

LIMINAL

*A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND ANALYSIS
WRITTEN BY THOMAS BYAM SHAW*



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This body of work and the exegesis succeeding it was partially produced on stolen land. This being the Whadjuk Noongar Boodja, sovereignty of which was never ceded. I acknowledge the Noongar people as the traditional owners of their land and pay respect to their Elders past, present, and future. Furthermore, I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

ABSTRACT

LIMINAL is a collection of short stories that attempts to unify the themes of Ecology and transit through the medium of the Weird. The collection begins with a series of short stories of varying length exploring the chosen themes of the collection in whole or in part. This is followed by a long-form narrative: 'Under, Under the Earth', an interactive narrative split into nine segments that tracks a train journey from Aberdeen to Perth through the innards of the hollow earth.

The fictional segments of the collection are followed by an exegesis. This takes the form of an essay that attempts to describe the connections between the chosen themes of the collection by discussing each in sequence. The Weird is discussed first, ecology follows, and transit follows after. The theoretical discussion is interspersed by a description of how these notions relate to each story within the collection. These more general discussions are followed by a specific dissection of each story within the collection relating to the circumstances of its production and other craft concerns.

The ultimate thesis of *LIMINAL* is its demonstration, both practically and theoretically, that the Weird is an effective mode for fiction engaging with both ecology (in terms of ecological collapse and the natural world more generally) and transit. Central to this thesis is the concept of liminality, which encompasses the blurring of boundaries found in Weird fiction, in travel narratives, and our current moment of ecological collapse.

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Contents

Short Stories	6
Poulou's Crabs	7
Outland	13
The Follies	25
The Return	27
Let's Talk About Snails	30
Modifications	33
Growth	35
A Geography of the Hollow Earth	45
Arcana	50
Dream Sequence	60
Tide	63
Travelogue	66
Under, Under the Earth	84
Exegesis	257
The Weird	260
Ecology	286
Transit	318
Craft	340
Bibliography	356

“Rhode Island drops into the ocean / No place to
call home anymore.”

John Darnielle, ‘Lovecraft in Brooklyn’.

*SHORT
STORIES*

POULOU'S CRABS

Poulou makes his coffee. The kettle hisses on the stovetop, rumbling like a rising wind. He shakes the grounds into the press, a little more than usual. Today is Saturday; by noon the weekend will stretch at his feet. He waits for the eruption of aroma when the boiling water hits the grounds. Taking a moment he holds his head, his face, over the press and lets it rise into him. Then he sees one of them, lingering on the countertop.

It is no bigger, nor smaller, than they normally are. It inches towards the press, investigating the swirling grounds. Poulou pulls his coffee away sharply, snapping the lid over the jar and pushing the plunger down, even though he hasn't given it enough time to brew. It's then he notices the second and third. They're clustered around his slippers. One ambles towards the cupboards, the other stands testily between him and the door. Hand shaking, he pours the first cup of the day. Taking a sip, he murmurs.

"All right, my dears, we're going to school. We're going to class, so we have to be quiet and still."

The metro is always a nightmare. People move together, like a liquid, like an organism: a slime mold that covers every surface, expands to fit every container. Poulou is enveloped, complicit. Between shoulders and through clouds of airborne sweat he sees a man wrap a grotesque hand around a woman's thigh, pressing the flesh between his gnarled fingers. His head jerks to one side, trying to cycle the moment out of his field of view. It occurs to him he could make a scene, elbow through the crowd and interrupt this. He stands, sucking breath and gritting teeth. The train rattles to a stop, shaking his balance. The second afterwards, everyone else has stood too.

The mass of passengers spills into Chatelet. Castor calls it the labyrinth and Poulou can see what she means. The years have grown it, its endless duplicate hallways dividing and dividing, burgeoning like a hydra or a rotten abscess in the city's heart. Poulou finds his way to the Line One platform. Breath condenses in the tunnels. The walls are slick. His skin crawls over him when he sees the rolling wet curtain of the white-tile walls, as if he's inside a cyst, flanked by waterfalls of pus.

They keep pace with him, the click of their legs and scrape of their claws cutting through

the scream of trains and the shuffle of mass. When he's on the train again, speeding towards Les Sablons, they flank him on his empty bench. One picks at its mouthparts with a claw. The other scuttles over the lap of a sleeping man with his hat pulled over his head. They follow him when he disembarks, trailing behind his brisk pace to the school.

The midmorning class is always the slowest. Poulou forgoes breakfast again. Castor would never tell him to lose weight, but he always feels stripped to the adipose when she looks at him. His twenties are behind him: his skin is beginning to slip; his flank wobbles like blancmange; his face hangs fleshily around his wrinkles. So he starves to shed kilograms but by midmorning his hunger is burning a hole in him and he wolfs down lunch with seconds. It's a trap. He feels penned in by his skin.

Luckily the boys are always tired in the morning. All he has to do is drawl something about Descartes, make scores on the massive blackboard behind him, and stare out over the wilderness of their faces: their rows and rows of uncombed hair and sunken eyes. On a bad day, usually Tuesdays and sometimes Fridays, there will be jokes about his lazy eye, or a piece of paper thrown between them. On the last day of the week he can rely on their exhaustion, coast pleasantly, go through the motions and think about anything else.

They form an audience as attentive as the students. There are more than he started with. *Where did I pick you up from?* There was the restaurant he passed on the way, with rows and rows of them on ice. All in all there are about eight. Two hunch on desks. A few hang near the back. *The louts.* One sits by his books, its body angled upwards at him. *My star pupil. Do you have an apple for me?* His body aches for the bell.

After school he's in bed at Castor's. They've just finished, the sheet half draped over them both. Her eyes are closed. The mid-afternoon sun has caught her face as it climbs glacially off the pillow. Poulou watches it, waiting for her to open her eyes and turn to discover his gaze. She doesn't.

"I have another report to make." Her voice is clear, as if she's giving a lecture or declaiming something in a bar.

"Oh? Transparency clause or—"

“Transparency clause.” Her thin lips curl into a smile.

“Let’s hear it.”

This had been painful to start with, but as things went on there was something thrilling about the things she’d recount. Her tales always seem more exotic and interesting than anything he’d end up with, but he’s come to accept that. Castor is handsome, charismatic within and without. He’s a sagging philosophy teacher with a lazy eye.

“Younger guy, a little younger than me.”“Oh, was he vigorous?”

“Quite, but vigor and inexperience are-”“Well, that’s life.”

Their audience has shrunk since Poulou left school. There are now about four of them. One clambers up Castor’s bookshelf, another crawls over her blanketed outline, two others circle each other on the floor; he can only see them intermittently. Making love while they watched used to be difficult, but Poulou finds if he blocks them he can do fine. As Castor recounts her conquest, he finds his mouth drying and his limbs stirring. Halfway through the story, he surprises her, and she folds into his embrace.

“It’s my friends again.” It’s childish to find comfort in euphemisms, but for years Poulou was too agitated to even say the word.

“Still?”

“Still. There are two of them here right now.”“Any on me?”

“Your hip.”

Castor smacks it, her lip curled. Her palm misses, it has already crawled to her midriff.

It slides down the sheet, coming to rest between them. “How’s Dr. Jacques for that?”

“He’s helping, and I like talking to him.”“What’s his diagnosis?”

“Well, the mescaline, obviously.”“Obviously.”

“And that it’s more than just that I was afraid of them. It’s something else. He wants to know more about my life. He asks about you a lot.”

“Oh?”

“You and my work. I tell him what I need to, nothing more.”“That’s reassuring.”

It’s tugging at the pillow now, pulling at it with its pincer. Poulou wonders if Castor can see its manipulations. They’re always stopped in some way before they can make a real change. Once he swept a glass out of the way before a foot-wide monster pushed it off a table. Later, he regretted it, wishing he left it there and saw what would break first: the vision or reality.

“There’s something else,” he said.

“Transparency clause?” Castor props herself on her elbows.

“No, something else.” She nods for him to continue. “I was on the Metro this morning, and I saw a man touch a woman. It was— Well, she didn’t want it. I didn’t know. I mean, she didn’t scream, nobody else made a fuss, so I,” He swallows. The words have gone rotten on his tongue. “It felt horrible, I couldn’t stand to see it.”

Castor rolls herself onto her back, clicking her tongue inside her mouth. Her disappointment always burns. She starts to speak, stops, but starts again anyway.

“The way men read these situations, it always comes back on them doesn’t it?” The lapse into soliloquy is always a sign of her contempt: when everyone else in a room is too small for her, this is how she distances herself. “It’s always their anguish, their discomfort.” He’s too mortified to intervene; she seems to realize this and roll herself back a little. “At least you felt something.”

“Next time I’ll try and do something.” “Try?”

“I will do something. Next time I will do something.”

It stops tugging at the pillow and sidles around to look at him, its feelers licking the air while its eyes crane towards her. Its mandibles shift a little, as if to speak. *You fool, you mug. You know better than to leave yourself open like that. You knew what she’d think.*

Transparency clause, he thinks back.

It’s the evening and he’s with Jacques. At Castor’s insistence, he’s called an emergency consultation. Despite asserting that it’s not just what he’s seeing, that it’s the day itself, she will not sit easy until he’s telephoned him. He sits in the chair while Jacques gets some brandy. He feels chewed up and spat out. His ironed clothes feel rumpled, his skin turned inside out, his mouth dry, his body sapped.

Jacques returns with the decanter and two glasses, half full of amber liquid. After the pleasantries, he asks after Castor; calls her “Mlle B”, he gets down to business.

“Why today, Poulou? Why now?”

Poulou considers telling him the truth: that this meeting is Castor’s doing, that his bad day has barely anything to do with the visions. He considers telling him that there is one on his lap, that it’s threatening to climb up his shirt, lacing its legs between his buttons.

“I was just wondering if you had anything else for me.” Poulou looks out the corner of his eye. There’s one toying with the name plaque on Jacques’ desk, scraping a claw over each embossed letter in DOCTEUR J. L.

“I have been thinking about your case, Poulou, I really have. It’s a fascinating little problem, truly a fascinating one.” His face could be Castor’s. It’s all angles, like hers, it has the same swoop of black hair. Poulou has never considered himself a homosexual, but doubt squirms in him in these situations.

“Consider your life, my friend. Before now, you were part of a group. You ran with all sorts, peasants, workers, and those of your own class. And now? I ask about your friends, and you talk about Mlle B; your life and you talk about Mlle B; what you do for fun? Again, the Mlle.”

“The problem is with Castor?”

“The problem is that there’s nothing in your life *but* the Mlle. You’ve turned yourself into a lonely child again. You’re isolated, cut off from the world. Why do you see what you see? You were afraid of these things as a boy, and they’ve returned. They’re here because that childhood loneliness has returned too.” It has climbed his shirt and is now circling his collar, clipping its claws like a barber.

Jacques leans back, waiting for the assessment of his assessment.

“It seems to make sense,” Poulou offers finally. “Does this mean we’re done with our sessions?”

“I hope not.” The doctor has stood, making his way to the desk where the decanter waits to refill their glasses. “I quite like our chats. Will you stay for another drink?”

“I should probably go.” He pauses as he slips on his jacket. “But thank you, thank you very much.”

Poulou walks into the night with a lightness on his body. He closes his eyes and the warm air balm his face. His pace is leisurely. No pincers edge into his vision, no scrape of segmented limbs invade his ears. Shrouded in evening, he feels unknown; unwatched.

It’s dark when he gets back and the light is hesitant when he flicks the switch. Already something in the air feels sharp, tasting like blood or rust. The kitchen isn’t lit, but he can see the thing on the countertop before it is. It’s larger than any other, legs that scratch like blackboard chalk, joints that snap like bones. Squatting like a king; eyes zoning on him, only

him. One of its claws is shrunk to its side, the other is grotesque and huge. In its grip hangs his coffee press.

The dregs swirl in the animal's uneasy hold. He hadn't cleaned it out before he left, he's terrible for that. The absurd thought that this is his hitherto unknown flat mate, taking him to task for his untidiness bursts and dies in his mind. It raises the claw. Poulou cannot speak. It throws the press on the floor. He hears it smash. The spell is unbroken. He cannot move. It speaks.

"I AM ILLEGIBLE."

It is another five minutes before he can bear to turn his back long enough to go to bed.

Sunday morning reveals the coffee press still broken, grounds scattered across the floor, dregs dripping from the shards like blood. There's one playing in the spill. Another on the countertop. Another in the overhang under the cupboards. He can only summon a bare whisper.

"All right my dears, my darlings. We have to go and buy a new press. Still and quiet, remember, still and quiet."

OUTLAND

In the tenth month of the second plague year I applied for a job with a security and traffic managing firm ahead of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, otherwise known as COP26. The funding for my PhD program had dried up and I had conjured some idea to make some money and move down to London and resume my life.

I got the job and was bid to make my way to an inner-city car park, just outwith the borders of the zone governed by the UN for the two-week duration of the conference. Glasgow was abuzz with the idea you could buy bevy there after 10 p.m. but that didn't matter to me as I wasn't really talking to anyone at that stage.

The hours ran through the night which I was all right with, really. I didn't participate in human life. I didn't do the things that humans do. I was living stably, with my parents in my childhood home. I accepted that I was luckier than most people. It was a state of living that agreed with me, even as it strained my patience and dampened my self-worth. Still, I needed a job. I could not prepare myself for the eventuality of staying there for the long haul.

I.

The car park was poorly maintained. It was already full dark by the time I arrived, ahead of my shift which would start at seven. I had bought dinner from Tesco: sushi and a sausage roll and a chocolate bar and a blended fruit drink. I ate it on a road block, hunching over, gorging. I didn't get pleasure from food, exactly, but it stopped me from feeling nothing.

There were two people at the gate I later found out was the exit: an older, larger man and a young woman with an intense, freckled face. Both wore hi-vis.

The man asked me, in a thick Scouse accent, if I was all right. His voice was rough, but not unfriendly. I told him I was about to start shift. In reality I was on in fifteen minutes.

He pointed me to a portacabin at the far end of the car park. I thanked him and made my way. Underfoot the ground was uneven, the gravel bit into my soles even through the sturdy shoes

I'd bought ahead of the start of work. The tarmac had broken in places, gouged deep in others. Later, when it would rain, puddles would fill up in the broken ground that would have to be navigated. It's a cliché to call something like it a lunar landscape, but it looked like it had been punished. By asteroids or neglect, it had been punished.

At both ends of the car park were small green spaces. Birch trees that hissed in the wind, a thicket that couldn't be seen through, only over. Both were flimsily fenced in by temporary blockers. A new-build apartment block peered over one end, while at the other squatted the neon-gilt shapes of hotels: the Radisson red, the Moxy, the Hilton.

Inside the portacabin was antiseptic and bright. There was a table running along the far wall: heavy with a microwave, a kettle, snacks on plastic plates. The site had no running water but there was a pallet full of bottles to drink or make tea with. There were two men in there already: a leaning, looming guy with a cauliflower nose and a shorter, well-groomed man with a beard. The shorter man was Romesh, my supervisor, the taller was Mark, my co-worker.

Romesh was shy, slightly put-upon, as he explained everything I had to do. My place was at the exit. I was to keep track of everything that left during the night. Mark would man the entrance, check the badges of those coming in. Everything had to be clicked in, tallied. Every car had to be accounted for, and discrepancies between tallies would be noted. I was given a hi-vis a size too small and a clicker.

I relieved the man and women who I'd spoken to when I came in. I later learned they were father and daughter, both bussed up from the south. Most of the workers at the site weren't local. I found out later that the only reason we'd been hired was that an entire security firm had quit and some of the reserve traffic marshals had been assigned to their checkpoints.

The shift began. Thirteen hours (as luck would have it, the first night coincided with the clocks falling back) is easy enough to kill. By midnight, no cars were leaving. The hours following that milestone I spent listening to old episodes of podcasts and pacing out into the street. It had been a while since I'd stayed up all night, but I was still capable of doing it.

At some point in the night Romesh, who was babysitting me a little, told me to take the entrance. Nothing was happening at that end either, but I got a slightly better vantage of the apartment block looming over the car park's eastern edge. At the top floor was some kind of gathering, the light was warm through the windows and I saw human shapes moving like smoke in front of it. It remained that way past two, three, four AM. It curdled in me to see it.

I imagined turning up there in my hi-vis and my hat pulled over my messy hair, in my black docs and black trousers, in my itchy pullover and the white shirt beneath it. I imagined sipping a sweet drink and dipping my head over someone's shoulder. My heart wailed for it. Everyone was going to that party, that party on the thirtieth of October at the top floor. Every failed romantic prospect, every friend I'd lost touch with, everyone who I'd spurned or had spurned me, they were all there and they weren't talking about me.

A shock of something crossed my field of vision: something lithe and loping. It turned its head for a moment. I met the fox's gaze. It had its paw raised, almost an apologetic gesture like one a flat mat might make after you caught them grubbing through your shelf on the fridge. But there was no sheepishness in its expression, no moment of apology beyond the smallest acknowledgement he (I thought 'he') had been caught.

Winding through the carpark, he disappeared into the thicket at the southwestern edge. Stationed at the exit I had peered through into it. There were human remnants, or something like them: a concrete arrangement, discarded windowpanes, something that might've been a shattered garden shed.

I wasn't reposted there until the end of shift and when the sun rose, grey and horrid, I had only the energy to go home.

II.

I was assigned to the exit for the whole of the second night. I'd made a mistake the night before: had allowed one of the cars leaving to turn right instead of left. Consequently I made a show of directing each one left, waving my light-up baton frantically each time. Mark made fun of me in the portacabin later, told me I looked like I was directing aeroplanes.

I was pleased, though. It's always better to be made fun of for doing a job too well than admonished for not doing it at all.

Halfway through the night a shape waddled to my post. I flicked my headphones out of my ears and beamed hello. I'd been doing it to everyone who entered and left, terrified that such and such a person might be some official or another. The car park was still accepting dignitaries, the Beast with the president inside had been spotted driving through Govan.

The woman, it was a woman, asked me if we had toilets on site. I pointed down to the southeastern corner, next to the cabin. She said that the nearest one to her post was in the UN zone, past two checkpoints, two checkpoints with armed guards, and she couldn't be fucked dealing with that, going across the river and all, and besides they were understaffed, and she had to stay on the fucking boat where it was too hot, and could she please use the porta-loo before she pissed herself.

Of course I acquiesced.

When she came back we got to talking again. I had assumed she was local, but she'd come from Fife. Like many of the people who'd travelled, she was being housed in one of the boats.

There were two, one in Govan and one in Greenock. Both were old Baltic ferries, the Greenock one had become unmoored the first night she'd slept on it she told me.

Had I seen the sniper, she asked. I had not. Fucking everybody had guns, she told me, everybody. All the UN guys, all the private security firms. A beat. There he was. She pointed.

Sure enough, there was the sniper. Half a mile away but clear against the dusty-grey night sky. Taking slow steps, patrolling the roof of the Moxy. A slim, dark shape walking like a child along a highwall: head tilted down, footwork careful.

I waved in his direction and pointed with sharp, jabbing motions at my own head. She yelped and told me to stop.

Of course he was turned away, he couldn't see us, but part of me wished he could. No greater joke, I thought later, than some hi-vis lunatic baiting instant death only for his head to burst open a second later.

III.

As time went on I got to know my co-workers. Mark was intense: lapsing between desperate joking (his idea of humour involved reciting the plots of films he found funny) and piety about earning.

He didn't take days off, he said again and again and again. Every one of these hours ticking away was another ten quid for yours truly.

I didn't know if he was recovered or his problem was ongoing. If it was, no part of it stopped him from arriving on time; from making his number every night; from maintaining lucidity in the face of the fantastic tedium of twelve hours in a car park. I never found out if he even was an alcoholic, if his cauliflower nose was the indicator I thought it was; people are full of depths that you can't see, still less that you can summarise.

Aside from Mark and myself, and two Indonesian women that Mark spoke about but that I never saw, the other men on our shift were mostly Nigerian.

Albert was tall, toothy, gregarious. During breaks he'd either watch videos on his phone without headphones, the volume on high, or he'd leaf through a comically large black leather-bound bible. Midway through either thing, he'd invariably fall asleep. Sometimes I'd turn to see him snoring, his fingers pinching the next page; poised to turn it. Other times he'd be midway through a long video of a sermon when he'd slump over his desk. The videos never woke him, but us calling out always seemed to.

Edward was leaner and more graceful. Whenever he spoke, it was as if whatever he was

talking about was occurring to him for the first time. He wanted to be a music producer, had worked out in the mines in Western Australia, he showed me pictures of his kids. He had a very easy smile, a very warm smile, and a handsome face beneath what a night-shift regimen will do to a person: stubble, hollow eyes, cracking and parched skin.

Everyone was fantastically qualified. Albert had a law degree. Edward studied international relations. Mark would talk about his travels abroad, or such and such Colombian girlfriend; or a Thai girlfriend; he had some kind of ranking system for the women of the world which he, of course, explained to me in detail.

When I returned to the exit, the security woman from the other night was waiting by the gate. I said hello.

“Some black guy freaked me out earlier.”

“Ah,” I said.

“Was going to the bathroom and he fucking spooked me, came out of nowhere.” Even if her imitation was amateurish, I knew she meant Albert, ““Oh, you want some tea? You want some tea? You are cold? You are cold?””

“Oh everyone’s nice, he didn’t mean anything by it; I’m sure he didn’t.” “Yeah, well.”

We were quiet then. When she left a little later, after some more half-hearted conversation I could tell that she was embarrassed, frustrated. Perhaps at her own outburst, perhaps at the fact that I didn’t join her in it. When she left, insisting that she had to get back to her checkpoint, I tipped my head back.

The wind hissed through the birches, through my hair. The others had seen the fox. There were two of them, a mating pair.

When dawn broke after the third night I slunk home. It was my day off, I’d arranged for one every three days so I didn’t get overwhelmed.

IV.

Even with the day off my sleep pattern didn’t reset. For the entire time I worked at the car park I was determined to sleep during the day and wake at night. I was contracted for the two weeks of COP26, I’d reasoned it wouldn’t be too miserable.

There have been points in my life where I’ve lived in total absence of the sun. Either because I didn’t leave my house or because my sleeping patterns had been knocked off by senseless anhedonia I’ve spent days or weeks where I haven’t seen daylight, haven’t spoken to anyone unless I really had to. I thought I could do it again, but on my own terms this time. I

thought that I could weaponise it to a useful end.

So I went to bed at Six AM on the fourth day, so I could lie in, get nine hours instead of my standard eight. It did help. When I woke at four to moody, lavender dark I did feel a little more able to come in.

When I did the site was abuzz with talk of protests. They'd had a load of cops in, apparently, and a row of their vans were still parked in a corner of the site. When I'd taken position by the exit I saw them filing back in. Before leaving they formed a queue, fifty officers strong, in front of our porta-loos.

It was only when they did leave, a convoy of vans rolling past me while I frantically indicated they had to turn left, that I saw HEDDLU in block capitals on the side of each van. Just like in every other regard, the whole country had bussed into Glasgow. I'd seen Lancashire Constabulary vans, Met vans, and all sorts occupying the checkpoints around the city.

I didn't want them here. When the officers in blue vests on the promenade by the river greeted me on my way to work I kept my head down. When the other guys scoffed at the thought of protestors, I didn't mention where I'd definitely be had I not had to work that day.

As we, and everyone else, settled into the rhythm of the shifts, things began to stabilise. There were enough workers to rotate. As long as one person each occupied the entrance and exit with an additional person in the middle, the rest of us could sit in the porta-cabin. When five AM rolled around and delegates and workers began to flood in, every hand was needed, but in the graveyard hours between midnight and morning there was no traffic and the only work was perfunctory.

I used this to map the edges of the western forest. It was bordered in by temporary removable fencing, the kind that sometimes encloses construction sites. I could bypass it with effort, but I didn't want Romesh on my case if he caught me. I contented myself with pacing along the outside.

The trees were exclusively birches: their trunks silver-white, their leaves rotting yellow or else their branches bare. There was grass, matted and overgrown. I still could not see a way through to the street the exit opened up on. It still struck me as the strangest thing, that this shard of green space wasn't claimed by the car park, that it was allowed to fester here; dying and growing.

By turning on the torch lamp on the back of my phone I could see a little clearer into the wood, as I began calling it. The thing that I thought might've been a playhouse or a shed was the façade of a porta-cabin, like the one the site was using. Its windows had been smashed but the door was slightly ajar on its hinges, rattling in the soft breeze. The vegetation had massed around

it, growing and weaving about the structure until it rested over the tangle of briar and shrub like a scab over a wound.

Flicking the torch lamp around I saw what was clearly the rest of the thing: corners and angles and beams smashed like broken bones and littered between the birches. Only the façade had remained in any way intact.

As the beam of the lamp swiped, it caught something small and reflective, set in something larger and bristling and tense. An eye, something watching.

I dropped my phone. As I snatched it up, realising I'd shattered the screen, I almost cut my thumb jamming on the torch button to reinvestigate.

Just as I did, a fox writhed from under the fencing. Turning its head to me it stared, mute as the glow from the car park's arc lights glittered in its eyes.

"Just you," I whispered as, disinterestedly, it loped across the car park to the copse at the eastern edge.

V.

I began to learn the constellations. I began to learn poetry. All my podcasts had a strict release schedule, but there was only so much of the back catalogue I could plumb before it began to get tiresome. Checking my phone and scrolling through it had become difficult after the screen had shattered, and I was determined to improve myself somehow.

I started from Orion, which had somehow always been the arrangement I was most familiar with. I moved outwards. Cassiopeia, Ursa Major and Minor. I learned where the pole star was, for fun. It wasn't comprehensive astrology, but it passed time.

At first I learned Larkin. My grandmother's funeral was soon, and a proviso in her will stated that she wanted each grandchild to do something for it. I learned 'Aubade' and 'An Arundel Tomb', before I moved on to Yeats. I'm more reactionary with my taste in poetry than anything else but, in my defence, it's much easier to remember something that rhymes and scans.

As I tipped my head back, murmuring 'No Second Troy', an unfamiliar figure approached. He was taller than the other security guard who still visited, less and less often now. He also wanted to use the portacabin his colleague, my visitor, had told him about. His accent was Northern English: Lancashire or Yorkshire, I couldn't tell.

When he returned, I had a surprise for him.

"Surely some revelation is at hand!" I called out to him across the tarmac.

"You what?"

“Surely the second coming is at hand!” I could feel myself grinning, beaming, my eyes wide.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s poetry, Yeats, I’ve been learning it by heart.”

“Ah?”

“It’s just something to do.” I deflated a little, I had hoped he’d be more impressed.

“Right, well, thanks! I ought to get back.” He waved a gloved hand and trudged off.

I was almost grateful for his departure. That night I used my breaks to walk along the perimeter of the forest edge. At no point, from my station to the edge of the car park that abutted the river, could I see even a glimpse of the street through the trees.

I did not know there was something in there. I did not know, yet. But I could feel the glint of the birch trees, the way the wind hissed through them. Two familiar pinpricks of light again. I saw the fox, one of them, turning to look at me. Its sleek form was framed between two birch trunks. Then I saw unmistakably how, rather than continue through the mess of trees to a presumed street beyond, he slunk into the shattered structure, slipping into the sunken door.

VI.

After my second day off, I returned to a surprise. Romesh had left. He was due at a wedding in India, and he had deputised Mark as a supervisor. I didn’t relish the prospect. I sometimes felt that the only thing keeping him civil was the parity among us all. I didn’t want him to have the supervisory ability to unleash his personality on me.

That is of course what happened. Every hour or so, flush with the new role, he’d stalk over to check how I was getting on. He’d make conversation at me, telling me about such and such life that he’d lived or this and that woman that he’d been involved with. I nodded mostly, offering little, sometimes commenting or laughing. I gave him exactly enough to not be accused of ignoring him, while at the same time making no attempt to carry on the conversation.

I suppose I should have been grateful that he liked me. But I was more focused on the forest, now. I reasoned that, as long as I was on break, I could get away with my investigations. In fact, when I asked Mark in the portacabin he seemed almost to anticipate my question.

“Oh sure, for sure, for sure, just don’t fall down any rabbit holes, Ha! Ha! Ha!” I replied that, of course, I wouldn’t.

There was a fantastic sense of trespass as I pulled the temporary fencing to one side. It ground against the distressed tarmac of the car park, but I no longer had any reason to fear

discovery.

My first break I spent picking through the birches. I found the road almost immediately, to my disappointment. It was just out of my field of view from the car park. From that view the copse had seemed impenetrable, a forest in its own right, but amidst it was almost balding. I stepped over plastic bottles and crisp packets and condoms: junk that had been flung in as people made their way through the street adjoining. I returned to my shift.

VII.

The twelfth day would be my last shift. I had spent the days since my abortive ingress into the copse going through the motions. I read the Twelve Days of Turin in the portacabin, then Piranesi, then Bitterhall.

Mark began packing up the cones that had demarcated the lines the cars were to park in. There were no vehicles left. The conference had ended yesterday or the day before. I decided to help him, just to have something to do.

“Of all the guys on the site, you’re the one I’d hire.”

I was touched, if a little offended on behalf of the others. “We’re all hard workers here.”

“Yeah, well.”

We stood beneath one of the floodlights at one end of the space. “You’d think they’d develop it.” Mark said at last.

“How d’you mean?”

“Well, riverside developments going up all over the place. Big flats. Lotta money. You’d think someone’d buy the land, use it. Clear your rabbit-holes away.”

“Huh.” I laughed.

“You going in again? Say goodbye?”

“I might do that.” He was baiting me, but something in what he’d said twisted in my stomach. It was good land, well situated. The car park wasn’t used out with COP26 or other events. Surely it would make more money.

I had to see. One last time. I had to say goodbye.

For the final day, Mark said we were going to leave early. Our shift would end at four AM, there being no day team to take over from us. If I wasn’t out by then, he’d lock up without me he said. Through his mocking I could sense something like an apology. I thanked him. It didn’t matter to me.

Dragging aside the fencing was almost easier than it had been a few days prior. I buzzed

with a new kind of energy. It was occurring to me now what I had seen. The façade of the portacabin was shattered, yes. It lay against the ground, yes. But it now cohered in my mind that it leaned against a rise. A hill, perhaps, a mound. The place where the rest of the structure was buried. Perhaps the foxes I had seen made their warrens there. Perhaps it was something else. Certainly it had been sturdy enough to hold me up when I had unwittingly climbed it on my previous expedition.

When I clambered through the branches to the opening, the door gave easily enough. There was a small space beneath, some kind of hollow. I slid in, shuffled forward.

The tunnel had earthen walls.

It was cold in there, and very dark.

The wind played on my face, through my hair.

I shifted onto my hands and knees, began to crawl.

The journey was shorter than I expected. Barely a minute of crawling.

When I emerged, it wasn't to the city.

Later

The way I had come was the rear end of the portacabin. This face lay flat on the forest floor, almost entirely covered by the amber birch leaves. This space was thick with them. At first I reasoned that the burrow had led me into a public park, possibly a green space that I had never been before. But I couldn't hear the river. I couldn't hear traffic. The wind didn't echo in the lonely way it did over the brick faces of the buildings. Every breath was thick with leaves, heavy with meaning, like I was being whispered to.

I began to walk, hoping that by getting deep enough into wherever this was, that something might resolve, that an explanation for what this all was, and my own part in it, might emerge to satisfy me.

Perhaps if I had been cautious I would have left some kind of trail back to the point of ingress. I would have unwound my sweater and dragged the yarn with me like Theseus. But there were no minotaurs here, nothing that could hurt me. I felt sure of that, somehow sure with the kind of deep certainty you feel in your marrow: something so fundamental that every belief beyond it is built above it.

I tilted my head backwards and did not recognize the stars.

Then

The only thing to do was walk forward, to find the explanation I so wanted. The birches were spaced enough that I had room to walk, through as I walked I saw that their trunks were thicker, the canopies taller. I had once read of a thousand square mile forest that was in fact a single organism, a mat of roots that spread for hectares and hectares under the ground: spreading by cloning itself, each tree a perfect copy of a single organism that had grown to maturity thousands of years ago.

I saw the fox, a fox. Perhaps both of them, at separate times. They were forever crossing my path, turning to look at me. Never following me but seemingly always encountering me, taking note of me, observing. Walking at a right angle to my own path through the trees, regarding me with mute understanding, and slipping out of sight again. They kept their distance, but they should've known I wasn't dangerous.

I began to check the motions of the stars. Never since my job in the car park did I have more of an awareness of how the night sky moves. How we, on the earth, grind beneath the patchwork above us. To see constellations is not to look at some appointed place, but to track them through the night sky, to understand where each star is in relation to the others. Some of the new stars were brighter than the others, some were so dim that they barely registered. I began to draw lines, to build understandings, to interrogate.

As my gaze returned to the ground I saw something between the endless lines of birches. A shape, gliding far ahead of me, crossing my path. It was not a wolf, nor was it a stag, nor a bear, nor a horse. Its head dipped and the magnificent antlers branching above its head bowed. Not for a second was I afraid.

Now

I am still walking. I keep to the new stars and have found a path. The vault of heaven above me wheels around and around, but when I look to the pinpricks of light in the sky and see The Sniper; the barrel of his gun points me in the direction I need to go. It is certainly past daytime in other places. People certainly wonder where I am. I will not say that doesn't trouble me. I look skyward and The Portacabin gives me comfort. Whatever other worlds there are, I don't live in them anymore.

Perhaps I see lights in the trees. Sometime soon I will abandon the direction of the stars and follow them to where they lead. I cannot be the only ingressor. If I am I cannot be the only

person. There will be a role for me here I'm sure of it. There will be something I can do. And if not, maybe I'll find something magnificent in the deep woods: something that will tower above me and speak my name in a language that hums deep into my bones; something that might, at last, at last(!), show me a place where I can belong.

THE FOLLIES

Way out to sea, past the grey reef, stand the follies. There are eleven, but we don't have names for each. They are all called the follies, because they were all built at the same time for the same reason. They are dirty white spires, long like our teeth, broken off at the tops. The wisest of us say they were built.

We are the seal people. We are the new people. There were people before us but we are the new people. The old people milked the earth and built the grey reef. They walked on land. We live in the grey reef. We swim in the sea. We reason that the old people built the follies, as they built the grey reef.

The wisest of us speak of the power of the old people. They speak of how they chewed the bedrock in their mouths and spat it into the shapes of the grey reef, how they walked on the waves, how they cartwheeled in the sky with the gods. For all that, they are dead and we live. I will tell you why.

The sea came for the old people. The sea was jealous of the grey reef, which once stood on land. The sea was angry that the old people walked upon its waves, and drank from the earth below it, and cartwheeled in the sky where it could not go. So the sea came to the palace of the old people, and lapped three times at its door.

"I AM THE SEA," it said, *"AND I HAVE COME FOR YOUR REEF, AND YOUR DIRT, AND YOUR LIVES."*

It was then the wisest of all the old people spoke to the sea, and knelt in supplication. "O sea, you are most mighty and beautiful, and I know my mistake. Take our reef with

our blessing, and let us live in supplication, and give us your fruits, and give us your fishes, and you may rule our reef."

So this one and the rest of the cleverest among them came to the sea willingly, and became the new people. Their teeth sharpened into points, and skin stretched between their fingers, and their hides became thick and mottled.

But many of the old people were upset because they liked to live on land, and they liked to milk the earth, and they liked to cartwheel among the stars. And these foolish ones built the follies in the sea itself. They thought the follies would hold back the sea. So they skipped across the water and clustered around them. The follies were not broken as they are now. They had heads with three blades that stuck out like a starfish. The foolish ones thought they'd be safe.

The sea rose in anger, and broke the blades of the towers they had made, and smote the

foolish old people, and drowned them. And then it rose up to smother the grey reef and it gave the new people the things it had promised them, and that is why we live here to this day.

I like this story, I like it very much. I will go out to where the follies are, where few go now, and duck beneath the water. I will dive down to their bases, to the forests of kelp, where they're embedded in the rock itself. I see the shattered wrecks of the blades that crowned the follies and am well pleased.

To put my point another way, you should always accept what comes for you. When I am diving in the deep and I find a crab, a big fat orange one, I will catch it in my mouth. I will squeeze its shell with my teeth, but I won't kill it. The crab will fight. It will strain its legs. It will pinch its claws. It will pull and roil and scream with its body.

It will go like this until it passes a certain point. The crab will stop. It will give up. It will go limp. It will accept what has happened to it. And that's when I choose to make it die.

THE RETURN

There's a mating pair of bullfinches outside your window. Someone's set up a birdfeeder. The male has a red chest, full and gleaming like velvet. The female is more muted, brown. You watch them eat together, dart their shivering beaks into the feeding trough and dig them out, sprinkling seeds onto the grass below. It's just like you've read online, just like you knew in your heart. Nature is returning.

The pandemic has driven us all indoors. We have sequestered ourselves in our homes to bakebread and write stories and drink to excess. Every day waxes endlessly, time grows fat and hazy. Days blur, hours bleed. The sickly amber of summer evenings last years. Outside, in the crack between tarmac and curb, around the wrought iron of the park fence, around the borders of well-kept gardens, things stir.

At night you hunch against your headboard. Your nails bitten. One tab on Facebook. One tab on Discord. One tab on porn. One tab on Twitter. You alternate. When you scroll Facebook it's full of charming videos that autoplay as you pass over them. Goats at suburban intersections. A deer in a public park, chewing on a floral display. Something with long legs moving through cornfields. The comments throng with middle aged women in sunglasses, young men in tight suits, or anonymous Deborahs from Ohio wearing characters from Trolls: World Tour as their avatar. Each of them in Selectively capitalised Words or else TOTAL CAPSLOCK proclaims Nature's Return.

One day a video finds its way onto your feed. The gleaming teal waters of a canal, Venice perhaps. A shaking camera focused unsteadily on the slow, regal, procession of a pack of swans. The view zooms out to empty streets, glittering sun, dazzling white marble. And something beneath the swans in the water. Long and dark, rippling like a cloud. The swans begin to disperse, swimming off to the side. They bend their glassy necks, getting lower in the water; speeding up. One breaks off ahead, starting to flap its wings. The cloud's shape coalesces, grows. It's coming up. The rest of the swans double back, swimming past the shape. Something in the leader's confidence seems to fail. Its head turns and that's it. A top jaw like a gar or a crocodile breaks the water and then breaks the swan. You can see it splinter, each honeycomb bone shattering under the predator's teeth. The scene lingers for a moment: the swan's head trails in the water, jerking; its wings manage one last spasming flap. The thing slips under with its prize.

The footage rolls for two more seconds before cutting off. You don't recognize the

person who shared the video. Their caption: Nature is Returning! 😊

Nature returns to your house one day when you wake to find a stag gnawing at the branches that have started to sprout from your bedposts. When you scream and pull your covers up, it turns to regard you with silent and empty eyes. The thing smells wet, its breath heavy in the air; its body stinking in your room. It blinks once, feminine lashes dipping over the blank caverns of its pupils. It looks at you like an animal that's already been shot, decapitated, and mounted on a wall: glass pressed into its sockets. It turns, placing each foot as steadily as anything, walking down the hallway and out the door you haven't unlocked for two weeks. You rush in your dressing gown to close it, but no human artifice can stop Nature's Return.

From there it's a simple matter of escalation. Your floorboards, long dead, long varnished, creak and groan beneath your feet. Your floor warps as each board, each cut from a different tree, jostles by inches: expanding and sprouting. You leave your room once a day to go to the toilet, and each time you do you mash the saplings under your feet. In the middle of the night or the middle of the day you turn the light on to find your bath a writhing, clicking mass of crabs. Hours, sleeps, later you think they've vanished but they turn up for days afterwards; scuttling across your kitchen counter or standing testily on your toilet tank: claws pinching and opening with an alien bravado.

So you ignore recent developments and continue to exist as a nodular centre: a scrap of skin stretched thin, frying, on a motherboard. You place an order for glasses to dim the light of your screen, your eyes are starting to hurt, your temple throbs. The order will arrive in two weeks' time. Nature's return has disrupted supply chains. People cannot tell, it's said, when biological goods will start to reanimate; reform. A lorry might become full of whispering branches, the oil in its tank might start to scream with antediluvian ghosts.

Sometimes you tell yourself that that's enough of that. You shut your laptop, leaving your tabs open, and find your phone in your unwashed duvet. In the flat, shattered mirror of the screen before you turn it on you see that the mushroom extending out of your shoulder has grown another two inches. You quickly button in to Instagram. Scrolling once, scrolling twice, you see apartment walls; alive with vines. You see loaves of sourdough and shit children's art. You see someone who's growing scales and someone else who's growing feathers. Couples bloom in pear and apple blossom together, their flowers extending outwards to join even before their mouths meet. You see intimate, stylish little photoshoots and you're driven to hot, angry tears.

And you sit by yourself, in yourself. Your body in fruit. Another head of fungus has sprouted out of your neck. You wish you could sleep for longer, take more hours out of the day or the night than your body will allow you to. You dream in plants growing out of you, describing

the shape of your shattering mind fractally, sleep so deeply that you might return to nature, as nature returns to you. Polypores dance up your wasted calves and thighs, breaking out of your skin in half-moons. Sleep so deeply that the wild dance all around you becomes a distant rustle, somewhere in a canopy far above.

LET'S TALK ABOUT SNAILS

It was late one evening and I had absolutely nothing to do when a friend of mine I hated called me and said: *Darling, Love of my Life, you must come to mine and talk about snails.* So I did, and we did. The snails were kept in Tupperware boxes, cloudy and damp with water and lettuce. They were well fed, the friend who I did not respect assured me, very well fed. Every night they ate romaine and filet mignon and truffes râpées from her family's estates in the south.

They were allowed to wring around her akimbo limbs as she spoke, slipping over her pearls and bangles and silks and cashmeres. The trails crossed her face and body like flight paths, forking and cross-hatching over her immaculate (but loathsome) form. For my part I didn't touch them, I was wearing blue velvet and the slime was ridiculous. I kept to my armchair and listened to my obnoxious friend's airy drawl as she talked about snails.

The way they reproduce, most fascinating, it's nothing like the human way, no no, no pain, no grunting, no sweat, no exertion, I saw two the other day, do you know how they did it? I did not. They burst from their bodies, just burst from them, they came out of themselves it was fascinating.

The monologue produced an enlivening effect in her, her reclining form juddering out of her chaise-longue and shivering with the quivering of her lips. The saccharine curls of her voice tumbled over and over, increasing in tempo and pitch until it was a sequence of hysteric shrieks. I leaned back, affecting a wrinkling of my nose and a thin slant of my lip so that I could imply the full measure of my disgust without openly stating it. My repulsive friend had fallen headlong into gastropodal obsession. Her voice was full of mucus.

At once, mid-sentence, she came to a stop and indicated a marvel. As if to illustrate, two of them on the smooth underside of her forearm had met and begun to twist together. Our breath caught in our throats and we watched. Their forms twined like tongues: coiling once, twice. Their split-sideways mouths met. They seemed to shimmer, pulse, and then they burst. Burst like two trees from their bodies, like timelapse plants they extended, shimmering reflective vines, glinting like mother-of-pearl, pink-white and delicious, the two met and became one tangled thing, the snails shuddered, and we shuddered too. We shuddered too.

That concluded our evening. The friend whom I thoroughly disliked offered me a quick hit of cocaine, or perhaps something stronger, and I accepted to be polite. We both knew I needed to go, in spite of what had passed between us. We had transcended talking: each of us had

embodied a snail. We had wound together and burst.

A couple of months later, as I was riding the suburban rail network, the friend who I had nothing but contempt for called me. *My only sweetheart, you cherished and beautiful person, I am going away for a very long time and we won't be able to see each other or talk about snails. I'm very sorry, but they've decided to repay me for my kindness. When I come back, you'll see what I mean.*

The friend whom I loathed unutterably hung up without me saying a word. I was upset, given how much fun we'd had last time, but everything passes. I indulged in a few powerful blows to my skull that evening to take my mind off it and fired one of my servants as a treat. I felt better immediately, but a lingering longing still twisted inside me. I had a burning wish to meet the friend, whom I would happily allow to be murdered, and talk of snails again.

When my useless sow of a friend called me at last she spoke slowly. *Come at once. Lots to talk about. Be alone.* I thought nothing of it: people pay for all kinds of surgery these days and, judging by the typical speed of her discourse, it was a procedure she had needed. When I rung her bell, and smashed the glass pane on her door for a joke, I was uncustomarily welcomed in by one of her servants.

Had I not been recently impounded for a similar incident, I would have killed the man where he stood. After I voiced my displeasure and he cringingly allowed me to sock him in the gut, I was appeased. Begging my pardon, he informed me that my bile-stain of a friend was *finding it difficult to navigate stairs, sir*. I acceded, but was still glad I punched him.

Proceeding inside we found the smooth varnish of the floor was coated with a glimmering, wet sheen. The substance coated the underside of my brogues and I was tempted to strike the pathetic man again. We climbed the stairs, clinging to the banister to steady ourselves on the glistening and dripping steps. I noted the tasteless panelling of my wretchedly mucose friend, clearly some things couldn't be fixed.

Arriving on the landing, I saw that the trail of the stuff found its source in the drawing room that my friend received me in all that time ago. Striding ahead of the servant, I knocked open the door. My friend reclined, or lay, or draped herself over her customary place on the

chaise-longue. There was something different about her.

The shell hung uneasily from her back. It was clear she was still working around it, unused to the whorl of chitin, navigating its mass with her slim frame. Her mouth opened sideways now. Her eyes sprouted from her head like dandelions, wet and unblinking. I did not hate her any more. *Darling they paid me back. Taught me how. I have changed. You see. Very Simple. Just think. About snails.*

We took tea. I marvelled at how her mouth sucked at a slice of cake, how she dipped her slim hands in a bowl of water to keep them moist. The frenetic energy that had coiled and sprung inside her was replaced with a breathless, baroque grace. Each word was dropped as anaphorism. The consonants of each syllable clicked in her new mouth, the vowels were bookended by a sucking hiss. When I left, kissing her on her damp cheek, I thought about snails all the way home.

I could feel the change. The next morning I woke from fitful dreams of spirals, whorls within whorls. I felt my eyeballs strain from their sockets. My sheets were wrung wet with a thick, sticky sweat that I had to peel myself from. When I called the friend whom I loved deeply to report the changes, I spoke slower. My mouth strained in ways it could not before.

There's a persistent crook in my back. It's heavier each day. My feet feel the pull of the earth. You must think about snails, my friends. It's a better way to be. Someday you will all be like my beloved friend and I. One day we will all crawl as close to the ground as we can. You will sleep tonight dreaming your bodies in Fibonacci sequences, willing the mucus from your skin. Your thoughts will give you form. Your obsessions will take your shape. And when they do, my dear friends, I make you a promise. I promise that we all will burst from ourselves and twine together.

MODIFICATIONS

So I think I first started seeing it in June, but it might've been September. September was when I began paying attention to it. I was in the kitchen at a party hosted by the guy who ran the student radio station. Alex had just done tarot readings and told me that my mental and physical health would take a hit, but that my writing and love life would flourish. I was riding pretty high, trading mezcal shots with some Scandinavians, when a woman with antlers walked by the door.

I set down my glass and spilled out of the room, catching her halfway down the corridor before she started to climb the stairs.

I got them from the new studio she said, tilting her head so they caught the murky light. They're bioluminescent. To demonstrate, she reached over and flicked off the light. They were pale blue, etched out of her head, parting her hair. Growing all the time, she smiled, her teeth flecked with light, since they planted them in my skull.

I left the party heavy with dreams, tracing the drizzled tarmac all the way back to my shitty apartment.

It became one of those collective student manias. Do you remember when everyone was going to or starting spoken word poetry nights? A bit like that. As harsh winter hit our town, first gradually and then all at once, the new mods on offer was what we talked about. The capitals and trendy places further south had their own studios and styles: bionics, mechanics, grafts, it varied.

Ours did a bit of everything. My friend Lachlan went in early November to get a new sense stapled in. I was apprehensive, but when I saw him again he explained. It was just under your diaphragm, the procedure didn't touch the brain. The implant hummed when you were facing due north. It'd be useful hiking, which he did a lot.

Others were bolder. Not long after I saw someone walking along High Street with another pair of eyes pressed into the side of their temples. Two pupils swam in each.

Right now you're probably wondering what you would have done. Not as an actual statement of intent, but as another hypothetical to torture yourself with. If you had to have something done, what would it be? Ruth put two whiskers in her cheeks so she knew when it

would rain. Asma had her hands and forearms split to the elbow, with another opposable thumbplanted in the palm. Nathan put LED lights under his skin; when he concentrated, rippling patterns burst from his fingers to his forearms like aurorae.

Helene outdid us all. It was a procedure that lasted 24 hours, and she emptied her bank past her overdraft and still asked her parents for more. When she was done, the difference wasn't obvious. After the bandages came off and the neat scars had closed completely, she was confident enough to offer a demonstration; while admitting that she'd been inspired by Nathan somewhat.

Standing in the centre of her living room, our circle of obsessives lined on the couches, she pulled the cord on her dressing gown. I can't remember who screamed. Across her skin points flexed and relaxed: bunching into tips and dissolving. Chromatophores. Like cuttlefish skin. Helene smiled as a wave of blue and purple shivered from her big toe to the inside of her thigh before exploding green and tracing up her stomach. Joining her arms above her head, she turned uneasily as her skin flashed and bunched.

Touch. She smiled. The crowd pressed in, feeling the bursts underneath her skin.

The receptionist was nice. The office was antiseptic. The light was clean and bright. Tinged blue. Not sickly. Somehow clear. I sat down, holding the binder full of notes. I had had my consultations. I had enumerated the procedures. My trust fund was empty. This would take two days. Every scrap of tissue would be re-arranged, re-purposed, re-used. I would change, alter so fundamentally to be unrecognizable to my friends, my family, my species. When you see me I will lope, or shamble, or crawl down the street. When your small and human eyes meet my compound; or bifurcated; or smooth eyeless plates you will know just what you are; just what you can become. Another form curls inside you, dear reader, curls inside you and waits to be born.

GROWTH

I went to *Arabica* whenever I was passing through the Wynd, which I did often. If I had time in the mornings I'd get off the tube a stop earlier and stroll through the lanes between Iris Street and my office on the corner of Manysaints Road.

It was an old suburb, upscaled. The tangle of slanted streets that resisted the grid of the areas around it had christened it. This sharp contrast with the Georgian layouts of its neighbours had somehow replaced the "i" with a more mediaeval "y". Every street in the Wynd had been pedestrianised, most eschewed normal paving in favour of charming cobblestones. It shone, especially in the morning. The place was charged with optimism; it was sugary, infectious.

The roasts at *Arabica* really were without compare. You wouldn't know, it seemed so typical a place. Everything was done up in a sleek and black plastique. A blackboard on an easel told you the roast of the day. It was the sort of place you'd get laughed out of if you ordered an Americano or a Filter. I really admire that kind of commitment, really making a statement with your business. It's a kind of artistry in itself, that branding.

On a retrospectively significant day I ran into Oliver in the queue. The sun was bright and beautiful, and it always seemed to show him up: his worn knitted coat, teashades, and greasy carpet of unwashed hair that glittered in harsh light. Nobody really knew what he did, he drifted from party to party telling people he was a music producer, but the sum total we could find out was that he had a dad who worked in the city.

Perhaps it was wrong, as someone from a well-heeled family myself, to be put off by this. Trust-fund failures are a fixture in any arts scene, but you'd think it would merit humility. You'd think that anyone with that kind of security could at least wash their hair or, failing that, moisturise.

Oliver wanted people to call him Ollie. He was tall, and when he leaned in to talk to you he assumed a kind of hunch. Once I saw him offer his hand for a woman to shake and, when she clasped it in hers, he turned it upwards to drag it to his mouth for a kiss.

Of course he was grabbing coffee before his daily walk.

"Mon proméné du jour, touse jours." Oliver grinned with yellowing teeth. I smiled back like I didn't want to correct him. We started into it, he was producing a new track so & so. He was going to sign with a record label, so & so. I told him about the office, a short story I was working on. We grabbed our coffees and began to walk.

The beauty of the place really helped contain my disgust with the man. Before they'd

done it up, the stretch was miserable. Dirt on the streets, mobile repair shops, that sort of thing.

It had been a slumped slice of the inner city. Now the light was pure and perfect, there were flower baskets hanging from the walls of the gastropub (The Hog and Sparrow, a lovely place). The cobbles, freshly installed then, glittered.

It was just when Oliver started explaining his track again, like he hadn't just told me about it ("the grime and heart of dupstep, *old dupstep* mind, with the, uh, the, the uh, PC music dynamism, that, uh, freshness") when we saw that a small section of street had been cordoned off, bright orange barriers had been set in a crude triangle. We made our way over to investigate.

Three workmen stood around the disruption, scowling in their bright yellow hardhats and high-vis jackets. Their faces were lined, red, puffy. On closer inspection one could see that the cobblestones had been lifted up, that something had been hammered into the space underneath. Sticking out of the street was a metal cylinder, like a piece of rebar but light grey, a worn steel tooth.

"Can't explain it." One of the workmen spoke, nodding as he did.

"It can't be explained." Another agreed, his head bobbing in time to his fellow's. "Maybe it's, uh, a piece of debris? Someone kicked up the stone on a night out?" Oliver always inserting himself; trying to be helpful, as if they needed help.

"No," said the third workman. "No debris under the cobbles, cleaned it all up." "Trust one of these twats to know."

"Yeah, trust these twats."

They laughed. I resented that. Less the slur, but my grouping with Oliver. Of course he was a twat. Grouping us together, though, saying 'these twats' like it meant something, like both of us signified something. Like clean clothes and clean hair and shorn face and tasteful paisley didn't put me in another league. I did resent it.

Oliver gave them the finger and we walked on. He said he'd walk me to the sculpture, which was a little way up the street. I could see his feet drag, the early morning sun wash over his deflated features. Perhaps he thought that if he allowed himself to grow stale around the edges he wouldn't be immediately recognizable as a nepo baby, that people wouldn't find him ridiculous. I didn't allow myself to feel pity.

I waved him goodbye a little before the sculpture, just when I felt he was threatening to talk to me about his track for the fourth time. Nodding, flashing me yellowing teeth, he raised a lazy hand and turned off into an alley. I made to walk on until he was safely out of sight, then doubled back to the sculpture. I had a little bit of time before they expected me in, and I had my coffee to finish.

I always liked what they'd done here. The artist wasn't listed, but it had a plaque and everything. It was a hybrid: clear plastic bottles and bright red wrought objects melted or soldered or stuck together. The shape roughly described a bare tree. It might've been ten feet or so tall, the ends of the branches thinning out to impossibly fine points high above the cobbles. It reminded me of a song that had stuck in my head, an earworm that seemed emblematic of the Wynd. A faintly depressing melody that still glittered somehow. The plinth was circled, ringed with letters, stamped in bronze. Once, I took the time to read them all.

& SUPPOSE THE STONES IN THE ROAD BEGAN TO SWELL & GROW BEFORE YOUR EYES, & IF THE PEBBLE THAT YOU NOTICED AT NIGHT HAD SHOT OUT BLOSSOMS IN THE MORNING?

If it was a quote it wasn't attributed, but it glowed with that same delight. Everything in the Wynd harmonized to that melody, everything seemed to pulse and bloom with life.

As I made my way to my office however, something occurred to me. The disordered cobblestone, the spike someone had hammered in under it. It seemed to make more sense, looking at the thing closely, that, rather than someone lifting the pavement and pressing it in, the thing had pushed the cobblestone aside when it burst up.

What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents?

Of course for the first few days of growth, no-one recognized it as such. I didn't pass through the Wynd every day, but when I did I made sure my meandering route intersected with the disturbed cobble. Each time it was still there, somehow each day it was more apparent that the thing had been pushed up rather than lifted.

But work consumed me. I was working with a celebrated author on 'a satire of modern times'. In the book the prime minister was cast as a king, his cabinet ministers as advisers, and the narrative broadly described his fraught relationship with the leader of the peasant revolt: Johnny Populism. Hilarious stuff, and timely too. I was so absorbed in this that I had to hear about the latest development second hand.

The house party was winding down, people were pairing off or bowing out. Oliver was so clearly trying to get with an intern for the *Enquirer*. He was draping over her shoulder, trying to enfold her, one hand on her stomach, his lips at her ear. Myself, the pair, and a few friends had

formed a kind of social semicircle, the dregs of drink at the bottoms of our cups.

Just when my mind turned to packing it in, Sue, a member of an experimental theatre group I'd dropped out of turned to me.

"Oh, you'll like this, that thing on Macher Way? The thing you were talking about? Someone stuck a bulb on it."

"What? Really?" Something in the air shifted a little. "A bulb? A flower bulb."

"A lightbulb," Sue replied. "Someone's stuck a lightbulb at the end of it."

"Oh yeah we saw that, didn't we?" Oliver ducked back from the side of the woman's face. "Maybe it's an art project, or something." His contribution made, he leaned back into the woman's neck, the stubble of his upper lip brushing against her cheek.

I made to turn back to Sue, but she was already gone, walking away. My head still humming with the news, I made my excuses, left as quickly as I could. I couldn't catch up with her, so I resolved to check on Monday.

On Sunday I woke up to the same feed post everyone else did. After the party Oliver had followed the woman from the *Enquirer*. Her name was Sally. He'd dogged her, touched her. She'd gotten away by climbing onto a night bus that had miraculously passed by. The post didn't mention him by name, but Oliver immediately outed himself in the comments. He'd misinterpreted signals. He always believed victims. He was sorry. It was a one-off thing. He would learn and grow.

An ex of his jumped in down thread. He'd done the same thing apparently with another woman when they were together. He didn't have an answer to that. The furore continued without him. That evening he posted an announcement that he'd be titling his new EP *Cancelled*. I felt comfortable unfriending him then.

When I got around to seeing it the disturbance was still cordoned off, as if the site was ground zero for some new pathogen. This time there was one workman standing by it.

Sure enough, there was a bulb at the end of it. Not an oval lightbulb, as I'd imagined when Sue told me, but a long, semi-cylindrical glass pane, covered by metal on one end and open at the other. You could see the filaments and support wires through the mist of the glass. The strangest thing was that there was no seam to indicate where the thing had been stuck, no obvious break in the metal and the glass.

"It's growing." The workman said, something low in his voice, his small browneyes fixated on the disturbance.

"It's what?"

"Growing. We've measured it. Council's orders. An inch since last week. And the

bulb.”

“Someone stuck it on?”

“Is this one of you people’s fucking art projects?” The venom the man had previously laser focused on the disturbance now hit me full in the face. He was slight, but wiry, the lines of his features each seemed to run over individually toned muscles which flexed as he scowled.

I mutely shook my head.

“That’s vandalism,” his ire redirected at the upturned cobble, “a crime. Hell to pay.” He nodded, seeming to draw strength from those last three words, repeating them like a prayer. “Hell to pay.”

I walked on, passing the sculpture without lingering. That day at the office I was sluggish, unproductive. Something lingering in my stomach was weighing me down, making me sick.

I passed by again on my way home from work, something I was normally too tired to do, but that day I couldn’t help it. I heard the sound from the end of the street. A long grating drone, a hissing scraping noise. The source became more and more obvious.

Three men, wearing high vis jackets and welding masks, were taking a buzzsaw to the disturbance. Sparks sprayed from the whirring blade and the screech of metal and machine was unbearable. I stopped for a moment, fixated. It only took a moment before one of the men, seemingly supervising the work his fellows were doing, caught sight of me and waved me on. My ears rung all the way back to my flat.

The next day I returned. The disturbance was undamaged, the bulb still attached, the metal unscratched. I think it was then that it occurred to me. What was growing (and it was *growing*, I realised) from the ground was unmistakably a lamp post.

You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it.

And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song,

you would go mad.

From then on I didn’t need to keep up with developments through rumour and supposition, I visited the thing every day. Workdays and weekends, morning and evening. I’d arrive late to work. I’d burst into the office late, unshorn, uncaffeinated, disordered. Once late at night I elbowed past clubbers, tweakers, nightlife detritus, with a length of measuring tape. Without catching much attention I scraped aside the metal barricade.

The lamp post had bent, the bulb sitting at an angle. The whole thing had curved now, it

broke out at the earth at an angle but now curled upwards along the stem. Measuring the thing, twice now, was an exercise in futility. I knew that it was growing, or I knew that the artist was incrementally adding to it. That secondary possibility was cover: something I could use to dismiss the more troubling notion as I marinated in my own sweat at 2 a.m., paralysed by the implication.

When I returned two nights thence to measure the difference, I found something by accident. Maybe a few metres away from the initial disturbance, something caught my foot. I nearly fell, but recovered my balance. In nearly tripping over I had kicked the cobble to one side. Underneath it, sticking like a thorn from the street, a grey metal cylinder, sprouting from the disordered and shattered tarmac beneath the cobble.

I didn't take the measurement. I ran home.

From then on I tried to avoid it. I took the tube the full way to work, sometimes went to the stop past mine so I wouldn't even be confronted by its implication as I made my way to the office. Even then, in the screaming dark of the subway, I thought I could hear something between the stops that marked the Wynd's space above: a sort of straining, a creaking, like an old house stretching and settling; the groans made by changing earth.

Even as I shied from it the news found me. A third post was discovered even before they found the one I'd stumbled on. I was told that the council were panicking, considering adding plaques on the things and declaring it a community art project. The way people talked about it had become charged, though, and I could see the manias that I had fallen into cropping up everywhere. The hushed tones, the half-whispered supposition. There was something illicit in this, forbidden in this.

"I found a stretch of tarmac in Marion Lane, it was like someone had poured it over the cobbles, or," and here the rumour-teller smiled, the tip of her tongue boiling with implication, "like it had *come up between them.*"

I had to excuse myself from such talk, always. I'd leave the function, try to shift the discussion to something else. My sleep cycle was returning to normal, I couldn't risk it. Even then I'd sometimes lie awake, my retinas drying out as they accustomed to the pitch dark of my room.

Eventually the Wynd was closed off. It was a drastic measure. There were petitions, crowd-sourced local campaigns. Save our Lanes! Save our Wynd! The subject was endlessly rehashed at interminable local council meetings. Teary-eyed women talking about the irreparable harm to their businesses and loud, indignant men opining about the importance of transparency and community. Every time the issue was raised the councillors, the administrators

were of one mind. They glanced between each other, gazes shifting and indistinct. They couldn't possibly reopen until renovations were completed, until the problem had been solved.

Of course people who lived there were still allowed in and out, but as the growth increased untrammelled that became difficult. Many houses had double ended closes, with entrances that opened up on other streets. Soon even the ones that didn't retrofitted exits through the back ends of their communal gardens. Doors were fitted, and the entrances to the Wynd lanes were blocked up.

The consensus seemed to be that the insides of buildings didn't see the kind of alterations that the outside did. None of us knew for sure. Rents were too high in the Wynd for any of us to actually get a place there, the only person that any of us knew who lived there was Oliver. No-one knew where he'd gone. No-one had kept in touch. The people that were, out of negligence or sick curiosity, still registered as his friend reported that he'd gone quiet the middle of last month. Before that he'd still been doggedly updating progress on his album, still relentlessly promoting it to jeers or silence.

One day a grainy photo of a spidering mess of industrial wire climbing up a speckled Wynd wall made its way onto my feed. I didn't recognize the person who shared the image. Following through the link I found a site with a black background, sickly green text. Something out of another era, GeoCities or Angelfire. Notations, narrations, descriptions of developments.

A photograph, better quality: a lamp post, now at full height, but crooked and twisted and bent in a way that described a reckless and irregular pattern of growth. I scrolled. A mire of tarmac, cobblestones half-submerged or completely swamped by an uneven mat of gunmetal-black asphalt. I scrolled. One final image that made me shut the laptop closed and lapse into a series of heaving, steady breaths: a cobblestone, broken at regular points, cut into segments but still joined, metal legs splaying from each section, copper wire feelers protruding from the top.

I made my resolve then. I called in sick to work.

*And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the
pebble that you noticed at night had shot out
stony blossoms in the morning?*

The ingress to the Wynd was unguarded most nights. In daytime there were usually two officers stationed there, swathed in hi-vis jackets and respiratory masks. The other points of entry, the alleys that spilled out into the mazes of streets, were blocked off by temporary fence panels held in place by rubber bricks. Easy to shift, to slip around.

I packed a torch, a high-quality camera and, after some thought, a spanner: the heaviest thing I owned that fit comfortably into my palm. I took a circuitous route, my face wrapped in a scarf, but I didn't need to. When I arrived at the alley I'd chosen, it was unattended and there were no security cameras.

I dragged the fencing to one side, slipped in with my back to a wall. My coat dragged grit from the bricks, it dusted down my back. It lodged there. I felt it settle into my pores, grind against me. Something inside me convulsed.

I saw the light, then. The creeping mats of wires glinted with it. It washed over the cobbles beneath my feet and the tarmac that had boiled up to swamp them. It was harsh, yellow-orange. Though the sources I'd read had warned me, though I was still nominally prepared, I did feel the world tilt a little.

Making my way from the alley I saw that the lamps were lit. I'd seen the pictures, but they hadn't communicated what it felt like to stand beneath that light. Now there were so many lamp posts it was useless to count them all. I had to step between them, edge around the slim metal trunks, my boots finding uneasy purchase on the shattered and uprooted cobblestones. Sometimes there would be a mat of tarmac, other times a solid mass of wires that allowed me to walk more evenly.

Inside the Wynd, the sound of the outer city was smothered. There was always some acoustic quality that kept out the sound of traffic and amplified the birdsound, the rustle of greenery. Now only the cold wind blew, carried distant echoes. Rattling glass, the uneasy swaying of the canopy of lamps overhead.

I made my way onto the central thoroughfare of the Wynd, where the growth had started. I didn't have an agenda. There was nothing I could do to stop this, there was nothing I could do to understand this. All I could do was experience this, experience it from the centre and hope that that would kill the curiosity inside me.

All the while I walked, things skittered around me. I had seen the pictures and knew not to look closely. Masses of metal legs, corrugated segmented bodies. Each perhaps about the size of my forearm. Something like a crab, or a woodlouse, or both. Some of the more unhinged blogs I'd read suggested these were surveillance drones, data collection automatons. I knew perfectly well what they were. The Wynd had developed Flora. Why not fauna, too?

There was something like a clearing on the main street. I came out by *Arabica*. The front had been smashed. The blackboard with the roast of the day had been tipped over, and whatever had last been written there was smudged into illegibility. The cupcake shop's insides had been gutted. I could only see in by virtue of the wayward orange glow. I couldn't tell if it was

professional work, or vandalism.

Some of the wicker baskets with flowers in them had fallen to the street, spilling dirt and dead plants. Others remained suspended from their storefronts, their contents rotting inside them.

I made my way forward, then. I would go to the sculpture, in the hope that I'd find something approaching an explanation.

I wasn't alone.

The things, the isopods, the drones (the *animals*, I corrected myself) were impossible to ignore now. Not least because they had chosen the direction that I had. There were crowds, lines, columns developing on either side of me. I saw them scrabbling over each other, pressing against each other, the scrape of their metal hulks whispering in the background to my echoing footsteps.

At first they gave me a wide berth, but as the growth thickened we were pressed together. My breathing was shallow. I tried to ignore when I felt something hard and jagged bump into my shoe, or when I took a step and kicked something squirming out of the way. I kept myself steady and focused, and eventually the monument came into view.

The treeline thinned around it. The closest post to it, I realised with a start, was the original ingressor. It still had the barriers ringed around it, the triangle undisturbed. Apart from this one identifying marker it was just like any of the others. This was not what caught my eye. The monument was thronged. Every one of the animals seemed to press in to it, crawling over each other. I squinted, filtering out the things in my vision to make sure I was seeing what I thought I was. The figure with its arms wrapped around the trunk of the plastic tree was unmistakably human.

I called out once, twice. Only the second time did it register, did the person detach from the embrace and turn to face me.

Oliver was naked. His hair was shoulder-length now. The stubble that he'd cultivated to a purposefully chic dishevelment had manifested into the wispy ghost of a beard. The light was reflected too harshly across his tea-shades, which seemed to be shattered across the bridge of his nose.

I knew he'd had tattoos. At parties he'd roll up his sleeves, or the legs of his trousers. Sometimes not necessarily to show that he had new ones, but unprompted to show you the ones that he had. The new marks on his skin weren't right. A double yellow line, two even stripes, started at his foot and trailed up his entire body to loop over his back. There were infinitesimally small black marks across his torso, sometimes over each other. White triangles fringed with red borders housing symbols I can't describe were evenly placed across his wasted frame.

I called out his name, my voice cracked and weak. Something in him jerked, his neck

snapped upright and he centred me in his vision. Then his head cocked further back, his face tipping upwards. Feet slapped across the cobbles as he began to walk with drunken purpose towards me. The sea around him parted, filling up behind him. None of the animals seemed to want to touch him. Both his arms spread out, his fingers stretching.

His skin had the grain of tarmac. Parts of it were already grey, already mottled. Little patches of it pocked his body. When he opened his mouth his teeth glinted chrome. When he stopped mere feet from me the blood was rushing so fast through my head that I couldn't even hear if I was screaming.

And I couldn't tell, when it happened, if the sound that Oliver made was closer to a car horn or anything approaching a human cry.

A GEOGRAPHY OF THE HOLLOW EARTH

There's a story by Calvino (or Borges, I'm not sure) where a person sets about dreaming someone else. Over a period of months or years a man is constructed in the magician's sleep: from the pulsing wet of his organs to his hopes and dreams. Eventually the dreamed person manifests in reality and just afterwards, as you've probably already guessed, we discover that the dreamer is himself being dreamed.

Anyway, that's how I feel all the time.

Every time I try to stand I get dizzy. When I climb to my feet there's a sensation that feels like my temple is being pinched by an industrial vice. Not painful, just unpleasant. I don't get hungry anymore, I just get sick. Actually I'm not sure if I'm sick from not eating or sick from my own smell and feel. It's been too long since I showered. When I'd get like this before I'd set aside one day where I cleaned all my sheets and showered and shaved. I'd slip into bed ecstatic and smooth, like an onion with all its skin pulled off. But the water's long shut off at my flat, assuming I ever went back there, and I'm not sure I could find another place.

I've been getting impressions recently. Actually I've been getting impressions for a long time now. Impressions about the state of the world, why things are like this now. Sometimes they're strong, ringing out loud in my head; I can hear every word. Sometimes they're like whispers, or implications, I have to figure out what they're saying around what they aren't. You know? Anyway, since before things went to shit and before I moved out here I've been writing them down. Like:

Souterrain

Every single municipal subterranean transit network is actually connected. If you see a door in a subway system, any subway system, you'll probably know what I mean, you know where it goes. Beneath the tunnels under Paris, London, New York, Moscow, and here too there's a more profound set of connections. A network of networks, a system of systems. Miles of concrete-lined tunnels cut into bedrock, the most comprehensive piece of infrastructure on the planet. They criss-cross the earth, girding under oceans and beneath our feet.

These tunnels run empty for miles: vast, echoing veins the width of cathedrals. There are checkpoints, yes, and a little traffic. There are clusters of civilization: embassies, black- sites, liaison offices. Those stationed there at the behest of governments or NGOs or multinationals

live quiet lives in the absence of the sun, busying themselves with the business of the lower earth.

Each of these diplomatic, political, industrial, and commercial nodes is based around an entrance to the deeper Souterrain: the guts of the hollow earth. There is a complex, secret business of liaison with the polities and peoples that populate the lands arrayed below our feet. This has been the case for centuries, since the kings of Pella broke into the Aerrhynian Underland through their silver mines, since Qin Shi Huangdi broke into the Mosslit Mangroves while digging his tomb.

No government on earth is exempt from this conspiracy of silence. No international corporation is clean from the taint of conspiracy. For centuries the powers that are have suppressed knowledge about the lower parts of the earth, the secret cities, the hidden underworlds. Until today, when the irrepressible truth of its existence bleeds from the ground itself.

I didn't move into the subway to explicitly get closer to the impressions, though they did start coming more clearly when I moved here full-time. My mattress sits at the end of a long platform. Usually when I go to sleep I feel the concrete boiling in the ground beneath me. Rich with implications, discussions, stories. My dreams are pretty normal, but the impressions come thick and fast when I wake. That's how I can tell they're real, because they come when I'm awake.

And I've never been more grateful for the absence of the internet. When I first started getting the impressions, I'd google to see what they were about. None of the stuff I found online came close. My searches would turn up pages on the Journey to the Centre of the Earth (which a lot of sites cribbed wholesale from), Atlantis, Thule, Nazi occultism, fantasies. Nothing real: crank shit or voodoo. None of them got at anything even half as true as my faintest impressions. And what's more, the deluge of false information suppressed and corrupted the genuine understandings I did reach. I had to purge each of my manuscripts after I had written them, exorcise them of David Icke or Gene Ray, leaving only that which had genuinely impressed on me.

Now my computer is a burnt out husk in my apartment and I do my research with my cheek pressed to the ground. Whenever I get an impression I write it out until it resolves itself. The impressions always come in words, long strings. The thought of each individual word occurs in my head and I follow each sentence until I have spools of them on the page.

Sometimes the words are lies, which I can tell when contradictions occur, in which case I work around the meaning of each word until it all becomes clear. It is a science, you see, and I am a scientist.

The Forests

The trees beneath the world do not grow closer to the sun. Each tree emanates from a central point, each branch is also a root. Their bark and flesh are white. In the country of the Axolotl-people the thinnest tuber at the very end of a branch-root is fashioned into a kind of flute-reed. The instrument plays a note so pure and so sad as to induce instantaneous suicide. Not from despair, you must understand, but in a kind of total surrender to the tragedy the note brings. It's not your personal feeling, you might reflect as you neck cyanide or saw through your throat, it just seems like the appropriate thing to do.

As the name of the Mosslit Mangroves implies, this region is lit up by the bioluminescent fungi and lichens that carpet the barks of the radial forests. Many miles of the region's tunnels are flooded, and traversal must be made either with amphibious vehicles or with the appropriate equipment. The bioluminescent flora is prized and scraps preserved in jars of swampwater fetch impressive prices at the markets of Sous-Chatelet or Deep-Boston but any piece of vegetation that leaves the mangroves does not keep its glow for long. Whether by the trauma of severance or loss of connection with the alchemy of the place, the light is extinguished.

It's this that has led some scholars to the belief that the light is mystical, not biochemical, that the forest speaks through the glow and that, with enough study, the illuminations might be interpreted. That, with lights of our own, we might be able to speak back to it.

Most of the time it's quiet and I roll onto my back, onto the mattress that I dragged down here. I do remember, can't help myself remembering. I remember going on dates, strung out and awkward. I remember working at the stationary shop, putting pencils on shelves. I remember every Sunday having dinner with my mum. I remember waiting for one of us to speak first, trapped on either side of a table at the All Bar One. I remember sliding down the wall of the supply room, my head boiling with an impression so strong my vision went hazy. I

remember chewing a potato for a whole minute while I was asked about my life or what I was doing with myself.

People are hollow too. Their skin stretches over huge voids of meaning. Nobody knew, and I made sure to tell nobody. It used to burn in me so strong, burn so hot and bright that I thought my skin would distend or my face would blister and pop. I wanted to start shouting, to start screaming. The ground felt like a taut, rotted hide: something so strained and permeable; like it was about to burst. I was afraid to walk, I was sure that if I made a mis-step the ground would rupture or I would.

I don't need to worry about any of that now. I can shout about the Hollow Earth all I like, and I do.

The Beasts

The ecosystems of the Souterrain are not radically different from those above. There are predators and prey: the foxbears hunt the paradeer, the ylmwyrn chase shoals of squid. But as any naturalist will tell you, there are outliers.

The walking-people are classed as animals by most prominent subnaturalists. The species is endemic to most regions of the souterrain. Before a specimen was captured they were considered a myth or a psychic phenomenon. You might find a walking person in a glade of the Tadych Dorr uplands, wearing a suit and carrying an umbrella. As it passes you, it might turn its head and exclaim "How do you do?" or "Fine weather we're having". If you respond it will make no comment beyond a simple grunt of affirmation.

If you follow it, you might come across a gathering, or a swarm. Their calls will rise in cacophony. "I'm going to be voting for the conservative party this year!" "Fine weather we're having." "How do you do?" "What's the time?" When a specimen was captured for the Station S-B zoo, the change in behaviour was minimal. The individual in question does not sleep. It does not eat either and there are no reports of any individuals falling victim to predation in any of its habitats. If you go to the Station S-B zoo today, you'll find it there: strutting laps behind the glass. Sometimes it will stop and stare out of its enclosure. If you meet its eyes, you'll find nothing behind them.

Do I miss the world before? I miss parts. I miss my mum. There was a girl — or was it a boy? My head is so full. It's so full and so heavy. It's so hard to remember what happened first,

if the world fell apart before or after I left my flat. I remember looking down at something on fire, something burning in the street. There was a pop, the sound of something bursting, and I looked out to see a car on fire across the road in the street. I wasn't the first to leave my flat, there were a few others. Their faces were cast red and orange in the light, their eyes open so wide. A few filmed on their phones. I don't think I talked to anyone.

Sometimes it lines up in my head. I can close my eyes and point at that moment and say 'yes, it was there.' That's when the warnings started to drip into TV and social media. That's when I stopped getting calls from my mum. When I'd stopped going into work. That's when the dating apps started, one by one, to shut down. It makes the clearest kind of sense to me, the sense that only the stars aligning in your own head can bring you.

The People

There are people beneath the earth. They're like you and me. The world turns over their heads. The sky is a cavern roof. They go to their jobs and punch the clock. Whether they're Axotl-People or Cynocephali or human-folk like you or me, everyone's got to make a living. Some of them have a hard time. Some of them had bad things happen to them when they were children. It's impossible to make general statements about people. I'm not sure if things have changed down there, like they have up here. There are reasonable arguments to suggest one way or the other. Of course, these things aren't governed by reason. I'll have to ask the ground again I'll have to wait for more impressions.

ARCANA

XIX. The Sun

The iron box is waiting, open in the cellar. It's important that it stays open, he could have it destroyed but it wouldn't be an honest death if it was. Of course he could find some willing individual, some brave soul, to help him do the deed. There are ways and means, too many to count. For all the power and glamour of his kind, they are made of their weaknesses. For all their professed immortalities, everyone knows how to kill them.

So he sits cross legged in the garden, waiting for the dawn to pierce the horizon. He knows a sunrise: of all the memories of the people he has drunk, he savoured the sunrises the most. So he's ready for it when it comes. And before the face of the sun cracks the earth and its gleam obliterates thirty centuries of pain, he sees a flash of lilac on the skyline and almost thinks about living again.

VI. The Lovers

I have forgotten my own face. I no longer hear the sound of my own voice. This fixation is total, its hold over me absolute. I have looked into the landscape of your face, interrogated it absolutely. Close enough, even the most delicate features become bulbous; unrecognizable. A lunar landscape of pores and folds of flesh, scars that you can't see, the places where smile-lines will carve through your flesh, the hairs so fine and so small and soft that no-one but me has never seen them.

When we are apart, I conjure you in my mind. This is magically unsound, dangerous even. I may make you an egregore, my own tulpa, waxing in power as I diminish; diminish. This would be a danger if I did not trust you absolutely. I know that whenever I am thinking of you, you are thinking of me. Our thoughtforms feed each other, nourish each other, we wax and wane simultaneously; like the ballooning of a lung or the clench of a heart.

We are the same, you and I, our features so alike after months and years. We are one being, one body, one flesh. And when the world sees us kiss, they imagine it is a trick, that there is only one person putting their lips to a mirror.

II. The High Priestess

They had to chain her to the pyre. Rope was no good. It would turn to snakes and she would laugh and laugh and laugh. Even as her bonds slipped from her and struck at her captors, she kept herself against the stake at her back: hands bent behind the wood with her wrists joined on the other side.

Of course, she might have turned the chains had she the inclination but the game had to be played according to the rules agreed. That was why she screamed as the pyre was lit, choked on the smoke, convulsed, and threw up over her smock and died. The townsfolk wailed and prayed and vomited themselves as the smell of her cooking meat filled their nostrils.

When the pyre was warm ash, her bones were found and scrubbed a sickly white. Bound in a sack they would whisper and hum to her apprentice as he hurried through the night. It was only when the soil began to boil and the serpents rose and something came to swallow the town that the murderers realised the spell they had helped to conjure.

VII. The Chariot

Between Aberdeen and Portlethen, the 9:00 Glasgow express train crashes forever. The site is cordoned off, no-one knows when the event will end. All that is known is that it is still ongoing. The train careens off the tracks. Its wheels spin in mid-air. In the carriage, young men in suits are thrown from their seats; convivial types, cans in hand, slam into each other in the walkway; a woman screams unceasingly as she tumbles into a luggage rack.

They are building a new line, they say, perhaps one that will bypass the site via Peterculter. When something horrible happens, you have to work around it. That's what you tell the families who beg you to tell them if their loved ones are still alive. God forbid if, even for a moment, the intricate rented world stops ticking.

XVIII. The Moon

There are two schools of magic: earthly and heavenly. The druids, wicca, Colquhoun, earthly. Dee, the Rosicrucians, Crowley, heavenly. All global conflict, in some way or another, has been a further litigation of this fundamental magical schism stretching to prehistory. In the latter half of the previous century, this fundamental conflict was as true as it was between the Romans and the Sassanids.

The moon is the holy grail for this conflict. Formed when an extrasolar body slammed into the earth, it contains elements of each realm of thought: fused atom to atom in the fire of celestial catastrophe.

Every spacecraft sent into orbit had sigils carved into the modules. There were words on the lips of the astronauts and cosmonauts, ostensible code-words, that they did not know the meaning nor the significance of. Spells were woven into the linings of their spacesuits, of exaltation or protection depending on the denomination.

Of course the space race was won, there was most assuredly a victor. The problem for scholars, for historians, is that we don't know which was victorious. After all these years, after catastrophe mounts catastrophe, we still do not know who to blame.

I. The Fool

Naturally, we all laughed when he released the Japan vlog. It was ridiculous on two levels: a grown man mugging about the strangeness of another culture, a premise more at home in the 19th century than the 21st; and the mere ridiculousness of vlogging as a concept, the datedness of it, the all-encompassing cringe.

Our laughter curdled when he found the corpse. It turned to outrage then: how dare he show us this, our children this; how dare he press the camera to its bloated and rotting face, take in every detail of its hanged body.

And that outrage curdled again when he released the next video: naked and gibbering in a bathtub, rocking back and forth. The body had told him things, he insisted again and again, eyes like peeled lychee, it had showed him things.

Everyone agreed that he had lost his mind but we tuned in for the next video. Bearded and wild eyed, he climbed over the rocks on the Pacific skerries, shakily held the camera to the strange and ruined structures. Frantically he repeated the co-ordinates, told us that if we joined him we'd understand it all; we'd find out what happens when we die.

Of course we would not go. Or we might, just to see. We'd see how much of an idiot this man was, how much of a moron. We'd show him, we'd see for ourselves of course, but we'd show him.

V. The Hierophant

The Pope's distended form lies in a lull in the river's current. A bend piles refuse on the bank and his rotting body reclines over patches of waste; trash; ejecta. Broken pottery and plastic bottles and human shite. Enough of the water has soaked into his once-white robes and tarnished the gilding that his vestments are now as green as the saggy skin on his eyeless head.

The new Pope, his replacement, had tried this one and found him guilty. He exhumed his corpse and had the two fingers on his right hand, the ones he used to bless, cut off. With all his acts invalidated, with his infallibility stripped, he was flung in the river.

But there is power in belief. Even without divinity washing his brow, his remains are soaked with the adoration he enjoyed in office. This rots slower than flesh and, as the half-life of faith decays, flourishes of the divine manifest. Lepers' sores are healed as they peer through the stink to look at the body. Cancers wither in his presence. The lame walk. The bank bursts into blooming.

It's not long after these miracles that, borne aloft by the commons, the hierophant is returned to the basilica to claim his own.

XXI. The World

I want to love your continuity. After death we come to our parts. The electrons that were our thoughts dissipate. Our meat and chemicals break down or are devoured. This is true, I know this is true. But we ourselves were other things before, and what makes us will be other things again. The processed proteins mashed to grow us were deer, ferns, fungus, mycelia, maniraptora, sauropoda, diapsida, tiktaalik, pikaia.

I want to love the continuity of your matter through the breadth of time. I want to see your Shield of Achilles: everything that your matter has ever or will ever make. Every fish-scale, every dinosaur feather, every rodent's tooth, and every beetle's husk.

There are people who say that we are stardust and miss the steps between. I am not dead dirt from space. I have not been that for a long time. I am alive, and I have been for billions of years. Not just in heredity, though that matters too, but because I am of that stuff that living things are of. I love that about myself. And I love that about you.

XII. The Hanged Man

Even after the crows ate his eyes, he wouldn't stop laughing. He even goaded them to do it, peeling back his eyelids and offering them as they perched on the bars of the gibbet cage. Their beaks pulled out the stringy, wet mess in his sockets while he laughed and laughed and laughed.

No-one knew the secret joke that set him in fits, left him doubled over even as the maggots chewed away his lips and the mess of his pulpy, rotting guts hung exposed from his juddering body. Even the laird he stole from claimed ignorance, though the criminal had hissed something to him when he was condemned in the dock.

The dead can see the future, they say, though they cannot often share their wisdom. The laird marched with the pretender in '45. His sons were slaughtered in the highland charge. The tenantry, who gawked, were evicted in the 50's. Now the only landmark on that road is a rotted gallows, a rusted gibbet cage, and a skeleton whose yawning jaws chatter in the lonely wind.

III. The World

The Girlboss places her heavenly foot across the span of the earth. We cringe to our knees and let our voices ring in celebration. She Herself has broken from the glass prison in which she was confined. Her Own pantsuit is sleek and slick with blood. Her Own face is set in lines that both smile and glare. The gaze that pierces and the hands that stretch: her acquisitions encircle the globe, coronating the planet itself with her unearthly majesty.

The Girlboss' enemies flee before her, falling over each other in their attempts to crowd away from her grandeur and her power. The MRAs and the mayo-boys and the not-all-men, each in turn are ground to a fine (yet slightly chunky) paste beneath her heel; suffocated by her toes; mashed to powder by the balls of her feet.

For the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer as they must. But what is sufferance when it is delivered at the hands of divinity? What is injustice when its dispenser's raiment is Light Itself? When the laws of what is exist within the bounds of the supreme being's knowledge and grace?

XIII. The Devil

The conclave is assembled. The goat skulls are daubed in pigs' blood and affixed to the masks. The victim is drugged, bound and dragged to the altar in the finished basement. Newspaper has been put down around it, so extra care is taken with the candles. In the end there is enough light to see, even through the dimness of the hoods and the eye-sockets.

The rite is long but it is, nominally, a success. At the turn of the fourth hour of chanting they are greeted by the Worm. It rises, before the altar, folding out of nothing; and regards the conclave in hungry silence. Shaking with joy, their leader tears his mask from his goateed face and steps forward.

The small man asks for money, power, prestige, the joy of true freedom and the freedom of true joy. He is not the first, but by the end all but the sacrifice are devoured. The conclave was banking on the power of fundamental forces, but there are none such. There are only those who eat, and those who will be eaten.

XVII. The Star

The star appears after the fifth seal is shattered. It is not like the rest of them. Its blue light is somehow warm, each point a refraction of some other colour. It burns like stained glass in the sky, fixed like a new point of light while the angels sweep low with their hungry mouths and the serpents burst from the ground. We turn our faces up to it, bruised; scabbed; tear streaked. We damned, we hopeless, we pray to it for clemency.

It is soon bright enough to see in daytime. Even as close as it is, it retains the sharpness of its shape. It still organises into points: nine, twelve, or fifteen (it alters between blinks). As the world burns or drowns or is eaten or is spat out, the star comes closer and closer. The vastness of its architecture enfolds the dome of the sky, each cruel point carving like a blade along the pitiless width of heaven.

Only then do we, at last realise that it is no beacon of hope but a forewarning of the yet-to-come.

IX. The Hermit

The man in the house can still hear the cries of his children from the street, even after they were eaten. He hasn't left in weeks, hasn't cracked a window. He's running out of dry food. The shapes moving outside do not touch the ground. They float and dance with twisting limbs and fat, bulbous bodies. And they sing, sing like people screaming. When they eat, it's almost graceful. The mouth, at the join of their limbs, presses against your neck. While you shiver and shrink as your organs are pulped and sucked from your body, they grow beautiful; grand; glowing red.

At night they light up, their bodies bursting in bioluminescence or magic or something else unspeakable. Sometimes one of them bumps against the window of his youngest's room, where he spends the night crying. The light saturates the pony calendar and the Disney princess bedsheets. Sometimes he almost hears a muffled 'daddy?' behind the glass. Sometimes he almost reaches for the latch.

XVI. The Tower

I have prophetic dreams on occasion. Usually before something bad is about to happen, I will have a powerfully upsetting dream from which I wake in great distress. Let me give you an example. Before the sudden death of a close friend, I dreamed I visited the beach with two people that I have not seen for a while and may never see again. Rather than warm and tranquil, as the beach was every time myself and the others had visited it before, it was troubled and the rain lashed down. I looked to a headland in the distance and saw a tower block. It was made of stone but the stone was burning. Like a tree in a forest fire it was burning, burning.

The supreme irony is, of course, that all my predictions do me not a whit of good. The dreams will never tell me the nature of the awful thing that is about to happen or how to avoid it, only that it is.

With that in mind, here is a dream I had the other night. I woke in the top room of a tower. It was evening, the sunset was golden through the pale silk of the curtains that covered the arches leading onto the balconies. Outside and beneath the city stretched forever and ever. It became night-time. It became night-time and the room, the bedroom, was full of anyone who I had ever loved and anyone who had ever loved me. They were all there, rows and ranks, men and women. I don't remember who stabbed me first, only that they all did.

XIV. Temperance

With every bite you do irreparable damage. This is important to remember. Every cut of the knife makes unwhole something that was complete, even as it completes you. Every gourmand must understand the necessity of holistic thinking.

“How is it?” The woman on the other side of the table is bone-pale, even as a smile cracks her shivering lips.

“Perfect,” you answer without lying. You pan fried the kidney with garlic, butter-basted it with rosemary. Kidney has such a unique flavour if you savour it, give it time, allow it to speak for itself.

“Afterwards, you can have my lung.” You put down your knife and fork to gently admonish them.

“You should rest, I can wait.” You can. After all, a sharp appetite is the best flavourant.

X. The Wheel of Fortune

It was necessary, as it is for all self-driving vehicles, to include provisions for horrific accidents in the AI. Suppose, for instance, the car is travelling at speed and is forced to choose between careening into a school-bus or driving so fast into a litter of puppies that it vaporizes them. These are normal considerations when driving, and they must be accounted for.

The training regimen was unorthodox. As the utilitarians tell us, we must be prepared to take life in order to save it. It is morally acceptable to kill one person to save five. A car is itself a kind of murder weapon. In the immediate aftermath of the automobile’s arrival, it is difficult to overstate how much child death ensued. A child’s body is a small thing, easily mangled, and the pioneers of automotive locomotion were not well instructed in road safety.

The self-driving AI was therefore trained to kill children. There might be a scenario, for instance, where without action the car would crash into a group of children but would be saved if it redirected its course to kill just one. These are reasonable considerations. Better that one child die than five, no? Innumerable training scenarios were developed where children were mown down, clipped, mashed, torn, mangled. Inside the car and out, under, over, and alongside. Hundreds upon hundreds of virtual children, to save thousands upon thousands more.

It is almost complete. We’ve run the tests. We’ve fine-tuned its moral calculus to our exact specifications. It’s coming out so soon.

IV. The Emperor

“... And folks, I have the greatest dinner parties. Simply some of the best.”

The pitch that Graydon Carter, Anna Wintour, and Alec Baldwin were daubed in has cooled on their skin. Each screamed as they were tarred, feeling the heat of the stuff as precursor for what was to come. Each has long given up any notion of begging. There is no resignation on their faces, merely a numbness.

“And it gives me the most tremendous,” a pause, “pleasure,” Nero paces back and forth in front of the three pillars, crown uneasily supported by his bouffant, orange skin glittering greasily in the lamplight. “To inaugurate,” his dentures mangle his speech, “the greatest events with the greatest,” he almost loses track, “amusements.”

Torch high in his hand, he approaches Graydon Carter’s pyre. The Emperor’s voice drops to a husky, growling, whisper as he leans in. The last thing that the erstwhile owner of V.F. magazine hears before he burns to death in agony, his organs boiling as his skin crisps under the heat, rattles from his ruler’s cat-pursed lips:

“Looks like your party’s finally hot after all.”

XI. Justice

The laws of nature are notoriously carceral. There’s no room for rehabilitation, no room for any harm-reduction measure beyond the most brutal and violent suppression. With this in mind, let us consider the fate of J. D.

It was, it must be stressed, unfortunate that his car broke down when it did. The stretch of desert is uniquely far from any population centres. A high-octane run through the dunes in a convertible was, fans have speculated, an attempt to capture the energy of his promising early filmography: an act of celebration after dismissing the allegations that had hounded him.

It is, of course, regrettable that the pack of wild dogs found him before highway maintenance. After having so soon emerged from a protracted trial, meeting the accusations of his ex-partner with accusations of his own, he might’ve expected some measure of rehabilitation.

Not so. J. was found in pieces, a paisley scarf torn at one end and soaked in blood at the other, a crumpled trilby, a pair of aviators with one lens shattered. Forensic analysis on his corpse indicates that he was, at least partially, consumed alive. Truly an unfortunate turn of events, all agreed, it was most; most regrettable.

I. The Magician

Every time he changes, he loses something of himself. Last week a flash of plumes remained stuck to his skin. Just yesterday, when he bundled up his coils into his shape again; flexing and shifting from snake to man, a scrap of skin between his ankle and upper calf stayed hard and smooth as glass. When he could bear to check he saw that the scales there were iridescent, catching light that he couldn't see at all.

And you might ask him if he regrets it, regrets playing games with magic and his skin, but he doesn't. The unchanged parts are part of the bargain. When people look into his eyes, see that one retina is a cat's and the other belongs to a fox, they will know. They will know that he has the secret of change, that he knows that everything crouches in wait to be something else, and that it is from this universal tension that he draws his power.

XIII. Death

Once decomposition takes hold, my body will burst with life. Centipedes and grubs will worry away at my skin, hewing my imperfections away until they're nothing. Beetles will roam my digestive tract, feeding themselves where I used to sate my appetites. Maggots will fill my brain case, the seat of my soul will become a nursery and new life will burst from my eyes. Spiders, who I so hated when I was alive, will play and hunt over my supine form; at rest I will care for and nurture them as I should have in life. My microbiome will continue uninterrupted, the microscopic tenants that teem in my inside will sustain until there is nothing left and then they will move on.

Even then, I won't be dead. My bones will sparkle in the earth, glowing even as they dry and grow brittle and cracked. Even when I'm a hole under the earth, that a corpse once sat in, my remains charnel-ash in the wet earth I will endure. Even when I am dust, I will be beautiful.

DREAM SEQUENCE

Gender Reveal 9/11

The second plane hits. There's something like a hush as, observed from a distance, it punches into the glacial face of the south tower. For the merest moment everything holds as United Airlines flight number 175 slices through glass, concrete, office furniture, flesh. Even in the youth of the century there are hundreds of cameras pointing directly at the rupture. The films inevitably shiver at point of impact, as the camera-holder's knees buckle, as they start cursing and screaming, as fire and black smoke bursts from the tower's midsection.

We go live to the newsroom. They've had the BREAKING ticker on since the first plane hit. An endless, rolling 90s graphic with the same word for hours: BREAKING, BREAKING, BREAKING. The woman behind the desk looks sick. Her hair is straighter than a bayonet blade, but for all her lacquers of foundation she still looks pale. A junior anchor, the midmorning slot was considered slow enough by the executives to trust her with it. This is her big break, though, she knows it. This will make her career.

There it is: grey smoke guttering as the towers collapse, clouds of concrete dust, asbestos and ash, descend upon Lower Manhattan. The colour, it's unmistakable, everyone knows what it means. The anchor starts, looks into the camera, practically screams:

"We have the gender! We have it: It's a war!" Almost standing from her desk, her smile near shatters her face. "It's a war!"

A clawed forelimb breaks the ruin of facades piled on ground zero. Another follows, twisting from the girders. A third rises, a fourth. They plant themselves on the ground, hauling the body from the mass of wreckage. The War is colossal. It drips black tar. Its sets of jaws laced within jaws creak and groan as they snap and taste the air. Limb after limb drags out of the ground as the War stretches towards the sky. Its jet-engine scream deafens the metropole as its great dark wings unfurl.

Trail Cam Donald Trump

You encounter him after nightfall. It's only the rustling of leaves and the snap of twigs that alerts you to his presence before he lumbers from the darkness into your field of view. In that moment you catch sight of one another. There's no hope of slipping away unseen. You

break eye contact and, facing him, walk backwards. A smart, wilderness-savvy, friend once said that if you ever encounter a one-term president on the trails you should never turn your back to them. Trump is wearing a long coat, velvet black in the night, the kind he wore after 2018 when he could no longer negotiate blazers. Turning his jowls and pouting lip to you again, he walks in your direction. You continue backwards.

“Bigfoot was very unfair to me, disgusting.” You are engaged in the absurd spectacle of walking backwards down the dirt path while he lumbers forward after you. “Actually a very low-class guy and he looks awful. Very disrespectful!” Moving as fast as you can while maintaining your footing, you’re deathly aware of the possibility you might trip and that he might pounce when you do. “People are actually saying more and more that I’m one of the best guys to find nuts, berries, and small mammals to eat.” He does that weird thing where his tongue slips out to lick his lower lip and instead pulls the whole thing into his mouth. “I actually caught and devoured a small ferret yesterday. Delicious!”

Eventually, casting your head over your shoulder, you spy your salvation. A fork in the path, diverging to the right, up a hill. A small wooden structure, maybe a bird hide, squats at the top. You tread backwards up the slope, step by awkward step. At the base, he stops. Raising his great head and turning to look at you, the moon glints in his small eyes.

“People say, and not just me, they say that I’m coming back! I’m coming back very very soon, and it’s gonna be better than anyone imagined. It’s gonna be so beautiful.” Shaking his great mane, he turns and walks away before you need to seek shelter.

Chernobyl Catgirl

This place is not a place of honour. Hard bass thrums and partiers teem in the disused buildings in Pripyat, in the exclusion zone, in the miles of pine forest, in the lonely wild. No highly esteemed deed is commemorated here. No-one esteems the Chernobyl Catgirl, life of the party, and she doesn’t esteem herself. Nothing is valued here. No-one values the Chernobyl Catgirl, soul of the vibe, and she doesn’t value herself either. What is here is dangerous and repulsive to us and the Chernobyl Catgirl knows it.

Thirty-six years ago they killed God by accident and now the Chernobyl Catgirl is trying to do it again on purpose. APCs thunder past on old roads, kicking radioactive dust into the air. BTR-82As carry horror on their treads but in the shells of the old maintenance sheds, the rave continues. It’s a party without rest or respite, without shame or consequence. The Chernobyl Catgirl is sweating so much part of her thinks she might die. Both sets of ears are ringing so

much she thinks her head might burst. Someone brings her a shot of cooling-tank water, another a tumbler of *horilka-enerhiya* and it's all right; for a little longer it'll be all right.

Some kids go into the basement, dare each other to look at the elephant's foot. One does. His fellows carry him out and aloft. The corpse crowd-surfs, every raver a pallbearer, even lifeless his body bounces with the partiers beneath him. The Chernobyl Catgirl makes her way to the edge of the scrum and staggers out, pushing the doors open to the blue night.

There were warnings about danger here, but they've been ignored. Gulping mouthfuls of night air, she sees a woman twining sticks of radium to make glowstick bangles. The danger was present in their time as it is in this one, but that doesn't matter now. The Chernobyl Catgirl catches one of the bangles when it's thrown to her and slips it on her wrist, the woman bouncing back in to join the rave. This danger is to the body and can kill. What a rush. The Chernobyl Catgirl will go back in a minute, just a minute.

In the meantime, in the moment of calm, she stretches out her radium-bangled wrist and casts it against the night sky. The stars get so bright, so bright, when everything for miles is dead.

TIDE

It's early evening on Cove. The moon sits, suspended and shimmering like a washed plate, still faint in the lavender sky. Jericho slips out of clothes and into swimming trunks; pulling gangly arms with clicking joints out of sleeves, turning away from any mirrors before he can see his too-long body, his acne-pocked skin.

The path to the beach is a scramble, he digs his sandals into the side of the slope, gripsat strands of xenoflora and pulls them taut to keep steady. The fence, emblazoned with SUPERTIDAL FLUCTUATION – DANGER OF DEATH does not faze him, he's able to slip under. The terrain evens, the path's coils level. Jericho tugs his bony form into a stretch and winces as he staggers down. It's not long before he's kicking white sand and the ocean stretches languidly ahead.

After trailing along the shoreline he finds a stray rock to sit on. From here the local Ecosynthesiser is just visible: its girders and convoluted architecture bursting fractally into the cloud-line; the faint blue lights of its processes, its alterations to Cove's biosphere, blinking through the mist. Its hums are ever-present, in his house, the village, the school.

Since elementary he'd been told, with an earnestness that made him uncomfortable even then, that Ecosynthesis was making Cove better for everyone: that it was cleaning the air, draining the ocean, killing the local predators. The first time he'd heard that, he'd raised a chubby hand and asked why the animals needed to die. The teacher had smiled and explained ve-ry slow-ly. The other children had laughed.

Ten years later Jericho still comes home from school with bruises he can't explain. He pulls his sweater up to hide his hands. In the corridors he keeps his oily head down, his back hunched, his voice hushed.

The tide crawls in. It's only when it reaches between his soles and sandals, laps at his ankles, that he's sure he isn't imagining it. He breathes deeply, balls his hands, prepares. It is up to his stomach in five minutes: buoying his trunks, animating them like seaweed. Just as it reaches his chin he catches a glimpse at the moon, resplendent now in the half-dark. A string of gold bands across it: the Hyper-Luminal Transit-Relay, the last IP-Train before closing, blinking off to a corner of space that isn't here.

Jericho ducks his head under.

For a project in middle school he had to become Luxloop Holo-pals with a kid on a Coreworld. Jericho remembers his parents (two of them, then) spending the whole day

assembling the comms network, his other mum climbing onto the roof and affixing the transmitter at its apex. He remembers rushing into the bedroom at the appointed time and shivering with joy as the whole room hummed and the Lux interface buzzed into an uncertain life. The girl at the other end, before they'd even said hi, asked:

So, what's it like: living on a gas-giant's moon?

Jericho couldn't answer, only say that he hadn't ever thought about it like that.

The gas giant, designate Cove-B, is a disc of light on the surface. Its supertidal cycle is fickle, he knows he has to work fast. Flicking the switch on his breathing apparatus, he slips it into his mouth and inhales. The synthetic oxygen is tangy, but fresh and rich. He kicks, starts out to sea. The ground dilates, collapses into blue mist. Forests of white kelp-like sways in the distance. The water's balmy on his skin and any anxiety he carried before evaporates.

Gradually the water fills itself with moving things: shifting, jackknifing fauna. Candelabras of limbs and feelers, bioform kalaedoscopes. The armoured bulk of a placodermomorph lumbers by, the shards of its compound eyes glimmering. Far below there's a tussle between something sharp and something soft, rippling arms batting against glinting carapaces. He counts each specimen down by phyla, orders, genera, as he sees them. Each one studied from banned xenobio holotexts he'd pored over, each one familiar as a mantra.

Jericho was in his last year of middle school when he heard on clandestine Luxnet channels that the die-off of Cove's harmless fauna was a by-product of the Ecosynthesising compounds, that predatory megafauna had been exported or poisoned during initial lifeseeding. The forms drifting and propelling and driving their way through the water around him are the last ones left: loose evolutionary flywheels, odds and ends of ecosystems eternally shattered. Animals brought only to the shallows by Cove-B's supertidal cycle dragging nutrients from the pelagic into the neritic, the gas giant's gravity pulling them close enough to be observed, undetected by Cove's sec-corps

For a while he hangs in the water, the ocean and its forms whirling about him. Something brushes by his leg, rough and then yielding. A psuedonipponite, its knotted shell effortlessly bursting into twenty long tendrils. Two of its eyes affix on him and a lump rushes into his chest. Before he can reach out to touch it again it jets into the deep. Jericho chokes into his apparatus and something trickles into the built-in facemask. There's no leak.

It's another couple of hours before he has to go. He watches the evening light play off Cove's survivors, observes behaviours that had endured for billions of years but would not last another twenty. When the sun finally slips under the ocean, it's Cove-B's light that glances off the shells; that illuminates the mantles and carapaces.

Jericho drags himself onto a beach that was underwater when the lifeseeding of his home began. Cove-B glimmers in the sky, shining bright and proud as if it were still a planet. As if it hadn't been demoted to its satellite's moon. As he picks his way back up the hill, to his house, to his school, he remembers something he read in a Xenoradical Journal. Breathing evenly, herepeats it under his breath:

“I'm making kin with my planet, I'm making kin with my home.”

TRAVELOGUE

Welcome to the Transit Supranational Class B187 Intraglobal Super-Sprinter! This trans-continental locomotion vehicle is designed to give you the ultimate range and freedom to experience the vastness and strangeness of the world today. In the course of your trip you will live in style and comfort while the B187 propels you across 2Xth century interTropic international rail-lines, the very apex of intersection between luxury and convenience! This brochure is designed to give you a brief primer on the range of destinations serviced by this vehicle, with special provisions for altering or adjusting your charter to visit new locations as your trip progresses. We will now give you a brief overview of the amenities provided by our service as well as the full information necessary to take advantage of them. On behalf of everyone at Transit, we wish you a pleasant trip.

At Transit we offer three tiers of service. Members of our Friends Society are lodged in the front cars. Each of our Friends will be stationed in single, or double, cabins at their convenience. We offer bespoke catering and on-demand service as well as bath and shower facilities. Chambers of the Hand, Heart and Eye as well as sensory deprivation tanks are available should passengers need to make contact or communion with a Power. Premium customers or customers who booked as part of a super-sprinter-super-saver bundle are lodged in dormitories in the C1-N4 cars. The premium dining cars are D5-E3. Friends services may be accessed for a small fee. Standard Economy passengers are assigned seats in N4 onwards. Toilets are located towards the rear of the train in the snack car (Q2). WiFi is offered on a pay-as-you-go basis.

The city of **Mycelaroa** is not built but grown. After the breaking of the world the damp gave ample food for the fungus it is composed of. Its inhabitants, human and otherwise, came upon the grove of mushrooms and carved their homes therein. There is no architecture, no urban planning in Mycelaroa. Projects take decades and concern the filling of the space given by the fungus, not the construction of any new structures. The yearly spring is a holiday, celebrated with pomp and jubilation as it signifies the city's further endurance. The Mycelaroan Hierophants, who are development project managers as well as priests, foresee their city expanding fully over the earth, consuming heretical structures of plaster, concrete, steel and flesh. Thus far the city has not expanded far enough to warrant any kind of reprisal from its neighbours, but it grows all

the time.

On 74 Ascomycota street is tucked **Cordatacept** which intuitively combines traditional Mycelaroan cuisine with more maritime elements, try the spore-aged Bacalhau with green wine. Despite popular jokes, the consumption of any kind of fungus is illegal in Mycelaroa. Disregarding profane rituals practised by the risky-minded, it is difficult to eat Mycelaroan fungus and highly inadvisable to try. Do not be disappointed, some experiences come close to its profundity. In the Armillarian district is **Hyphaeus** which utilises the sacred power of the spores to great effect: rather than consuming the fungus itself, the food is fed to it and the natural properties of its mould season and prepare the meal in a process similar to dry-aging. In preparation and consumption, as with *fugu*, great care must be taken. Of course the fungus is not poisonous, but the dilettante traveller must take care lest Mycelaroa spore and proliferate inside you.

The first night was hard. Everyone seemed to be more experienced in travel than I was. The man next to me had brought a whole pillow with him, placed it along the back of his seat. When he looked at me, his lip curled. I only realised how right he was four hours later, twisting against the leather, my body itching and sweating. I did anything to prompt sleep. I queued up audiobooks, bought a facemask from the snack car. In the end I watched a full detective TV serial through the on demand video, drifting off exactly twice before the woman in front of me leaned her seat all the way back. That kept me up until morning.

When inter-rail routes became assigned by algorithm, the small mining town of **Emingharop** was mistakenly chosen as the end point for 1/6 of all travellers. Cut off from trust funds and savings accounts, these accidental citizens turned their workaway programmes into steady jobs and slumped it in flatshares or squats. They founded open mic nights, performance space covens, street art cults. By the time the glitch in the inter-rail assignment program had been fixed, Emingharop began showing up in the results anyway thanks to its now acceptable standing. More and more culture accrued in Emingharop. Mines closed, murals grew on their tunnels like lichen. Melodramatic performance poetry ate all words spoken, zines and

pamphlets all written. The discerning traveller is advised to stay for only a few days, the fate of the original inhabitants does not need to be emulated.

There are a number of entrances to the Emingharop mines in the city itself, the tunnels being extended in the years following the ‘revival’ to encompass the old sewer system. Here are the most interesting, and perhaps most dangerous, attractions the city has to offer. The performance night Echoes Underneath is the easiest to access, being advertised in a popular tourist trap bookshop in the town plaza. The night is blisteringly sincere, with the only verse accepted being elegiacs, villanelles, and epics in hexameter. It was not always this way. At an unspecified point in the past, disgruntled ironists broke off from Echoes to found The Tunnels:Lit Up! This night will only accept the ridiculous, the insincere and the profane and is generally regarded as a better time; if slightly edgier. Go to one or both depending on your taste, but don’t linger in the tunnels after either is done. When words fall quiet, different battles occur. Artistic grudges are hard to shake.

The queue in customer service car was wretched. Fumbling, half asleep. A conga line of people exactly as miserable as I was. The woman in front of me rehearsed her script under her breath, hissing exactly what she would say and choosing her venom carefully. When her turn came, her delivery was halting and she left meek and ashamed. Beaten though I was, there was nothing I could extract from the stony faces of the customer service reps; no vengeance I could gain. I upgraded to a dormitory as part of a package, paying the thoroughly reasonable rate that I still knew I couldn’t afford.

The descendants of the inhabitants of **Lulupt** found safety from the breaking under the earth. Enclosing themselves for a time in the darkness they, as with those above ground, found novel ways to cope with their situation. Every citizen of Lulupt, upon reaching a certain age is blessed with the gift of the city. In patterns of their choosing or from a set of pre-developed templates, each citizen’s blood is laced with bioluminescent compounds. These crystallise, paint the insides of veins, and light bursts from the wearer. A Luluptian street at rush hour is a gleaming throng, hundreds of blue-green bodies shifting between each other; the rippling glow bursting from translucent clothes or shining from skin: in the heat of the earth, minimal body

covering became Luluptian custom. For the visitor, this can be too much. Travellers have been known to erupt in tears after entering, to extend their visas, bankrupt themselves on hotels. Fortunately, the mayoralty has methods to deal with these embarrassments.

There is no day in Lulupt and no night either, yet enterprising clubbers have found a way. **Daydrunk** is a popular spot with a randomized happy hour. Only those on the mailing list are notified exactly one hour in advance, so it is advisable to befriend a local to get the true experience. Typically these clubs are unlit and the effect of seeing half-a-hundred gleaming bodies wind into rhythms is arresting to say the least. For those overwhelmed, we advise **Diurnal**, an establishment on XXIVe street unlike any other in the city. Using UV radiation plating, the establishment generates the closest thing possible to a day-night cycle. However, even though the bioluminescence of the inhabitants does not work in full daylight, outsiders will still stick out. Bioluminescence is writ in motions, those used to glowing will move to show themselves: dance while walking, pirouette to cross a room. In this way, Lulupt writes itself inside those who live there.

The dormitory car was being vacuumed when I found it. An older woman, leaning past middle age, scraping the nozzle along the carpeting between the bunks. I couldn't get past even when I tried to edge around her, my back flat against the doorframes. I slung my rucksack on the unoccupied bed next to mine, which I could just reach, and hoped that would do. Then I went to the dining car and took a complimentary meal. The food was serviceable, came readymade. The foil tray was full of vermicelli in a dark, tangy sauce. I ate messily, hunching over. A part of me was still inhuman from the journey through the night, as if something inside had bent parallel to my back

Along the coast of the bitter north sits the city of **Gharasp**. It was far enough away that the breaking did little to affect the already thriving community, but the subsequent political crises caused calamities and contractions. Despite this, it survives into the present. As per a tradition so ancient its point of origin has been lost, a door cannot exist in Gharasp without the bones of a marine animal. Large entrances use the jaws of bowhead whales, smaller frames are wound with the curling spine of a seal. The least important doorways are marked with a corona of

shark's teeth. Whenever they cross a threshold, a Gharaspan will brush their fingers over the

interior of the doorframe and murmur "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." They recognize that entering anything is an intrusion, that passing a threshold means to walk on the bones of what has died to make it.

Public monuments in Gharasp are few and far between. No bone is wasted in non-functional art, stone and other materials are difficult to extract in sub-zero temperatures and even harder to ship. This lack caused outrage in the face of the burgeoning tourism industry and tentatively, reluctantly, the Gharaspene instituted an ice sculpting festival. This begins on the first day of winter, with citizens and certain honoured guests allowed to participate. It's the latter that always seem to perform the most successfully. Gharaspene, even with the chisel steady in the hand and a design glimmering behind the back of the eye, are awkward in creating anything that exists for itself. Their creations wind into practicality: forming benches, alcoves, doors.

Returning to my cabin, there was a man sat on the bunk I'd left my bag on. "This is yours," he took my rucksack and held it at the end of his extended arm. "Yes, it's mine, thanks." I grabbed it, but he held on.

"This is yours," his eyes were beetle-dark, his mouth set in a line. "I'm sorry, I'm —"

"Keep your things off my bed."

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry." He let go.

I didn't make conversation, I climbed to my bunk and stowed my bag in the shelf carved into the wall next to the flat bed. I stared at the ceiling, the bottom of the bed above me. The reading lamp, switched off; the service button, dim; the air vent, half open. I pulled both my shoes off without unlacing them, tugged off my clothes and stuffed them in my bag without folding them. I slipped myself under the poly-fabric sheets and felt my inside straightening as I waited for sleep to swallow me.

Of all the cities that suffered from the breaking, it is generally agreed that **Locmaria** endured the worst among those that survived. Much of the time in the years since has been dedicated to recovery and even then, most of the town remains sunk. Public transit in Locmaria is half aquatic, half terrestrial. In a system of civil contracts frantically installed in the

breaking's aftermath, ticket dispensers are circulated among citizens with suitable vehicles. The machines are balanced on hovercraft, gondolas, tugboats, and thus the aquatic portion of the city's civil transport is administered rotationally. In spite of all this, Locmaria has done its best to ensure that its citizens live as well as survive. There is an annual street art show held in some of the sunken districts, the fluorescent colours from the murals radiate from under the glassy water, fish swim blindly around temporarily installed sculptures.

In the face of the rising sea, Locmaria's rubbish dumps became flooded and for a few years the city's canal-avenues were sluiced with trash. But trash, as those in the know are familiar, precipitates salvage. Several junk shops consequently established themselves in the dry town and the wet. The best of these include **Binbag**, **Gonedola**, and **Rakeup**. These are not altogether different from each other, as their content is determined by what can be salvaged. In each of these shops, cast-offs are sold as objets d'art. Watch mechanisms, dolls eyes, and other artefacts that were plentiful before the breaking, scarce after it, fetch high prices. Rarely one can find plastic, and less frequently glass. There was a time when Locmaria guarded its treasures instead of selling them, but through despair; hope; or some other collective realisation they have come to the conclusion that hoarding the past is useless. In the new world, they must shed their history.

Now, a testimonial from a satisfied customer!

The thing that's always appealed to me about transit is the certainty of destination. When you lean back into a seat and the vessel begins to move, it feels guaranteed that you'll arrive somewhere. Even if it's a destination that you didn't pick out, or one that you didn't think of going to, you will arrive somewhere other than where you started.

The ritual of transit compounds this. I always make sure to read the safety instructions in the front seat pocket. I take out the card and look over it lovingly, trailing my thumb down the sharp plastic of its edge. I take a sufficient amount of time to look at each diagram, to familiarize myself with the marketing avant-garde of its design. I make sure I understand every aspect. I take out my headphones and put down my books for safety demonstrations, watch the cabin crew. No, I don't resent the mid-journey announcements, even when I'm woken from sleep or whatever I'm doing's interrupted.

I imagine myself changing as I go from one place to another. Like I'm the soup between a worm and a moth, my quantum shape flickering as I'm held in the crucible of the borders of

locales. They say that pressure turns ash into diamonds, travel is much the same. Every time I step out of a vehicle of transit I am reconstituted and renewed.

– An Anonymous Pervert

The city without a form is **Lassetre**. Many many years ago an official in a form of local government that has long since gone extinct designated an area on a map as Lassetre. Things gained traction and the other arms of the bureaucracy sprung into motion: roads were built to the new town; maglev tracks were laid; new maps were printed with the municipality inked in, white boxes outlining exactly where the new buildings would rise. The station was finished and put in good order before anything else was. The day the workmen and their equipment were ferried in, Break started to happen. There were no casualties, but the fire on the horizon scrambled the crews. Some fled into the desert to die, others returned to the train and waited for it to leave. Lassetre was left undeveloped, untouched.

Due to its condition, not much is available for the discerning traveller. The galleries and empty halls of the fully functioning train station are the most obvious landmarks for miles around. Exterior temperature is sometimes dangerous, but in the darker hours adventurous travellers have been known to wander out. They trace the ditches that the tarmac would have tracked, let the hollows of buildings describe their shape, tentatively guess if the space that they wander through would be a convention centre; a car showroom; a suite of luxury apartments. As the sun burns the horizon it's almost possible to guess the place it might've been, almost possible to pretend that in another day the workmen will arrive and start construction again. Like the old Moscow subway it's a place where dead futures are visible, though intangible: they look real enough to reach out and grasp. This more than anything else is why people come.

The weeks passed. I woke early, always around seven or seven-thirty. Earlier than I'm used to. I had been put on this trip as a result of my condition, and it seemed to be working. We passed city after city, spending a few days docked in each Maglev station before returning to the thrum of blurred motion, the uneasy shudder of the corridor, the muffled announcements over the tannoy. Some days we spent docked I didn't even leave the carriage. I went to the upper observation deck and read, or else noted the shape of each place from behind

glass. I would even restrict myself, at points, to the simple rotation of the cabin, to the dining car, to the bathroom car. Living simply, taking only what was offered, not making eye contact when the other passengers would file on board. Mycelaroa was the only place I spent any time in to start with.

The city of **Hurt** lies far to the south, and as such is under the hand of the Cross. Breaking remnants are most visible here, sometimes even from its docks. They erupt, in white lights or shivering water-static. Hurt, despite its proximity to the Break, did well in the years following. The most recent development involves the solution of the city's automation crisis. By issuing a machine cognition quota, the appetite for mechanical workforces among corporations has stymied. Now electronic cashiers trundle on the picket lines, algorithms sabotage their code, Roombas download *Love me I'm a Liberal* and render it in cheerful chiptune. Of course, outlaw fast food restaurants with automated servers and privateer financial firms with electronic actuaries exist. When caught, their architects are punished ruthlessly and their mecha-chattel workforce is inevitably released after being implanted with sentience.

Hurt's unique position among other cities afford it some interesting opportunities for the thrillseeker. Once a week, the popular bar **0110110011** holds a Voight-Kampff night. This involves the contestant sitting in front of a screen and guessing, through questioning, whether the individual behind is human or synthetic. This said, fleshy traveller ought to take care in synthetic spaces in light of recent events. A Mx. X, after one too many off-colour jokes in a hardcore bar, found themselves set upon by eight anarchist ex-delivery drones. After clustering around her, all emitted a supratonal buzzing noise until the intruder fled the establishment in a panic. Though considered a utopia by some, Hurt's tensions linger. Flesh-Revanchist elements carry EMPs and signal-jammers, isolating their prey before disabling and ripping it apart. Synths carry themselves in groups, maintain their neural networks until safely indoors.

One morning, I noticed a tag of skin under my armpit. I pinched it, pulled at it. It didn't come loose, didn't hurt. I worried at it for the whole day, reaching through my clothes to scratch at it, pull at it. I couldn't focus, couldn't read, couldn't write. I sat in a recliner chair, pushing my right hand through the left sleeve of my shirt. After tugging at it for more than five minutes, I felt

something rip, painlessly. A part of it had come off in my hand. It was spongy, speckled. It didn't look like my skin, was a sickly tan. My fingers were wet with something black, seeping. It dripped onto my trousers, stained my hands. When I ripped off my shirt in the bathroom, a blotch of it spilled down the inside.

The Calico-Terrmedea fault-line runs across the sheet-ice plane where **Russmussen** is situated and provides an example in microcosm of how urban settlement works around that which is Broken. As the learned reader is no doubt aware, there is no set rubric that one can apply to BREAK phenomena but there are general rules that may be applied. DO NOT LEAVE the transit vehicle without wards, protective clothing, the consent of the transit staff, and the assent or wyrd of a sponsoring Power. DO NOT RESPOND, BAIT, OR OTHERWISE INTERACT with BREAK radial phenomenae; special blinds will automatically descend to obscure the windows once in sight of the fault. DO NOT TAMPER WITH, DAMAGE, OR OTHERWISE INTERFERE with the window-blinds, they are there for your protection. DO NOT ENGAGE in the 96 actions listed in your guide-module while the fault-line-sign is illuminated on the train. Transit is not responsible for any displacement, transfiguration, annihilation, inversion, wounds physical; mental; metaphysical, abduction, antiduction, or subduction endured within a fifty kilometre radius of the Calico-Terrmedea fault. All passengers must sign an insurance (life, property, travel) waiver upon chartering a trip that passes through, near, or around stop Russmussen. Failure to do so may result in ejection from the train at the closest stop.

As a locale Russmussen is thoroughly unremarkable. It was a research station built to study the breaking before we realised that there was nothing we could know or want to know about it. Now it's another stop on a line. There are no attractions to visit. There is no reason for stopping there. Transit does not offer holiday packages, two-for-one deals, or any other special offers relating to Russmussen station. It's really not worth stopping there.

I've never been good about going to the doctor. I negotiate problems and don't confront them. For a while I refused to pay attention to what was going on with my body. I touched the place where I'd torn only briefly. I felt something rough, gritty form over the wound. Like a scab, but not. Like sandy dirt. Little pieces of black dirt dusted my fingertips. I smoothed over the wound in the shower with soap. Years ago I'd been taught to stroke insect bites rather than scratch them. I applied this technique, even though the itch was in my mind. Even though I felt something spongy spread as the days went on. Even though I felt my skin distend as it grew more and more.

The explosion in animal and human biodiversity of recent decades is no better illustrated than in **Teagloft**. At a certain stage of life, every citizen chooses a bird. The process is extremely gradual. One day the voice might change, shift in pitch or warble slightly. The arms may bend a certain way whole freezing in others. Body hair might stiffen, branch, multiply, change in hue. All eye colours transform at a certain stage. Long ago, perhaps even before the breaking, the inhabitants of what would be Teagloft made a promise to a local Power. Though the Power is dead and the city is under the hand of the Crux, the ancient words remain and the pact endures. Transformation is inevitable and desirable. Teagloftan lovers will pray that their change occurs at the same time and natural biases towards individuals of similar age and bird often dictate which relationships endure.

Concerts and plays are the chief distractions of Teagloft. Though not all birds are capable of song or speech, there are ample ways of contributing to any production that do not involve either of these talents. Ibises provide adroit and dignified mute choruses. The pitched croak of a white-eyed raven will lend an ominous air to any foreboding scene. The dexterity and agility of the omolskaeans make them compelling interpretative dancers. As human players are always sought after visitors are welcome to take part year-round, with a special and emphatic desire for outside participation during the annual musical and dramatic arts festival. The event runs for a full month, usually too short a time for the words to take effect on any foreign bodies. Outliers to this rule are not unknown and so, for prudency's sake, any long term visitors are asked to choose a bird after a certain duration of stay.

It spread onto my back. I could no longer feel my skin at the centre. Even when I pressed in enough that black bile spotted my fingers all I felt was a kind of distant pressure. I would change completely in the shower or toilet cubicles, not ever risking the possibility of the growth being seen. I considered it with an almost sickly satisfaction. I always knew I was unwell, it seemed to rhyme that my outside was now as plagued as my insides. It was when it crept to the underside of my arm, rolled all across my flank to my back, that I knew I had to do something.

In the years prior to breaking, air travel was common and popular. In those days, **Llowell** skyport was a major hub for the skyfaring traveller. In the years since, as venturing by air has become more and more unacceptable and unviable to the public and other powers, Llowell International has become something different. The aerial walkways have become thoroughfares, market stalls sprouting across the beige-marble paving stones. In the years of disuse the glass panes have grown cracked and dust-choked but the halls ring as loud as they ever have. They heave with the smell of people; goods; and food. The warehouses that were the old terminal buildings host stacked shanties climbing to the ceiling, pulley elevators ferrying the residents from the narrow corridors to their homes. More homesteads span out across the miles of disused runway, the tarmac long since broken for pasture and farmland.

The night markets of Llowell have become famous thanks to a recent photo spread in *International Inquirer*. While the article and accompanying images are a useful primer on the markets, the discerning traveller should seek local advice before relying wholly on it. The northern corridor, between residential terminals A and C, plays host to a number of small vendors specialising in fried lizard. The stalls on the barely functional skyrail cars hawk compact disks and players; one may even commission and record a song for the right sort of price. The arcology dome at the centre of the skyrail routes and terminals has long since been broken open, but traders still operate in the shadow of the ruptured glass and torn beams. Fruit can be bought, fresh from the tree. The tropical vapour distribution infrastructure has since been repurposed to facilitate spa treatments and pay-by-the-hour wellness retreats. Above all in Llowell the presiding philosophy rules: no past mistake made should ever be wasted.

So I returned to the customer service desk. I explained my problem in hushed, halting tones. A man walked behind me into the car so I turned to stare at him until he left. The face of the customer service rep drooped the more I spoke. The flat affect of their training withered away somehow, they leaned backward and told me to wait there, wait right there. So I did. A man in a captain's uniform returned with the rep. Beaming, he announced that I'd been chosen as a Friend. I was baffled. The rate for a Friend was ten times what I had paid for my current package. It was not, nor would ever be, within my budget. But the man kept smiling. I had been upgraded, he said. I was a Friend, he said. Would I let him show me to my cabin?

The path of the super-sprinter intersects with that of **Ironclad**, as it makes its yearly refuel stop at **Spite** Midstation. The Glass-Salt desert is vast and sterile, and has been since the Break, which necessitates a rest stop of a month rather than a week. Spite is like any other maglev station, save for its windows: at high noon, when the sun strikes the clear-white sand at lethal angles, the glass walls tint to protect those inside from blindness. When Ironclad is arrayed around the station, visitors have been known to venture out and risk exposure to see the hulks of its repurposed battleships and tugs suspended in the incandescence of the desert. Eyewitnesses say the sunlight refracted from the sand glows like burning quartz between the gangways and chains linking the ships.

The ships of Ironclad were, once, fitted for war. In a critical engagement, both sides ceased their cannonades when the Break flashed on the horizon. A ceasefire developed into an ad-hoc truce as both sides turned together to flee the radial tendrils of the shatterlines as they followed the initial Break. On the first night, the admirals and officers met on two life-tugs. Negotiations turned to constitutional drafting sessions and within two weeks' time, the flotilla moved north as the Commisarial Republic of Ironclad, the youngest of the post-Break polities. Bloodless mutiny followed as senior officers stepped down or were dismissed; as martial arrangements became civil ones. Soil was dug from the flatlands that Ironclad moored above and spread on the decks. City wits quipped that "beneath the furrows, the decks."

Ironclad's stay at Spite will coincide with the length of the stop that the super-sprinter makes. Guests are encouraged to make full explorations of the larger decks of the main battleships, but are advised to be cautious when crossing the unsecured gangways: at points, the drop to the desert floor can be as much as one hundred feet. The library is a particularly valuable attraction: its stock is drawn from every place the city has ever stopped. Secure behind

the ten-inch-thick hull of the *IVF Lector*, the literary treasures of a hundred nations are protected from raiders and iconoclasts alike. Guests enamoured with the city are welcome to stay as it tracks Nor'West, but are advised to switch into our 'Glass Sun' travel package to secure a cabin berth and avoid duties.

The man did not touch me as we went. He explained quickly that further instruction would await me in the cabin. He held open the hardwood door for me, closed it the moment I stepped in. The thing shut with a hiss and a click. An airlock. My new room was climate-controlled, then. I set myself to an exploration of the facilities. Everything was sterile white, clean. Bottle of shampoo, shower gel, blessed oil were arrayed on the nightstand: intricate things made of real glass with amber liquid inside them. The Chamber of the Hand, Heart, and Eye was smooth and black. Black granite, featureless save for the suspended prism of glass. I had never seen a real one before. Finding everything to my liking, more than to my liking, I went to leave. Though I turned the handle, I could not open the door.

Vision was created not through an accident of geography, but through necessity. It doesn't sit at a river ford, a point of contact between trade routes. It was not built on its commanding height solely for defence. The great drum of its central structure takes up most of the hill, secondary dwellings spilling off the sides of its cliffs. The purpose of Vision is singular, focused. At the apex of its hub is its eye. The telescope is trained on the gleaming line of a dormant breakfault, the light that it captures is refracted thousands of times through the complex blown tubes of its glass structures. The persistent, hyperobjectivity of the break and its epiphenomenae allow the possibility of foresight. Vision was built out of a spirit of preventative action. The horror of a second break, what that would bring, hummed in the minds of its architects.

There is little to do here. The city functions under a kind of permanent anxiety. The eye's insights into the fault offer no visions of Break to come, but that's not to say there is nothing. Data, when observed, seems to bend to the perspective of the viewer. Flashes of light might coalesce into the shape of a childhood accident, a vision of an ex-lover in bed with another. Incidents of foresight are even stranger. Car accidents, train derailling, political

assassination. Impossible things. Horror upon horrors. Vision's population is transient. Visiting scholars, passers through. No-one can stay for too long. The future is too sharp to bear. The possible is almost worse. Vision's residents are caught between the bitter anxiety of hope and the suffocating depression of certainty. Yet it will never be abandoned. We cannot, cannot, take the risk of leaving the yet-to-come unknown.

And now, a quick word on safety. Travel, as much as we love it; cherish it; and enjoy it, is not without its risks. Here at Transit Supranational we do our very best to ensure that such risks never have the slightest impact on the comfort and safety of our passengers and Friends. It is therefore of the utmost importance that any people travelling with us follow our instructions to the best of their ability.

All passengers must READ each entry on any destination that they may be visiting carefully. Any risks or threats to passenger health, safety, or sanity WILL be enumerated in these entries. FAILURE to read the entries on any location that the passenger departs at is constitutive of a SERIOUS RISK to health and safety. As all risks are enumerated in the entries, any adverse consequences endured by a passenger demonstrates that the relevant entry has not been read. This constitutes a breach of contract and makes the passenger in question LIABLE to PROSECUTION.

All passengers must take great care when encountering BREAK phenomena. If a passenger should encounter BREAK phenomena it is the advice of Transit Supranational that you STAND STILL, that you DO NOT call for help, that you DO NOT cry out, that you ENDURE, and that you SEEK SPIRITUAL AND MEDICAL ATTENTION where possible.

All passengers are advised NOT TO MAKE CONTACT WITH NON-HUMAN INTELLIGENCES. Passengers under the sponsorship of a POWER OR POWERS must alert staff 30 minutes prior to use of a CHAMBER OF THE HAND, HEART, AND EYE. Passengers MUST NOT CONTACT A POWER BY ANY OTHER MEANS. Transit Supranational is NOT LIABLE for any annihilations, spiritual mutilations, or soul indenturing caused at the hands of a Power.

ALL THESE INJUNCTIONS are SUBJECT TO CHANGE. It is the RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PASSENGER to know the safety conditions of the Mag-Lev Super-Sprinter. We hope all on board have a pleasant trip!

Before known time, a Power came to rest on the bank of a nameless river. As silt built up, burying the sleeper, **Midden** arose from its dreams. The dreams of Powers are sharper, stranger than those of lesser forms. Midden is real as any other place, but is folded under the waking world; and travellers must dream to reach it. To this end, passengers are offered complimentary sedation and Hypnogogic therapy when the train pulls into Midden's locus. The maglev line draws as close to the Power's barrow, the outline of its bulk under the turf, as is pleasant. It stops in the goldilocks zone. Not so far that the lines of the city are spectral and indistinct. Not so close that Midden's towers burst into the waking world and its streets scream into the minds of those unfortunate enough to be near.

Midden was built by its Power, but shaped by dreamers. When the first refugees camped by the river, a few miles upstream from the barrow, they propped up the crumbling towers they found in sleep; affixed roofs over the caved-in dwellings. Some were content to move on after this, leaving Midden like a sand-castle they'd made in the river-dirt. Others walked downstream, coming so close to the power's dream that they were torn out of the waking world and became Midden's first citizens. The architecture is shaped by thought, conscious and unconscious. Rooms warp when walked into. A stall might sell chocolate cake that melts into pulled pork in your mouth. You may meet your mother on the street.

NO PASSENGER is permitted to leave the train during the stop at Midden. Transition from one scape to the other is INADVISABLE and you will be SUBJECT TO FINES AND PROSECUTION.

Meals come to me through a hidden chute. I have been given no instruction, as the Captain promised. I cannot hear anything beyond my door save for the hum of the tracks and the train beneath my feet. There aren't windows and it is difficult to tell when it's day or night. I have stopped showering. I keep the sheet from my bed over my distending body. It has grown to the small of my back. I cannot tell how deep in my skin it has penetrated. I scratch and scratch and paint this sterile room a sickly; sticky jet. It makes no difference. The wounds scab overnight. I jab the plastic cutlery into the mound. I still feel nothing. I do not know what it is. It doesn't feel like scales, like a shell, like the dense flesh of a mushroom. I do not know what I have.

Lazare is a refuse city. Not a pre-break structure that has found efficient ways of recycling its trash and buildings, not a city that dedicates itself in se to the processing and managing of waste, it is a city made of refuse. In older times, barges of waste would make their way up its river. Sometimes they would split or capsize at a sharp bend and the trash would spill onto the banks. It built up. Mulch upon plastic upon polyester upon metal shavings upon scrap. After enough had accrued on the riverbanks for it to pile high, the barge punters simply unloaded at the spot, letting their loads sink to the river-silt or float to its banks. After this came the pickers. Those who made their homes and lives from the trash. Who would take the valuable stuff to sell, repurpose what could be repurposed, eat what could be eaten.

In later days, there are no ferries to bring the garbage to Lazare, but the trash comes anyway. Like attracts like, so the saying goes. Lazare has grown. The river no longer flows through the pile but under it. Anything that goes upriver is caught in its mire. Cynics say Lazare is the only thing that grows anymore, that the pickers jobs are the only things that are recession proof; crisis proof; Break-proof. The philosopher Candide of Locmaria has said that life should be understood as the self-replication of waste producing machines. In this opus *Discourse on Sorry Inevitabilities*, Candide argues that Lazare will endure until the end of the world. Cities and states fall with the dissolution of their central industry. Warlike polities are conquered. Trading hubs are bought out. What conclusion can there be for a city that produces, is, trash? That it shall make until it can't. It will extend over the world, choke its river and all rivers. Swallow its land and all lands.

The train will not stop for more than two days in Lazare, the smell is unpleasant.

Dear __

I don't know what you're hoping to achieve with this obstinate refusal to take this trip. You know that this is for the best. You know that this is what's good for you. In spite of you knowing all of these things you have repeatedly spurned our insinences. No longer.

I shall make this brief and plain. If you wish to continue living in the standard to which you are accustomed it is a requirement that you take this trip. It brings me no end of pain to say this, but I must drive my fist against the post.

I trust you know that this is for the good of your health. I trust you know which decision

you must take.

Yours in sincerity, __

In the south is what is left of **Perth**. We don't know much about what it was, less of what it is. Archaeologists cannot permeate the outer limits of the fault, though any trace of lethal Break phenomena has left it. What can be told of Perth is seen behind the shimmering Break-Wall, abstracted by the epiphenomenal pulses and shimmers of the fault's outer radius. At different angles you see gleaming white towers, smoking ruins, the rolling floodplain. Before the break they say that Perth was made by a swan who was also a snake. It tracked up through the sea and carved the coastal plain with its body. On each of its scales or feathers was imprinted Perth. Here was the frosted spire of the Bankwest building, there the stumbling apology of Yagan square, here the glint of the sun hitting the harbour.

No-one knows what happened to the people of Perth when the Break radiated around them. A persuasive argument suggests that every person in the CBD and surrounding suburbs was vaporized instantly, but others have cited the true nature of the Break: not a singular event, not a disaster in se. A persistent phenomenon, a hyperobject, a recurring catastrophe. There have been reports of fractured hints of conversation through the chaos of Break's limits, lilting musical loops of human voices. One researcher gave an (unsubstantiated) report that he heard several verses of the Our Father prayer sung from the Northern edge. One imagines the population of the city pre-break swimming fractally in the choral soup at the Break-Scar's heart: each moment of their lives blooming for nanoinstants for all time.

What's the line? 'The future teaches you to be alone, the present to be afraid and cold.'
The future teaches me to be afraid too. When I was small, it gleamed in its distance. It is so close now, and it is too bright. I know where this train is taking me: back to where I started. How can it be, if history repeats itself, that things keep getting worse? A piece of paper slipped down with my last meal tray. There was only one word on it: my destination. I do not know how they will get me out of the train. I suppose I'll be forced. I suppose they'll deign to touch me; even drag me out. I might be born aloft and thrown on the platform of Union Square station. I do not know how far away we are, but the engine creaks with ecstatic urgency. We are so close, I

know it. We are so horribly close.

North you will find **Aberdeen**, unapologetic. In remote antiquity, the Pictish King Rosson Thomas commanded his people to weave a fifty-foot rope of twine from the hair of slain maidens. When this was done, he bent his own granite sword into a hook and affixed it to the end. Then he commanded that the whole thing be lowered down the cliffs of Greyhope bay, overlooking the plain between the Don and the Dee, where no city had ever stood. For twenty days and nights he held the end of the rope until from the depths there came a mighty tug. Then another, and another. After a battle of wits and wills and bitter strength, King Rosson hauled from the grey water something indescribable. He strode down from the height to do battle with it, expiring in his jaws. His people watched in horror as his flesh dissolved into that of the beast's, until it too melted into his body, until all soaked into the earth.

This stain bore Aberdeen. How deep is human evil? How vast is our capacity for cruelty and ill-gain? How rotten are our hearts? These are not questions, least of all in Aberdeen. Aberdeen is a mistake that every person makes in turn, and one that the world made before you were born. It is a mistake that you were raised in the wreck of: too late to change, too slow to escape, too large to pass unnoticed. You lived your life without knowing that you swam in the enclosure of a predator's eye, made each decision well within the outer limit of its hunger and spite. Oh the places you were to go, oh the people you were to see. But the places you went all had the same harsh reflection. And the people you saw all had the same face. All had stone-flat eyes and silver-glint teeth, and the only word that any of them spoke to you was Aberdeen.

*UNDER,
UNDER, THE
EARTH*

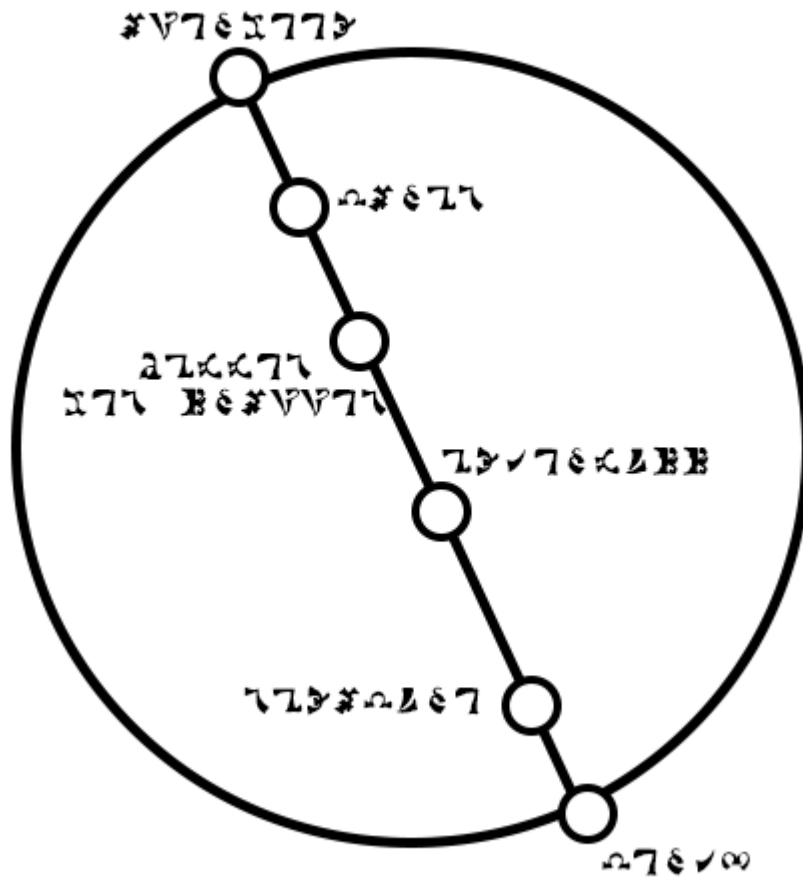


Fig. 1. A map, so it is said, of the Perth-Aberdeen SCTN transit line. It is enshrined here so all may know that the mistakes of the past are not to be made again.

The following interactive segment relies on your choices to propel the narrative. The experience of travel is one that fundamentally has its roots in freedom of choice and personal exploration. The aim of the following narrative is to display this.

You will be asked, in the course of this journey, to progress nonlinearly. Each entry will provide you with a choice. That choice will be performed by your progression to another numbered entry later. In so doing you will reach a destination. Be aware that to progress forward in the narrative, you may have to double back to an earlier entry.

This is by design.

Turn to page 87.

You're here to take the train. Marischal Grand Central is all around you, the iron ribs of its arched girders joining far above your head, its clouded glass ceiling refracting light onto its dapple-tile floors and the multitude moving across them. Surface people move with the easy confidence of those who can afford it. Dwellers avoid shafts of light, shifting with the uncertainty of lighter ground. There are others, too many to enumerate, all going somewhere; all of them taking the train.

Through the chaos, the multitude, you pick out a number of places of interest. A vast tunnel opens up behind a line of ticket gates. In gigantic lettering over the arch of the entrance reads BON ACCORD. This is the entrance to the SCTN, the network for which Aberdeen is the hub. A less guarded, and less attended tunnel nearby wears the gloomy sign REGI_NAL RA_L. Elsewhere there are SCTN ticket booths and behind them a mural of historic and artistic interest.

To purchase tickets, turn to page 89.

To attempt to enter the SCTN without purchasing tickets, tun to page 88.

To view the mural, turn to page 90.

To attempt to enter the regional lines, turn to page 91.

You've seen how this is done in Paris, London, Glasgow, and assume the same principle works for all systems of public transit. As always, there's a line of people entering the ticket gates. You filter in, taking your place at the back of one of the columns of people. Right in front of you is a Dweller, talking on their phone. Their voice is quick, crackling, coming in staccato bursts.

The line's pace crawls, each commuter passing their ticket through the input slot and snatching it out once it's been checked. The Dweller fumbles, patting his trousers and his pockets, someone behind you hisses. At last he produces it and plunges it into the machine, inching through the gates before they've fully opened. You follow, without scanning a ticket of your own. For a moment all seems well, you are halfway through the gate, and then something clamps around your sides.

The gate has shut on you. The built in alarm on the machine begins to groan and the line that had formed behind you dissipates in a mess of fuck-words and spitting. Two SCTN transit control officers walk from their booth to flank you. Both of their necks are noticeably thicker than their heads. Taking you by the arms, they frogmarch you to the booth to buy a ticket.

Turn to page 89.

The vendor's face is hidden in the shadows of the booth as you approach. The queue here is comparatively small and you reach the front quickly. Most commuters use the Wayfarercards, allowing cheaper fares for a monthly fee. The initial expense put you off buying one and now, even recognizing you'd save considerably, you're too embarrassed to admit you should've taken up the trend.

You ask for a return ticket. *To where?* A return ticket, you repeat. *A return ticket to where?* You're confused. Aren't SCTN fares standardised? *One open return then.* For a moment you think you've won, you swell with your negotiation prowess. It's only when you produce your wallet to pay and you see the price that you balk.

It is, however, too late. The vendor has won. The corner of their mouth crooks into a leering smile. Helpless before the guile of the service industry you produce the fare of £XXX and slip it into the opening in the glass. In two seconds, they print your ticket and slip it to you, your meagre change balancing on top. Walking away, humiliated, you consider your options.

To enter the SCTN (legally), turn to page 92.

To attempt to enter the SCTN without wasting tickets, turn to page 88.

The mural is vast, taking up a whole stretch of the far wall. It's rendered with wide and flat hexagonal tiling, pastel and gleaming. The result is like an image fed through a photoshop effect, the slivers of mortar between each tile and the glint on the varnish the only proof that it hasn't been printed on plaster.

It depicts, in a vast and jumbled tableau, the discovery and conquest of the Hollow. From the initial drilling expedition to HRH Thomson Ross accepting the subjugation of the Dweller city states, the Kingdom of Ache and Hwich, the Honeycomb and the Under-Water. Ross himself sits at the right-hand corner of the frame, the Granite Coronal banding his head like a grey ornament, his lip curled like a threat.

The monument is bare of graffiti, with one notable exception. A dual phrase in tippex, white paint, or something else loops where Ross' cape brushes the floor. First in the looping language of the Dwellers, then in human English.

DETH TO THE FALS MAXHAR

To purchase tickets, turn to page 89.

To attempt to enter the SCTN without paying like a true drain on society, go to 88.

You find your way to the regional line platform, of which there is one. It is open air, gray, and thoroughly boring. The next train leaves for Stonehaven in two hours. You realise that this was a stupid decision and elect to return to the main station area.

Turn to page 87

Passing through the ticket gate, there's commotion behind you. A waterdweller is caught by their leg in the doors. Two SCTN controllers close in. The waterdweller raises his headlimbs, starts gibbering. You turn as the hydraulic rush of the opening gate melts into the wet sounds of batons or fists against rubber, the queasy noises of cartilage violently rearranged. You suck breath in, tune it out, keep your eyes front, duck through the tunnels with the other commuters.

There are stairs, where there aren't the hallways angle down. The passages close in, the tile wall pristine but glistening: damp like something infected; the off-white colour of pus. The crowd tightens, you grip the straps of your rucksack close to your back. You've never been robbed in here before but it happens enough. Happens enough to be a problem. Happens enough for your friends to worry about it. You're guarded, and that's before the underground starts to twist things.

The channels, the streams of people, open into a cavern: a gallery, the SCTN mainline platform. The automotive is gigantic, its plating a burnished black steel. It stretches into the roof; its machinery grinding, drilling into the air. As if on cue, its row of doors shudder open. The mass pours in. You are swept with it, swept inside, into the train.

TURN THE PAGE

You step in the carriage, find a seat. Sliding into a booth you find a welcome pack already laid out for you. Opening it you find a pamphlet, a map, and a handbook. While you fish through these and set your things to one side the other spaces on the carriage begin to fill. While still absorbed in all the materials, you feel a small but insistent tap on your shoulder.

The fox stands upright at about shoulder height. Tall, comparatively, and well-groomed next to other urban foxes you've seen. His coat sparkles and his tweed jacket and suit trousers seem well brushed and immaculate.

“Do you mind?” His voice is urbane. His lips don't move to form the words, he holds his mouth open and something in his throat produces them. He holds one forelimb outstretched to the empty pair of seats opposite you.

To accept, turn to page 94.

To refuse, turn to page 95.

“Thanks kindly,” the fox smiles, closing his mouth and stretching his mouth into an upward curl. An uncertain approximation of a human gesture, something learned through imitation or an attempt at acclimation. There’s an inauthenticity to it beyond even that. Affect comes easily to him, but hangs uneasily off him.

Turn to page 96.

“Now, that’s not very nice.”

The fox smiles, his mouth open, all his teeth in view.

“But your refusal does intrigue me, are you the sort of person who must get what they want? For whom choice is paramount? Perhaps,” his eyes glitter, “you’ve found yourself in a similar situation before, and you’re deliberately refusing to test what happens. If that’s so, I hate to disappoint you.” He slips into the seats opposite you.

“If you’re going to be so rude as to refuse my company, I’m going to repay the favour by ignoring your refusal.”

You realise it’s pointless to argue with him. Turn to page 96.

“Frequent traveller?”

You look up from the pamphlet and ask him to repeat himself.

“I asked if you were a frequent traveller.”

You travel, you say, but you’ve never been on the Hyperloop before. It’s your first time travelling on this scale. Despite being a citizen of Aberdeen for years you’ve never made the visit to any of its territories, much less Perth or anywhere else outside of Europe. The fox’s ears perk, he studies you for a moment.

“Why are you travelling now?”

If you are travelling for academic reasons, turn to page 97.

If you are travelling for personal reasons, turn to page 98.

If you are travelling for the hell of it, turn to page 99.

You are travelling, you explain, for a marvellous opportunity. JC Antipodean Technical has offered you a fabulous scholarship to observe and catalogue metaphysical phenomena in the Swan river valley. You have also been commissioned by JCAT to write a small book of prose- poems in celebration of the Bell, the Swan, the Cross, and the other local powers. All in all, you are very excited.

Turn to page 100.

Two months ago, you explain, you received an email from a great aunt. She lives in Melbourne currently, your father's mother's sister. Having recently come into a bit of money you decided to take the opportunity to meet this woman, whom you had never seen before, and see a little more of the world in the process. You are uncertain about all this, but hope it will turn out well.

Turn to page 100.

You are, in no uncertain terms, a freak. You are the sort of demon that others might call “a rail fan” but most would call “disturbed and deranged”. You take some kind of libidinal or psychosexual pleasure from the mere act of going from one place to another. Not from arriving at a destination, but bouncing between them: a sort of delayed orgasm but for physical locomotion. This sort of mindset is classed by some as a paraphilia, but ought to be deemed an illness. You are an acute sufferer.

Turn to page 100, you waste of skin.

“Well that’s all very interesting,” the fox begins.

Is it? You cut in.

“It isn’t,” he flashes a smile, “but we’re going to be spending a lot of time together, if you really are going to Perth. Like you, I’m in it for the long haul. Not all the way, mind you, if it can be helped. But a while.”

You try to place his accent. It’s something like Received Pronunciation, but certain words are more strenuously emphasised than others. You’re reminded of an American doing a near-perfect impression of a BBC newscaster. Since oil drilling opened the inner world, you’ve become used to more marvels and wonders than you could count.

“Since you are new,” the fox begins again after a pause, “you’ll need a rundown on the train, a better explanation than all that literature can give you. What do you want to know?”

If you need an explanation on the passengers, turn to page 101.

If you need the facilities of the train explained, turn to page 102.

If you need an explanation about the destinations of the train, turn to page 103.

If you need an elaborate commentary on contemporary politics, turn to page 104.

If you don’t need anything explained to you, turn to page 105.

“As you know this is an expensive service, very high class. As such there are a few persons of importance travelling with us. The one you’ve got to watch out for is Mr. Lam. Blue suit. Red Tie. White shirt. Envoy for,” he whispers the letters, “A T L A S”.

You ask if it’s that Atlas.

“That Atlas,” he replies. “I wouldn’t trust him, but I don’t think I need to tell you. He’s probably busy most of the time, but I’m sure he’ll talk to you if you seek him out. Though why you’d want that,” he trails off.

“The second VIP you will most certainly be familiar with. A Mrs Barbara A. Lond? The MP for Castlegate? Second minister of Greater Aberdeen? That’s right. They say she’s on her way to Perth for a trade delegation, but there’s already a trade agreement set up between Australia and Aberdeen; not to mention the numerous treaties between the Granite and the Cross. My instincts are that this is bigger than all that. If you want to try and suss it out, I’m sure that she’ll take a visit from a constituent.”

“Now, the bearded man with the sad eyes, he’s at the other end of the carriage. No, don’t look. That’s Jacob Curzon. If Mr. Lam is Atlas’ representative aboard this train, Mr. Curzon represents the Swan. Now, rumour has it that the Swan sent some kind of delegation HRH Ross and the Granite; but negotiations turned sour. I’ll bet that the reason Mr. Curzon looks so down is the failure of that deal. I’m sure you can ask him, he doesn’t look like he has a lot to do.”

You ask about someone you saw in the station. The person swaddled in a sweater, a scarf.

“I’ve never heard of them, but they seem interesting enough to have caught your eye. Oh, what do you mean ‘don’t look at you like that’? It’s natural. We’re all dislocated. Far from home or going to be. These things happen, no need to be ashamed of it.”

“And me? What about me?”

You ask again, for the fox to explain himself.

“Oh there’s nothing to tell,” he smiles, “what you see is, for better or worse, what you get.”

If you need the facilities of the train explained, turn to page 102.

If you need an explanation about the destinations of the train, turn to page 103.

If you need an elaborate commentary on contemporary politics, turn to page 104.

If you don’t need anything explained to you, turn to page 106.

“I’m sure that, along with badgering some of the fine folk taking the train, there’s plenty the Hyperloop has to occupy you in itself. I’ll run down everything quickly.”

The fox explains that each SCTN locomotive comes outfitted with a dining car. The food isn’t spectacular, for the price of admission, but it does come gratis with your ticket.

At the front of the locomotive is an observation deck. If you’re to pass through any spectacular sights on our journey beneath the earth, you’ll be able to get a full appreciation of them there. He warns you that, most of the time, the Immer is a misty place. Most days the best thing you’ll see is the mist.

Of course, as all modern facilities must, each cabin on the train is adjoined by a Chamber of the Hand, Eye, and Heart. Or Heart, Hand, and Eye. Or Eye, Heart, and Hand. It varies. What doesn’t is the function. The chamber will allow you to relinquish parts of yourself for secret knowledge.

Lastly there’s the luggage car. You left your bags there, as did everyone else. The fox gives you a sly wink. You couldn’t possibly know what he means.

If you need an explanation of the passengers, turn to page 101.

If you need an explanation about the destinations of the train, turn to page 103.

If you need an elaborate commentary on contemporary politics, turn to page 104.

If you don’t need anything explained to you, turn to page 106.

“Aberdeen, where we are now. The city of, well, someone’s desire. A city state that just so happened to break into the hollows of the earth. They’ve reaped that reward richly.”

“Paris, the city of lights, illuminates the underworld. You will, of course, be familiar with the events that led to the sinking. Still a nice tourist destination, all in all.”

“Place de Crabbes, well, the less said about this place the better.”

“Midway through our journey we will pass through the Mantle. This is perfectly safe but it can be,” he pauses, “unusual for people such as yourself. Ask me more when we’re nearer.”

“On the other side of that is the Antipodean Railway Interlock. It’s a fun little waystation, a little industrial and bleak, but there’s no better place to see Pre-Aberdonian Dweller society.” He grins. “If that’s your thing.”

“Penultimate stop on our journey is Sub-Singapore. This little enclave was the first purposeful excursion into the Inner Earth by a surface polity. Marvellously clean place. This is my stop.”

“Perth. Final destination. Home to Aunts and academic opportunities and most of the world’s desires. A beautiful place built on a legacy of unimaginable cruelty. Who can resist?”

If you need an explanation on the passengers, turn to page 101.

If you need the facilities of the train explained, turn to page 102.

If you need an elaborate commentary on contemporary politics, turn to page 104.

If you don’t need anything explained to you, turn to page 106.

For the past half-century, the Fox explains, Atlas and the Atlantic powers it sponsors have been waxing. Now, their force is bloated and they sense a shift in dynamics. The opening of the inner earth has changed things. Powers that have no reason to collude, that exist on opposite ends of the globe, have shared interests and new opportunities for expansion.

Atlas guards its hegemony jealously, and while it still reigns supreme there are cracks in the façade. It has ceded more and more ground to Heaven. While the peace between them holds, the current state of *détente* seems doomed to erupt into a more overt hostility.

While Atlas attempts to bring the smaller powers that ought to be in its sphere of influence to heel, Heaven and other upstarts attempt to tempt them into neutrality or opposition. Both sides of this game knows that failures, weaknesses, are like dominos. If global faith in Atlas' dominance is cracked, it will soon shatter.

If you need an explanation on the passengers, turn to page 101.

If you need the facilities of the train explained, turn to page 102.

If you need an explanation about the destinations of the train, turn to page 103

If you don't need anything else explained to you, turn to page 106.

“Ah, perhaps you were lying when you said you’d never done this before.” For a moment, his smile is almost hungry. “Am I right? Maybe you actually are travelling for the hell of it, you waste of skin.”

Turn to page 106.

Just as the fox is done speaking, when he sets his paws crossed on the table, the engines around you hiss. The whole carriage jolts once, twice, before starting into an uneasy sort of motion. You experience something you never have before in your life: the sensation of rapid downward motion. It's like an elevator magnified several times over. An intense feeling of nausea rises as the platform drops out of view and you close your eyes until it subsides. When you open them, the window is black; light shuttering on and off as the carriage whisks ever downward. You have left Aberdeen. You have passed under the Earth.

TURN THE PAGE

When you wake up the next morning you shower spottily, use the three-in-one shampoo-bodywash-conditioner that you're convinced is slowly killing you with microplastics, dry, deodorize, and dress. You can't help but notice that the view from the windows have changed from strobing lights to a dimly illuminated mist. Slipping out of your cabin, you notice that the synthetic lights running in strips along the top and bottom of the central carriage aisles are brighter somehow. It's as if they're trying to give the impression of a cheery morning with access only to artificial lighting.

You find the fox in the booth you had shared before. Now you make the decision to sit with him. In the sea of anonymity that is the SCTN, the fox is at least a familiar presence and one intent on help.

"Sleep well?" You did.

"At any rate, don't get excited. Paris is a while away yet, but," a smile, "this means you can avail yourself of the fruits of the train. There are a range of amenities on offer, and you can also take this time to familiarise yourself with your fellow passengers."

You enumerate the list of people you could speak to in your head and ask him about what he would recommend of the train's services.

"If you want to get a sense of the value of the SCTN, I recommend the observation deck. It's really something, a sight to behold. If you want to nourish yourself with something other than bar peanuts down here, your only option is the dining car."

"As far as people go, the Dweller you were looking at is in this carriage, a few rows back if I'm not mistaken. Or, if you're feeling brave, your MP is available for a constituency meeting." A curl in tone and a curl of the lip that you're not wholly comfortable with.

To spend the day speaking to the train's passengers, turn to page 108.

To visit the amenities of the train, turn to page 109.

You have decided to occupy your day seeking out the passengers on the train and speaking with them. As it stands, your options are as follows.

To find the Dweller in winter clothes, turn to page 110.

To find the MP for Castlegate, Barbara Lond, turn to page 111.

You've chosen to enjoy the amenities that the train has to offer. You can either head to the dining car for a meal or you can visit the observation deck to see what views the inner earth has to offer.

To visit the dining car, turn to page 112.

To go to the observation deck, to turn to page 113.

You find the Dweller sitting a few booths down from the fox. Inexplicably, they are still wearing their winter clothes. A thick parka, a scarf over the lower half of their face, a knit woolen beanie pulled over the top of their head, from which their shock of white curls spills down past their shoulders. They're reading from a book bound in black leather with gold lettering creeping down the spine. Their yellow eyes flick up from it to meet yours. Their gaze isn't cold. You ask to sit down and they acquiesce. They introduce themselves as Nirn and you give your own name.

How do you open?

To ask about their purpose on the train, turn to page 114.

To talk about your own reasons for travelling, turn to page 117.

To ask about the book, turn to page 120.

When you find Mrs Lond, she's absorbed: tapping away at her laptop. She has wireless earbuds in. As you approach, she smiles, acknowledges you. You wait for a second but it's only when you speak, try to introduce yourself, that she removes one bud to engage with you properly.

"I'm sorry, tad busy at the moment."

You explain that you're here for a constituency meeting, official business. Her schedule is booked, or so she says, and you should try again later. The phrasing is pleasant enough, diplomatic enough, but she cannot disguise the sharpness in her diction. You judge it best to occupy your time doing something else and step away.

To speak with the enigmatic Dweller in winter clothing, turn to page 110.

To retire to your cabin for the day, turn to page 124.

As luck would have it, you're situated fairly close to the dining car. Stepping in, you see that it's crowded, but not too crowded. The setup is similar to a buffet or a cafeteria, with a long queue stretching along a metal counter. Joining the queue behind some anonymous passenger, you note the dimensions of the space. It's quite clearly the same size as the standard lounge cars, but without the extraneous bulk of the booths and tables. Seating here is chic, slim, and modern: two long tables occupy the rear half of the car, the chairs seem ergonomic but are barely supported on spindly legs.

Eventually, for some reason the plurality of passengers seem to have chosen this opportunity to take their lunch, the queue rolls around to you. There are two options for lunch today, sir, the disinterested voice of the woman behind the counter informs you. Looking down you see the batter-outlined shapes of entirely too large portions of what you presume is fish. There are, further, mounds of grey-brown fillets of meat, you assume steak. Everything is served with either salad or what has been termed, in a transatlantic spirit, fries.

To have fish and chips, turn to page 115.

To have steak and salad, turn to page 118.

The observation deck is at the very front of the train. Consequently you have to elbow your way through multiple lounge cars, the dining car, and at least two dormitory cars before you see the signs for it. It is not exhaustively signposted as if the train, this particular train, is a little embarrassed about the presence or role of the deck. When you finally reach it you see why.

The view from your window has not thus far been awe-inspiring. Due to the way that the train's track is suspended through the inner atmosphere, more often than not all you see through the reinforced glass is cloud or mist. That's all that's visible now.

The entire tip of the locomotive is taken up by the deck. Sloping to a softened point like a bullet, the walls above and to the side form one contiguous glass pane. If there was a view, it would be unobstructed. As it is, you can see the mists of the Immer without it being broken up by structural beams or reinforcing girders.

There are a few other passengers in the deck when you arrive. Somehow, it's all clusters of people: groups of friends or families with small children. You don't feel comfortable talking to any of them. Any attempt to begin a conversation would be intruding on one already being made. You instead find a spot and stand there, leaning against the thrumming glass wall. Either you can stay where you are in the hope of seeing something, or deny the sunk cost fallacy and depart for pastures elsewhere.

To stay, turn to page 116.

To leave, turn to page 122.

“I’m being relocated,” the suggestion of a smile beneath the scarf. “Officially.” Despite the deep horror of the answer, they don’t appear to be too perturbed about you asking about it and brush off your clumsy attempt to apologise for inquiring. You get to talking about their life prior to the order. They had to go to Aberdeen itself to apply for the right kind of permit to be let into Singapore.

“Not the worst place to be,” they say, smiling limply.

To talk about your own reasons for travelling, turn to page 117.

To ask about the book, turn to page 120.

To make your excuses and leave, turn to page 123.

Oddly enough, flying in the face of every meal of this type you've had up to this point, the chips are the better part of the dish. They're crisp on the outside, fluffy on the inside. The crust around their exteriors is dusted with some kind of seasoning: a mix of herbs, dried garlic, and salt. Often eating accompaniments like this is more of a chore than anything else but you manage all of them and enjoy them until the last bite.

On the other hand, the 'fish' is woeful. The batter is so thick around it that it requires excavation from its crust before you can properly dig into the meat. The flesh in question is flavourless and limp. Rather than flake apart it clumps and almost mashes when you try to lift it to your lips. You make a mental note to leave a bad review, at least once you're safely off the train.

Turn to page 121.

The people come and go. The pattern appears to be: a group of people bound in flush with excitement, realise that there's nothing to see or do here, grow disappointed, and leave. You see it happen repeatedly with fresh waves of customers breezing through the sliding doors at the opening of the deck. People watching has always been something you've indulged in with not a small amount of guilt, but you do it anyway. Overwhelmingly, it's families: tired parents and hyper-active children. There are some groups of adults and, amazingly, the odd loner. Having committed yourself to observation, however, you don't attempt to make conversation with any solo visitors.

To stay, turn to page 119.

To leave, turn to page 122.

You clumsily begin to explain your life story, the exact confluence of circumstances that brought you to the SCTN and your journey. Be it an aunt in Melbourne, a lucrative academic placement, or a demented love of the process, Nirn listens intently and patiently. Perhaps you just needed someone to talk to about this who isn't the Fox, someone who won't try and study you or analyse you. You are lightly made fun of for your first world problems and you share a laugh. It's nice to hear them laugh, you think.

To ask about their purpose on the train, turn to page 114.

To ask about the book, turn to page 120.

To make your excuses and leave, turn to page 123.

Perhaps you wanted to try eating like an adult for a change. Perhaps you found the thought of fried food disgusting. The notion of you, a fully-grown sophisticate, ordering chips in a restaurant like a nine-year-old was perhaps so disconcerting that you chose the, arguably, grown up but, definitely, worse option that sits on your plate now.

In lieu of a dressing the salad is drizzled in balsamic reduction. It is tangy, sweet, syrupy, and too much. In addition, the rocket appears to have been tossed in olive oil. Fine by itself, but it's clearly been left, dripping, like that for long enough for the leaves to lose any of the peppery bite they might have had.

As the steak goes, it's nothing to write home about, but it's not dreadful either. The fibres of the meat are tough even if the cut as a whole is tender. There's some lingering aftertaste beneath it, leaving you wondering if, instead of grass-fed beef, this is some Immer papiasaur or the flank of a cave whale. You make a mental note to tell the fox about how wretched this is, when you're out of earshot.

Turn to page 121.

Having previously committed yourself to people-watching, you decide to give view-watching a try. Yes, for the most part the only view available is the swirling mist. No, at the speed you're going at any attempt to catch sight of any wildlife would be impossible. If any living thing got close enough to the train for you to appreciate it, it would be paste. So instead of anything normal or legible, you tune your gaze to the mist: try and tease its swirling patterns into any kind of legibility. Perhaps you're only doing this for the inevitable long-form article you'll write about the journey after it's done, you're not typically the kind of person who surrenders to woo-woo thinking of this nature. Either way, you allow yourself to suffer twenty minutes of mist-watching until you're quite certain you have enough material for the Atlantic Monthly. Then you're done. Then you're going.

Turn to page 122.

They turn the book to you. It's old, older than you'd realised. They explain it's a long term loan from the special collections unit at the Robert Gordon University library. 'ANGELS OF THE INNER EARTH' reads the text along the spine.

"Would you like to borrow it?" You say that you would, in the hope that it might be useful in your travels. They explain that you've got a better chance of returning it to RGU than they have. That you don't dispute.

Opening the book, one particular passage calls your attention:

ᵐᵒᵑᵒᵑᵒᵑ	SPHINX
ᵐᵒ	OF
ᵐᵒᵑᵒᵑᵒᵑ	BLACK
ᵐᵒᵑᵒᵑᵒᵑ	QUARTZ
ᵐᵒᵑᵒᵑᵒᵑ	JUDGE
ᵐᵒ	MY
ᵐᵒᵑᵒᵑ	VOW

This appears to be a translation key for an unknown language. As the book is now yours, there's nothing to stop you from tearing out this segment and using it for your own purposes. It may prove useful if you are ever required to communicate in the language it describes.

To ask about their purpose on the train, turn to page 114.

To talk about your own reasons for travelling, turn to page 117.

To make your excuses and leave, turn to page 123.

With a full belly and some measure of satisfaction, you consider your options. You could call it a day and return to your cabin or visit the observation deck and work off some of the food you've just ingested.

To visit the observation deck, turn to page 113.

To retire for the day, turn to page 124.

Having suffered as much of the observation deck as you'll allow, you consider your options. You can retire to your cabin or, if you haven't eaten before-hand, perhaps your experience staring into nothing has done something to whet your appetite.

To head to the dining car for a meal, turn to page 112.

To retire for the day, turn to page 124.

“If you’re worried about the mantle,” they say after a cheerful farewell, “you can come to me. Surfacers can find it,” a pause, “disquieting.” You say that you’ll take them up on that and bid them farewell.

There’s still a little time to talk to the other passengers. Either you can proceed with the Fox’s idea for a constituency meeting, or can call it a day and retire to your cabin.

To seek a constituency meeting with your MP, Barbara Lond, turn to page 111.

To retire, turn to page 124.

Your business for the day done, you walk back to your cabin. The day's activities have left you time to prepare for bed. You make the bed before you slide into it. You make a point of changing fully into your pajamas, spraying the room with air-freshener, and taking out the hardback you've been meaning to read but haven't cracked since the journey began. Of course you still don't manage to open it. Sleep comes easier than it normally does and you wake up refreshed, making your way out to the lounge car when you do.

TURN THE PAGE

The first stop on your Journey is Paris-Below. You visited Paris once, when it was still above ground. You remember a place that was altogether too hot. Somewhere where one street corner might smell of freshly baked bread while the next might smell of human urine. As the train pulls into Chatelet, the hub of city just as it was above ground, you ask the Fox if he's ever been.

“Many times on business, though not always as myself.”

Trying to be witty, to match him, you ask if there's ever a time in business where one is oneself.

His snout wrinkles slightly.

CHATELET calls the tannoy, CHATELET it repeats. It says something in French before translating. THE TRAIN WILL STOP HERE FOR a pause TWELVE HOURS. WE ADVISE PASSENGERS TO RETURN TO THEIR BERTHS AN HOUR BEFORE DEPARTURE. ENJOY PARIS.

To take a moment to ask about Parisian history with the fox, turn to page 126.

To take advantage of the tannoy's suggestion, turn to page 127.

To spurn Paris' hospitality and stay in the train, turn to page 133.

As you and the fox both know, Paris did not always sit beneath the Earth's Crust. Not long after the Hollows were discovered by Aberdonian experimental boring, but before the Granite had moved MP Ross to declare independence and take up the crown, the President of France made contact with a power of the inner earth. The power in question's name isn't known, but given how Paris' new standing suited the needs of the nascent Aberdonian state as a waystation and resupply depot, we can assume it was allied in some way with the Granite. The President ascended as the Jupiterian and, while he was quickly voted out of office for damning the capital, his influence has guided the fortunes of the city of light as it illuminates the inner earth.

To take advantage of the tannoy's suggestion, turn to page 127.

To spurn Paris' hospitality and stay in the train, turn to page 133.

You bid farewell to the Fox and make your way out of the train and into the maze of tunnels that is Chatelet. Crowds, human; dweller; and neither, form a steady stream of traffic that you negotiate with some small success. After cannily reading the correct signs and diving down the correct corridors, you eventually find yourself in the station's massive atrium. The exit is in sight and a huge mural of a map is painted on a nearby wall.

This is a stylised but highly accurate rendition of the major streets and thoroughfares of the city. Within the limits of the twenty arrondissements, Paris is identical to how it was above ground. When the city sank, its mass of suburbs were left bereft of a centre. Now that is has, new suburbs have grown around it.

The stylised map offers a number of possibilities for the day.

The Eiffel Tower is an obvious choice, perhaps, but you wonder how it's changed in the years since you last saw it. Turn to page 128.

The Orsay Museum is painted like a steel and glass ribcage, yet something compels you to visit. Turn to page 129.

You take the Furtherground Metro: Ligne 4 to Montparnasse, changing to Ligne 6 and on to Bir-Hakeim. Outside the closed corridors of the train the streets are wide, but dark and crowded. The crowds are silent, as if Paris is a cathedral and the bustling multitudes are shuffling through the pews, searching for a seat.

The champs de Mars is carefully maintained, its lawns are trimmed daily but most of the flower displays no-longer sport upper-earth flora. Strange new flowers and fronds bloom beneath the jutting, crooked Eiffel tower. When Paris sunk, its tip scraped and its spine bent against the cavern ceiling. The Jupiterian has its offices at its apex and a warm light blooms through the girders. You spend a long time looking at that light. Beyond this there's nothing to see.

You find a café to sit down and repose yourself. Turn to page 130.

The Orsay Museum is exactly the same as when you last visited, but you remember receiving a tip that its contents have changed since you were last here. Bolefully you pay full fare for the ticket. Even though Aberdeen has joined the EU, you no longer qualify for the under-twenty-five free museums pass.

You breeze through your favourites before coming to the recently acquired pieces of Dwyler art in the new Galerie Macron. It's mostly sculptures and mostly Amytkan. All figurative, glassy pieces. At points two different types of stone are blended together in a single sculpture, the seam between rippling and indistinct.

You check the provenance of each piece. All you can find is a small line of print indicating that every work of art is "On Permanent Loan". The uneasy feeling follows you out of the museum, into the underworld air.

You find a café to sit down and repose yourself. Turn to page 130.

The café is typical, at least typical compared to the cafes you visited in Paris-Above. Something halfway between a brasserie and a high-end coffeehouse. You order an espresso and tip generously before trying it. The waiter, a dweller, doesn't thank you, but stares: their eyes glassy, watchful.

You check your watch, two hours have expired since you set out from the locomotive. You have a few things in mind to do. You remember the poetry nights that you used to attend here on the south bank, but you've heard good things about the Jazz nights in a bar on the north bank.

To attend the poetry open mic, turn to page 131.

To attend the jazz recital, turn to page 132.

You're greeted before you even get inside the bar where the recital is being held. Arms fold around you, old friends kiss you twice on both cheeks and you're barely able to keep up. Ushered inside The Black Cat and down the stairs to the basement, you pay the €1 courtesy fee before assuming your seat on a bench and waiting for the event to start.

Too late do you realise it is, as it always was, dreadful. Old men in goatees reading spectacularly explicit and poorly conceived love ballads about café waitresses. Younger men pontificating aloud through layers of overwritten prose. Hyperbolic, hysteric *cris de couer*. Deliberately underwritten prose that falls flat deliberately in a misguided attempt at profundity. You get very drunk though, and roar applause at each performer.

When you stumble out of the bar, you have two hours before the train departs. Preferring to err on the side of caution, you make your way back.

Turn to page 133.

With some difficulty, you take the Ligne 11 to the North and, after getting lost a fair few times, find your way to the bar. The recital is already in session, but the bar is raucously loud; the jazz is barely more than a backing track to the harsh music of yelled French and the percussion of glasses clattering on tables.

Edging into a seat with a pastis ricard, you lose yourself in the ambience of the bar. Scanning the clientele you spy an old friend of yours. Hurriedly you make your way over to them, greet them, embrace.

You join your voices to every other in the room, shouting over the jazz and everyone else as you catch up on the city and each other. The moment is glorious, warm, somehow triumphant. When you check your watch, you realise you have two hours before the train departs. Promising to meet again when you're in town, you make your excuses and head back.

Turn to page 133.

You're in your seat when the train starts into motion again, but it's not ten minutes before something happens. Shuddering, juddering, slowing, and halting the train comes to a stop. Frantically you consult the pamphlet and trace your journey to this point on the helpfully and brightly coloured linear map. In bold-italic-red is printed PLACE DES CRABES. You look over at the fox, and they smile.

"Don't worry about it, at least you're in your seat."

And why should you worry?

PLACE DES CRABES chimes the tannoy.

"Why indeed?"

PLACE DES CRABES

You cannot see the station through the crowd of limbs. Not even bodies, just limbs: multi-jointed, chitinous, arthropodal. Every window view is blocked by a lattice of stilt-legs and pincers. It's only by focusing, parsing the jumble that you manage to pick out their owners. Bulky, round, some wide and spiked; some thin and segmented. Each and every one carries their eyes on stalks over their busying mouths, mouths that seem to chew even when there's nothing in them; though some are occupied by croissants, sandwiches, chocolate bars.

The doors snap open. The artificial bell rings. All at once the platform-people spill into the train. A few strategic thinkers occupied the spaces on the platform near the doors. These clever ones enter first, jostling and sidling their way between the rows of seats, folding their entire bodies into any space that will have them. A coconut crab taller than you are slips into the seat next to you, setting a coffee cup down dangerously close to your pamphlets and books. Smiling at him, wincing, you slip them off the table and onto your lap. The elbow of the crab's crusher arm juts into your stomach.

An orange, half-moon shaped individual takes the seat next to the fox. Though his partner is significantly larger than yours, he somehow navigates this with more grace than you could ever hope to. Without even trying, his body bends in such a way that effortlessly accommodates his fellow. At the same time he doesn't look in a bit of pain. The one next to you jostles in his seat, the feet scraping against the cushioning and the floor.

"They're only with us to the next stop." You look around anxiously.

"Rest easy, they don't speak English. This is France, remember?"

The carriage is full in seconds, every variety of carcenic life spilling between the automatic doors. Even when every bit of ground is covered, more push in. Smaller fiddler crabs climb on the shells of larger ones. A family of hermit crabs, huge snail shells slung over their backs, weave and dodge through the maze of pointed legs. The children have Minnie and

Mickey Mouse hairbands affixed just past their antennae. Two lobsters lean back against the wall away from the door, deep in some kind of conversation.

After about two minutes there's a loud blare from a siren over the tannoy. There are still crabs on the platform, crabs who have half-nestled their way into the carriage and are blocking the doors. The last few minutes have been so crowded and hurried that you forgot even to ask if there was time to explore this stop.

Another crab, a hi-vis jacket slung over their back and a conductor's hat perched above their eyestalks, pushes their way through to the door and shoos the offenders into the train or out onto the platform. Some of them turn to argue with this official and, while from the gestures and movement of the mouthparts it looks heated, all those who cannot fit on the train acquiesce. Though your ears are perched, you can't hear anything over the hiss of machinery and the sound of chitin grinding against chitin.

It's a few more moments before the train starts to move again. From this you can surmise that similar altercations are happening all across the locomotive. Eventually, the engines start and the platform drops away. You ask the fox when the next stop is, careful to modulate your tone to not cause your fellow passengers any offence; even as the one next to you repositions a leg so that the point digs in to your thigh.

“Oh it can't be more than twenty minutes.”

To ask the fox why the crabs make this journey,, turn to page 135.

To ask the fox why the Company installed these stations on the line,, turn to page 136.

“It’s a natural part of their life cycle.” You motion for him to go on.

“Well, it’s part of the natural order of things. The crabs depend on the restaurant to manage their population and to continue their species.”

You ask about the restaurant.

“Le Twickenham, it’s a famous place. It was a very big deal in Paris-Above, in the sixth or the seventh I believe, so they franchised and brought it down here. Since Paris sunk, the old shop closed up; but they’re never short of business.”

“You ask what a restaurant has to do with a crab’s life-cycle? Well, the spawning pools are in the back, the assisted dying facilities are in the kitchens.”

You mean that-

“Yes, I do mean that. I don’t know why you’re giving me that look, they certainly don’t mind. I think they have more right to choose how to dispose of their earthly remains than you.”

But, you splutter, there are children here; families. The fox shrugs.

“And some of them like to eat there.”

You sit in silence for the rest of the journey.

Go to 137.

“Well, the crabs were making the journey here long before they set up the stations. Every crab makes the journey from Le Ville to Le Twickenham once in their span. Only, once they installed the line and dug the tunnels, it coincidentally created the perfect shortcut for the crabs on their migration.”

“This was a complete disaster. Whole crowds of them would climb down the tunnel shaft. Perhaps that’s perfectly safe when a hyperloop locomotive isn’t barrelling its way through the earth’s crust, but when it is—” he trails off. “Carnage. Utter carnage. Mass death, whole families wiped out. And what a waste! The new system is a lot tidier.”

You ask the fox if the crabs left on the platform will try to travel through the tunnel. “I shouldn’t think so, they set up a replacement bus service. They just prefer the train because, well, who wouldn’t?”

To ask the fox why the crabs make this journey,, turn to page 135.

To think better of it and keep shtum, turn to page 137.

The train slows again. The tannoy blares: LE TWICKENHAM, then a pause, then LE TWICKENHAM. The doors open almost immediately, like a gasp for air. Right away the crabs file out. They are orderly this time, no jostling, no pushing. There's no air of desperation. You look out the window and see them heading towards the only landmark beyond the station signs and the information boards.

Le Twickenham is a massive neoclassical edifice. It's sculpted out of sandstone, with a row of columns along the front arranged like teeth. Above those, across the entablature, are gigantic electrically illuminated letters spelling the establishment's name. The crabs tottering towards it are bathed in that light. Families and loners, adults and children, all are washed in it; embraced by it.

Eventually both you and the fox's seat mates file out with the rest, stumbling along the corridor between the seats and heading out the doors. You take one last look at Le Twickenham. The crowd of crustaceans are dwarfed by its size, enclosed, almost consumed by it. The door opens for the first one to arrive. A concierge in a white shirt and waistcoat motions them in. Before you can catch a closer look, the carriage shudders to life. The doors shut and the inevitable process of the hyperloop takes you further into the earth.

TURN THE PAGE

It's only after the last of the crabs are long gone, after the faint sea-mineral smell has dissipated from the air, that the Fox speaks again.

"This is not where the strangeness ends." There's a smile on his thin lips but there's something beneath it. There's a tension in his voice, in his body, that lends a certain urgency to his speech. You ask what he means.

"The next stop on our journey is the Interlock, where the lines of the Hyperloop intersect, however," a pause. "Before that we will pass through the mantle." You are vaguely aware of this. Any passage through the earth on SCTN lines necessitates navigation through the dangerous and molten regions of the earth's core, inhospitable to life but passable by the train.

"If I were you," for the first time his smile is cautious, almost nervous, "I would spend my time looking for information." He tents his fingers. "I'm sure you've felt it too, something is afoot here. And it concerns you. Don't spend your time idling."

"On the SCTN we're in the presence of three ambassadors. You've surely seen them: Mr. Lam, Mr. Curzon, and Ms Lond. All, in some way or another, are in service to a Power. If you're going to talk to anyone, I would talk to them."

"You'll also have noticed, surely, that the amenities on the train can be tuned to the pursuit of intelligence. The cabins on the train each come adjoined with a Chamber of the Hand, Eye, and Heart. There you may gain some intelligence. It's gruesome, I warrant you, but effective."

"There is another," he continues, "less gruesome way to accrue information. Services like this are too high-end to bother with real security. Paradoxically," he smiles, "the fancier places are easier to steal from. I would bet good money on the luggage compartment being unlocked, if you think you can find anything in the bags of your fellow passengers."

To spend your time speaking to the other passengers, turn to page 139.

To avail yourself of the train's amenities, turn to page 140.

You have decided to spend your time speaking to the other passengers on the train. Each power in this arrangement is in some respect a rival, and consequently you may only have a chance to speak to one before you reach the mantle. Choose wisely.

To seek a constituency meeting with Barbara Lond, turn to page 141.

To speak to the representative Mr. Lam, turn to page 142.

To speak to the advocate Jacob Curzon, turn to page 143.

You've chosen to spend the day enjoying the train's amenities. As you see it, you can choose to rummage around in the luggage racks to seek intelligence about your fellow passengers or you can gather information by exchanging parts of yourself in the Chamber of the Heart, Eye, and Hand.

To seek the luggage car, turn to page 144.

To go to your cabin and the Chamber that adjoins it, turn to page 145.

You find Barbara Lond tapping at a laptop a few tables down from your base with the Fox. Papers are spread under or around her machine, and it takes at least thirty seconds before she looks up from her work to notice you.

“Aha, my constituent!” A short smile. Her blonde hair is cropped close at the sides and stylised at the top. She looks a little like a golden paintbrush. “Are you here for a meeting?”

You explain that you are and start to ask her some questions before she cuts you off. “Look, I’m sorry. I am sorry, but,” she pauses long enough for the frustration to register on your face. “I’ve made time for you, I know you’ve been wanting to speak to me.” Some of your frustration dissipates.

“If you want to talk, find me in the observation deck once we pass into the mantle. In the meantime, I’ve been working with Mr. Lam and he’s expressed some interest in talking with you as well. While you’re waiting for your meeting, why don’t you pay him a visit?”

To do as she says and find Mr. Lam, turn to page 142.

To call it quits and return to the lounge, turn to page 164.

You find Mr. Lam a few carriages back. He is a tall man and in the confined space of the seating booth he seems even larger. Most of his size is in his limbs, they have to bend awkwardly to be contained by the space, by the seat, by the table. Even though his suit is noticeably tailored to him, he still seems too big for it.

“Hey sport,” he offers you the seat before you even need to ask for it. “What’s up?”

To ask him about Barbara Lond, turn to page 146.

To ask him about Jacob Curzon, turn to page 150.

To ask him about Atlas, turn to page 154.

Jacob Curzon meets your eye before you even ask to sit opposite him in the booth he's cornered for himself. There's something guarded in his affect, he allows you to speak first and waits a long while before assenting with a flattened palm. You realise what the Fox meant by his sad eyes. They're soft, no matter the knot of expression playing across his features.

"It's you." His voice isn't as warm as his eyes. While not unfriendly, it doesn't hold the same kind of exuberance that the others you've met on your journey have offered you. Perhaps you appreciate that, the honesty of it, perhaps you don't.

To ask about his meeting with the King, turn to page 147.

To ask if there's anything you can do, turn to page 151.

Covertly, you make your way to the back of the train, almost the very end. Amazingly, at least to you, the door is unguarded and, more importantly, unlocked. It worries you, to know that the belongings you've stashed away are just as vulnerable as everyone else's are on this train. Looking around the space, a cramped carriage with shelves that stretch to the ceiling, you can roughly match every passenger of interest with their luggage. This is a covert operation and it necessitates speed and caution. You will have time only to search one passenger's luggage before you are forced to make away with whatever ill-gotten information you have gained.

To search Mr. Lam's luggage, turn to page 148.

To search Mrs Lond's luggage, turn to page 152.

To search Mr. Curzon's luggage, turn to page 156.

To search Nirn's luggage, turn to page 159.

To search the Fox's luggage, turn to page 161.

The Chamber adjoins your cabin. It is labelled simply. The door is black, some kind of synthetic material, smooth. You imagine that it's designed to replicate the oily stone from which they are typically made. Pushing the door, it opens easily into a small space. It's shower sized. The drain on the floor gives you to imagining that perhaps this was a shower once, but it quickly occurs to you that the drain would have a function in a Chamber as well.

The cylindrical interior is just large enough to fit you. Opposite the door, there's a plastic flap, like a tray-table, labelled 'ALTAR'. You unfasten it and it swings down. Set into a depression on the tray there is a cloth and a knife. Taped to the alcove where the table was secured is a plastic card, a basic set of instructions is given. You murmur the words to practice first before you speak. After a long moment, you're ready.

To sacrifice the middle finger on your left hand to learn of death, turn to page 149.

To sacrifice the pinky finger on your right hand to learn of love, turn to page 153.

To sacrifice the ring finger on your left hand to learn of your foes, turn to page 153.

To seek no knowledge and make no sacrifice, turn to page 162.

“A fine woman, dynamite, dynamite,” his slang seems last century, and his accent slicks over the syllables. Even if you find the sentiments behind his words genuine, they’re slick with petroleum jelly, dripping with crude.

“You’re a lucky fella, if that’s your rep. Your, uh, Ehm-Pee.” His accent and his understanding negotiates the concept and the acronym a little clumsily. You mention that Ms. Lond said you two were working closely together. You ask him on what.

“Hah, can’t a fella do some trade delegation without getting his neck breathed on? Our trade links with you people are important, and we love what you’ve been doing with the Ess-See-Tee-En,” perhaps he’s just not good with acronyms, “Bab’s important to that. We’ve just been working out import-export, supply-and demand, y’know: boring shit?”

A million dollar smile.

To ask him about Jacob Curzon, turn to page 150.

To ask him about Atlas, turn to page 154.

To thank him for his time and leave, turn to page 158.

“Do I look like a happy man?” At first you think the question’s rhetorical, but the pause he leaves after it seems to prompt an answer. You start to give one but he cuts you off almost immediately.

“My colleagues said I was an idiot for coming to treat. They said that any one man who would make the alliances that your king has, has done what your king has done, has declared himself king of this rotten monstrosity in the first place isn’t worth our embassy. They were right. I’m an idiot.”

You start to speak again, commiserating, voicing your displeasure and disgust with the Aberdonian monarchy, its actions in the inner earth.

“You’re travelling under royal protection, aren’t you? Your own government is telling us, both me and you, exactly what your dissent is worth. Come with your sympathies when you aren’t using your little colonial passport, and I might take them seriously.”

You ask if there’s anything you can do, turn to page 151.

You spy a navy blue duffel bag. You recognize it as the same one that hung from the shoulder of Mr. Lam, swinging awkwardly against his gangly frame as he boarded the train. There are no padlocks, no ties, no form of security except the zip which you quickly undo. Inside you find a change of suit, navy blue like the one he wears always, folded to a level of precision that's almost painful. There are starched white shirts, one or two books by former

U.S. presidents, and a blocky mobile phone: the screen is green and primitive, like the face of a digital watch, there are glyphs cut or burned into the side of the thing's case, illegible to you.

Turn to page 163.

You make the cut. It doesn't hurt as much as you expect, but it does hurt. There's a lot of blood. Quickly you press the flat of the knife to the stump of your finger, as instructed, and the bleeding stems. Sucking in breath, your entire hand is still throbbing, you make your invocations and speak your question to the thrumming walls of the chamber.

The answer is uncertain. This is always the worst thing to hear at a consultation. If the future is mutable, it means that it is close, it means that the choices you make are the sole influence behind what is to come. You are to avoid constituency meetings. You are to avoid buying electronics. You are to avoid large windows. This is all that it tells you.

Turn to page 162.

“Such a sour little man.” He runs a hand over his close-cropped hair and lets out a long sigh. “One of history’s losers, y’know? So what, I mean, his guy lost? You think he’d find another boss, right? You’d think he’d stop being such a loser,” his accent lengthens the first vowel in that last word.

“I mean, sure. Raw deal. Colonialism. Mistakes. You got me, but Christ. There’s no truth and reconciliation without a little reconciliation, feel me?”

“My advice? Stay away from him. He’s a crank. Total crank.”

To ask him about Barbara Lond, turn to page 146.

To ask him about Atlas, turn to page 154.

To thank him for his time and leave, turn to page 158.

“No. If there’s anything you could do, you wouldn’t be on this train.” He sighs, the breath rattling in him as he draws his hands together, clasping them. Something in the illegibility of his expression softens and after a long blink, his eyes meet yours directly.

“I’m not angry at you. I don’t hate you. I’ve been defeated, we’ve been defeated, and I don’t know what to do. I wish you could help, if you seriously wanted to.” He sighs again.

“Perhaps we both could have spent our time more productively, but at least you aren’t speaking to Lam.”

Turn to page 155.

Barbara Lond had a pink valise at her side as she boarded. It's easy to spot now. When you unzip it, the padlock around the zip came undone without key or combination, it smells of a harsh and sugary perfume. The products inside her bag don't appear to be particularly expensive, the sort of thing you'd find at a mass-market beauty-pharma shop. It's when you find a hastily folded piece of paper that the true point of interest arises. Unfolding the paper, you see that the note has only one message: two repeating words, drawn in a harsh, stony, hand, that repeat all over the sheet in irregular scrawls. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them.

Turn to page 163.

You make the cut. There's a lot of blood. You realise the need for the gutter. The pain is shocking, and even when you press the flat of the blade towards the new stump it does not cease. There's blood everywhere: down your front, on the floor, on the altar. Muttering the incantation, your voice straining, you eventually get it out.

There is love for you in the inner earth. At the crossing of the threshold, seek the one who hides their face. The words are not spoken to you exactly, but each occurs to you in turn as the chamber buzzes around you in time with their occurrence. There's nothing more for you beyond this terse missive. Whatever awaits you, it is close.

Turn to page 162.

“The boss? You can’t—” something like outrage feigns over his face, “you can’t!” A few more seconds of mock horror before he drops the act. “Nah, really? Seriously? I’ve got nothing to hide. I’m an Atlantic boy, semper-fi, protecting freedom in the world. No I’m not ashamed, no I will not apologise.” A toothy grin.

“What you’ve got to understand is, no matter what people say about us, no matter what people feel.” He claps his hands together. “First off, facts don’t care about feelings. We’re the sheepdog that keeps the wolf from your door. The world needs us, we’re the strong men, the bad men, the superheroes. Pardon my French, but I won’t fucking apologise for that.”

To ask him about Barbara Lond, turn to page 146.

To ask him about Jacob Curzon, turn to page 150.

To thank him for his time and leave, turn to page 158.

You decide to make your excuses. Curzon doesn't stop you, allows you to draw to your feet and make your way into the corridor again. Before you go, he pauses, opens his mouth. You hang on his words.

“I am going to consult with my benefactor. If there's anything that you can do to help me, to help us, I will ask.” His expression hardens, though not aggressively. “In the meantime, don't seek out Lam. Don't seek out Lond. She's dishonest, our negotiations taught me that much. He is a monster. Whatever lies you've been told regarding either, don't listen to them.”

You nod and thank him. Turn to page 164.

Jacob Curzon had hoisted a simple backpacker's rucksack over his shoulders when you saw him on the platform. Its anonymity makes it difficult to spot, but you eventually find it, tucked between two similar looking bags on one of the shelves. Inside you find some rumpled clothes, a few worn paperbacks, and a disc of cold metal. It's a pocket-watch, elaborately made though not of any obviously precious material. The substance is something brighter than chrome, but heavier than silver or gold. There are several hands, and they move around the face with some irregularity. One hand stays still, juddering slightly, as if it's the point of a compass. You can't shake the symbol it's pointing to from your mind as you replace it in the bag. From a certain angle it looks like a crude rendition of a sun, with a rending gap down the middle breaking it in half.

Turn to page 163.

You make the cut. While largely bloodless, it is very painful. While the flesh parts easily, the blade of the knife grinds against the bone. Weeping a little, you resort to a sawing motion and eventually it comes apart. You almost forget to press the flat of the knife to the stump to stem the bleeding, when you do it stops immediately. Huffing and heaving through your agony, you recite the words and ask your question.

Your enemies extend from the inner earth to the upper stratosphere. There are two powers who want you dead, and everyone in service to them does too. You must array yourself against Americans and Aberdonians. No Australian or Dweller shall harm you, but they aren't your friends either. Do not seek your enemies when you are vulnerable. To go forward you must go back.

Turn to page 162.

He smiles all the while as you excuse yourself and stand to leave. Waiting until the last possible moment, he speaks.

“Oh, Bab told me to tell you. The constituency meeting? Come to the observation deck once we hit the mantle. She’ll take your questions then.”

You thank him and make your way back to the Fox.

Turn to page 164.

Nirn's bag is simple, canvas, with designs weaved into the fabric of the outside. It's secured with a tie, like a gym bag, but it's much more elaborate and capacious. You feel faintly unclean looking through it, as there's no possibility for advantage in your investigations. Therefore, you limit your search to their books rather than any more personal effects. You find something promising in a language manual. 'ANGELS OF THE INNER EARTH' is illuminated in gold on the black leather cover, and looking into it you see the languages of the Immer and its gods discussed in detail. This you retain in the hope that it might prove useful in the future.

Opening the book, one particular passage calls your attention:

ᵐᵒᵐᵐᵐᵐ	SPHINX
ᵐᵐ	OF
ᵐᵐᵐᵐᵐ	BLACK
ᵐᵐᵐᵐᵐ	QUARTZ
ᵐᵐᵐᵐᵐ	JUDGE
ᵐᵐ	MY
ᵐᵐᵐ	VOW

This appears to be a translation key for an unknown language. As the book is now yours, there's nothing to stop you from tearing out this segment and using it for your own purposes. It may prove useful if you are ever required to communicate in the language it describes.

Turn to page 162.

Perhaps the thought of mutilating yourself for a glimpse of the future disquiets you. Perhaps you've played this game before and found no profit in it. Whatever the truth, you decide not to engage the services of the Chamber. Stepping out of it, you consider your options. You can call it an afternoon and retire. You can investigate, as the Fox suggested, the luggage car and glean what information you can covertly.

To rummage around the luggage compartment, turn to page 144.

To retire, turn to page 164

The satchel that you saw the fox carrying when you initially spoke to him upon boarding is easy to spot, it's as bright as beige can be, and the fabric is tweed or something else durable. It seems unsecured, taking it into your hands, but try as you might you are unable to open it. There's no obvious lock, nothing to suggest that opening the thing is impossible, but no matter how hard you tug or pull or fiddle with the clasps around the opening flap it steadfastly refuses to give or even budge. Seething in frustration, you replace the thing exactly as you found it. Conscious of the limits on your time here, you decide to cut your losses and run.

Turn to page 163.

Having made your choice and sought your truth, you change your clothes. The pain is gone by the time you set your mind to other things. The way you see it, you can either retire for the day or seek covert information in the bags of other customers.

To retire, turn to page 164.

To rummage around the luggage compartment, turn to page 144.

Realising that you're out of time, you steal out of the luggage compartment and back to your seat. Any ill-gotten gains you've made are effectively concealed on your person.

You still have time to visit the Chamber of the Hand, Heart, and Eye, if you have the inclination, or you can call it a day and retire.

To visit the Chamber, turn to page 145.

To return to the lounge and experience the mantle, turn to page 164.

You step back into the lounge car and take your customary seat opposite the Fox. While he greets you as he normally does, he's quiet. Both of you proceed in silence as you prepare for what is to come, as you feel the earth swallowing you.

TURN THE PAGE

For a while you lean against the train window, your brow thrumming against six inches of reinforced, pressure-resistant glass. It's gradual at first, but all too quickly you begin to notice the change. Some kind of alteration in the light. The blues and the pale beige of the under-earth is lost gradually to rippling orange, magenta. What begins as a tint deepens in intensity until the glow radiates through the window, casting a light into the carriage itself. Seeming to sense a question coming, the fox pipes up.

“We approach the Mantle.”

You're familiar with this. The earth, while hollower than previously thought, is not empty. While the core and mantle do not extend all the way to the crust as previously speculated, the inner reaches of the planet are still taken up by hundreds of radial miles of molten rock and metal. Rather than branching around this interior, the SCTN ploughs through.

The speculative reality tunnelling that the hyperloop employs allows train, track, and every other element to pass through this most hostile region of the inner earth unscathed. Unscathed, but not unaltered. You've heard of strange happenings on SCTN services passing through this stage, strange behaviour.

“If discovery is on your mind, the next few hours will aid you immensely.” You notice that something in his speech is slurring, that there's a guttural rasp behind the immaculate RP of his tones: something that might be a cough, or a snarl, caught in his throat. “In the mantle, understanding is,” he sucks in air, pauses, “warped. Priorities are changed. If you've got burning questions, ask them now.”

Like something kicking in in your brain, you can feel it too. The light through the window begins to pulse and something in your body thrums with it. It's as if your body resonates with some unheard musical note, or like you have a second heartbeat; harder and out of step with the first.

Back in Aberdeen, it's morning. The air smells like toast, deathly cold. Across the campuses of Old Aberdeen and Garthdee, figures swaddled in wool and anoraks hunch into themselves as they head to lectures and libraries. Some stop by coffee shops, half asleep, walking into doors and twisting their ankles on pavement blocks or cobblestones. Others rush, bundling themselves together into seminar rooms and study sessions.

In the palace at Marischal, King Ross sets the granite crown on the desk in front of him and fixes his tie. There's something askew or pinched in his face that portraiture hides but photography cannot conceal. It's even more pronounced in person. A beadiness to the eye, a slight slant to the facial features. As if his cheekbones are set on a crooked axis, his is a face that ought to be handsome but isn't.

There is a great presence in the room with him, speaking. The voice is like rock scraping rock. Thomson listens, somehow able to track the thing with his eyes even as its being extends far beyond the office. It extends into the earth, up to the sky, and across the entire city; forming a rigid and parallel architecture.

On the other side of the world, the river bisects Perth lazily before sweeping out to the ocean. The sun melts into the sea, bathing the parks and the parking lots and the edifices of the CBD in a glorious light. The whoops of magpies intermix with the sobs of the ravens as the blistering heat of day mellows into something cooler.

Down on the waterfront, the light in the glass tower sputters pitifully. The more it burns, the more it seems to bleed; winding down like a motor on low power. In the hills to the west something long and coiled sleeps. Every scale or feather rustles with each drawn out breath. Gasps and then sighs shudder along the crook of its neck. As evening melts to night, four stars array in the sky above; shining, burning. The Cross arranges itself like a dagger angling itself to the south; the fourth star, its point, gleaming.

Between both ends you see the SCTN, banded in gold, threading through the earth like a string or a sinew or a vein. You see the lie in the straightness of its path on the maps but in reality it winds through caverns, galleries, looping through the innards of the planet until finally it reaches the glowing core of the mantle. Everything it touches is bound by it, trapped by it.

“We’re entering the mantle,” the fox murmurs. His voice has changed undeniably. It’s a low rasp now. Somehow his suit pinches tight around the crooks of his body. “We are halfway through the planet.”

To ask the fox about the changes to him, turn to page 167.

To keep silent and wait for him to speak, turn to page 168.

The fox doesn't seem to hear you at first. Instead he twitches, his whole body suddenly intensely unstable. He wriggles his back against the seat, struggling as if there's a knot in his lumbar or something uncomfortable stuck between him and the cushioning. You're about to speak again when he replies.

"Mustn't ask. All too obvious really." He appends the sentence with a little snarl and a bark, not directed at you but not directed at anyone else either. His head shakes from side to side, a wriggle that ripples through his entire body

You press the question, and this time he really does bark at you. Snarling, his lips draw back over his teeth.

"Must. Not. Ask."

Turn to page 168.

The fox doesn't speak for a long while. For a moment, the only audible thing above the rattle and hum of the SCTN is the sound of his breathing. For a while it's shallow, sharp, but grows deeper; methodical. When you turn to look at him again, both of his paws dig into the table between you. He's pushing down against it, the action taking a great deal of effort and concentration. At last, he speaks.

"Takes a while," he huffs, "to get adjusted. The nature of my being," more huffing, "adverse to these conditions. Please, don't mind me." Something of his old voice returns again, but it's a more subtle, underlying note. Despite all his attempts to remain urbane, the snarl he speaks with is sustained.

From here, a number of possibilities stretch before you. The mantle presents a unique opportunity. Every passenger is available to interact with, and each will present unique opportunities for knowledge and progress. However, special rules apply. You may only interact with one passenger, and your choice will necessarily exclude all other interactions. Choose your options wisely.

To seek out Mr. Lam, the Atlas representative, turn to page 169.

To seek out Nirn, the Dweller wearing winter clothes, turn to page 170.

To seek out Mr. Curzon, the advocate of the Swan, turn to page 171.

To seek out Ms. Lond, the MP for Castlegate, turn to page 172.

You catch Mr. Lam in the hallway next to the observation deck. He studies your face, trailing his fingers through the close cropped hair on either side of his head.

“It’s you, you. I thought’d you’d be—”

As he trails off, you tell him that you’d like to talk.

“Talk.” The word drips from his tongue for a moment. “Yes. Talk. Let’s.”

There’s something graceless yet deliberate in his movements as you both head to an unoccupied car. He moves like a grounded bat; each footfall placed thoughtfully, though clumsily. This makes you self-conscious: you hold onto the backs of chairs, take every step as carefully as you can. It’s a relief when he slips into a seat, you take the one opposite.

“Talk about?”

To ask him why he’s on the train, turn to page 173.

To ask him what his real name is, turn to page 177.

To ask him what his opinion on Atlas’ decline is, turn to page 181.

As you head backwards through the train you bump into them. You weren't looking, your face was turned to one side and suddenly you're brushing fully against them. Their winter coat tickles your skin. Immediately your instinct is to back away, to give them space, but their hands are on your arms, holding you there. At the amber centre of their eyes you see, for the first time, their pupils: described in a soft, cursive w like a cuttlefish; they pulse softly.

“Are you all right?”

You are so close that you can feel the breath of their question tickle you on the lips before you respond that you aren't. It's so strange, and it's frightening, and you have this feeling burning inside you that something terrible is about to happen and that you can't stop it. You correct yourself. This feeling has always burned within you. Somehow you know now that something terrible was always happening, and you've never been able to stop it. Your stomach swims. Nirn collapses you into an embrace.

“You should come back to my cabin now.”

It's soothingly inevitable. You stagger ever deeper into the bowels of the train.

Eventually they open the door to the cabin and you both fold into it.

If you are a top, turn to page 174.

If you are a bottom, turn to page 178.

If you are neither, turn to page 182.

If you'd prefer not to have sex, turn to page 185.

The pulsing red of the mantle follows you as you trail down the aisle, between seats carrying soporific or passed out passengers. You feel the lead weight of your body begin to complicate, the constant pulse of light ripple through you and resonate within you. It makes you sluggish and heavy.

When you find Jacob Curzon, however, he is perfectly poised. His back is straight, his hands knitted together, his face slightly angled as he takes you in his gaze. His eyes are watchful and warm.

“I’m glad you could make it. Sit down.”

You oblige him all too readily, crashing against the spine of the seat and almost balling up there. It feels like dizziness, like a loss of balance. You feel like you’re about to vomit, even if your stomach is empty.

Mr. Curzon waits for you to compose yourself and then begins to speak.

Turn to page 175.

Barbara Lond isn't hard to find. As the SCTN commenced its ingress into the mantle you saw her leave her seat and shuffle forward, in the direction of the observation deck. Following what you assume must have been her path, you slide through the lounge cars, past the shut doors of the berth cars. You pick through the tables of the dining car, its sleek chairs resting upside-down on the glass tables, its lights almost utterly dimmed.

It's only when you reach the observation deck that you see her. She's cast in silhouette against the brilliantly lit front windows of the deck. The deep orange of the mantle blisters and throbs behind her, casting everything in its glow. At last, she turns. What's on her face isn't really a smile.

"Ah, you're here. Good. This would be the constituency meeting you were so desperate for, no?"

There's a shift behind you. You turn your head. Mr. Lam, his eyes lidded and weary, leans against the rear wall of the deck. He pushes off and approaches you.

To ask about the crimes of the King, turn to page 176.

To ask about irresponsible allocation of funding, turn to page 180.

To escape, turn to page 183.

“What a stupid question.” His accent curbs the ‘u’ in stupid. You have asked a stoopid question. In all your previous dealings and sightings of the representative, his voice had been urbane and precise. It’s only now that he slips into American lethargy, sounding more like a Scorsese extra than a corporate seminar.

“I’m doing my god,” he punctuates the next few words with a closed fist banging on the table, “damn, job. You know how hard you limey fucks make it for a man to do his God,” thump, “damn,” thump, “job?”

To ask him what his opinion on Atlas’ decline is, turn to page 181.

You take the initiative when disrobing. Somehow, in the cool dark of the cabin, the pulsing red light of the mantle, and the conclusions it brings, and the disorder it sprouts in your brain, is unreachable here. All there is is softness, the softness of their hair as you push it to one side, and the softness of their shoulder as you bend to kiss it.

Things progress intensely. The fold-out bed is sturdier than you thought it might be. Their skin is not slimy, but the texture is yielding and porous. Once the scarf is off their mouth is drawn from one side of the face to the other. Lipless, almost like a gash beneath their snub nose and glittering eyes. You wonder if they were self-conscious, if that's why they had had the thing cinched tightly around their face. It's not a feature that displeases you.

Once things are done you hold them close, you're both too exhausted to speak for a moment. Long moments pass until you realise that Nirn has fallen asleep on your chest, and the soft rise and fall of their body has evened out. It's not long before you tune out the hum of the air conditioning and follow them there.

Turn to page 187.

“For centuries now the world has endured the cruelty of Atlas and its predecessors. From the Bull to the Lily to the Lion to Atlas itself these powers have usurped one another in unbroken and unchallenged successions. The advance of years has made their hegemony no less cruel, and for years their dominion has only extended. The empires of the past, the powers of the past, the Eagle, the Flame, even Heaven itself could not hope to enjoy the domains that Atlas now controls. From the upper stratosphere to the centre of the earth, its writ is supreme and its influence unchallenged.

Now there is shifting. Now there are whispers. The servants of Atlas aren't the equals of their forbears. Weapons systems fail. Jet engines sputter. Ejector seats decapitate their pilots. Interventions die slow deaths. Trade deals lapse.

But Gods don't go quietly into the dark. No. No, a God will rage against the dying light, especially if it knows it is dying. Especially if it knows its rivals are making inroads into its spheres. I have consulted with my benefactor and I know what they will do.”

Turn to page 179.

“His crimes?” Barbara laughs. “You’re such a beetle, such an insect. Did they write callout posts about Frederick the Great? Did Pericles get MeTooed? Did they try and cancel Alexander?” The anger comes uneasily to her lips, she negotiates it in her mouth like chewing gum, spitting it out with effort.

You duck over your shoulder and see that Mr. Lam has repositioned himself and blocked the exit. Your vision swims.

“Do you think that someone like our Lord can be endowed with the foresight,” her voice breaks a little, “the vision to see into the inner earth, and still be bound by the law of lesser men?” She takes a step towards you. She pulls the knife from her pink blazer.

To attempt an escape, turn to page 183.

“God, they don’t make you smart up there, do they?” There’s a real sneer in his voice, a downwards cut to his lip, as he looks at you side-on. “I tithed my name. I am Mr. Lam. That is what I am called, that’s what’s in the boss’ book and it’s what’s stamped on my paycheque each month.”

To ask him what his opinion on Atlas’ decline is, turn to page 181.

You allow them to take the initiative. Both in pushing you onto the bed and everything that follows it. It's electric. The specifics of their anatomy are immaterial, though they are quite specific. Curling upwards you reach for them but they anchor you into the sheets and bend to meet you.

At the outset their form had seemed mostly human, but the nuances emerge once you're intimate together. Their hands have three fingers and a thumb. Their toes, organised similarly, are much longer than you'd find on a typical person. While their legs are not digitigrade, as you'd find on some other denizens of the inner earth, they have an extra joint below their thigh; functioning almost like a second knee.

You fall against them at last, exhausted. One of their fingers trails through your hair, another softly caresses your back. Their skin is so soft. When they speak it's in a language you can't interpret, and it doesn't seem to matter. The language of softness, the language of night, whether it's a working or something simpler you find yourself falling into that comfort. Your eyes flutter shut and you sleep dreamlessly.

Turn to page 187.

“The Bell was a failure. An attempt in the latter century to write a power on what its makers thought was an unwritten land. A white power in the southwest. It is a failure, was a joke, and only remains alive because to kill it now would be to do a greater harm than to allow it to live.

That is what Atlas plans to do. I don't know who is advising it, though I believe your king and your Granite have something to do with it. I don't know what calculations they have made. I only know that even if their plan works it will be a monstrosity. Millions will die.

They will use the train. That is why none of them are travelling to the end. I don't know how you have managed it. I don't know why I cannot. Only you can go further than us, can open the way for us.

You must stop the train. It is the only way. You must stop the train.”

You don't remember when you leave, only that you do. The last thing you remember is Jacob Curzon's eyes. Extrinsic to the mantle, there's a light in them and it blazes.

Turn to page 188.

“God, this is your game?” Now she can’t hide her smile, an ugly thing that splits her face and brightens her eyes even against the light of the mantle. “Local fucking government? So a library closes, the poor kiddies can’t read, an old and useless building falls into disrepair in theory and not just in practice.”

You duck over your shoulder and see that Mr. Lam has repositioned himself and blocked the exit. Your vision swims.

“To think I got a kill order on an activist.” She takes a step towards you. She pulls the knife from her pink blazer.

To attempt an escape, turn to page 183.

“I can’t abide weakness, can’t stand it. Cannot fucking—” he checks himself. “It’s bad for business, bad for self-image, bad for morale. Do you know how many memos I’ve sent out this past month, how many of these new hires I’ve had to soothe, babies I’ve had to burp? Do you know the kind of strain that,” the next words drip with venom, “executive failure places on middle management? I didn’t get into this line of work to be failed by my boss.” He slumps forward.

“We’re going to sort it, though. We’re going to fix it. This century’s still ours. Go team.”

To ask why he’s telling you this, turn to page 184.

To ask what he means by ‘Sort It’, turn to page 186.

It's difficult to communicate how you want things to go, but this is progressing inexorably and eventually you realise that what you want is simply going to happen. It's a little feral. Both of you bite the other, press over each other, take turns to try and overcome the other in something that might have been in a spirit of play if it didn't result in what it did.

Eventually there's something of an equanimity between you. But it's hard fought, on both of your parts. Each of you operates on the assumption that you're indulging the other by allowing some semblance of authority. It allows things to progress feverishly until it resolves with an intensity you're not used to.

You kiss them, and they kiss you back. Your bodies both crook inward, backs arching convex, forming a rough shape that might've have meant something if anyone could see it from above. Your fingers interlace. Their eyes are like lamplights. You try a few staring competitions, keeping them in your field of vision until your consciousness begins to ebb and the dull light of their own gaze begins to flicker. Neither of you know which one falls asleep first.

Turn to page 187.

Even as you try to turn, Mr. Lam takes you by the shoulders. You elbow him in his gut but his wiry frame deflects any blow you could hope to land on him effortlessly. Barbara Lond approaches.

“I hate to do this to a constituent, but you’re going to make too much trouble. I hope you can understand the necessity of this, and how much it breaks my heart.”

Lam wraps his arms around your chest, and flattens you to his front. It’s curiously intimate. You don’t feel the knife. You feel yourself ebb. Mr. Lam lets go and you fall to the floor, unimaginably heavy. The mantle pulses around you as two figures look down, look to each other, and walk out of sight.

You have achieved an END STATE.

You might call this “death” or “destination”. Either way, the narrative has no ability to progress beyond this terminal egress. This is not failure, as some would understand it. With the nature of the universe being deterministic, you must understand that you could do nothing other than what you did and that this outcome was inevitable.

Fortunately, while deterministic, the universe is not finite. You may return to the beginning or, using arcane literary techniques, revert yourself to a state beyond your previously doomed path. Whatever you choose, for the moment,

YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

“The boss can’t hear me. No-one can down here. I’m severed.”

You see the truth of it, Atlas is an aetherial power. The mantle and core, with its massive energy signatures, blot out upper-earth frequencies. Any representative of a Power of the upper earth is out of sight and out of mind of their sponsor.

“The boss can’t hear me, I’m fucking depressed and,” he raises his drawn face and curls his lip, “no one would believe you.”

To ask what he means by ‘Sort It’, turn to page 186.

Before anything starts, you make your intentions clear. You don't want anything beyond company, beyond companionship, beyond platonic contact. They're unconcerned, almost unsurprised. Feeling exhausted and grateful and complicated, you collapse onto the bed with them. They keep their winter-wear on. It's an impossible question to avoid, you ask why they're wearing it. The Immer doesn't have seasons, did they leave it on from Aberdeen?

"It helps me pass unnoticed."

For a moment you wonder, trying to flick through the paucity of your knowledge of them, puzzling over whether they're a spy or an operative, or something vicious and covert and vile.

"I just don't like being seen."

It's spoken so mournfully that you can't help but hold them after that. You hid your body in jackets, you said. Clothing can be armour, even if it's something you never really worked out how to wear properly. You do know what it's like to need protection, at least like that. You stay holding each other for a long while, before sleep inexorably draws both of you in. It is its own kind of amor, shielding you from the train; the mantle; the troubles of the world far above and around.

Turn to page 187.

“Wipe the slate. Fix the mistake. Fix the Bell. We get a real power in the Southeast. We need to slap Heaven down. Opium War three. Korean War two. The Bell was a stupid mistake by a stupid country. We’re fixing that mistake. We’re killing the bell.”

You quiet the alarm in your chest and take a minute to process what he just said. Kill a power?

“Barely a power, barely. A Frankenstein. A freak. Don’t get pious with me. That thing is an embarrassment. The snake, that’s an embarrassment too. A relic. We finish ‘em both. Wipe the slate. The Cross moves in. The South is ours.”

For years the bell has been an exemplary failure for Powers and Politics alike. A Power may make a Power, but lesser things cannot. The Bell was built as a counterbalance to the Swan, a colonial power to supplant what had come before. Too late did the engineers realise that its scope was limited, its reach was non-existent, and the strain of maintaining its body left it in constant agony. At the unveiling ceremony its screams burst windows for miles around. From then on it was locked in its tower on the waterfront, barely spoken of.

You ask, haltingly, how they’re going to do it.

“The hyperloop is progress. It unites the world, brings together nations and people and Powers. The symbolism, the branding. We’d be fools not to use it. We’re going into the new age, my friend. The future is coming at the tip of a train.”

When you stand again you stand uneasily, something in your stomach rolls and crashes. Mr. Lam makes no attempt to stop you. His despair has abated and he leans back in the plush executive seating like a king.

“I can see it, y’know,” he speaks just as you’re about to leave. “Every day it’s coming a little closer. When the time comes, I’ll be at the observation deck. I’ll be cashing it all in, but it’s worth it, just to be there when it happens.”

Turn to page 188.

Eventually you wake in the night. Sleeping next to someone has always been difficult for you. Nirn's body is curiously lukewarm to the touch as you disentangle from them. Taking a minute to look at their face in repose on your way out, their body rising and falling softly, you close the door as gently as possible and make your way to your berth.

Turn to page 188.

There are blackout curtains in your cabin. You draw them. You cannot even take your clothes off. You sleep in your shoes. When morning comes the red glow of the mantle is gone and the familiar, if not friendly, light of the Immer has replaced it. Changing, showering, you become yourself before you make your way out into the lounge cars.

TURN THE PAGE

When you wake up, the flares have faded. The rippling, orange brilliance of the mantle has been replaced with the dull, ghostly light of the inner earth. You rise from your bunk and take a shower. The water smells of petrol, you lift your face to it and let it run over your face and body. It's pleasantly warm.

After you've dried and dressed, you make your way through the carriages back to your seat. "Ah, the prodigal!" The fox says as you slip in. The RP is back and any hint that he might be self-conscious about how he behaved, or what he told you, is absent. "We'll be pulling into the interlock soon, the highlight, or so they say."

You look out of the window. Space has been cleared in a radius around the track, but beyond that the teeming vegetation blurs as the hyperloop speeds by. You've heard that this is the last Dweller enclave on the SCTN route. Once part of Hwich, it's now an internationally administered protectorate. In practice, the real authority is SCTN itself: the architecture of the hyperloop interlock and transit offices dominating the Dweller community arranged around it.

"There she is," the fox's immaculately placed words coloured with a hint of foreboding. You can see the hints of it just ahead. The laced girders branching out from the hub, the sleek glass of the offices, the miles of squat concrete housing. After Paris Below, this is the most consistently urbanised space you've seen so far.

As the hyperloop slows, the nets of girders fill more and more of the view until they shut off the outside entirely. It's seconds before the space opens up around you again, but the train has passed into a grand station. You see multiple tiers of platforms, other SCTN lines threading through and between them. Every element of the station is bustling with some kind of activity. Every person or thing is going somewhere or doing something.

INTERLOCK, the tannoy blares as the train slows to a stop. INTERLOCK. THE TRAIN WILL STOP HERE FOR, a pause, FIVE HOURS. WE ADVISE PASSENGERS TO RETURN TO THEIR BERTHS AN HOUR BEFORE DEPARTURE. ENJOY THE INTERLOCK.

To stay for a moment with the fox to chat about the station, turn to page 190.

To head out boldly into the great unknown, turn to page 193.

The fox smiles and steeples his paws.

“You’ve got questions, of course. Let’s hear them.”

To ask the fox what there is to do here, turn to page 191.

To ask the fox what the purpose of the Interlock is, turn to page 192.

“The way I see it,” the fox begins, “you have two main options. Firstly, you could visit the SCTN transit offices for a guided tour. Secondly, you could go to the market and experience,” he pauses to smile, perhaps consider something, “culture.”

Before you can ask for any clarification, he immediately launches into a discussion on the merits of each choice.

“You might think of the SCTN tour as a tiresome exercise in corporate propaganda, and you’d be right. They lay it on really thick. In fact, I think the point of stopping here and the, well, limited window of time they allow you is purely to facilitate this tour. So if you’re interested in sticking it to the man, it’s probably not for you.”

“However,” he goes on, “if your interest is academic, if you’re interested in the functionality of the train.” His eyes flash. “You could do a lot worse.”

“The market is a broad, though not extensive, experience of local culture. SCTN realised at some point that not everyone wants the lean-in branding exercise, that not everyone comes here to swallow what they spit out. So, they opened the Central & Southern district for access by overland passengers. It’s probably the only place where you’ll be able to access Dwellers on the track but it’s a very, shall we say, filtered experience.”

“The only Dwellers who live in the district live in SCTN subsidised housing, work in SCTN affiliated businesses, and send their kids to SCTN sponsored schools. It’s a company town. If you want to ‘experience the culture’ or learn something about the Dwellers with an SCTN film pasted over it.”

“Realistically, you can only pick one place to go with the time you’ve got, so I suggest you choose wisely.”

To ask the fox what the purpose of the Interlock is, turn to page 192.

To head out boldly into the great unknown, turn to page 193.

“The Interlock is a nexus of all SCTN routes. The Perth-Aberdeen line intersects with the Guangzhou-Lima line and the Seattle-Pretoria line too. There are a host of other lines that go into other reaches of the inner earth but you can only access these with special approval from the UN or,” he pauses to smile, “a pass from the SCTN.”

“This place is also where all the administrative and technical functions of the network have their nexus. The offices administer and regulate the lines. The central computer calibrates the routes of each hyperloop vehicle. The registration offices are the closest thing the Dwellers get to a civil administration out here, beyond their local polities and kin groups. As you might imagine,” a smile, “it hasn’t served them all too well.”

To ask the fox what there is to do here, turn to page 191.

To head out boldly into the great unknown, turn to page 193.

You make your way hurriedly through the station, a great cathedral-sized space flush with crowds. Beyond physiognomy, it's easy to tell Dweller from surface tourist. Some of the latter style themselves backpackers, sporting full rucksacks along the lengths of their bodies; bandanas, beards, white-person dreadlocks. Others wear loose khakis, airy pastel shirts. They move with an easy grace, drifting or standing around.

The Dwellers are unmistakable. Even before they're up close and you can see their round eyes, gills, head-arms, or other features, they wear jumpsuits; fingerless gloves. Some bunch together in groups, work crews with toolbelts, hard hats, and carefully pressed overalls. Their direction is always fixed. Their pace always brisk.

You let a crowd of tourists carry you out of the station, relishing the invisibility that the crowd brings you until you're spewed out the great gates and into South & Central plaza.

To your immediate left, you see shining edifices climbing almost to the roof of the cavern. To your right, you see a squat maze of concrete buildings parting to reveal street stalls, clotheslines, and neon lights.

To head to the glass buildings, turn to page 194.

To head deeper into the district, turn to page 206.

The plaque in front of the towering arrangement of glass and steel reads ‘SCTN TRANSIT OFFICE HEADQUARTERS’ with smaller lettering underneath spelling: ‘FORWARD INTO THE FUTURE’. The crowd you’re moving among now is decidedly human, decidedly corporate. Those that aren’t wearing black blazers, trousers, pencil-skirts, are the pastel-shirt and khakis contingent that you saw a few examples of in the interlock station.

Everyone files towards the bank of doors at the base of the edifice, the group narrowing but somehow maintaining coherence. No-one rushes, even those among you dressed for work maintain a kind of leisurely but assured stride.

The automatic glass doors glide open as you approach. While yourself and the well-heeled tourists spill out aimlessly in the central lobby, the formally dressed ones quickly file into their own specific routes, heading to this office or that checkpoint.

You and those around you eventually come to a stop, taking stock, waiting for something to happen.

“Hello! Yes! Tours here!” A small, bright, voice pierces the misty; echoing incoherence of the lobby. A woman with black hair, a Scottish accent, dressed like an SCTN Hyperloop steward with a sign on a stick reading ‘TOURS’ is gathering a small crowd around her.

Off to the side you see a sign advertising the café. While the corner of the lobby it indicates doesn’t inspire much in the way of a boutique dining experience, it does look clean.

To the right, at the other end of the building from the café is a sign that reads ‘SCTN EXHIBITIONS: GIVING BACK’. Beneath it are illustrated two pastel figures, one a human and the other (presumably) a dweller, embracing.

The tour looks set to depart immediately. If you intend to experience it, doing so now guarantees your participation. Occupying yourself with another activity first may lock you out of this particular path.

To join the tour, turn to page 195.

To investigate the exhibition, turn to page 196.

To hang around in the café, turn to page 197.

“Hello, hello hello, hello, hello!” The woman is all brightness, all smiles. She gathers you around, announces that the tour will commence as soon as there are enough participants. It’s not long before the quota is filled. More and more spill in through the automatic doors to the building and, like the steady accumulation of algae, flock around the woman and her sign. Once some invisible and unspecified quotient has been reached, she beams and pipes up.

“Good morning, everyone! My name is Emma! And I’ll be your guide today!” Every clause is punctuated by an exclamation mark, with a kind of late-millennial lilt following each break in the breathless string of words.

“As you’ll all be aware! The SCTN Hyperloop network is a marvel of modern engineering! And we’re so glad you’ve made the choice to find out what makes it tick!” You wonder if she’s Aberdonian. The accent is central-belt neutral, but it’s not outwith the realm of possibility. Thousands of above-grounders in the city and the shire made their way into the Immer for the lucrative opportunities afforded by Aberdonian independence and expansion.

“If you’ll follow me!” She departs down a corridor.

You follow her, turn to page 198.

The exhibition is really a long wall of photographs and text. It begins with a discursive history lesson. Forty-thousand years of dweller history prior to the initial ingress into the lower earth is digested into a few paragraphs. Following that there's a potted history of the Six-Weeks war, Aberdonian conquest and subjugation of the Immer, and the independence of the city and assent of Ross I to the Granite Throne. Accompanying that passage is the state portrait, his strangely slanted face looks dreamily askew into the top right-hand corner of the frame. 'Death to the false Machar' you whisper under your breath.

The following paragraphs are more bright and jaunty than the historically mandated gloom that preceded them. It describes the cultural makeup of the Amytka region, Sec-12 as it's known in administrative parlance, the location of the Interlock. There are various festivals it illustrates, customs, relationships between kin-groups. Ample text is spent discussing the job opportunities that the presence of the SCTN has afforded to the region and the regions that it passes through. There are photographs of dwellers in work-gear: hi-vis jackets, hard hats balanced uncertainly over their varied heads, overalls. Each photo opportunity is scrubbed clean, the clothes are bright and shining, there are no individuals present with non-anthropomorphic features. Always two eyes, a mouth, something approximating a nose.

It's when the text titles something called THE AMYTKA SCHOLAR-PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME that your stomach really begins to turn. Dweller children cluster around an SCTN rep in a suit. The children themselves are in shorts, sandals, and Aberdeen-FC football strips. They're holding up drawings: some of the train, some of the hyperloop, some of childishly proportioned and indistinct figures, haphazardly scrawled glyphs label the misshapen people. One of them, beaming with all their teeth, holds out a piece of paper with the words "MY NAME IS TRIN" in block capitals; some of the letters back-to-front. There's some pablum about how SCTN charter schools improve opportunities and increase development in Indigenous communities but at this point you're so sick that you can't read any more. You step back from the 'exhibition' and consider your options.

To go to the café, turn to page 197.

To leave the building and return to the train, turn to page 227.

You're hungry, and you're after some ambiance, so you make your way over to the airy and open space of the café. The furniture is all plastic but it's the kind of high-rent, sleek plastic that you might find in museums or art galleries. You pull up a chair at a table and stare aimlessly around for a few minutes before you realise it's more of a self-service cafeteria, and that no waiter is coming to take your order. You don't resent that. You can be proletarian if you need to. You actually enjoy it.

Making your way up to the counter, you consider the options. There are numerous coffees and cakes on offer, as well as more substantial fare.

To have a black coffee and a croissant, turn to page 199.

To have tea and a slice of walnut cake, turn to page 201.

To have a sandwich and sparkling orange, turn to page 203.

“We’re passing through the administrative offices! Of the SCTN transit authority!” She beams, walking just briskly enough for the crowd of tourists to strain themselves to keep up. On either side of the corridor glass walls open on to vistas of endless offices, standing desks, ergonomic design. You think you see kombucha taps rather than water-coolers, beanbags rather than chairs or couches, a counter with a coffee machine on it rather than a separate staff room.

“Here our administrative divisions work hard to maintain, innovate, and improve our transit services!” Through the glass wall to your left, you spy the impossible. Squinting, you see the open space in the middle of the open-plan office. It’s perfectly square, a depression in the centre of the room. It’s full of multicoloured plastic balls. It’s a ball-pit. There is a ball-pit.

To ask about the ball-pit, turn to page 200.

To maintain composure, turn to page 204.

You can't remember when you became the sort of person that you are. You're at peace with the fact that you spent your teenage years essentially incomplete, picking up affectation after affectation to try and build a personality through persistence. However, there's no set marker on when this stopped happening. You say *esspresso*, not 'expresso' as the people you laugh at might. This was how you got into vapour cigarettes without smoking first, how you started listening to folk-punk. You pronounce it 'cwa-ssant' in an accent that would still make any self-respecting Francophone cringe with their entire body. When you finish your double espresso and poorly-made butter-loaf will you finally have achieved self-actualisation? Will you 'peak' in a Maslovian sense and obliterate yourself through an intense psychic orgasm as you finally assume the self you always wanted to? The jury's still out as you finish the last slurps and gnaw away the last bites.

To examine the 'giving back' exhibition, turn to page 196.

To leave the building and return to the train, turn to page 227.

“Ah, I’m sorry! The facilities here are for employees! Only! You can find facilities for guests in or adjoining the foyer!”

To insist on the ball-pit, turn to page 202.

To drop it, turn to page 204.

The option you pick is so safe it's a wonder you even picked up the courage to travel here in the first place. You've delved into the inner earth, travelled on a route that wasn't conceivable just decades ago, encountered new vistas, new cultures, new forms of life, and yet your taste still resembles that of a nineteenth-century matron. Perhaps you're the sort of person that onion powder is a little too spicy for, who becomes dyspeptic if they encounter insufficiently overcooked celery. It's a truly sad state of affairs and you wonder, as you finish your tea and scoop up the last crumbs of your cake, if trying to make your life more interesting has sort of been a wash. That, no matter how hard you try, you're never going to live in a way that will truly satisfy how you want to experience the world.

To examine the 'giving back' exhibition, turn to page 196.

To leave the building and return to the train, turn to page 227.

The guide walks ahead, somehow pushing herself to a breakneck pace while maintaining the same brisk walk. You jog to keep up with her, your tone almost plaintive: begging for a go in the ball-pit, a better look at the ball-pit, a mere crumb of experience in the ball-pit. It's only when she turns to you, her lip trembling, that you realise the increase in pace was to put distance between the two of you and the group as a whole.

“Don't make this difficult for me you fucking man-child, I'm on three hours of sleep and this is the last one of these I have to do before I go home, I can't let you in the ball-pit because that thing is sterilized every fucking day, the balls are individually sanitised by hand, do you think they'd let you just jump in it with your pollutants and diseases and your fucking hippie train stink you worthless little baby?”

Her pace slows dramatically and the rest of the group catches up with you. The smile returns. Normally you'd complain after such an altercation, but you're a little too afraid to do that. You drop it and the tour continues.

Turn to page 204 like a man-child.

Food has always been your comfort. It's the comfort that you can rely on most readily. Drugs and alcohol are problematic, friends are fickle, sex has never been consistently available, and writing and reading are twin millstones around your neck. Food will not take your time, argue with you, complicate your life beyond the simple procedure of consuming it. Of course, the sandwich is a uniformly filled panini with featureless and flavourless cheese that clumps rather than melts or stretches. The bread might crisp on the outside but is pool-noodle dry and springy on the inside. This doesn't matter. As you eat you think about nothing else other than eating. It's a warm Novocain that blunts anxiety and destroys any exterior concern. It's exactly what you need.

To examine the 'giving back' exhibition, turn to page 196.

To leave the building and return to the train, turn to page 227.

Eventually you come to another expansive space. The rear walls of the building are glass too. Through them you can see that the offices sit at the top of a slope. At the bottom there's some kind of campus. Blocky concrete edifices mix with tropical greenery until it reaches a perimeter fence. There's an adjoining set of spiral staircases up to a mezzanine. The guide and group begin to climb.

“Here you can see where our hard-working employees enjoy their downtime!” She gestures to the campus. “We have a range of accommodations for the different tiers of employees who help keep the SCTN running!”

Climbing up onto the mezzanine, you see it's another open space: one that must span the length of the building. With good reason, considering the central feature: an SCTN hyperloop train, arrayed on a series of plinths.

“And here we can see the model itself!” It's a gigantic thing, somehow even larger now that it's free of the constraint of track and station. Cylindrical, the exterior shell sleek in parts and busy with pipes and wires in others. The glass front of the observation deck is black, and you can catch only faint outlines therein.

Emma takes you down the length of the train, explaining the facilities. In many ways it's a total re-tread of everything you've already learned in your time in transit. If anything, the absurdity of the tour is underlined by your familiarity of the experience of travel. When she enumerates the bathrooms, you know exactly which ones don't work. You know the ‘range of options’ that the dining car affords, know that it's very much not the cornucopia of choice that Emma seems to think it is.

It's only when, after much walking, you approach the end of the chrome and titanium serpent that you hear something that piques your interest.

“And of course! Every one of our hyperloop trains is fitted with an emergency stop function! The lever in the rear compartment of the train will bring the SCTN locomotive to a safe and immediate stop in case of accident or emergency! Be aware that the fine for an unauthorised stop is —”

The obscenely large number that follows concerns you not at all, nor does the trivium of the rest of the tour. By the time you spill out into the lobby you feel that you have learned at least one useful thing.

There's not much more in the tour after that, and what you learn you quickly forget. Eventually you flush out into the main foyer again with a limited range of options before you. There's still the café, and if you haven't had enough SCTN propaganda for one day, there's always the exhibition.

To investigate the exhibition, turn to page 196.

To hang around in the café, turn to page 197.

To spurn both and retire to the train, turn to page 227.

The crowd of tourists that swept you through the station heads towards the stalls and shopfronts of the Market. You follow them, slipping in, feeling that sense of sickly belonging returning for a moment. There's something about being part of a whole, even a whole you ought to hate. Even subject to scrutiny as a collective, you're spared being subject to it on your own.

Without exception, the stalls you pass are attended by Dwellers. Without exception, they speak English. Some do so with difficulty, negotiating the twists of the language with mandibles or headarms or lipless mouths. Some manage eloquently, speaking alternately in Chinese or Spanish.

Gradually the crowd you had inserted yourself in begins to disperse. As more and more people are drawn to this or that stall, you find yourself walking alone. Coming to a stop, you decide to take stock and consider your options.

There are multiple fried food stalls, their hot and savoury smell rich and heavy on the air. Some of the stalls sell tech, one Dweller sits cross legged on a cushion before a spread of smooth metal and glass objects. At the end of the street you see a chain-link fence, a small post attended by heavily armed human guards in body armour.

To get something to eat, turn to page 207.

To investigate the tech stall, turn to page 208.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

You head to the nearest stall available to you. After a short queue, you come face to face with the vendor. The lower part of their face is hidden by an elastic scarf, a black beanie is pulled down to their eyebrows. You wonder they're hiding a breathing apparatus, gills, head-arms. Their bright orange eyes fix on you.

“What’cha want?” There’s the briefest hint of a smile, some kind of shift underneath the scarf. Of course, it could’ve been a scowl.

You check the menu quickly, conscious of time.

FRIED LIZARD – 40c – turn to page 210.

DOUGHNUT – 60c – turn to page 214.

SAFFRON RICE – 120c – turn to page 219.

GARBAGE PLATE – 200c – turn to page 223.

The ‘stall’ is on closer inspection a bedsheet, spread across the concrete. It’s dirty, purple tinged, the faintest of patterns might be visible beneath the grime. The electronics are arranged on top. You see a few of the less-recent series of smart phones, glittering, beetle-black. Cracks spiderweb at the corners of some of the screens.

A few other things catch your eye. There’s an oval object about the size of a fist with no opening seams or cracks, no buttons to speak of either. There’s something about its glint, the way it catches the light. Its surface is not quite chrome, but seems too reflective to be grey.

Next to it there’s a mass of wires, a rat-king of copper and plastic. There are no attaching points, no device that the nodes appear to connect to, no obvious function. Were it not set aside as a clearly defined object away from the other tech you would think it were just junk.

The owner of the stall has taken notice of you now, and has further taken notice of your noticing

“Hello.”

To ask about the oval object, turn to page 211.

To ask about the mess of wires, turn to page 212.

To walk away without buying anything, turn to page 213.

The checkpoint appears to be set in an entirely unremarkable section of street. The mesh-wire fence has been set up arbitrarily, with the row of shop fronts and bustling crowds mostly identical on the permitted side as it is to the other.

The guards are stapled in black body armour, the faceplates on their helmets opaque dark glass. Four attend the two gates in the fence: one leading into the deeper city and another leading out, a long queue forming at each. There are no humans in either line, each dweller has a stack of papers that they hurriedly flash at one guard or the other before they are waved through.

The remaining four guards patrol the fence. Large assault weapons hang from straps over their shoulders and smooth, featureless, sidearms slot into holsters strapped around their belt. They are similarly armoured to their colleagues overseeing the gates.

For a moment you consider approaching one, posing some questions, getting some answers even if those answers are a grunt you can't hear or a scowl you can't see. After taking the first step, you find your legs rooting in place; your eyes flashing to their weapons.

In the end you are, have always been, something of a coward. You cannot continue in a spirit of inquiry under conditions of absolute danger such as this. What could they tell you? What more could you know about the unremarkable bit of fence on this unremarkable stretch of street? What could you change without the dissolution of your body? What could you hope to change even with it?

You step back from the fence and, like a worm, consider your options.

To get something to eat, turn to page 207.

To investigate the tech stall, turn to page 208.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

You've seen it on Instagram. The somehow ubiquitous trend of Influencers finding themselves in the interlock, making faces with Dweller fried lizard. 'ACTUALLY NOT BAD THO???' You remember one caption reading. It always made you wince, the kind of reckless contempt photo ops like that displayed. Perhaps by ordering this you want to rebuke that contempt, or perhaps you're secretly curious that it's justified. Either way the vendor hands you the fried animal, its white-translucent eyes still visible beneath the layer of batter, by the stick. You can't tell if that's apprehension in his demeanour or something else.

"Have a nice day."

It's something like the flat tip of a chicken wing. The bones are almost unavoidable, and you find yourself crunching down on some as you bite in. It's tough, a little leathery, but the flavour's not bad. The harshness of the spice cuts deliciously against the savouriness of the meat itself. That said, you find yourself eating around the eyes. Eventually, you drop the stick and the skeleton in a nearby bin. You survey the market for other things to do

To investigate the tech stall, turn to page 208.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

“Perdition’s Egg”.

A what?

“A Perdition’s Egg.”

You drop to your knees and reach out for the thing. The air is humid, muggy with the mist from the inner earth, but the smooth rounded surface of the egg is startlingly cool. You hear the vender limply protest as you slip your hands around the thing and grip it, but his voice slips far away as the hum you feel from the thing begins to resonate through your entire body.

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The voice you hear is phrased like a question, the sound curling at the end. The words are like an orchestra tuning, the long vowels snapping into consonants and pauses.

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The words burn in your head. You feel something like electricity, something like thought, spiking through your arm and coursing up your nervous system.

ᓂᓂᓂᓂ ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ. ᓃᓂ ᓃᓂᓂ ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ. ᓂ ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ
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ᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂᓂ.

Your body has received instructions. You know this. Already your form bends to an outside will.

To give in, turn to page 215.

To attempt to resist, turn to page 216.

You ask what the tangle of wires is. Now that you take a closer look at the object, you can see the faintest flickering of blue at the extremities of its wires. And then, a curl like a finger, a twitch, something barely noticeable. You ask the vendor what it is.

“Heart spider.”

You ask him to repeat himself, quietly unable to believe what you just heard. “Arc slider.”

It seems more plausible. You scrutinise the object again but it’s silent, motionless. You ask him what it does. He shrugs.

“Nice to have around.”

You ask him the price and he opens his fingers five times. 250c.

To buy the Heart Spider/Arc Slider, turn to page 217.

To have a look at the other object, turn to page 211.

To walk away without buying anything, turn to page 213.

You hear him spit behind you, but aside from this he offers no comment. The district spreads before you, its options open for your perusal.

To visit the food stalls, turn to page 207.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

You're a worm. Perhaps there's something in you that naturally shies away from appropriation, that's cautious about commodifying the experiences of different cultures. That might be admirable but if there's one thing worse than cultural appropriation, it's forcing another culture to meet your needs. The middle-class vultures who crow about tapas when they come back from Andalusia are bad, but the ones who pack their suitcases full of bacon are worse. The vendor hands you the baked good with palpable revulsion.

“Have a nice day.”

You know you won't. When you slink away to bite into your doughnut, you're dismayed to find that the filling isn't sweet but savoury. It's something like marmite, with chewy hunks of meat swimming in the tar-black sauce. While not bad, it's not what you wanted either. You survey the market for other things to do.

To investigate the tech stall, turn to page 208.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

Your fists close, and then open. You blink, shut your eyes, and the will that opens them is not yours. In perfect Hynyrk-Amykta, or Sec-12 Dwellerish as it's known to the coalition occupiers, you ask the vendor for the egg. Producing all the money from your wallet, you leave it in his slender outstretched fingers and tell him to leave immediately.

As he bundles his electronics into the sheet, carrying it as a sack over his shoulder, you find a car. Speaking the language of the rusts with your hand placed against the door, you wither away the iron of its locking mechanisms and open the door when you can. Hotwiring the old motor, you speak the language of fire to its engines and fuel mechanisms. Though not an adept, the words come easily to your tongue. The egg is sandwiched between your legs.

You accelerate as the motor catches fire around you, speeding between the tightly-packed stalls towards the checkpoint. Tourists and dwellers dive out of the way as the coalition guards look to you in horror. They spray the vehicle with their rifles, one of the bullets punching through your cheek into the headrest, but you continue to accelerate. Now fully aflame, the car crashes into the guard post. The hood crumples and bursts into a gout of fire that envelopes the post and two of the men within.

Between your thighs, the Perdition's Egg buzzes like a phone. As you, and the guards, and the car burn that vibrating builds in intensity until it shatters. The resultant psionic scream will kill every human within a spherical radius of 2 miles. At the centre of the blast, you are somehow still alive as the Egg evaporates from your mind, alive for the few seconds until the burning and the bleeding and the twitching of your ruined body does for you.

The resulting chaos will be known formally as 'The Unrest of 20XX'.

You have achieved an END STATE.

You might call this "death" or "destination". Either way, the narrative has no ability to progress beyond this terminal egress. This is not failure, as some would understand it. With the nature of the universe being deterministic, you must understand that you could do nothing other than what you did and that this outcome was inevitable.

Fortunately while deterministic, the universe is not finite. You may return to the beginning or, using arcane literary techniques, revert yourself to a state beyond your previously doomed path. Whatever you choose, for the moment,

YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

You concentrate on your stomach, forming a fist of something like energy or power in your gut. Building yourself there, you extend outwards, battling against the new influence in your body. Both sides form fronts, pressing against each other. The work takes every ounce of your will but you maintain pressure. Eventually the voice rings out.

רָ אִתְּךָ רַחֵם אֶת־עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדְךָ
וְלֹא־תִשָּׁחַח אֶת־בְּרִיתְךָ אֲשֶׁר־כָּתַבְתָּ לְעַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדְךָ...

How do you answer?

רָ אִתְּךָ רַחֵם אֶת־עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדְךָ

Turn to page 218.

רָ אִתְּךָ רַחֵם אֶת־עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדְךָ
וְלֹא־תִשָּׁחַח אֶת־בְּרִיתְךָ אֲשֶׁר־כָּתַבְתָּ לְעַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדְךָ...

Turn to page 220.

רָ אִתְּךָ רַחֵם אֶת־עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדְךָ

Turn to page 221.

You have just enough. Taking the mess of wires from the grubby mat, you weigh it in your hand. It's featherlight, slightly warm to the touch. Thanking the vendor, you pocket the object and slip off into the crowd. You let it carry you for a moment before you break away from the mass of people and wander into an alley. Retrieving the thing from your pocket, you study it. What exactly is this thing?

If you have an Arc Slider, turn to page 222.

If you have a Heart Spider, turn to page 225.

If you have an Arc Spider, turn to page 226.

ገጽ ፳፻፲፱, ገጽ ፳፻፲፱ ገጽ ፳፻፲፱. ገጽ ፳፻፲፱ ገጽ ፳፻፲፱.

Turn to page 215.

Saffron. Rice. Two things that you like, you think. The combination can't be that bad, surely? The vendor produces a cone, digging a ladle into a hot-pot in the back of the stall. The rice they fill the cone with is bright orange, streaked with little strands of red. It smells heavenly. You can't detect anything in the vendor's affect as they hand you your food and stick a plastic fork in the mound.

“Have a nice day.”

While the smell is out of this world, the taste is a little different. The rice isn't bad, but it is a little bland and there is a lot of it. You're too full by the time you've eaten half of the cone. Try as you might, you can't stomach any more. A little regretfully, you put what's left in a bin. You look around for other things to do.

To investigate the tech stall, turn to page 208.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

אֲנִי הָיִיתִי בְּעַד הַמִּשְׁפָּט וְלֹא הָיִיתִי בְּעַד הַמִּשְׁפָּט.

Turn to page 215.

With that you can feel the control sweat out of you. Like water ebbing or a sound dying you can feel the resonant hum of the Egg's presence within you dull and then fade. When you breathe out it's a shock.

“Don't fucking touch it!”

You jerk your hand back, the pale glow of the Immer now impossibly bright to your eyes. The vendor is frantic, having got up into a squat, waving his hands in front of your face.

“It's a Perdition's Egg you don't just-“

You gather yourself. Nod. That seems to calm him down. The whiskers protruding from his face, his mess of clicking mouthparts relax.

“So, you buying or?—”

Having come to an agreement with the Egg, you are no longer in danger if you choose to touch it.

To buy the Egg, turn to page 224.

To inquire about the other object, turn to page 212.

You have an Arc Slider. You say this confidently, nodding at the thing in your hand. An Arc Slider seems like the proper name for such a piece of machinery. No poetics, no elaborations, a simple explanation of function; though you have no idea of what that function is.

The moment that the thought finishes in your mind the Arc Slider begins to vibrate. The flickering blue light at the end of its wires is now clearly visible. You feel a surge beyond that vibration, like when you put your hand on the hood of a revving car. A spiritual-mechanical certainty of potential.

Those sparks extend, the glittering blue becoming a vivid corona of light that envelops you entirely. Once on a school trip you saw a Faraday cage, and you imaging this is what it must look like from the inside. Reflexively, your hand opens. The Arc Slider drops.

The sound of shattering. Refracted. Loud. Impossibly loud. You stagger backwards. The sparks have gone wild. The crowds scatter as the electricity licks up buildings. You peel backwards, staggering into a run. You tear your way back to the station as chaos rings out around you.

Turn to page 227.

The least appetising and most expensive thing on the menu. Worth taking a chance over? The vendor produces a cone, ladling a helping of saffron rice into it before digging into another hot plate and spooning some sauce over top. Reaching into a bag with his latex gloved fingers he deposits something ovetop that might be fried onions. With a kind of grudging respect, he hands you your food.

“Have a nice day.”

The stuff is heavenly. The rice provides a wonderfully sweet and spicy undertone to the richness and sweet-and-sour tang of the sauce. The small pieces of fried matter were a mystery to you until you bit into them. The unmistakable crunch and chew of scraps of meat scrapings. Unappetising in any other context, somehow irresistible in this one. Half way through eating it you find yourself hitting a wall, but it’s too good to stop. Despite aching and protests from your bloated stomach, you continue until you’re scraping the sides of the cone for the last remnants of sauce and rice. You throw your rubbish in a bin, feeling twice as heavy as you did when you entered the market. You look around for other things to do.

To investigate the tech stall, turn to page 208.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

After paying the vendor what he's owed, and tipping a little extra, you take the egg in your hand and walk back into the bustle of the market. It's still cool to the touch, cooler even. It draws the warmth from your hand.

You feel it, prying outwards, but it is less assertive. Now it moves with consent.

FOR YOUR BENEFIT I SHALL SPARE YOU THE LABOUR OF TRANSLATION.

The voice is as resonant as ever, but you feel the words acutely. Accentless, they curl into fluent forms.

YOU ARE AWARE OF THE DESTINATION AND KNOW WHY IT CANNOT BE REACHED. WHEN THE TIME COMES, FIND THE REAR OF THE TRAIN.

You take note of the instruction, make to place the egg in your pocket, but the voice goes on.

ATLAS KNOWS THAT THIS IS BLASPHEMY. TO KILL A POWER WILL UNWEAVE THE WORLD. THIS IS NOT A COUP. IT IS A SUICIDE ATTEMPT. YOU WILL STOP IT FOR THE GOOD OF US ALL.

You find yourself nodding. To no-one, the crowd enveloping you.

PUT ME DOWN NOW. I AM NO USE TO YOU.

For a moment, the thing reaches into you. Your knees bend and you slip to the floor. Setting the thing down on the concrete, the control dissipates the moment you let go. You consider trying to pick the thing up again, but decide against it. For a thing that can so easily pilot you, it's probably better not to mess with it.

To visit the food stalls, turn to page 207.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

You have a Heart Spider. A morbid thing, but somehow the name slots right above your tongue and makes itself comfortable in your mouth. Heart Spider, Heart Spider Heart-Spider. Each vowel arranges perfectly, none of the consonants biting too hard. You are so engrossed with this new name that you don't notice the wires curling around your palm.

When you look down, the wires have twined about your hand. Your mouth suddenly dry, you try to speak but stop. You've always been an arachnophobe, but there's some new rush of pleasant sensations that stops the terror from roiling in your chest. A wave of chemicals flows from your hand. The thing has pierced your skin with some pair of teeth invisible until now. You feel them painlessly root in the skin of your palm, two trails of blood like teardrops trickling to your wrist.

As you gasp, the thing begins to make you whole. You feel it, replacing what you've lost, smoothing out old scars. Old aches dissipate, pains that had long been the background rhythm to your day to day are now only visible with their absence. The thing lets go, tumbling to the floor. Before you can register this, it has scuttled into the crowd.

If you suffered any injuries in the chamber of the heart, hand, and eye, it will please you to know that those have been undone.

To visit the food stalls, turn to page 207.

To investigate the checkpoint, turn to page 209.

To return to the hyperloop, turn to page 227.

You have an Arc Spider. This was a mistake. You've always been an arachnophobe, and the harshness of the words in your mouth belie the harshness of the things itself. Those wire ends constrict, piercing into your skin, driving through, finding your bone.

Passersby watch dispassionately as pulse after pulse of electricity roars through you. Soon a small crowd gathers, only to disperse when some security officers push through it; their hands pressed smooth against their sidearms.

All they can do, all anyone can do, is watch as the energy slowly wears your nerves to nothing, chars your flesh. Perhaps you lose consciousness but perhaps you don't. Perhaps it hurts the whole time you're dying.

You have achieved an END STATE.

You might call this "death" or "destination". Either way, the narrative has no ability to progress beyond this terminal egress. This is not failure, as some would understand it. With the nature of the universe being deterministic, you must understand that you could do nothing other than what you did and that this outcome was inevitable.

Fortunately, while deterministic, the universe is not finite. You may return to the beginning or, using arcane literary techniques, revert yourself to a state beyond your previously doomed path. Whatever you choose, for the moment,

YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

You make good time returning to the station. As you pace between the floods of people, something strikes you. It's an almost spiritual realisation, an understanding that every person is moving through this place with purpose. Each has their own designs, their own intentions, their own destinations. Each of their discrete aims has led them here. The station is a knot in destiny, a wicker cane around which your life and the lives of others twine.

As you make it back to your seat, filing down the aisle, you find your body settling from the excitement of the day. Yawning a greeting to the Fox, who is himself engrossed in a paperback and only able to give you a wordless acknowledgement, you slip into your seat and crash almost immediately into dreamless sleep.

When the hyperloop kicks into action, you jolt awake for just long enough to stumble back to your berth.

TURN THE PAGE

When you make your way to the lounge car the next morning, you find Sub Singapore shimmering as you approach. While the other destinations announce themselves hours before by the architecture that accompanies proximity to them, this colony of the inner planet heralds its presence with light. The smoky texture of the Immer throngs with it, beaming like quartz as the first trees of the glass forests sparkle on ridges as you speed by.

“Ah, very soon now.” The fox’s tone is measured. Throughout the journey he always spoke like he was keeping something from you. Now you detect from his tone that you might, just might, find out what it is.

For a long moment he’s quiet. He stares out of the window, his already illegible expression describing an emotion you haven’t seen on him. The faint glow flourishes into true light, the first light you’ve seen since you passed beneath the earth. It could be daylight, but there’s a synthetic glow, like hospital or stage lighting. It’s a light without warmth.

“When Aberdeen first pushed under the earth I didn’t expect anything good. There were a few like me, Dwellers like me, who thought it would mean trade; opportunity; progress.” It seems obvious now that he has said it, but you don’t think you’d ever registered the fox as a Dweller. “I suppose we did have that last thing. Progress upon progress, always progress. Progression so far and so fast that you can’t even tell where you’re going, or where you started from. I was alive before the ingress, but I don’t think I’d even recognize the world as it was before. Do you know what I mean?”

You might. You were small, so small, and it seemed so exciting. The horror came later, of course, when you’d grown a little and first understood, inchoate though that understanding was, what injustice is. You try and offer some kind of platitude, aware now more than ever of how painfully useless it is.

The Eden-Branch finally coheres out of the window. Sub-Singapore is suspended entirely beneath the canopy of the glass forest. The Eden-Branch is the centrepiece of it. While the forest itself is a single organism, the Branch is the first expression of that organism. Every other glass tree is a clonal copy of its silica form. The light, flowing seemingly from the walls of the cavern itself, refracts through the rhizomatic extensions of the Branch: a canopy that is not quite foliage but not roots either.

“Neither myself nor my patron know what the ultimate purpose of this voyage is. Atlas has some plan. We all know that. Whether it’s a plan we can stop, or influence, is unclear. It may already be too late.” This is a revelation that surprises you. Up to this point you had imagined the Fox as a free agent, but something coheres now that you know of his sponsorship. His behaviour in the mantle, the interference the energy signature caused between him and his

Power.

The train glides in, slipping beneath the canopy. Structures swim into vision at the base of each tree, clustering around and up their trunks. The station is set into a hollow in a particularly large specimen. All is blinding as you slip into the tunnel, swimming in iridescence. Human structures, platforms and kiosks and terminals begin to appear as you slow to a steady stop.

SUB-SINGAPORE, the tannoy blares, SUB SINGAPORE. THE TRAIN WILL STOP HERE FOR A SHORT TIME. SIGHTSEEING IS NOT ADVISABLE.

“My stop.” The fox says with a little warmth. “And the end of the line for almost everyone on this train. If you want to say goodbye, now would be the time.”

It’s a moment before you can climb into the central aisle to disembark with the rest of the passengers. It seems that every passenger, perhaps bar yourself, is disembarking. As you finally slip into the train of passengers you see that, no, there is one person still aboard. Mr. Lam sits in his seat a few tables up: head tipping back to lean against his seat cushion, long leg folded over long leg. When he notices you staring, he meets your gaze and holds it as you flush out, with the rest of them, into the light.

The fox is behind you when you disembark, you raise your hand in front of your eyes: the unfiltered glare of the city takes a long moment to adjust to. When you do you see, in the crowd of passengers, some familiar faces who have disembarked. Nirn is there, still in their winter clothes. The MP for Castlegate, Mrs Lond, wears business casual: a pastel cardigan and a pursed smile. Jacob Curzon looks around guardedly, trying to catch your eye. The fox affects a smile: a glint of the Immer in his eye.

To speak to the MP for Castlegate, Barbara Lond, turn to page 230.

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

To speak to the advocate Jacob Curzon, turn to page 232.

To speak to your friend, the Fox, turn to page 233.

“Well, are you really going to keep going with this?” Mrs Lond sounds like she’s angrier than she’s allowed to be. Her words are clipped, curtailed, her bottom jaw sticks out. “You have to know it isn’t a good idea.”

To say that you are, turn to page 234.

To say that you aren’t, turn to page 239.

There's something misty, unreadable, in Nirn's face when you approach them. You cannot tell if the strangled, muffled quality of their speech is merely the scarf that hangs about their mouth; or something deeper than that. Their eyes are as wide as ever, cursive pupils dilating in the brightness. You pull close to them, trying to interrogate what you can of their face through their obscured expression. Your closeness becomes something more than that and you look down with a start when you feel their yielding skin press against your hand; grasping it.

“Don't go.”

To assure them that you won't, turn to page 235.

To tell them that you must, turn to page 240.

Mr. Curzon tries not to look too anxious as you approach. His hands come out of his pockets and he brushes his jacket away from his front, a nervous tick.

“This isn’t your stop, is it?”

To reply that it is turn to page 237.

To reply that it’s not, turn to page 241.

“You can stop here, you know.” The Fox stares into the shimmering distance, the light glistening in his eyes. “There’s no shame in it. No-one thought you’d be taking this train. You weren’t ordained, you weren’t chosen. You aren’t being sponsored. You’re not involved in politics. There’s nothing in the rules that demands you see this through. The world moves without us helping it along, but we don’t need to move with it.”

To agree, turn to page 238

To disagree, turn to page 242

There's a wrinkling in her nose, a long slow exhale of breath. Smoothing down her cardigan, Mrs Lond looks at you directly. Perhaps it's a mere alteration in the quality of the light, but perhaps you can see something in her iris shift, change, become more like flint and less like flesh.

“If you do what I think you're going to do it will be the worse for you. It will be so much the worse. Whatever plans you have, whatever futures you nurse, whatever you think you're doing or you're going to do, you should know that it will be the personal concern of myself, our city, and it's sponsor,” and with that last word her voice grinds like stone upon stone, “to make you suffer.” She turns away and does not respond or speak to you again.

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

To speak to the advocate Jacob Curzon, turn to page 232.

To speak to your friend, the Fox, turn to page 233.

To return to the train without speaking to anyone else, turn to page 243.

You hold them close and make a snap decision. The rest of your life begins now. It's so easy to fall away, to fall away from what you were meant to do. There's no shame in it. You take their hand, say you'll take your stuff from the train now. When you re-board to reclaim your things, Mr. Lam starts in his seat but he's considerably more relaxed when you re-emerge from the luggage car with your bags. As you brush past him on your way to the exit his mouth opens, he looks like he might almost say something, but he's quiet for as long as it takes for you to re-emerge into the sun.

No-one speaks to you, not even the Fox, though there's some kind of inscrutable congratulation in his manner as he watches on. Mrs Lond smiles, but Mr. Curzon stares with a look that might be the purest look of disgust you've seen on a person if it weren't complicated by the numb cast to his features.

It doesn't matter, none of it does, Nirn's hand presses easily to yours. The possibilities open to you creak and readjust. Their apartment isn't far, they say. It's upscale, the light from the trees falls into it in just such a way that it doesn't catch you in the face as you look through the window. The next day is spent in blissful exploration of Sub-Singapore. You eat out for lunch but return at home to cook. You make love, if that's your preference, and you fall asleep in each other's arms.

You awake to the news the next day. Rather, the news awakes you. A hairline fracture, complicating the sky. The brightness of Singapore that you knew for one day flares and sputters. Outside the apartment window there are the wails of people and sirens and spirits. You and Nirn tune the radio all day, the television has no signal, the internet isn't working. It's a long time before you decide to give up, but neither of you can sleep. The Fox was right, you do pull together. You leave the apartment, find a group.

You always imagined an apocalypse would be hell, would be mayhem. The reality is calmer, slower. Before what happened, you had never seen a corpse. You were quickly introduced to that reality of systems collapse. Beyond this there is no great scarcity, no resulting competition. By and large you and the people you find work together, pull together. You don't build something new but you make an adequate home of the old, sheltering together beneath the broken sky of Singapore below.

You and Nirn finish quickly. You move on to other partners in your group. Perhaps it was something about the train, the mystery of it, that brought you together. It ends gradually but amicably. Neither of you have the stomach to fight one another, particularly over something as petty as a relationship ending when the world already has.

In the end you never find what caused things to go so wrong. That's what eats away at

you, when you can't sleep in your corrugated iron shelter beneath the false and fractured sky. More than abdicating the conclusion that had been written out for you, you denied yourself the chance to influence the outcome. Whatever happened happened without your say and that's what consumes you. Perhaps the alternative would be worse, perhaps you could not have meaningfully prevented this, but whatever the reality of the situation you denied yourself the ability to alter it. That stays with you forever.

You have achieved an END STATE.

You might call this "death" or "destination". Either way, the narrative has no ability to progress beyond this terminal egress. This is not failure, as some would understand it. With the nature of the universe being deterministic, you must understand that you could do nothing other than what you did and that this outcome was inevitable.

Fortunately, while deterministic, the universe is not finite. You may return to the beginning or, using arcane literary techniques, revert yourself to a state beyond your previously doomed path. Whatever you choose, for the moment,

YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

There's no anger in Mr. Curzon's voice when he speaks, when he does speak, only a slow and careful plea.

"Your train is to Perth. You have to see this through. You might say that this isn't your concern, that you didn't sign up, that you're not involved. You are involved. You've been involved since before you were born. You weren't chosen, no more chosen than everyone else in your country, everyone else of your culture, everyone else of your heritage."

Mr. Curzon's hands slip from his pockets, clench, unclench, before he continues.

"I need you to understand that you can't claim non-participation. The machine, this machine, this architecture, was built for you. It was built for you and it runs on our blood. It's all very well to abdicate from it, to abandon your rotten birth-right. In ordinary circumstances it is the least you can do. You will say that you don't get a choice, that though it runs for your benefit it doesn't run with your consent. Nobody else gets a choice either. Right now, you do have a choice. I'm asking you to reconsider it. It is beneath my dignity to beg. If you give up now, there will be an atrocity on your hands."

Mr. Curzon bites his tongue, dips his head, and steps backward.

To speak to the MP for Castlegate, Barbara Lond, turn to page 230.

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

To speak to your friend, the Fox, turn to page 233.

To return to the train without speaking to anyone else, turn to page 243.

“If you want to stop, speak to the Dweller. You can build a life together. Things are going to go very bad very fast but in bad times you find people and pull together with them. That helps, I find.”

Turning to you, the Fox grins.

“Invite me to the wedding, won’t you?”

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

And she's pleased. She's most pleased. There's no great amount of discussion. There's no mountain of congratulations. There's no exaltation of the wisdom of your decision. Barbara Lond, the Member of Parliament for Castlegate, smiles a long, wan smile.

"I hope you understood that you've made the right decision. I hope you carry that with you into the new world." Her hands fold in front of her, bunching to her cardigan in a pose of stature and majesty. "We'll need people like you, always. Aberdeen will always have need of its most devoted servants." With a curt nod and an about turn she's off into the shimmering, Singaporean light.

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

To speak to the advocate Jacob Curzon, turn to page 232.

To speak to your friend, the Fox, turn to page 233.

To return to the train without speaking to anyone else, turn to page 243.

The illegibility of Nirn's expression resolves now to one of pain. The glances you had shared, whatever moments you enjoyed together, it has built in their mind to this point and it's breaking now. Whether you're making this decision to progress with the course that you have set for yourself or you simply cannot countenance a life with them, the result is the same.

They understand. Of course they understand. You have things to do, you have a path, what happens on the train, etcetera. You try and hug them, enfolding them into one last comfort, giving them some kind of balm for what has to happen. They don't pull away, but their body resists touch.

You nod at each other, smile. Perhaps you cry. This is the only way it could have ended.

To speak to the MP for Castlegate, Barbara Lond, turn to page 230.

To speak to the advocate Jacob Curzon, turn to page 232.

To speak to your friend, the Fox, turn to page 233.

To return to the train without speaking to anyone else, turn to page 243.

“I hope you have the strength to do what needs to be done. I’m asking you that, before the destination is reached, you stop the train.” Curzon’s voice quavers somewhat, but behind even this there’s a surety in him that burns past any doubt that might still nest in his mind.

“I mean it sincerely when I say that I was the last person who wanted this for you. You aren’t who I would have chosen. But things are pushing behind you with a strange and terrible force. I would hate to be you, even more than I normally would.” His mouth twists, he grabs his beard, wringing it almost like a cloth. It’s like he’s trying to work past something that he feels.

“Good luck. Please,” he sucks in the sparkling, hot air through his teeth. “Please, good luck.” That’s all he needs to say before you nod, say something affirming, and step away.

To speak to the MP for Castlegate, Barbara Lond, turn to page 230.

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

To speak to your friend, the Fox, turn to page 233.

To return to the train without speaking to anyone else, turn to page 243.

“Pot committed, are we?” His tongue clicks. “That’s good. If you start something, it’s usually a good idea to stick with it; even if it’s not something I would do.” He waits a long moment before speaking again, canting his head from side to side, as if he’s weighing his options.

“You’ll have to confront Lam before the end. Like as not he’ll confront you first.” Picking at his nails he continues. “He might look like a Langley embryo, but it’s rarely as simple as looks with his sort, I’m afraid. I wish I had some advice for you, but all I can say is good luck.”

A pause.

“So I’ll say that, won’t I?” He offers you a paw to shake. You take it. “Safe travels into the new world, eh?”

You repeat his words. Safe travels into the new world.

To speak to the MP for Castlegate, Barbara Lond, turn to page 230.

To speak to the Dweller Nirn, turn to page 231.

To speak to the advocate Jacob Curzon, turn to page 232.

To return to the train without speaking to anyone else, turn to page 243.

As you climb back onto the train, out of sight and out of the sun, it almost occurs to you to turn back and take it all in again. These people: friends and not, enemies and not. It astounds you for how short a time you knew them, and it is the past-participle now: knew. Whatever branches from this experience, wherever you go from here, you will never know them as who they were on this journey. For a moment, a mere moment, you wound together.

You once heard it said that for a being that lives in four dimensions, outside time, people would not exist as defined shapes but as constantly weaving strings: twining through spaces in a long line as history milled around them. For a mere moment the strings of Jacob Curzon, Barbara Lond, the Fox, Nirn, and you pressed together in the greater thread of the train. Now each diverges, exploding outwards along the ordained path. You remain with the thread, the rest splay out like tendrils of light into the abyss.

The possibilities open to you creak and readjust.

You and one other. He's impossible not to notice when you return to the sitting area. Mr. Lam, who sold his name at nineteen to a God he couldn't understand but had decided to love, runs his hand over his close-cropped hair. It doesn't matter when you sit in a booth far, far away from him. He stands, his loping legs take him to you. Sliding into the seat opposite yours, always the Fox's place, he places his thin hands, his doctor's hands, onto the flat of the table and looks you directly in the eye.

“Well,”

TURN THE PAGE

“Well.”

Mr. Lam tenses his fingers. His head rolls back onto his shoulders. Something cracks. Everything in him communicates a readiness, a wire-strung precision that he’s gearing up to direct squarely at you. For the first time you get a clear look at his eyes. They’re a deep blue, almost navy, like the ocean viewed from a plane at maximum altitude.

All around you the SCTN begins to gear into motion. Prior to this point all it’s been is background noise but Mr. Lam’s silence, and your heightened awareness, has transformed it into an all- pervasive, deafening noise. The hum of its warming engines drones until you’re in full motion. You see sub-Singapore pull away and the faintly luminous mist of the Immer replace its radiance.

“I’ve been told,” he says at last, “to reason with you.” His head cranes forward, and he gazes straight into you. You are under the eye of a laser-targeting system. The looming aluminium limbs of Atlantic architecture rear up behind him like a snake. The military industrial complex takes aim.

“Are you a reasonable person?”

To ask why he’s doing this, turn to page 245.

To ask how they’re hoping to accomplish what they’re doing, turn to page 246.

To ask what’s in it for you, turn to page 247.

To steadfastly refuse to co-operate, turn to page 248.

“I’m a good employee.” You can tell that he’s trying to repress the sneer in his features, but it shows up anyway. “Employee of the month. Every month. I understand obligations. I understand doing things that I’m told to.”

“Let me guess.” He leans back into the plush of his seat, and the flickering light refracted by the window plays over his smooth forehead, his hollow cheeks. “I should flip my boss off. I should go my own way. That’s the problem with your generation. This is why no-one wants to hire any of you.”

To ask how they’re hoping to accomplish what they’re doing, turn to page 246.

To ask what’s in it for you, turn to page 247.

“The train will crash.” Lam speaks simply, a smile playing over his features. “We have arranged a derailment just prior to pulling into Curtin International. The train will leave the tracks, and it will strike the tower where the freak is kept.”

You see now what will happen. Everything coheres. Powers have died but they have never been killed, least of all by violence. The speculation is that the destruction of a power in this manner, to unbuckle the physical bonds holding together the matrices of belief and understanding, would release energy signatures on a level unreproducible by any conventional or unconventional weapon in the history of earth. Beyond any physical power, the psychic signatures of such an attack would unknit the minds of the millions inside its massive radius. You tell him this.

“Yes, we’ll turn the Gibson desert to glass, how sad.” And he leans even further across the table, his features straining. “But you don’t understand, Christ, how could you? We’ve spent our entire lives on top. Do you want us to be second rate? This is the only thing we have now. We finish Heaven’s mining operations. We extinguish the Bell, the parochial fucking embarrassment. We finish the Swan. The traitor, the relic. The east moves in. If, God forbid, the energy signature radiates outward we’re in the other fucking hemisphere. It’s not our problem.”

To ask what’s in it for you, turn to page 247.

To steadfastly refuse to co-operate, turn to page 248.

“A man after my own heart.” What warmth is in his voice is utterly dampened by how dry his tone is. Something in him seems to relax as you begin to do things on a level he’s familiar with. “Shall we negotiate?” Lam lays his hands flat on the table. You see each bony knuckle, protruding in its own discrete way from the back of his palms. The veins in his fingers pulse. The entirety of his body distends and contracts with the roll of his breath.

“I’m afraid I can’t offer you your life. That’s your own fault. You should have left this when you had the chance to, or not embarked in the first place.” His lips purse. “But. Your funeral arrangements will be comped. Your family will be well provided for.” His tongue seems to curl in his mouth, as his instincts as a deal-maker fights against his need to lowball. “Apotheosis is on the cards. It certainly is for me. The boss typically doesn’t take foreigners, but when I join him,” a pause, “he may reconsider.”

To ask why he’s doing this, turn to page 245.

To ask how they’re hoping to accomplish what they’re doing, turn to page 246.

To co-operate with Mr. Lam, turn to page 249.

“I thought so.” Lam lets out a long, but not laboured, exhalation. “You have to understand that you have no chance. You have to understand that there’s no difference between whining at and withstanding this. It might be admirable, if it weren’t so fucking stupid.”

You stand, clambering out of your seat into the aisle. Lam makes the same motion. Every part of his body seems to flex. He’s not obviously strong, but his lankiness belies the wire-tuning of his musculature. You can see that power as he stands, ready to grab you, hold you, end you.

There’s no way you can overpower him. The best you can do is to run. Rushing forward, you can push past him to the front of the train, in the hope to find something to stop the train there. Running backward, you can make your way to the rear of the locomotive, in the hope that something back there will halt it.

To run to the front of the train, turn to page 250.

To run to the rear of the train, turn to page 252.

If he relaxed when you asked him about payment, he fully collapses now. Tipping his head back, the close crop of his hair rubs like Velcro against the seat cushion. The sigh that escapes him is long, almost whistling, like the deflation of a balloon. It's only temporary. When he rises, he almost jumps into the aisle. Coming to his full height in seconds, a smile breaks the finished concrete hardness of his expression.

"You've made the right decision." He's giddy, like you've accepted a job application he made without really expecting he'd get it. When he clasps his hand in yours, each digit presses around your hand like ribs. For a moment he lets this joy percolate in him, stepping back and drawing in breath. Just as he exhales, his eyes snap open and he grins like a child.

"I'm going to the observation deck. I'm going to see it happen. Want to come?"

You join him as he walks. It's slow, solemn, almost processional. The certainty of your extinction is carried with every heavy step of your feet. Eventually you open the doors to the deck and the Immer's glow washes over you.

Turn to page 253.

You press forward. Amazingly, he doesn't stop you. Brushing past, your elbow hits him hard in the gut and he's forced against the plastic table. Either he's still reeling from the blow, or he's considering something, because it takes a minute before you hear the clumsiness of his pursuit. It doesn't matter, though, you're already flying ahead.

You pass through lounge car after lounge car. Each is set out identically as the one you started from, with two columns of booths along either side of the aisle. Eventually you reach the dining car, passing through it. The long tables are desolate. Rows and rows of chairs are set on them upside down. You wonder if the train's staff departed in Singapore too, if the only two souls aboard are you and Lam. As you run you frantically look from side to side: for a utility compartment, for a side door, for anything that might contain something that could bring the SCTN to a stop. You're still looking when you burst through the doors of the observation deck.

Turn to page 251.

Everything in you screams in animal panic. Briefly you consider doubling back, retracing your steps, trying to figure out if there's anything you missed. But before you can even properly entertain the idea you see him through the glass pane of the observatory's rear door.

Lam walks like a machine. Every movement in his body is considered, calculated, targeted with precision. And the most terrifying thing about his current manner is the leisure of his pace. Each shoe falls softly. His heel digs into the carpet and his step springs onto the ball of his foot. Inexorably he's carried forward, forward. Forward until he pushes open the door to the observatory and stares into the rushing mist of the Immer.

"The thing I've always loved about travelling is the inevitability." He says after a moment. "No matter what destination you've picked, you're going somewhere. The moment you sit down on a bus, a plane, a train, you know that you'll rise somewhere else." He laughs. "Public transit? That I can take or leave. Fuck the public. But transit? Transit's where it's at."

He turns to you and his smile is so terrible.

"I told you that nothing you can do to stop this. You're whining, I'm withstanding. That's the difference between us. I'm ready for the future, and you're kicking and screaming into it. But you'll go, you'll all go."

Turn to page 253.

You are so much closer to the rear of the train than you are to the front. Perhaps that's why you pick this option. Perhaps you judge Mr. Lam too dangerous to even brush past. But even on this safer route, his eyes widen in alarm as you start to step backward. He launches into action seconds after you and pays for it. There's a muffled thump and a roar of fury as he hits the carpet, falling forward in his eagerness to catch you.

You take the head start, tearing down the aisle and into the next coach. The layout is the same, even if all the booths are empty. The next door takes you into the luggage car. Remarkably it's unlocked and unsecured. You wonder if all the personnel, including security, have left the train. Perhaps they were forewarned. Edging your way between empty shelves, where suitcases might once have been, as fast as you can, you reach a door at the end of the aisle marked 'UTILITY'.

Breath soaring inside you, limbs flying forward, you turn backwards to check on your pursuer. Lam has tangled himself up in the shelves. For once his height, his gangly form, has manifested as a disadvantage. He screams, tries to say something before you reach the utility room. Panic mangles his diction, and all that comes out is a strangled half-sound. Already your grip has closed on the handle and you push through.

The control panel is mercifully simple. Through all the arcana of the buttons, dials, and knobs, there is a single lever: coloured in red, unprotected, marked with the words 'EMERGENCY STOP'. You wait for Lam to burst through the door before you yank it downwards.

Turn to page 255.

The Immer has always glowed to you. From your new vantage of the Observation Deck, you can appreciate this and watch as it intensifies. As you rush towards the crust, ready to break from outside the hollow tomb of Earth's prison, the pulsing mist outside the windows builds in its brightness. It's a warm, fiery light, totally unlike the cool antiseptic glassy brilliance of Singapore. Its white heat totally eclipses the sputtering warmth of Paris' own flame.

Mr. Lam tilts his head back, and the light casts his cheekbones into sharp relief. The laughter builds in him gradually, starting as a titter. Once he starts, he cannot stop. The sharp barks of his mirth build along with the whine of the engine until his head is thrown back in delight. Spreading his arms, extending each finger, he draws himself out to the tallest, widest, largest that he can.

You are frozen by panic or exhilaration. You continue to accelerate, despite how close you are to the destination. Even in the sealed, climate controlled, train you can sense the rate at which you're building in speed. The engine screams. The glass of the observation deck judders while the mist of the Immer whips and wraps around it.

There's a crash.

The world tilts, weightless.

A scrape. A scream. A flash.

You are never resurrected. No power would bother to do that. If anything strong enough remaining in the world could, they would not. Your name is not remembered, even as a curse. Perhaps if history books were written in the time after your decision, they would remember the name of Mr. Lam. But no such books exist. Not a great deal exists.

The Bell bursts. The SCTN locomotive crashes into it at just the right, or wrong, angle. Not only is the east coast glassed with the western desert, but the Indian Ocean boils from Perth to Sri-Lanka to Madagascar.

The catastrophe is so comprehensive and so sudden that in the histories after no definitive cause is ever established. The managed decline and systems collapse of the years prior to what will become known as the Break resolves into a conclusive, and explosive, apocalypse.

More destructive than the physical impact of the explosion is the psychic wave, a blast front of puissant screaming that crosses the earth thirty-two times before it dissipates into harmlessness. Every power is extinguished. Every epiphenomenon of human consciousness,

spirit, God, abstraction, is destroyed.

The people of the world of tomorrow, and there are people, live lives that are totally illegible to you. Babies are born, cities are built, and new powers even grow from the worms in the new minds of these new people. Even in circumstances like this, history knows no true conclusion. The end of every world is the birth of a new one.

You have achieved an END STATE.

You might call this “death” or “destination”. Either way, the narrative has no ability to progress beyond this terminal egress. This is not failure, as some would understand it. With the nature of the universe being deterministic, you must understand that you could do nothing other than what you did and that this outcome was inevitable.

Fortunately, while deterministic, the universe is not finite. You may return to the beginning or, using arcane literary techniques, revert yourself to a state beyond your previously doomed path. Whatever you choose, for the moment,

YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

Everything tilts. The hum of the engine lets out a long, slow, groan as it winds down. The magnetic brakes on either side of the SCTN vessel engage and the long sigh of the engine draining power resolves to an electronic scream. The wail of anguish builds and builds as you feel the momentum of the train dissipate gradually. You'd never forced a train to make an emergency stop before, and the thrill of forcing this bubbles through you when you realise what you've done.

Lam is screaming too. He's collapsed to one side of the wall of the utility cupboard, his long limbs arranged awkwardly as he sits disconsolate. He's sobbing, sobbing so loud the sounds he makes don't sound human after a point. It might be cliché, but apt, to say that you pity him. You don't. The only thing that rises in you, looking down at this overperformance of grief, is bile. Stepping over him you move out into the luggage car.

You make your way through the train slowly. At first you're worried that the man you left back there will get up, will return to have some kind of revenge of you. There's nothing, and eventually you're comfortable enough to stop putting distance between the two of you. When the rescuers come you will tell him where he is. For now, you pick a booth and take a seat. The view out the window is still illegible, even now that you've stopped.

Amazingly you aren't formally sued. SCTN tries to charge you the monstrously large fee for an unwarranted emergency stop, but your law-savvy Aunt helps you to countersue and they back off. In the years after, living with her in a housing co-operative in Melbourne, you google Mr. Lam. You google Barbara Lond. The latter lost her seat, her place in the King's Privy Council, but now lucratively occupies herself speaking at book festivals and culture panels. Lam, who had some search engine hits prior to the date of the voyage in 20XX has none after. You wonder if there's a concrete box he's languishing in, or if his employers just killed him.

Things continue on a steady pace of managed decline. Some Dweller authorities and compacts are able to break away from Aberdeen's grip as it restructures in the wake of the failure of its plans. In every declaration of independence, the immediate path of the SCTN is still wholly or partially under Aberdonian suzerainty. Atlas ever wanes, raging against the dying of the light but doing so harmlessly. The terror of a unipolar world relaxes into the returned anxiety of a multipolar one. The wheel of history creaks as it turns.

You never return to the North. The quality of the light in the stolen land you now live

on glitters brighter and stranger than any you know elsewhere in the world. When you try to tell other people about it they don't seem to understand you. You try and talk about how glassy, how pure, how ethereal it is. It's Pommie nonsense, so one of your new friends told you once, but it keeps you where you are. It's the terror of losing it, you think, that stops you from leaving. It's the thought of going further than you meant to be and forgetting what it was like.

You have achieved an END STATE.

You might call this "death" or "destination". Either way, the narrative has no ability to progress beyond this terminal egress. This is not failure, as some would understand it. With the nature of the universe being deterministic, you must understand that you could do nothing other than what you did and that this outcome was inevitable.

Fortunately, while deterministic, the universe is not finite. You may return to the beginning or, using arcane literary techniques, revert yourself to a state beyond your previously doomed path. Whatever you choose, for the moment,

YOU HAVE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

EXEGETIS

INCIPIT

This collection was always a triangulation of three points. Through the course of writing this collection I have tried to keep each of them in my mind. Sometimes I have found in writing exegetical work for academic creative writing that it's closer to an exercise in post-hoc justifications for what I have already written rather than an authentic explanation of my motivations and the theoretical backbone of my writing.

In the length of time it has taken me to complete this thesis, I have found that my research in elements of literary theory has caused me to come to new understandings in the fiction I have written. The opposite has also happened, wherein the direction of a piece of fiction has swayed me in the pursuit of a particular branch of theory.

In this way, any exegesis that I might write for this collection is going to be 'co-hoc' rather than post-hoc or ad-hoc. It did not come up on the fly after I had done all my fiction, but grew and evolved as this collection grew and evolved. Much of my theoretical grounding was pursued prior to many of the stories in this collection had been written.

The three elements of my initial proposal for this thesis are: the Weird, travel or transit, and ecology. One of the more rewarding elements of developing this project was the ways in which these elements interacted and complimented one another. It did not make the writing of any of this easy, but it gave me more lamp light to continue. Before I demonstrate how each element works in concert in the body of this exegesis, I will introduce each individually here.

Weird fiction has held a fascination for me since I was young. H. P. Lovecraft was the first writer I read that was not specifically marketed towards young adults. Though my tastes quickly evolved beyond reading stories of the slimy, the mollusoid, and the tentacular exclusively, it quickly became the genre I wrote in most. Through it, I was able to triangulate my interest in the ecological and the strange most effectively.

For the first chapter of this collection, I will discuss the Weird. The chapter will begin with a history of the mode, followed by an attempt at a definition, followed further by an exploration of the theoretical and fictional potential of the use of the mode in *LIMINAL*.

The ecological bent of this collection was first inspired by a talk given by Timothy Baker in late 2017 at Aberdeen University. It was through the talk that I was first introduced to Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, a work that quickly became the lynchpin for many of my conclusions on writing the climate crisis. Baker's talk was particularly useful through its distinction between 'cli-fi', which is dismissed, and speculative works such as Jeff

Vandermeer's *Area X* trilogy, a distinction that Ghosh does not make in *Derangement*. Creating this distinction was particularly useful from the perspective of morale, at least regarding the effectiveness of my own fiction to describe the current moment of ecological collapse, and provided me with the academic food-web niche for this collection to exist in the first place.

The second chapter of this exegesis will focus on the interplay between the ecological and the Weird, how the inclusion of each benefits the other. It will discuss the limitations of describing ecological collapse through mimetic or 'realist' fictional modes and the effectiveness of the Weird in particular in describing ecological collapse with reference to fiction and theory.

Travel or transit forms a particularly resonant aspect of this collection, given how important the act of transit itself was in its writing. The first year of my PhD was spent at Aberdeen, where I had studied for five years. At the time I started writing this collection, I was in a long-term long-distance relationship and was consequently a seasoned traveller. I had at this point lived for six months in Paris. In the course of writing the collection, I was subject to the longest experiences of travel I had ever endured. While I had survived twelve-hour night bus rides from Aberdeen to London, I had not yet enjoyed the dubious pleasures and definite displeasures of long-haul flights to Singapore or Qatar. While miserable in the moment, they provided ample fruit for the fiction I would write once I had endured them. My year at Curtin was interrupted by the novel coronavirus pandemic and I had the definitely novel experience of fleeing a country before the borders closed. On the last direct flight from Perth to London, the cabin crew cried over the intercom and all passengers were placed at least one seat apart. The brief layover at Heathrow was one of the most existentially terrifying hours of my life.

The third chapter of this exegesis will attempt to connect the Weird with the theory of travel and transit, as well as explore Weird tales that have chosen the locomotive space of travel as a setting. It will conclude with an exploration of imperialism and its role in travel writing both historical and modern, and the attempts by which this collection intends to avoid these retrograde understandings in theory and fiction.

I will conclude with an explanation of the craft of each short story and the longer interactive narrative. Anything that I have not explained my reasonings, or justifications, for I will explain there.

WEIRD

Etymologically ‘Weird’ links to *wyrd* ‘fate’, ‘becoming’. Weird stories to this day concern transformation, flourishing, watching the outside alter you as it blooms from within your body. However, the word has the roots of its connotative properties equally from *Macbeth* as any other source. The Weird Sisters, inexplicable elements in the narrative of the play that emerge and transform the plot and characters with that emergence.¹ This febrile mix of connotations and implications would emerge in the late 19th century in the first ‘Haute’ wave of Weird fiction: a literary trend that expressed itself mostly through the pulp magazines of the time.²

My own personal history with the mode, and ultimately the reason it is included in this collection, begins with these initial pulp iterations. In my teenage years I read H.P. Lovecraft and, chasing the mode through its later manifestations, read the new Weird writing of China Miéville and Jeff Vandermeer. My Master’s dissertation was titled *Inks and Sharps* and took place entirely within the mode. *LIMINAL* is a culmination of my studies and writing in the Weird. It spans the full breadth of my engagement with the mode and contains my own attempts, as someone who has read and written within it for the entirety of their adult life, to test the boundaries of the genre and interrogate the extent of its capabilities.

The aim of this chapter is to detail the validity and use of the Weird for this collection in se, as well as to build the groundwork that I will use in later sections. To this end I will begin with a background and a general history of the Weird, how it developed from the late 19th to the 21st century. I will synthesise the opinions of authors and critics into a working definition of the mode that I will use throughout this chapter and the rest of this exegesis. With this definition to hand I will examine the potential of the Weird to explore topics such as the grotesque, limit experiences, eroticism, and queerness.

Prior even to our discussion of the nature of the Weird, we must explore what category it sits in. Roger Luckhurst in his discussion of the Weird describes its waywardness, its “slipperiness of form” and “refused to fit narrative or generic expectation.”³ In his discussion of Kelly Link’s fiction, he describes how she “alternat[es] disconnected generic strands” in her

¹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by David Bevington and William C. Carroll (Macmillan, 1999), pp.28-29.

² China Miéville, ‘The Weird’, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. by Sherryl Vint, Mark Bould, Adam Roberts, and Andrew Butler, pp.510-515 (Routledge, 2009), p.510.

³ Roger Luckhurst, ‘The weird: a dis/orientation’, *Textual Practice*, 31.6, pp. 1041-1061 (Sep, 2017) doi:10.1080/0950236X.2017.1358690, p. 16.

collection *Stranger Things Happen*.^{4,5} The Weird-ness of these narratives “manifest in a waywardness that leaves the reader confounded at the slow mutation of the story out of one horizon of expectation and into another.”⁶ We might understand the Weird in this way as a trans-generic mode: something that can occupy or flip between genres to accomplish its purposes. We can see this in China Miéville’s *Bas Lag* series which we might see as traditional epic fantasy, infected by the Weird.⁷ Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia* is a text of theory-fiction that squats across the genres of horror novel, geopolitical text, and grimoire: all while expressing a tentacular tendency that is unmistakably of the Weird.⁸

Other understandings of the Weird are manifold in lay and scholarly discussions, however. Many place it as a subgenre of horror. Among the earliest of these was Lovecraft himself. In ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, Lovecraft discusses the origin of the mode and attempts to categorize and codify it. He describes the Weird as a subset genre of speculative Horror, differentiated from the then more typical gothic by “something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains.”⁹ This carries through to *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*. Weird elements are still understood in this later essay, more a treatise on craft than a work of criticism, as purely horrific.¹⁰

While we might dismiss this thanks to the evolution of the Weird since its earlier expressions, more sophisticated scholarly understandings have recently been expressed attempting to understand it as genre or subgenre. Michael Cisco in *Weird Fiction: A Genre Study* explicitly defines the Weird as a genre, contesting Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronnel’s understanding of genre as an excluding category.^{11,12} Cisco begins his study with an attempt to forge a more positive definition of genre: as something that includes rather than excludes.¹³ In the course of the first chapter, Cisco identifies the hallmarks of the Weird-as-genre: the

⁴ Kelly Link, *Stranger Things Happen: Stories* (Small Beer Press, 2001).

⁵ Luckhurst p. 16.

⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷ China Miéville, *The Scar* (MacMillan 2000).

⁸ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Autonomous Materials* (Re.Press 2008).

⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009 <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx>> [Accessed at 05 Apr 2024].

¹⁰ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009, <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/nwwf.aspx>> [Accessed at 05 Apr 2024].

¹¹ Michael Cisco, *Weird Fiction: A Genre Study* (Palgrave MacMillan 2022) p. 1.

¹² Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell, ‘The Law of Genre’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1, pp. 55–81 (University of Chicago Press, Autumn, 1980).

¹³ Cisco, pp. 1-2.

bringing together of “elements of the supernatural, the bizarre, and destiny.”¹⁴ In the spirit of repudiating Derrida and Ronnel, he does not limit the genre to this: describing the constantly expanding horizons of the Weird in an ebb and flow of deterritorialization, a reassertion of the genre’s boundaries, and further deterritorialization.¹⁵ This model accounts for the Weird as constituted by the tales and themes that have already been expressed. It also includes the Weird-to-be: the as-yet unwritten formations of the genre. Cisco’s definition is coherent, inventive, and expansive: it is a well-articulated challenge to other conceptions of the Weird.

The reason for the articulation that I have chosen is that it suits the nuances of this collection. The way I have written the Weird in *LIMINAL* is trans-generic. ‘Outland’ occupies an autofictional niche: a large part of the story being an effort to record my experiences as a Traffic Marshal in 2022. ‘Poulou’s Crabs’ is a (mostly) historical narrative, describing a day in the life of Jean-Paul Sartre. ‘Arcana’ flirts with gothic horror in its framing device of the tarot and its description of more traditionally horrific entities such as ghosts and vampires. ‘Under, Under the Earth’, ‘Growth’, and ‘Let Me Talk About Snails’ play with farce and more overt attempts at political satire. My hesitance in the full-throated adoption of Cisco’s definition of the Weird-as-genre is to highlight this generic interplay. The Weird as I have written it squats in genre, complicates traditional forms of storytelling through its expression, and lies in wait to twist what is traditional to its own ends. My hope with this modal definition is not to necessarily exclude alternate understandings from wider discussion. For the purpose of exegeting what I have written, however, the wayward and trans-generic understanding offered by Luckhurst offers the most holistic description of the way that this collection engages with the Weird. Therefore, this is the lens through which we shall proceed with our analysis.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

A History of the Mode

Edgar Allan Poe is identified by Lovecraft as the first author of the Weird thanks to his explicit divergence from gothic horror and ghost stories.¹⁶ Tales like the bizarre and comic ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, wherein a spate of murders is found to have been performed by an ape, presage the outlandishness and the grotesquery that would later become fixtures of the mode.¹⁷ However, we might look for similar antecedents even earlier. While folklore and its trappings are considered anti-Weird typically, folk stories such as those of the green children of Woolpit bear an undeniably Weird character. In the tale, set in the village of Woolpit in Suffolk during the 12th century, two children with green skin emerge from a hole in the ground. While one child dies soon after baptism, the other is taught English and explains that she and her brother are visitors from Saint Martin’s land, a place beneath the earth where everything is green.¹⁸ Tracing features of the mode back even earlier, we might consider the opposition between the Olympian gods and their primeval counterparts an early iteration of the mode’s ingress. The hundred-handed, fifty-headed *Hekatoncheires* would be as comfortable in any Weird tale as they are in Hesiod.¹⁹ Hesiod’s own description of Typhon, with its countless heads and voices, places it comfortably in the same vein as an antagonist from a cosmic horror tale.²⁰ While none of these monsters or ingressors can be said to truly inhabit the milieu of the modern Weird tale, their existence in the literary substrate illustrates what would later be codified and understood by later authors.

In his guide to Weird fiction in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, the author and critic China Miéville describes the period from 1880 to 1940 in Weird fiction as the mode’s “high phase”. Citing scholar S.T. Joshi, he defines this sixty-year span as the “haute” period.²¹ This era of the Weird would see authors working in the folk revival of the late 19th century, Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood, engage in the mode. They would later be followed

¹⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’.

¹⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe – Volume 1* (Project Gutenberg, 2001) < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2147/2147-h/2147-h.htm#chap07> > [Accessed 05 May 2024].

¹⁸ William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, trans. by Joseph Stevenson (Seeley’s, 1861).

¹⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. by M.L. West (Oxford University Press, 1988), p.7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.19-21.

²¹ Miéville, ‘The Weird’ p.510.

by pulp writers such as Lovecraft himself as well as Clarke-Ashton Smith, Robert Bloch, August Derleth, and others. While this period would see an explosion in the use of the mode, it would also see an infusion of the mode with political reaction.²² Machen's horror is as much at democracy and rooted in misogyny as it is pre-Christian religious belief, Lovecraft is infamously and noxiously horrified by the influx of immigration and the prevalence of America's Black underclass in its cities.^{23,24}

The haute period is divided, writes Miéville, and profoundly influenced by the First World War. The “mishigas[s]” of Machen, Lovecraft, and others are a response to “capitalist modernity [...] entering a period of crisis.”²⁵ Citing letters written by William Hope Hodgson, a writer working in the Weird prior to the war who later fought in it, Miéville declares that there is “no Weird so Weird as the backwashed bad sublime called Paschendale.”²⁶ In this we can draw a line of connective tissue between the Weird and the Modernist art movements that emerged in the aftermath of 1918. The surrealist movement, as obsessed with grotesque absurdity, hybrid forms, and exquisite corpses as any haute-Weird writer, seems a particularly apt counterpart for the Weird.²⁷ Miéville himself is especially aware of this: his novella *The Last Days of New Paris* imagines a German-made ‘surrealism bomb’ detonated in the French capital at the height of the Second World War. The bomb manifests the Weird bodies of surrealist art to life, birthing them as *kaiju* rampaging through the devastated city.²⁸ Lovecraft, and the other traditionally minded pulp haute-Weird writers, held a horror of modernism. In a rage at T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Lovecraft wrote his own parodic version titled: ‘Waste Paper: A Poem of Profound Insignificance.’²⁹ The author Alan Moore has suggested that Lovecraft, like others working in the Postwar Weird, was a “closet modernist”.³⁰ The text of his celebrated ‘Call of Cthulhu’ is a collage of letters, interviews, second-hand descriptions,

²² Ibid., p. 510.

²³ Ibid., p. 511.

²⁴ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Horror at Red Hook’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009 <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/hrh.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

²⁵ Miéville, ‘The Weird’, p.513.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 515.

²⁷ Jake Chapman and Dinos Chapman, *Exquisite Corpse*, 2000, etching on paper, 465 × 380 mm, Tate Britain.

²⁸ China Miéville, *The Last Days of New Paris* (Picador, 2018).

²⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘Waste Paper – A Poem of Profound Insignificance’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009 <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/poetry/p228.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

³⁰ Alan Moore, ‘Alan Moore Interviewed on the 20th Century’, *Facts in the Case of Alan Moore's Providence*, 05 Nov 2015 <<https://factsprovidence.wordpress.com/2015/11/05/alan-moore-interviewed-on-the-20th-century/>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

closer to *Tristram Shandy* in this sense than *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.³¹ At the centre of ‘Cthulhu’ is the eponymous human-dragon-octopus god: as close to a stapled-together exquisite corpse as you might find outwith the work of Max Ernst.³²

The self-consciously Weird literatures of the second half of the 20th century grew to be something profoundly unlike their pulp antecedents. After Lovecraft and his contemporaries the Weird was swept up in, and was influential in, the New Wave movements in Science Fiction in the mid-to-late 20th century. We can see the Weird influence at play in stories like Octavia Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’ as well as the surreal dreamscapes of J.G. Ballard’s *Vermillion Sands*.^{33,34} At the same time as Science Fiction pioneered the use of the Weird as a trans-generic mode the author, and co-founder of the Inland Waterways Association, Robert Aickman was pioneering his own “strange stories”.³⁵ Aickman’s significance to the history of the mode lies in his representation of a parallel tradition in its use. His work sits firmly in the Horror genre, and the strangeness of his stories draws more from the domestic unhomely than the extraterrestrial or the tentacular. Aickman’s stories are Weird not only in content, but structure and character. Stories such as ‘The Cicerones’ imply otherworldly and hideous fates, but the outcome lends itself more to distortion and unease.³⁶ ‘Never Visit Venice’ is, while the title is plain enough, is as inexplicable as any other Weird tale.³⁷ An Aickman protagonist is confronted, frustrated, stymied by supernatural, or ab-natural, forces. While these forces might be explicable in some senses, they are always partially incomprehensible. The grounded lives of these protagonists cut against the bizarre and absurd forces arrayed against them. This use of the mode is echoed today by writers like Thomas Ligotti, who works in horror, and M. John Harrison, who does not, who along with Aickman represent a distinct and vibrant strain of Weird literary fiction.^{38,39}

If the Weird in the 20th century and prior was a disruption to the traditional understanding of horror and speculative fiction, the New Weird was an attempt in the early 21st

³¹ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009, <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cc.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

³² David Larkin, *Max Ernst* (Random House, 1975), p.33.

³³ Octavia Butler, ‘Bloodchild’, *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, ed. by Anne Vandermeer and Jeff Vandermeer, pp. 630-641. (London: Corvus, 2011), p. 640.

³⁴ J.G. Ballard, *Vermillion Sands* (Vintage, 2001).

³⁵ Richard T. Kelly, ‘Robert Aickman, an Introduction’, *The Wine Dark Sea*, pp. 7-13. (Faber, 2014).

³⁶ Robert Aickman ‘The Cicerones’, *The Unsettled Dust*, pp. 106-120 (Faber, 2014).

³⁷ Robert Aickman, ‘Never Visit Venice’, *The Wine Dark Sea*, pp. 263-295 (Faber 2014).

³⁸ Thomas Ligotti, *Teatro Grottesco* (Virgin Books, 2008).

³⁹ M. John Harrison, *The Course of the Heart* (Night Shade Books, 2006).

to apply this disruptive force to an elevated degree. Helen Marshall describes the muddled and confused inception of a sub-mode that seems more an attempt to create a form of literature than categorize one that already existed.⁴⁰ M. John Harrison, a writer working in the mode, was the first to propose its existence with an introduction to China Miéville’s novel *The Tain*. Harrison later attempted to codify the emergence with a forum post: ‘The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything?’⁴¹ Marshall points to the trends in the mode as cutting against what has been called the ‘consolatory’ strain in speculative fiction written in the 20th century, located most prominently in the secondary world fantasies of J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien’s comprehensive worldbuilding, a tactic in speculative fiction later inveighed against by Harrison, was symptomatic of a logical and coherent approach to the speculative in literature.⁴² This New Weird was anti-coherent, described by Steph Swainston as ‘multi-spectral’, replete with ‘baroque detail’.⁴³ Among the movement’s fascinations was urbanism, Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* and Vandermeer’s *City of Saints and Madmen* are both set in the bowels of Weird metropolises.^{44, 45} The politics of the new mode were distinctly radical in contrast with its reactionary forebears. Marshall describes China Miéville’s co-option of Tolkien’s strategy of worldbuilding, of creating coherent structures of the impossible, “to confront the self-perpetuating fantasy of capitalism.”⁴⁶ Miéville’s work is further suffused with radical politics: *Iron Council* playing host to a workers’ revolution, and *The Last Days of New Paris* describing antifascist workers’ movements in its own burned-out metropole.^{47, 48}

Of all the existing elements of the history of the Weird, it is this latest iteration that has the profoundest influence on my work in *LIMINAL*. The formal hallmarks on the mode in unreliable narrative and the blending of different narrative forms find their expressions in ‘A Geography of the Hollow Earth’. The urban landscape common to ‘Growth’, ‘Under, Under

⁴⁰ Helen Marshall, ‘A flare of light or ‘the great clomping foot of nerdism?’: M John Harrison’s radical poetics of worldbuilding’, *TEXT*, 24.2, pp. 1-24 (AAWP, October, 2020) p. 6.

⁴¹ Jeff Vandermeer, ‘The New Weird: “It’s Alive?”’, *The New Weird*, ed. by Ann Vandermeer, Jeff Vandermeer, pp. 7-17 (Tachyon, 2008) p. 7.

⁴² M. John Harrison, ‘very afraid’, *Uncle Zip’s Window*, 27 Jan 2007, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20080410181840/http://uzwi.wordpress.com/2007/01/27/very-afraid/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁴³ Marshall, p. 11.

⁴⁴ China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

⁴⁵ Jeff Vandermeer, *City of Saints and Madmen* (London: Macmillan, 2014).

⁴⁶ Marshall, p. 12.

⁴⁷ China Miéville, *Iron Council* (Del Ray, 2004).

⁴⁸ China Miéville, *The Last Days of New Paris* (Macmillan, 2016).

the Earth', and others is drawn from the New Weird metropolises of New Crobuzon and Virconium.⁴⁹ *LIMINAL*'s 'multi-spectrality' is drawn from the designs of its non-human creatures, more readily taking inspiration from the a-folkloric blending of forms than established haute-Weird shibboleths like the tentacle. My engagement with the earlier periods will largely be illustrative for the purposes of this exegesis. While the haute Weird authors provide a foundation on which the mode is built, the elements of social reaction embedded into their work make them unviable and unpleasant as artistic inspirations. Lovecraft and his writing, being so fundamental to the way that the mode has been expressed for so long, is a useful short-hand for illustrating features and elements of the Weird and my engagement with him is primarily one of academic convenience.

⁴⁹ M. John Harrison, *The Pastel City* (Pocket Books, 1981).

Defining the Mode

Miéville's essay *M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire* attempts to re-assess the celebrated author's ghost stories and situate them equidistantly between the Weird and the gothic, which Miéville calls the hauntological. In his discussion, he defines both modes and impresses the diametric difference of each to the other. They are "in non-dialectical opposition, contrary iterations [...] of the same problematic – that of crisis-blasted modernity."⁵⁰ James' ghost stories are, to Miéville, engaged in "unstable haptic flirtation [...] without merger".⁵¹ While they might carry "appurtenances of the Weird" they are not "Weird in any straightforward sense", in spite of their "teratological" elements they carry the gothic and folkloric trappings that would, as Miéville describes, soon be repudiated by later haute-Weird writers.⁵²

It is this teratological, monstrous, unhuman, element that Miéville locates his Weird. At pains to describe the unprecedented nature of the Weird, he calls to mind the tentacle: a near-ubiquitous feature of certain types of Weird stories. Such an object, and the creatures on which they are present, is "afolkloric": absent from a western mythological or folk tradition.^{53,54} A Weird element is not the return of the repressed, as in the gothic uncanny, but a "hallucinatory/nihilist novum": something that flourishes into being without any prior human cultural antecedent.⁵⁵ While Miéville concedes that Weird monsters may emerge from catacombs, dusty books, or the half-remembrance of characters in their stories this is not a stab at gothic's "strategy of revenance" but a "recruitment to invented cultural memory" that "back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself."⁵⁶ This strategy of revenance is alien by definition to the behaviour of the teratological Weird to the point that, as Miéville describes in relation to M. R. James, the gesturing towards folklore

⁵⁰ China Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire', *Collapse IV*, ed. by Robin Mackay pp.105-128 (Urbanomic, 2008), p.128.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵⁴ Karen Furnweger, 'The Octopus Beats Its Own Legends', *Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art Blog*, 5 Sep 2017

<<https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Blog/2017/09/The-Octopus-Beats-Its-Own-Legends>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

⁵⁵ Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire' p. 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

disqualifies a work from the mode. Wryly aware of the fine line of this distinction, Miéville suggests to us that the Weird is ab- rather than un-canny.⁵⁷

Relation to human experience, then, is what separates Miéville's Weird from the gothic. Ghosts in gothic horror are human revenants. In gothic narratives concerning folklore we and the protagonists discover ancient mythological traditions in fact attest to something actual. In a Weird story we will rather encounter something unclassified or unclassifiable: a tentacular, chitinous, or a slimy novum. While this definition is illustrative, particularly of the type of fiction that the Weird encompasses, it lacks the kind of methodology that would make it truly useful. To find this methodology, we will have to turn to another thinker.

The late theorist Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* has its premise in the same non-dialectical opposition between the Weird and the gothic as Miéville does. In the first part of the work, in which he deals with the first element in the title, he details a framework to outline his own parameters for the mode. A Weird tale, in Fisher's understanding, is one in which an element of what he calls the 'outside' intrudes on quotidian reality.⁵⁸ To back-project this definition onto Miéville's discussions of James, we can call the teratological elements in these stories such an intrusion. In the case of a writer in the pulp haute-Weird of the early 20th century, the outer gods and monsters crashing into the lives of academics in New England constitute an extreme example of an intrusion from the outside.

Fisher is at pains to define the outside as not necessarily speculative. It is not something that's simply unreal, rather something that defies reality. For instance: while a vampire is a speculative being, it is something completely within the realm of human comprehension. We might identify a vampire, understand its limitations, and comprehend its abilities. Fisher's counterweight to a vampire in this argument is a black hole.⁵⁹ We know that black holes exist, they are not speculative entities. Yet a black hole is, mostly, an unknown quantity: its properties defy logic, its values are unknown, its limits are strange and boundless. Such an object is, to Fisher, the most concrete example of a thing from the outside.

An effective implementation of the outside can be found in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*. In *Ballad*, a reinterpretative work of Lovecraft's racist short story 'The Horror at Red Hook', the titular character of Charles Thomas Tester is driven to work for the occultist

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

⁵⁸ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater, 2016), p. 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

Robert Suydam.^{60,61} A memorable incident occurs during an encounter with Suydam at his mansion in the upscale area of Flatbush. As Suydam pitches the benefits of involvement with the Great Old Ones, cosmic monster-deities, Tester begins to hallucinate. The windowpanes in Suydam’s library “took on the colour, and apparent depth, of the sea.”⁶² The hallucination escalates into an impossible encounter with another of the story’s principals.⁶³ This is later revealed to have taken place in reality, with the link between Tester and deuteragonist Detective Malone connecting across space and time.⁶⁴ After this episode, Suydam explains what has happened. “Before then, all through the night, his home had been *Outside*.”⁶⁵ While the library was in “normal time and space”, but is surrounded by “the shadow-haunted *Outside*,” a realm “beyond human perceptions.”⁶⁶

While the definition of the outside is contextual within *Ballad*, it harmonizes with Fisher’s own conclusions regarding the nature of the interplay between the outside and the quotidian. Suydam’s library is the Fisherian understanding of the Weird in microcosm. The human characters of *Ballad* linger in the library and are menaced by forces beyond their power which stalk outwith it. Further, the idea of a mundane setting like an upscale Flatbush mansion being a portal to worlds beyond mortal ken underscores the quotidian-outside dynamic.

The utility of this definition and my interest in it lies in the decoupling of the speculative from the mode’s elements. By Fisher’s definition you could in theory, though this is rarely the case in practice, write a Weird tale without any speculative elements. Perhaps even more interestingly: if the outside isn’t necessarily speculative, the quotidian elements might not necessarily be grounded. A story in which a culture from a fantastic secondary world encounters a black hole is still a Weird story, the (actual) outside is still extruding into a literary framework that we understand as typical.

Also useful for our purposes is Fisher’s characterisation of tone in Weird tales: he eschews description of horror for that of *jouissance*.⁶⁷ Weird things compel as well as repel, creating a limit experience: an event so extreme that opposing reactions collapse together.⁶⁸ The key to the Weird is its strangeness, not any implication derived from that strangeness. A

⁶⁰ H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Horror at Red Hook’.

⁶¹ Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom* (Tor, 2022) pp. 153-154.

⁶² LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*, p. 50.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ Fisher, p. 17.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Weird tale constitutes an encounter with the utterly unknown and inexplicable: any kind of direct threat or terror constitutes a level of interpretability excluding it from the mode. A Weird tale can be a subtly horrific one, and will likely contain horrific elements, but can break away from the confines of the genre.

In my short story 'Poulou's Crabs', I attempt both of the gestures that Fisher suggests are possible while retaining elements from Miéville's discussions on teratology. The narrative tracks a character, Jean, progressing through his day haunted or menaced by spectres of crabs, though the animals are not named anywhere in the story save the title, that only he can see. The crabs are taken by everyone, including Jean himself, to be the expression of some kind of psychological phenomenon relating to his social alienation, until the close of the tale when one of them acts physically: breaking a household object. The narrative itself is based on an account of Jean-Paul Sartre's experience with hallucinations of marine life after a psychotic breakdown following a mescaline trip.⁶⁹ The characters of Simone de Beauvoir and Jacques Lacan both appear pseudonymously in the story as they would in Sartre's life.

Up to the point that they make their presence physical, the crabs are not intrinsically a speculative element. Throughout the course of the story, the hallucination is purely visual and purely experienced by Jean. While he is at home, in the Metro, in his classroom at work, with his psychiatrist, or with his lover they are invisible to everyone but him. These other characters cannot see the crabs even when Jean points them out. After a visit to said psychiatrist, who diagnoses the crabs as visions relating to his social state, Jean believes that he is cured and briefly does not see the spectres. This refers to Lacan's actual diagnosis of the apparitions, which to him were manifestations of Sartre's social dislocation in Paris.⁷⁰ Where 'Poulou's Crabs' differs from the historical account is towards its end: when a large crab breaks a coffee press in Jean's house, defying the notion that it is a metaphor.

This moment in the story is the closest it approaches to the horrific. While Jean is menaced, discomforted, by the animals throughout he is never in the kind of danger that the typical protagonist of a Weird horror story is. While his mental state is theoretically under threat, and indeed the presence of the crabs is taken as an indication of the already disordered nature of his psychology, his interaction with the outside in the form of the crabs does not presage the kind of total mental collapse at the end of pulp haute-Weird stories such as

⁶⁹ John Gerassi, 'When Sartre Talked to Crabs', *The New York Times*, 14 Nov 2009 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/weekinreview/15grist.html>> [accessed at 05 Apr 2024].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

‘Dagon’.⁷¹ Rather Jean must accommodate his own disorder and discomfort and live with it as he has done up to this point.

This gesturing towards discomfort is accomplished through deploying teratological elements as described by Miéville. The crabs are a non-human, un-human element. A “chitinous [...] novum”, transplanted from their traditional marine habitat into an urban one.⁷² Where this story diverges from Miéville’s conception of teratology is in how these elements are deployed. Miéville’s understanding of the tentacular, chitinous, or slimy is purely as a component in a hybrid form. Despite this the crabs retain teratological elements: while they are not formal hybrids, they are hybrids behaviourally. It is both the fact of their intrusion into an urban environment and their pseudo-social fixation with Jean that marks these crabs as entities of the outside. While they are crabs, they do not behave as crabs do: following the protagonist, interacting with the people that he interacts with, making themselves at home in the environments that he has a home in.

‘Poulou’s Crabs’ is a test of the collection’s and the mode’s limits. It presses against Fisher’s parameters for a Weird tale, trying to avoid the speculative as much as possible. At the same time, it interrogates the teratology that Miéville characterises as a key feature of the mode. In addition to these two aims, the story is also an experiment in writing the Weird outwith its traditional home of horror fiction. While not wholly successful in operating non-speculatively, the majority of the narrative’s development occurs without the reliance on speculative plot elements. While the Weird elements in the story provoke discomfort, as is the case in a horror tale, the effect amounts more to existential nausea present in Sartre’s own writing than the out-and-out threat of mental or bodily dissolution present in horrific narratives.⁷³ While Miéville’s teratological elements are present they are not attached to a hybridised monster typical to the mode but are animals in themselves, albeit animals that acquire a teratological character because of their social and narrative function in the story.

⁷¹ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘Dagon’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009
<<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/d.aspx>> [accessed at 05 Apr 2024].

⁷² Miéville, ‘M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire’, p. 122.

⁷³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Éditions Gallimard, 1938).

Hybridity and the Grotesque

Past his definition of the Weird, Fisher expounds and elaborates on Miéville's teratological fixation. Fisher opens the chapter with a quotation from Patrick Parrinder's *James Joyce* in which Parrinder discusses the origin of the term *grotesque*. This being the discovery of Roman architecture in caves or 'grottoes' "consist[ing..] of human and animal shapes intermingled with foliage, flowers, and fruits in fantastic designs".⁷⁴ Fisher identifies this immediately with the Weird, going as far as to say that such hybridity intrinsically places something within the mode.⁷⁵

This blending of forms is a feature of many of the mode-defining works of the early 20th century. Lovecraft's gods and monsters are frequently exquisite corpses composed of different hybridised elements. Cthulhu, a being so ubiquitous in culture that it might be said to have stepped from the threshold of the outside into the quotidian, is described as a combination of "an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature".⁷⁶ Hybrid bodies themselves form a kind of microcosm between the quotidian and the outside as described by Fisher. Each element: the dragon, the octopus, the caricature is, if not quotidian, at least familiar. Placing these elements together in a single form, however, creates an anti-quotidian being and estranges this familiarity.

These questions of hybridity were familiar to Lovecraft and his contemporaries. In 'Under the Pyramid', a story ghost-written by Lovecraft for Harry Houdini, the locus of the Weird in the story is the Sphinx of Giza. The ubiquity of this hybrid form has mostly robbed it of the aura of the outside, a fact that Lovecraft plays with in the tale. The conceit of the story is that the human face of the Sphinx was an act of antique censorship, erasing the unspeakably horrifying original design that Houdini (who is also the protagonist of the narrative) discovers.⁷⁷ With this story, Lovecraft outlines the parameters for the Weird-ness of hybrids. Traditionally mythological or fantastical hybrids, dragons, centaurs, sphinxes, et-al, do not qualify as representatives of the outside thanks to their ubiquity.⁷⁸ They are known quantities,

⁷⁴ Patrick Parrinder, *James Joyce* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 8.

⁷⁵ Fisher, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Lovecraft, 'Cthulhu'.

⁷⁷ H.P. Lovecraft, 'Under the Pyramids', The H.P. Lovecraft Archive, 20 Aug 2009
<<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/up.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

⁷⁸ Fisher, p. 15.

in the same way Fisher describes vampires and werewolves. It is the unprecedented blending of disparate forms, then, that both Fisher and Lovecraft understand as hallmarks of the outside. Miéville too, in his description of the “unprecedented forms” of the mode, tacitly describes this piece of criteria.⁷⁹

Miéville’s description of teratology and teratological elements within Weird fiction also falls within this frame of hybridity. As I mentioned in my discussion of ‘Poulou’s Crabs’ Miéville’s deployment of the slimy, the chitinous, and the tentacular as rhetorical are inevitably components of some monster. In Miéville’s own fiction we can find expressions of hybridity. The character Lin in his novel *Perdido Street Station* is herself a hybrid: a creature with the body of a woman and the head of a scarab beetle.⁸⁰ Joan Gordon in ‘Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateships in China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*’ uses the word “grotesque” to describe the blending of forms present in her physical appearance.⁸¹

Hybrids and grotesques appear throughout this collection. In the story ‘Let’s Talk About Snails’ the culmination of narrative is one of total hybridity and total grotesquery. The story describes a nameless, aristocratic young man and his relationship with a young woman who transforms herself into a snail-like-creature. The story concludes with the protagonist resolved to make the same transformation and exhorting the reader to do the same.

The friend’s transformation in the story is immediate, but she retains both human and mollusoid features. Her eyes extend on stalks and her body extends from a large, spiral shell. However: she retains human hands, human facial features and, in a reduced capacity, human speech. While her hybridity does not have as many inputs as, for example, Cthulhu the components are as comprehensively blended in the style of the surrealist exquisite corpse. There is a suggestion in the narrative that the form that we see the protagonist’s friend in is only an interstitial stage and that upon further transformation she will exhibit more snail-like features or even fully transform into a snail. However, the narrative does not progress beyond this point. In practical terms, she is a true hybrid.

The blending of snails and the human form has been expressed before in other works of Weird fiction: Junji Ito’s *Uzumaki* and Hidetaka Miyazaki’s *Bloodborne* to name two.^{82, 83} In spite of this, I would argue that that this particular hybrid arrangement remains

⁷⁹ Miéville, ‘M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire’, p. 112.

⁸⁰ Miéville, *Perdido*, p. 13.

⁸¹ Joan Gordon, ‘Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateship in China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 30.3, pp.456-476 (DePauw University, 2003).

⁸² Junji Ito, *Uzumaki*, trans. by Yuji Oniki (Viz Media, 2001).

⁸³ FROM Software, *Bloodborne* (Japan, 2015).

unprecedented. Unlike more established chimaeras, blends of human and snail are a folkloric, a feature of the Weird as set down by Miéville.⁸⁴ What removes mythological hybrids from the arena of the Weird is the narrative substrate of folklore and cultural understanding. While blendings between humans and snails have been previously articulated, that articulation has not been substantial enough to codify a set of rules and characteristics.

The deployment of hybrids in text is a concise and effective means of articulating the outside in a work of Weird fiction. It can locate the central tension of the mode, between the quotidian and the anti-quotidian in a single figure. In 'Let's Talk About Snails' the expanding and ever-evolving nature of the outside is presented. The outside is not just something that ingresses onto reality, it is a totalising and consuming force. The hybrid form is the end state of something that has encountered this force and has been changed irrevocably because of it.

⁸⁴ Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire', p. 109.

Bataille, Eroticism, and the Outside

Fisher, in his examination of the Weird, details how the *jouissance* intrinsic to the mode constitutes a limit experience.⁸⁵ This concept, concerning an experience that is so extreme that it collapses human understanding and categorical distinction between modes of experience, was initially articulated by, among others, the author and critic Georges Bataille. While Bataille himself did not write speculatively, his criticism, specifically this question of limit experiences, can illuminate the ways Weird fiction is written.

The theorist Maurice Blanchot, in his discussion of Bataille that forms part of *The Infinite Conversation*, describes a limit-experience as “the response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically into question.”⁸⁶ This decision is an expression, Blanchot states, of the “impossibility of ever stopping.”⁸⁷ ‘Man’ as a rational animal approaching the end of history, a motif that Francis Fukuyama would seize upon over two decades after Blanchot, and the culmination of ‘his’ potential encounters the limits of ‘his’ potency and comprehension and therefore confronts the sublime: “God, Being, the Good, Eternity, Unity”.^{88,89} This is a literal conception of the limit-experience: there exist limits of epistemes and there are certain questions that lie beyond our ability to empirically evaluate them: questions of theology, ontology, and morality. Once these questions are approached, they necessarily annihilate these epistemes and our ability to evaluate rationally.

What is interesting about this framing of the limit experience is, despite its distance from Fisher’s and even Bataille’s conceptions, how it mimics the narrative arc of Weird tales particularly those in the cosmic horror vein of Lovecraft and his pulp contemporaries. In Lovecraft’s tales the protagonist is often an academic, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ and others, and always

⁸⁵ Fisher, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 203.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

⁸⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 2012).

⁸⁹ Blanchot, p. 204.

male.^{90,91,92} Some involve a research tangent, as in ‘Whisperer’ or ‘Mountains’, or a personal encounter with the outside, as in ‘Cthulhu’ and ‘Shadow’.^{93,94,95,96,97} This trend continues into modern Weird tales: John Langan’s ‘Mother of Stone’ concerns a reporter investigating a series of gruesome happenings after the idol of an ancient goddess is uncovered in the grounds of a country hotel.⁹⁸ These characters begin their stories certain of the limits of their world. Whether they encounter the outside by chance or by deliberate provocation, it is their confidence in their own empiricism that encourages and then compels them to interrogate the ingress of strange happenings into their lives. As Blanchot describes, the limit experience occurs when they have finally pushed their epistemes as far as they are able and encountered the outside. What follows is annihilation: either death as in ‘Mother’, ‘Cthulhu’ and others or a deliberate retreat into ignorance as in ‘Shadow’, ‘Whisperer’, ‘Mountains’, and others.^{99,100,101,102,103}

In the story ‘Growth’, in this collection the protagonist slots into this mould. The narrative tracks an employee of a publishing house who becomes fascinated by the emergence of a lamppost from the cobblestones of a gentrified sequence of lanes in an un-named city. While this character is not an academic nor a reporter his encounter with the outside, first in the form of the lamppost and then with the flourishing of ersatz life after it, embodies the trope of the investigator set on a course of feverish study thanks to a chance encounter with the outside. Rather than emulate total mental collapse, as is often described in a Weird story, the protagonist’s investigations prompt the beginning of a nervous breakdown. The investigations

⁹⁰ Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu’.

⁹¹ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009 <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/wid.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

⁹² H.P. Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009 <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/mm.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

⁹³ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Out of Time’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009, <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/sot.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

⁹⁴ Lovecraft, ‘Whisperer’.

⁹⁵ Lovecraft ‘Mountains’.

⁹⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’, *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009, <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/soi.aspx>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

⁹⁷ Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu’.

⁹⁸ John Langan, ‘Mother of Stone’, *The Wide, Carnivorous Sky*, pp.215-279 (Hippocampus Press, 2013).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu’.

¹⁰¹ Lovecraft, ‘Shadow’.

¹⁰² Lovecraft, ‘Whisperer’.

¹⁰³ Lovecraft, ‘Mountains’.

he embarks on are less the life-consuming studies of pulp Weird tales and more designed to emulate late-night Wikipedia binges.

It's notable that Lovecraft chooses academics as his protagonists when he often also includes so-called "psychically sensitive" artists who commune with the outside in their dreams or work.¹⁰⁴ Lovecraft was himself often inspired by his dreams, yet rather than choose characters most like himself he makes the deliberate decision to locate his protagonists in what Blanchot calls "ultimate m[en]".¹⁰⁵ What the academic protagonist offers to the Weird tale is a heightening of the contradictions between the quotidian and the outside. In these stories, the academic is built to exist under conditions of absolute reality. They are masters of the quotidian world and they are sure it is the limit of what exists. The encounter with the outside is doubly jarring if the protagonist is so wedded to the quotidian to be unable to consider anything emerging outwith it.

Turning to Bataille's own discussion of limit-experiences, which he refers to as "inner" or "interior" experiences, we find his concerns located more in sexuality and taboo rather than knowledge or human potential.¹⁰⁶ Eroticism, as distinct from the sexual act for purely reproductive purposes, for Bataille is a behaviour fundamentally contrary to what is typical for humans.¹⁰⁷ Energy is spent, ferociously, with no gain and no possibility for gain. This constitutes, in Bataille's opinion, a kind of death drive: in pursuing eroticism we expend our resources so extensively that the moment of climax can be considered a kind of annihilation. Bataille cites the colloquial euphemisms for orgasm in pursuit of this argument when he says, "sensual pleasure is so connected with ruination that we have named the moment of its paroxysm 'la petite mort'."¹⁰⁸

Yet for Bataille this limit experience of eroticism is one that is as much about the coming together of disparate elements as it is the drive towards death. In the introduction to *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, he describes the act of reproduction as a process resulting in human discontinuity, as it creates more distinct human entities, contrasted with the act of eroticism which purely concerns the "blending and fusion of separate objects."^{109,110} Later he

¹⁰⁴ Lovecraft, 'Cthulhu'.

¹⁰⁵ Blanchot, p. 206.

¹⁰⁶ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism Death and Sensuality*, trans. by Mary Dalwood (City Lights, 1986) p.29-30.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 25.

describes the “final aim” of eroticism: “fusion, all barriers gone”.¹¹¹ Eroticism, for Bataille has its double in religious ecstasy. In *Eroticism* he dedicates discussion both to sacred orgies and sacred sex-work. Even religiosity that reviles and erects taboos around the erotic is necessarily connected to it, and vice-versa: there is an additional liminal thrill in the breaking of a taboo in erotic acts, but these acts require the taboos to exist just as these taboos require acts to forbid.

This framing of eroticism might be understood as Weird, in that the fusion of disparate elements is most reminiscent of Fisher and Parrinder’s account of the grotesque. Parrinder, in his description of the unearthing of Titus’ Baths in Rome, even cites Vitruvius’ *On Architecture* wherein the author describes the heterodox fusion of forms in terms that an arbiter of religious morality might use to condemn non-standard sexuality: “Such things neither are, nor have been, nor can be”.¹¹² This notion is reminiscent of a common euphemistic metaphor for the sex act in pre-modern English: to engage in sexual intercourse was ‘to make the beast with two backs’.¹¹³ The coupling of two distinct human entities is re-imagined as a single, grotesque form. In this sense, the annihilation of the self that Bataille relates to the erotic is not merely a co-occurring event to the fusion of forms, but a necessary precursor to it. In order for the blended beast to be born, the individuality of its distinct components must be eradicated.

As well as the eroticism which we might call innately embedded in Weird tales featuring blended forms, the mode has also included a more direct iteration of this eroticism particularly in its more modern expressions. We might call such narratives ‘teratophilic’, wherein a blended grotesque form engages in erotic contact with a typical human, often the protagonist of the tale. Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* features Lin, the scarab-headed *Khepri* woman, who has a romantic and sexual relationship with Isaac, the protagonist.¹¹⁴ In Naomi Mitchison’s *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* the titular protagonist has sex with a number of alien life-forms.¹¹⁵ In Octavia Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’, she describes a human society in a symbiotic relationship with an alien species which reproduces by embedding eggs in humans to incubate and later birth their offspring through a kind of caesarean section.¹¹⁶ In the conclusion of the 2018 adaptation of *Annihilation* by Alex Garland the character Lena embraces a doppelgänger of her husband created by the Shimmer: the Weird stretch of land she was tasked with

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 129.

¹¹² Parrinder, p. 8.

¹¹³ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Norman Sanders (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 86.

¹¹⁴ Miéville, *Perdido*, p. 15.

¹¹⁵ Naomi Mitchison, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (Gollancz, 1962).

¹¹⁶ Butler, ‘Bloodchild’, p. 641.

investigating.¹¹⁷ Just as the notion of hybridity itself creates a microcosm of the interaction between the outside and the quotidian, an erotic act between a thing of the outside and a quotidian, human, body heightens and doubles this contradiction.

In ‘Let’s Talk About Snails’ the notion of teratophilic coupling occupies a progressively larger amount of the narrative at the approach to the tale’s close. At the opening of the story, the protagonist describes the experience of watching two of his friend’s snails engage in sexual intercourse. This involves iridescent, hermaphroditic organs extending from the bodies of each animal and twining together in mid-air. When his friend transforms into a snail himself, part of his fascination and part of what prompts him to decide to follow his friend’s course is the prospect of engaging in this act. At the very end of the story, the last sentence exhorts his audience to become snails themselves so they might all twine together. While this longed-for act does not take place in the narrative the act of fantasising about it on the part of the protagonist constitutes the experience of eroticism as described by Bataille. The protagonist is so invested in expending energy to experience such an erotic act that the very notion of doing so begins to erode his very being. By the end of the tale he begins to feel a shell grow on his back, his eyes strain from their sockets. As Bataille describes, his drive to experience the erotic act both prompts annihilation, of his humanity, and fusion, in the form of the promised sexual union between himself and his friend and also between his human form and the mollusoid forms of the snails.

This conception of the inherently Weird nature of sexuality is compounded when we consider the work of the theorist Leo Bersani. Bersani wrote the essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ at the height of the AIDS pandemic in 1987. While lamenting the crisis, it disparages the notion that pre-pandemic gay scenes were any more harmonious than they were, at the time of writing, under the new HIV-AIDS paradigm.¹¹⁸ Bersani relates the grim new realities of gay life under the pandemic to Bataille and proposes a new understanding of the value of sexuality. It is not wrong to think of passivity, referring to being the receptive partner in sex, as a demeaning act claims Bersani.¹¹⁹ Rather the fact that it is demeaning to the “masculine ideal” is one that the male-male sex act should be celebrated for.¹²⁰ As in Bataille the erotic and the fatal are conjoined in a single act. We can consider such sex acts the apex of what Bataille would

¹¹⁷ *Annihilation*, dir. by Alex Garland (USA, 2018).

¹¹⁸ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 11-12.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 29.

consider the erotic: engagement in sexual behaviour that does not even remotely carry the risk of creating discontinuity of being with new life.

Earlier in the same essay, Bersani describes what he considers a fundamental aspect of the gay identity. This being the revulsion that it inspires. In lamenting the perception of gay communities as bastions of liberal values, he states: “to make the argument [...]” that “gays seem like passionate defenders of [...] mainstream liberal culture” “[...] is to be disingenuous about the relation between homosexual behaviour and the revulsion it inspires.” Bersani quips ironically that this revulsion “is a big mistake: what we’re really up to is pluralism and diversity, and getting buggered is [...] incidental”.¹²¹ Bersani relates this to the “epidemic of displacements” in theory, what he describes as a retreat from the “concrete practice of fellatio and sodomy” as well as other aspects of gay culture at the time of writing.¹²² This thesis of revulsion paradoxically affirms and contests the theorist bell hooks’ understanding of queerness as “not who you’re having sex with, but about being at odds with everything around it”.¹²³ While there is disagreement on the importance of sex to queer identity, both thinkers affirm the fundamental alienation between it and society at large.

It is here where we find analogies between the Weird and homosexuality. We can imagine the Weird as an outside to the heteronormative world’s quotidian. Gay sex and gay identity is, or ought to be, alien to the paradigm of heteropatriarchal society: as alien to it as Cthulhu is to bookish New England academics. When Fisher opens his discussion of the Weird he describes how the mere presence of a thing of the outside complicates ontologies of the quotidian: “the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid [...] it is our conceptions that must be inadequate.”¹²⁴ This mirrors the interaction between Bersani’s rectum-as-grave conception of gay sex as demeaning to the masculine ideal. The idea of erotic realities existing outwith the violent norms of heteropatriarchal society is necessarily fatal to the idea of heteropatriarchy itself. Philosopher Jonas Ceika’s analysis of the Weird-horror film *Hellraiser*, an adaptation of gay author Clive Barker’s novella *The Hellbound Heart* affirms this view.^{125, 126} Weird monsters representative of nonstandard modes

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 26.

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹²³ bell hooks, 'Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body', *YouTube*, 07 May 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>>, [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

¹²⁴ Fisher, p. 15.

¹²⁵ Jonas Ceika, 'Hellraiser, Bataille, and Limit Experiences', *YouTube*, 29 Oct 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ge0P8z_q1M>, [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

¹²⁶ Clive Barker, *The Hellbound Heart* (Harper-Collins, 2008).

of eroticism, Ceika argues citing Henry Jenkins, are deployed to “to reshape our sensibilities” and to “invert or transform dominant ideological assumptions.”^{127,128}

In *Brainwyrms* by Alison Rumfitt there is another manifestation of this connection, specifically in the realm of gender identity and trans-ness. Both of Rumfitt’s central characters, Frankie and Vanya, are trans: Frankie is a trans woman and Vanya is non-binary.¹²⁹ However, rather than the outside manifesting through their marginalised identities, Rumfitt turns the typical dynamic on its head. Throughout the novel, both characters are menaced by a transphobic cult of cisgender individuals. The members of the cult include Vanya’s mother, horrified at her child’s assertion of their gender identity, and several other pillars of cis-hetero-normative society: including a character clearly based on transphobic¹³⁰ children’s author J. K. Rowling.¹³¹ The cult eventually captures Frankie, forcibly impregnating her with a parasite they have nurtured in their own bodies. Frankie dies birthing the ‘conqueror worm’, a Weird monster that Vanya nurtures as a surrogate parent.¹³² Rumfitt locates her Weird in the transphobic venom of cis-normative society, rather than operating on the assumption of the inherent Weird-ness of LGBTQI identity. In doing so, she retains the interplay between gay or trans identity at large but explores this dynamic from an inventively alternative angle.

I would temper this discussion with a caveat. The mere deployment of Weird aesthetics and the hallmarks of the outside does not automatically code a sexual encounter or an element within a narrative as queer. Such a piece of sleight-of-hand would brush against Bersani’s taboo against dodging the concrete realities of gay sex and gay bodies in favour of a fluffier hetero-friendly understanding of what queerness is. Aside from any moral representative qualm that this might invoke in writer or reader, it would not be an honest or effective way of examining the multiplication effect that discussion of queer identity, sex, and bodies have on the mode of the Weird.

In ‘Lets Talk About Snails’ the transcendence of both characters represents a step away from the farce-Edwardian social mores of the story’s setting and towards a future where they

¹²⁷ Čeika, ‘Hellraiser, Bataille, and Limit Experiences’.

¹²⁸ Henry Jenkins, ‘Monstrous Beauty and Mutant Aesthetics: Rethinking Matthew Barney’s Relationship to the Horror Genre’, *MIT*, 24 Oct 2022 <<https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/horror.html>> [accessed 05 Mar 2024].

¹²⁹ Alison Rumfitt, *Brainwyrms*, (Cipher Press, 2023) pp. 39-40.

¹³⁰ Brendan Morrow, ‘J.K. Rowling’s Transphobia Controversy: A Complete Timeline’, *The Week*, 13 Feb 2023 <<https://theweek.com/feature/1020838/jk-rowlings-transphobia-controversy-a-complete-timeline>> [Accessed at 05 Mar 2024].

¹³¹ Rumfitt, *Brainwyrms*, p. 103.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 296.

might 'twine together'. Snails are hermaphrodites and the sexual encounter between them operates outwith any modes of sex and gender that human observers might care to project on them. The promised end-state of cochlean apotheosis wherein the protagonist and his audience 'twines' together is a sort of universalised orgy: the total elimination of any distinction erected by heteropatriarchal norms in an act of total coupling. This is, of course, compromised by the fact that both characters in 'Snails' are cisgender and, being a man and a woman, any coupling between them is necessarily heterosexual. Where the queer element is introduced, if it is introduced, is in the possibility of a universalised transformation and coupling.

In the interactive novella *Under, Under the Earth* that forms the majority of this collection the protagonist encounters a queer character and, dependent on the decisions they make, has queer sex. Nirn is a Dweller, a general name for a group of sentient inhabitants of the inner-Earth subject to colonial exploitation by the powers of the surface. Nirn's species' anatomy is 'plastic' and can alter depending on their whims. As a result they are all, on some level, gender-fluid. Through the function of the interactive narrative, the reader can decide the specifics of the anatomy Nirn exhibits in the episode although in each the coupling between them and the protagonist is hazily described.

The possibility of the Weird as queer underscores Fisher's initial description of the mode. It highlights the *jouissance* that Fisher describes. One feels delight in experiencing the true remit of ones sexuality and identity, this delight is complicated by the revulsion that heteropatriarchal society exhibits towards this remit and the self-loathing that this revulsion engenders in the gay individual. The Weird as a mode is not inherently queer, but the mirroring of the destabilizing relationship between the outside and the quotidian and the homosexual and the heteropatriarchal allows for a synchronicity between queerness and the mode.

As well as allowing for a locus to convey the other themes of the anthology, the Weird is a very useful aesthetic mode to work in in se. This utility primarily expresses itself as a heuristic for the exploration of various modes of transgression and trespass. A Weird tale will always include the elimination of a border, the violation of a border. This border dissolves either in the body, when a form is blended to create a grotesque monster, or in the space between the outside and the quotidian itself, which the monster or outer element must cross to spur the narrative into action. This central theme of the Weird is what makes it so useful for the exploration of diverse topics.

No mode of fiction is better built to embody the crossing of boundaries, perhaps because categorically it is built to discuss such a topic. A Weird tale is not a Weird tale unless this transgression occurs. This allows for a unique interplay with modes of transgressive fiction, such as horror and erotica. This further allows for the kind of interrogation surrounding hybridity and the monstrous not possible in other speculative modes. Its versatility and its generic slipperiness allows for a further breadth of commentary impossible with a purely speculative mode.

In the following chapters I will outline the ways in which my use of this mode allows me to better discuss the major themes of this collection. Concerns of hybridity and grotesquery will be particularly useful in the discussion of the ecological themes of the collection. The efficacy of the Weird in the depiction and discussion of limits and the crossing of borders will be useful in the discussion of travel and transit. As it is the aesthetic backbone of this collection, I will use the groundwork that I have established here to explain why I have chosen it to represent both travel and ecology.

ECOLOGY

Having articulated an understanding and a definition for the Weird in the previous chapter, I would like to turn to the second concern of this collection and thesis: ecology and climate collapse. The notion that the degradation of the biosphere by human-made technologies, processes, and practices is the province of the yet-to-come is a fiction. 2022 saw record catastrophes across the world related to the escalating conditions of climate collapse. From the most destructive flooding in a century in Bangladesh and parts of Northeast India to heatwaves in northern Europe responsible for wildfires and the deaths of thousands, ecological collapse is not now, nor has it ever been, theoretical.^{1,2} At the same time COP26, the United Nations forum on the climate crisis held in the author's home city, saw national and international commitments falter or break.³ An apparently recent characteristic of the Anthropocene, the portion of geologic time where humans have the capability to drastically affect the planet in ways never before realised, is the inability of human institutions to actively recognize the potential for destruction and harm.⁴

In literary terms it has been asserted that fiction as a whole is 'failing' climate change. So opens *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh, which argues that a focus on the personal, petty, and human undermines literary fiction's potential to understand and document the crisis. With reference to Ian McEwan's *Solar* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*, two early 21st century works that use the crisis as a backdrop will be examined with Ghosh's criticisms in mind. The notion that we might use alternative literary modes to understand climate change, rather than the soi-disant mode of the literary, will be the subject of the rest of this chapter.

Through analysis of critics and theorists working through the trouble of the climate crisis we may be able to create a set of understandings that we could call 'Weird Ecology'. This may involve interpreting the climate crisis, the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene, through the tropes and modal conventions of Weird fiction. Theorists like Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, and Wilhelm Flusser write on ecology but their understandings of

¹ Esha Mitra, 'Floods and landslides kill 10 in northeast India after heavy rain', *CNN*, 20 May 2022 <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/18/india/assam-india-rain-flooding-intl-hnk/index.html>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

² Reuters, 'EU saw 53,000 excess deaths in July amid record heatwave', *Global News*, 16 Sep 2022 <<https://globalnews.ca/news/9134651/european-union-excess-deaths-july/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

³ Michael Sheldrick, 'COP26: A Failure For The Planet And The World's Poor', *Forbes* 15 Nov 2021 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/globalcitizen/2021/11/15/cop26-a-failure-for-the-planet-and-the-worlds-poor/?sh=7903cd092275>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁴ Paul Crutzen, 'The 'Anthropocene'', *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, ed. by Eckhart Ehlers, Thomas Krafft, pp. 13-18 (Springer, 2006) p. 13.

ecology find many parallels to common understandings of Weird fiction. The Anthropocene and the climate collapse, too, prevail as obsessions for writers of Weird fiction. Jeff VanderMeer's *Area X* trilogy, short stories like China Miéville's *Covehithe*, and the astoundingly Weird video game *Disco Elysium* by Robert Kurvitz, Aleksander Rostov, and Helen Hindpere touch both on human relationships to ecology and anthropogenic eschatologies.

This chapter shall marry the clearly suited camps of the Weird and the ecological. It shall interrogate the strengths of the Weird in the representation of the Chthulucene. With both reference to authors working in the mode itself and theorists applying their interpretations to the crisis, a working definition of Weird ecology shall be set out and its presence within my own work will be illuminated and expounded upon.

Much has been made of the method by which writers, critics, and theorists refer to the climate crisis. Donna Haraway devotes a large portion of *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* to the naming of the “scandals of times”.⁵ Timothy Morton in his *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* takes special care to refer to the climate crisis as ‘global warming’ specifically, considering more general terms such as ‘climate change’ more neutral and therefore mollifying.⁶ To the author it is clear that the consequences of human actions on the world’s climate extend beyond simple warming. Recent years have seen freak snowstorms, hurricanes, flooding, as manifestations of this collapse

⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016) pp. 2-3.

⁶ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobject: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) p. 3.

beyond the fires and desertification that an increase in temperature promises.^{7,8 9,10,11} Nor do I wish to rely exclusively on terms such as Paul Crutzen's 'Anthropocene' or Jason Moore's 'Capitalocene'.^{12,13} The notion of a change in geologic period is useful, and the framing of the crisis as caused by capitalism and by human action are necessary for a full understanding. To me, however, the nature of the crisis is one of omnidirectional collapse: as weather events spiral out of control, species are exterminated, and the certitudes of the environment and the biosphere are eroded.¹⁴ In this text the manifold events and circumstances of the Capitalo/Anthropocene will be referred to as 'climate collapse', 'ecological collapse', 'the climate crisis' and so forth. These names will often append the phrases anthropogenic or 'capitalogenic' in order to make clear the parties and interests responsible for the collapse.

⁷ Jacob Ohara, Ashley Minazi, and Todd Wiseman, "It looked like the end of the world": Listen to the stories of Texans who lived through 2021's historic winter storm', *The Texas Tribune*, 17 Feb 2022 <<https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/17/texas-winter-storm-2021-stories/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁸ Christina M. Patricola and Michael F. Wehner, 'Anthropogenic influences on major tropical cyclone events', *Nature*, 563, pp339–346 (2018) doi:10.1038/s41586-018-0673-2.

⁹ Shehnaz Khan, 'Pakistan flooding: Millions still homeless, says aid volunteer', *BBC*, 30 Dec 2022 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-64068860>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

¹⁰ G.J. Van Oldernborgh, F. Krikken, S. Lewis, N.J. Leach, F. Lehner, K.R. Saunders, M. van Weele, K. Haustein, S. Lee, D. Wallom, S. Sparrow, J. Arrighi, R.K. Singh, M.K van Aalst, S.Y. Philip, R. Vautard, and F.E.L. Otto, 'Attribution of the Australian bushfire risk to anthropogenic climate change', *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences*, 21.3, pp. 941–960 (2021) doi:10.5194/nhess-21-941-2021.

¹¹ Mike Hulme and Mick Kelly, 'Exploring the links between Desertification and Climate Change', *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 35.6, pp. 4-45 (1993) doi:10.1080/00139157.1993.9929106.

¹² Crutzen, 'The Anthropocene', p. 15.

¹³ Jason W. Moore, 'The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44.3, pp. 594-630 (2017) doi:10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036.

¹⁴ Fred Naggs, 'Saving Living Diversity in the Face of the Unstoppable 6th Mass Extinction: A Call for Urgent International Action', *The Journal of Population and Sustainability*, 1.2 pp. 67-81 (Apr 2017) doi:10.3197/jps.2017.1.2.67.

Amitav Ghosh and the Centrality of the Improbable

Amitav Ghosh in his *The Great Derangement* speaks at length on the inability of the modern novel to confront the improbable. This inability, it is argued, has led to a unique paralysis in literary fiction that renders it further unable to accurately describe the stresses of the climate crisis. This inability will be tested with reference to two works of early 21st century literary fiction: *Solar* by Ian McEwan and *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver. Per our definition and analysis in the last chapter we shall evaluate whether the mode of the Weird is a suitable one for climate fictions that understand the importance of the unprecedented and the improbable. Ghosh explicitly rules out science fiction and other speculative modes in later chapters, but the mutable and shifting character of the Weird potentially holds the key to its use as an exception from these judgements.

The modern novel, Ghosh asserts, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable.¹⁵ This is illustrated in his account of witnessing a freak tornado on Delhi's Maurice Nagar street in 1978.¹⁶ If it were to be written into a novel, Ghosh argues, it would be taken as a “contrivance of last resort.”¹⁷ The emergence of the freak weather event bereft of the context and what critic Franco Moretti describes as ‘filler’ renders it improbable in narrative in spite of its presence and evident probability in the lived experience of the author.¹⁸ Filler, according to Moretti, is the mechanism by which the “regularity” of bourgeois life is established and reinforced: a narrativizing tool that functions as the ‘opposite of narrative’, conjuring calmness and everyday normalcy through description of quotidian experience.¹⁹

In his discussion on filler, Ghosh cites Gustave Flaubert and the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The former works in a form well established in his native western Europe and therefore serves as a useful point of comparison to the latter, a novelist attempting a radical break from traditional storytelling methods on his subcontinent in an effort to try and assume the mode popular in Europe at the time. Moretti's filler is used in both Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* in the same manner: a picturesque description of pastoral scenery. In *Bovary* a “[...] meadow stretches under a bulge of low hills

¹⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) p.22-23.

¹⁶ ‘HT this day: March 18 1978 – Tornado Hits North Delhi: 30 Dead’, *Hindustan Times*, 11 Mar 2022 < <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/htthis-day-march-18-1978-tornado-hits-north-delhi-30-dead-101647009953381.html> > [Accessed 05 May 2024]

¹⁷ Ghosh p. 21.

¹⁸ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (Verso, 2013).

¹⁹ Ghosh p. 25.

[...]”while in *Rajmohan* one “[...] describes through the intervening foliage [...]”.^{20,21} These excerpts, to Ghosh, underscore the “mimetic ambition” of the use of filler and therefore of the modern novel: to imitate the calm, quiet, and orderly expectation of bourgeois life.

The roots of these notions are embedded within literary fiction from its inception, Ghosh argues. The emergence of the form in the 19th century, amid the triumphs of the philosophical schools of gradualism and the inception of the sciences of probability and statistics themselves imprinted upon the nascent form its understandings and expectations. At the same time as the filler of the modern novel was coming into use, Ghosh describes, proponents of geologic gradualism, the notion that changes in geology occur gradually over long periods, was rhetorically triumphing over those who advocated for a school of more dramatic changes by accusing them of primitivism.²² Charles Lyell, one of the founders of geologic uniformitarianism, argued that to believe that nature ‘made leaps’ was a “delusion” akin to ascribing “moral phenomena [...] to the intervention of demons, ghosts, witches and other immaterial and supernatural agents.”²³ “The nineteenth century,” Ghosh writes, “was indeed a time when it was assumed, in both fiction and geology, that Nature was moderate and orderly”.²⁴ The gradualism that came out of this moment eventually became “a set of blinders” that prevented the scientific consensus from fully accepting Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift and Luis and Walter Alvarez’s Chicxulub crater impact hypothesis of the K-T mass extinction until after they had been attested beyond reasonable doubt.^{25,26}

It is this failure to understand and confront the improbable, Ghosh argues, that makes the modern form of the novel so ill-equipped to engage in a discussion of anthropogenic climate change. Ghosh’s principal engagement with the manifestations of the climate collapse is through extreme weather, given his personal experience with the same. To introduce a weather

²⁰ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by Eleanor Marx-Aveling (Project Gutenberg, 2004) < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2413/2413-h/2413-h.htm> > [Accessed 05 May 2024].

²¹ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Rajmohan’s Wife: A Novel* (Chatterjee, 1935) p.90.

²² Ghosh p. 26.

²³ Owen Anderson and Charles Lyell, Uniformitarianism, and Universalist Principles, *Zygon* 42.2 (2007) < https://a8inea.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Charles_Lyell_and_the_uniformity_princip.pdf > [Accessed 05 May 2024].

²⁴ Ghosh p. 27.

²⁵ Imre Josef Demhardt, ‘Alfred Wegener’s Hypothesis on Continental Drift and Its Discussion in Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen’, *Polarforschung*, 75.1, pp. 29-35 (2006).

²⁶ L.W Alvarez, W. Alvarez, F Asaro, and H.V. Michel, ‘Extraterrestrial cause for the Cretaceous–Tertiary extinction’ *Science*, 208, pp. 1095–1108 (1980).

event so extreme and so unprecedented as the tornado he survived, sans the Morettian filler that would mollify, sanitise, and rob the event of its power, would be to risk “banishment” from the “mansion” of literary taste making.²⁷ The conventions of the ‘realist novel’ is hampered by its function. While attempting to contrive a more realistic world through the deployment of filler, these mimetic attempts conceal reality.

To interrogate the extent to which the form is ill-equipped we will now devote some time to two realist works of fiction that purport to be about the climate collapse and the human response to it. In the appendices of *Derangement*, Ghosh mentions both of these works: *Solar* by Ian McEwan and *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver. The former concerns a Nobel-prize winning solar energy physicist beset with marital trouble as well as his scientific and personal travails. The latter concerns an Appalachian housewife confronted by a swarm of monarch butterflies and the scientist who comes to study them.

Solar is concerned primarily with human affairs, intimately and generally. The deliberately repulsive figure of Michael Beard occupies centre stage, recounting the narrative in a limited third person. Beard, an accidental expert in the field of renewable energy, does not initially believe in anthropogenic climate change. Through the course of the narrative, however, he becomes intertwined in research into, first, wind and, then, solar energy research. In spite of this stage-setting, Beard’s travails are personal. The novel opens with his cuckolding by a succession of men: first a physically abusive builder, Tarpin, and then one of the PhD students he supervises, Aldous. Aldous’ accidental death, and Beard’s framing of Tarpin for his murder, provides the foundation of the rest of the novel’s events: Beard is able to claim Aldous’ research as his own and subsequently ensconces himself in the field of solar energy research. But aside from this the presence of ecological elements is sparse. Other than a memorable interlude wherein Beard is almost chased down by a polar bear during a visit to an arctic research station,²⁸ little in the plot actually features the ecological concerns that Beard has built his fraudulent life around. More ink of *Solar* is spilled in descriptions of Beard’s infidelities and sexual inadequacies than to the actual reverberations of human action on the biosphere.²⁹

The approach to something that might constitute an embodiment of Ghosh’s notions of the improbable comes in the novel’s third act wherein Beard’s misdeeds catch up with him.

²⁷ Ghosh p. 88.

²⁸ Ian McEwan, *Solar* (Random House, 2010) pp. 69-70.

²⁹ Jason Cowley, ‘Review: Solar by Ian McEwan’, *The Observer*, 14 Mar 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/14/solar-ian-mcewan>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

His nascent solar power plant is sabotaged, potentially by the man he framed for murder, he is diagnosed with cancer, his business partner abandons him, his theft of solar panel technology from his student is discovered, and the novel closes mere moments before his probable death from a heart attack. This moment, wherein the consequences of the protagonist's actions accumulate and then destroy him, might on a level mirror humanity's own suffering thanks to the consequences of reckless carbon dioxide emissions, unsustainable farming practices, and so on.^{30,31} However, the impact of these consequences onto one person who is also solely responsible for the mistakes and malice that led to them makes for a poor representation for climate collapse. Anthropogenic climate change is inarguably a systemic issue and will visit its worst consequences on those least responsible for it.³²

Solar is in itself not about climate change as such, it is more concerned with the human world that surrounds the problem of climate change. While exhaustively researched, the scientific filler of the novel offers little more than another metric by which its protagonist can be adjudged a failure. Beard's failings in the novel are personal. The consequences of his failings are personal, visited almost exclusively on him. This frame of the personal, the petty, and the bourgeois minutiae of Beard's intimate life prevent any true examination of anthropogenic climate change, the scope of which extends vastly beyond the sex life of any one physicist. Ghosh writes that fictional engagement with anthropogenic climate change involves an acknowledgement of the centrality of the improbable.³³ At *Solar*'s close, an overweight man suffering from cancer dies of a heart attack.³⁴ A more probable conclusion could not be conceived.

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Flight Behaviour* is another work by Ghosh touted as a serious engagement with ecology from the perspective of literary fiction. In a few respects it is more successful than *Solar* in this. The incipient moment of the narrative, wherein protagonist Dellarobia Turnbow discovers a swarm of monarch butterflies prior to her embarking on an

³⁰ Zeke Hausfather, 'Analysis: Global CO2 emissions from fossil fuels hit record high in 2022' *Carbon Brief*, 11 Nov 2022 < <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-global-co2-emissions-from-fossil-fuels-hit-record-high-in-2022/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

³¹ Stephen Russell, 'Everything You Need to Know About Agricultural Emissions', *World Resources Institute*, 29 May 2014 < <https://www.wri.org/insights/everything-you-need-know-about-agricultural-emissions>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

³² Sebastian Bathiany, Vasilis Dakos, Marten Scheffer, and Timothy M. Lenton, 'Climate models predict increasing temperature variability in poor countries', *Science Advances* (May 2018) doi:10.1126/sciadv.aar5809.

³³ Ghosh pp. 22-23.

³⁴ McEwan, pp. 278-279.

affair. The strangeness of this moment is carried through in the prose, the wings of the insects compared to fire sparking: with later Biblical allusions describing them as flames from a burning bush. The singular unprecedented nature of the butterflies' arrival bears more than a striking resemblance to Ghosh's own encounter with a tornado. The butterflies in flight, to Turnbow, are even referred to as "Twisters of brightness against grey sky".³⁵ The quasi-magical appearance of the butterflies, couched in an ecstatic atmosphere of pseudo-religious revelation, is an effective communication of Ghosh's principle understanding of ecological collapse as an unprecedented wonder.

However, despite the laudable expression of the improbable and the nonhuman, the structural failure at the centre of *Flight Behaviour's* engagement with anthropogenic climate change is identical to *Solar's*. As Turnbow's life progresses with the fact of the swarm of insects on her doorstep, her understanding of herself shifts and changes: eventually departing the 'natural habitat' of her failing marriage and dead-end life working on her in-laws' farm. By the end of the novel, the reader is confronted with the somewhat troubling implication that the purpose of the butterflies in the narrative is a metaphor for its protagonist's own struggles.³⁶ Just as the monarchs are swept away from Mexico by the changing climate, Turnbow's life is knocked off-course by her shotgun marriage to Cub. *Flight Behaviour* begins its engagement with the realities of climate collapse with a studied and nuanced description of the realities of ecological destruction but its focus on the human in the narrative bends all focus towards this element.

We may add a caveat here. While we might say that these attempts to accurately reflect the realities of ecological collapse are unsuccessful, we need not exclude literary fiction as a whole from discussion. If we consider literary fiction to be 'realist' it will necessarily adapt to the new realities caused by the emergent monster of the Anthropocene, despite its 19th century roots. Ghosh's argument may be that literary fiction is in se unable to reflect and centre non-human presences, but ours need not be. Indeed, his argument extends beyond a repudiation of the literary. In *Derangement*, some speculative modes and genres, such as science fiction, are dismissed even as others, such as magical realism, are cautiously endorsed. We shall examine the endorsement, the dismissal, and the caution in our own evaluation as to whether our chosen mode of the Weird might provide an effective medium for the concerns of the Anthropocene.

³⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour* (Harper Collins, 2012) p. 72.

³⁶ Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*.

Even as he dismisses the literary, Ghosh does not cleave to the speculative. The problem with “magical or surreal” accounts of extreme weather and crisis is precisely their surreal or magical natures. Extreme weather events, the consequences of anthropogenic climate collapse, “are actually happening on earth at this time.” We might therefore consider it a failure to represent them through modes such as this. The problem with “cli-fi”, climate-focused science fiction, Ghosh expounds later, is that these stories are set “in the future”. The immediacy and presence of climate change in the present is necessary to Ghosh for a true communication of its phenomena.³⁷ Citing speculative fiction author Margaret Atwood, he raises the contention that every speculative work of fiction is located “in another time, in another dimension, through a doorway into the spirit world, or on the other side of a threshold which divides the known from the unknown.” All modes of speculative fiction in their totality “might be placed under the same ‘wonder tale’ umbrella.”^{38,39} We might then say that Ghosh rejects the speculative definitively as a medium for climate discussions.

Ghosh, earlier in *Derangement*, is at pains to describe the ‘uncanny’ nature of ecological phenomena. In describing the moment of ‘recognition’ that occurs when meeting the eyes of a tiger and the kind of realisations that this awakens more broadly in the human mind aware of the scale and seriousness of ecological collapse. The “improbable events that are beating at our doors seem to have stirred a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be the most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness.”⁴⁰ But this uncanniness is not the same as Freud’s return of the repressed, states Ghosh. This uncanny “pertains to nonhuman forces and beings”.⁴¹ While literary revenants and ghosts were once human, the new uncanny beings of the climate crisis “have no human referents at all.”⁴²

It will be recalled that Fisher’s *The Weird and the Eerie* was an attempt to separate the traditional Freudian concept of the uncanny into two distinct modes. Whereas the Eerie is what Fisher calls the return of the Freudian repressed, the Weird is the twin of the same: the other

³⁷ Ghosh, p. 97.

³⁸ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (Little Brown, 2011) p. 8.

³⁹ Ghosh p. 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ *MIT*, 12 Sep 2012

<<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁴² Ghosh, p. 43.

constituent part of the uncanny.⁴³ Ghosh's description of the tiger, the hurricane, the tornado as revenants without precedence: strange entities that emerge and challenge and distort with their emergence and presence correlates impressively strongly to Miéville's description of the Weird as a "hallucinatory/nihilist novum", aping the uncanny's "strategy of reversion" to evoke a similarly, even more profound, destabilizing effect.⁴⁴

It is this unprecedented nature of the Weird that aligns it most with Ghosh's parameters. Like the tornado, the ingresses of the Weird's manifestations into a tale are without precedence: without the Morettian 'filler' necessary for literary fiction's mimetic ambition. Definitionally the Weird elements of tales in the mode involve a radical ingress: an ingress as sudden and as powerful as the arrival of the monarch butterflies in *Flight Behaviour*. Similar to magical realism in which the quotidian universe is breached by surreal elements, the arrival of the Weird always disturbs, distorts, and destabilizes. Just as Ghosh describes the mimetic ambition of the modern novel actually functioning as a concealment of reality through the flattening of the unprecedented by fillers, the radical strangeness of the Weird allows for a more complete reflection of the unprecedented, sudden, and disruptive nature of capitalogenic climate change despite its fundamentally speculative nature. Just as Ghosh describes climate change leading to an erosion of the assumptions of the 19th and 20th centuries, so the breach of the outside and the teratological into a Weird tale necessarily erodes the certainties previously enjoyed therein.

It is further the Weird's necessary connection to the quotidian and the real that may ground the mode in a way necessary for its effective use as a descriptive mode for the Anthropocene. Ghosh correctly states that the weakness of speculative modes in their potential description is in their reliance on unreality and their displacement. The issue with novels writing the effects of climate change hundreds of years into the future is that any events they depict must necessarily take place in that distant time period, robbing the climate emergency of its immediacy and its unprecedented nature. According to Fisher, the Weird is not a purely speculative mode.⁴⁵ The form of a Weird tale relies on a breach: a breach of the outside into the quotidian. Radical strangeness must penetrate the walls of the real for a truly successful deployment of the mode. While the Weird still occupies a firm place outwith Ghosh's 'manor house' of bourgeois fiction, it is a speculative mode that is still partially reliant on mimesis.

We may also speak of the Weird's nonhuman focus as a point of communion for Ghosh's blueprint for ecologically minded fiction. Early in *Derangement* the "urgent proximity

⁴³ Fisher, p. 60.

⁴⁴ China Miéville, 'M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire', p. 110.

⁴⁵ Fisher, p. 15.

of non-human presences” is referred to as a defining aspect of the era of anthropogenic climate change.⁴⁶ The Weird with its teratological obsessions and frequent invocation of non- or ab-human presences is a mode as twined with the nonhuman as can be.⁴⁷ The tradition of teratology within the Weird tale has a particularly elucidatory function here. A Weird monster is not a conscious being in the way other speculative or fantastical lifeforms are. Cthulhu in Lovecraft is closer to a worldwide catastrophe, a natural force, or a principle of physics: while we only ever encounter most Weird monster-gods indirectly, their effects are felt universally on any story that features them.⁴⁸

My aim for this exegesis is not, as Ghosh’s is, to necessarily exclude literary fiction as a whole from discussions involving the climate crisis. Ghosh’s unique conception and interrogation of some of the failures of certain literary works is however very useful to writers working within the mode. In particular, it describes the strengths that the Weird affords us in discussions involving ecology. Ghosh’s demands for the centrality of the improbable as well as the presence and proximity of nonhuman forces are both adequately fulfilled by the traditional concerns of the Weird. We need not fully affirm his conclusions beyond these.

The following chapters will further illustrate this suitability by drawing connections between ecological scholarship in order to further describe these connections. Beginning with a discussion of Weird works that examine the climate crisis, we will then examine the Weirdness of ecological scholarship. We will discuss in turn sympoiesis in Donna Haraway, hyperobjects in Timothy Morton, and the vampyroteuthis through Vilém Flusser. The analysis of each writer informs another synchronicity between Ecological scholarship and the Weird that contributed to the writing of *LIMINAL*.

⁴⁶ Ghosh, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Miéville, ‘M.R. James’ p. 113.

⁴⁸ Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’.

No Truce with the Cthulucene

To further evaluate the applicability of the Weird for the representation of the concerns of anthropogenic climate collapse, it is necessary to turn to Weird stories themselves. ‘Covehithe’ is a short story by China Miéville concerning the discovery and ecological discussion of animated oil-rigs in a small English coastal town. The Southern Reach trilogy by Jeff Vandermeer is a series of novels chronicling the titular government department’s investigations of *Area X*, an emerging geographical phenomenon expanding in a rural stretch of the United States. *Disco Elysium* is a video game released in 2019, the expansive narrative of which touches on apocalypse, ecology, and the relationship between the human and the non-human.

In the short story ‘Covehithe’ by China Miéville, a father and daughter sneak into the eponymous seaside hamlet to catch a glimpse of a nesting oil rig. In the world of the short story ‘Platform Events’, wherein scuppered, disused, or destroyed rig platforms animate and take on the characteristics of a living organism, are an extant phenomenon. Rather than a cataclysmic event, the ambulatory -and reproducing- oil rigs have been digested into the everyday in the short story’s world. There’s a visitor centre in the hamlet with ‘activities’ for children, even a camera-feed set up to watch the rig-eggs gestate and hatch.⁴⁹

The ecological implications of a walking oil-rig as a Weird monster-god are rich. Human-made constructions, intimately connected with the most devastating effects of climate change, brought to life and brought to shore destroying everything in their wake could be read as metaphorical analogues for the process and character of anthropogenic climate change in itself. This premise is not unlike that of the *Pacific Rim* series of films, wherein monstrous *kaiju* are born at sea and swim to the shores of human civilization intent on destruction.⁵⁰ The ‘platform events’, however, do not behave like *kaiju*: the only thing monstrous about them is their size. What devastation they do cause is on account of their size: the “inefficient deadly motion” of the accidental intrusion of their bulk into human landscape. When human society has acclimatised to the extent that a Platform Event is considered typical, though catastrophic, they are studied: research teams are deployed, visitor centres are set up.⁵¹ The phenomenon of

⁴⁹ China Miéville, ‘Covehithe’, *The Guardian*, 22 Apr 2011
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/22/china-mieville-covehithe-short-story>>
[Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁵⁰ *Pacific Rim*, dir. by Guillermo del Toro (USA, 2013).

⁵¹ Miéville, ‘Covehithe’.

the platform events is one that is decidedly ecological in the context of the world of the short story.

Miéville writes that the Weird can be understood as an expression of ‘bad sublime’, and in *Covehithe* this function is deployed to further serve its ecological bent.⁵² In Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman’s *Good Omens* Pollution, a reimagining of Pestilence, the first horseman of the apocalypse, describes the beautiful sunsets caused by the releasing of chemicals into the atmosphere.⁵³ Similarly, the Weird bad-sublime of the Platform Events is evident in the narrative. They leave behind trails of “rainbow-filmed liquid spoor”, observed up close one can see the “edificial flanks, the concrete and rust of them, the iron of the pylon barnacled, shaggy with benthic growth.” In one particularly memorable moment Dughan, the protagonist, imagines two of the platforms breeding: “An inhuman pornography of great slams and grinding, horrified whales veering from where one rig mounted another, warmed by hydrothermal vents.”⁵⁴

Jeff Vandermeer’s *Area X* trilogy concerns the monitoring of and expeditions into the titular region, a transformed stretch of coastal America, by the Southern Reach organisation. In the film adaptation of the first book, *Annihilation*, the area’s transformation is caused by a meteor strike but the reason behind, and true nature of, the change is left unexpounded in the novels. The ecological conceit of the story was, according to Vandermeer, directly inspired by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the catastrophic impact the disaster had on the biosphere of northern Florida.⁵⁵ The ecological elements of the *Area X* trilogy are consequently woven comprehensively into the Weird horror of the work as a whole.

A memorable episode in *Annihilation* concerns a creature named by the protagonist, a biologist, as the ‘Crawler’. Inhabiting a lighthouse on a coastal stretch of *Area X*, the Crawler inscribes an endless message in script written in a kind of lichen or fungus. The text of the Crawler’s message, beginning “Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead [...]”⁵⁶ This text is, according to Vandermeer, taken directly from a dream that he had concerning the Deepwater Horizon spill.⁵⁷ Beyond this,

⁵² Miéville, ‘The Weird’, p. 515.

⁵³ Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, *Good Omens* (Gollancz, 1990).

⁵⁴ Miéville, ‘Covehithe’.

⁵⁵ Andrew Strombeck, ‘Inhuman writing in Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach trilogy’, *Textual Practice*, 34.8 pp. 1365-1382 (2020). doi:0.1080/0950236X.2019.1583684.

⁵⁶ Jeff Vandermeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy: Annihilation, Authority, Acceptance* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014) pp. 48-49.

⁵⁷ Strombeck, ‘Inhuman writing’.

however, the Crawler is a microcosm of the marriage of the ecological and the Weird that the novel attempts to effect. The text, which has no definitive meaning or beginning or end, is akin to the glossolalia of earlier haute-Weird works: the elder language expressed in phrases like ‘*Chtulhu fhtaghn*’⁵⁸ effects a similar tension between the presence of implication and the absence of meaning. At the same time the nature of the Crawler itself, being a creature so Weirdly hybridised that an attempt to define its components is impossible, and its biologically active calligraphy brings the ecological elements of the novel to the fore in a distinctly Weird way.

These elements are even more present in *Annihilation*’s film adaptation, directed by Alex Garland, which deviates significantly from the novel. Within the film’s *Area X* the human form blends constantly: characters turn into plants, fungus spectacularly disrupts the human form, and shark DNA is found inside a crocodile. In the most memorable passage of the film, the protagonists are terrorised by a rotting bear-like creature that has learned to imitate the death-wails of those it has devoured.⁵⁹ Rather than the construction of transcendent monster-gods, the creatures of both *Annihilations* are blends of forms that bring distinct biological categories to the fore. Rather than a superficial blending of forms, Garland and Vandermeer’s hybrids are intimately concerned with the biology of their constituents as opposed to a mere mining of the natural world for teratological lucre. This focus on the animal non-human, rather than the mere nonhuman, is another effective expression of Ghosh’s uncanny delivered through Weird fiction.

Disco Elysium is a video game initially released in 2019 with an updated release, or ‘final cut’, falling in 2020. While the elements in the story relating to the climate collapse are initially opaque, as the player progresses through the narrative they come more and more into the foreground. We learn the details of *Elysium*’s world piecemeal throughout the narrative. Our protagonist, riven with amnesia after a multi-day bender, learns of his world and his circumstances through the game’s RPG-style multiple-choice dialogue trees. From these we learn that the world of *Elysium* is divided into isolated pockets of reality, between which are seas of unreality of anti-matter called ‘pale’.

Pale covers 72% of what was once the sphere of *Elysium*’s world, and through the narrative we learn that it is spreading. Areas of the district of Revachol, where the events of the narrative take place, such as the doomed commercial area and the Church of Humanity are

⁵⁸ Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu’.

⁵⁹ Garland, *Annihilation*.

found to be ingress points of pale: holes through which seeps its unreality. At the climax of the narrative, we learn that this creeping crisis is anthropogenic. Human consciousness is causing the pale, the annihilatory biproduct to the “violent, irrepressible miracle” of human sentience.

The key to our knowledge of pale in *Disco Elysium* is an encounter with the cryptid known as Insulindian Phasmid. At first considered a legend, the gigantic stick insect appears from the reeds at the culmination of the game’s narrative. Through a quasi-religious experience, the protagonist communicates with the creature and comes to understand the nature of the pale through this communication.

While the events of the narrative are the kind of secondary-world fantasy that Ghosh cautions against using in *Derangement*, there are multiple instances whereby the narrative meets his criteria for effective discussion of ecological collapse. The protagonist’s encounter with the phasmid is a study in the improbability of the intrusion of the natural world. Though a three-metre tall insect is not a tornado, its appearance is as sudden and as revelatory as the extreme weather events that Ghosh describes. The construction of *Elysium* as a setting is crucial to this. The unreal elements of the narrative are locked from the player in the first instance. Our introduction to Revachol is through mundane elements: a hotel bar, a dockworkers’ strike, a murder. True to the mode, the outside elements creep in with the progress of the narrative. We, in the role of the protagonist, are confronted with the ingress and expression of *Elysium*’s anthropogenic apocalypse and the endangered species that is its herald as improbable events in an otherwise grounded narrative.

Each of these stories is speculative to a greater or a lesser degree. Miéville’s deployment of the unreal might be considered the smallest, with only the platform events separating the world of ‘Covehithe’ from ours. *Elysium* takes place entirely in an, albeit convincingly quotidian, secondary world. Throughout each work’s narrative, the juxtaposition between the quotidian elements of the narrative and the extrusions of the Weird into them is central to each. The destructive and strange phenomena of *Area X* must be managed and understood by Southern Reach. The Platform Events of Covehithe are studied and digested into popular human ecological understandings. The Insulindian phasmid and the apocalyptic prospects of pale expansion cut all the stranger against the grubby detective plot-line of *Disco Elysium*. Ghosh’s metrics require fiction that can confront and acknowledge the improbable. By requiring the quotidian as a necessary element in Weird storytelling, the mode offers a powerful method of deploying it.

We shall now approach the synchronicity of ecological scholarship and Weird fiction from the other end: illustrating the ways in which scholarship reflects tropes common to the mode.

Haraway, Chthonia, and Weird Sympoiesis

While ecology has been a thread throughout theorist and critic Donna Haraway's corpus, of particular interest to a Weird understanding of ecology is her 2016 work *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Within it she explores notions of *sympoiesis*, making-with, an alternative explanatory model for living systems and one that bears a striking resemblance to existing Weird conceptions of hybridity. *Trouble* is further littered with allusions to Weird works, with even the title a playful call-back to a Lovecraftian monster. These coalesce to make *Trouble* a work of criticism that can be understood as constitutive of the Weird, a work of theory that is equally at home in the mode as Miéville or VanderMeer.

In *Trouble's* title Haraway alludes superficially to Lovecraft's Weird monster-god but a deeper interrogation finds these concerns of the teratological and the tentacular deeply enmeshed within the concerns of the text.⁶⁰ The 'chthonic ones' are a device that appears in *Trouble's* earlier chapters and, beyond the superficial confluence of consonants, reflect an attempt to encapsulate a potent species of Weird-Ecology. Their name derives from Haraway's interpretations of Greek myth: as well as nameless 'hairy', 'tentacular' beings: the gorgon Medusa and the pre-Hellenic mythical motif of the *Potnia Theron* are enumerated amongst the ranks of the Chthonic ones.^{61,62} In the text of *Trouble*, the chthonic "demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters".⁶³ In mythology Medusa and the chthonic deities in general represented a pre-Indo European substrate pantheon of natural and subterranean deities, as opposed to the Olympian 'ouranic' pantheon of sky-gods.⁶⁴ Haraway invokes such beings as metaphor in her writing in the same way the adherents of these deities did in antiquity: as a contrast and a rebuke to *Anthropos* and anthropocentrism. "They are who they are", they "make and unmake" in themselves and with themselves as opposed to the more problematic and authoritarian *Anthropos*.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Haraway, p. 169.

⁶¹ E.H. Visiak, *Medusa: A Story Of Mystery And Ecstasy And Strange Horror* (Gollancz, 1946).

⁶² James Mellaart, *Catal Huyuk: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (McGraw Hill, 1967).

⁶³ Haraway, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Christopher Faraone, 'The Collapse of Celestial and Chthonic Realms in a Late Antique Apollonian Invocation', *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, ed. by Ra'anana Boustani, Annette Yoshiko Reed, pp. 213-223 (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶⁵ Haraway, p. 2

These chthonic ones are, indisputably, of the Weird. When they are discussed in the text, their nature is hybrid. Writhing with tentacles, stapled together expressions of hybridity, the in-text description of the chthonic ones is laden with Weird potential. Their expression in mythology which Haraway names are constitutive of mythical expressions of the pre-literary Weird. The *Potnia Theron* is literally a nameless, ancient goddess who finds potential expressions back to the earliest roots of human civilization.⁶⁶ John Langan's Weird novella *Mother of Stone* has an aspect of *Potnia* in its titular figure of Cybele.^{67,68} E.H. Visiak's novel *Medusa* takes its title from the chthonic gorgon and the cnidarian after which it was named.⁶⁹ Medusa's own clear hybridity, her pseudo-associations with the tentacular through jellyfish, lace her richly with Weird implication.⁷⁰ More broadly, the notion of substrate, subterranean pantheons are a feature in haute-Weird stories such as Lovecraft's *The Mound* and Algernon Blackwood's *The Willows*.^{71,72} Haraway's invocation as a positive force, rather than as a civilization-ending, racially charged threat is reminiscent of recent Weird fiction that casts a reclamatory eye at the racist tropes of the haute-Weird and pulp eras.

The chthonic and its creatures are a focal point of interest in *LIMINAL*. The vast majority of the setting of 'Under, Under the Earth' takes place in a literal chthonia. The Immer, a place folded into the place of the work's title, is the series of interstitial waystations and destinations charting the protagonist's journey from Aberdeen to Perth. The chthonic, subterranean world is understood as a kind of locus for the Weird. While the geopolitics and the geography of the story's alternate world are not especially dissimilar from our own, When the reader-player enters and experiences the subterranean world where much of the story takes place the distortions to reality and the elements of the outside come much more prominently to the fore. The story 'A Geography of the Hollow Earth' suggests a similar relationship to the outside, the other, and the interior of the earth. The 'visions' that come to the mind of the protagonist concern exclusively the interior of the earth. I wanted to convey the sense of the

⁶⁶ Mellaart, *Catal Huyuk*.

⁶⁷ Lynn Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: the Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (University of California Press, 1999).

⁶⁸ Langan, 'Mother of Stone'.

⁶⁹ Visiak, *Medusa*.

⁷⁰ Antonio Marques and Allen Collins, 'Cladistic analysis of Medusozoa and cnidarian evolution', *Invertebrate Biology*, 123.1, pp.23-42 (2004).

⁷¹ H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Mound', *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009
<<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/mo.aspx>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁷² Algernon Blackwood, 'The Willows', *Project Gutenberg*, 04 Mar 2004
<<https://livros01.livrosgratis.com.br/gu011438.pdf>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

interior of the earth being an expression of, and containment for, the Weird potential of deep time: the pre-historic and pre-human strangeness of natural history and the in se nausea of a non-human past and future.

The notion of the chthonic as a precursor state to the modern, anthropocentric world is also suggested in 'Growth'. While there is little subterranean scenery, cthonia is present in the form of hallmarks of precursor urbanisms, the lamppost, tarmac, wiring, emerging spontaneously in a district that has recently been gentrified. My aim was to play with the notion of cthonia, deep time, in Weird fiction. Rather than a pre-human or a pre-modern past asserting itself through the appearance of a primordial monster-god, the features of industrial urbanism rise to supplant the cosy facades of the gentrified inner city.

In the introductory chapter to *Trouble*, Haraway dissects the manifold names of the current climate emergency. She refers to the 'Anthropocene', a term used by Soviet scientists to refer to the present geologic epoch and popularised by Paul Crutzen to refer to the climate crisis in 2000.⁷³ The 'Capitalocene', an alternative description propagated by Jason Moore which challenges the notion that humankind itself is responsible for the climate emergency, is also considered.⁷⁴ Rather than choose between these descriptions of the current "scandal[.] of time" Haraway hews to both, regarding capitalism and anthropocentrism as contributive causes to the crisis, and proposes an alternative model in the Chthulucene.⁷⁵ Its name is, Haraway is at pains to mention, not derived from the Lovecraftian deity but from *Pimoida Cthulhu*: a spider found in western California. The original description of this spider by Gustavo Hormiga is, however, a specific reference to the Lovecraftian monster-god.⁷⁶ Haraway's stated discomfort with Lovecraft's problematica, as well as a desire to reach for other implications than a mere association with Cthulhu would provide, leads her to distance herself from these connections by removing the 'h' from the end of Cthul(h)u.⁷⁷ Her desire to add connection with the chthonic ones and create further distance, places the same letter between the 'c' and the 't'.

We need not dispute Haraway's desire to distance herself from Lovecraft in our attempts to apply a Weird framing to her Chthulucene. A spider is, itself, a creature rich with teratological implication. A memorable scene in Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* involves an

⁷³ Crutzen, 'The Anthropocene'.

⁷⁴ Moore, 'The Capitalocene'.

⁷⁵ Haraway, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Gustavo Hormiga, 'A revision and cladistic analysis of the spider family Pimoidae (Araneioidea: Araneae)', *Smithsonian Contributions to Zoology*, 549, pp.1-104 (1994) doi:10.5479/si.00810282.549.

⁷⁷ Haraway, p. 174.

extradimensional ingression from a ‘Weaver’, a creature from an alternative reality that mutilates all the principal characters in pursuit of its aesthetics-based morality.⁷⁸ In the tale, the Weaver is literally an outsider: operating on a thread of reality alien to the grounded material interests of the rest of the, human and non-human, characters. Its shape is that of a gigantic spider, with a human hand at the end of each limb. This Weird interest in spiders is well founded in their biology. Joshua Sokol’s ‘The Thoughts of a Spiderweb’ outlines the ways in which some scientists believe that a spider’s web functions as a component of its consciousness.⁷⁹ A spider is not merely teratological in its shape, as hairy, multi-limbed, and strange as any of Haraway’s chthonic ones, but are outsiders in their minds themselves.

A key component of Haraway’s Chthulucene is her concept of sympoiesis. A literal translation of this is ‘making-with’ or ‘making-together’. The phrasing is deliberate. ‘Autopoiesis’ was coined in Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realisation of the Living* as a framework for understanding life and the cells that constitute it.⁸⁰ An autopoietic or ‘self-making’ system is something that organises components to create and re-create itself.

Sympoiesis, as proposed by Haraway, is not only an alternative model for living systems but also an exhortation to understand relationships between living and non-living components. Autopoiesis is, as Haraway describes in the third chapter of *Trouble*, a fiction. “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing.” Haraway instead describes living organisms as interpenetrative assemblages, things that “loop around and through one another, eat each other[.]”⁸¹ The root of sympoietic thinking is the underlying reality that something cannot be said to have made itself in isolation if it requires other things to make the components in its ‘self making’ process.

Rather than a discussion of individuals, individual organisms, species, genera, environments, Haraway proposes an understanding of life as composed of ‘holobionts’. These are rhizomatic holistic assemblages that are constitutive of every biotic system within them.

⁷⁸ Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, pp. 403-405.

⁷⁹ Joshua Sokol, 'The Thoughts of a Spiderweb', *Quanta*, 23 May 2017 <<https://quantamagazine.org/the-thoughts-of-a-spiderweb-20170523/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁸⁰ Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (D. Reidel, 1980).

⁸¹ Haraway p. 58.

^{82,83} Respecting the understanding that a crucial component of certain biotic systems to their non-biological environment, Haraway proposes the term ‘holoents’ for systems that contain non-biotic components.⁸⁴ We might consider a human being and its microbiome a holobiont. The relationship between the two elements is obligatorily symbiotic: neither the human being nor the mass of bacteria, viruses, archaea that subsists on its body can survive without the other.⁸⁵ To understand them as separate individuals or collections of individuals is a mistake as neither can be meaningfully separate, meaningfully autopoietic. The human organism makes-with the gut microbiome in a sympoietic relationship.

We might understand Harawayan sympoiesis as being a deeply Weird concept. The notion of hybridity as explained in chapter one of this exegesis provides a clear analogue with making-with as described by Haraway. Weird hybrids in fiction are comprised of two radically dissonant body-forms making with each other, working together. Considering the figure of Lin in Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* as the typical example of a Weird hybrid, her form comprised of a scarab beetle perched as a head on top of her feminine body, we can see Weird sympoiesis in action.⁸⁶ The entirety of her body works in tandem, a fact particularly in evidence in the production of her art: her materials are chewed up and spat by her head’s mandibles, the resulting slurry is moulded by her anthropomorphic hands.⁸⁷ Lin’s anatomy in *Perdido’s* world of Bas-Lag is not ontologically composed of two separate elements. The idea that her head is derived from a separate organism to her body is, in her view, human chauvinism.⁸⁸ In this way, the union of her radically dissonant elements breaks down the boundaries between species and so-called biological individuals in a similar manner to Haraway’s proposed sympoietic framework.

The Weird erotic and teratophilia are further expression of potential sympoiesis in works within the mode. We might return to the example of Lin in *Perdido*, and her relationship with the protagonist Isaac. The notion of individuals from two separate species achieving a limit-blurring erotic union is one that itself reflects the erasure of the boundaries of species, environment, individual that is proposed by sympoietic thinking. While often such Weird

⁸² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁸³ Haraway., p. 60.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Herb Brody, ‘The gut microbiome’, *Nature*, 29 Jan 2020 < [nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00194-2](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00194-2) > [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁸⁶ Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 13.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

unions do not produce offspring, life finds a way in Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, the protagonist of which has several interspecies children, and Butler's 'Bloodchild', where the Terrans are able to reproduce with the *Tlic* through complex and gory surrogacy.^{89,90} One of the hallmarks of successful speciation, the process by which mutations develop lineages of animals into separate species, is an inability of an individual from the new species to successfully produce non-sterile offspring from a parent species. When individuals from two species in stories featuring the Weird erotic defy this, it can represent a doubling to sympoietic thinking: a desire to make (children) with biological kin and kind against all opposition.

Alison Rumfitt's *Brainwyrms* is suffused with nested beings. Vanya, one of the protagonists, has and indulges in a fomicophilic obsession relating to parasites. From an early age they become sexually fascinated with parasite implantation, going to extreme lengths to contract ringworm, tapeworms, and other parasitic infections.⁹¹ At the same time, deuteragonist Frankie is similarly fetishistically obsessed with pregnancy.⁹² While this does not directly relate to the nesting of interspecies forms conceived of by Haraway she eventually becomes 'pregnant' by, and gives 'birth' to, a 'conqueror worm' parasite in a moment of lethal apotheosis.⁹³

This treatment of holoents considers Haraway's conception of nested forms from another angle. The happenings of *Brainwyrms* are violent, cruel, and striking in their unpleasantness: Vanya's insertion of fox dung into themselves to contract a parasite make for a particularly memorable episode.⁹⁴ This runs in direct contrast to the more friendly conception of holobionts displayed by Haraway. This does allow for a more holistic understanding of the Weird potential of nested forms. Rumfitt's deployment of the traditionally Weird strategy of disgust gives us a further connection between the mode and Haraway's scholarly understandings.

In these respects, sympoiesis is present throughout *LIMINAL*. In 'Let's Talk About Snails', the relationship that the socialite deuteragonist has with the titular molluscs transforms her physiology. The socialite grows a shell, eyes on stalks, mucose skin, and other physical characteristics of snails. The kind of hybridity that Haraway illustrates in *Trouble* was an inspiration to lean into the ecological side of teratology: to imagine Weird monsters as

⁸⁹ Mitchison, *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*.

⁹⁰ Butler, p. 640.

⁹¹ Rumfitt, *Brainwyrms*, pp. 159-160.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 295 .

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

partnerships between species, holoents which depend on and host each other. The choice of snails was specific in its aim to stress the breadth of difference between species in a holobiotic relationship: half a billion years of difference separates their kinship with humans. The almost religious exaltation of the protagonist for his 'friend's' state plays on Haraway's own attitudes towards sympoietic living: as a desirable outcome and a necessary step to avoid the ravages of the Anthropocene.

Similar themes of hybridity are expressed in both 'The Return' and 'Travelogue'. In 'Return' the nameless narrator finds himself growing steadily into a tree that has sprouted from his bed. In 'Travelogue' a fungal infection grows into a mat of lichen spreading across his entire body. Both plants and mycelia were chosen in the same spirit as snails were: the breadth of distance, that of a whole kingdom of life, plays with the strangeness of hybridity and sympoiesis as an idea. The contrast in outcomes for each was also deliberate. In the former, the protagonist's transformation is an ecstatic transcendence of his loneliness, an entrance into a general communion with the natural world to escape the stresses of the social one. In 'Travelogue' hybridity and sympoiesis manifests as an infection as the fungus on his body slowly consumes him.

This play with sympoiesis, hybridity, and parasitism is further expressed in 'Growth'. The character of Oliver, a disgraced musician, is transformed by the mews and the ab-life within them. Rather than plants or animals, the 'biology' of the mews is expressed by growing lampposts, wire vine-creepers, and metallic isopods. When the protagonist encounters Oliver, he has been altered by the closed-off district: tarmac scars his skin, signage covers his body like tattoos. This plays on Haraway's conception of 'holoents'. The life in the mews is not biological, and the notion of life of this type engaging in sympoetic 'co-operation' with conventional creatures teases at the notion of entities comprised of biological and non-biological parts.

Hyperobjects and the Hyperobjective Correlative

Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* is a seminal work by the author and academic, a description of the titular ontological category.⁹⁵ While the term 'hyperobject' might refer to a spate of objects that fit its criteria, Morton coined the term to discuss anthropogenic climate change and it remains the most dramatic and pertinent example of the category. In *Hyperobjects*, Morton outlines the parameters of the category: the specific qualities of a hyperobject. A Mortonian hyperobject is: sticky, phased, nonlocal, interobjective, and molten.⁹⁶

The first of these qualities is viscosity. Morton describes, in fairly horrific terms, the pervasiveness or 'stickiness' of a hyperobject: "They are already here. I come across them later, I find myself poisoned with them, I find my hair falling out".⁹⁷ The supermassive black hole at the centre of the galaxy, a hyperobject, affects us wherever we are.⁹⁸ Ecological collapse affects us wherever we are. This is Morton's 'stickiness'.

Yet at the same time hyperobjects are elusive: the sun on your face is not climate collapse, even though it is a result of it. This is 'nonlocality'. While a hyperobject is felt everywhere, it is not reducible to its effects.⁹⁹ The example of a supermassive black hole is particularly pertinent here: Sagittarius A*, the black hole at the centre of the Milky Way, is felt and understood by us as the force that holds our galaxy together but it exists beyond this effect.¹⁰⁰

The third characteristic of hyperobjects concerns their relation with time. Morton is at pains to demonstrate that hyperobjects are finite, paradoxically he argues that this makes them harder to grasp than infinite objects, although it is a "very large finitude".¹⁰¹ Hyperobjects are distributed throughout incredibly long stretches of time, sometimes they are so large that they affect the passage of time itself. Morton writes that hyperobjects end the notion that space and

⁹⁵ Morton, p. 14.

⁹⁶ Morgan Meis, 'Timothy Morton's Hyper-Pandemic', *The New Yorker*, 08 Jun 2021 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/timothy-mortons-hyper-pandemic>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁹⁷ Morton p. 29.

⁹⁸ A. M. Ghez, B. L. Klein, M. Morris, and E. E. Becklin, 'High Proper-Motion Stars in the Vicinity of Sagittarius A*: Evidence for a Supermassive Black Hole at the Center of Our Galaxy', *The Astrophysical Journal*, 509, pp. 678-686 (1998) doi:10.1086/306528.

⁹⁹ Morton, pp. 38-39.

¹⁰⁰ M. J. Reid and A. Brunthaler, 'The Proper Motion of Sagittarius A*. II. The Mass of Sagittarius A*', *The Astrophysics Journal*, 616, pp. 872-883 (2004) doi:10.1086/424960.

¹⁰¹ Morton, p. 61.

time are containers that entities sit in.¹⁰² The effects of climate collapse have been projected to endure for hundreds to thousands of years, beyond the complications to the deep-time oriented effects, such as mass-extinctions, that it will cause.¹⁰³ Sagittarius A* will eventually evaporate through Hawking Radiation, at a rate of one solar mass every 2×10^{67} years.¹⁰⁴ Sagittarius is four million times more massive than the sun.¹⁰⁵

Despite their size and capacity to warp space-time, hyperobjects remain difficult to perceive. This is what Morton describes as their ‘phased’ quality.¹⁰⁶ We can observe a phase of a hyperobject, just as we might observe an individual phase of the moon. However just as we can’t perceive the entirety of the unphased moon from earth, so too can we not see the entirety of the hyperobject at once.

The final quality that Morton ascribes to hyperobjects is their interobjectivity.¹⁰⁷ A hyperobject is never experienced directly, but our experience of them is rather mediated by their effect on other objects. Climate change floods rivers, dries fields, melts icecaps, and displaces populations.^{108, 109, 110, 111} The way it interacts with the world is through its effects on these objects, never as a thing in se.

Each and all of these qualities are as applicable to expressions of Weird teratology as they are to ecological catastrophe. Many Weird expressions in fiction are hyperobjects. The qualities of a hyperobject are necessarily of the outside. We might illustrate the extent of this

¹⁰² Morton, p. 56.

¹⁰³ Morton, pp. 58-59.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Hawking, ‘Particle creation by black holes’, *Communications in Mathematical Physics*, 43.3, pp.199–220 (1975).

¹⁰⁵ Geoffrey C. Bowker, W.M. Goss, Heino Falcke, Donald C. Backer, and Yoram Lithwick, ‘The Intrinsic Size of Sagittarius A* from 0.35 cm to 6 cm’, *The Astrophysical Journal*, 648.2, pp. 127-130 (August 2006) doi:10.1086/508019.

¹⁰⁶ Morton pp. 70-71.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 81-83.

¹⁰⁸ Monirul Mirza, ‘Climate Change, flooding in South Asia and implications’, *Regional Environmental Change*, 11.1, pp. 97-107 (March 2011) doi:10.1007/s10113-010-0184-7.

¹⁰⁹ Alan Grainger, Mark Stafford Smith, Victor R. Squires, and Edward P. Glenn, ‘Desertification and climate change: the case for greater convergence’, *Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change*, 5.4, pp 361-377 (2000) doi:10.1023/A:1026537621437.

¹¹⁰ Sid Perkins ‘How much of the Earth’s ice is melting? New and old techniques combine to paint a sobering picture’, *PNAS*, 119.37 (Aug 2022) doi:10.1073/pnas.2213762119.

¹¹¹ Catherine Higham and Arnaud Koehl, ‘How can climate policy better address climate-driven population displacement’, *LSE*, 06 Jan 2023 <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/how-can-climate-policy-better-address-climate-driven-population-displacement>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

correlation by taking these qualities of a hyperobject and applying them to the fundamental ur-Weird monster: Lovecraft's Cthulhu. This comparison is directly made by Morton himself.¹¹²

Cthulhu is viscous. The disciples of its cult are spread across the world. The narrator of the story is eventually murdered by them. Cthulhu's emergence causes earthquakes, an epidemic of nightmares, and global social unrest simultaneously. All of these phenomena are not localized to the monster, however. More than that, Cthulhu doesn't personally intervene to cause them. All are emanations of its presence and his awakening.¹¹³

Cthulhu's monstrous age is emphasized again and again by the narration. His imprisonment has occurred since "the sun was young". The monster has lain in torpor beneath his sunken city for so long, that he occupies a state between dreaming and death.¹¹⁴ The oft-quoted rhyming couplet, an in-universe quotation from the *Necronomicon* or the book of the dead, illustrates this: "That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange aeons even death may die."¹¹⁵ Cthulhu has lived so long that the duration of its existence causes ontological problems. It can certainly wake from its torpor, but the duration of the state aligns it less with sleep and more with death.

When Cthulhu himself appears in the narrative, his presence is complicated. The account which describes him is second hand. Any adequate description of his physicality is elusive, even before the monster itself appears. The narrator lists a number of elements that comprise Cthulhu's form, while at the same time stressing that the overall picture of the monster is the source of its horror.¹¹⁶ When the being's city of R'lyeh is described, the architecture is described as 'non-euclidian', shifting and changing as the observer moves through it. Cthulhu and its works are viewed in phases, it is understood only as components of a whole.

Fundamentally, Cthulhu's representation in the directly narrated text of the story is interobjective. We receive accounts of a physical Cthulhu, one that snatches up sailors and devours them, one that interacts physically with the world. Our narrator has no direct experience with this being, however. The account in which Cthulhu interacts with the world

¹¹² Morton p. 64.

¹¹³ Lovecraft, 'Cthulhu'.

¹¹⁴ Marcia Kutrieh, 'The Cosmology of H.P. Lovecraft', *Bulletin of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8, pp. 37-49 (1985) doi:10.15448/1980-3729.2018.2.28490.

¹¹⁵ Luis G. Abbadie 'The Much-Discussed Couplet' *Ars Necronomica*, 26 Feb 2014 <<http://al-azrad.blogspot.com/2014/02/the-much-discussed-couplet.html>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

¹¹⁶ Lovecraft 'Cthulhu'.

directly is received second-hand. For the narrator, Cthulhu is a distant malign presence: causing earthquakes and plagues of madness, murdering his uncle, and threatening his own life through his cult.

For the *International Convention on the Fantastic in the Arts*, I participated in the panel ‘The Sense of an Ending: Closure and Disjunction in Weird Fiction and Horror’ along with Brooke Wonders, Bonnie Cross, and Timothy Murphy.¹¹⁷ In the course of the discussion, which separately examined Timothy Morton’s theses on hyperobjects and the objective correlative, Timothy Murphy raised a notion of a ‘hyperobjective correlative’: a proposed combination of the two theses.

If we define the monster-gods of Weird fiction as hyperobjects, we might understand the proposed ‘hyperobjective correlative’ as a means of anchoring such entities in literature. In order to communicate the presence of hyperobjects in fiction, we require the presence of an effective correlative.

The ‘Objective Correlative’ was popularized in a literary context by T.S. Eliot in ‘Hamlet and his Problems’, even if it was first used in earlier context. The deployment of the term in the essay is part of a wider discussion on the failure of the play, this being that the audience is granted no insight or point of connection to the protagonist’s emotional distress. The audience is unable to localize Hamlet’s intense emotions in anything external to himself. This leaves the audience confused and detached, according to Eliot.

Leaving aside whether this is an effective criticism of the play in question, we will examine the identified flaw. Eliot argues that in order to effectively convey or display emotion in a text, there must be “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion”.¹¹⁸ This he identifies as the objective correlative.

What might we call a hyperobjective correlative? To answer this, we must examine how hyperobjects are represented in literature. Their very nature presents a problem: a hyperobject cannot simply appear in a text as itself. The qualities necessitating its placement in the ontological category make it impossible to directly represent. The presence of a hyperobject within a text relies on literary device.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Byam Shaw, Bonnie Cross, Brooke Wonders, and Timothy Murphy, ‘The Sense of an Ending: Closure and Disjunction in Weird Fiction and Horror’, *Virtual International Convention on the Fantastic in the Arts*, (20 Mar, 2021).

¹¹⁸ T.S. Eliot, ‘Hamlet and his Problems’, *The Sacred Wood*, pp. 47-50 (Methune, 1920) p.47.

If an objective correlative is to generate “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] particular emotion,”¹¹⁹ we might understand a hyperobjective correlative to be a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, or some element within the text that in sum present the audience with the five qualities of a hyperobject.

Using Cthulhu as an example of an effective conveyance of a hyperobject in text we might consider each fulfilment of the five conditions of a hyperobject the correlatives. The disconcerting idol that the protagonist encounters is one such, the dreams of the artist Wilcox and the sculpture in his sleep is another. A third is the Johansen account in the story’s latter half, the only glimpse the reader ever gets of Cthulhu’s physicality. The story opens with the narrator’s relief concerning “the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents”.¹²⁰ So too is the work of discovering hyperobjective correlatives necessarily one of correlation. Like the protagonist of a Weird story, we must piece together the evidence to discover the hyperobjective horror at the heart of literature.

Perhaps we should add a sixth piece to our components of a hyperobjective correlative. If the hyperobject in question is an entity or an intentioned being, it cannot be encountered by the narrator. No matter what previous elements have been bestowed upon the thing in question, if the narrator enters its physical presence the necessary interobjectivity of a hyperobject is broken.

In both my longform short fiction projects, ‘Under, Under the Earth’ and ‘Travelogue,’ the narrative refers loosely to ‘powers’. These powers are discussed more in terms of their effects on the narrative than their presences themselves. In ‘Earth’ the powers are given direct names and corresponding geopolitical spheres of influence: ‘Atlas’ for the north-Atlantic, ‘Granite’ for Aberdeen and its holdings, ‘Heaven’, ‘The Swan’ and so on. The powers remain nameless in ‘Travelogue’, with their effects on the world of the narrative present in the descriptions of the cities the story details.

In my writing of the powers I was influenced by the notion of Weird monster-gods as hyperobjects. The characterisation of Cthulhu as directly malicious harms the reading of his hyperobjective nature, in my stories I was determined not to make any one power an antagonistic force in se. Those powers that do have a strong presence, particularly in ‘Earth’, have varying motivations, goals, and natures. Uniting the powers as a category is their hyperobjective nature. Through their human agents, powers are both sticky and interobjective:

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹²⁰ Lovecraft, ‘Cthulhu’.

they are omnipresent either through their vast metaphysical capabilities or their plethora of human agents, their presence on the story is entirely dependent on the distant consequences of their interventions or through the people they act through. I was determined that the powers occupy a phased presence in the story: the Granite appears once in something approaching a physical form in 'Earth' but as only a phase, an element of his physicality that extends far beyond where he appears. While tied to a specific area of influence, the nonlocality of the powers as vast entities of deific power was something that I emphasised in my writing of them. Some powers have lifespans that have persisted so long that their actions are remembered more as myths in the narratives of the stories, as per the 'Perth' segment of 'Travelogue'. Another excerpt of 'Travelogue' details a 'dead-but-dreaming' power, a reference to the ontological complications of 'sleep' for a 'molten' hyperobjective being.

These themselves, the enumerations of Morton's qualifying characteristics of hyperobjects, are their own sorts of correlatives. As an additional correlative, the prose in the stories becomes indistinct. Specifics and descriptions are avoided in favour of a murkier language that echoes the uncertain prose of Lovecraft and other Weird writers' descriptions of their monster-gods. Physical characteristics are never described and the very presence of powers and their effects on the page becomes ambiguous to reflect the metaphysically and ontologically troubling nature of their existence.

Flusser and Eco-Teratology

Vampyroteuthis Infernalis is a paranaturalist treatise written by Vilém Flusser, a Czech-Brazilian philosopher and theorist concerning the, then recent, discovery of the deep-sea cephalopod that gives its name to the book's title. Flusser's analysis of the vampyroteuthis places it as a kind of diametric opposite to humanity: physically, psychologically, and philosophically opposed to the human form and the human mind in every way. The utility for us is his provision of a connection between the classic tentacular teratology of the Weird and a critical analysis of biology and zoology.

Vampyroteuthis infernalis translates literally to 'vampire squid from hell'. Coined by the German teuthologist Carl Chun, the genus name refers to its alternating black and red 'cloak' of interbrachial membrane that it can draw over itself when threatened while the name of the species itself refers to its habitat: the abyss of the deep ocean.¹²¹ It is this diabolism and this strangeness that Flusser focuses a great deal of attention on. This commences with his location of the vampyroteuthis, and cephalopods in general, in "the abyss". The vampyroteuthis is the ultimate 'Other', says Flusser: a total negation of human anatomy, human culture, and human psychology.¹²² Their teeth are "articulated [...] knives", they have three penises, their evolutionary trajectory is almost directly opposite to ours. While we, Flusser argues, made the leap "from the treetops to the tundra", the Vampyroteuthis plunged directly into the abyss.¹²³

In spite of his pains to illustrate molluscoid diabolism, Flusser opens *Vampyroteuthis* with a quotation from the poet Horace: *de te fabula narrator*, this story is about you.¹²⁴ At the same time Flusser emphasises the otherness of the squid he relates it to humanity. Both, as Flusser beautifully explains, are "variations of the same game played with the calculi of genetic information".¹²⁵ While the ancestors of modern molluscs diverged from our own a potential five-hundred-and-fifty-five million years ago, we share a common ancestor and common traits: bilateralism, a body plan with symmetry on both left and right side; cephalisation, the concentration of the sense organs and the mouth around the head; and a digestive tract

¹²¹ Carl Chun, *Aus den Tiefen des Weltmeeres*, 1901 <<https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/654>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

¹²² Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (trans.) (Atropos Press, 2011) p. 15.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹²⁴ Horatius, *The Satires of Horace*, trans. by A.M. Juster (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

¹²⁵ Flusser, p. 23.

beginning in a mouth and ending in an anus.^{126,127} Despite the vastness of the physical and environmental gulf between us, we are each other's cousins.

The game that Flusser plays here is discussed and dissected by Colin Dickey in an article on Flusser for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. As the work progresses, Flusser develops his conception of the vampire squid as a heuristic with which to critique the canon of Western philosophy. Large amounts of the book are dedicated to arguing the nature of the vampyroteuthis' *Dasein*, the Heideggerian term for 'being-in-the-world'.¹²⁸ Heidegger, Dickey claims, could not conceive a non-human animal of having such.¹²⁹ In developing these critiques, however, Flusser first illustrates the critique of anthropocentrism that the vampire squid poses. A vampire squid is only disgusting to us because of its radical divergence from our own mammalian lineage. In science the quest for objectivity is impossible, and is constitutive of a "pernicious madness."¹³⁰ "Disgust [...]", in Flusser's words, "[...] recapitulates phylogenesis."

Here we find Flusser's connection with his peers in ecological theory, with this link manifesting in a way that is particularly relevant to the Weird. The disgust that Flusser describes runs parallel to the kind of jouissant nature of contact with the outside in tales within the bounds of the mode. As Dickey himself describes, the most pronounced feature of many Weird monsters is the tentacle.¹³¹ The relationship that the vampyroteuthis has with anthropocentrism is the same as the relationship between the Weird and the quotidian reality upon which it intrudes. In each case the introduction of the teratological, its extrusion into the typical, destabilises, disturbs, and calls into question.

As described in our prior discussions concerning notions of hybridity, the body can provide a kind of microcosm for the mode's strategy of transgression: a hybrid form is one in which is contained both the quotidian and the outside. Sometimes this hybridity is confronted

¹²⁶ P. Yu Parkhaev, 'The Cambrian 'basement' of gastropod evolution', *Geological Society*, 286.1, pp. 415–421 (2007) doi:10.1144/SP286.31.

¹²⁷ Elise Rigot, 'Vampyroteuthis Infernalis as Bioluminescent Lighthouse to Think among the Living' *Flusser Studies*, 30, pp. 1-20 (2021) <<https://hal.science/hal-03197472v1/file/rigot-vampyroteuthis-infernalis.pdf>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

¹²⁸ H. L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (1990, MIT Press).

¹²⁹ Colin Dickey, 'On the Trail of the Elusive Vampire Squid from Hell', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 Oct 2012 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-the-trail-of-the-elusive-vampire-squid-from-hell/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

¹³⁰ Flusser, p. 38.

¹³¹ Dickey, 'On the Trail'.

by a tale's protagonist in the form of a Weird monster or, in the case of later narratives within the mode, negotiated with as a character.

Stretching back to the Haute period there is, however, a parallel strategy wherein the horrific turn of the story is manifested by the protagonist themselves realizing the presence of the outside in their own bodies. In Lovecraft's 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth' the narrator is confronted by a race of hybrid creatures, a device inspired by the author's own racism, descended from New-England fisherfolk and a race of immortal undersea monstrosities known as the 'deep ones'. After he survives his ordeal, the narrator discovers that he himself is the offspring of an Innsmouth family and that the deep ones form a part of his heritage too. At the story's close, the narrator descends into madness and resolves to join his ancestors in an immortal life beneath the waves.¹³²

This tradition occupies a similar en-Weirdening strategy to hybridity, but goes one step further. Rather than locating the point of contact between the quotidian and outside in the familiarity of the human form, the location of the Weird within the form of the protagonist or narrator brings the central effect of the Weird into an even sharper focus. In building connections between the Weird and ecological theory, this tradition in the mode is particularly pertinent. To see the similarities between the outside and the human, to perceive the human in the outside and vice-versa is a crucial component of Harawayian symposiosis.¹³³ The nausea experienced by the pulp Haute-Weird protagonist when they realise the alien elements of their heritage runs parallel to the annihilation of the Anthropos upon its situation nested within holobionts and holoents.

Ecology and the Weird are natural corollaries in theory and fiction. The expressions of theorists working within the realm of ecology naturally resolves to their discussion in terms that align significantly with writers working within the Weird as a mode. At the same time, modern Weird fiction resolves itself inevitably to discussions of the changing climate and the altering of ecological conditions. If the Weird is something that we might consider, in Miéville's words, as the 'bad sublime', the alteration of the natural world, where historically

¹³² H.P Lovecraft, 'The Shadow over Innsmouth'.

¹³³ Haraway, p. 59.

the sublime was most described, makes Weird-ness an obvious locus for the description of this trend of alteration and collapse.

The final and following theoretical component of my thesis is transit, travel, and liminality. In the subsequent chapter I will connect the conclusions I have made in the previous two and create a holistic vision of a Weird fiction that effectively discusses ecological collapse through narratives concerning travel and transit. The efficacy of liminality as a concept central to Weird understandings of theory and fiction will also be elaborated upon.

TRANSIT

Travel is both a cause and consequence of ecological collapse. At the same time as rising sea-levels and flooding displace populations in their millions, the transport of goods and people and the carbon emissions they cause drive the crisis ever further.^{1,2,3} In writing fiction, and theory, about the climate crisis it is important to understand travel and transit as necessary concerns. At the same time, travel and transit have become enduring subjects for the Weird. Stories within the Weird mode often rely on the instability of states of transit. In fiction, as in M. John Harrison's *Travel Arrangements* and China Miéville's Bas-Lag series, the state of flux necessitated by the act of crossing borders provides a prelude to transgressions more typically at home in the mode.

Central to the connection between transit and the Weird is Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's shared theses of liminality.^{4,5} While initially developed to understand interstitial states in rites of societal passage, study of liminality as a concept has developed to encompass a wider variety of topics. It is this understanding of liminality in a literary context that provides the best parallel to Weird fiction's strategy of transgression and transformation.

If we understand transit as a state of being where liminality is a central concern, we see this connection develop fruitfully. The liminality of transit, found in the crossing of borders, the state of being between two places, and the transformations necessitated by this unstable state, mirror the liminality of the Weird itself. Application of the thesis of liminality to the aforementioned Weird texts provide an illustration for this.

In our study of liminality and the Weird, we may also tie in the concern of the previous chapter. We might understand our current period, wherein the spectre of the climate crisis is present but not fully manifested, as a time of deep liminality. We might consider the climate crisis itself, bound up in transit and transportation, as a rite of passage in its own right. In this way, van Gennep and Turner's thesis binds every concern of this thesis together.

¹ Issa Ibrahim Berchin, Isabela Valduga, Jéssica Garcia, José Baltazar, Salguerinho Osório de Andrade Guerra, 'Climate change and forced migrations: An effort towards recognizing climate refugees', *Geoforum*, 84, pp.147-150 (2017), doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.022.

² Christian Hofer, Martin E. Dresner, Robert J. Windle, 'The environmental effects of airline carbon emissions taxation in the US.' *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment* 15:1 pp.37-45 (2010), doi:10.1016/j.trd.2009.07.001.

³ Ellycia Harrould-Kolieb, 'Shipping impacts on climate', *Oceana*, Jul 2008 <https://oceana.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/Oceana_Shipping_Report1.pdf> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 93.

⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Gabrielle Caffee, Monika Vizedom (University of Chicago Press, 1960) p. 105.

A focus on travel, however, demands caution from the author and scholar. Caren Kaplan's *Questions of Travel* is an effective illustration of the pitfalls encountered by academics in their engagement with travel as a locus for their queries and studies. Kaplan's thesis might also apply to works of fiction. The marginalising strategies of displacement employed by academics are as much perpetrated by those writing in a less scholarly bent. Study of Kaplan will, in this way, encourage a more serious engagement with the material concerns of displacement and migration that both a theoretical and fictional work concerning travel and transit demand.

Questions of travel must further include, necessarily, an understanding of the material conditions of imperialism and colonialism. As a material condition of the type described by Kaplan, many popular and culturally hegemonic travel narratives involve reification and reproduction of the racist ideas that underpin imperial and colonial systems. When writing travel narratives or delivering theoretical analysis on them, it would be prudent to reject such ideas.

Study of transit and liminality provides the final piece of connective tissue between the Weird and ecology. In addition to its importance in this regard it provides even further avenues for artistic and academic exploration that impact discussion of both in literary and critical fields. A more effective understanding of either the Weird or the Anthropocene can be made with additional focus in this area.

Hybridising Liminality and the Weird

Liminality began life as an academic concept in anthropology, specifically describing societal ceremonies of transition. However, the concept of a state ‘betwixt and between’ more established boundaries has provided fertile ground for scholarly inquiry and discussion. As a concept, liminality concerns borders and boundaries and the transgression or instability thereof. In its original anthropological understanding, the liminal state is a prelude to transformation. A state of liminality, as understood academically, is one of transition: the pupa between larva and moth. This brings it onto common ground with the Weird, an aesthetic mode particularly concerned not only with the transgression of borders but also with the transformation that such a crossing can cause.

Arnold van Gennep in *Rites of Passage* describes a number of rites of initiation wherein the initiand is separated temporarily from the community prior to their transformation and re-integration as a member of that community. As well as describing ritual purification prior to initiation among the Brahmin caste in regions of India van Gennep devotes special attention to the state of ‘*iḥrām*’, the sacral state entered into by Muslims prior to the crossing of the ‘border’, ‘*Mīqāt*’, of their pilgrimage.^{6,7,8} To describe such rites, in which an individual is physically or socially separated from the community at large prior to their re-introduction, van Gennep uses the term ‘liminal’.⁹ This term derives from the Latin word ‘*limes*’, and was used in antiquity to denote the borders of Roman administration and the frontiers of the Roman world.¹⁰ Liminality, as a concept, has always been intimately concerned with boundaries and their transgression.

Further development in the thesis of liminality occurred in the 1970s with Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols*. Turner’s work discusses specific ritual practices of the Ndembu, the southern branch of the Lunda people located in Zambia. Turner breaks down van Gennep’s understanding of liminality into three ritual stages: separation, wherein the individual leaves the community; margin, wherein the initiand occupies a liminal space outwith the community;

⁶ van Gennep, p.105.

⁷ Adam Zeiden, 'Ihram', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 03 Aug 2020
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ihram>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁸ van Gennep pp. 184-5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Isaac Benjamin, ‘The Meaning of ‘Limes’ and ‘Limitanei’ in Ancient Sources’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 78, pp. 125–147 (1988), doi: 10.2307/301454.

and aggregation, wherein the initiand is re-integrated into the community having been transformed by the ritual.¹¹

Turner's contention is that this liminality occupies a special state in societal ritual. The initiand, in a state of 'betwixt and between' is invisible and unacknowledged by the society that they are shortly to rejoin.¹² "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the 'Nay' to all positive structural assertions" writes Turner, describing the capability of this ritual state to erode borders beyond that of the two states of being in the community.¹³ "Initiand Ndembu [...] masks combine features of [...men and women...], have both animal and human attributes, and unite in a single representation human characteristics with those of the natural landscape."^{14,15} The 'limes' of liminality describe more than societal boundaries and this has implications for the divide between human and animal, between genders, between person and place.

In Fisher's understanding of the Weird, the incipience of the mode occurs when the border between the quotidian and the outside is transgressed.¹⁶ But beyond a surface-level understanding of both liminality and the Weird, the parallels between the two are strong. The mutability between forms common in many Weird tales can be seen as a literalisation of van Gennep and Turner's understanding of separation, margin, and aggregation: wherein an individual is transformed upon contact with a border.¹⁷ The experience, for many protagonists of Weird tales, of an encounter with the outside is such a powerful one that they are driven mad, providing a mental transformation even when no physical one is in the offing.

Liminality, writes Turner in reference to an Ndembu mask that combines the features of a lion and a man, "breaks the cake of custom and encourages speculation."¹⁸ Speculation, he means, about what lions and men are but we could equally say that this kind of discussion of boundaries encourages an approach through the lens of speculative fiction. The hybridity present in Weird monsters is intimately concerned with this kind of speculation. A hybrid creature is a kind of two-fold crossing of a border, a twice-ingressor over the border between the quotidian and the outside. Not only is there the border between the two component beings of the hybrid, the man and the lion, there are the borders within the hybrid body itself: where

¹¹ Turner, p. 93.

¹² Ibid., p. 95.

¹³ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁴ Unknown, *Ndembu Ritual Costume*, 1950, costume made of bark cloth, string, pigment, basketry, 509 x 304.8 x 254 mm, Cornell Anthropology Collections.

¹⁵ Turner, p. 105.

¹⁶ Fisher, p. 16.

¹⁷ Fisher, p. 35.

¹⁸ Turner, p. 107.

the man becomes the lion, and where the lion becomes the man. Hybridity is central in this way to both the Weird's strategy of alienation and liminality's expression of transgression: for each the result is the same ultimate destabilisation.

The title of *LIMINAL* itself comes from Turner and Van Gennep's shared thesis and these notions of betwixt and between formed a core rationale when writing them. Notions of liminality informed more than understandings of the Weird, but their inclusion complimented and mirrored engagement between the quotidian and the outside. Many characters approach their narratives in states of transition. The protagonist of 'Tide' enters high school as the terraforming process drains his planet of its pelagic ecosystems. The narrator of 'A Geography of the Hollow Earth' was drifting aimlessly through late adolescence before the unspecified crisis drives him into an underground station. These interstitial periods of transition form unofficial rites of passage in contemporary globally-northern society wherein the individual is transformed by their brief extraction from the social rationale. The inclusion of these states in a Weird tale deepens their liminality and their Weird potential.

Several stories have a particular fascination with architecture and the liminal qualities that certain architectural features can have. Returning to 'A Geography of the Hollow Earth', the subway station and network are extrapolated in their liminality to extend across the earth and beneath it. The liminality of the station, a place that exists to be moved through, a place of passage, is inverted as a dwelling for the narrator: this not only reflects his disordered mind but also the disorder of the world outwith his sanctuary. The extrusion of his conspiracy-minded thoughts on the quotidian world is mirrored by a breach in the quotidian order. The liminal space of the car park forms the setting for 'Outland', a quasi-autobiographical narrative that details the author's experience working as a traffic marshal during COP26 in Glasgow. Where the story slips from autobiography, when the narrator travels into an endless birch forest found through a hole in some ruins in the car-park, is again the result of the liminality of the story's space extrapolating into a deeper breach of bounds. 'Outland' seeks to not only dissect the liminal space through its inclusion in Weird fiction but also play with the boundaries between non-fictional and speculative narratives.

Speaking specifically to liminality as regards hybridity in *LIMINAL*, the stories are more interested in the interstitial states of transformation than they are with the fully transformed being. In 'Let's Talk About Snails' the narrator never fully achieves the ecstatic state of molluscoid being that he exhorts at the story's close. While he may feel the change, it is never detailed. At the close of 'Travelogue', the total state of the protagonist's transformation is suggested, but never fully explored or elaborated. It may be argued that the state of true

hybridity is not found in a total transformation, but rather in the interstitials of that transformation. To use Turner's analogy with Ndembu ritual masks, it is when the person and the lion are equidistant ends in the linear process of transformation. In this sense, hybridity too is a notion that owes much of itself to liminality and liminal thinking.

Travel Narratives and the Weird

Beyond more abstract questions of liminality as it appears in the form and functions of the Weird mode, there is a common thread in Weird tales that locate the boundary between the quotidian and the outside in the act of travel itself. Often in a Weird tale, the act of travel is one that precipitates the rupture of boundaries beyond the crossing of borders. In such stories there is a kind of dual breach of borders: a double shattering of the boundary between both a static existence and the liminal state of transit and between the outside and the quotidian. *Travel Arrangements* by M. John Harrison is a collection of short stories in which the strangeness of transit and travel butts against the strangeness of Weird fiction. Within its tales, Weird occurrences are precepted by the entering of its lonely protagonists into states of transit. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and 'Invisible Planets' by Hao Jinfang are both long-form narratives that, while occupying a literary space outwith the Weird mode, engage with travel narratives in a way that is pertinent to writers within it. The playful dissection through speculation of the historical form of the travelogue precipitates as much Weird-ness as tales written within the mode's bounds. China Miéville's Weird-western epic *Iron Council* seizes on the destabilizing potential of modes of transit. Within it the traditionally western feature of the train becomes a venue and an instrument of perpetual revolution.

In *Travel Arrangements*, each short story is an interrogation or dissection of the act of travel through the lens of the mode he has so influenced. 'The Iron Horse and How We Can Know It' is a deliberate esotericising of the act of transit. Each stage in the story is headed by a different card of the tarot. In traditional esoteric readings of the Marseille tarot the sequence of the major arcana, the twenty-two named cards existing outwith any of the four suits, represent a hero's journey or 'fool's progress' in which the protagonistic card, The Fool, attains enlightenment through a series of encounters with the other arcana.¹⁹ 'The Iron Horse' imagines its protagonist, the *ephebe*, as the fool on an endless and seemingly pointless rail journey determined by a tarot reading.²⁰

After recounting the *ephebe*'s journeys, 'The Iron Horse' becomes obsessed with the counterfactual. "'All the things that might be.' A voice says clearly. 'The one thing it is.'"²¹ Harrison draws a line between the apparent determinism of divination, the notion that the yet-to-come is so set in stone that it can be read and interpreted, and the 'railroaded' act of transit

¹⁹ Robert M. Place, *The Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination* (Penguin 2005) p. 129.

²⁰ M. John Harrison, *Travel Arrangements* (Gollancz, 2000) p. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

itself. At the story's inception and close, the notion of the train as an 'iron horse' is literalised.²² There are repeated references to a figure with a horse's skull for a head, an image reminiscent of the Welsh *Mari Lwyd* folk practice.²³ Life, rail travel, divination, are all united in their determinism and all represented through the sinister death's head of the iron horse.

Through the occult representation of transit, Harrison achieves a novel approach to the traditional Weird interplay between the outside and the quotidian. Rather than any outside elements intruding on the reality of the story the esoteric reading of the quotidian practice, both of the human life and the rail journey, effects the same en-Weirdening interplay that the breach of properly speculative elements would. Without the inclusion of monster-gods or of the more traditionally speculative representatives of the outside, the same destabilising effect is ultimately attained.

Invisible Cities is a travel narrative, ostensibly authored by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan that depicts the cities visited by the adventurer. However, as Calvino is quick to note in an explanation of the work, the cities are unrecognizable. All of them bear the names of women and without exception they are invented. The plausibility of the cities ranges from those with mere strange customs to Octavia, which consists of a network of ropes hung over a chasm.²⁴ *Invisible Cities* is a brush with the Weird. While the text features no explicitly Weird happenings, no ghouls or alien gods, the shimmering blend of historical actualities (Polo's relationship with the Khan) and invention creates the conditions for the Weird as described by Fisher.^{25,26} The blend between the inexplicable and the familiar is not based on the interaction between two elements of the content, but rather between the content and the form.

The speculative potential of *Invisible Cities* has not been lost on some authors more broadly ensconced in its genres and modes. Hao Jinfang is the author of 'Invisible Planets', a short story similar to and directly inspired by *Invisible Cities*. The story is simultaneously a broadening and a narrowing of *Invisible Cities'* scope. While, owing to its nature as a short story, it necessarily covers less ground than its inspiration, its subject is the vastness of space: its range of invention now touching the biological and ecological beyond merely the societal. The described inhabitants of the planet Jinjianlin have skins that allow two individuals to merge

²² Ibid., p. 61.

²³ Iorwerth C. Peate, 'A Welsh Wassail-Bowl: With a Note on the Mari Lwyd', *Man*, 35 pp. 81–82 (1935), doi:10.2307/2789906, p. 81.

²⁴ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver (Picador, 1974) p.61.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁶ Fisher, p. 16.

and recombine.²⁷ Tisu Ati and Lutikawulu operate on Lamarckian and Darwinian evolutionary models.²⁸ At the same time, the deliberate invocation of Calvino generates a connection to the familiar that functions intertextually. While its transplanting into science fiction locks access from what made *Invisible Cities* Weird, it arrives at the mode on its own, stranger terms.

In both stories the travel narrative provides the premise and the base structure. The difference between the two is temporal, and the cultural assumptions of each time period in which the narratives are set. *Cities* is itself based on the writings of Marco Polo, and the speculative elements from the unknown elements at the extremities of the mediaeval world. The tradition that 'Planets' draws from is more contemporary, that of science-fictional space-exploration. In this way, Jinfang is engaged in a two-way dialogue: through Calvino and *Cities* the mediaeval travel narrative, through the setting pulp science fiction exploration narratives. In each narrative, the speculative elements are introduced with the process of travel and the commencement of the travel narrative. 'Home' is a place of quotidian stability, and the Outside is one of strangeness and speculation. In this way, each story grasps the central understanding of Weird fiction as a brush between the typical and the extraordinary.

China Miéville's *Iron Council* is the most recent entrant into the Bas Lag series of novels and its thesis on trains and transit may be regarded as a companion piece to M. John Harrison's 'Iron Horse'. The titular Council is a mobile revolutionary society, formed after a trade union movement overthrew a rail-building expedition. The train moves through the desert on a course charted by the revolutionaries on board, building and dismantling the track ahead and behind it. At the novel's climax, the Council turns to attack the city state which sponsored the expedition in an attempt to overthrow its corrupt government. However: the expedition faces with certain defeat. In light of this, the 'golem-mancer' Judah Low freezes the Council in time: turning the spectacle of the approaching train into a static monument to inspire radicalism which will one day unfreeze and accomplish the revolutionary goals of the Council.²⁹

In many ways, *Iron Council*'s thesis runs against Harrison's. The latter's train is a place of pre-determinism, death, certain destination. Miéville's train is one of revolution, hope, and perpetual progress. This contradictory understanding of rail travel is described by Grace Lee, "the fundamental paradox of train travel, simultaneous motion and stillness", as being with the

²⁷ Hao Jinfang, 'Invisible Planets', *Invisible Planets*, ed. by Ken Liu, pp.201-220 (Tor, 2016) pp. 217-18.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 212-13.

²⁹ Miéville, *Iron Council*, pp. 590-91.

cultural understanding of the train since its inception.³⁰ This unsteadiness makes it ripe for dissection in Weird fiction. *Iron Council*'s train not only plays host to the hybrid forms, magicians, and oddities typical of Miéville's work but also provides space for revolutionary 'monsters', political expression, and new emergences in radical thought in the world of Bas Lag.³¹ Just as the act of travel or the narrative of travel prompt emergences from the outside in other tales, Miéville's trains prompt ingressions outwith the political norm.

The connecting sinew between each of these works of 'Weird travel' is the relationship between the act of transit itself and the introduction of the work's Weird elements. The interplay between crossing borders in space and the breach of the boundary between the outside and the quotidian symbiotically reinforces itself. Further, the discussion of various modes and narratives of transit benefit from their discussion through a Weird lens. The difference manifestations of the outside in relation to rail travel, deterministic divination for Harrison and political revolution for Miéville, explore the paradoxical and contradictory cultural understanding of trains themselves. The flourishing speculation in tales inspired by mediaeval travel narratives, in *Invisible Cities* and 'Planets', dissects the origins of the genre itself. Not only are stories of transit fruitful spaces for Weird fiction, but Weird fiction is itself conducive to the understanding of travel.

The stories here discussed and their notions of the Weird qualities of travel and transit were instrumental to certain stories within *LIMINAL*. The conceit of 'Travelogue' was directly inspired by both *Invisible Cities* and 'Planets'. Rather than the medieval travel narrative or dialogue that each respective story plays with, 'Travelogue' takes the form of a travel brochure for a series of destinations in a landscape in the aftermath of catastrophe. The text of the story mixes descriptions for these places with a first-person narrative of an individual on the train the brochure advertises. Rather than describe the narrator visiting each place, the tourism is implied while only the act of transit is narrated in any detail. In the same way that both *Cities* and 'Planets' comment on the respective nuances of their form, 'Travelogue' is a dissection of the brochure as a work and genre of travel literature. In the same way that brochures prime locations for consumption, breaking down the complexity of place into an easily-digestible slurry of landmarks and experiences, 'Travelogue' separates the act of tourism from any actual experience of the location described.

³⁰ Grace Lee, 'The Contradictory Trains of Cinema', *Youtube*, 13 Dec 2018
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOBLESHpwbQ>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

³¹ Miéville, *Iron Council* p. 270-71.

The interlinking notions of determinism and transit expressed through the tarot in ‘The Iron Horse’ are played with in ‘Arcana’, a collection of microfictions based on the major arcana of the tarot. The particular place where M. John Harrison’s thesis is explored is ‘The Chariot’, the card that the collection chooses to interpret as one of destruction, chaos, and unalloyed catastrophe. In the text of the story, a train derails perpetually. The process of the crash plays over and over again. Rather than attempt to solve the crisis, the authorities responsible build around the line. The story closes with an exhortation to keep ‘the intricate, rented world’ ticking. This line, taken directly from Phillip Larkin’s ‘Aubade’,³² at once offers the notion of perpetual progress in a clockwork construction while simultaneously describing human helplessness in the face of time and fate. The train crash, repeating in perpetuity, mirrors and thwarts the promise of transit over rail: instead of endless progress, it promises endless collapse.

This notion of transit determinism is further detailed in the long-form interactive narrative ‘Under, Under the Earth’. While it is nominally an interactive work, where the reader can progress through the narrative through their own choice and at their own pace, the outcomes of the story are limited. The decisions that the reader is invited to make cover a spectrum of areas for the narrative. These choices range from which individuals to make conversations with on the journey to choosing to deliberately crash or stop the hyperloop train. Often the result, purely from structural limitations in adoption of the form on this scale, of one decision is materially identical to the others. In extreme cases, when a choice results in the conclusion of a narrative thread, the reader-player is met with a piece of text following a description of the outcome. This piece of text, denoting ‘death or destination’, is identical no matter the nature of the choice and outcome preceding it. In response to ‘Iron Horse’ and the difference between ‘all things that might be’ and ‘the one thing it is’, ‘Under, Under the Earth’ offers a plethora of ‘might bes’ that resolve eventually to one, concluding, ‘is.’

³² Phillip Larkin, ‘Aubade’, *All Poetry*, 16 Aug 2016 < <https://allpoetry.com/poem/8495769-Aubade-by-Philip-Larkin> > [Accessed 05 May 2024].

Questions of Travel

Writing about travel has, states Kristi Siegel in the introduction to *Issues in Travel Writing*, often conceded to the notion that a writer could “understand a culture simply by looking at it.”³³ This tendency is, according to Siegel, a refraction of imperialism: a kind of duplication of the political and military realities of conquest and extraction reified by authors in the imperial core casting their eyes towards conquered territories. This imperial attitude towards writing about transit and place is a pitfall that, as authors and scholars working in the global north, it is necessary to be mindful of. While Siegel and others question travel writing in a novelistic non-fictional autobiographical sense, the same concerns necessarily apply to fiction as well. Depictions of exotic locales and adventure stories describing dark continents full of savages are as prone to appearing in works of fiction as they are in self-presented non-fiction accounts. Examinations of pitfalls arising from this imperial view in both scholarship and fiction is necessary for both a theoretical and an authorial approach.

Edward Whitley, in his discussion on Theodore Roosevelt’s and Ernest Hemingway’s engagements with Africa in their travel writings describes both in the frame of the 19th century ‘adventure story’, as understood by Richard Phillips. These narratives, so formulaic that the mode itself demanded conformity rather than innovation, involve “explorers, surveyors, geographers, [...] storytellers who describe journeys ‘into the unknown.’”^{34,35} In the course of the formulaic narratives the adventure story sees its interchangeable heroes “hunting, avoiding danger, succeeding under great odds, and so on.”³⁶ True to the form of the adventure story, Roosevelt’s descriptions of Africa and Africans transpose primitivism on his subjects to the extent that the ‘travel narrative’ is as much temporal as it is spatial. The opening chapter of Roosevelt’s *African Game Trails* is titled “A Railroad through the Pleistocene” not, Whitley notes, a ‘Railroad through Africa’.^{37,38} The narrative, and meta-narrative, surrounding *Game Trails* seizes on Africa as a place of ecological interest where creatures like the rhinoceros, a

³³ Kristi Siegel, ‘Travel Writing and Travel Theory’, *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, pp.1-12 (Peter Lang, 2002) p. 2.

³⁴ Edward Whitley, ‘Race and Modernity in Theodore Roosevelt’s and Ernest Hemingway’s African Travel Writing’, *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, pp.13-28 (Peter Lang, 2002) p. 15.

³⁵ Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: A geography of adventure* (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 1.

³⁶ Whitley, p. 15.

³⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *African Game Trails* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910).

³⁸ Whitley, p. 19.

‘survivor from the Miocene’ who can “only exist at all in regions that have lagged behind”, live alongside primeval man: a “wilderness of savage men and savage beasts.”^{39,40} Even the children’s edition of *Game Trails* describes “the many unknown and strange quadrupeds, bipeds and quadrumane [T.R.] meets,” seizing on Africa as a primeval locale of zoological and botanical interest where, “primitive”, people live only incidentally.⁴¹

The reason for this deliberate indulgence in the idea of a primitive Africa is two-fold, according to Whitley. The first aim of such narratives are ideological. The second is to prime travel narratives for public consumption. Phillips describes the adventure story as “being motivated by a clear political agenda: broadly speaking, imperialism.”⁴² Roosevelt’s *Game Trails* is quick to suggest the ways in which the interventions of those of “European stock” might bring Africa from the Pleistocene into the Holocene.⁴³ Written in the decades after the Berlin Conference, where Africa was divided among the European powers into spheres of domination and theft, it is plain that Roosevelt’s exhortation to “thrust[...] civilization” onto the continent is an endorsement of the continuation of the project.^{44,45} Whitley cites Toni Morrison in her analysis that Blackness, whether in Africa or America, is used by white people to define historical progress: to illustrate the gulf between the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilized’.⁴⁶ In the illustration of this apparent ‘progress’, *Game Trails* reads as propaganda for white intervention, extraction, and domination.

The second purpose of *Game Trails*’ imposition of primitivism on its description of Africa is the priming of the continent for literary consumption. At the same time as exhorting imperial powers to ‘modernize’ and ‘civilize’ Africa, Roosevelt mines his primitivist understanding of the continent for the enjoyment of his readers. In the same way that far-right online communities seek a “‘retvrn’ to tradition’, or *mitläufer* Leni Riefenstahl’s *Die Nuba* titillates her readers with photography of ‘primitives’, supposedly ‘primal’ societies are depicted for the gratification of their self-assuredly superior fascist or imperialist audience.⁴⁷

³⁹ Roosevelt, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Whitley, p. 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴² Phillips, p. 12.

⁴³ Whitley, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Phillips, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁵ Roosevelt p. 1.

⁴⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage, 1994) p. 52.

⁴⁷ Mario Laghos, 'We can't Retvrn to Tradition', *The Critic*, 06 Apr 2023 <<https://thecritic.co.uk/we-cant-retvrn-to-tradition/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁴⁸ Caren Kaplan describes a strain of travel that seeks “an escape from modernity”.⁴⁹ The traveller observing the ‘primitive’ society can be said to be travelling in time as well as space.⁵⁰ By ‘displacing’ the past “to another location”, the modern subject can make the journey backwards through time.⁵¹ In this way the narrative enthrals the reader at the same time as propagandising to them.

While imperialism of the kind that Roosevelt carried water for, and presided over, is no more, extractive practises of a different stripe endure in power relations between the global north and global south. This relationship, just as it did in Roosevelt’s day, has its own attendant literature. Louise Linton’s *In Congo’s Shadow* was roundly mocked for its depiction of Zambia upon its release in 2016.⁵² Beyond the factual inaccuracies, including geographical, historical, linguistic, and even zoological mistruths, the nature of the book’s discussion about the Zambians and Zambia is remarkably similar to Roosevelt’s own work from a century prior.⁵³ In an excerpt published by *The Telegraph* Linton experiences “close encounters with lions, elephants, crocodiles and snakes”, akin to T.R.’s zoological perils, enumerated by Phillips as a typical feature of the adventure tale.^{54,55} While bereft of Roosevelt’s more strident assertions about the primitive nature of Africans, the lurid description of sexual panic, “I tried not to think what the rebels would do to the ‘skinny white *muzungu* with long angel hair’ if they found me”, still imply a sub-humanity in the apparently beloved secondary subject of her memoir.⁵⁶ T.R.’s exhortation to white intervention in the “dark continent”, a line used in *In Congo’s Shadow*’s

⁴⁸ Leni Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba* (Harper and Row, 1974).

⁴⁹ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Duke University Press, 1996) p. 78.

⁵⁰ Whitley, p. 18.

⁵¹ Kaplan, p. 35.

⁵² Lucy Hancock, 'Angel-haired' aid worker memoir ridiculed', *BBC News Online*, 05 Jul 2016 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-36716288>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁵³ Lydia Ngoma, 'Louise Linton's Zambia is not the Zambia I know', *The Guardian*, 06 Jul 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/jul/06/louise-lintons-zambia-is-not-the-zambia-i-know>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁵⁴ Louise Linton, 'How my dream gap year in Africa turned into a nightmare', *The Telegraph*, 01 Jul 2016, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160701064204/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/how-my-dream-gap-year-in-africa-turned-into-a-nightmare/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁵⁵ Phillips, pp. 114-115.

⁵⁶ Tobias Denskus, '#LintonLies: How Zambians Are Using Social Media To Talk Back', *NPR Online*, 06 Jul 2016 <<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/07/06/484810475/-lintonlies-how-zambians-are-using-social-media-to-talk-back>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

copy, is further reinforced in Linton's prose.⁵⁷ Another line from *The Telegraph* reads: "I try to remember a smiling gap-toothed child with HIV whose greatest joy was to sit on my lap and drink from a bottle of Coca-Cola."⁵⁸ The imperialistic travel-memoirists of today may not exhort the 'thrusting' of 'civilization' as easily as they did a century ago, but the symbolism of the Black child sitting in the lap of the white 'angel' aid-worker being hand-fed American soft drinks is more insidiously propagandistic than an open call for conquest, domination, and extraction.

These understandings are not marginal. While *In Congo's Shadow* was self-published, it was accepted for excerpt in a major English broadsheet. This same broadsheet in 2002 published future prime-minister Boris Johnson's description of the Congolese diplomatic response to a visit by the then-prime-minister: "No doubt the AK47s will fall silent, and the pangas will stop their hacking of human flesh, and the tribal warriors will all break out in watermelon smiles to see the big white chief touch down in his big white British taxpayer-funded bird."⁵⁹ In the same article, Johnson uses a racial slur to describe the said Congolese.⁶⁰ Just as Roosevelt's *Game Trails* was published after his presidential tenure Johnson went on to hold high office, Linton is married to former United States Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and enjoys a career in Hollywood. Not only are these tendencies in memoir and travel writing not marginal, but they enjoy a close relationship to the political and cultural core of their respective countries.

The trends observed in Roosevelt and others have manifested in the Weird, particularly in its early 20th century pulp iterations. Of the pulp writers, Lovecraft in particular is guilty. While his work is suffused with his own racism in general, the short story 'The Horror at Red Hook' is the nadir of these trends in his work and is particularly illustrative in comparing him with Roosevelt.⁶¹ The story concerns a series of events leading to the death of the occultist Robert Suydam reported by a New York city police officer, Detective Malone. The narrative describes how the 'primitive' nature of metropolis' immigrant, Black population makes them

⁵⁷ Louise Linton, *In Congo's Shadow* (CreateSpace Independent, 2016).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Boris Johnson, 'If Blair's so good at running the Congo, let him stay there', *The Telegraph Online*, 10 Jan 2002 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3571742/If-Blairs-so-good-at-running-the-Congo-let-him-stay-there.htm>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁶⁰ Adam Forrest, 'Boris Johnson says describing black people as having 'watermelon smiles' was 'wholly satirical', *The Independent*, 30 Jun 2019 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-conservative-leadership-latest-racism-watermelon-smiles-satirical-a8981166.html>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁶¹ LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*, p. 154.

susceptible to the influence of the Weird occult forces that hound its protagonists.⁶² These nameless, faceless inhabitants of the metropolis worship the malign influence of Lovecraft's occult presences but are not themselves the prime movers of the story's dealings with the occult. This role is left to the, white, Suydam. The Black, immigrant population of New York is flattened into the backdrop of Weird horror: Black and Arab people are as horrifying to the author as any tentacled beastie.

The Ballad of Black Tom introduces Charles Thomas Tester, a young conman and failed musician who is drawn into the orbit of the occultist Robert Suydam. As Tester's father is murdered by police and the young man finds less and less to live for, he gives himself fully over to Suydam and works as the "Octavius" to his "Caesar".⁶³ Tester eventually adopts the monicker 'Black Tom', symbolically abandoning the heritage of his slain father and reducing himself to the sidekick of the self-appointed occult master Suydam.⁶⁴ By frontloading his race in his nom-de-guerre, LaValle plays with the flattening tactics of Lovecraft. At the same time, he upends them. Tester is the fulcrum of his narrative, eventually sacrificing Suydam and using his father's ritual music to engage with the occult on his own terms. Rather than pushed into occult servitude because of his Black heritage, Tester defines himself with the occult and against white society with the memorable line: "I'll take Cthulhu over you devils any day."⁶⁵

At the same time as LaValle describes the flattening of Black and Indigenous characters through his description of Tester, he undercuts the assumptions of Lovecraft and others. The Black people, even the Black occultists, of LaValle's Harlem draw on traditions beyond Lovecraft's invented cosmologies. Prior to the introduction of Suydam and the main thrust of the plot Tester is contracted to deliver a yellow book titled 'Zig Zag Zig' to Ma Att, a secretive figure living in Flatbush.⁶⁶ The yellow book is an allusion to the Five Percenter traditions of the Nation of Islam, an occult offshoot of the political-religious organisation. 'Zig Zag Zig' means, in the context of the Five Percenter Sacred Alphabet, the attainment of enlightenment from knowledge to wisdom to understanding.⁶⁷ Ma Att herself is, by LaValle's own admission,

⁶² H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Horror at Red Hook'.

⁶³ LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

⁶⁵ LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*, p. 141.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶⁷ Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop and the Gods of New York*, (Oneworld Publications, 2023) p. 184.

a reference to the Egyptian goddess Ma'at.⁶⁸ Within a few short pages, LaValle is able to richly texture the occult landscape of Harlem by incorporating Black radical mysticism and antique African religion into the Lovecraftian mythical pantheon.

By engaging with Lovecraft through 'The Horror at Red Hook' we can see that the same trends that poison travel narratives may also find their expressions in Weird fiction. LaValle's riposte to Lovecraft in *Ballad* is illustrative both in his dismantling of the racist attitude exhibited in 'Red Hook' and his own sketching of authentically Black engagements with the outside. Despite a history of racist expressions in the mode, it is possible to engage with the mechanics of the Weird without caving to these racist traditions.

As in *Ballad*, the aim for fiction and scholarship should be to move away from these misleading, and dangerously misleading, tropes and assumptions. Caren Kaplan in *Questions of Travel* opens the volume by stating that "the terms of displacement in Euro-American [writing] rarely admit to [...] material conditions."⁶⁹ Kaplan makes a distinction between 'travel' and 'displacement': the former being a voluntary relocation for leisure and the latter being the forcible moving of populations and individuals due to fraught material conditions.⁷⁰ Both scholars and artists, Kaplan writes, may "participate in the mythologized narrativizations of displacement"⁷¹ which conflate the two or reduce the victims of the latter to metaphorical devices in scholarly arguments. Kaplan describes in 'Traveling Theorists' the ways in which "the author and critic are represented as singular, unique, and existentially estranged from a point of origin."⁷² With the material conditions of those undergoing forced displacement so fraught and so painful, our engagement with these concepts cannot exist exclusively within the realm of metaphor. In the modern United Kingdom, individuals seeking asylum face

⁶⁸ Victor LaValle, 'Interview with Victor LaValle' (Interview by Douglas Wynn for *The Lovecraft Ezine*) 19 May 2016 <<https://lovecraftzine.com/2016/05/19/interview-with-victor-lavalle-author-of-the-ballad-of-black-tom/>> [Accessed 03 Mar 2024].

⁶⁹ Kaplan p. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 3.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷² Ibid., p. 103.

detainment, abuse, and death.^{73,74,75} Representation of the material realities of displacement in theory and fiction is necessary for an uncompromised understanding of what these concepts mean.

In engaging with these questions of travel with a care to avoid these mythologisations and narrativizations of material realities, the question must be asked as to whether writing these realities from the perspective of speculative fiction falls into these traps. In speculative fiction, the author necessarily operates on a different plane of reality to the one they must discuss. The approach to the representation of imperialism and the avoidance of tropes that reify it *LIMINAL* were made at multiple angles. While the collection relies on speculative fiction, it was important in the writing of it to not misrepresent or displace real struggle and tragedy that occur in the real world. The most concrete place that this manifests within the collection is in 'Under, Under the Earth's' 'Interlock' section. This is as close to 'Dweller' (the Indigenous people of the interior earth) society as the player-protagonist comes. The player-protagonist is invited into a touristic and commodifying journey into Dweller society. It was written as something of a combination between a place like Gaza or the West-Bank, tightly controlled with military check-points⁷⁶ and a tourist destination like Hawai'i scarred by colonial extraction.⁷⁷ While it cannot necessarily be a perfect insight into imperialism, I wanted to communicate these elements authentically while at the same time remaining true to mostly the speculative nature of the collection.

Indigenous Australian artists and scholars have commented on these particular trends expressing themselves in literature concerning their Countries and communities. In 'Playing in

⁷³ Rob Merrick, 'David Davis warns Priti Patel that 'cruel' indefinite detention of immigrants is making modern slavery worse', *The Independent*, 06 Jun 2020 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/priti-patel-immigration-indefinite-detention-modern-slavery-a9550871.html>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁷⁴ Rowena Mason, 'Theresa May 'allowed state-sanctioned abuse of women' at Yarl's Wood', *The Guardian*, 03 Mar 2015 <accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/mar/03/yarls-wood-may-state-sanctioned-abuse-women>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁷⁵ Peter Apps, 'Yarl's Wood death: Woman, 40, dies of heart attack at controversial immigration centre', *The Independent*, 30 Mar 2014 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/yarl-s-wood-death-woman-40-dies-of-heart-attack-at-controversial-immigration-centre-9224701.html>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁷⁶ Said Zeedani, A Palestinian Perspective on Checkpoints, *The Palestine-Israel Journal*, 13.4, September 2007 <<https://pij.org/articles/980/a-palestinian-perspective-on-checkpoints>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁷⁷ Haley Tenore, 'The Barrett Hawaii Trip is Rooted in Colonialism and Self-Interest', *The State Press*, 21 Feb 2022 <<https://www.statepress.com/article/2022/02/barrett-honors-college-hawaii-spring-break-trip-colonialism-self-interest>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

the Pastoral' Evelyn Araluen expresses through poetry the tendency of the Australian pastoral to "assimilate natural and human worlds into objects / of white Endeavour".⁷⁸ The same flattening of Indigenous peoples, and the Countries which they inhabit, into the backdrop of their imperial oppressors present in Roosevelt's 'railroad through the Pleistocene' is present in the 'Australiana' that Araluen critiques.^{79,80} "The putative telos of the national character arising from a shared stolen experience of 'the hostility of the landscape to man's efforts to tame it' moves anxious" writes Araluen.⁸¹ While the Australian pastoral has developed since the more overt imperial projects of previous literature, the nature of these foundations bleed into later efforts. Araluen further interrogates the culture of white apologia surrounding invasion, particularly in relation to arts spaces. In 'Acknowledgement of Cuntry', she mocks the endless 'respect and acknowledgement' of white artists expressed through acknowledgements of Country.⁸² Araluen reproduces Kaplan's thesis that suggests the lack of focus in globally northern writing on material conditions.⁸³ The endless, cheap, 'respect and acknowledgement' delivered through Acknowledgements of Country mask over the violence of colonial efforts and further flatten Indigenous narratives. In Araluen's poetry we can see the problems in other colonial literatures expressed through a uniquely 'Australian' context. The throughline from Roosevelt to Linton is reproduced in efforts from the violent colonial past unto the present day.

The Indigenous scholar and poet Jeanine Leane describes a further problem with white authors engaging with Indigenous stories. This is in reference to the cultural expropriation of Indigenous narratives. Leane is careful to not totally exclude the possibility of any settler authors including Indigenous characters or narratives, but describes the many caveats involved in this.⁸⁴ "Literary representations," Leane writes "are never just benign descriptions; they enter into and shape our national discourse." In discussing books like *Coonardoo* and *Secret River*, she demonstrates that works like this necessarily inform the opinion of Indigenous people for their white audience. If works like these describe Indigenous people as superstitious, primitive,

⁷⁸ Evelyn Araluen, 'Playing in the Pastoral', *Dropbear*, pp. 19-20 (University of Queensland Press, 2021) p. 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Roosevelt, *African Game Trails*.

⁸¹ Araluen, p. 19.

⁸² Evelyn Araluen, 'Acknowledgement of Cuntry', *Dropbear*, pp. 30-31 (University of Queensland Press, 2021) p. 30.

⁸³ Kaplan, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Jeanine Leane, 'Subjects of the imagination: on dropping the settler pen', *Overland*, 5 Dec 2018 <<https://overland.org.au/2018/12/subjects-of-the-imagination-on-dropping-the-settler-pen/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

hypersexual, or otherwise racist it retroactively justifies the invasion of Indigenous Countries by settler forces.⁸⁵ In ‘O Australia’, Leane writes “Australia listen to your ghosts / hear that terror still nulling you”.⁸⁶ Leane encourages settler authors to question “should you be writing *this* story? Should you be taking this space?”⁸⁷ In defiance of reactionary authors like Lionel Shriver inveighing against ‘ensorious’ criticism of cultural appropriation, Leane writes that “appropriation is not empathy. It is stealing someone else’s story, someone else’s voice.”⁸⁸

This has created a double bind in my writing. When I first moved to Perth it was the first time I had visited an (ongoing) colonial project. Australia exists as a nation thanks to the theft, domination, and expropriation of its Indigenous nations by the British state.⁸⁹ It was important to engage with this but it was equally important to retain a remove and respect, as stories of invasion and Indigeneity are not mine to tell. Elements in the story refer to Indigenous traditional narratives such as the creation of the Swan River valley in ‘Travelogue’. ‘The Swan’, another reference to this narrative is present as a ‘power’ in ‘Under, Under the Earth’. Where I have done this, I would like to think I have taken a step back, referring to these traditions opaquely and without any measure of authority on or over them. Despite Araluen’s, justified, mockery of Acknowledgements of Country I have included one in this volume. Considering Curtin’s presence on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja, I have not kept my hands clean from the ongoing project of imperialism occurring under my feet.⁹⁰ Some acknowledgement of this was necessary, even if it is definitely insufficient. Negotiating this was not easy nor, I add, ought it be. Ultimately the calculus dictated, both in the reference to colonial violence and in the Acknowledgement of Country, that to omit something was worse than the reverse.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jeanine Leane, ‘O Australia’, *Red Room Poetry*, 26 Jul 2021
<<https://redroompoetry.org/poets/jeanine-leane/o-australia/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁸⁷ Jeanine Leane, ‘Subjects of the imagination’.

⁸⁸ Jeanine Leane, ‘Other peoples’ stories’, *Overland*, 19 Mar 2017
<<https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-225/feature-jeanine-leane/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

⁸⁹ Asafa Jalata, ‘The Impacts of English Colonial Terrorism and Genocide on Indigenous/Black Australians’, *SAGE Open*, 3.3, pp. 1-12 (September 2013)
doi:10.1177/2158244013499143.

⁹⁰ Harlene Hayne, ‘Welcome to Curtin University’, *Curtin University Website*, 02 Aug 2022
<<https://www.curtin.edu.au/about/welcome/>> [Accessed 05 May 2024].

Questions of travel are a natural association for scholars both of the Weird and of ecology within their respective fields. Crossing borders and blending boundaries is already natural terrain for the hybrid and grotesque beings of the Weird, whose ability to incite ‘limit experiences’ has already been documented. At the same time travel is natural theoretical terrain for ecological investigations. The material conditions of displacement that Kaplan bids us to understand must necessarily include the emissions that the mechanics of transit produce. The catastrophic ecological outcomes of anthropogenic climate change being visited upon the global south is, some have argued, a continuation of the violence of imperialism.

In terms of writing the fiction of *LIMINAL*, the necessary inclusion of travel provided a mechanical benefit to both the elements of the Weird and those of ecology that I wished to develop in writing. The breadth of ecological understandings that were afforded by a sense of displacement from the typical were of benefit to the stories within the collection. The theme of transit allowed me to draw on narratives such as Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.

At the outset the three themes chosen for this collection were selected with any special understanding that they would work so well when discussed in tandem. The more work was done on *LIMINAL*, however, the more everything worked on around it seemed to communicate and co-reinforce. Rather than an unwieldy assemblage of disparate parts, every theoretical and fictional element in this collection works in harmony. It is a tremendously fortunate thing to have this kind of coherence and it speaks, to my mind, of the natural confluence that exists between these three subjects. To write about travel and ecology, one might do so effectively with the Weird. To write about the Weird and ecology, one might do so effectively by delivering a narrative centred on displacement. To write a Weird travel narrative, each element would be strengthened with discussion of ecology.

CRAFT

With the conclusion of the exegetical section of the thesis, I would like to take time to explain myself in a more general way. While I have linked my theory to my work, the argument-driven structure of the prior chapters has left elements within the stories, and the stories themselves, undiscussed. The following section will focus on the craft of each story, the specific reasons for putting it together as I did, and my reasons for including it in *LIMINAL*.

The writing of *LIMINAL* spanned a period of five years. At the start of writing in 2018, the most pertinent threat to human life from the natural world was the effects of anthropogenic climate change. While this is, I believe, still the most pressing concern in the long-term, and it could be argued that it stems from anthropogenic conditions, the emergence of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 in early 2020 problematised this notion, as indeed it problematised the completion of my thesis as a whole.

COVID-19 is present in the stories ‘The Return’ and ‘Outland’ most prominently. The social effects of lockdown and its impact on the physical and ecological effects in those tales is discussed comprehensively. Much of the collection, however, was written or planned prior to the outbreak and is not necessarily as comprehensive as I would like it to be. While this collection discussed climate collapse, it is mostly climate collapse extrinsic to the most prominently and recently felt expression of it.

You might divide *LIMINAL*’s stories into three parts. The first part is comprised of works of performance flash and micro fiction. In studying for my Master’s and the early phases of my PhD, I regularly attended the Aberdeen English Literature society’s performance nights. These were dominated by poets and musicians which I, perhaps foolishly, felt I had to compete with. Audiences wouldn’t stay awake for fiction longer than 1,000 words so I tried to compress the narratives I would write to plausibly entertain drunk and bored students. I was rewarded creatively, as well as with applause, for this. The Weird can thrive in these miniature formats, where the tightness of the narratives synergises with the terse storytelling common to narratives in the mode.

The second part concerns longer form, more literary, short stories. These began around the mid-point of my PhD, as I tried to transition from these shorter and more amusing stories into something more considered and long-form. These works allowed me to deepen my engagements with certain aspects of the Weird. The longer narrative of ‘Growth’ allowed me to create the sense of building dread common to Weird stories that I was familiar with but had not successfully attempted. ‘Outland’ allowed me to synthesize autofiction with the Weird. ‘Travelogue’ enabled a discussion with Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and Hao Jingfang’s ‘Invisible Planets’, two works of fiction that inspired *LIMINAL* in the first instance. As with the general

breadth of the collection, versatility in format allowed for versatility in themes and engagements.

The final part is a narrative unto itself, ‘Under, Under the Earth’, an interactive novella. The reason behind this particular choice was a desire to engage with the form of interactive narratives as a whole and the possibilities that it might offer for works concerning ecology and transit. Both subjects perhaps encourage us to believe our choices are fundamental: whether in small acts of personal ecological virtue contributing to the salvation of our planet, or in the rigid passages of the railway or motorway being conduits of ‘freedom’. An interactive narrative also gives the impression of choice but is in fact highly limited.

The decision to make *LIMINAL* a short story collection was an easy one. My earliest engagement with the Weird which was with, shamefully, Lovecraft came through short fiction. While I have read and enjoyed many novels in the Weird, the manifestations of the mode that most satisfy me come in the form of shorter narratives. The excellent, now defunct, *Years Best Weird Fiction* series by Undertow was a major source of inspiration to me as I wrote *LIMINAL* and through it, I encountered writers such as John Langan and Chen Qiufan.¹ Ultimately the reasoning behind including a range of narrative formats was the breadth of subjects that I was able to engage with. In this collection I am bringing together a wide range of personal influences and attempting to discuss disparate topics that necessitate their own narratives. The interactive function is necessary for ‘Under, Under the Earth’, but would ruin the tailored and straightforward writing of ‘Travelogue’.

In the following section I will discuss each story separately, explaining my reasoning for craft elements and plot points within them, doing my best to illustrate myself as an artist rather than as a theorist as I have already done.

Travelogue

This story was conceived very early in the development of *LIMINAL* and was originally intended to be the longest piece of work within it. It eventually ended up being shorter than I intended and further surpassed in length by ‘Under, Under the Earth’. As I will later describe in my explanations for ‘A Geography of the Hollow Earth’, the notion of an *Invisible Cities* style catalogue of places occupied my mind even before the commencement of my PhD and those ideas found partial realisation here.

¹ Laird Barron, *Year's Best Weird Fiction: Volume 1*, (Undertow, 2014).

Part of what fascinated me with speculative fiction from a young age was ‘world-building’: the idea that speculative narratives necessitated the conception and construction of other realities in which the narratives could take place. One aspect of continued adolescence in myself and my writing is that I still find it fascinating, perhaps shamefully more fascinating than any narrative that might take place in such an other world.

‘Travelogue’ was at first intended to be a work of pure worldbuilding, with no narrative to join the segments. In these initial drafts of the story I believed that the mere act of their arrangement would be enough to constitute a narrative of travel between them, as in *Invisible Cities*. Dr Alexandra Lewis, the initial supervisor for this project, advised against that. The narrative, consequently, is better for it. While there is something to a ‘Kuleshov effect’ style narrative of transitions between states, the first-person narration that intersperses each destination allows intimate discussion about the dehumanising aspects of travel that I encountered on long-haul flights, bus journeys, and other arenas of the liminal.²

The first night on the train is based on my experience travelling to Singapore, my first leg on my initial journey to Australia. The flight was nineteen hours long from London, and I did not sleep at all. As happens so often, the passenger in front of me leaned their seat all the way back. When I tried to do the same, the passenger behind asked me politely not to. While I, of course, obliged the passenger behind me I was too much of a coward to confront the one in front of me in the moment. Instead, I have chosen to do so almost four years later in the exegesis of my PhD thesis.

The common thread in each place described by the brochure is an accommodation of post-collapse conditions. Catastrophism is something that is leaned into heavily when discussion of the climate crisis rears its head. This is self-indulgent, since if the Global North suffers collapse from the effects of anthropogenic climate-change it will be the last place to do so, and generally inconsistent with crises faced by life on earth throughout its history. I find my beliefs on this most reflected by the coda of the *Hell on Earth* podcast, which discusses the eschatological thinking in the seventeenth century prior and following the Thirty Years’ War. “The end of the world is happening, always, but something new is always being born.”³ The crisis is terrible and its effects oughtn’t be minimized, but the self-indulgence of apocalyptic

² 'Lev Vladimirovich Kuleshov' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Mar 2023
<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lev-Vladimirovich-Kuleshov>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

³ Matt Christman and Chris Wade, ‘A NEW GOD’, *Hell on Earth*, 25 Mar 2023
<<https://www.patreon.com/posts/hell-on-earth-10-80036490>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

thinking is misplaced. Certainly the post-collapse animals of the world will lead lives illegible to us, but lives will be lived. ‘Travelogue’ is an attempt to read those illegible lives.

Under, Under the Earth

This interactive narrative is the longest section of the collection. Its size owes itself to its structure. Having structured my Master’s thesis ‘Inks and Sharps’ as a collection of stories unified by an interactive narrative, I was persuaded more and more of the use of including the structure again for *LIMINAL*. The genesis for the interactive narrative elements found within ‘Under, Under the Earth’ occurred with ‘choose your own adventure’ novels I read during childhood. While these were intended to be interactive games with dice rolls and rules in the style of *Dungeons and Dragons*, my own engagement with them was altogether more primitive. I neglected dice rolls, as they often produced outcomes I didn’t like. I forwent the inventory management system and turn-based battles, because they bored and confused my nine-year-old self. I proceeded with the book by reading through each outcome and choosing which one I liked best. If I found myself in a bad spot in the *Scorpion Swamp* or *Island of the Lizard King*,^{4,5} I would retrace my steps until I could choose a better path. Through no small coincidence this is the optimal ‘play-style’ for ‘Under, Under the Earth’, my way of inflicting my own warped understanding of interactive narratives on an academic audience.

Beyond these analogue interactive narratives, I took substantial experience from digital ones. Foremost among these were *Disco Elysium* and *Pentiment*. Part of the joke or conceit at the heart of ‘Under’ is the irony of a system of choice-driven narrative propelling the reader-player towards a certain and inescapable conclusion. *Pentiment* takes the form of a murder mystery at the fictional alpine monastery of Kirsau in the 16th century. In each chapter the protagonist must investigate, and eventually convict, a plausible suspect. Despite the player’s options a suspect is always executed at the end of each act, their innocence or guilt left entirely ambiguous.⁶ The plot of *Disco Elysium* involves the solution of a murder mystery, though a substantial amount of the plot involves extraneous affairs. The murder is eventually solved, even if the player offers minimal input to the actual solution of the case. Powers beyond the player-character’s control force a confrontation between the two principal factions: a group of

⁴ Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, *Scorpion Swamp* (Puffin, 1984).

⁵ Ian Livingstone, *Island of the Lizard King* (Puffin, 1984).

⁶ Obsidian. *Pentiment*, PC (USA, 2022).

striking dockworkers and the mercenaries called in to break the strike.⁷ Porpentine's *With Those We Love Alive* is an interactive narrative experience taking place in a nebulous secondary-world fantasy setting. The protagonist is trapped in a position of quasi-abusive service to an inhuman empress and is witness and victim to the brutalities of her regime. While the protagonist can alter the items she can produce for the empress, she can do nothing to change the character of the regime and its abuses.⁸

In each case, the narrative inexorably progresses outwith the control of the player. The confrontation between the strikers and the mercenaries in *Disco Elysium* is set in motion before our arrival and will happen and will end bloodily, even if we succeed in mitigating it.⁹ While we hunt a murderer in *Pentiment*, we inevitably cause the death of at least one character per chapter. Even though one must die, by choosing a suspect we are effectively killing them.¹⁰ The horrors of each narrative are inevitable with or without our input. This is the central irony of interactive narrative. While the player advances the plot through their choices, the need to craft a specific narrative shall necessarily limit the player's freedom. In all three games, the powerlessness of the player-character reflects human powerlessness against political and historical forces. This, too, is true for 'Under, Under the Earth'. I settled on the train as a metaphor for this inevitability: a method of transport that promises to take you anywhere, but quite literally 'railroads' you to a specific path. Our character's impacts on the world of 'Under' could be interpreted as substantial, it is eventually up to them whether to rescue the world or destroy it. Ultimately, however, they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. The plan to crash the train is set in motion by powers beyond them. Should the crash be prevented, the world is saved but there is no justice or definitively happy ending. *Disco Elysium*, *Pentiment*, and *With Those We Love Alive* all carry a sense of melancholy from the inevitability of their various narrative outcomes. It's this melancholy that I try to impart on the end-states of 'Under', the sense of sorrow and defeat from playing a rigged game.

'Under' was written at the outset as an attempted 'prequel' to 'Travelogue'. If 'Travelogue' is about the aftermath of apocalypse, to stay with the trouble after a catastrophe, then 'Under' is the attempt to describe how such a catastrophe might have occurred. This catastrophism is played with in 'Under', with the reader-protagonist cast as a 'chosen one' by

⁷ Studio ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium*.

⁸ Porpentine, *With Those We Love Alive*, Twine (USA, 2014) <<https://xrafstar.monster/games/twine/wtwla/>> [Accessed 05 Mar 2024].

⁹ Studio ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium*.

¹⁰ Obsidian, *Pentiment*.

the various political actors of the Immer to accomplish their political needs. One trope, particularly as regards to advertising, is that consumer choice is the ultimate authority on climate crisis. The citizen of the global north is invited to buy sustainably, to recycle, to drive electric cars and in so doing turn back the tide of waste, greed, and theft. Operating on the bare minimum, or at least the intended bare minimum, of sustainable or reparative behaviour is commodified as a customer option. This is why I found the potential for an interactive narrative to be so resonant. On both the level of transit and ecology it suggests similar notions of free will only to rebuke them with the very structure.

The conceit of the narrative was drawn up for me as I was preparing to leave the U.K. for Australia in mid-to-late 2019. I remember discussing the narrative with the supervisor of the Aberdeen-Curtin Alliance programme, Ali Lumsden, and taking heart that she found humour in it. The actual writing of ‘Under’ did not begin until 2020, after I returned from Australia to Aberdeen. The circumstances of my return to the U.K. in spring of 2020 are partly why, I believe, Aberdeen is so disparaged in both ‘Under’ and ‘Travelogue’.

The inspirations of this particular narrative are many. As the largest element of the collection, it has soaked up a lot of my prevailing interests over my time writing it. Very early in the writing of ‘Under’ I conceived of Ross Thomson, the disgraced former MP for Aberdeen South as the king of a theoretical independent Aberdeen.¹¹ As he was confronted by assault allegations, and was drummed out of the political sphere the circumstances of his accession to royalty became more bizarre and narratively interesting. However, had I started writing it more recently, I believe I would have made Michael Gove king. The names of both Mr Lam and Barbara Lond are references to the esoteric personalities supposedly encountered by Aleister Crowley in his magic(k)al misadventures.¹² ‘Atlas’ as the personified god of America is a reference to the Ayn Rand novel.¹³ The para-political bleed into elements of the story, and into ‘A Geography of the Hollow Earth’ owes itself to my own preoccupation with secret histories I nursed in 2021.

In the ‘good ending’ of ‘Under’, the comment specifically on light is in reference to something that my counsellor at Curtin university said to me. She was also not from there

¹¹ Libby Brooks, ‘Commons dismisses sexual assault claims against ex-MP Ross Thomson’, *The Guardian*, 29 Oct 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/oct/29/commons-dismisses-sexual-assault-claims-against-ex-tory-mp-ross-thomson>> [Accessed at 05 Apr 2024]

¹² Aleister Crowley, *In Nomine Babalon*, ed. by Mark Gilley (Fulminating Mercury, 2019), p.107

¹³ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (Penguin Classics, 2007).

initially and we spoke a lot about the quality of the light in Australia. There is something different about it, beyond being the most tropical place that I've ever spent any amount of time in. It's the light that I miss the most about Perth and it's what I look forward to most should I ever come back to visit it.

Arcana

This sequence of microfiction was not initially written to be included in *LIMINAL*, but seeing the tarot connection in M. John Harrison's 'Iron Horse' persuaded me that it would be a good fit. Divination and transit are, for me, complimentary concepts: both allow us, or give us the illusion of, knowing where we are going. The complication of this, the failure of this, is a thread present throughout this collection. In *Arcana*, the failure of transit is most concretely expressed in 'Chariot'. The failure of divination, prophecy, and magic in general is discussed in 'The Devil', 'The Tower', and 'The Fool'.

Of all the stories in *LIMINAL*, 'Arcana' is the one that most sways towards the eerie end of the Weird-eerie dichotomy. In the stories where ghosts, devils, and vampires do appear, however, I believe I have imagined them in a Weird way. At least, the layout of the stories has created a Weird nave for the gargoyle of the eerie to sit itself in.

The story was inspired by my own limited experience as a Tarot querent and reader. This is barely a party trick, but it allows for interesting conversation. Like, I believe, a great deal of people, I am most compelled by the Tarot's major arcana, even if there are resonances and points of interest in the minor face cards as well. At the very least, covering the major faces exclusively leaves the story at a much more comfortable length.

An early draft of this story was performed at the Ooh Mami bar in Leith in September 2021 and published online through Leopard Arts.

Modifications

Of all the stories in this collection, 'Modifications' is the one that most clearly illustrates the character of my writing prior to the start of my PhD. In many ways, *LIMINAL* has been an experiment with longer narratives, longer writing, and more extensive stories and sequences in general. Prior to this, in particular with regard to *Inks and Sharps*, my Master's thesis, much of my fiction was of 'flash' (under a thousand words) length. Many of these flash stories were written to be performed. 'Modifications' is no exception to this.

The impetus for writing ‘Modifications’ was an attempt to tackle hybridity as a concept in Weird fiction. In the social scene of Aberdeen University and the city as a whole, I imagined Weird hybridity as another element in personal affectation and fashion. It was an interesting circle to square for me as well to imagine transformation that occurred on the basis of consent rather than one imposed on the characters as occurs in so many other Weird tales.

This story was published in Leopard Arts and is available to read online.

The Follies

The inspiration for this story found itself in the view my old flat in Aberdeen had over the water. On clear days you could see right to the horizon, and the growing wind farm as it was built. There was some sense at the time that Aberdeen, as a petro-city, was done. Oil had crashed, rent was cheap, art was booming. The idea that things were getting better was one I happily surrendered myself to.

This story is probably the most climate pessimism prone of the collection. Like every story that deals with the aftermath of crisis in this collection, I am careful to show that there is still a human future in the backwash of catastrophe. In spite of that, it is fairly grim. The depth of the pessimism owes itself to the hope I felt in 2018. This story was written after oil’s resurgence, and after the pandemic.

The title itself comes from my drives with my mother up the Stonehaven road to Aberdeen itself. She’d always point out the ‘folly’ on the way to Dunnottar castle. When I climbed the hill it sat on and found out it was a war memorial, it excited something in me. Of course, folly is a descriptive and technical term rather than a value judgement but the notion of a foolish monument commemorating mass death was enough to serve as this story’s foundation.

This story was read as part of a podcast discussion on Far From the Madding Crowd’s *Spoke in Mirrors* sequence and was published in the *Leopard Arts* online magazine.

Poulou’s Crabs

The title of this story was suggested by Matthew Chrulew and the premise finds its basis in a real episode in the life of Jean-Paul Sartre. The characters of Poulou and Castor are not written to be completely faithful representations of their historical counterparts, but I found the specific problem of Sartre’s mescaline hallucinations of sea creatures to be resonant on a number of levels.

This story, with the possible inclusion of ‘A Geography’, is the only one of the collection that does not directly engage in speculation. I wanted to prove, as per Mark Fisher’s point in *The Weird and the Eerie* that speculative elements are not necessary for Weird-ness in a tale. The historical fact of Sartre’s hallucinations seemed a useful avenue in with which to detail this.

This, along with elements of *Under, Under the Earth*, is where I discuss and describe Paris, where I lived between the completion of my Master’s degree and the commencement of my PhD. I could not allow a short story collection discussing travel to leave out the uniquely horrible and fascinating experience of travelling by the Paris metro, no matter how anachronistic my depiction of the lines or stations are.

A Geography of the Hollow Earth

This story is an attempt to imagine the mindset that prevailed, at least among myself and the people I knew, in early 2020. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus really did feel like an apocalypse, rather than another modular addition to the endlessly rolling *Katamari Damacy* of systems collapse that we now know it to be.

This element to the story is newer than the idea itself. ‘Geography’, or something like it, had been sketched roughly even before I had been accepted for the PhD scholarship. Two of its descendants, ‘Travelogue’ as a ‘Tlön’ or *Invisible Cities* style speculative geography, and ‘Under, Under the Earth’ as a study in conspiracy paranoia and para-politics as relating to said geography, are present elsewhere in *LIMINAL*.

The value in its addition to the collection is to discuss conspiracy paranoia as a pure state of mind rather than, as ‘Under’ posits, actual fact. This is yet another exploration of the Weird as a not necessarily speculative mode, though I believe that it is less successful in this than ‘Crabs’.

This story was eventually included in *Dreem World*, a self-published anthology of poetry and short stories compiled and edited by myself and Ian Macartney. Parts of it were excerpted for *Dark Show*, a radio production produced by William Byam Shaw and Jess Haygarth.

The Return

Of all the stories in *LIMINAL*, this is the most explicitly of the pandemic. The particular inspiration for it was a piece of twee social media babble that started in the initial weeks of lockdown derangement. The notion of ‘nature’s return’ was at first a joke but, as the conditions of life under the stresses of the pandemic necessarily worsened, like all pandemic ‘jokes’ it steadily became less funny.

A particular thread in ‘Return’ is the effects of the conditions of social isolation imposed by the rolling lockdowns. The interruption of my studies in Australia compounded the blows to my wellbeing and the roiling circus of social media left me feeling quite unwell through the years of 2020 to the end of 2021.

As a piece of pandemic fiction, ‘The Return’ is necessarily flawed. Being written at the start of the outbreak it cannot reckon with the full effects of COVID on societal and individual psyches. As a historical document and a commentary on my own desperate desire to achieve any kind of escape from my own situation, it will have to do.

‘The Return’ was published through Leopard Arts and is available to read online.

Let’s Talk About Snails

This story grew, mutated, out of a piece of performance fiction that was read as a set of three for the Aberdeen Occult and Avant Garde society in late 2018. Throughout each of its iterations the thread of transformation and hybridity as a solicited thing, rather than an imposition, on the narrator was something I was careful to bear in mind.

The gratuitous French, and the aristocratic diction, is partly an attempt to poke fun at myself, partly an experiment in narrative register: one of the features of my writing that I most worry about is that every one of my narrators uses the same voice. The two characters are two people I know or knew, monstered slightly but retaining the class and social backgrounds that they enjoyed when I knew them.

The conversational tone of the narration is another thing that evolves from its origins as a performance piece. On the page, it feels a little incomplete. If the voice reading it out to you is not physically exhorting you to transform into a snail, it loses something of its lustre.

Being caught between my performance flash fictions and my short stories proper, it’s something of an evolutionary missing link between the work I completed for my Master’s (and

‘Modifications’ in this collection) and later work like ‘Outland’ and ‘Growth’ that were written to be read on the page.

Dream Sequence

Like Arcana, this wasn’t written explicitly with the intent of inclusion within *LIMINAL*. However, upon revising both the collection and the stories themselves, there are more resonances than I had initially anticipated. The failure of transit symbolised in a crisis or a crash that unfolds into monstrous consequence, as in ‘Under, Under the Earth’ and the ‘Chariot’ section of ‘Arcana’, is encapsulated in ‘Gender Reveal 9/11’. The monsters of the Anthropocene symbolised ecologically and haunting the present features in ‘Trail Cam Donald Trump’. The idea of life persisting after anthropogenic apocalypse, as per ‘Travelogue’ and ‘A Geography of the Hollow Earth’, is the central concern of ‘Chernobyl Catgirl’.

Each of these stories was named for a prompt posted online, used to create an image with ‘artificial intelligence’ programs like Midjourney. While the question of A.I. art has shifted from one of a humorous diversion to a genuine threat to the integrity of artistic production and welfare, the stories themselves have value enough to outlive what they were inspired by.

‘Gender Reveal’ was partially inspired by the wealth of information on baby ‘gender reveal’ parties in America that have gone spectacularly wrong, causing pink or blue forest fires and horrific explosions. It is also an attempt to fuse the event of the eleventh of September attacks with their cultural impact. ‘Trail Cam’ is another document in my ongoing fascination with the former (potentially future) U.S. president, the profound strangeness of his mannerisms, and his ongoing threat to my psyche. ‘Chernobyl’ features the text of the Sanda National Laboratories’ long term nuclear waste warning message, which I planned to include in another (eventually scrapped) idea for this collection.

This sequence was performed at Argonaut Books on Leith Walk in August of 2022, it was later performed in Glasgow at Inn Deep and later at McNeill’s. The author performed ‘Trail Cam’ in his approximation of Donald Trump’s voice at all three readings.

Growth

If ‘Snails’ is, within this collection, the missing link between performance pieces and work written for the page, ‘Growth’ is the *labyrinthodont* to its *tiktaalik*. Longer and more explicitly built to remain on the page, it does still have its roots in a performance piece.

Evolving from a very short ‘Growth’ piece included in my Master’s thesis, the initial story ended on the speculation that there was fauna in the lanes rather than the inclusion of it as a certainty.

The expansion of this story owes itself to a few things. The commentary on gentrification that was more present in the initial work has to compete for space with more discussion on post-pandemic isolation. The sections wherein the narrator stays up all night, fraying his psyche with online research, is taken from direct experience.

The character of Oliver is based partially on the fall from grace of Sam Kriss, a blogger and philosopher with whom I was obsessed until allegations about sexual misconduct on his part emerged in 2017. In some ways this character is an indulgence on my part: an attempt from me to wash my hands of ever having liked him in the first place by casting him as pathetic from the outset.

The location of the lanes itself is mostly based on Shoreditch, where I had a weekend away with my then-partner in 2017. However, it contains DNA from the streets branching from Byres road in Glasgow, from Fittie in Aberdeen, from parts of the Perth CBD, and from Victoria road in Glasgow’s south side through which I now regularly walk to work. This story is partly why whenever I see cobbles in a heavily urbanised area, I take it as a bad omen.

Outland

This is the most directly autobiographical of the stories in *LIMINAL*. While each will contain elements from my life, for the first two-thirds this story is taken directly from my experience working as a traffic marshal in the Sky Park and Walk for the duration of COP26. It was a night-shift job, the first I had ever done, and the shifts were twelve hours, the longest I had ever worked. I earned above minimum wage, just, and it practically converted by hobby of walking around at night into a full-time position.

The interactions between the narrator and the various people through the course of the narrative are factual, transcribed as best as I could from my own memory of them. All the individuals are pseudonymised. The foxes are real too, as is the shattered portacabin at one end of the carpark. The exploration, and apotheosis, of the narrator is entirely fictional.

The idea of an endless birch forest came to me from Pando: the world’s largest living organism, a quaking aspen forest interconnected through its roots found in Utah’s Fishlake

National Forest.¹⁴ To me, the features of Pando represented the ideal of an holistic being as described by Donna Haraway. If I were to return to nature rather than have, as in other stories, nature return to me I would choose to go to Pando. The reasoning being that an organism containing one-hundred-and-eight acres worth of trees must surely have room for one more.

Tide

This was the first story written explicitly for inclusion within the collection. While others were written or conceived before it and were included because of a fortunate confluence between their themes and the collection's, 'Tide' was conceived completely after I had accepted the brief of the PhD. It was also written before I had intuited that every story need not contain every element, hence the clumsy inclusion of the inter-solar train.

This story was founded on two elements. The first is my suspicion of utopian elements in science fiction. The idea of terraforming is popular in fantastic depictions on interstellar futures, but the idea that radically altering biospheres to allow us to better inhabit planets bears more than a passing resemblance to the process of anthropogenic climate change is, to my knowledge, criminally unexplored in mainstream fiction in the genre.

The second element was spite-based. Early in my starting the PhD I heard a story read that featured a gay teenager committing suicide by walking into the ocean. This upset me on a level that I found difficult to understand, it felt like a commodification of the pain that I felt when I was young. In the fullness of time, I realise that this reaction was immature: that the author was certainly drawing from his own childhood, and that my reaction was not too dissimilar to that of an animal that sees its own reflection and attacks it. I've kept the story, despite the ill-feeling that went into the first draft, because there is thankfully value in it extrinsic to those elements.

In 2018, not long after I'd begun this collection, myself, my romantic partner, and a mutual friend went to fish. I had always entertained the idea of myself fishing as a gesture

¹⁴ Nicola Davies, 'Sound artist eavesdrops on what is thought to be world's heaviest organism', *The Guardian* 10 May 2023
<<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/may/10/sound-artist-eavesdrops-on-what-is-thought-to-be-worlds-heaviest-organism-pando-utah>> [Accessed 05 Apr 2024].

towards sustainability. We didn't catch anything, or it seemed like we hadn't. When we drew our lines in close to midnight, ready to go home, we found a little resistance on one of them. When we drew it out, we found an octopus at the end of the line.

For me the octopus always represented the intersection between the natural world and the Weird. When I was very young, only five, I remember encountering one on a beach in Corfu. My parents tell me that I couldn't speak, that I visibly shook, overcome with the strangeness of the thing before me. In my latter encounter, I interceded to protect the animal from my friend who wanted to eat it. I know now, as I think I knew when I was five, that we were part of the same strangeness: sympoietic fellows, just trying to make with and get along.

That animal was of course a victim, or at least subject to, collapsing ecological conditions. My friend speculated that overfishing and trawling of the predators that normally eat octopuses were the reason behind its visit to us that night. Looking it up based on the photos of it later, I deduced that it might have been an *eledone cirrhosa*: a common octopus in the north sea. In that case it might have travelled too, spawning off the coast of Norway and swimming south west to catch its webbing on my hook while it went for the luminescent tackle.

It's the role of the octopus as a stranger that I return to when I think about the themes of this collection. The Weird is the genre of strangers, not malicious or benign necessarily, intruding upon somewhere that they haven't or oughtn't. Ecological collapse estranges us from our environment and estranges our environment: it en-Weirds our conditions. The things that ought to eat us don't. The things we ought to eat end up eating us.

Travel is the business of strangers. No matter how familiar one is in any number of places, the act of travel will turn you into a stranger eventually if you do it enough. An old romantic partner was a multi-polyglot, fantastically intelligent, but always found themselves forgetting any one of their languages if they weren't in the place where it was spoken for long enough. They had to keep bouncing between each, never belonging properly.

The world will get stranger. Even without the pressure of ecological collapse it will get stranger. A thread in the fiction I have written for this collection is fear of the future. While much of speculative fiction is about hope, or looking forward, or anticipation, or excitement, I don't believe that an uncritical cleaving to these attitudes helps us to brace for what's coming.

Lovecraft, who is cited far more in this explanation than he deserves, wrote Weird fiction as an expression of his fear of the future. His fear was of the fall of white civilization and the abrogation of world power to those that the western powers had enslaved. His outlook in the early 20th century was that of a Tom Buchanan. While more aristocratic, etiolated, baroque, it was no less boorish or nasty. This fear, while no longer bearing the same toxically

reactionary character, is still present in the mode, in imagined apocalypses, in unsolicited transformations, in uninvited guests.

But alongside this, not necessarily reactionary, fear there is an emergent parallel strategy in the mode. Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis* opens with 'de te fabula narratur' and the same may be said of many similarly Weird fictions.¹⁵ My engagement in Weird fiction always operated in this way. One of my early, favourite, Lovecraft tales was 'The Outsider' which follows an figure living in terror of a horrific monster, only to realise that the monster is himself.¹⁶ To recognize the strange in oneself helps us overcome the strangeness of others. While the former strategy of the Weird is certainly present in this collection, I have good reason to fear the future, the second is why I write what I do and why I've written what I have.

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¹⁵ Flusser, p. 2.

¹⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, 'The Outsider', *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, 20 Aug 2009, <<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/o.aspx>> [Accessed 20 Apr 2024].

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