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## The tower

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**The Tower**

By

Charles C. Hoppe

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

Advisory Committee

Chair, Dr. Bruce Beasley

Mr. Oliver de la Paz

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Charles C. Hoppe

May 19, 2010

**The Tower**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Charles C. Hoppe  
May, 2010

## **Abstract**

*The Tower* is a collection of poems in a post-Zombie Apocalypse world. Inspired by a dream, these poems explore the nature of memory, mythology, media, pop culture, and patrilineal relationships. The architecture of the poems emulate Freudian concepts of symbolic overdetermination in dream imagery by building both structural and symbolic parallels in the work.

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## **Part I. - Sleeping**

## [HELP WANTED]

First there was the battle to name it:  
the TV anchors rose from tanning  
bed coffins like the Great Criswell

delivering the horror to a swirl of graphics,  
sound effects, half-brained slogans,  
and animations of the reanimated.

Beat reporters flocked to the scene  
taking (or becoming) eyewitness accounts.  
The whole country was contagious.

The Falwells called it a plague  
sent from on high, society's free-fall  
into fagotry, bestiality and incest.

Historians—those half-assed punsters—  
called it *The Great Un-Awakening*, and  
declared from over-stuffed recliners

that the outbreak, though “quite alarming,”  
was but a blip on the radar of Battles  
Science Will One Day Have Won.

But everyone was afraid of the Zed-word,  
that night of the living dead word,  
which staggered, moaning with the kinetic

restraint of a compulsive jogger  
on a transcontinental flight. Then—  
for lack of a better word—the plague

died down. The Falwells returned  
to their flock to plot. The Historians  
sat vindicated from the labor of inactivity.

The TV anchors scanned their hand  
mirrors for stray tooth-spinach.  
That's when the towers arrived,

glowing white with their clear resin coats  
like an Apple store with an erection  
and we found ourselves on the bottom,

dying to get in. At the base was  
an old-fashioned HELP WANTED sign,  
with its white rectangular border,

red background, all caps white block  
lettering, projected onto a curved screen  
that wrapped around the entire lower tier.

It was the kind of thing where people  
would walk by and feign interest  
by saying “Hey, that’s neat,” or

“Ooh, shiny” and continue on  
their merry way, sucking the last bits  
of flavor out of the crushed ice

that was once an Orange Julius.

## Dying to Get In

Inside, ground floor

the brochure goes to great lengths to describe the barriers. The first was some sort of ultimate super metal, capable of not only stopping tanks but melting them in the process, truly a sight to see.

The second barrier followed a more dastardly technique: a 100-meter trench filled with boiling salt water, the salt apparently being the most unexploited weakness of the Undead. I think the brochure said something about healing old wounds.

The third barrier was my favorite: a 10 ft thick gelatinous blob thing that was bite-, claw-, and burn-proof. Never understood the burn-proofing though. It's not like the Undead would be carrying blowtorches. Nor would they be on fire considering they'd have just gotten out of a pool of bubbling sodium, soaking wet and smelling like the ocean.

There were two entrances, which I thought one too many but there was probably some fire marshall mandate so I suspended my disbelief.

These entryways were of course guarded

but once you were inside the first barrier several elevator compartments rose out of the ground and took you straight down 200 feet. I had an epiphany the first time riding down when I realized that years of sci-fi movies had conditioned me to expect a future exactly like this, and yet now that it had arrived I wasn't really that impressed.

Then we shuffled out onto escalators,  
the flat ones, like the ones  
between hotels in Vegas  
and we'd pass underneath  
the second and third barriers,  
under gallons of boiling salt water  
and what looked like a giant eraser.

All of this certainly contributed to a sense of safety: if it was this hard for us to get in, those of us in need of eating brains could never do it. After living here a while I realized this same entrance process was the same reason I'd rarely leave.

I can't remember how many times I talked myself out of going somewhere by saying something like *but then I'll be out late, and I'll be all tired and won't want to go through all the damn entrance hassles.*

Like the time I tried to get past the security in the American rich person renta-mansion neighborhood of Cabo San Lucas but was too drunk to remember the name of my villa, so the security took me for a ride in the foothills until I was good and lost. Like that, but more tedious.

Plus most bars and restaurants by then had web chatting so you could have a beer with your friend cyber style.

I lived there because Dad was one of those people impressed by the HELP WANTED sign and as hard as the post-epidemic economy was I was living with him and he was looking for work.

I was living with him because in these times the gravity of my lifestyle hadn't found orbit around a proper -ism yet

ever since loss of faith had become the norm  
the best combination of dogmatic keywords  
in a Baskin Robbins dozen ruled the day

but I just couldn't get my flavors  
right.

## Home, Home Again

Our apartment

—or condo

(I was never sure what arrangement he had with The Tower)

—was open

filmed in front of a live studio audience  
and impossible to see from certain angles.

In lieu of the fourth wall

a sci-fi movie void, its only reason for existence  
apparently being that the bad guy had to fall down  
something or else how was he going to die?

I'd wander through rooms with no doors  
testing all the couches  
all those elaborate instruments of ass-rest

find my favorite and lie down, propping my pillowed head  
against the armrest, expanding and contracting,  
calling *why am I still here?* to The Great Void

and it was like calling for Beetlejuice,  
for on the third day [he wasn't there] materialized  
from the applause and canned laughter of the Void,

a manila folder of stock answers tucked under his arm,  
sat in the armchair next to mine, as indifferent  
to his magnetic entrance as possible, and said

“You're still here  
because the two of you will  
always need each other to mend”

but I felt like a molting pigeon  
pecking at cigarette butts,

a grain of rice expanding  
in my self destruct stomach.

## Everyone Else

In social networking moviequote in joke chat sessions  
we used to talk about who we would draft

for the Zed-word Apocalypse  
like there were fantasy leagues

like there were actually stakes in all of this.

Far as I know I wasn't ever picked  
but I survived the Great Un-Awakening and they, well,

I don't know what happened to them.  
Another tower perhaps?

There was only a before and an after

when they were headshots on screens,  
like the Random Photo of the Day I saw

while stumbling online. The picture was  
hand drawn, rendered in ball point pen

at the top just white space

then a picture of an obese male, 18-24 demographic,  
surrounded by computer monitors and keyboards.

Of course the picture had a caption:

*Everyone else on the internet is actually the same really fat guy*

and because of that I couldn't be sure  
if I still talked to my friends

or to friend facsimiles.

Dad sat like that too,

and it was really the only way I ever saw him.

He was either at work  
or in front of the screens,

a stimulus/response mechanism.

He was Everyone Else on the Internet,

the foundation of all my interactions,

the black rims framing  
my entire vision of the world.

And if he was Everyone Else,  
was he aware of me,

or did he think he was only talking to himself?



## Saving the World

“Did I ever tell you,”  
Dad would say to me  
“about what went through my mind  
when I read my first issue of *World’s Finest*?”

Of course he had,  
so I focused instead on the implications  
of the title *World’s Finest*:  
an illegal alien and post-traumatic psychotic  
running around in primary colors and capes.

“I’d gotten so excited,”  
he’d continue, indifferent to me  
and more just enjoying the memory of it,  
“that when I went to bed that night  
I expected Batman and Superman  
to come crashing through my window  
to enlist my services in saving the world.  
And I knew it couldn’t actually happen,  
and in fact I wasn’t sure what I would do  
if it actually did happen.”

The story gets better  
with each retelling;  
he slips into that routine like a preteen  
into a pre-faded Batman shirt from Hot Topic.

And I sit here right now  
unable to sleep because I’m waiting  
for something to come to me,  
as if the retelling of this flimsy story  
will get me a better understanding of me or him  
and I can’t distinguish anymore  
between the experience, what people told me,  
and what I told myself to make it make sense.

Just as the Great Un-Awakening  
was dying down and the Towers were sprouting up  
I took it upon myself to try to keep the story going,  
to stay fluent in our last common language,  
hand-drawn comics of crime fighting and daring deeds,  
outlines & ink marks, colored pencils and whiteout,  
stapled and wrapped and delivered solemnly on Christmas.

I think I thought  
I was trying to save him,  
to come crashing through the window  
of this Tower we'd retreated to  
and to rouse him into action.  
The whole world was ending,  
and I needed him to save me.

But I stopped writing before I finished  
the last issue just like I've stopped doing everything  
worth doing right before it started to mean something.

I listen not  
to humor him but because I enjoy the routine,  
enjoy a story you can set your clock to.  
I've catalogued them all,  
sorted them out by frequency and probability,  
but the story he told me only once  
sticks out the most in my mind.  
I don't remember the telling of it  
as much as the content but I remember  
believing him completely  
and knowing I shouldn't at all.

He was in his room,  
scanning the screen like he'd been waiting for something  
to appear and a word shattered the green hum of the glass.

"Did he tell you the word?"  
[he wasn't there] asked.

*Yes, I said, Dad.  
With a question mark.*

## Treading Down

The slogan was either  
—Run For Your Light  
or  
—Run For Your Life

and though I still didn't really understand  
where our food, toys and sex products  
came from, the electricity was pure hamster style.

It made sense to all of us.  
One ever-charging teslation of energy  
big Matrix-like copper conductor  
the spine of the Tower,  
the floors arranged around it  
  
everything arranged around it

It was brightest in there, white and sterile  
like the plot of a dystopian sci-fi B-movie,  
unoriginal the first time you saw it.

It was also the only level where you could see outside  
to the city we'd left in exchange for an upright lifestyle.

The first time I ran for my life

I looked out onto the city  
and was struck like C3PO in an escape pod

because the damage didn't look as bad from in here  
though I think I'd been too young to remember the worst of it

but now we were safe  
as long as we ran for the turbines  
but I'd forgotten my water bottle  
and through the window  
I saw the skyline scramble,  
into pixellated nonsense,  
sky a matted black, buildings  
replaced by sharp blocks of color,  
stacked like a game of Tetris  
slowly getting out of hand.

I spent the rest of the night  
trying to convince myself  
that I'd hallucinated,  
that I'd just been dehydrated

pictured My Friend when  
he went to the Emergency Room  
with lightheadedness only for the nurse  
to buy him a Gatorade  
out of the lobby vending machine.

I must have been close  
to that point that day,  
content to ignore the world  
as long as I believed  
there was still one out there  
to ignore.

## Falling

My great-grandfather was the first person I ever knew of that died, but I don't remember ever meeting him.

Apparently one day sometime in his 90s (in the mid-80s) while I was two or three he spent a week not eating

in his retirement home on Katella Avenue and died, leaving his wife alone at the home with glass eye memories

of bathtub gin parties and staged moon landings. They'd tell me that he always loved seeing me, or

that he would have gotten a kick out of me as I grew older, but I'd never seen a dead body, and the only way I could picture

his death was the silhouette of a body falling through space, like a CAUTION WET FLOOR sign or a poster from *Vertigo*

I pictured myself facing away but standing strong, hunched in a somber yet somehow deferential gesture

to a man I didn't know I'd ever known. I saw that chasm for the rest of my childhood at my other grandparents' house

on Driscoll St. There was a glass table in the reception room, a room that never changed once in all my visits.

The Table of Eternity was thick and tinted green. Sis and I found an abyss hidden there, if we peered in

to the table's side, a mirrored set of rings stretched impossibly infinitely, like being caught between two mirrors .

I thought of General Zod from *Superman*, trapped with his cohorts in rings, judged by floating heads,

and banished to a pane of glass, knowing by the fact they weren't killed they'd be back for the disappointing sequel.

## New Shoe Smell

The Tower Shop  
—ground floor—

had every platinum-series-  
five-year-warranty-  
tested-by-astronauts-  
wearing-mittens-  
made-from-sheep-  
with-lipstick-stains-  
they-got-from-kissing-  
cosmetics-testing-pigs-

Anniversary Edition reissue,  
thing that started it all,  
all those years ago,  
“back in the “good ol’ days”  
type distraction you could find.

Of course that’s where they start you,  
when you get a job that is,  
when you follow the HELP WANTED sign  
and pass the screening process,  
which to the best of my knowledge  
amounted to someone checking your pulse  
and making you kiss a pig.

Courtesy clerks stood in front of barcode scanners  
smiling and bagging  
like boring déjà vu

but oh that sign,  
its neo-retro sheen rang  
as nostalgic as a free collector’s Coke glass  
with an upgrade to a Super Value Meal,  
Spaghettios and Friday night sitcoms  
the Undead alive in the laugh track  
wearing pre-distressed jeans

and my soul  
treading down lanes  
of new shoe smell

glossy dioramas-in-waiting  
25% off sticker obscured  
by a 40% off sticker and a clerk  
smiling as he told me  
there was only one way  
to walk out of there alive.

## Earlier

During the annual unpacking of the Christmas ornaments  
we found the *Ghostbusters* toy [he wasn't there]  
(did I have a brother?)  
had lost the year before, a toy he'd stolen from me  
and up it went onto the tree alongside Batman and Superman  
another generic object with a deep personal meaning.

\*

One of the earliest dreams I remember  
was the dog from *Ghostbusters*,  
it's glowing red eyes and drool and horns  
dragging [he wasn't there], his head in its jaws,  
the dog shaking furiously to break  
the boy's neck as it dragged him off.

\*

I saw scars poorly concealed  
at [he wasn't there]'s wake.

I sat overstuffed  
dedicating the silence to him,

like the silence of the room  
before they could figure out  
how to tell me he was already dead.

A fringe industry was born  
in the makeup on his face, the fine line  
between authentic and caricature

and I remember none of it.



## Old Farmer Pete

Each treadmill  
had a plasmariffic flatscreen HD viewing station  
so you could watch TV while you ran.

This became its own kind of voyeurism,  
rows upon rows of sweat and circuitry  
and me spying from my station

at everyone running at moderate paces  
towards two-dimensional fantasies  
like turtles chasing carrots.

In the shuffle for the proper slotting  
    there were smiles  
        wandering eyes and  
    spandex,  
        old T-shirt Rorschach sweat prints

and then the screens  
    with explosions and guns  
        and car chases,  
            great white nature show  
        romantic comedy  
    formula one car races  
        Jerry Springer social diseases.

Usually I'd take the back row  
towards the corner near the wall  
and watch "The Meat Market,"

footage from the Undead Zoo,  
location unknown.

Most of the show was spent  
watching the Undead stumble  
into each other while a live

studio audience pelted them  
    with eggs  
    tomatoes  
    beer bottles  
    water balloons

golf balls  
or whatever else they thought to bring  
and at the end we'd vote to determine which "thriller dancer"  
(that's what we called them in those days)  
we wanted to see die (again) the most.

I'd usually pick based on the clothes they were wearing—  
the same ones they'd been wearing when they got infected  
then I'd try to picture each character's back-story.

Like last week  
I imagined The Farmer standing in his overalls,  
corncob pipe dangling from his mouth,  
his double barrel staring down a staggering invader.

By the looks of the bite mark,  
Old Farmer Pete was attacked from behind,  
poor feller never even saw it coming.

Next we'd vote on method of displacement—  
each week a new set of three options.  
Last week we chose "thrown into a volcano"

and the week before that  
we chose "trampled by elephants,"  
which was somewhat forgettable.

I don't think it was until that moment  
that I started to wonder

where all the replacements came from.

If the plague had been solved so long ago,  
why was everyone still undying?

## First Memory

I was at a park  
climbing a picnic bench  
to grab a sucker  
I'd apparently left there earlier.

At two  
balance is a privilege  
not a given

and before long  
I was falling  
staring up at the sky

and my head found the slab  
of concrete the table rested on.

I remember this now  
as my first lesson  
on what it feels like to die.

## Service with a Smile

I could never visit the food court  
Without picturing the post-apocalyptic farm.

I suppose in their quest for brains  
the Undead would be smart enough  
to avoid the Scarecrow

but I wondered about other measures  
to keep those glazy-eyed stumblers  
from eating the crops

(Did they eat *anything* besides brains?)

and what about the synthetics  
what about the workforce for the farms  
what about the airtight factory-sealed prepackaging plants?

This abundance looked out of place,

like the food court in Carlsbad Caverns when I was five.  
Never thought I'd eat a burger in a bat cave,  
and I didn't really see many bats during the tour  
and I still don't know the difference  
between a stalactite and a stalagmite

but at sunset we crowded on amphitheater steps  
around the entrance and watched a tornado  
of fleidermausen billow out  
and a twin rainbow in the background.

Otherwise, there was the bouncy ball  
from the toy machine  
the security guard kept eyeballing

but I was just there to pick up My Friend  
from the Orange Julius  
so we could go Christmas shopping,

but ended up on a bench  
eating soft pretzels  
and stealing passing conversation,

and how badly I wanted to yell *no, tell me!*  
when I overheard one security guard say to the other

“Yeah, but did you hear what happened to the Santa the other day?”

## Out Past Curfew

There's a training video we all had to watch  
after becoming members of the Tower.  
The on-air personalities were racially diverse  
and as mimetic as flight attendants  
during the pre-flight routine  
where everyone knows we'd probably die  
in a real disaster but are still reassured knowing  
the locations of all the Emergency Exits.

But the sign-off to the video is what struck me  
in that casually metaphysical way. "Now remember,"  
one of the personalities said with a bright smile,  
"all the Undead really want is to tell you  
the one thing you want to hear most."

The one time I saw the Undead in person,  
on the outside, I was out past curfew

and they were standing outside the HELP WANTED sign,  
just big silhouettes with boxed shoulders, glowing eyes  
the only detail, boring into me with tractor beam precision.

I felt as exposed as the time I pissed myself  
playing third base in Little League

I wasn't drawn to the Undead  
as much as the distance

simply diminished  
until only the wrong memories stood out,

like when Dad and I went to the *Star Trek* attraction  
at Universal Studios and I threw up chunks of hotdog  
in his new Camaro on the drive home,

and how I didn't move the rest of the way home  
afraid to disturb the brownish-pink perfection  
draped over my arm, the seat and the floorboards.

And I guess the Undead's way of telling me all the things  
I wanted to hear most was to show me all the things  
I wanted to remember least.

## **Part II. - Waking**

## A Copy of a Copy

to think  
that we only  
accept

depictions  
of dreams  
if they follow

certain rules.

The picture has to be blurry, or muddled in some way. Fisheye lenses are handy but a dab of Vaseline smeared around the edge of a normal lens works in a pinch.

Another method is the super surreal, the downright Lynchian, something like a cupcake feeding Spaghettio's to an ostrich wearing boxing trunks while giving an interview to the Prime Minister on a blustery Wednesday afternoon and you remember it was a Wednesday specifically because the girl your parents said used to have a crush on you in the second grade kept saying "Wacky Wednesday!" over and over while sculpting a rabbit from discarded cassette tapes

but  
for me  
it's just  
an image

a feeling  
or memory  
of a feeling.

When watching a movie the viewer sees equal parts film and white space alternating at 24 frames/sec, but our brains don't process the blank spots. The illusion is seamless.

Lately I've been feeling as if someone has been sneaking into the cutting room and splicing only the most memorable parts of the best scenes of an otherwise formulaic flick into a two-minute trailer

and somewhere in the back of my mind I know that after the throngs on opening day I'll be on basic cable, heavily censored with commercial breaks seven minutes apart, timed perfectly to interrupt the poignancy of every major scene.



## Still Here

Once I had to draw a picture from memory  
of a shape with squares on both sides  
connected by a single line  
but there was something missing  
from the image, and I left the test  
feeling like a failure.

Still

it got me into the smart kids school,  
put me through the pearly GATE program:

a clandestine experiment  
to see how children responded  
to expectations of success and failure.

No one ever told us we were wrong,  
so therefore we never thought we were.  
I could only imagine the control group,  
my goateed mirror universe doppelgangers,  
the brilliant brainiacs raised as failures.

I wonder who fared better in the long haul.

[he wasn't there] interrupted to ask me the point.  
I said that wasn't a very professional question  
and he said he'd never claimed to be a professional  
and I barked something back about how I refused  
to subject myself to his mindless probing.

[he wasn't there]  
adjusted his glasses  
set his notepad down  
looked directly at me  
and asked  
—then why are you still here?

## Another Day at the Meat Market

I must have looked like an ass, jogging along  
in gym shorts and a fading t-shirt that read

*I Survived the Great Un-Awakening and All I Got Was This Lousy Shirt*

running for my life several rows from anyone else  
watching “Meat Market” again. It was time to vote  
and our choices for the week came down to

- A) Ice Cream Truck Driver (tempting)
- B) White Lab-Coated Scientist (meh)
- C) Little Boy in a Batman Costume

*(tasteless I repeated to myself over and over again.  
How could they exploit the death of a little kid like that?).*

I voted for the Ice Cream Truck Driver  
(that poor man, out there spreading joy  
to children everywhere, cut down in his prime).

The percentages on the screen jockeyed for position  
and it was neck and neck right down to the buzzer

before the hard stop—*After these messages, we’ll be right back.*

\*

I paused the treadmill, stretched,  
and wiped the sweat from my face.  
Why did I care who they killed?

He was already dead and I had no one to protest to.

I felt a little like that moment

where someone calls your name  
while you’re walking down the street  
and you stop and you smile  
and you chat  
and they ask you about people you know

and you don't know how they know those people  
or how they know you

because you don't know this person  
but they know you too well  
and it would be rude for you to ask their name

and besides it would be embarrassing

and you wonder  
how you could make such an impression  
on a person's life when they had left

little-to-no impression on you.

Still, the kid reminded me of someone.

\*

Return from commercial.  
Bat-mite was chosen.  
on to method of dispatch.

I felt sick and looked for ways to keep myself distracted,  
but I had to keep running  
(I hadn't yet met my quota for the week)  
and on the screen they strapped him to a table.

All I had to do was change the channel.

They strapped him in and began showing off  
the instruments, toothed sawblades that buzzed  
with the same sound I grew up trying to replicate

on guitar; they buzzed in a way I could never recreate  
and flayed open his small, infected body.

All I had to do was change the channel.

The first organs were removed  
and Batboy was still twitching  
and half his heart was missing

and I forgot I was wearing headphones  
began repeating over and over  
*no, no, no, no, no*

(change the channel)

*they're killing him*

(change the channel)

*no*

(change the channel)

and the monitor ripped off

(I couldn't save him)

easier than I thought it would

(I don't remember the last time I saw him alive).

## Self Destruct

We are all always set to go off, even if we don't know our triggers.

I was neither prepared nor expecting to go off that day  
but there I was ripping the screen from its mount  
calling a name I'd forgotten to remember,

and it was the first time I saw the woodwork of the Tower come to life,

Security guards in sterile plastic suits were  
filing in efficiently, keyrings and handcuffs jangling  
walkie talkies straining words through the static

*Broken monitor on terminal 9* and my arms were shoved into my back

and as I tasted the floor I thought to myself  
*now this here truly is a floor one could eat off of*  
*and if I'd only known I would be so detained*

*I might have brought a snack, something to freshen my brain a bit.*

Apparently I have a sarcastic inner monologue.

## **Iris In**

The feeling comes to me  
often before I fall asleep

like tonight it was a saw  
and every muscle in my body

seized up as I felt  
the toothed blade drag

across my finger severing  
the tip and I've never cut

myself with a saw but I have  
felt the careless glide of work-

related accidents elevated  
my hands above my chest

to increase pressure chastised  
myself with a red paper towel

finger skywriting in the ice water  
my indifference to the vegetables

the knife or the tin can lid  
in a trash bag by the dumpster.

Once I was working off  
house arrest doing chores

dusting and polishing the piano  
when my arm passed under

the lamp with the chipped glass  
and it was more the resistance

I felt than anything else,  
the surprise when I saw

the pooling blood, the quiet way  
the pull-shaped scar reminds me now

of the butterfly stitch I never got  
while bandaged home alone

shaking off the dreamless  
anesthetic sleep of the knife,

my only real memory  
is people growing serious

and efficient, me apprehensive  
then somebody shaking me awake

so I marvel now at how much  
I can picture the blade

but I can't picture the room  
where he went under,

and why they couldn't stop  
the bleeding and he shakes me awake

every night to remind me I'm alive  
when I only want to be asleep.

## Undertaken

There's nothing like the disorientation  
of waking in a strange room  
when you don't remember going under.

Across the room from the bench  
where I'd apparently been sleeping  
I saw Dad sitting on a stool

blue and grey fabric in his lap  
methodically tearing holes  
red eyedropper in one hand

box of dirt on the ground beside him  
which he'd slowly drag the cloth through.  
Clothes racks lined every wall of the room.

There was the farmer's overalls,  
the baseball uniforms, the police,  
the firemen, the astronauts,  
and of course the doctors

and here facing me  
was a rack of child-sized Batman pajamas  
each in a different stage of distress.

The Undead weren't authentic after all.

He held up the suit,  
admiring his degradation,  
and without even looking at me said

"They kept him breathing,  
you know,  
even after the brain was gone.

It took me two days  
to convince you  
he wasn't going to wake up."



## Breaking the Fourth Wall

The illusion  
of safety

is more  
important  
than safety  
itself

isn't it?

Like ordering a Diet Coke  
with the Large Value Meal,

like flotation devices  
on an airplane,

like a Tower with full-color brochures,  
the words "impregnable," and "foolproof"  
scattered liberally throughout, yet  
it turns out the Undead are carted in  
for the sake of good entertainment.

Or perhaps casting for the "Meat Market" is done in-house?

Surely they've got the bodies,  
and a fire marshal to appease,  
and who doesn't want to be on TV?

A rotating cast of caricatures  
prevents the viewers  
from fostering attachment.

The Undead,  
after all,  
are only here

for our amusement.

## Oscar Clip

I like to remember it this way,  
that the lights flickered out  
in time to a thunderstorm  
—but I couldn't see outside

and the only other storm I remember

I was about 3 sitting on my parents' waterbed  
recoiling at each thunderclap while they smiled  
  
in recognition of my fear, and on that night  
God became a metaphor for forces out of my control.

But the lights were blinking in  
and out more often these days,  
  
and [he wasn't there] was growing more cryptic.

He was sitting there in the sharp  
shadows lining the walls, facing me.

I realized he never spoke first.

*I suppose now's the time  
where I ask you what's going on,  
because for some reason  
I expect you to know, I said.*

I'm trying to remember his face  
so I can describe what it looked like,  
but only the word "concerned"  
remains in place of the image.

He was a brooding silhouette of light and shadow,  
the Bat Signal in a cloudy Gotham sky.

"The Tower represents a lack,"  
[he wasn't there] finally said.

Somewhere I pictured a John Williams score  
trivializing the moment with a mournful string  
section coloured with just a hint of anticipation.

*So what does that make you then?* I asked.

“The same.”

I wanted to say I didn't know what that meant,  
but then the music swelled,  
the thunder became the percussion,

and a choir would have been the perfect  
counterbalance to my face dawning  
under a perfectly-angled arc of light

at least the way  
I like to remember it

the night that Lack became a metaphor  
for forces out of my control.

## Jumping the Shark

If I had framed it

there'd be a low camera angle

my body occupying the center of the lower half of the screen, fists clenched

in the same heroic pose  
that showed up in the comics  
I drew every Christmas for Dad,

the same pose he taught me  
after practicing it for years  
in the pages of his own stories.

I picture a breeze blowing from behind me on the left side of the screen,  
but of course I'm on set, so it's probably just a wind machine.

Right off the soundstage was a door with a sign marked GREEN ROOM  
with the ubiquitous biohazard warning sign placed underneath.

I took a few steps toward the door  
and heard their moans,  
their occasional thuds against the wall.

The Undead were in there all right.

If this were a movie  
you'd be yelling at the screen about now

because I kept walking towards it, opened the GREEN ROOM door, and let them out.

## Run For Your Life

And then the lights went out.

Somewhere an Emergency Generator  
clicked in motion

aux lights found  
the perfect red-glow tempo

and at the peak of each pulse I saw [he wasn't there]  
staring at me, waiting for my next move.

A soothing voice came from invisible speakers, told us

not to panic  
but the Undead were inside

and it was time to go.

The spiral staircases wrapped the Tower  
in a double helix,  
connecting the condos to each other,

the rooms so open  
I felt like my whole life had been nothing but a tour  
through an IKEA showroom.

They blocked the way down  
and I tried to run past but  
one of them caught my eye

and immediately

I was 7 under a table  
in my brother's hospital room  
even though he wasn't there

and I had the Batman toy someone  
bought for him and it occurred to me  
he might die and I asked Mom

who would get to keep the toys if  
he died and I felt the whole room stop  
and she didn't say anything

at least not that I remember so I hid  
under the table until it was time  
to go, because he wasn't coming back.

## We Can Anticipate You and Control You

*Where is the hero in all of this?*  
is the inevitable question,

though it presupposes  
that there's some sort of arc to all of this.

Everybody dies at the end,  
depending on how far back  
you push the ending.

Think about it:

the last time you heard a story that went *woke up, had two eggs over hard*  
(this is your brain on drugs)  
*along with two cups of coffee while I graded papers,*

you thought  
*not only is this story self-consciously trying to be about much more,*  
(this is all nonfiction)  
*it creates an endless feedback loop between the writer and the written.*

Just because I tried to play the hero doesn't mean I was one.

The hero is always remembered

for his one flaw,  
his fatal flaw.

The flaw is the memory.

If you push the ending far back enough  
the flawed becomes the immortal

like the villain in the superhero movie:  
more interesting than the hero,

better cast, and likely to say  
*we're not so different, you and I*

before plummeting to his death—  
possibly outside a cathedral in the rain.

Though we assume the villain dies in the end  
we're always too far up to see the bottom.

If only the camera  
would follow him down far enough  
for us to see the splat.



## The White Between the Frames

I am picked up from school by a relative. The last time this happened was the day my brother was born.

\*

I am in the living room, the same look on the relative's face now on my parents', smiling with everything but their eyes.

\*

I am arguing with Dad about the line between alive and dead. We are in the hospital cafeteria. Everything is fluorescent white, metal tables and plastic dinner trays. I want to say now that the food was terrible, but that's not a memory, just what we expect to hear when someone mentions hospital food.

\*

I am in my classroom in a fetal position on the floor. It's recess, but I haven't moved since story time.

\*

I am in the room where he died. He is there, behind the machines on every wall, the clear plastic tubes, fluids suspended inside. I don't remember the heart monitor flatlining, but I remember the white speckled tiles, the reflections from the fluorescent lights above, and feeling no difference in the room when my parents told me my brother said goodbye. I faced away, wondering why I didn't hear him say it too.

\*

I mistake silence for confirmation when I ask if I'm going to die next.