avoids the grease."*

The wood under him was cold on his bare thighs, and his fat toes ached already in his leather shoes. He could feel them wriggling against the buttery leather, and it played to his nerves as he puzzled out the Sudoku he couldn't finish yesterday.

He crossed through several of his answers before cutting the yolks and then watched as all his work leaked onto the plate. Rivulets of yellow chasing the imperfections and ridges in the clay. Brennan hoped that a human hand played a part in those imperfections. But he knew better. Machine-made by machine-operated machines. The yellow river found its path.

He pressed his fingers to his eyes and rubbed them for want of sleep. Yellow phosphenes emerged in the man-made darkness, and Brennan wondered why that kind of pain was enjoyable. Why there was light when there was no light. His breakfast had flooded the plate.

He emptied the massacred eggs in the trash and waited for the drippy yellow ropes to follow after. Brennan rinsed the plate twice before deciding it was clean enough to put away in

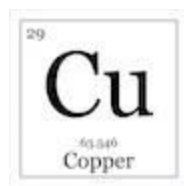
the dishwasher and then washed his hands twice before deciding he was clean enough to wear his pressed slacks.

In the closet, there were five blazers—all varying temperatures of black. He had a cadre of ties and matching shirts that others had bought for him in a decades' worth of Christmases. As a boy, he watched his father dress every morning and marveled at the precision of it, the purpose and design. Once he'd tried to mimic the ritual and barreled down the stairs after his father, drowning in a wool suit and choking on a tie he'd fashioned around his neck like shoe laces. Brennan chuckled, remembering how hard his father whipped him for it.

He thought about the man's suit, how it had changed over the century. *We add buttons, cut buttons—hide them, expose them. Accentuated the tie, close the tie—frame it with lapels wide and thin—they're still funerary robes. The tailor may do as he likes so long as we look sharp when we visit the dead* . *Impractical* . *No wonder mom hated them* . He rubbed his eyes again, wishing now that he hadn't thrown away his breakfast.

“Choo yate, doh,” he said, chewing on his toothbrush. He focused special attention on his lower teeth—all baby teeth that grew in straight and then never fell out like they should have.

All those quarters he could have had. *Used to be made of silver. Mostly copper now.*



660.3°C

Cynthia's wood burning hung above the mirror. A sickly chunk of bleached wood, cut



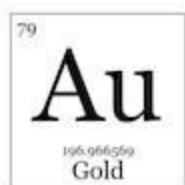
through with hitched words:

*Be Sincere*

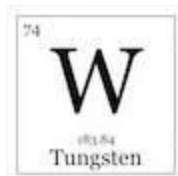
He lied when she asked if he still had it. It was so absurd, he had to keep it. *How else would one live? Even when she lied, she was sincere about it. And when I tried to be sincere, I never could be.*

Brennan breathed out heavily, testing the strength of the buttons on his shirt. None of them gave, and he decided the morning was as finished as it could be. He kept his rings in the cigar box his father brought back from Grenada.

Index: Dad's.



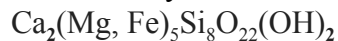
Middle: Edge.



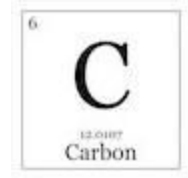
Ring: Ouroboros



Pinky: Jade.



Cynthia's:



He'd kept her ring too. Left it there with all his change and old receipts for dry cleaning. He told himself he kept it just in case, but he didn't know what the case would be. Whatever he'd planned for the thing, the moment was gone. His belly grumbled, and he thought of the singing pot.

Brennan cracked his thick fingers with all the rings in place, patted his pockets to be sure he had all his things—*keys, wallet, phone, pen, Sudoku*—and then left for work after checking his pockets once more.



The walk to campus was thankfully short. He sweated through his thick wool suit. The rings made his fingers itch. The heat of 150 bodies in an auditorium didn't help.

“Dr. Johnston—did you get my email?” Ruth asked. Brennan noticed they always used his title when they wanted something from him. And she did—*they always do. They don't just want your love—they want your time. All those unquantifiable granules of sand. They're hers now. Malevolent “They.”* Otherwise the interrogative was really just a demand to be noticed for what they did or didn't do the night before.

“Yes.”

“Okay—well I'm sorry I missed class. I was sick.”

“Okay.”

“I have a doctor’s note, if you want.”

“Okay.”

He cued up the presentation and as he watched Ruth reseal herself, he could feel how cynical he’d become over the years. They weren’t students to him anymore. A sea of mouth-breathers fogging the surface of an LCD screen. Scrolling further and further down timelines and memories for data the internet let them forget. His colleagues complained often about the considerable change in their students over the course of twenty years. He told himself he’d never be like that and for twenty years it never really bothered him—twenty years wasn’t even measurable in geological time. *Be sincere.*

The lecture was boring even for Brennan. He’d given it a dozen times, and he could hear in his voice how trivial he thought it all was.

79 AD. Mount Vesuvius. Pompeii and Herculaneum. Pyroclastic flow. 700km/hour. 1000°C—hot enough to melt Copper. All they could do was watch. *Inexorable.*

“Now, we know today how Vesuvius formed.” Brennan used his fists to demonstrate how “the African plate subducted beneath the Eurasian plate causing pressure and heat to build below the surface.” Brennan changed the slide behind him but he couldn’t move fast enough to avoid eclipsing his presentation. He squinted at the light above, a solid white lense that forced all those zeroes and all those ones into what Richard Cosway called Venus and Mars. “The Romans, though,” he continued, “They believed that Vulcan was angry at Venus for cheating on him.”

He cycled lazily through the photos from his dissertation on Pompeii. Paved streets. A

lawyer's office. Pottery shop. Cave canem. Et cetera. Plaster casts of the dead. Huddled together in fear. Waiting for Vulcan to claim them. Faceless faces. Phallic graffiti.

"So—what does this tell us?" he asked the class.

The class languished in the silence he made. They always did after seeing it. Ruth raised her hand and Brennan ignored her.

"It tells us that dick jokes are still funny two-thousand years later." The class laughed and Brennan could feel the muscles in his face force a smile. Like heat burning muscle into rigor. The students stood as one and began to leave. *They don't need bells anymore. Everyone on earth knows what time it is when time is up.*

"Have a good day, Dr. Johnston," Ruth said, in passing. He forced the same smile he'd practiced in the mirror. It wasn't a smile—just a folding in his face that, at least, illustrated some vague recognition of the passersby. He wouldn't want them to go unnoticed.

That wasn't always the joke. The real joke was the irony of Pompeii being the jewel of the empire and swallowed by the ash of a volcano. He'd told Cynthia about it once.

"I mean imagine it—all that monumental building, the great works, the civil engineering—undone in a matter of hours. The irony of it." Cynthia said, "I don't think you understand irony." When he asked why, she said, "because it takes a woman to understand irony, properly." *Hubris.*



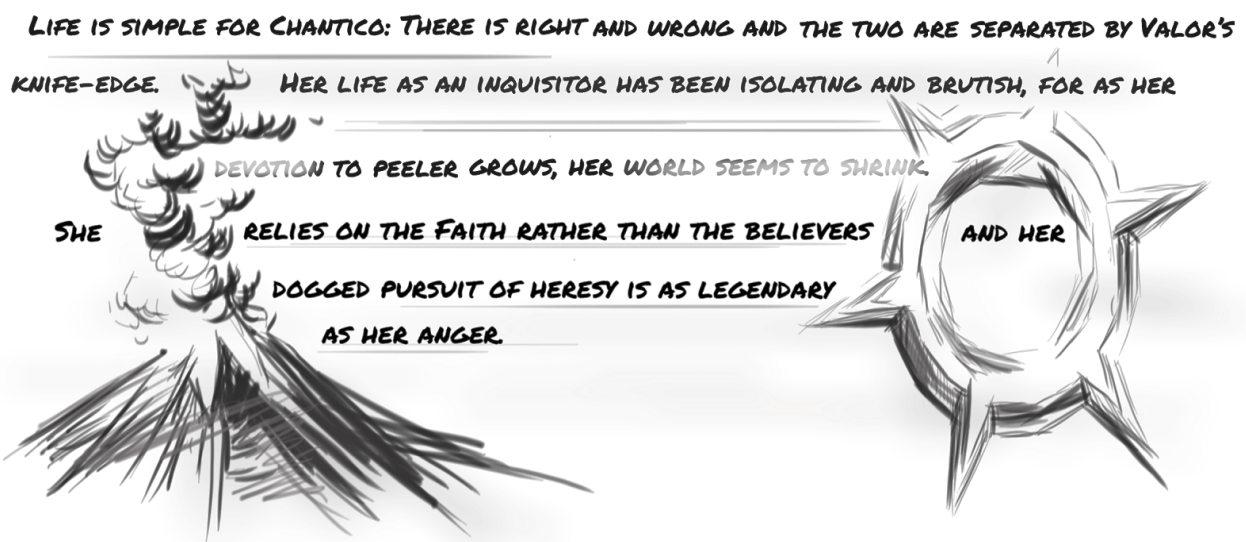
He rolled the die between his fingers, pursing his lips for want of something to say. Nate and Aaron were arguing about the ethical ramifications of putting Ashbury to the flames in the

name of Pelor. Jim watched passively from behind the DM screen.

“Sister Chantico, what do you say?” he asked Brennan. Nate and Aaron quieted.

Whenever the others argued, Jim often turned to Brennan for answers. Brennan was the oldest of them by two decades or more. They were all his students once, but now they were townies, and once a month they met to play D&D.

Brennan scanned his character sheet for an answer he knew he wouldn’t find.



She’d been molded and formed from a collection of experiences that were themselves Friday night fictions. She’d culled demons and devils and put down expunged dark cabals the small folk will never hear about. Brennan was a tired middle-aged man, who was beginning to think he was too old for a game he’d played for twenty years. He could see their futures mapped out like the dungeons they crawled. Isolated. Fictional. Programmed.

“I don’t know,” Brennan said, doodling on his character sheet.

“*You* don’t know or *Chantico* doesn’t know?” Jim asked.

“Do you guys ever watch *The Big Bang Theory* ?” Nate asked. Brennan used to think Nate’s ADD was cute—the type of thing that warranted a *bless his heart* . But now that he was older, Brennan wondered how much of this was identity and how much of it was show. He’d constantly derail the game, and they were easy to derail. Nate recounted episodes of the trite little sitcom shot-for-shot as though he’d dreamt it up himself. *Six degrees of separation. Fourth wall breaks. A guy walks into a bar and says to the bartender ‘a guy walks into a bar...’ I got beat up for playing this game as a kid. Now they sell it at Wal-mart. 10¢ comics are billion dollar movies. Commodity.*

“No, no—Nate—no,” Jim stammered. He threw a d4 at him and demanded that he “Focus—Ashbury is at stake.” Aaron didn’t seem to notice. *Texting Ruth. Again. All smiles. No soul.*

“Sorry—it’s funny though,” Nate said. “You should watch it.”

“Whose turn is it?” Jim asked before remembering. “Chantico’s—Chantico, what do you want to do?”

“About what?” Brennan asked.

Jim stared at him.

“The witch coven that has infiltrated every aspect of the village? The inevitable siege to come so soon as the Templars discover your lethargy here? Are you paying attention?”

“Yeah—sorry.” Brennan looked to his character sheet again, studying it carefully. He’d played Chantico for months now. He loved her once. A firebrand of the holy orders. He knew her well because she was, in every way, his antithesis. Dogmatic. Heartless. Rigid.

“You took points off my grade for that, sir,” Jim laughed. Nate and Aaron joined in, and Brennan could remember when they looked up to him for answers. Now it’s just decisions. He wondered how much they remembered.

“You kicked me out of class once for not paying attention,” Aaron said, not looking up from his text.

“You guys remember in *The Walking Dead* —”

“I say we burn it,” Brennan said. “*Chantico* says we burn it.”

They all stared at him. Surprised by her conviction.

“Burn what?”

“All of it—slash and burn. This place is cancerous,” Brennan said. “Every cell turned against itself and now even we are turning against the people we swore to protect. So we burn it.” The others watched him carefully, leaning in to the table. “We put every inch of the city to the flame. All her crops. All her livestock. Poison the wells and never look back. And whoever comes after us will know they’re not meant to know this place.”

“What about the people?” Aaron asked.

“Chantico says: ‘let them find their own way. Those that want to come with us can. Those who resist, die. But we cannot stay here. If we stay, we’ll never leave.’”

Chantico watched the fires from the ridgeline. A pillar of jet black smoke blossomed from the city center. The wheat fields were nothing more than glowing cinders. The screams of butchered men, too proud to flee, harmonized with the forest’s evening whispers. Bystanders now, but in time, Ashbury wouldn’t even be a memory. Another victim, another martyr.

“Goddamn you, Brennan,” Jim said.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?” Brennan said, forcing down a growing smile.

“Yeah, but it took me a month to write out all the details about the city.”

“He’s playing his character, Jim,” Nate said. “That’s what Chantico would have done.” “Well, she’s a bitch then,” Jim said, obviously more angry than he was letting on. “We won’t be able to play again for a while. Not until I write another city for us.”

“So write a new city,” Brennan said. He folded his character sheet in half and stood from his chair. He knew he’d never see her again. All that work for nothing. Not nothing. What other outcome could there have been? The world is cruel, and Ashbury was always going to burn.



He leaned against his door and let his weight push it closed behind him. Breathing deeply again, he was thankful for the smell of home. His home. Not *home* home. But it was his.

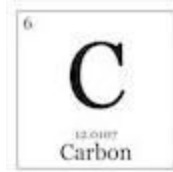
Leather-backed recliner. Flat-screen TV with an extensive cable package. The couch he never used anymore. A refrigerator filled only with eggs. A kitchen equipped with copper pots. A queen-sized bed. Everything a man needed and nothing he didn’t. The American dream come true. *Commodity*.

All the things that made up his life collected into one place that was only his. There were spaces on the shelves and hidden in closets where something about him once lived. Pictures of Dad when he came home. Pictures of Cynthia before she left. The young man subducted beneath the old man he’d become. Twenty years was nothing on a geological timeline. He kept



the photos because they were pictures of a man who was still afraid of losing what he had. Now he was indestructible. *Hubris*.

He replaced his rings in the old cigar box, one-by-one: Edged tungsten. Braided jade. Dad's gold. Silver ouroboros. They lay on the bed of copper coins and huddled in the corner so as to not touch the carbon in her ring. *Be Sincere*.



The sciatica forced him to move slower now when taking off the suit. One arm at a time. The silk lining of the jacket clung to the cotton shirt, hissing and whispering. The tie resisted his thumbs, and he fitted his fat fingers through the loop to coax it from around his neck. It hung with the others, all color-coded and ordered by the days of the week. Nooses hanging on the gallows. *Malevolent “They.”*

No—not nooses. Nooses had thirteen coils. *Triskaidekaphobia*.

Ceviche: “*Fish is cooked by lime while you drink wine.*” A cheap white affair that was marketed as nine dollars but tasted like three. He checked the coloration of the tuna before finding his recliner and then the clicker. The news announced that some new conflict had emerged. There were no wars anymore. Only conflicts and operations. The bell tolled for someone somewhere, and he Googled “the hangman’s knot.” *While commonly thought to have thirteen knots, the so called “hangman’s knot” typically had six to eight loops.* “More at 11.” The wine was coming on as *The Big Bang Theory* began. It wasn’t as bad as he remembered.

*Stagnation.*

A belly full of fish and head swimmy with wine, he washed the plate and bowl and inspected the copper pot he'd washed earlier. He rubbed out the water spots and set it on the stove eye where it belonged. He did the same for the ramekins and the perforated ladle. He emptied the old coffee filter in the trash and replaced it, filling it with Colombian dark for the morning. The fridge was bare but for the carton of eggs due to expire within the week.

*Inexorable.*

The kitchen was closed. Doors were locked. Front and back. Knob and deadbolt. The porch light was off. He returned to the kitchen, flicked the lights again, and checked to be sure the stove was off. The coffee maker was unplugged. The lights were off. The kitchen was closed. He fumbled his way through the hall, using the wall all the way to the perfectly made bed. He tried to read before he slept, but the words swam on the page. Douse the lamps. The pupils struggled to dilate in the sudden dark, producing thin wires of yellow light in his vision. He wondered at how there was light when there was no light. *Phosphenes.*

#### IV: Pareidolia

Valerie's voice was fading. Having just finished another conference over the break, her thoughts were something she had to force into existence. Shaking hands with all the other speakers. Frozen food microwaved en masse. The dryness of cabin pressure. Students panting for reassurance now that the semester had reached its half-life. Small wonder she couldn't manage more than a few words. They came on fighting. What was left to say, really? She'd done all she could for them.

"Final papers are due on Sunday at 23:59." She remembered when close of business was still Friday at 13:00. Before she was naturalized, she figured it was that ubiquitous nuclear power that opened up life for twenty-four hour business. *People here, though, think Belfast is some coal-fired traktor factory beyond the curtain . Babushkas in babushkas armed with loaves of rye bread . But coal-fire plants burn well into the night just the same as the folks using the power. And mother was a doctor. There are no more bedrooms. Only kitchens painted sterile white.*

"That's midnight, right?" Nadia asked. The little thing, so sure she's unsure.

"Yes—of course, so sorry," Valerie answered. Valerie touched Nadia's hand carefully, just as her sister did whenever she was being childish. She found it often made Americans uncomfortable. Set them off guard. "It's a hard habit to break. Almost as hard as the declarative interrogative, Nadia."

"Sorry?" Nadia looked as though she'd been plucked out of space and time.

“Ask if you don’t know,” Valerie continued, tapping Nadia’s hand. “By now you know very well the twenty-four hour clock, so why ask for permission to know that you know it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because you’re trained to doubt yourself. All women are.” She let go of Nadia’s hand, and Nadia seemed remorseful of that now. Just as she expected, Brad spoke up in protest.

“You’re saying that girls are trained to ask for permission to speak?”

“No, I’m saying that women are trained as girls to doubt themselves, and in spite of that fact all students should ask permission to speak by raising one’s hand just as Ruth has here.” She touched Ruth’s raised hand and shook it playfully.

“Yes, dear,” she smiled.

“The Hardy Tree?” Ruth asked, unsure of where her question was going.

“What of it?”

“You know it?”



“It’s a little thing—most folks don’t know it,” Laura said. Valerie had known her for only a month now and already she’d been turned into her plaything. She ran her fingers across Valerie’s chest, careful and slow. Cold and slow as a glacier. “St. Pancras Church,” she continued.

“Like Dickens writes about—*about* which Dickens writes, I mean,” Valerie said.

“Indeed,” Laura replied. She would never have a conversation on things small, things unimportant. And she’d often scold Valerie as if a child should she engage in the confessional.

Self-indulgence, she called. As Laura made yet another point, she punctuated her stream of consciousness with a kiss that fell slow and languishing just like all those leaves Dickens droned on about.

“It was consecrated by the Romans.” Slow. “There’s a bus station there—those big red gaudy things, you know, obligatory for tourists such as yourself.” Torture. Filling. Her lips were chapped, and Valerie thought they might cut skin so sensitive.

“Anyway, there’s a tree in the yard—not a cemetery—just a yard. The Hardy Tree, they call it.” Laura smiled at the taste, Valerie’s sharpened breath. Porcelain. Touch and tone, all dry and fragile.

“As in...Thomas?” Valerie forced, only half interested. Laura ignored her. She’d finish her story as she meant to.

“It’s a knotty thing, all roots, no foliage. The rootwork is entangled with dozens of these grave stones. You can’t read the imprint anymore.”

“Why? Why can’t you? Why can’t you read it?”

“No more families visiting them, I suppose. Same as the Romans. This root bulb looks as though she dredged all the dead from the earth and brought them up for us to see.”

“Yes.” The story had no point.

“They call it that--The Hardy Tree--because Hardy exhumed them all and piled the headstones in place about the tree.”



“Yes, I know it,” Valerie said. Those words too were dredged from the earth like all those dead and nameless things. Empty of meaning. “Been there many times.”

“Is it true that Hardy did it?” Ruth asked. “Dug them up, I mean?” Valerie knew a sadness in Ruth that was only empathetic. Plain to see but unnameable. Time eroded it. And time reclaimed it.

“Yes it is—little sign there and everything.” Valerie released her hand and passed by Brad’s desk on her way back to her own. He was scribbling away inside his notebook. A bunch of scratches and dagger-shaped things. Some colored in and others left blank.

“Ruth, it’s not far from there—the Hardy Tree I mean—the Crossbones Graveyard. Ever heard of it?”

“No,” Ruth said. She was already writing it down. She wrote everything down. Said it was her way of learning. Might never look at it again, she’d say, but once she wrote it, she knew it. Valerie didn’t understand that. Never looking at it again.

“It’s just an old lot, but that’s where the English tossed all the dead ‘single women.’” Valerie pointed to Brad with a rigid index finger.

“What do I mean by ‘single woman,’ Brad?”

“A prostitute?”

“Correct! Anyway, more than ten thousand are buried there. Can’t dig a spade into the earth without striking someone’s bones. It’s a warehouse now.” She watched Ruth carve the words into the page. They became real for her there—real as if she were standing there. Smelled like mildew.



The rains were coming on but Laura explained it was only “London rain.” Light and flirtatious, though cold at times. They’d only known each for a year but there was mystery in it still. There was language—an entire culture in Laura’s intangible smile. Sapphic. Divine. They’d bought flowers from the shop below their flat. The shopkeep ignored them, watching the television noise and moaning about the bombings. They weren’t tragedies anymore. Just troubles for the tourists and tories.

They strolled along the sidewalk, ignoring the giggles of children they passed. Couples muffled their conversations as they passed, quiet about everything but the weather. Laura hated it—sharing those things with strangers, with lovers. She never talked about the Troubles though. Said small minds want some grand moment when all is made right in the world. Build up walls in the meantime.

Others had come before them and placed their own flowers there too. There were never any headstones there, so some had been fashioned from sticks and twine of red and gold. The rain got them and filled them with mold that filled the air. Laura said it was only London rain.



“There’s a fence there now,” Valerie continued. “Women tie ribbons on the fence posts. They’re beautiful too—all manner of colors.” She could remember still when walls and blocs were built up to cut off the world. *There were clear cut lines in the soil--real lines in the sand that we all ignored and betrayed and hated together. There are no more wars though.*

*“Operations” they call them, now. No more troubles.*

“Anymore questions?” she asked. She could see Ruth had them. She pursed her lips together tight. *Little earthworms*. But that she’d never ask them. She didn’t have to since she’d written it all down. Never look at it again.



Laura used to play the piano for her while she graded papers. Never had to ask either. It was covered in dust. She wondered when last it was watered and wondered too what that meant exactly. She touched the keys, unsure the difference between the dark and light keys. The pedals where the water might go. It had been furniture for eight years now. Photos she didn’t need. They were digitized some time ago and catalogued and archived.

Valerie graded Brad’s paper first. C-. She hated him the most and liked to order her work by ascension of mood. She found it was a reward system that encouraged the drudgery of reading and correcting and correcting and correcting all those little moments Althusser and Cixous were misapplied. Ruth’s always came last.

“Between the Medusa and the Abyss”

Valerie imagined those same pursed lips once she saw the improbable “C+”. She’d been slipping for some time now. Wore it in her face. *“Once I’ve written it, it’s in there forever,” she’d say. Indelible.* No matter what it looked like. There were never any calls home anymore. She turned her phone facedown again.



Brad'll be satisfied with it, she thought. *Ruth won't. She'll be crushed by it. And whatever else is in her, she'll own this too.*

Laura had painted the kitchen plum and yellow. Sponged the walls with a sea sponge she'd cut up and pressed against the yellow, careful to be random. Poised and spontaneous. Before, it was novel and strange. Now it was blurry wallpaper in a stock-photo.

Chinese food is the best part of America. Laura hated it. Said it was too predictable. Valerie ate at the piano, folding her bare legs into a triangle. Her fingers found the keys again, and she couldn't know which were the last she touched.

V: Hiraeth

The driver's side was growling inside the wheelwell. Nate imagined it like singing in its own way, something full of pain and anger—*kind of anger you don't know where it comes from or where it's going but harmonized just the same*. It worked that way for Nate—thoughts interrupted by thoughts interrupting thoughts. Little moments spliced together into something like recall, bouncing around like a *wheel bearing, probably—all that growling. Comes loose over time inside the housing. Vibration does it. Pits the metal and gets lost in there and growls. Sings maybe. It'll happen again. Atoms work the same way*.

The drive home was ritualistic once. A sacred pattern to Nate's patterns of behavior that marked something he ignored until he couldn't anymore. *Scarification* —a little date on the calendar that wasn't on the calendar anymore: December 17. *Faulkner and Quentin and all those clocks thrown down by kings with unpronounceable names. All that magic assigned to numbers assigned arbitrarily. Always now. Perpetually always. Ask Caesar and it's December 4 all over again*.

The drive home was populated with all these dead places. Towns named for their surroundings. *Whiteacre. Northbranch. Woodland* . Nate wondered about their founders, when they were just people wandering over mountains looking for people wandering over mountains. *They must have wanted to be more than: Gas station. Church. Presbyterian. Church. Seventh Day Adventist*. Ad space now, all those wanderers. Marking a plot for all those places named and renamed. Those wanderers became towns and those towns filled up with churchyards filled up with nameless bodies. *They're coming to get you, Barbara*.

Folks had written songs about all those hills around him. Railroads and coal mines and whiskey runners—Nate hated them, those songs. Called them “fool’s gold” *for the same reason pyrite’s called “fool’s gold”: sold to the stupid willing to believe they’ve struck it rich.* His dad used to walk him along the rails and tell him stories about folks who would do the same in the Pinkerton days. Never gave a date for them, but the way he told it made them seem alive.

A whistle scattered a patch of cardinals and his dad reached into his pocket for a handful of change. He’d portion out the pennies on his palm, lower it for Nate to claim one, and they’d set their sacrifice on the rail. *Fingers the size of carrots . Texture too. He’d plunk them—those pennies down on the rail, and it’d rattle down the line. We’d wave at the coal cars like they was—were carrying dead soldiers. And when they’d passed, we’d go and pick up them copper stains crushed under the weight of all that coal bound for Norfolk, and he’d bring them low so I could see just what had become of Lincoln.*

The growling pitch-shifted as the tires crossed over the trestle bridge. The replacement bridge ran alongside it, draped in plastic wrap for the inevitable snow to come. The river below was dry—a mud slick, slick with mud. The winter had been warm and the crayfish down below suffered for it. But for the smoking, he’d smell those thousand deaths below.

*The tires sing. The bridge is drumming. Barry must have sung the same before the fire. Coroner said he never felt a thing. Burnt up all cold.*



*Helheim*

Nate did his best to mind the benediction. He knew Pawpaw would ask him about it after. Pastor McGrady explained that it wasn't simply that Cain killed his brother, but that he lied about it. He denied his brother. *Maybe he had and maybe ol' McGrady up there chose the only parable he could think of that included brothers on the two sides of the same god.*

"The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground," he said. Did it with a pronouncement that must have meant something to someone. *Funerals are for the living. Folks looking to settle the chaos of the most natural thing in the world.* He left out the widows and mothers in his little sermon. But that was Sarah's burden now, Nate thought. *Dead husband—hanged. Dead son—burned. The mistress of a frozen hell. It'll happen again.*

This far south, it was the widow's job to host all the grieving masses. Stuff them full of fat and salt and listen to all those polite moments in conversation when the guests did their best to not mention the deceased. The survivors staring them in the face, just begging to go unnoticed. He could overhear it all.

"So sad—now she's lost her son, too."

"Too bad—too, too bad."

"You know he doesn't even talk to his mother—calls Sarah by her first name."

He turned to his phone, sure he'd have heard from Aaron or Jim by now. There was nothing and the boredom of another funeral made him itch for another smoke outside on the porch.



*Hel*

Sarah spotted him through the screen door. The swinging bench groaned—rhythmic—the chains lamented Nate’s presence. Not Sarah, though, much as she tried. They shared the same teeth-conscious smile, and forced it upon one another for want of something worth saying. She sipped loudly from a mug and offered it to Nate. He dragged on his cigarette and the two traded one another. Nate sipped from the mug himself—hot chocolate—and set it down on the porch railing while he pulled another cigarette from his pack. He lit the thing using both hands and squinted at Sarah’s smoking mug. A yellow Minion squinted back through his cyclopean goggle.

### **MONDAYS GOT ME LIKE...**

Sarah felt the snow melting on her face and didn’t bother to brush it away. The smoke mingled with her frozen words. “I dreamt you died, you know,” she said. She couldn’t find the exact memory in her mind. There was little reliable in her mind anymore. She’d given most of it away and sold the rest. “Don’t remember how you died. Only that you did. Won’t even a body.” She sat next to him and brought her knees to her chin, huddled within herself beside her son. There was heat in him, and she could feel hers being eaten by cold.

“Had a dream about that, too—had it once before, too.” Nate forced the smoke through his nose. He stood before she could touch him, arching his back away from Sarah. She watched him bend away and fold under himself. His dad did the same thing when he wanted to be alone. When he knew he was being watched.

“Grey out,” he continued, “grey all over and cold too, you know.” His eyes were hooded, too, just like his father. Housed all that sightless, nameless fear, she thought. *Fears a man fears for himself*. She could see that place he made for himself in his sleep. See just as he described it.

“Someplace industrial,” he said. “Morgantown, I think—anyway, I’m climbing a steel ladder—impossibly tall, like. In the clouds. Ladder leads to a covered water slide. The thing is sickly blue—color of a corpse—and yellowed at the top where the sun burnt it once.” Nate eyed the cherry of his cigarette and must have thought better of the burning filter.

“It’s all blistered at the joints with these rusted bolts. I manage the ladder easy enough even though I can feel it give underneath. I get to the top and then go down the slide. The thing breaks all the laws of physics—uphill, downhill—and then I crash in a heap in something like a well.” He tossed the spent filter into the snow gathered on the deck like a thin mold.

“There’s dead folks down there and none of them are surprised to see me,” he said.

“Not surprised at all.”

He turned away from her and Sarah did nothing to bring him back. His steps put a groan in the frozen wood, and she thought of the sounds the noose must have made pulling against itself. *How dark that well must have been.*

## VI: Markov State

Aaron flopped in a kitchen chair across from Jim who was setting up another game he'd made for them. Just like when they were kids. Cheap. Handmade. Type of thing someone makes in prison for Christmas. He kept it all straight in his mind somehow, where each piece belonged.

"What is it called?" Aaron asked. Another hobby Jim had dredged from the haunted oceans of the internet.

"Xiang-qi," Jim replied as a matter of course. Aaron thought it might be a cross between checkers and badminton. *Maybe that tabula thing he came up with last time. Said it was Emperor Zeno's favorite game, but I've never heard of it.* Said he had a copy built into his chariot so he could play it on the go. Anachronism. Zeno the Bystander—just watched while Rome fell. Just another game to lose.

Whatever Xiang-qi was, it was self-contained within a thin wooden box that housed its game pieces. The box-lid was also the game surface and it was divided into a grid. Latitude. Longitude. Jim opened the box so quickly that all the pieces exploded across the kitchen. He managed to keep most of them on his side of the table, but several pieces escaped, rolling along the surface of the table. Horses braying, chariots crashing. Wheels gone rogue across the table, rolling toward Aaron before he slapped the quickest of them flat. He pulled his hand away slowly, marking it as though it were the corpse of a fly. Aaron gathered the pieces, one by one, and offered them to Jim who was busy placing those he'd managed to salvage on a grid carved into the box's interior. He muttered the name of each piece as he placed it on the board,

turning it over to be sure he had the English correct.

“Chariot, horse, elephant, guard, general, guard, elephant, horse, chariot, cannon: one and two. Soldiers: one, two—one, two.” Aaron watched him carefully, mimicking the placement on his own board edge, and correcting them once he realized he’d confused the elephants with the horses.

“Alright,” Jim clapped his hands on his thighs. “It’s Chinese chess, basically.” Aaron could see it plainly now. A rank of pawns. Rooks and knights on the flanks. King in the center. The same except for one aspect.

“The pieces go on the nodes,” Aaron asked, “not the squares? That’s counterintuitive.”

“Right? Fucking Chinese, man—I don’t know. Anyway, pretty simple, really.” Jim explained the tactics and strategies available for each piece, moving them as he did.

Aaron did his best to understand it all but was already overwhelmed by the choices. He remembered immediately why he didn’t play chess. Too many choices, he thought. *L'Embaras des richesses. Only one real outcome. And all of it dependent upon the opening. No going back. No corrections—all response. Setup again. Try again.* Aaron examined the elephant piece, certain it was anything but an elephant. He wondered about Ruth, and if she was feeding the horses at night again. He hated it when she did that.

He used to love Jim’s discoveries—all these complicated games. Wargames—tabletop, and abstract—TCGs, RPGs—all these lovely distracting distractions. They flowed along a spectrum of realism and iconicism—a 1/35th scale war-elephant versus a wood pog marked with



a 象. *One is easier to package, though, that's for sure. Easy to label. What's chess really for, anyway? If the outcome is so predictable, why even play?* Aaron replaced the elephant, realizing he hadn't heard any of Jim's rules except: "Oh, and it's not checkmate," he said, pointing to his king. "What it is is 'flying general.' So, if it's your turn and I can't move my general out of LoS from yours, then I lose."


"Got it," Aaron said, though he didn't. He traced his fingers around the board's gridwork and asked, "Does the king have to stay in this little box, here?" The box was separated from the rest of the field by orthogonal lines mirrored on either side of the board. To Aaron it resembled a math equation, some bygone memory forced upon him in high school.

"That's the palace," Jim corrected, but it was only lines. Aaron detected the frustration in his voice. Jim seemed to hate explaining all these games over the years, convinced that anyone could learn them just by doing them. Aaron never told him how little he cared about them. He wondered where Ruth might be now. The horses were gone now too.

"He can't leave the palace unless he can do the flying general. Then he flies across the board and kills the other general."

"Okay—why are mine red?" Aaron asked, holding up his general for Jim to see. "And also different symbols from yours?" Jim took the general from Aaron and returned it to the grid where it belonged.

"It varies, really." Jim re-set one of the elephants his reach knocked out of place. "Some are distinctions in rank and nobility. Or it might be the masculine feminine marking. So,

like, the horse...” Jim picked up his own horse and rotated the piece between his index finger and thumb like a coin. “See—that one’s feminine.” 

Aaron stared at the red mare. He propped his head up with one hand and used the other to slide the mare back and forth from the node to the square. Node. Square. Back and forth. Back and forth. Hypnotized by the shuffling sound caught between the wooden piece and board. He was doing his best to uncouple himself from the idea that the grid served as the play surface and not the squares it created. *A square isn’t a square.*

“She’s got to go on the node, dude.”

Aaron was bored with the game already and Jim could tell. And Aaron could tell.

“Sorry—that’s hard to remember.”

“Think of them as roads.”

“What’s the middle bit, then?” Aaron pointed at the center of the board. A blank plane separated all those all those red soldiers from all those black soldiers.

“A river.”

“Can you cross it?”

“Everyone can but the elephant.”



After eight straight losses, Aaron felt he had earned his smoke break. The two of them shared a lighter, forgetting who it belonged to at the beginning of the evening and not caring particularly who it belonged to now.

Jim had beaten Aaron evenly, and Aaron reworked the circumstances in his head as best he could before deciding it didn't matter to him. He didn't have the mind for it like Jim did—to see all those moments and minutes laid out perfectly, and to have a response for each of them.

*Must be blinding to know every move your opponent makes. Must be exhausting.*

“How'd you like that last one? I'm sure it sounds better in Chinese, but it's called 'Sac the horse; G.G. in thirteen moves.'”

“How do you remember that?” Aaron asked, only half-interested. Really he wanted to ask how he managed to make thirteen successive mistakes. Exploited. Each mistake forging a perfect and total failure. *Every war ever must have ended with the same meaningless questions.*

*What if I'd flanked right instead of left? What if my rate of fire was a second faster? What if we committed an hour earlier and avoided sunrise, or an hour later and avoided the rain?* He knew

there was no place in his head for such questions. He wondered how Ruth managed it all the time. Every moment calculated. Every second measured. *She must be terrified. I'd be terrified.*

“Game theory,” Jim answered, flicking his cigarette into the lawn.

“That's a thing?”

“Yeah—what it is is simplified economics, but it basically organizes decisions into ons and offs and measures all those combinations into something predictable.” Jim took up another cigarette and passed the lighter back to Aaron who followed suit. He continued with the cigarette bouncing on his lip. “So like, every turn has a finite number of outcomes. Player wants to win, they'll choose the one that makes the most sense. If I want to win, I stop those moves.”

“So there's a pattern to it?” It was just conversation for Aaron.

“Of course, dumbass,” Jim said, chuckling. “There’s a fucking grid, for christ’s sake.” Aaron forced a laugh and Jim seemed to notice how far away he was. He offered something more conciliatory. “It’s basically a puzzle box. The pieces don’t matter as much as the moves.”

Aaron cupped his hands around the cherry for some measure of warmth. “Maybe that’s why I suck at it,” he said, dragging on the thing at length. “I don’t like thinking there’s a right answer.”

“I don’t know about ‘right’ answer, but there’s always an answer, you know.”

“I don’t know.”

“Math doesn’t play favorites. It’s just always cruel.” For some reason, it was absurdly funny for them and neither of them could say why. They choked on the smoke in their lungs and doubled over, red in the face, tears blurring their vision. *All for nothing, Bobby Fisher! All for nothing!*



The next morning, Elise found Aaron outside sketching on the porch. He rarely stayed over anymore, but he could tell she still hated it when he did. Aaron smiled at her and thought he might apologize for something, though he didn’t know what.

“Morning,” he said.

“Did you sleep?” She sipped at her coffee and watched the weather roll beyond the pines.

“No.” The morning was grey and old before she was fully formed. Aaron sketched the steel sink Elise left on the porch last month. It was packed with empty mason jars, but Aaron

drew them filled with something gray. Little glass jars, cups of Atlantic. Elise didn't ask him about it, but he could feel her watching him draw. She sipped her coffee noisily, leaning her elbows on the railing.

"Jim awake yet?" Aaron asked, scribbling away.

"Getting there," she assured him. Elise ambled away from her perch, finding Aaron's sketchbook beside him on the wicker loveseat. She took it without asking him, and he didn't move for her to sit beside him. He could feel her examining him, all the sounds a body makes when judging something. Huffs and clicks. The creaking of muscles reserved for disinterest. She plucked one of the pages from the book and studied it while sipping her coffee again: Ruth's old comic. Aaron was surprised that she'd noticed it at all. More surprised, though, that he'd forgotten all about the drawing himself. Ruth never finished the script. Said she was busy with school and it just fell away after a while.

Elise turned the page over and tried to work out Ruth's notes there. When she couldn't, she offered it back to Aaron.

"What's this mean?"

Must be dialogue, Aaron thought.

Blason.

Everything's owned - everyone's owed.

No exceptions.

“You drew this then?” Elise asked, turning back to the illustration.

“Yeah—it’s Ruth’s story though. I’m just following her lead, really.”

Elise handed the drawing back to Aaron, her face hidden by her mug.

“Looks good,” she said.

“Thanks,” Aaron said, reluctant to accept the kind of critique only mothers give.

“I haven’t really looked at this one in a while. Any advice for me? You’re an artist.”

Elise forced a polite smile and glanced at the sketch again. “She’s pretty cut-up.” She answered the wind.

“Yeah. Ruth said she’s supposed to look dissected, you know, like a corpse, kind of.”

“No—I mean she’s just parts—literally just parts.” Aaron looked back at the page and studied it carefully to understand just what she was getting at. He turned the page over and read Ruth’s words again.

“I think that’s the point though.”

“Well then, Aaron, you’ve done it.”

Jim came outside with coffee for him and Aaron. Elise stepped off the porch after kissing him and padded into the yard just before the treeline where she kept her garden. Jim voiced his excitement through a mouthful of coffee.

“Mmm—Mmm! I remember this,” he said, taking up the page where Elise left it. Aaron closed his sketchbook with a clap. “Did you show this to Elise?”

“The comic?” Aaron asked, unsure. “Yeah, she saw it.”

“Hey—what’d you think, baby?”

Elise didn't answer. They watched Elise pad around the edges of a low wooden fence in the yard. She'd made it herself, Jim explained, driving splinters of deadfall into the lonely earth, binding them together in places with lengths of twine. She said it protected her herb garden, but from what, Aaron couldn't tell. It was too low for deer. He watched her curiously.

"What's she doing?"

"Elise? Did the deer get at it?"

"No." She skirted the edges of the fence once more, passing the gate she'd built there. It was framed with a bowed branch, latticed and bound-up again with more twine and hubcaps that she had beaten flat into bucklers. She'd never opened the gate, though. It had no hinge. So she ignored it and stepped over the low fence with ease.

Jim and Aaron laughed at her while she sectioned off portions within the little space she'd carved for herself. Jim stood, taking his cigarette with him, and Aaron followed closely behind him. As Jim approached the gate, his hands found the frame and he shook it, checking its strength.

"Don't!" Elise said.

"It's not that sturdy."

"It's not supposed to be," she said, returning to her twine. She measured lengths of it with her forearms, cutting the twine as it met her wrists.

"Want help?" Aaron asked. He waited just outside the fence for her reply.

"Sure," she said, though it was clear she hated the idea. Aaron stepped over the fence carefully, and Jim followed after. She'd portioned out the lengths of twine alongside a pile of



soup ladles Jim had beaten flat in the shop. Aaron knelt and picked one up. She'd soldered each of them with hitching and starting words. They felt like the things they named.

### **CARROTS, CUCUMBER, THYME**

Elise instructed them to tie the twine into sections, forming a gridded network hovering just a few inches above the soil. Elise watched them tie the grid in place from the grass, her hands resting on her hips. Aaron worked on his hands and knees and held one of the ladles up to Elise.

"Now, where do these go?"

"I'll do it," Elise said. She was squinting in the stark, grey light.

"No—it's no trouble."

"No—I want to do it. You guys'll just fuck it up."

"She's kicking us out, dude," Jim said playfully.

"Right—we'll go."

Aaron and Jim stepped over the fence again and stood beside Elise. The three of them looked down on the grid she'd ordered.

Jim dug into his pockets for his cigarettes, arching as he did into a kiss with Elise. The awkward thing didn't distract her from her heavy thoughts, and Aaron wondered if Ruth ever kept *her* eyes open too when they kissed.

"Fuck," Jim despaired, realizing his lighter was still inside. He turned to the house and put a jog to his pace. Elise passed over the fence again, kneeling in the soil, and Aaron found

himself doing the same across from her. She was looking for a pattern in the earth that Aaron couldn't detect.

"Sure you don't want help?"

"I said no."

"Sorry."

"What are you—"

"Jesus—Aaron, what do you want?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Look—this is mine, Aaron—you have your thing with Jim, but this is mine."

"I'm sorry—did we fuck it up?"

"No—just...I'm sorry. Look, I just want to do this myself, okay? I'm sorry."

"Okay—no problem." Aaron stepped away carefully. "I'm sorry," he said. He wasn't sure why. Only that he meant it.



Aaron found their apartment empty, and Ruth explained that she'd *be back before dark*. He set to fix her lunch, knowing she likely skipped it again, and studied the drawing at the kitchen table while he waited for the water to boil. He considered Elise's words carefully. She was right: cut-up, a vivisection, but he thought that was the point. *That's Ruth's design—that's how she see's Enneas, I guess*. He emptied the pasta into the boiling water. *She always adds salt to it. Says it makes it boil faster. Nonsense.*

He could hear Ruth coming home, plodding up the stairs with her muddied boots. He met her at the stair landing where she stopped him with a kiss and half a smile. She reeked of horse.

“Hello, pretty lady,” Aaron said.

“Hey.” She was far away.

“How are you?”

“Tired.” He could see it in her. Not in the eyes, exactly. But obvious, just the same.

“I made you lunch.”

“Thanks—I’m not hungry.” *She didn’t eat today. Again.*

“You should eat.” *Never does when she’s out riding.*

Aaron had stowed away her food in the microwave to keep warm. He pulled it out and set the table for her as Ruth shed her barn-clothes like a snake’s skin and found a seat at the table. The open window behind her breathed cold air on her back. She turned her head and watched the icy rain fall out there. Aaron felt another panic in his chest.

“Ruth? Can you hear me?” *Where’s the glucose?*

“I’m fine, Aaron. Fuck.”

“Sorry.” Aaron placed the bowl in front of her, overly proud of his work. He took the opposite seat and waited for her to speak first. When she didn’t, they sat in silence, and Aaron returned to his drawing as best he could. He hated how long it took Ruth to eat but hated it even more when she would skip it for time’s sake. He smiled past the drawing, knowing full and well she was annoyed with him watching her eat.

He held the drawing up in the light of the window, hiding from Ruth behind it. The light bled through the page revealing, among imperfections baked into the paper, Ruth's notes on the reverse. She *was* cut into pieces—particularized, atomized—a vivisection of a ruined woman. *No*. She wasn't ruined, Aaron thought. *I ruined her. I made her a ruin. Immortalized her into a story that was going to be finished.* It wasn't real until then.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's you—your comic anyway, remember?" Ruth stood from the table and took the drawing from Aaron's hands. She turned it over. Front and back. Front and back. Her face hardened, and it seemed she did remember it all at once. Her eyes scanned the room as though the memory were a bird trapped in the kitchen. Fluttering and diving around. Trying to escape.

"You never finished it, though," Aaron said. "Did you still want to?"

Ruth didn't answer immediately. She found her seat again, her face still twisted. She looked up from lunch, and Aaron watched the anger and fatigue drain from her face with subtle breath.

"No," she said, a smile growing on her face. He was surprised, and not just for the answer. She began to laugh slightly. "No," she said again. "I *hate* that story."

Aaron couldn't help but smile. He turned the drawing over and watched Ruth giggle over her gluten-free pasta.

"I'm sorry you drew it," she said. She turned toward the window again, doing her best to hide her laughter.

He laughed too and didn't know why. "Next time I want a full script," he said.

“No such thing,” she said.

Ruth was hot, he could tell, but she’d never admit it. Her jacket fell off and soon after came her snakeskin boots. They *kloped* to the floor, one after another. There was a heartbeat in it, he thought. Something like a harmony.

## VII: Bit-shift Register

It was too warm in the car for Jim, but he couldn't leave yet. His shift didn't begin for another hour, and he'd be damned if they get it from him. The digital clock in Jim's car was sixty-seven minutes fast. Elise gave it seven minutes extra. Said it kept her on time when she was out. Daylight savings time gave it another hour, and Jim never corrected it.

He could see inside the thing when he closed his eyes. Any idiot could make one with some copper wire and a potato. Four plug-in, seven-segment LEDs. That was the most beautiful part of it, he thought. *Seven segments—all it takes to make any number at any time. Switches: on-off. 0's and 1's. Twenty-four hours. Ad infinitum.* Seven segments at a time, he watched another hour die away as a light snow began to fall. He snuffed another cigarette and noted the taste of the burning filter. *Zero. 0. 1.*



After eight years at the plant, Jim didn't hear the noise anymore. Churning metal. Moaning conveyors. A humming electrical feedback. Sound hearing sound hearing sound carried on the pellucid whims of 50,000 volts. Jim felt it in his spine while FUNGUS glowered at the snaking pipework chasing them down the service hall. He'd been there for thirty minutes.

"Don't worry, FUNGUS," Jim shouted, "you get used to it after a while." Robert said nothing and continued to follow Jim too closely until they reached the bay door. Jim spread the plastic curtains and stood aside for Robert to pass. As he passed, he tripped over Jim's heavy boots and offered an awkward yelp in place of an apology. The curtain flopped open, and the halogen lamps fifty feet above washed out the world around them. Machinery howled up to

the rafters. They shelled out whole pallets of cardboard juice boxes wrapped in cellophane, and men and women clad in white chased after their work.

“Ever worked in a plant before, FUNGUS?” Jim asked.

“No,” Robert muttered.

“What?”

“No!”

“Speak up, FUNGUS! We’re all friends here.”

Jim refitted his beard-net and checked his breast pocket again to be sure he had his favorite pen. He pointed with it like a conductor giving directions to Robert as they crossed into the sterile white machine bay.

“Alright,” Jim declared “This here is the floor and down east is East Bay and up there is Down Bay.” The directions flowed out of him like a chant. “Here you got machines one through seven.” Rising and falling. “Cabinet’s on the end there with the grounding.” Divining some meaning from the chaos. “Across the line you got machines eight through fourteen.” He tapped his pen on machine eight’s interface. “Obviously—and again, there’s your cabinet. Grounding.” As a shaman marks the edges of the sacred and the profane.

“I’m sorry—which machine am I on?” Jim hated FUNGUS already. Electricity was simple. It’s still just keys and kites. He shouldn’t have to explain it twice.

“Number seven, FUNGUS, but you don’t fuck with the machine—you let *it* work. You stand here and feed the hopper more boxes—that’s it. When she runs out of cardboard, you refill it. When the pallet’s full, drag it off the line with the others down in Down Bay. If you’re

machine fucks up, buzz me in the shop upstairs. Anything else?”

Jim pricked his ears towards machine one. He’d opened her up a week ago to chase down that phantom clanking, but there was still something hitching inside. Something was off or on in there.

“Yeah,” Robert screeched out, “what’s FUNGUS mean?” His eyes followed the canopy of wiring and piping overhead. A child in the woods.

“Fuck U New Guy U Suck,” Jim said. “Anything else?”

“No,” FUNGUS said, forcing his earplugs in farther.

“Alright—you’re on machine seven.” Jim pointed at machine seven with gloved finger, clapping his other hand on machine one. “I’m going to be over here on one for now. Watch the output on seven. Anything misses the pallet, tap me.”

“What happens if I miss a pallet?”

“Then you tap me, FUNGUS. Cool? Cool—don’t get electrocuted.”

Jim turned toward machine one and examined the interface’s readout: a digital display showing all the workings and wantings within. There was a mystery to it once—all those zeroes and ones switching on and off over and over until the machine erupts into an electrical fire. But after eight years, it was just math. Math rectifying itself the only way it knows how: the path of least resistance. Just like electricity, math always finds a way to 0. *That’s the tragedy in it*, Jim thought. *A billion billion outputs and they always mean the same thing. Deus ex machina.*

Jim peered over his shoulder to check on Robert. He was throwing his hands behind his back, bringing them together again; one fist, one open palm. Trying to appear nonchalant. *0. 1.*



0. 1. There was no sound in it. Deadened by the noise and noise canceling earplugs. Jim snorted. *A week*, he thought, returning to the interface. *No way he's sticking around. I've seen it too many times. The silence of it kills 'em in the end. Eight hours of noise and all you have to listen to is what's in your—*

“Fuck!—back up FUNGUS!” Robert had crept up on Jim again. He turned on him though FUNGUS couldn't stop leering past him to see the blinking interface.

“Sorry—sorry. What's wrong with it?”

**Error Code: 6174**

“It's fucking hot work—FUNGUS. Step back.”

“Hot work?”



“Alright, Jim, first rule of ‘lectricity?” Terry asked for the thousandth time. It took Jim eighteen months to get certified. Another three to know what he was doing. Another three before Terry let him do it by himself.

“Volts work, amps hurt,” Jim said. The pliers trembled in his hands. The cabinet lay open, and folded within was a linear mile of wire pulsing with enough amps to stop his heart.

“You got it,” Terry said. She bent down, resting her palms on her knees. Terry waited while Jim waited for Terry. Zero. One. Zero. One.

“Now what did you forget?” Terry asked. Jim looked inside the cabinet for the answer. Terry reminded him after a few seconds.

“Calorie gear—”

“Calorie gear—shit—sorry.” Jim cursed himself and drew out his vest and gloves from their shared toolbox. A child in the woods. Terry pointed an ashy finger at his gloves.

“Whenever you doing hot work, always remember: calorie shirt *and* gloves. Don’t do no good to save your hands if your chest’s on fire.”

“What do you mean, hot work?”

“Fucking-a, FUNGUS,” Bruce howled. “Hot work!” Must be self-evident, Jim thought. *Fucking stupid* . Terry turned on Bruce and sent him back to work with her withering silence.

“Don’t pay him any mind, now,” Terry said. “You focus on *you* and *your* machine. Hot work’s what we say when there’s live ‘lectricity and that means you wear your calorie gear. Alright?”

“Volts work, amps hurt,” Jim said, clapping his gloved hands together.

“That’s it—we got it now.” Terry flashed a toothy grin. “Let’s do it then.” Jim breathed in carefully as he installed the ohmmeter. Red. Black.

[s/c]

“Continuity...” Jim half-guessed. He could tell the problem by the smell alone. Melted plastic and atmosphere. Terry could tell from the sound, but she still made him check the ohms. *Math don’t spare your feelings,* she’d said, *but it will save your heart* . “...so that means there’s a short—burn-out?”

“See! You got it, now.” Terry clapped Jim on the back carefully, taking the ohmmeter from him. She knelt down and began wrenching the mounting of a ruined servo. “You think of it like a dam, yeah? It’s water versus stone, and one of them gunna win, eventually.” Terry

drew the offending servo. All charred and ruined. “Unless you slow down the water or build up the stone.” Jim handed her the replacement she knew she’d need before they’d even examined the machine. “People think it’s hard because they don’t understand it, is all.” She punctuated her words with grunts as she tightened the bolts. “Electricity is real simple, really—you got to know it’s *always* moving—on or off, it’s going somewhere whether it’s your ground or your heart. But it’s just zeros and ones at the end of the day.”

Terry replaced the burn-out, explaining to Jim every step of the process as she did. Afterwards they closed the cabinet and examined the interface.

“Alright,” Terry said, throwing down her calorie gear, “what’s ol’ number one saying now?”

**Error Code: 6174**

“What’s that mean?”

“Mean’s she miscounted on the last pallet and the bit-shift corrected it. So that pallet there’s likely got too many units in it.” Terry used her forearm to wipe the sweat away from her face. Jim threw down his gloves and trundled to the affected pallet.

“How’s a machine miscount anyway?” Jim asked, tearing away at the plastic wrapping. Terry was right, just as he thought.

“Short answer?” she asked. “Same as we do. Reads it wrong.”



At midnight, the Super hosted his little meetings in the break room. Used them to announce new product lines, so-and-so’s birthday, or else the latest hire.

“Oh yes!” he forced through his mustache. “I wanted to take a minute to welcome Robert, our new hire, in the back there.” The Super pinned his clipboard between his elbow and hip, clapping with his free hand. Robert waved to the room like the homecoming queen. Jim’s face twisted while the eighty operators feigned interest in Robert’s presence. His eyes found the halogen lamps above, and they blurred into white-hot halos.

The break room used to be administrative offices when that was still in-house. It was a mausoleum now. Bleached white walls broken up with the framed pictures of retired operators. Faces of the dead and retired ordered like a columbarium. Lit that way too. Jim called it the “ghost ship,” and thought it very clever after realizing it was directly above the bay below. He often found himself in there for quiet. While the Super droned on, Jim began to convince himself he could still hear the sound of typists typing. Pearls and pencil skirts. No more, though. Open floor packed with those folding, funeral chairs set at press-wood folding tables covered in plastic tablecloths from the last retirement party. The smell of breakfast pastries and instant coffee made Jim think of all those nights in cheap diners. Drunk. Again. Hiding from Elise. Hiding from home. *Gone but never really gone. 0. 1. 0. 1.* FUNGUS tapped him on the shoulder, and he realized the staff meeting had started all around him.

Every shift, every week, there was a mandatory safety meeting for all employees. For third shift especially, though. They had the worst record. Corporate chalked it up to late hours: someone loses a finger in the press. The Super figured it was carryover from second shift. Extra work, cutting corners: someone loses a finger in the press.

“So remember,” the Super said, “if you need help, ask for help.”

Jim watched the Super fiddle with his mustache and wondered at what age a man decides to become a cliché. Short sleeve button down, off yellow, just like he wears to church. A gaudy red tie shaped like a trout. Mossy Oak sunglasses peaking out of his breast pocket. Gold watch with leather band just like his “daddy” used to wear. *Leci n’ es une pipe. What treachery?* The ghost ship had carried him off again, and the Super clapped his hands signaling another bell gone by without him.

“We’ve got a great run on TL this month, so let’s keep at it, huh?” he said, triumphantly.

FUNGUS leaned across the table and whispered to Jim, “What’s TL?” He hadn’t totally adjusted his voice to the quiet of the ghost ship and leaned too close to Jim again.

“Time loss,” Jim said. He sat folded up, eyes forward, and mumbled through his beard net. “Means there was an accident. Corporate calls it that because it sounds better than ‘someone lost a finger in the press.’” Jim never looked at Robert. He was too focused on the Super now, waiting for him to finish his mandatory explanation of the patented partner-pull procedure.

“Alright—that about covers it then,” the Super said, punctuating his words again with another obnoxious clap. “Any questions?”

Jim’s hand shot up, and he didn’t fail to notice the Super scan over him twice before acknowledging it.

“Yeah...Jim.”

“Real quick—where are we on the Bit-shift?” The operators turned to the Super, anxious

for his answer.

“TBD, Jim,” he said, visibly annoyed. “We’re working on it.”

“It’s just that, we’re losing marks on our efficiency ratings and that affects my pay, so...” “I know, Jim.”

“You know I can fix it though—Terry showed me how.”

“Jim, frankly, that’s above my pay-grade,” the Super said. He was working his way toward the door. Making his escape. “You know if I could, I’d have you do it.”

“So we’ll just keep dropping like twenty pallets a night, then?”

“We’re working on it, Jim. Like I said.”

“Cool.” Jim folded his arms again and chewed on his lip. *They’ll miss twenty pallets tonight and it’ll fall on me. Simple solution. It’s just math. 01010. But fuck it. Maybe one day I’ll be adult enough to—*

“Alright—and that’s it then, guys,” the Super said with another clap. “Let’s go out there and finish strong, huh? Thanks, everyone!”

Jim waited for everyone to leave and noticed that Robert stayed behind too. “What are you doing?” Jim asked, still looking ahead.

“Waiting for you.”

“Why? You’re on your own now, FUNGUS. Get out there.” Jim stood and made his way back to the shop. “Buzz me if you fuck up. Don’t electrocute yourself.” As Jim stood to leave, he saw Terry’s retirement photo. The last in a long line of faceless faces.

Upstairs, Jim shared the shop with two other mechanics. They had each staked out their

corners of the room with a workbench, marking them with steel toolboxes they'd decorated with stickers from their vacations to the Outer Banks. Before finding his stool, Jim used his favorite pen to draw another dick on the bottom of Bruce's toolbox. He finished his work and pulled his lunch from the fridge, ignoring the desperate pings coming from FUNGUS's pager.

He forced his pulled-pork sandwich in his mouth and stared at a calendar he didn't mark anymore. The sandwich found his lips, but Jim decided it wasn't worth finishing. Tasted like a refrigerator. Just eating to be full. He stared at the shredded meat, daring it to impress him. And when it didn't, he swiveled on his stool and chucked the thing at Bruce's workbench.

Elise had put a napkin in with his lunch.

*milk, eggs, flour tortillas (not corn). thank you.*

-E



Terry pulled a thermos from the refrigerator and emptied a hearty soup into a paper cup destined for the microwave.

"What'd you bring?" she asked Jim.

"Nothing—I figured I'd go get something."

"At midnight?"

"Yeah—just something from the gas station across the street."

"Stupid—don't eat that shit—here have some of this stew." Jim refused once out of politeness until Terry placed the cup in front of him. "Eat." Before her lips touched her own cup, the pager buzzed from machine one. She clicked her tongue and took up her toolbox again.

“Come on, then,” she said. Jim set his soup down and followed her down the stairs.

Another burn-out, but one that Jim got to fix himself. She was quiet as he worked.

“Jim, what do you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you go home—what do you do?” Jim crawled out of the cabinet to meet Terry’s eyes. But she was far away.

“I don’t know—I sleep. I read a lot.”

“No—you’ve got to have something else, Jim,” Terry said. She was checking her phone for the time and watching the lights flicker above. Said she never once seen one go out in her twenty years. She looked down bay at the open loading dock, careful not to make eye contact with Bruce.

“You go home, but you gotta have something else than this place.”

“Like what?” Jim asked, still on his back.

“I mean you’ll go crazy if all you do is this place. So what you do besides work and sleep?”

“I...um...well—I play a lot of games.”

“Not video-games.” Terry checked the time again.

“No—it’s, more like strategy games.” Jim never knew how to explain himself in that way. Little toy soldiers and little dice and little wars on the kitchen table.

“You mean like chess?”

“Not exactly.” Machine one began wailing.



“Goddamn it!” Terry said. “Get out of the way.”

Terry shoved passed Jim to see the interface for herself. Embarrassed. Maybe ashamed.

“Still with sixty-one seventy-four?” she asked, though only Jim could hear her. She sighed and felt her breast pocket for her cigarettes.

“Come on then—I need a moment away from this one.”

The two of them stood outside in the loading bay. Even in the summer heat, they were still cooler than inside the plant. Terry offered Jim a cigarette, which he refused once out of politeness before finally taking one.

“Games then?” Terry asked.

“Yeah—me and my friends.”

“Well, that’s alright, I suppose. But you need a place to go is what I mean to say. Not like a physical space, necessarily, a place that’s far away from here, from you, and from everyone you know.” Terry threw down her cigarette and drew out another, and Jim followed her lead.

“This place here don’t ever close,” Terry said, pointing at it with an open palm. “It’s always here.” She turned away and Jim watched her watch the dawn. The sun was rising out there. Wasn’t bright enough to washout the rusted fence yet. Terry didn’t seem to be listening to herself anymore, Jim thought. Used her hands to cut out the portions of thought.

“Either you got to accept that you’re part of it for good, or else plan your escape—you hear?” The exterior lamps were still glowing orange, electricity within humming like locusts. Didn’t know it was dawn yet.

“What’s yours, then?” Jim asked, coughing on the cigarette.

Terry smiled carefully. “I think this—you know—this whole thing—could have been *anything* else. And that makes us think it ain’t so special.” Terry dragged on her cigarette. “And maybe it ain’t, you know. But I remember that it’s *exactly* this—precisely *this*, which makes me think I’m doing okay.”



Four a.m. was the hardest hour in third shift. He was hungry. Tired. Angry with FUNGUS. Angrier with machine one.

#### **Error Code: 6174**

“Still?” Jim had disassembled the fucking thing twice now. Reset it each fucking time and still the fucker wouldn’t count the goddamned pallets correctly. It had already misfired eighteen pallets. *It’s almost like I know what I’m talking about. What the fuck is FUNGUS doing? Thumbs up? Yeah—sure—okay. Thumbs up—fucking retard. A week, at best. Max. The silence of it, that’s what gets ‘em. It’s like feedback. Sound hearing sound hearing sound—Fuck!*

Jim’s wrench slipped out of place and his knuckles met with a bolt. He clenched his fist and watched the blood roll across the back of his hand. “Fuck it,” Jim said, though no one heard him over the noise. He threw his wrench to the floor, reached for his cigarettes, and brushed past FUNGUS on his way to the service bay door.

“Come on,” Jim said. “Time for a break.”

“I don’t smoke,” Robert said.

“So stand there then,” Jim said.

Outside the snow fell like ash and gathered at the edges of the dock like mold. Jim dragged off the cigarette, offering one to FUNGUS until he accepted it. He pretended to smoke it, and Jim smiled at how inept it was.

“How old are you, Robert?”

“Twenty,” Robert coughed.

“Yeah, that’s when I started too.”

“Oh really? How long you been here, by the way?”

“Seven years, now,” Jim said, thinking about the number carefully. It seemed longer than that, though, and somehow shorter too. Seemed, too, like he should know more by now. The sun was rising out there somewhere. Lamps didn’t seem to notice. Everything was stained with synthetic orange.

“You like it?” All those pinks and purples flooded the edges of the trailer park just beyond the rusted fence. The gold broke through and caught the edges of thin clouds.

“It works, I guess. They tell you you can be anything and the problem is it’s true.”

“Well, it’s just a job, you know. It’s not your life.”

Jim’s bloody hands burned in the cold wind. The blood was already crimson dark under the rag he’d wrapped around his knuckles. *It’s all math, anyway. Finds zero one way or another.*



His vision blurred the edges of the end cap so much so that he had to squint to see if the

tortilla was flour or corn.

*flour tortillas (not corn).*

He wandered the empty aisles and listened to the silence of an empty supermarket. He circumvented the liquor aisle but passed by the cards and dice games twice before he decided they didn't have anything he didn't already have somewhere in the attic.

Terry warned him about this. Said he had to have a place to go, and he thought he did when she'd first told him.

*milk*

Maybe he never did though.

*eggs*

Jim wandered from self-check after realizing he was out of smokes. He waited impatiently for the geriatric retiree to emerge from nowhere and ring him up.

"Pack of Parliaments too, please."

"Such a young man, you oughta quit."

"Sound like my wife."

Jim slammed the car door, placing the groceries carefully in the passenger seat. The snow was already picking up, but he wasn't far from home now. What the Donner party would have done for milk, eggs, and bread. He groaned as his phone bleated out in the quiet of the misfired dawn.

Elise: Don't forget eggs 🙄

Me: U r the worst. B home soon

Elise: ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

It was too warm in the car for Jim, but he couldn't go inside yet. She hated it when he woke her up before her alarms. He watched the seven minutes she made fade and figured that was enough time for her. He snuffed the last cigarette and went for the eggs beside him. He lifted the carton and found one had leaked through, staining his passenger seat. Given enough time and heat, the whole truck would smell like sulfur. He opened the carton and sure enough the culprit lay there broken inside, his brethren stone-silent on his behalf. *I am Spartacus. One. I. O.*

He tore out of the truck, tried to slam the door, but his jacket caught. The eggs fell to the ground, and only seven were spared. Those he threw at the front door of his house.

"Fuck you! And fuck you! Fuck you too. Mother fucker!"

Elise opened the door in time to catch the yellow carnage of the fifth mother fucker.

"What the hell are you doing?" She slung yellow ribbons from her hands in a fit of movement.

"I don't fucking know!" Jim screamed at the neighbors they didn't have anymore. Since they'd moved out to the fucking woods—up a goddamned mountain with fuck-all to do in the goddamned blizzard to come. *We'll eat each other—surely. Donner, party of two.* Jim lay on his back, staring at the amorphous clouds above. He imagined they looked like the coloration in marble. An impenetrable light up there.

Elise stood out on the grass and measured the assault from a distance. The porch was slick with what should have been breakfast. She watched him watch the clouds before sitting

next to him. She took the last two eggs from the now crushed carton, offered him one, and kept the other for herself. Elise pointed across the lawn at the fat little gnome her father had bought her. It stared back at them with a smug, ceramic face smoking a long-stemmed pipe.

“Bet you can’t hit it,” she said. She did her best not to smile. Jim didn’t have to try. He accepted the challenge without a word and hurled the egg across the lawn, striking the gnome clean in the face.

“First try,” he said. He turned to Elise in time to see her egg striking Jim in the chest.

“Proud of you,” she laughed.

“What the fuck?” He would have been angrier if he wasn’t so proud of her.

“You’re weakest at the cusp of victory!” She jumped with excitement. *The Art of War*. She’d beat him at his own game. No one else ever had.

“You actually get it now?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She smiled.

## Afterward

The title for this project is derived from the Greek *allos*, meaning “other,” and *tropos*, meaning “form.” In chemistry, an allotrope describes an element’s ability to exist in variable physical states, such as carbon’s ability to exist as both graphite and diamond. The two are cooked at different temperatures and hardened by different pressures, but they’re still just plain old carbon—same as us. Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson illuminates something astounding about this fact:

The most astounding fact is the knowledge that the atoms that comprise life on earth—the atoms that make up the human body are traceable to the crucible that cooked light elements into heavy elements...these stars...went unstable in their later years. They collapsed and then exploded, scattering their enriched guts across the galaxy; guts made of carbon...When I look up unto the night sky I know that, yes, we are part of this universe, we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both those facts, the universe is in us. (Tyson)

The characters within “Allotropes” are allegories for these variable physical states, cooked and pressed under different conditions but all made of the same basic ingredients. They all seek the same thing—Self-identity—and they all struggle to find it for the same reasons: they believe that identity is *sui generis*—Self-made.

“Allotropes” models my own conception of the Self as a function of the mind that is necessarily contradictory. These characters view the Self as a commodity with a finite shelf-life—something they own for a while and inevitably lose. And by accepting the limited

nature of their Self, they have been convinced by their own minds that their existence is, in fact, a very rare occasion. Rare as diamonds. Their sense of Self is inflated as a unique object in and controlled by the universe, something that must be protected at any cost but especially at the cost of the Other. And such a notion makes their Self-hood a paradox that leads to anxiety, egoism, and solipsism. For how can anyone define the Self without first defining the Other? This paradox leaves the *sui generis* Self with only two interpretations of reality: either we are “thrown in” a hostile universe to suffer Others, or else we must become gods and rule the Others we’ve created. Such characters view themselves as something that is pushed and pulled by universal forces—good and evil, male and female, life and death—and so seek a similar governance within their own lives. As Theologian Peter Berger relates, they “forget” that the universe is not governed by order—order is projected onto it as a human construct—any more than it is governed by chaos. And the same applies for humans themselves. “Any exercise in social control also demands legitimation over and above self-legitimizing facticity of institutional arrangements...the sharper the resistance...the more important will it be to have additional legitimations” (Berger 31). Put another way, as we seek Self-hood, the definition necessarily becomes more complex and uncomfortable for the *sui-generis* Self that can interact only with the Other. And all this while death is looming overhead. So we build a nomos of artificial discourses and binary oppositions—a wall that better enforces our illusory separation between the Self and the Other. The Self becomes good, so everything else is evil. Everything else we attach to the Self—gender, religion, politics, wealth—all follow the same path. Under this model, the characters within “Allotropes” reveal their Self-hood paradox: an attempt to



Self-actualize by Otherizing. Not only is it impossible—it's just absurd. Harvard psychologist Richard Alpert asserts:

In our culture, we've been trained for individual differences to stand out. So you look at each person and you immediately think brighter, dumber, older, younger, richer, poorer and we make all these dimensional distinctions—put them into categories...and we get so that we only see others as separate from ourselves. (Alpert)

These “distinctions” are, of course, human concepts—carbon didn't decide that diamonds are more valuable than graphite. But more importantly, these distinctions have no value to a mind that measures concepts dualistically—they can't exist independent of one another because they *are* one another. Philosopher Alan Watts shares this sentiment: “What I'm doing at the moment is not completely described unless your being here is described...what I am involves what you are—I don't know who I am unless I know who you are” (Watts). Just as with diamonds, we conceptualize an artificial rarity for the Self valued at the limits of our lifespan. The mind commands that we must go on existing and so anything that contradicts that mind in this way is interpreted as enemy—as Other. This project, however, stresses that just as diamonds can only exist as carbon, the Self can only exist as Other. And *vice versa* . “We define ourselves as being only [a result of the big bang]...way out on the edge of that explosion—way out in space and way out in time...You're not something that is a result of the big bang on the end of the process—you are still the process. You are the big bang—the original force of the universe—coming on as whoever you are” (*The Unpreachable Religion*).

“Allotropes” pits mythical “heroes” against “villains” to illustrate their co-dependence as Self and Other—as expressions of a Universe defining itself. The “heroes” realize the paradox of their Self-hood and shed their delusory identity. The “villains” not only alienate themselves, but ultimately fail to Self-actualize as they cling to the limited identity they’ve crafted at the expense of the world around them, a psychological process that emancipates the Self by enslaving it to the Other.

Writers such as Eliade and Foucault examine such binary oppositions as symptoms of inescapable discourses, linguistic viruses that subjugate the Self. Man vs. Woman, Black vs. White, Good vs. Evil—all linguistic categories we’ve internalized, just as Berger notes, to hold some ephemeral value. “Allotropes” doesn’t deny this—quite the opposite, in fact—binaries can be as divisive as they are artificial. So why use them? Well, a cataphatic system that relies on positive sign value would make even basic conversation infinite:

“Who are you?”

“I’m me.”

“But who is ‘me’?”

“Well, I’m myself, of course.”

And an apophatic system that relies on negation of sign value would be too esoteric to function:

“Who are you?”

“I’m not you.”

“Well, I know that—but who are *you*?”

“I’m everyone that is not ‘me,’ obviously.”

Wars have been fought for less. The trouble here is our personalization and internalization of language itself—a function of the mind that tells us our thoughts are as material as the mind itself. Hans-Georg Gadamer expresses the same notion: “‘The linguisticity of human experience means that human relationship to the world is absolutely and fundamentally linguistic’...language has invaded the transcendental domain as an *a priori* restriction that enables the world to emerge” (Parkes 203). That is to say, our reality can only be defined through language that we in turn use to define ourselves. As the illustration above demonstrates, this is a messy business because our language value is as artificial as the Self *ding an sich*. And we often “forget” this for, “internalization entails self-objectivation. That is a part of the self becomes objectivated, not just to others but to itself, as a set of representations of the social world—a ‘social self,’ which is and remains in a state of uneasy accommodation with the non-social self-consciousness upon which it has been imposed” (Berger 83). One can see both the difficulty in defining the Self and the necessity of the Other within that description. Language is a tool—it’s no more sexist, or racist, or xenophobic than a hammer is. It all depends on what we do with it. The model I’ve constructed for “Allotropes” suggests that we don’t use language to build or break our world, but that our language uses us to build the Self and break the Other; our frustrated identity is a case of the tail wagging the dog.

“Allotropes” doesn’t aim to reverse binary oppositions as it is a paradoxical exercise. The practice relies on the supposition that language begets thought, thought begets Self, and that Self is something unique. For one, there’s far more ebb and flow between this abstract hierarchy

than that. And such a practice ignores the intense egoism manifested by our assumption that our Self must be well-defined and even better preserved. Binary oppositions are the gate keepers for a Self that will stop at nothing to linger on and on forever as *only* the Self. Such a landscape provides the Self with a wilderness populated by Other and the Other a bastion that is under constant assault by the Self. To reverse, say, *man* with woman does nothing to resolve the tired implication of dominance and even less to afford her agency if the purpose is to dismantle the very concept of dominance in the first place. She is given the impossible choice of solipsism wherein the world happens *because* of her or idealism wherein the world happens *to* her. She must either be woman because man let her or else take from man the agency that makes her woman. Binary oppositions, deconstructed or otherwise, can only serve to inflate the sense of Self as either subject or ruler without ever addressing what the Self actually is. “I’m me” or “I’m not me.” It’s like the prophet Zarathustra’s conundrum of willing to un-will: “Not backward can the Will will; that it cannot break time and time’s desire—that is the will’s loneliest tribulation” (Nietzsche 146). “Allotropes” relies not on oppositions, but on a union inspired by the Gestalt theory of perception, which claims a figure and background are a single geometry ( *The Book* 74). *Mona Lisa* is not a woman nor the Italian country side—she’s a painting; a painting that is co-dependent upon a foreground and a background.

The trouble for these characters is not simply their perceived dominant/dominated identity, but with the egoism that demands an identity, a Self independent of Other—the Self-hood paradox. Erwin Schrödinger remarks, “This life of yours...is not merely a piece of the entire existence, but is, in a sense, the *whole*; only this whole is not so constituted that it can be

surveyed in one single glance” (Schrödinger 21-2). While our disparate interpretations of existence as Self and Other may differ, our identity is shared among all of us.

The mind works in this way—we can’t help it. It tells us to make distinctions between the “me” and the “everything else” around it. And such distinctions serve a purpose—when we needed to distinguish between us and the prehistoric beasts hunting us. But as we’ve grown, our culture has come to mimic this kill or be killed polemic as an egocentric fabrication; we assume that the beasts are hunting *only* us in a world we’ve been “thrown in” as victims of a cruel universe. Such a thought, logical though it is, grounds the Self’s compulsive need to live on forever and asserts that the Self is somehow separate from the world that created it. Alan Watts suggests this very idea, claiming that by defining the Self as the opposite of Other “we have orphaned ourselves both from the surrounding world and from our own bodies, leaving ‘I’ as a *discontent* ed and alienated spook, anxious, guilty, unrelated, and alone” (*The Book* 105).

“Allotropes” emphasizes that binary oppositions are not destructive in and of themselves—they’re just words after all—but that our compulsion to define the Self by any means necessarily makes them destructive. Destructive not just for the Other, but for the Self too. When we attempt to designate Self by means of Other, we are crafting a finite concept in order to define our infinite Self as beyond all definition. Which, of course, is utter nonsense.

“Allotropes” vindicates those characters who realize the Self-hood paradox is as artificial as the binaries used to create it—a latent and assigned value prescribed by the Ego. The “heroes” of “Allotropes” come to see that by “confusing [your] names with nature, you come to believe that having a separate name makes you a separate being” (*The Book* 69-70). The “heroes” see themselves not as Self surrounded by Other but as quantum states of existence—

Self and Other, existing simultaneously. As Heideggerian Graham Parkes conveys, “Self-transformation can then be described as a process in which the normal relationship between language and reality breaks down into silence...in such a condition there is no split between the world and the one who observes it” (Parkes 204-6).

The core purpose of “Allotropes”—the thesis—is to disassemble this notion that the Self must be either independent of discourse or beholden to it. Instead, these “heroes” walk a “middle path” that resolves the Self-hood via co-dependence with their Other. For if there is no Self without Other, the margin between the two is less and less quantifiable. As Watts again relates, “the morality that goes with this understanding is, above all, the frank recognition of your dependence upon enemies, underlings, out-groups, and, indeed, upon all other forms of life whatsoever” (132). If “Allotropes” can reveal binaries as co-dependent, they cease to be divisive and come to inform the Self “as one particular focal point at which the whole universe expresses itself” (78).

All the characters illustrated within “Allotropes” share a unifying need for Self-creation. As such, I’ve designed the thesis, in part, as creation myth complete with rise, fall, and renewal. Each individual within “Allotropes” is oriented around a particular mythical archetype—The Quest, The Voyage, The Revolt—that expands on this design. Additionally, each character is designed to encompass archetypal patterns such as the Warrior or the Ruler. *The Ennead*, for example, functions as Voyage myth centered on Enneas—the Destroyer. Similarly, “Delenda Est” is written as an allegory to the Punic Wars—Appian’s mythical Rebellion narrative.

Within “Delenda Est,” the protagonist Elise seeks Self-actualization by revolting against her foil, Jim, just as in *The Aeneid* Queen Dido revolted against Pygmalion to claim her own destiny.

This same mythical allusion is threaded throughout each of the eight stories in “Allotropes.”

Why Myths? Philosopher John Hick indicates that “we speak mythologically about the noumenal Real by speaking literally or analogically about its phenomenal manifestations” (351). The same notions are shared more immediately by Peter Stillman, who writes that myths are “an attempt to say something important in story form—something that would be too awkward or difficult to explain literally, like death” (5). The questions I’m asking within “Allotropes” are uncomfortable—existential questions always are. However, the function of myth within “Allotropes” exceeds this simplistic construction. The myths within “Allotropes” serve as tributary examination of binary oppositions as a perceived mechanic of Jung’s collective unconscious. Wilfred Guerin explains that “[Jung] theorized that myths do not derive from external factors...but are, in truth, the projections of innate psychic phenomena” (239). I’m not saying there’s any truth to this claim save for the function of a myth as a linguistic apparatus of the Self. Put another way, the Self reinforces its observance of discourse and binary oppositions through myths as an attempt to prove their validity. Mythical heroes and villains emerge in consciousness as extensions of the *sui generis* Self. In other words, the mythical hero is what we imagine ourselves to be and the villain is a projection of our social Other. But as Watts notes, these ideas are not our own. “Our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society” (*The Book* 89). Our heroes and villains, despite what we might imagine them

to be, are just more guardians for the Self surrounded by the Other—the origin myth of *sui generis* Self.

Through their flaws, the characters within “Allotropes” are engineered to reveal that a human condition emerges at the moment of consciousness; i.e., as these characters seek to create the Self, they fail to realize that the concept is not only dependent upon the Other, but they assume that the Self could manifest without the Other—again the Self-hood paradox emerges. With “Allotropes,” I claim this paradox is not the result of social conditioning, but of personal conditioning—our need to be the Self *ding an sich*. Returning to Eliade, “man assumes a humanity that has a transhuman, transcendent model...man is not given; he makes himself, by approaching the divine models” (99-100); in other words, when one assumes an identity, she or he assumes that it is a very important, unique identity manufactured *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—when in fact no identity exists without all other identities with which they come in contact. To claim otherwise would be like claiming the Mississippi is the source of the Atlantic Ocean. And this is precisely what the “villainous” Self of “Allotropes” does. These “villains” are forced to experience the Other on a spectrum of Idealism or Solipsism. They are sinking in the Atlantic and trying bail to out all that Mississippi flooding their ship. For these characters, either the Other is a very real threat interpreted through sensory perception, or else the Other is an invention of their mind designed to detail their own faulty Self. Whether we believe the ocean is rising or the boat is sinking, we still end up drowning.

Through mythical construction, “Allotropes” complicates its characters’ perception of Self-creation. Like Virgil’s Aeneas, they claim that they are free agents because the gods told them so—proof of Self through self-reference.



These discourses and binaries become internalized like Eliade's "divine models" and take on the form of human artifact like pottery, something invented to store cumbersome things—something that must either be used or cast down and broken. And so, for these characters, identity becomes as artificial as pottery and, must be balanced over their shoulders as a necessary burden or else shattered. The "heroes," however, realize this paradox and make the simple choice of asking their neighbor to help carry the pot. They see through the illusion that one must suffer in order to live properly. The "villains" seem themselves as "the innocent victim of this indoctrination...[as someone] being told that he *must* be free," which of course is not freedom at all (*The Book* 72). Aeneas is so indoctrinated; the Warrior follows the whims of The Divine Mother who demands, on pain of death, that he survive his trials.

The mythical structures within "Allotropes" express a tertiary dimension of the quest for identity: the duality of persona and anima/animus. I've designed "Allotropes" to explore this duality by the use of archetypal characters and their archetypal foils—foils who essentially are projections of the protagonist. Again, the Self vs. Other image occurs. We see such a transaction with Ruth and Aaron—diametrically opposed artists who seek to create the same thing with *The Ennead*. Their relationship exists as a creative endeavor for both characters, a project that combines their identities into one covalent bond—a chemical reaction wherein no matter is created or destroyed. The two form what, in mathematics, is referred to as a Ruth-Aaron Pairing—a sequence of numbers that, when added together, have the exact same prime sequence. In fact, mathematics and numbers are subtly deployed throughout "Allotropes"

as a literary device in and of itself—a device inspired by Nyogen Senzaki’s famous quote, “There are no remainders in the mathematics of infinity.” Furthermore, the mythical structure is expanded by emphasizing the importance of numbers as symbols themselves within archetypal stories. This device is meant to offer both a computational and mathematical expression of binary oppositions.

The use of numbers is explored first through computer science. In computing, bytes are the primary unit for measuring information. A single byte consists of eight bits expressed in binary code (0s and 1s) that together form a single character of text. e.g., the byte “a” is represented by the octal series: 01100001. As a literary device, this computation represents the eight unique narratives (and eight allotropes of carbon) that together form a single character—a collective Oneness that describes all others through their unique arrangement of binary information. Additionally, this literary device relies on the presumptive value of “0” being “nil” or “void” and “1” being “all” or “total.” As separate integers, they can only describe their polarity. But together, they harmonize into something greater than themselves—something infinite built through something finite.

*The Ennead* is influenced by profound theoretical and practical contributions to the comic book genre. McCloud is a primary source for the theory of comic books as a cultural meme. With regards to sequential art, McCloud theorizes that “when [artists] abstract an image through cartooning...by stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). The “motion” and evolution of the character’s psyche are depicted in real time with negative space between each successive iteration. Wonder

Woman is not simply Diana Prince—she is a vast network of human experience informed by history, by culture, and by the individual readers. Each incarnation, each issue, each panel is a depiction of a single Wonder Woman at a single moment that together forms the total being. Her Self-hood is co-dependent on the Self-hood of everyone who knows her. As Alpert relates, “I wasn’t born Richard Alpert—I was just born as a human being and then I learned this whole business of who I am and whether I’m good or bad...all that’s learned along the way” (Alpert). The same is true for Diana—she isn’t heroic because she’s strong and egalitarian—she’s strong and egalitarian because her readers have come to define those qualities as heroic. She is the very best of our Self-hood. The use of image *with* text comes to represent not simply a linear view of character, but character informed by the changing environment she or he inhabits.

“Allotropes” juxtaposes sequential art with linear narratives to illustrate an inevitable problem with language use: categorical definition. If I were asked to define myself, I might say I’m “Alexander Beisel”—but that’s not enough to identify me completely. My identity is always process and never fully complete; same as any other. *Alexander Beisel* is a concept my parents invented and gave to me to maintain. How many times do we hear “You’re not acting like yourself,” or “This doesn’t sound like you.” This is another example of the Self-hood paradox; if my name doesn’t identify me, then I must identify myself through others. “I’m Joanie and Chris’s son.” And they, of course, have the same Self-hood paradox. We might define ourselves by vocation—“I’m a writer” or maybe “I’m a graduate student,” but these concepts also come from everyone else. What’s a writer without readers? These concepts don’t encompass

everything about me—they can't. "Allotropes" and *The Ennead* seek to reveal that the very concept of "me" is co-dependent upon what you mean by "me," and your "me" is based on everyone else's "me," *ad infinitum*. And this is maddening for a mind convinced that it is a Self. McCloud continues, "When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself....Who I am is irrelevant. I'm just a piece of you. But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more" (*Understanding Comics* 33-7). Within *The Ennead*, the reader combines her or his experiences as "me" with Enneas's experiences as a fictional "me," and indeed, with Ruth and Aaron's construction of the same "me." And that's the point. Not to tell the story of "good" vs. "evil," but to show the two are co-dependent upon one another as total Self.

Regarding my literary influences, I've drawn heavily upon Transatlantic Modernism and its philosophical extension, idealism. Authors such as Woolf, Stein, Olsen, Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway inherited a discourse that questioned the nature of personal identity. As the nineteenth century ended, so too did the West's models for economic, political, and technological standards. For these writers, the foundation of the world shifted underfoot virtually overnight. These authors write from a perspective that captures this fluctuating landscape, and the challenges of crafting a Self that was, in some ways, a hybrid of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I see these same basic questions emerging today at the dawn of another century. Even a century removed from this era, it's hard to ignore a connection between "The Lost Generation" and "The Worst Generation." Both labels are, of course, sensationalized and far more complex than can be discussed here. However, the characters

within “Allotropes” are not immune to these similarities—a breed of “eternal recurrence” that allows a discourse of failed personhood to flourish. “May not whatever can happen of all things have already happened, resulted, and gone by?” (Nietzsche 163). Commoditized warfare, crumbling political structure, and a dizzying technological pace all contribute to the Self with “Allotropes”—another “failed” generation and failed for the same reasons as before.

Virginia Woolf remarks that “do what she will a woman cannot find in [literature] that fountain of perpetual life which the critics assure her is there. Suppose for instance that men were only represented in literature as lovers of women...how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them.” (903). This is the foundation for inverting the genders within *The Ennead*. *Though I can only write "with the male side of the brain," I have designed Enneas to address those archaic Victorian ideals denounced by Woolf herself* (903). Enneas is first a human being, and secondly a woman, and her narrative calls to task the contemporary iterations of *Leda and the Swan* as seen in works like *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. *The women of “Allotropes” are not dependent on men—far from it. They are either dominant or co-dependent on their male counterpoints. As such, they are my own “plan[s] of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female...[a] normal and comfortable state of being...in harmony together, spiritually cooperating”* (Woolf 901). The men within “Allotropes” are similarly designed as either domineering or co-dependent upon their female counterpoints. As Alan Watts relays, “A man who is emotionally paralyzed cannot be male, that is he cannot be male in relation to female, for if he is to relate himself to a woman there must be something of the woman in his nature” (Nature, Man and Woman 113). “Allotropes” is not, by design, absent of sexism, but sexism is used to expose itself as an “androgynous mind” flailing and desperate

to define the Self as anything but the Other (Woolf 901).

Woolf herself greatly admired Joyce's unique brand of feminism, and I've adopted similar strategies for "Allotropes" as well. Joyce's "A Little Cloud," "Eveline," and "Two Gallants" far exceed their time, drawing into question the definitions of masculine and feminine as both a cultural and economic distinction. Joyce's characters, especially Eveline and Chandler, are both paralyzed within a discourse rife with gendered binaries—Eveline defined by Frank and Chandler defined by Annie. With "Allotropes," I assert that such characters fail to Self-actualize not simply because of social constraints, but because of the Self-hood paradox. Frank fails by seeking to control Eveline, and Eveline fails by being controlled. The same can be said for Hemingway's *In Our Time*, as Nick inhabits a world where gender roles are no longer divined from on-high, but rather from basic human equanimity. Both Nick and Krebs reject their feminine counterparts—their "feminine minds"—to better define their masculinity, and both, of course, fail to Self-actualize. Faulkner, too, activates this "failed-male" archetype for characters like Quentin, who cling to the Old South as a means of identity—a system of control that creates a Self only at the cost of the black and female Other. Quentin's own Self-hood paradox emerges within the text: "It's not when you realise that nothing can help you—religion, pride, anything—it's when you realise that you don't need any aid" (*The Sound and the Fury* 134). With Faulkner, we see also the implicit dominance within binary oppositions: "He had a word, too. Love, he called it...I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that any more than for pride or fear...people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too" (*As I Lay Dying* 172).

Authors such as Vonnegut and Lee have, for me, carried on and expanded the scope of the post-Modernist era, adapted it for the twentieth century, and affected the new millennium. Vonnegut's use of black humor, cutting sarcasm, and repetition coalesce to form a bleak but contemplative view of the human race. The characters within "Allotropes" are partly inspired by his perspective on identity—"we are who we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be"—and they are similarly a blend of cynicism and naiveté that offers a comedic outlet for what would otherwise be "preachy" characters (*Mother Night* 52). Additionally, Vonnegut's "The Shapes of Stories" has been rendered within *The Ennead*'s panel structure. Likewise, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s perspectives on class, race, and gender have proven a heavy influence for me with this project. As with Judge John Taylor's nearly comical axiom—"People generally see what they look for and hear what they listen for"—I have written my characters so that they obviate their own sense of Self to better define the Other (Lee 97).

"Allotropes" draws on these influences to convey a cubistic and polyphonic expression of identity. Together, *The Ennead* and the seven other narratives that comprise "Allotropes" total an expression of the quantum Self: an articulation of unity and dissolution of binary oppositions invented by the mind to reconcile the Self and Other. Through these fictional narratives, the definition of the Self and its Other are questioned, explored, and detailed as a shared psychological process between all people.

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