Writer's Block, Avenue

JACOB RUSSELL DRING

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“Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality.”

Edgar Allen Poe

“Horror’s not a genre; it’s an emotion.”

Doug Winter

“When words don’t come easy, I make do with silence and find something in nothing.”

Strider Marcus Jones

1

The night felt thick on his skin, like a cosmic quilt layered with soot and stitched with iniquity. The air tasted bitter, as was the blood flowing through his veins. He knew he was trapped here, but he did not belong here. There was greatness for him, he believed it, and it augmented his heart. But this place, it chewed away his shell of sanity. The argent eye in the sky reflected its glow over the town, and as he gazed up he saw that its scarred face resembled his own. Then a crow swept past, cawing as it perched atop a street sign he came across. His gut knotted into a noose as he read the decrepit lettering.

"Writer's Block, Avenue."

His voice spoke for his mind, and it was a raspy sound beneath his breath. As the words fled his lips like maggots crawling from a carcass, a chill iced his spine. There was a shift in the air, or so it seemed, and the very night itself materialized dread. He could feel it alright, gooseflesh of his skin and bristling hairs on his nape.

The crow, abnormally large, cawed and lifted off into the night. Such a prominent full moon and a vast glow, considering so few street lamps lit, not a single cloud in sight and yet not one star.

A sudden creak caught Brendan's ear and he pirouetted at the street corner to look behind him. His gaze found an abandoned car, its wheels missing, propped up by four cinderblocks. A burgundy paintjob was on its final stage of decay, rust devouring the car inside-out. The passenger door was missing, this side of it facing the street and thus Brendan too. He spotted a shadow shift in the dark bowels of the car's cabin, then lumber out onto the street. It gained shape and form, sprouting legs upon which it plodded and arms it used to claw through the air.

Brendan hadn't known true fear until now.

As the aberration gained speed, loping toward him with an awkward gait and snarling with an unseen mouth, Brendan's muscles froze up. The air was temperate, but the cold of fear plagued his body. His breaths became staccato repetitions, the requiem to his demise. All of a sudden a bellowing, frantic man with disheveled glasses and tattered clothes sprinted out into the street. Where had he come from, an alley or building on the side perhaps? He was swinging a machete over his head like a lasso, while the warmth fled from his face to leave but a pallid semblance behind.

The aberration's top half spun to face the charging man, while its legs continued to pace forward. With one swing of an arm, it severed the man's head from his neck. An arc of blood crossed the air, following the head as it tumbled and then sickeningly bounced down the street. Brendan felt his throat seize up, his thoughts scattered and regurgitated upon. He had never seen someone get decapitated before, but then again he didn't have much recollection of his identity or life before walking this dreadful street. His mind was no clearer than chimney smoke rising amid a fog storm.

Just as nightmarishly, the headless man's body staggered to and fro for a few seconds, as if confused and blind. Blood spurted from the gory neck stump until the corpse collapsed onto the tarmac, then just laid there vacated of life. The aberration, the abomination, the atrocity—all of these valid names in

Brendan's eyes—now returned its full attention to him. It regained speed, and as it neared him its features became ominously more detailed.

Viscerally appalling, the thing was pure terror.

Its face, if such a thing it could be called, hung in strands of sinew and tissue, a macabre palette of flayed flesh. It was Picasso's mind thrown into a fan and splattered across a canvas that was neither bone nor skin. Its eyes were multiple and shadowy, like onyx beads reflecting the moon's glow. They swiveled in their terrible sockets, searching for something—not Brendan as a whole, because he was already very visible, but something particular. Where to attack first, what to dismember, what to dissect, what to toy with and ultimately devour.

What was worth consumption and what was worth the buzzards?

Brendan felt, somewhere deep and abysmal inside himself, that he actually grasped this. Saw it, read it, in the atrocity's stygian eyes and how its twisted face shifted with every stride. Its body was less detailed, victim still to whatever shadowy pit it had crawled out of. Hell had no meaning to it or Brendan—even Hell was not a dismal enough place for this terror to have walked from.

This was worse than some apparition or demonic entity. This was fear and doubt and sorrow personified. This was a wall of flesh and shadow that threatened to destroy everything Brendan was. This *thing* sought to end the human and conscience that defined Brendan.

As it came within reach, however, Brendan's brain lit up with incandescence. It wasn't some epiphanous brilliance or solar flare glancing across his Third Eye. It was, simply put, a basic realization.

Brendan wanted to live.

Moreover, he didn't want to die *here*.

An abrupt sidestep almost as easy as breathing saved his life. Had he not moved at that nanosecond, the atrocity's jagged shadow flesh of an arm would've lobotomized him. Now he

scrambled down the sidewalk, stumbling every other bounding stride, fingers raking a tall chainlink fence on his left. It rattled like metallic bat wings. A hundred feet later he realized that the fence not only bordered a large basketball court but was also crested with barbed wire. Old, rusted, cruel barbed wire. Some strips were tangled, others missing entirely.

Why would a basketball court have such security? And then the thought evaporated when a shrill cry pierced the air. The fog itself, which was thin and hung like a low ceiling above the town, seemed to ripple from the wail. It lasted six long seconds and drawled without flaw, never cracking. It gave Brendan the impression of being inhuman, although something vaguely hominid about it tickled him with dread.

When he looked over his shoulder next, he didn't see the atrocity pursuing him. In fact he didn't see it at all, which partially unnerved him even more. Fear of the unknown was a common concept of the human conscience, and in this place it seemed to be an element of the atmosphere.

The blood-curdling scream, half-screech and half-howl, finally cut off. Brendan's heart skipped a beat before resuming the race it was poorly competing in. He paused to survey his surroundings with a more meticulous eye, vigilance never leaving his perception. On one side of this road enigmatically called Writer's Block Ave., was an extensive stretch of courts. Basketball, tennis, even a squash court with walls erected against the fencing. Stranger yet was this ten-foot fencing perimeter and the barbed wire lining the tops. The courts' floors were all tattered and in ruins, like a mangy dog's fur. Some of the basketball hoops were folded over, toppled halfway up their posts, backboards having plummeted at some point or another despite a melted look.

And then Brendan saw it. A figure, a twisted dark shape, caught in the netting of a tennis court. It struggled to free itself, but was quiet and languid in doing so. As Brendan reluctantly approached it, he realized it was wounded and might've been the source of that wail earlier. Meanwhile his thoughts warned him

of a potential trap. His head was on a swivel, however, and he reassured himself that it was alright for now…

Upon reaching the fence dividing the tennis court from the sidewalk, Brendan paused and gazed over his shoulder. Assumedly abandoned buildings lined the other side of the street, mostly local shops and cafés. Every window was dark and some even barred, resembling urban faces of lamentation. Then he returned his gaze to the tennis court, and frighteningly saw not one creature entangled in the net but seven more—of which stood like gargoyles on the court.

Their stares branded Brendan with trepidation. He was outnumbered and immensely terrified, but still did his empty hands clench into fists at his sides. His breath felt hollow, the taste dry and sour at his lips, but inside his chest beat residual courage.

Retreating for he could not logically fight them, Brendan nonetheless salvaged this valor for what it was worth. He utilized vigor for composure, instead of panicking earlier. The fear washed over him only to cling to his shoulders like an anvil-bound cape. It could slow him down, it could even temporarily hold him back, but he wouldn't allow it to stop him.

Only he had that power. And, of course, the horde of anomalies now pursuing him.

They each had two legs and bulbous bodies with stout necks, like featherless rooster mutants. Skinless, too, for that matter. What portions of their shadow-coated bodies were visible suffered from loss of skin and even chunks of flesh. They appeared to bleed as they loped, giving the impression that motion caused them pain and thus quite possibly enraged them more. All the same, they continued chasing Brendan across the street, their misshapen faces opening up and snapping shut every few seconds. Saliva viscous like coagulated blood strung from disheveled fangs, below eyeless brows and teardrop nasal cavities.

Brendan reached the other side of the street, lowering his shoulder into a seemingly condemned library's front door.

Partially to his surprise, the wooden double-doors buckled inward, splintering down the center and rattling the hinges. Brendan stumbled inside, where darkness spoke a whole other language. The corners were shrouded with personal abysses, but the center of the two-story library was settlement to a yellowish glow. It was like daylight filtering through windows, while firefly-sized particles of dust drifted lazily through the air. This might've been a comforting sight and feeling had it been logical, but as it was daylight didn't grace the town. Night was upon them, and the troposphere was thick with fog.

Where, then, did this dim radiance originate?

Brendan heard the bawling abominations enclose on the library behind him. He frantically turned around to close the shoddy doors, which he had to barricade to keep shut. Through their brazen handles he drove a steel curtain rod lying nearby, then backpedaled as the atrocities barreled into the doors. They rattled and clattered, wood splintering but not shattering. Their howling became barking, as if from zombified Cujos, undoubtedly regurgitating saliva and blood onto the doors outside.

When they finally stopped, it was abrupt. Silence came in pall form, like a massive thunderhead settling over the library, except without the storm.

2

Brendan's irresolution on his next move was shattered when a blur of motion caught his eye. He glanced up, to the second level balcony, whose railing was of ornate oak posts. Several were missing, shredded curtains and flayed books occasionally draped over the railing. This blur of motion was humanoid alright, and despite having been brief, Brendan felt reassurance upon glimpsing certain details.

Clothing color, like a maroon T-shirt and faded, ripped blue jeans. Shoeless feet, pale if not dirtied. It came to Brendan then that he was uncommonly observant.

The semi-detailed blur was now lost among the book shelves. Now Brendan's gaze washed over the second floor, taking note of a swinging chandelier that looked like it might've cost two grand. In spite of the town's otherworldly squalor and ruination, this library had a stomach for luxury.

Unfortunately for Brendan, and possibly its former denizens, the town itself had a stomach for him.

He headed for the front desk, which was draped in erratic shadows, as if they were playing hide-and-seek with each other. When he arrived, they scattered like cockroaches after a flipped light switch. Sitting in the chair behind the counter was a corpse whose innards were coiled in its lap, the gruesome remains of a

pet cat. Instead it stank of mildew, decomposition, and families of larvae burrowing through what flesh remained.

Brendan tasted bile in his throat.

Suddenly he spotted movement—the faceless corpse's left arm shifted. A shoulder bone dislodged with a sound like crumbling chalk, and Brendan leapt back. Lunging out into the open, trying to bridge the gap between him and the corpse, was a poodle-sized creature. It appeared to be a cross between frog and pig, with gruesome tusks rising from a severe underbite and glinting black eyes staring straight up. Perhaps this was why it missed Brendan, who staggered back while the creature squealed and hit the floor rolling.

Panting, Brendan lost both his nerve and cowardice in the same breath. He rushed over to the atrocity and began stamping it, kicking with the toes of his shoes when he wasn't driving his heel down. It squealed and whimpered, twirling around on the ground using one of its broken shoulders as a pivot point. Blood had spread across the floorboards and chunks of its flesh were coming undone like dislodged puzzle pieces. Seven seconds of this left Brendan nearly breathless and the monstrosity lifeless. He tiredly backpedaled until his heels knocked the bottommost step of a staircase and he collapsed into a sitting position.

"Good job, mister," said a juvenile voice behind him. Startled, Brendan leapt to his feet and put some space between him and the stairs, whitened fists raised. The stranger was maybe twenty years old, short brown hair, pale skin where dirt hadn't caked it on his face and arms…a maroon T-shirt and unintentionally ripped jeans. He held a makeshift spear in his right hand.

"But," the kid added with a shake of his head, "I wouldn't rest for too long. Can't afford it. I'm Cliff, by the way."

"You mean that thing I'd like to jump off of right about now?" Brendan's subconscious spoke for him, lips barely moving to accommodate the words.

"Oh, no. Take your own life and you'll stay here forever.

I doubt that's in your itinerary."

"Is that…is that what happened to those things out there? Were they once people?"

"Yes, but not the suicides. They're in the air, that humidity you breathe. Their souls are condemned to speculate the terrors of this place. Afterall, they took the easy way out. There is never pride in that."

"How…how do you know all of this?" Brendan cocked an eye, taking a cautionary step back.

"Been here for some time. Surviving. Can't say how long exactly." Cliff breathed deep, looked around frantically. "We should get going. If you feel that you can trust me. I think I do."

Brendan wasn't sure if the kid meant that he could trust this stranger or himself, the latter possibility giving Brendan chills. Regardless, he did agree with Cliff that they should keep moving.

That much should be damn obvious.

"*What* is happening here?" Brendan voiced instead, the fearful curiosity gnawing at him from the inside.

"I assume you arrived the same way I did, and the others. Walking, amnesiac, afraid. You saw the sign. And the things outside…the ones that never made it out of here alive."

These words from Cliff alone made him want to ask more questions. And then a fluttering sound caught his attention. Like a bird, with the plumage of book pages, bouncing around the library. A fly unable to find an open window. Trapped, frustrated.

Angry.

The fluttering enigma amplified and adapted newer, rawer sounds. Bones extending, breaking through a flesh-bound cage. Cliff's eyes widened, and Brendan practically clung to him; his eyes ransacked the immediate area, looking for a weapon.

"Grab the paper cutter on the desk. Then meet me upstairs. Hurry!"

After saying this, Cliff scrambled up the stairs, which angered Brendan a bit, but made him hurry more, which was

good. He frightfully returned to the desk, giving a wide berth to the thing he'd killed earlier, and spotted a paper cutter on one corner. He held it down and tore free the blade part, breaking it just the right way. The blade was stainless steel but still showed signs of wear. It still seemed very sharp, and as he palmed the handle this was all that mattered to Brendan.

"Get up here!" Cliff suddenly yelled, his voice cracking.

Brendan heard shuffling feet and that terrible fluttering again, only now it was heavier and harsher. He could've sworn he heard the sound of bones dangling and clattering together, like some rib-cage chandelier. He hoped that Cliff wasn't in danger, no more than he was at the moment; he tried to picture the kid in his head but all he drew was blankness.

"Where are you!?" Brendan called out as he crested the steps, nearly slipping on the last one. "What's that sound!?"

"Get down!"

Brendan dropped without hesitation. In the same instant something bulky and winged flew directly over him. A barbed tail swung down, slashing through the air. If he hadn't moved when he did, Brendan's head would've been bouncing down the steps. When he rolled over on his back to look up, the airborne adversary had gone. It now flew through the library, despite its manta ray size, wingspan and all. Brendan heard bookshelves being knocked over entirely as the creature flapped its wings, which didn't sound the least bit normal.

No surprise there.

"It's clear, c'mon!" Cliff yelled. "Aisle Seventeen, all the way back!"

Brendan didn't waste any more time than he already had. He scrambled along the main aisle, keeping close to the guardrail. The aisles he passed on his right were each empty, but he didn't glance down every one. An inkling of fear gave him visions of some unknown monstrosity lurking in one, lying in wait. His shoes slapped the floorboards as he ran, giving the impression of a rabid dog barking at his heels. The sounds were an orgy of paranoia, until he reached 17 and veered around the

corner.

Quietude settled for a moment when he saw Cliff standing there, waiting.

"This way, mister," he said with a simple nod of his head. The spear remained in his hand, except now it had blood on the sharp end. Or was that blood? Looked more like viscid oil.

"Did you wound it?" Brendan asked with a raspy breath.

"Doesn't matter," Cliff shook his head. "It'll be back soon. We gotta go."

"Lead the way," Brendan exhaled. So, Cliff did. He followed the kid to the back wall of the library's second floor, where a window had been shattered and overlooked the parking lot. It was a boneyard of abandoned vehicles, most of them appearing to have severely caught fire or been in wrecks. For a moment Brendan thought he could hear their postmortem groans, just a herd of steel animals whose souls were as condemned as the ones Cliff mentioned.

That notion alone made Brendan's skin crawl and his throat itch. Could he really feel their lost souls with every breath he took? Unseen ash of the afterlife creeping along his tongue and filling his lungs with doubt…

"Don't stand in one place for too long outside," Cliff's voice snapped him out of his daze. Brendan nodded and descended the makeshift ramp behind Cliff, bridging the gap between the library's second floor and the asphalt. His feet alighted and he took a brevity of respite. He asked where Cliff was leading him.

"Sanctum. And then we'll part."

"What, why?" Brendan asked, panic tinging his voice. "Can't you help me?"

"To an extent. Sanctum has weapons. Then you have to venture into the Fog, and if you survive…well, you'll escape. But there's more to it than that. You'll have to come to a conclusion, psychologically."

Normally Brendan would just roll his eyes at such a

statement, but now he was beginning to truly question the purpose of being lost here. And what did Cliff mean by 'the Fog'? It was night here but a haze remained visible nonetheless, thickest above the buildings. And 'Sanctum?' Why leave a place called that?

"What is the Fog? Is that like a district or something?"

"The far side of town. Well, of the street. There are no other roads here. Just this, and it seems to go on forever. Nobody's ever returned from the Fog though. It is always night here, but in the Fog it is nothing…the air is gray, the sky unseen. It is not dark, just…gray."

Brendan nodded, although it was more dismissal than understanding. He then posed the obvious question—if it were possible to speak in anything but riddles. There was both frustration and authenticity in his voice, lead in his eyes.

"When you've been here as long as I have…" Cliff trailed off, mumbling.

"Fine. Whatever. And this Sanctum place…how far?"

"That I can be curt about—ten minutes' walk, it's at a school. There are other people there. We should get going, mister."

"Right. My name is Brendan, by the way."

"Good to meet you. I hope you make it, Brendan. I really do. Now c'mon, let's get going. Stay close."

Brendan felt that he could trust this young man, but was growing wearier by the minute of just how vague this situation was. Since the obscure winged encounter back at the library, nearly ten minutes have passed without any sign of hostility. Silence laid its pall over the area like a thick cape of blood and shadow, the night still heavy and pervasive.

"So what attracts them?" Brendan asked out of the blue.

"The creatures?"

Brendan nodded. "Yeah, if that's what you wanna call 'em."

"Well, they aren't anything but—living animals, people more or less when it comes down to it. As atrocious as they are,

they were once like us.”

“Tell that to yourself next time one’s trying to eat your face.”

Cliff released a brief chuckle, a tiny flicker of flame in this abyss, and then it was gone. Cliff shook his head and continued to answer Brendan's initial question.

“They’re drawn to fear, doubt, and diffidence.”

“I’m scared shitless right now. Why aren't they crawling all over us?”

“You’re with someone you trust, who gives you some form of comfort. That’s a defense, but it isn’t a very good one. Which is why I’m walking pretty fast. In higher numbers, we are strongest.”

“Then why were you alone?”

“I'll tell you when we get to Sanctum.” There was a sensitive defensiveness rolling off his tongue. “And keep your voice down, please.”

Brendan wasn’t going to press the matter anymore, but he had a feeling that Cliff was with someone else before crossing paths with him, and they’d been killed.

“How far are we?” Brendan whispered. He couldn’t discern time very well here, nor distance considering the bleak consistency of surroundings. One condemned building after the next, some brick and others wooden, but all were on death row. Their cries were as silent as the atmosphere, nonexistent but somehow terribly melancholic.

“Six-hundred and ninety-seven feet,” Cliff replied, almost robotically.

Brendan cocked an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yes, I have the distance memorized from certain areas. I move around a lot and, like I said, I’ve been here for some time. Some damn, indeterminable time.”

“Gotcha. And what do you do for food? You, I mean, and these other people at the school?”

“Provisions aren’t a necessity here. Time, if you can even call it that anymore, passes without much consequence. Hunger

is as oblivious to us as we are to it. The only voracity we feel is the yearning to leave this place. There are some men and women at Sanctum who claim to have been here for years, without food or water, just cowering at the school. They haven't aged a day. Although…"

Cliff paused at the sound of metal scraping metal, but it was distant and faint. Brendan saw him shudder and then it's gone, this fear that passed over him didn't bother to dig in its claws. Or perhaps Cliff had grown a thick hide from that human flaw, a sort of armor that protected him against its more capricious kin.

"Although," he continued, however picking up the pace, "staying here for so long without venturing beyond the school…without exposing yourself to the creatures and to the fear, without fighting them…does have its consequences."

"Like?"

"Mindlessness. They grow incoherent, often babbling gibberish, even including numbers. The really 'old' ones are completely quiet. As if their souls have taken vows of silence."

Poor timing and terrible punctuation, the silence that was engulfing them no longer existed. A howl the sound of brakes squealing and a hundred moons dying not only pierced the air but permeated it. Brendan, unlike Cliff, froze with fear.

"Do you have…" Brendan swallowed a lump in his throat, then continued his whisper, trying to keep up with Cliff while his gaze darted around. "Names for these…creatures?"

"Sure do. Best to gauge our defenses that way. The one you just heard, we call an Eater. The winged thing back at the library, a Snapper. And the creature that you beat to death by the desk—that was a Quad. They're the vermin of this place."

"What about the bipedal things, they're eyeless and howl shrilly."

"Cataracts. They frequently hunt in packs, but none of these things work like any organism might. They can manipulate the air, manifest seemingly from nowhere, and adapt in macabre ways beyond our imagination."

T W O

"Excellent," Brendan said sarcastically, the cynicism thick on his tongue. He then recalled the very first thing he saw, the first monster that had decapitated that man. He still hadn't mentioned it to Cliff, nor did he really want to. Maybe it'd wait 'til they reached Sanctum.

If they reached Sanctum.

3

Eaters, Snappers, Quads, and Cataracts. These rudimentary names for such complex atrocities crowded Brendan's mind as much as the images did. Reveries he wished to forget, banish from his cranium for all time. They devoured his comfort and courage like rats on a decaying corpse. He felt that his conscience had become not so different than such a thing. No more than roadkill melting to the asphalt.

Cliff was clearly experienced in this place, despite his age. Remembering what he'd mentioned earlier about how time didn't affect human antiquity here, not physically at least, made Brendan think Cliff has been here for weeks or even months.

If such a meter of time existed.

Brendan couldn't imagine surviving here for more than a day or two. If he hadn't met Cliff when he did, chances were that he wouldn't see the end of a few hours' stay. Unlike these other people yearning to stay alive and cower behind four walls, something in Brendan kindled wildly. He needed to *leave*, to escape this wretched place of facelessness.

To be doomed here for eternity should he die in trying, however, was quite the discouragement. But to remain here in a similar condemnation, only to slowly lose his mind…which exactly was worse?

THREE

"Dare I ask why you call them 'Eaters'?" Brendan sighed.

"You'll see."

"I'd rather not."

"We're almost there, but reaching Sanctum without an encounter would be a first."

"Are there any guns here?"

"What's that?" Cliff asked with a crooked gaze.

Brendan sighed. His mind wandered, trying to escape prematurely. He pondered if Cliff's sanity had already begun to dwindle from being here however long, or if some aspects of mankind were simply devoid here. If so, then why did Brendan sustain such knowledge? He couldn't place his last name, his first only lingered behind his eye and on his tongue, as it seemed to with Cliff and probably the others. But nor could he ascertain his precise identity, occupation, residence, or kin.

Not a single memory, not even a blurry mold where one might've once resided.

"Nevermind." Brendan exhaled gutturally. His legs ached, the muscles groaning for respite. The fear, meanwhile, grew with this fresh realization. "So by 'weapons' at the school, Sanctum I mean, you really just meant more spears and shit?"

"Spears, blades like the paper cutter in your hand, knifes, fire axes, machetes, and a few bows."

A light of hope illuminated a dim corner in Brendan.

"Bows and arrows?" he asked Cliff.

"Yes. The school had an archery class, apparently. Javelins, too. None of us had believed it—hell, we even looked. Everywhere, we thought. Then one of the people who've been here for so long began mumbling about it…after filtering through all of his mindless gibberish, we figured it out. We checked, and sure enough there it was. Don't know how we missed it, but the shed offered quite a bit. He died later that night, just drifted off in his sleep. We couldn't find his pulse, and in the morning his body was gone."

Brendan perceived this as strange to say the least, although he had the faintest idea as to what had happened. He kept his notions wrapped up in his subconscious for now, hopeful to grapple a building block of courage.

"I bet a bow would be useful."

"Against some of the creatures, sure," Cliff said, throwing a few wild glances around. The air was thick and wet, suddenly feeling as if it was swimming around them. And then Cliff stopped in his tracks, left hand extended to halt Brendan at his side. Cliff's eyes slowly widened. "Eaters. They're here. I need you to run, Brendan. There's a gas station across the street about a hundred feet up. Pass that, stay on this…shit…stay on this side of the road, after the station, school will be on your right."

Cliff's movements became choppy, panic incarnate.

"Go, *now*!" he abruptly barked, such a loud voice from such a young man. Brendan, startled and genuinely terrified especially with Cliff acting this way, scrambled down the sidewalk. He began to pick up speed just before Cliff's voice chased him. "Take the ladder up, mention my name!"

"Okay!" Brendan yelled back, short of breath. "You'll be behind me, right!?"

"Yes, just *go*!"

Brendan went, alright. He ran, fueled not by cowardice but intelligence. The fear bred in his muscles and his blood, multiplying cells of commonsense in the air that he breathed.

This wasn't a craven act but a smart one.

Some battles cannot be won.

And yet Cliff remained behind, wielding but a spear as he trailed Brendan by more than five seconds. Brendan's gaze twirled about like a basketball on a player's finger, seemingly never-ending as it swept his surroundings. He grew dizzy and sick, not just from the notion but the disgust and terror. He could taste the air grow thicker by the second around him, as if alive and fretting. He briefly pondered the lost souls condemned to this place, and how their forlorn nature affected the atmosphere.

THREE

He felt sick, sure, then he imagined how they must feel. If it weren't for the reality that was the unfazed emptiness in his stomach, he would've spewed midstride. Instead his gut heaved and his throat reminded his senses just what bile tasted like.

Then his eyes spotted them.

Shapes, dark silhouettes emerging from even darker shadows of the night to his far left. Beyond parking lots and streetlamps, the latter which were often bent or uprooted from the asphalt. An urban jungle devastated by unnatural forces, a logging company whose employees were as evil as they were enigmatic. Savage creatures, doomed animals of humans as Cliff had put it, yet Brendan couldn't help perceiving them as sheer monsters.

When he spotted the first of the *creatures* emerge from their shrouds of darkness like stygian robes being shed, he stumbled to a stop. Literally frozen with fear, captivated not just by repulsion and dread, but awe in its purest form. Wonder, amazement, far from a positive manner but somehow enough to keep him from running.

Panic eventually set in, seeping into his skin.

What his eyes perceived was somehow worse than anything he had seen before this. These humanoid abominations were emaciated and tall, lanky, with skeletal limbs and a neck twice as long as most men's. Its skin was sallow and speckled, an embodiment of death's grip on the human flesh. It represented the sin of greed and gluttony in its rawest form, a painting of the macabre, a walking nightmare that howled from not one but two jaws.

The first mouth was located on its face, its bottom jaw composing its entire chin and cheeks, while the top rose where its hairline might've been. It was hairless and the skin appeared leathery. Lipless, the upper and lower rims of these mouths were bleeding gums of a terrible pink color, like a hundred lamenting roses. The inside of its cranial mouth was ruddy, wretchedly stretched and vascular, with a single slithering tongue lashing out every time it howled.

The monster of sorts moved with a hobbling gait, for clearly it possessed no muscle but then again how true to nature were these atrocious denizens? As Cliff had said, they don't adhere to the reality that their human minds might usually confide in. Nonetheless, the creature—a dozen of them, now, he saw across the backside of the parking lots—came rapaciously.

What pricked Brendan with disgust the most was its second pair of jaws. From the base of its sternum to its pelvis, essentially composing what would've been a protruding stomach, was a red-gummed mouth forever agape. No tongue here, just a vascular canvas of crimson skin that was its lower back's interior wallpaper. The teeth lining the top and bottom jaws of both mouths were unnaturally long incisors, not sharp-tipped but nonetheless incredibly gruesome.

There was no reason not to feel fear and disgust now.

"Why'd you stop!?" Cliff's voice rang out in Brendan's ear. Startled, he nearly jumped the curb when he began running again. He threw a glance over his shoulder to see Cliff bolting down the sidewalk in his direction, less than fifty feet away and quickly enclosing.

Brendan transiently assumed that Cliff had been distracting the creatures long enough for him to get some good distance. Now they were both in about as much shit as each other, the depth and stickiness of their fate beginning to mire their feet.

The twelve Eaters, as Cliff had previously called them so aptly, were beginning to cross the four-lane street now. They hobbled with less speed than an inebriated homeless man, but with a thousand times the hunger.

Brendan's eyes swept hard right, diverting from the atrocities to spot a gas station, then they swung even further and he saw the school up ahead. His shoes scuffed the sidewalk as he slowed to hang right, gaze locked on a rusty but seemingly fortified ladder on its left façade.

"Scale, scale, scale!" Cliff hollered.

THREE

Brendan dropped the paper cutter and scaled the wall via the ladder. His physical energy felt depleted, or perhaps it was just his mind that seemed sore, but regardless he ascended with bountiful speed. Below and behind him was Cliff, who lagged a bit as an Eater traversed the sidewalk.

Brendan paused halfway up the ladder to look below. He shouted something that was incoherent to even himself, half calling Cliff and half blaspheming his attacker. Then Cliff, with both hands on the spear, bent his knees and gave one solid thrust. His elbows locked and the tip of the weapon entered the Eater's stomach-mouth, exiting out its backside. Blood like melted mahogany spattered the sidewalk and the creature howled out shrilly, its voice gurgling and lilting. Cliff retracted the spear and bounded for the ladder. Behind him the Eater crumpled to the ground, death in all of its certainty taking over, leaving behind a deflated vessel from which Brendan hoped a human soul was pacified.

And then voices arrayed the roof's ledge above him.

He looked skyward to see human faces, blemished with dirt and fatigue and dread, loom over the parapet. A mental smile fluttered through Brendan before leaving on swift wings, and Cliff joined him on the ladder while the people above helped them into Sanctum.

4

There was nothing holy or remotely consoling about this place that they'd come to call Sanctum. Brendan understood it as their only form of retreat, their idealistic shelter, and it served this purpose as much as rain would make something wet. But beyond that its function was lost to the soot and shadows. After being helped and hoisted onto the roof, Brendan was greeted by empty visages and drab eyes. These were men and women, alright, no children younger than Cliff, some seemingly in their forties, but the life that might've once filled them was now en route to the exit. It was taking the escalator down, though, making for a sluggish departure.

Brendan still wished that he understood.

He felt that he grasped part of it, but which part? The beginning, middle, or end? Or maybe none of it. Maybe just a fragment that crumbled to dust in his sweaty palms.

Once Cliff was over the parapet and on his feet, he introduced Brendan to the others. Their names and identities, which were ghosts lost in a distant wildfire, faded from Brendan's retention soon thereafter. All of their attire shared the same bleak and tattered fashion sense as Cliff's, and it wasn't until now that Brendan realized he was no different. His T-shirt was disheveled and dirtied, seemingly forever. The

personification of a stain, and one that expanded to drape itself over this place entirely. His jeans were worn and discolored, not unlike his clammy and coarse skin.

He felt like they looked.

A patch of toiled dirt with a face and muffled voice.

Cliff was, amid a very few others, the most coherent. He seemed more like another individual, another human to Brendan, than the other folk inhabiting this condemned school. Abandoned, per se, except not anymore. In a sense it still housed so many children, just adults with their minds lost to a timeless time, all the way down to degenerated motor skills.

The only thing absent was the learning.

Where were the teachers, what were the lessons?

Brendan began to adapt the feeling that he and all of these people were living them right now. He tried to wrap his head around it but his brain ached and his eyes seemed to tire, as if straining to see something he simply could not.

Structurally, the building itself shared a quality of inferiority among its inhabitants. Wallpaper peeled where there was any left, what was once so vibrant in some classrooms now grayed and deathly. Locker-walled hallways were warped metal and stripped tile, mildew crept along the ceilings and in a similar manner some people cluttered corners.

This felt more like a homeless shelter than a sanctuary, although Brendan knew they were about the same when it came to vagabonds. And what better to call these people? Lost, yet most of them didn't appear too intent on finding themselves.

Sodden with melancholy, this place was.

Eventually Brendan was led by Cliff and two others, a man with a woman, to an isolated room by the base of a stairwell. The man was in his thirties by normalcy's standards, with a ragged beard and gray halo of hair. He had scarred cheeks and worn eyes, bags beneath them, but appeared to possess a strong spirit. He spoke with raspy words, an imperious voice despite the apparent fatigue, and a constant warning to Brendan—

Do *not* venture into the Fog.

Cliff and this man, Darryl, bickered all the way to the room. Eventually Cliff, and even a chiming Brendan, managed to stifle Darryl's concerns about the Fog. Brendan overtook responsibility, stating that he's had all the discouragement he could take for a lifetime, but ultimately he assured them it was for the best.

"Life or death, whatever waits me on the other side," Brendan had said with finality, "is better than decaying here."

He didn't have to say 'no offense' after that, either. They understood. The woman who strode at Darryl's side was equally strong, perhaps his spouse. Her shirt was ragged but in layers, and her skirt a beyond blemished floral pattern that draped below her knees. The pumps she wore were practically nonexistent, their transition into arid slippers leaving her on the verge of being barefoot. She didn't seem to mind; these few people who had their minds collected and their voices intact appeared more or less stable. They didn't limp around like the others, those that even moved that is, and Brendan assumed these two were some of the active few like Cliff.

Her name was Ola, and although she spoke less than Darryl and Cliff, her gaze did more than their voices ever could.

"Shut the door, please," Cliff said once inside the room. Ola gently closed the door until it clicked. She briefly stared out the small square window in the door, although its opacity limited visibility. The perfect exemplification of their life in this place.

Before Brendan stood a wall with shelving and hooks, a myriad of tools and equipment that might be used as weaponry. The few longbows were obvious choices, while the javelins and makeshift spears snagged his curious touch. Nailguns, paper cutters, even portable buzz saws were present. As appetizing and simultaneously revolting it might be to butcher his savage enemies, Brendan refused to get that close to them. Not intentionally, at least.

There was very little discussion here. Just advice, from all three of them, while Brendan heeded every word before

coming to his conclusion.

For the first time since he got here, Brendan truly felt confidence. It wasn't necessarily that he was armed now—a longbow with a quill of sturdy arrows, and a belted machete—but that he was growing more and more aware of this place. Not just the terrors that threatened their lives, either—afterall, what sort of life was this? He sought freedom, whatever that might mean beyond this place, and if he had to fight 'til he bled out then so be it…perhaps, just maybe, the principal of valor and pride could save him.

That notion was a gossamer one, as it drifted through his subconscious like a butterfly through an ocean's mist, before vanishing.

He acknowledged the full weight of his new weapons, like burdens only without the omen. His two new acquaintances, despite the doubt in his eyes conflicting with the strength of reassurance in hers, voiced their joint confidence. Brendan read the uncertainty in Darryl's gaze, felt it flow over him and leave behind a molassic residue. Was he trying to incite even more fear into Brendan, convince him to stay?

It didn't matter. Brendan was gone.

He was gone as soon as he stepped foot on the roof of that school. He was gone as soon as he read the dozens of dulled eyes under it. He was, especially, gone as soon as he entered that room of weapons.

His tools of confidence—utensils of freedom.

Brendan was assured that body armor or any form of physical protection was useless against them. Their assaults, if resulting in contact, would not end well at all. Nothing could be deflected or cushioned. Dismemberment and evisceration was common, as was decapitation, which Brendan had had the misfortune of witnessing earlier.

After being wished bountiful luck and given truckloads of see-through reassurance, Brendan was led by Cliff to the side exit. Before he reached it, at Cliff's heels, a hand seized his shoulder. He was pulled back, only to stand nose-to-nose with

the woman—whom Darryl was now calling after, jogging forth probably to pull her back.

"Don't ever look away," Ola said, her voice hushed and shaking with a hint of purity. "Never close your eyes, my friend, not both and not all."

"Dammit, Ola, would you let the man be?" Darryl grumbled, pulling Ola away from Brendan in more a warm embrace than aggressive maneuver. Ola hugged Darryl and hugged him tight, while Brendan backpedaled, his mind swimming, until Cliff's voice pulled him back into reality.

Or whatever version of it that was here.

"You okay?" he said, almost distant.

"Yeah," Brendan replied, dodging a stammer. He turned and joined Cliff as they neared the exit. There was a makeshift cage built around it, tripling the barrier efficacy of the metal emergency door.

"So, any questions before you make the journey?"

"Well…do I just keep walking, 'til I enter this…Fog, you speak of?"

Cliff nodded. "You cannot miss it. The transition might be sudden. But there is no turning back once you've entered. Only forward, can you go."

"How do you know all of this, if it's such an inescapable and dark place?"

Cliff simply shrugged. "Thoughts. Notions. The kind that just flutter through you. Others have gone, never to return. Most believe it is death that lurks toward the end of the street, supposing there is even one. Perhaps it just keeps going. For all we know the Fog *is* the escape—the world beyond this one. Whether good or bad, authentically, personal experience is the only way to find out."

"Then why don't *you* go?" Brendan insisted, lowering his voice but grinding his teeth. "You seem to be one of the most…*collected*…people here. You're smart, pensive, resourceful, and compassionate. I don't…understand."

Brendan's last word dropped like the final green leaf on a

tree at autumn's edge. He realized, now, why it was that Cliff stayed. To help the others, to try, or simply to guide those who might become trapped in here next.

A guardian of sorts.

"All shapes and sizes," Brendan muttered to himself, his gaze passing over Cliff before focusing on the emergency exit door. He felt the outside atmosphere literally pull him toward it, although he'd yet to take a step.

"I'm sorry?" Cliff said, for he hadn't quite caught what Brendan said.

The he turned back to Cliff and realized it was now or never, as painfully true as that statement was.

"When I first found myself here, that is, walking down the street…and saw the sign…" Brendan started mumbling before collecting himself. He clearly had Cliff's utmost attention. "I saw something. The first of the terrible things. It was…humanoid, but far from us. Shadows and distortions of flesh. Evil…just, pure evil. And it killed a man."

Cliff nodded, the captivated look in his eyes fading to a plain understanding. The smallest of smiles brought dimples to his cheeks, and he whispered his words to Brendan with clarity.

"You don't even know what you look like, do you?"

Brendan felt chills trickle down his spine, ice cubes crushed and dumped beneath his collar. His hands went to his face, calloused fingertips feeling the chin, lips, nose, glasses…

How hadn't he realized it until now?

Because he wasn't a man until now. He had been what he had felt most, the epitome of fear and doubt and confusion. Now he was aware, now he was confident, and yet with this realization now he was truly afraid.

But this was a necessary fear, this was tangible.

"He was…me?" Brendan's lips barely moved.

"He wasn't really there. Nor was the nightmarish thing which charged you, as I assume it hadn't gotten very close. Clearly…you're still alive, and unscathed."

"What…what does that mean?"

Cliff shrugged. “It is for you to find out. So few before you have even made the connection. Whether or not you find what you’re seeking in the Fog, I trust that you’ll ascertain the truth…in one way or another. I have faith in you, Brendan. But still…I wish you the best of luck.”

“Thank you, Cliff. And I to you.”

There was little else to be said. Their gazes exchanged handshakes, as did their palms, but ultimately it was that mutual stare that spoke what their voices couldn’t brandish. And then Brendan left Sanctum, its door clanging shut behind him, audibly locking and sealing him out of its grasp.

Brendan took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the bitter taste of forlorn souls. His body wept for them as he sweated, and his heart beat in unison to their requiem.

It was a forever thing, but Brendan hoped to end that.

5

The Fog, its capitalization obvious on the tongues of those who've spoken it, was not just an atmospheric mist. It was more than a simple fog resultant of bad weather. This was different, terrible, and as thick as mud suspended in the air, yet easily trespassed. Cliff had told Brendan that it would be unmistakable when he made the transition, which might be abrupt. Cliff had been right so far in Brendan's sojourn here, and he hadn't yet disappointed. Although looking at it that way, Brendan almost hoped for disappointment.

Nonetheless, walking down the middle of the street at night in this place was about as apprehensive an experience that Brendan could endure. Even so, his heavy feet walked him forward, proceeding deeper into the night and the street that might never end.

Bow in hand, machete dangling at his beltline, he had one arrow from his slung quill armed. He hadn't taken any practice shots, so he wasn't sure how effective he would be.

The night slowly began to recede, faster than he could've expected though. It lifted instead of retreated, replaced by a dense gray fog that seemed to inhabit the sky as well. All of a sudden Brendan could not see the moon high up, nor the blackness of the ceiling, and much of his surroundings were lost

to sight. Only the cracked asphalt beneath his feet, the longbow and his hands, and just now the frame of his glasses, could be seen.

His breath cut off before resuming, as if his lungs were being yanked by a puppeteer. He coughed until his respiration was restored, temporarily dropped his gaze to his feet. When he looked up again a stretch of the road was visible before him—and buildings. They hugged the right curb, but the left was entirely lost in clouds of mist. These buildings were not necessarily condemned, but small shacks and worn-down warehouses, abandoned garages and refineries, all with their doors gaping or removed entirely. Sections of walling were missing here and there, as if welcoming a guest inside.

All Brendan could see beyond these doors and absent walls, however, were crossing beams and still shadows. When he began to stare for a moment too long, the shadows took shape and started moving, swimming even, teeming with life. He would then look away, continue staring ahead of himself, focusing on the road.

The fear kept him on the road, for it was safe.

And why would he bother venturing elsewhere?

Then it struck him. Like one of his own arrows in his side, the words of Ola and seemingly elsewhere, perhaps his own voice echoing inside his decapitated head—

"Don't ever look away."

Brendan stopped in his tracks, feeling that ice garland draping down his spine again and bristling his nape hairs. The heels of his shoes scraped the asphalt as he pivoted to stare into the mouth of a particular building not thirty feet away. It had a shingled awning supported by wooden columns and a corroded, ineligible sign up front. A rusted windchime dangled under the awning near the open doorway, which could fit an entire car through it. It swayed an inch to the left and another to the right, almost motionless.

With a deep, steady breath, Brendan walked under the awning. He paused in front of the doorway, his eyes scanning

the darkness inside. The shadows began taking shape, materializing, swallowing each other to give way to some form of light inside the building. It was not a radiance, only a clarity through the shadows which Brendan's human eyes could perceive. Walls, he saw, and counters. Tool boxes and car lifts. A skeleton of an old vehicle raised off the floor, a steel remnant of what once was.

Brendan took a step forward.

The windchime above him swayed, the sound of breeze nonexistent, but he felt it roll over his cheeks and rustle his thin hair. When he entered the building, it too entered him.

Bones subjected to putrefaction, sucked of their marrow, dripping in shards from a rotting carcass, these were the repulsions which graced Brenda's olfactory senses. His nostrils flared as the odors violated his body, clinging to his skin with injected humidity. Then he felt that same air around him shift, and with it came a skittering sound like claws tap-dancing on the concrete. Brendan spun on his heel, bow obviously not ideal in these confines.

He saw what he recalled from Cliff's terminology as a Quad, the same four-legged poodle-sized creature he'd beaten to death in the library. It was shuffling toward him, its strange mouth snapping and salivating, eyes directed at the ceiling as were its tusks. It would have lunged at him had he not shot the first arrow so suddenly. It was a sloppy action, rushed and frantic, but the fifteen-foot gap between them sufficed. The arrowhead split down the center of its face, halving it with a plume of gore. It squealed terribly as it ran in circles before falling down, twitching and dying. Its corpse deflated with a hiss, emitting an awful stench that was soon doubled when two more of its kind leapt from the shadows. One of them tore through a flap of Brendan's shirt, ripping the fabric and coming within inches of shearing his skin. It hit the floor and rolled, then flew against the wall when he kicked it with all his might.

"Off!" Brendan screamed, meaning lost to the moment. He turned and backed himself to a wall while arming the second

arrow for another shot. He released it too soon and the projectile missed the second creature, which now galloped toward him. Its frog-like hindquarters launched it airborne, claws extended for Brenda's face. He spun and swatted it down with the bow's limb, making a loud *thwack* but not breaking it. The creature, however, hit the floor in a bout of pain and anger, while the other one regained its wits.

Brendan took a deep, borderline calm breath, armed his third arrow from the quill on his back, and stared down at the struggling creature. The other was beginning its slow return from the wall he'd kicked it into, about seven feet on the other side of this one. Brendan, glaring menacingly, aimed down at fired the arrow. He probably could have just as easily stomped it to death, but this seemed more appropriate.

More composed.

The bowstring snapped as he released his fingers, slinging the arrowhead through the Quad's skull. Brain matter spread across the floor and its anomalous corpse withered.

The other charged him now, squealing.

Brendan had the next arrow armed when a winged creature swept out of the shadows beneath the high ceiling, swooping low to hook its scythe-like claws into the Quad's abdomen. And just as swiftly they returned to the darkness, punctuated by fluttering wings that seemed to fill the entire room.

Surely this place wasn't large enough to fit such a winged monster flying freely.

Then again…

Brendan, heart pounding relentlessly against his breastbone, averted his gaze in every direction. He could see nothing, only the myriad abyss circling him. Then it thickened, noticeably, and what little light had once inhabited the room now disintegrated.

With several deep breaths and the upturning of his eyes, he salvaged his poise. He then slowly, cautiously, left the room. His back turned to the deepening shadows, he trusted in blind

faith as he passed under a small doorway.

A gap in the wall, framed by exposed beams, offered a look out into the street. It was welcoming, for although it was quilted in fog it at least offered light.

Instead, Brendan looked right and advanced deeper into the building. He could feel its aphotic innards explore his nooks and crevices, too, prying with a foul curiosity all its own.

There was a building fire inside of him that he hadn't known exited until lately. His fears were becoming phobias but at least then he could assess them soundly. His subconscious wielded a clumsy mace versus the defter rapier that his central nervous system brandished, and the fight was a peculiar one. On one side was his hope in overcoming this obstacle, but it was slow and perplexed. On the other side struggled a focus on reality and commonsense, that his fears were rational and inescapable.

During this inner turmoil, the physical vessel that was Brendan searched not for a way out but for a path deeper.

It was here that he believed freedom could be obtained.

Whether he was insane or not was beyond question; if he were sane, how could he have found himself in a place like this?

Minutes upon hours he walked for days and seconds. Time melted on the walls of his skull like hearts lamenting at a funeral and yearning for the release of a peaceful drive home.

Then his foot struck a threshold that he nearly tripped over. He staggered into the next room, and as had the one previously done so did this—shadows scattered to reveal dim details. The fog from outside had penetrated the building, as if investigating at his side. It diffused only to make clarity into static, but at least Brendan's sight had been lifted from utter blackness.

A far wall seemed to stretch for miles down his left and right. Impossible under this roof, and yet his eyes did not pose lies. He trusted them, or at least tried to. His feet brought him walking in that direction, until ten paces later he spotted a gap in the decaying wall. Its skin, as aptly as it could be called, peeled

and dripped like the flesh of decomposing roadkill. This gap, however, was impenetrably black and solid. Perhaps it was not a gap, but a featureless monolith.

Regardless, it stood before Brendan by about sixty paces and never moved the slightest.

Even when something walked out of it.

Eaters—plural. Three of them, spreading out like a carnal fan. Each one featured those terrible mouths and that rapacious emptiness inside. The centermost creature howled, its tongue rippling in the wake of the scream. Their gait was uniform—slow, methodical, yet mindless. The other two appeared to lose direction on more than one occasion, and Brendan felt that they didn't necessarily detect him.

The Cataracts which emerged from the blackness in the wall after them, however, clearly did sense his presence. Five of them swarmed the capacious room, slaloming around the indolent Eaters while screeching and mutating midstride. Their shadow-thick bodies adapted to the openness and distance to their prey. They aimed to frighten Brendan before coming in contact with him, they aimed to taste him before their teeth sunk into his flesh.

Brendan dropped one with an arrow to the face before he could think twice about his actions. And then a second one was drown, and it too divided the skull of another Cataract. A pitiful yelp spilled into the air as it cartwheeled onto its back. Brendan went to draw a third arrow for a third Cataract when another winged creature—Cliff had called them Snappers—swooped from the shadows above. It knocked him over, its barbed tail slapping the bow free from his hands. The weapon slid across the floor and so did he tumble.

The Snapper returned for a second attack, this time with its discus-shaped jaws agape, teeth like sharpened bone calling Brendan's name. Its clean-cut wings sliced the air, stiff and sharp-tipped, while the emaciated fuselage of its body torpedoed at its target. Two muscular limbs dangle with the intent on snatching Brendan like an eagle might a fish, except that its

talons were twice as menacing

Brendan, however, was being underestimated.

He stayed on his stomach, mouth breathing puffs of dust away from his face as he nearly kissed the floor. The winged creature swept down, talons protracted and jaws ready to exemplify its name. The remaining two Cataracts closed in on him, yet still he was poised. Finally the Snapper was upon him, but he was determined to violently turn the tables. Brendan suddenly rolled onto his back, pushing his quill to a shoulder, and drew the machete with his right hand. In this same swift motion he lashed out with the three-foot blade, severing not one but both of the Snapper's extended legs. Blood like gelatinous oil splashed the floor and the creature shrieked as it plummeted. It struck the ground just behind Brendan, headlong causing its face to pancake against the concrete. There was a sickening *crunch* sound and an end to the even worse din of its shrill cries as it tumbled limply head-over-nonexistent-heels.

Now the Cataracts really came at him.

Brendan sprung to his feet like a maniacal jack-in-the-box, eyes feral but expression impossibly passive. His elbow locked with every swing, giving him a far reach and full vigor to deal that deathblow. The first Cataract was cut in half below what might be called its head, spurting gore through the misty air and causing its fellow atrocity to slip in a puddle of it. Brendan sidestepped its stumbling progression, its body mutating in a feeble attempt to adapt to its demise. Jaws lashed out, seemingly unattached to its face, and it let loose that abysmal screech that threatened to scramble Brendan's brains. Instead, as he himself staggered backwards, he performed a wild swing of his right hand. The machete drove out and down, obliquely halving the Cataract's horrific face. The gruesome blow spilt brain matter and other unidentified goop onto the floor, along with the deflating mass of its corpse.

His eyes were drawn to that black doorway, which was exactly what he perceived it to be, and apparently so was his body. The seemingly magnetic pull was also metaphysical, and

he felt that he couldn't look away from it lest he be vacuumed into some Eater's endless jaws. Now, however, the doorway was swimming with activity. The closer he got, the more it bubbled, like shadow static fizzing upon his approach.

One step closer, two steps, three—

He found himself running so fast toward it that he practically tripped into a violent stumble. Instead of trying to right himself or pull back, however, he simply released control of himself and leapt forward.

Into the black mass he went, and it rippled to swallow his entirety.

There was a brief oblivion in which he could neither see nor feel, physically, not to mention a complete lack of thought. All that he could sense was the sound of his own heartbeat thumping, reverberating, through this emptiness.

It picked up speed.

The human condition of fear returned to him.

It was unavoidable—but it felt natural.

Moreover, it felt conquerable.

And then the emptiness took shape. Light punctured the blackness as if via the hole in an oubliette, quickly filling it until Brendan found himself standing at the center. The room was vast, with neither walls nor ceiling, not even a discernible floor. Just an extensive whiteness, insubstantial if it hadn't been for two things: the thin gray fog permeating the area around Brendan, and the creatures emerging from it. Their faces were distorted, their bodies horrendously malformed.

They were Eaters, Quads, Cataracts, even Snappers who walked like pterodactyls on their wingtips and legs.

Who…

That was the biggest realization for Brendan—Cliff had been right. These were all people once, their souls now condemned to this terrible place. Or were they, truly condemned? Brendan began to feel that it wasn't they who were condemned, but himself. He was doomed to believing he'd have the same fate as others, that this trend of fear and failure was

some impassable muck.

The worst case scenario playing out in Brendan's brain like a viscera-riddled carousel was that these *were* in fact condemned souls…and that to free them, regardless of his own fate, meant killing what they'd become.

He found an indescribable peace in this.

A level of insurmountable comfort.

Having lost his machete on the way here, he realized his bow was still intact and on his person. He wielded it, and as the creature came at him he calmly drew an arrow for each of their lives. He fired one, two, three arrows. The creatures evaporated when the projectiles met with their deformed flesh.

When Brendan went to draw a fourth arrow—meanwhile the creatures still came, an influx of confused terror—his fingers found emptiness. His quill was vacant, his arrow reserve used up. An even greater calm came over him just then, and he dipped his hand deep into the quill. When his hand came up, still empty, he brought his fingers to the bowstring and wielded neither arrow nor weapon.

Not conventionally, at least.

It was a lead pencil, with a sharpened tip and a healthy eraser. The expression on his face, moreover his eyes, had hardly even changed. No smile, no doubt, no fear.

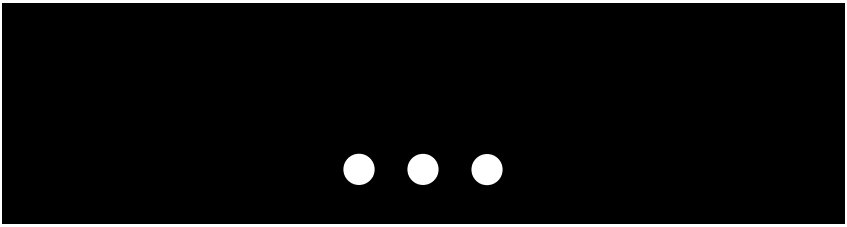
Just tranquility.

Acceptance.

Brendan drew the string and pencil back, as if it were an arrow, and released it believing it was nothing else.

His eyes suddenly upturned, making white marbles of them, as his lids fluttered and the reality before him shuddered. A familiar blackness overcame him, except this time he could neither hear, feel, see, nor smell anything.

It was as featureless as it was silent, and beautiful.



Brendan's eyelids slingshot open. A deep, smooth breath elicits from his chapped lips. He picks his head up, indolence seeping from his body and nerves. His right shoulder is sore, perhaps from sleeping on it, as it appears he'd passed out on his desk. His eyes spot a small mesh trash bin on the top left corner of his desk, its contents half-full. Balled-up paper and pencil shavings seem to carry their own smell, and it isn't too pleasant. The papers are recycled defects from the thing sitting before him on the desktop, a single sheet of blank paper. Yet it is wrinkled, suggesting that it had once been written on—perhaps the back—or was abandoned before anything came of it.

Pinched between the fingers of his right hand is a pencil with a worn eraser and nearly blunt tip. A small steel sharpener is within reach. He picks it up, slides the pencil in, then stops. A fresh notion swims through him. He holds the two things together, as if puzzle pieces that have just found love. He vows not only to never sever them from this bond, but to give them new life.

He tosses them into the trash bin with the shavings and balled-up papers, before knocking it off the desk. It lands with a bounce and spews its bowels across the floor.

A smile creeps across Brendan's face as he reaches for a ballpoint pen.