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Realization: A Short Story Collection for an Existentially Confused World

Payton Nguyen
Western Washington University

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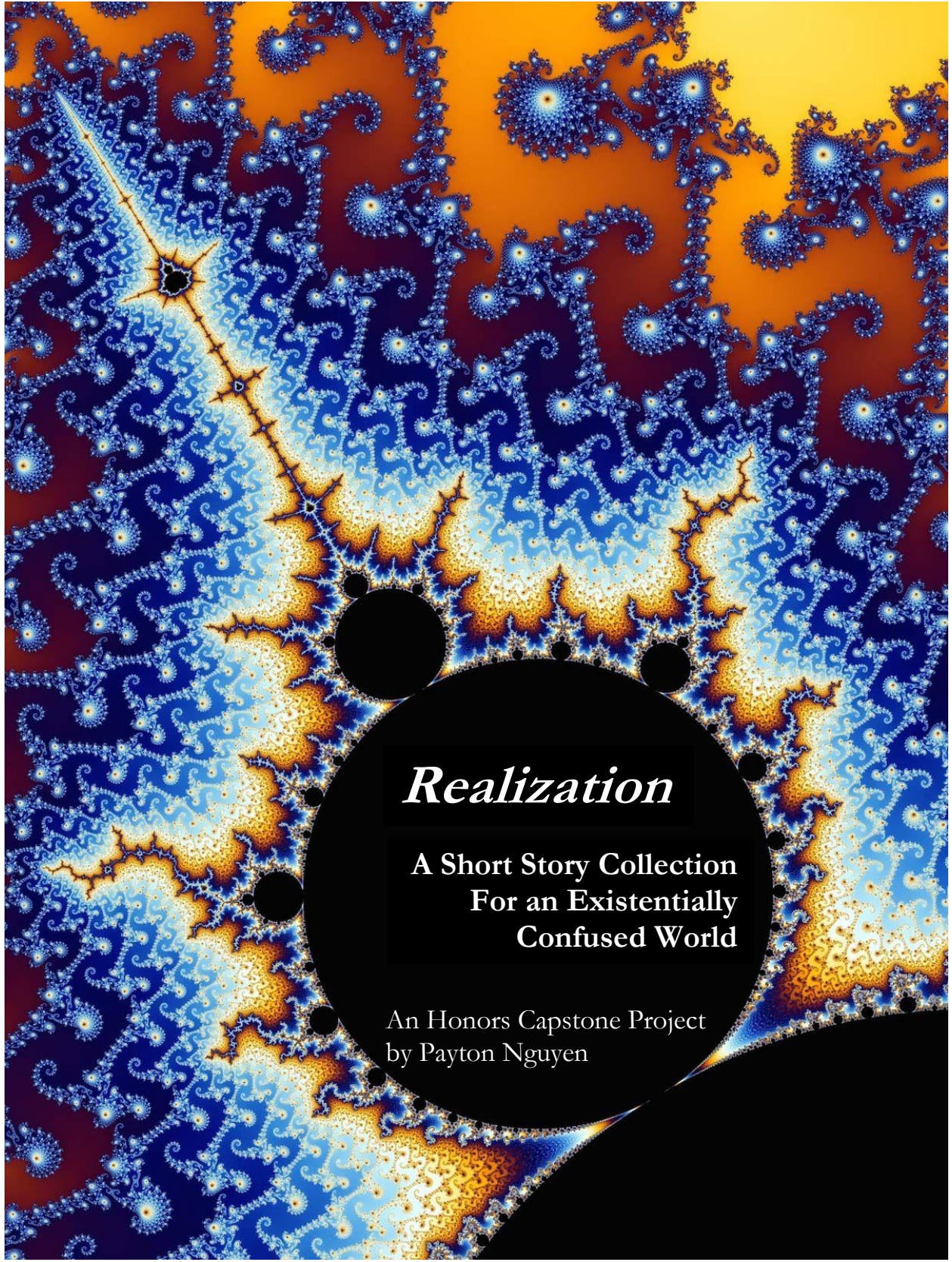
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Realization

A Short Story Collection
For an Existentially
Confused World

An Honors Capstone Project
by Payton Nguyen

Paralysis

The first worry to come when I wake up this morning is, maybe today isn't the best of days to gather in Father's name. The second is that today is the day we gather in Father's name, and I don't know what I feel. That's nothing new; though I find this torment is always a torment – the more familiar it becomes, in fact, the more I dread its incomprehensibility. But to be unsure as always, on a day like this – it takes on a sour tang.

That's already enough to bear. But since last week, this day has promised to not allow a quiet space. Some shooting happened three days ago at one of [Science]'s factories. Him, [Tradition], and [Art] will be together in one room. My room. God, I hope they... *don't* talk about it?

Talk about it?

No, why would I want that?

But, what if they don't? ...

I...

I—

Stop.

It's whatever.

There's a knock at the door. I know it's Mother. She always knocks whenever entering a room I'm in. Even when it's her own room, like it is now. Knocking has no practicality – she knows I won't answer. But I suppose she knocks to respect my privacy – what little privacy I can have.

After a small pause she creaks the door open. She peeks her head through the gap she made, and, seeing my eyes are open, pushes the door fully open. She has that motherly smile she always gives me.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she says. She walks over and kneels in front of me, looking up at me. “Breakfast is ready. The others are waiting downstairs for you.” The last thing I remember is her placing a kiss on my forehead.

My fingers tingle as if they were left to freeze in a blizzard and then dunked in a vat of boiling water. That shivered heat wave runs up my arms and to my head. The hard cartilage of my ears feels like it’s pierced all over. There’s a low rumble. *Is that them?* My feet feel like the vat came first, then the blizzard. Needles shoot up my legs and daggers plunge into my stomach. I feel my ears expand. Every minute sound jabs my ear drums. I can’t make out anything that resembles language, but, in everything I hear, there is something so distinctively human. I can’t not listen. *Are they already talking?* Then, in my gut, that overwhelming numbness—

The back of my chair clicks into the wall. I’m at the top of the staircase. The chair hums as it glides smoothly downwards, floating over each step. The hum is monotone and gentle, something that lays as a backdrop to everything. The vibrations of the hum reverberate through every limb, in every organ. It all spears to the gut. As if my appendages absorb the vibrations and send them flying into my core. Or maybe the vibrations ring out *from* my core, sounding through my whole body, but tolling most clear – most excruciating – in the center. That’s what the overwhelming numbness feels like. At least, that’s what I feel right now.

The hum and the vibrations die away as the chair reaches the bottom of the stairs.

Silence.

Only the faint memory-tinge in my limbs. My center is free, nothing crushing or confining it.

I want the hum back.

Mother fiddles with the back of the chair and there's another click. She looks me, like she was distracted by my face. She smiles, and brushes a lock of my hair to the side. *Maybe today won't be so bad*, is a thought that feels wrong to think. She wheels me towards the dining room.

Then I hear: it's quiet. There are no voices, not a whisper. Just the occasional clink of silverware. I'm being wheeled towards a bomb, set to go off when I see them. I can feel the fuse sizzling towards the gunpowder with every turn and bump of the wheels. The light from the dining room windows creeps into the artificially lit hallway. Cabinets and chairs and the table reveal themselves as I move closer, the slit of the doorway expanding wider and wider until—

There sit my siblings – the singeing sunlight from the backyard doors blasts into the room behind them. All but Levi I haven't seen in a long time. [Tradition] is wearing his black clergy shirt, what I assume he wears for service. The white tab under his collar is hinted with yellow, like stained teeth. [Science] has a grayish navy-blue suit with a red striped tie. I've seen him wear that same one during an interview Mother watched. I can't tell if it's his glasses or the lines, but he wears an expression that seems incapable to form smile nor frown. His eyes, however, can't hide that he's tired. [Art] put on a mocha-colored sweater and some black khakis. She seems to always wear that outfit whenever some degree of formality is needed. Perhaps it's the only formal thing she owns. I imagine she was

sitting slack in her chair, as she is slightly slumped. But now, now that I'm in the room, her body looks stiff with uncertainty.

I don't need a kaleidoscope to see their Essence. There is a silent combat ricocheting between them, making the air thick with their reluctance to share a table together. The only things it seems they share are their animosity, the negative effects of age, silence, and that all their eyes are staring at me.

I want the bomb to go off.

The whine of Levi's chair on the floor explodes the silence.

"I've got him, Mom." He briskly walks over and offers to take my chair from Mother.gard

"Thank you, Levi." She places a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Go ahead and eat, you guys," she adds as she makes her way to the kitchen.

The others' unwavering faces seem to relax, as if they are broken from a trance. The room soon echoes with clearing throats, scraping forks and knives, splatting eggs and sausages and hash browns onto plates. They still do not talk.

There wouldn't be all this noise if Levi had stayed in his chair.

Levi wheels me to the other end of the room, facing me away from the sunlight. Usually the curtains are drawn – the light is too strong, a torment of mine that has stayed consistent. But having guests over, Mother feels obliged to let some sunlight in. So, this will do.

After Levi adjusts my chair to be just right, he squats down in front of me. He adjusts himself so my eyes stare into his. He smiles, like he's satisfied with something. His gaze drops to his pocket as his hand slips in and retrieves his kaleidoscope. It's an older model; the thickness of the temple and its one frame make that clear to anyone. It's as if someone snapped a pair of glasses in

half and then squeezed and molded the temple into a silver kidney bean, about the size of a thumb. But there's something about the bulbous shape and the plastic-like shade of silver that makes things feel simple. It feels like childhood, and dread won't leave my stomach so much as my longing to go back continues.

Levi brings the kidney bean temple to his own temple, and opens his fingers, letting the lens – so clear it nears invisibility – hover in place. He's about to ask me a question.

“Did you have any dreams last night?”

If I did, I don't remember. Though, for all I know, this could be a dream. Being asleep and being awake weren't really that different for me. It's more, what do and don't I remember? How conscious or unconscious do I feel? I don't do anything, so knowing what's real and what's not has no practicality to me. If anything, letting things merge is probably for the better. If I didn't have a worry for certainty, I wouldn't be in this chair.

Levi's kaleidoscope glitters. Or maybe it's his eyes. Maybe both. I wonder what he sees in my Essence; I wonder if he sees a muddle of colors and shades and tones. I wonder if he sees something prominent and telling radiating in my Essence. I wonder if he can see what I dreamed about.

If he can, why can't I?

A small chime goes off. [Science] swipes his hand in front of him. He scans at the edge of the hash brown plate before letting out a silent sigh. His fingers type the air like a keyboard. The air remains ambivalent, but the lens of his glasses glow and flicker with miniscule text and images appearing, disappearing, and flying across them.

Please, say... don't say... something... anything... don't... don't—

Mother comes back into the room with another plate of scrambled eggs and replaces the mostly empty serving plate with the new one.

“[Science]?” she says. “Is everything alright?” *Please...*

“Well,” he says. *Please...* “I’m being filled in about the incident from a few days ago. *No...* “I’ve got my secretary sending me police reports, legal paperwork, financial reports, news articles, and a bunch of other stuff non-stop. All this might stack up to cost the company a lot. And *we’re* the victims. There ain’t no rest for the wicked.”

Can they hear my heart? It’s pushing on my stomach. I might puke.

“Ah, I see,” says Mother. I don’t know how much time passed before she spoke. She doesn’t talk for a while longer.

Please, talk. Don’t talk. I...

“I can’t believe another one happened so soon,” she says. “Let alone so close to one of my children. It’s like the world has gone crazy. It makes you wonder what happened.”

[Tradition] lets out a heavy gruff.

No, please...

“I’d thought you’d know, Mother,” he says. Mother looks a little taken aback.

“What do you mean, [Tradition]?”

No, please.

“Well, being who you are, I’d thought you’d understand that the reason the world has, as you put it, ‘gone crazy’ is the same reason we were called to come here.”

Mother gives a disoriented look. [Tradition] huffs softly.

“It’s Father. Or, the lack there of.”

No. No.

Levi scooches his chair closer to mine and tucks my hand into his.

[Art] gives no effort in hiding her groan.

“Could you not with the religion right now? I’m trying to eat.”

It’s starting.

“I’m sorry, is discussing the reason we’re all here an issue for you?”

“Look, [Tradition], I know how you get when you start rattling off about the *Great Tradition*, and I know when things are being shoved down my throat, I tend to gag, so can you wait until later at least?” Levi’s head is in the way of me seeing [Tradition]’s face. I don’t know if seeing would be better.

His bony, milky fingers clench the red tablecloth. He lets out a rumbling exhale as his hands relax. The color of his hands looks like he drained the cloth of some of its redness.

“If my point was not clear before, Mother, surely *that* has shown you what I mean.” [Art], with a sausage in hand, slumps her body back, faces away from [Tradition], and takes a vindictive bite out of the sausage, chewing as if it proved a point.

“[Tradition], [Art], please, get along,” says Mother with betrayal in her tone.

“Do I not at least have a reason to retort her?” He turns to [Art]. “Mother proposed a topic, and I gave a response. One, I imagine, much more grounded than one you would give.”

[Art] spins towards [Tradition] and plants her hands firmly on the table. “Grounded, my ass! All you do is repeat things out of books a bunch of old dudes wrote.”

“[Art]!” Mother winces.

[Tradition] stands up from his chair. “Those ‘old dudes’ were wiser than any of the ‘free spirits’ you talk so much about! They knew what was good, what was beautiful, what was true. Your kind just make up what they want to be true!”

No, no, no, no.

“[Tradition]!”

“At least my ‘kind’ can think for themselves, instead having to refer to what someone else *thinks* is true!”

What they’re saying doesn’t matter. Just ignore it.

“You two! Stop it, please!” Mother cries. “[Tradition], don’t you remember what you just said? We’re here because of your father. I’m sorry I said anything, can you two not put all this aside?”

Neither of their glares are calming – growing only sharper.

“[Science], please, remind your brother and sister why they’re here!”

[Science], who had been staring intently with a focusing gaze, doesn’t respond immediately. Neither [Tradition] nor [Art] interjects before he does – perhaps they think he will side with one of them.

Eventually, he says, “Both of you should put aside your silly ideologies. If either of you had listened to the other, the flaws in your claims would be clear.”

Levi’s hand clenches. The way the tips of his fingers press into my knuckles tells me it isn’t to comfort me. It may not be conscious.

[Tradition] and [Art] let loose on their words. The silverware rings with the mixed cacophony. Neither wait for the other to finish, making both incomprehensible. [Science] keeps quiet, arms crossed, eyes unimpressed.

“Please! Please, quiet down you two!” says Mother. Her body quivers, but her bones seem to be locked. When they begrudgingly do, she turns to [Science]. It looks like she means to say something, but nothing comes out. Perhaps she forgot. Perhaps she changed her mind. She closes her eyes, lets in a shaky breath, and exhales, her head wagging sadly.

“We’re here for your father. Not the man who contributed much to The Great Tradition. Not the man who spoke of what you see are truth or lies. Not that man. But your father. Can you not give him that respect? And if not him, can you not respect your brother?” She motions to me.

“You wish us to respect a loafer?” [Tradition] snaps back.

Mother says nothing.

“Think what you will, Mother, but I cannot respect someone who uses others to live a carefree life. Someone who lets others sink lower and lower into their personal despair just so they don’t have to confront their own. Someone who gives not a damn thought about others – not even one – and instead goes forth doing what they wish to do.” His eyes shoot to [Science] and [Art]. He looks at me, as if considering if my face matches with all he has said. His eyebrows steadily knit and his lips pull tight.

“He’s in a coma, [Tradition],” says [Science]. “A coma patient can’t loaf.”

“Of course you would say that, with that kaleidoscope – utterly demeaning to the Fractal.” He pulls out his own kaleidoscope, a round paper of glass. He lifts the kaleidoscope so it stands between me and his gaze.

I wonder what he sees.

“His Essence is screaming with activity. He is *fully* aware; aware of every word we say.”

“Your little magnifying glass can’t prove that,” says [Science].

[Tradition] thrusts the kaleidoscope towards him. “Have a look for yourself before you deny me of what *I* see.”

“I don’t need to.” [Science]’s chin raises ever so slightly. “A faulty device will never show you how things truly are. And therefore, whatever you or I see through such a device would mean nothing.”

“Faulty!? And what exactly makes yours not?”

“Simple.” [Science] nabs the kaleidoscope out of [Tradition]’s hand and holds it up to me. After a moment of inspecting, he says, “I see a mix of floating colors, mostly darker shades, and I suppose you could make out the shape of a dog. Maybe a table.”

He lowers the kaleidoscope, and the lens of his glasses light up with dim lights. “Ah, but with these, there are clear distinctions between the colors and shapes.” He points at the space between us. “There, you can see a stream of red, wrapping around and flowing and connecting like a Mobius strip, to and from a pulsating center. And there, you can see a faint blue condensing and expanding. But you’ll notice that, around his head, there isn’t much of anything. Just dull tones and slow movement.”

“Would you get to your fuckin’ point already?” [Art] says.

“My point,” [Science] addressing both of them, “is that what I see through these” (he taps his glasses) “have a one-to-one correspondence between a being’s existence and the Fractal. And with enough time and studying, anyone can come to understand this correspondence. No interpreting needed – just straight to the facts.”

He holds up [Tradition]’s kaleidoscope. “But with this model, things are muddled and murky. Some correspondence may be there, but it’s far too inaccurate to make any properly derived truth claims. If you happen to be right through the evidence of such a device, it’s because you got lucky more than it is you saw the truth.”

He holds out the kaleidoscope. “While, I admit, I agree with your assessment of his utility, him being conscious was just another of the million guesses you got unlucky with.”

I don’t know what happens next. I’m yanked from this spiral – so alluring, so promising, surely the answer lies here – by Levi’s hands cupping my ears.

Levi speaks then – I’m not sure how I hear him, but his words are clear: “Idiots. All of them, aren’t they. They don’t listen to anyone other than themselves. No one but those who agree with them.”

Levi’s hands echo the crashing waves of some far away place. They make my ears sweat and feel sticky. I feel like I’m in space: the grand infinity, ceaselessly boundless, absolute freedom – void of air, my lungs collapse and explode.

“They want things to be simple. And how can I blame them: it’s human. But things just aren’t simple. And no matter how much they try to hide from the complexity, they will continue to suffer because their own hubris won’t allow them to see what they try so hard to deny. You understand this, don’t you? I can see it— no, feel it. I can *feel* it in your Essence. I can feel how your Essence contorts and screams and bashes. You’re trying to work it all out. What is right. What is good. What is true...

“To a degree, I think they’re doing the same. They just think they each already have the answer. I think most people are like that. Too many people...

“Do you think most people want the world to be better? I think it’s natural to. But no one can agree on what actually makes it better. Everything that’s happening right now should be proof enough. And if three people – three widely recognized and respected people, might I add – can’t come to a consensus, then how can we expect most of the world to achieve such a feat?

“So many things have been happening recently. Like Mom said, it’s like the world has gone insane. And it’s made me wonder...

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be saying all this to you. I’m sure you’ve already thought these things – you don’t need to think of them again.”

It’s okay. Go on.

Levi doesn't say anything at first.

“Remember when I asked you if you had a dream last night? Well, I had a dream. I've been having it for a while now. In my dream, the world was dark and clouded by smog. The exact place is different with every dream, but they're all places I recognize: the town across the way, my school, the capital, this house. Last night, it was at the factory.

“People, all around me were bloody, beaten, and beating themselves. There were fists and knives and bats and guns. I once saw a person use a broken wine bottle to rip open someone's stomach. I saw another time a two-by-four with three or four nails stuck through it pierce right through a guy's head. Some lady used a drill. The worse thing, though, were the hanging bodies. From trees, from balconies, from flag poles. They were everywhere. And they were people you'd see in the news: people from Congress, famous writers or directors, journalists and news anchors, the president... I don't know if they hanged themselves or if they were lynched.

“But then, there would be this boom. Everything would shake, all the violence would stop, and everyone would look up. There, parting the dark gray gloom to reveal a warm blue, descended a serpent. The gravity of its mass felt like we were being pulled off the earth. Everyone stared. Unable to think about anything else. The serpent let out a growl – a roar or screech would easily deafen all that heard it. As if commanded to, all clenched fists slackened, and their weapons clattered to the ground. They lowered to their knees – many fell – and at once, in perfect alignment and harmony, they bowed. I looked back up at the impossible serpent, and, every time, it spoke: ‘I am Leviathan.’”

Levi pauses for a long while.

“Those dreams keep coming to me every night and I would think about it all day while I was awake. I couldn't get it out of my head: the Leviathan. I wanted to ask it questions, I wanted to

understand what it was. But then, one day, something clicked. The Leviathan growled, and when everyone bowed, I lowered onto my knees and bowed as well. I can't help but wonder – I can't help but *believe*: the Leviathan will bring good into the world. No, it will *make* the world good. Maybe it isn't truth that will save us – save the world. Maybe, the only savior is the fist and embrace of the Leviathan.”

I choke on my gasp of air and fly out of my chair. I stumble, forgetting where the floor and table and chairs are. My hand catches something, I give a deadly grip and hold myself up. My lungs burn as I hack up the excess air. I feel inflated, like I could burst at any moment. My supporting arm convulses under my weight. I swing my other arm over, clutch whatever I'm holding onto and hoist myself up. My ear drums thump as my heart pounds through my whole body. My breathing – still tight, wheezy, and heavy – slows to a better rhythm. I feel my legs again, and my feet on the floor. I let my arms relax a little, knowing I had better support. Sweat rolls into my eyes and into my mouth. I worry I might choke again, just on this little bit of moisture.

And then, something appears within me. From somewhere I cannot locate. My core and my throat and my limbs are filled with energy – a shock was sent through me. But my head. My *mind*.

It is clear.

Free.

This...

This is...

Peace.

My ears then realize: it's quiet. I lift my body and head and look at the room. No one is talking. Everyone is looking at me.

Mother's mouth quivers. Her jaw and lips move, but nothing comes out. She holds onto the table, like she's about to collapse. [Tradition] and [Art], standing nearby, quickly raises their arms, ready to catch her. [Science], on the other side, does the same, though unsure as to how to do so from where he is, with his sister in the way, and with me standing up.

Mother holds her other hand, signaling to them that she's fine. She pushes herself back up and crawls her way towards me, using her arm on the table like a cane. My heart explodes with each step.

Then, there she stands. I'm taller than her. She looks at me with an expression I do not recognize, but understand fully. Her hand reaches to my face gently, as if I will disappear if she isn't careful. But I don't disappear. I stay in place as her clammy palm hugs my cheek. She whimpers, as if saying she forgot how to cry.

I'm not sure what happens next. I don't know if anyone starts talking. I don't know if anyone moves. I don't know if they stay in the room. What I do remember is I grab a plate from the table, littered with scraps of egg and ketchup. With one step, and then another, and another, I walk to the kitchen, the sink in my view. My knee gives for a second, but I catch myself. I feel Mother's hand on my back and her other reaching for my chest. I lift my arm to block her hand and gently push it aside. I struggle to maintain balance as I turn to face her. She has the face of sorrowful pride.

I say to her, "It's okay. I got this."

Fodder

(A picture will go here)

“Just as the economic success of a company is measured only by the number of dollars in its bank account, not by the happiness of its employees, so the evolutionary success of a species is measured by the number of copies of its DNA.... This is the essence of the Agricultural Revolution: the ability to keep more people alive under worse conditions.”

—Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*

I don't know what will become of any of this: if it'll be published; if it'll be tucked away somewhere so I may visit it at a more certain time in my life. If it'll be used as fuel to keep the local firepit burning. These words' future isn't important to me. What is important is that these words are written down by my hand: put them on paper – make them tangible, real. It's how I've always made sense of the shocking discoveries I make and their accompanying confusion. I only hope that this deep disorientation from my most recent discovery can be resolved the same.

What follows are a collection of said writings; some I have already written, some I have yet to at the time of writing this: recountings of my experience, relevant notes, things I just had to write for personal reasons, so forth. The earliest of what I wrote are failed drafts for what was meant to be my magnum opus, the investigative report to end all conspiracies. That was before I got the answers I was searching for, before I made the big discovery all youthful investors strive to make. It's not until after the truth has been revealed do you realize just how blissful that youthfulness is. It wasn't until after I knew the truth did I realize it's impossible to capture everything in such a simple format – if able to capture at all.

Again, I don't know what will become of all this. Just as much as I'm sure what will become of me. If someone reads this, even if that someone is me, I hope something within will help them – help *you* – make sense of this world that we live in.

Draft 26 of To-Be Magnum Opus

I say this with no regrets: I had the misfortune, as thousands of others did, to have been born and grown up in the Lower Echelon. No one would take up an offer to move to the Lower Echelon unless they had once called it – and most likely still do call it – home. No one willingly goes back to a broken house – filled with poisonous filth meant to be food and water, with hitman fathers and brothers, with prostitute mothers and sisters, with rotting supports that will come down at any second – unless it is their home. It is for this reason I keep coming back. It is for this reason I will never turn away. Because I don't want my home to be dying anymore.

For all my life, I've known Laboure has been behind our suffering. How could it not be? It's a massive company that the city relies on and works for, whose main building sits at the epicenter, looming over the other Echelons like an alien saucer: all the foreshadowing and red flags are there. But red flags, conveniently, do not count as evidence in a court of law.

It didn't matter if the thematic links are there: "Symbolism is not proof."

It didn't matter if the people of the Upper Echelon ate chocolate more expensive than my limbs as a snack while the people of the Lower Echelon had to sell their limbs just for their next meal: "That's a reflection of the people, not the system."

It didn't matter that my own father, after working his whole life for Laboure, was not rewarded with a raise or a vacation or even recognition, but with retirement at forty-four after a debilitating injury and financial compensation to his family after he passed: "Anecdotes are not proper evidence."

None of that mattered. But, I conceded. They wanted evidence? I would give them evidence: only 64% of the Lower Echelon's population have access to safe drinking water; around 14,000

workers across the Lower Echelon are permanently injured and around 1,200 are killed annually due to work-related accidents; the local manager of the Bryant District, either in secret or in cahoots, was recently exposed to be sexually harassing his secretary, threatening any employee who found out with immediate termination. Those are facts – truths – that cannot be denied.

I take both comfort and pride in seeing so many others supporting my work; to know that people are beginning to see the truth. But even so, I am ambitious. What I've revealed thus far, though important regardless, are merely chips away at Laboure's steel walls. There is still some esoteric truth out there, I can feel it. And if it were made known, it alone could tear the whole company down. For so long, I have made this truth my ultimate pursuit.

Laboure, both the company and the man behind it all – today, everything comes forth. I know the truth. I know you're secret:

Things will most likely change to better fit with whatever the truth is, but this opening feels right.
Perfect, even. All I need is the truth.

Mom,

Don't worry – I'm okay. I'm sorry I've been quiet. I can only imagine what the last week has been like for you. I just needed some time, that's why I've been quiet. I still do, honestly. I know you're wondering what happened, but unfortunately, that's not why I'm writing you. I'll fill you in on the details some other time, once I've figured things out for myself. For right now, please just trust me when I say I'm okay.

I'm writing to answer a different question, one you've asked me ever since I became a reporter: why do I get myself in so much trouble? Odd thing to talk about now, I know, but there's a reason. I've started having the same question myself. And when I thought about it, I realized I didn't really know. I've thought about it more, and though I'm still not fully sure of myself, here's what I got.

Ever since I was a little girl, I have found it impossible to live in the Lower Eches without hearing people rail on the state of their lives and the larger society. Ever since I was a little girl, I have understood people's railing. I knew they had good reason to. Dad showed me that; he knew that better than anyone.

As I've grown older, thinking about Dad's work history became more and more depressing. Forty to fifty-something hours a week at construction sites – all for buildings I never got to see until my adult life. I remember how Dad came home exhausted every day. Sometimes sickly. He said the air was hard to breathe from the fumes of the machinery and nearby factories. I've done research on the pollutants for a previous article – the air hasn't gotten any better. You know how Dad would wear those cloth masks to work to help with the smog? Sometime when I did the laundry, I'd find a black stain on the inside of his masks. I assume you already knew; you did the laundry too. But none of us ever talked about it.

And then, no one knowing what happened, one day Dad's coughing made something in his lungs pop, and within a few hours he was let go from his job. I saw him more in those last few weeks than I had at any point in my life. That was the only good that came from it all: at least I got to be with him. Up to when he passed. I'm still sorry you couldn't be there when he did.

We both know this wasn't a completely uncommon experience in the Lower Eches. Death in the Lower Echelon is rarely anything but the big three: sickness, work-related accident, or an "altercation," as most news outlets like to put it. So it's clear that people's frustration, including our own, is warranted.

But what I have never understood is how many peers, coworkers, friends, family, neighbors, and so on would lament about the state of society or the tragedy in their lives, how the world itself is at its end – and then they would go on doing as they always did. Right back to work.

You're unhappy, but you don't do anything about it? Perhaps they thought they were responsible for their own unhappiness – that they weren't working hard enough and that's the reason they're suffering.

But I knew the reason was much more sinister. All the poverty, the weak infrastructure, the high crime rate, the horrible work condition – how could the answer not be clear? It was impossible for me to live in the Lower Eches and not blame Labour. It was impossible not to *know* it's been Labour. They were most certainly the cause for all these horrors and evils, yet they took no responsibility. There was no evidence to make them – nothing unsurfaced that proved the agonies of the Lower Eches and this company were one and the same. And because there was nothing, the people were left to blame themselves or just accept that things are terrible.

I don't believe that. I believe evil can only exist if there are evil people. And people can continue being evil if no one ever calls them out.

That is why I became a reporter. Yes, my work was dangerous. But was doing nothing much better? Was accepting a torturous life with no resistance better than fighting back for the chance things could be made manageable? Maybe even peaceful and pleasant? Those are serious questions. I know I tend to speak rhetorically, but not this time. Was it better? Even if that peace and pleasantness couldn't be achieved for myself, would it be just as worth to fight for others to have that life? If I could prevent a little girl's dad from dying, prevent her from experiencing the same horrors I did, it would be better than doing nothing for the sake of self-preservation. Right?

I don't blame you if you still think it's foolish. I'm not all too sure myself. Again, that's why I'm writing this. Whatever the case, this was my motive. This is what pushed me forward. And its absence is what's keeping me at home. Quiet.

Before I end, I have one last thing to ask: if I needed to, would I be able to stay with you for a while? I hate to ask – you've taken enough care of me as it is. But I might need someone else to help me with daily things for a while. If the time ever comes, you'll see why.

Again, I'm sorry for worrying you. I love you, Mom.

Love,

Pedious

On Monday, it was reported that Vice President of Labour, Lewis Rufus, was killed just that morning. Rufus's absence means his son, Simon Rufus, would be promoted to fill the role the next day. This could have been my ticket to go straight to the top – straight to President Labour himself. I couldn't let this moment pass. I grabbed my stuff and left for the office district as soon as the news broke out.

Simon Rufus was previously the manager for the entire Middle Echelon, meaning I knew exactly what building he worked in. I hailed a taxi and told the driver to head there. I imagined Simon Rufus sitting behind his desk, being briefed about his new role in the company – smirking. I imagined him rolling the title of “Mr. Rufus” around in his mind – that name was now his, not his father's. I imagined him sitting where his father sat just a week ago, paying the hitman his promised bounty. *What if it was him? What if he killed his father? That'll make quite the article!* I remember thinking those things as my taxi pulled up to the Middle Echelon Labour Office building.

The building looked dead. I wondered if I got there too early, but I brushed the thought aside. I handed the driver a wad of cash I had at the ready. I caught the driver's eyes: they were dull, had no shine or light in them. The white of the sclera seemed to meld with the black of the iris, making the whole eye have a light coat of gray. I've seen those eyes before. I've seen them in the Lower Eches. I almost said I'm sorry to the driver, but I caught myself before the words left my lips. I said ‘thank you,’ exited the car, swung the door shut, and the taxi drove away.

My gut squeezed and silently whined as I stood before the building. I put my hand to my stomach as I scaled the steps to the front door, wondering what this feeling meant.

Lewis Rufus was a man who, in recent memory, left the Lower Eches without clean water and a great number of jobs when he ordered to shut down the water filtration plants for half a year – all because they needed money flowing to greater projects. Would have been longer if I did expose

him. But I knew near nothing about Simon Rufus. And that made things worse. What would this man do to follow up a man like Lewis? The image of Rufus's hitman flashed in my mind again.

~~To the Revolutionary and all who follow him,~~

~~I once praised you. I once believed you were the hero in dystopian stories who fought for justice in a world desperately clambering for it. That was before I realized you and Mr. Rufus shared something: you both only saw numbers~~

The lobby of the office was empty besides the front desk secretary. She didn't seem to notice me coming in. I took a breath and approached her, deciding which lie would be most suitable. I reached the desk and stood there, waiting for the secretary to look up. But she continued to stare at her monitor. I had questioned at first if the monitor was even on – her face reflected the blue-tint of the screen, but her eyes remain gray, dull, lightless.

I gave a subtle cough. Her head craned up to face me. There was no sway or jitter or imperfect in her movement, as if she was an android. There was no surprise on her face, nor apology; she merely looked at me and said, "How may I help you?"

A little taken aback that she had said anything, I fumbled for the ID on my lanyard hanging around my neck, and held it up.

"Pedious Pawn, from the MidTimes Newspaper," I lied. "I'm here to interview the new Vice President."

A shiver of unnerve ran through me when I saw the secretary's plain face curl slightly with confusion. "I'm sorry, ma'am," she said, "but Simon Rufus has not come in yet."

I stood there for a bit. I wasn't sure what to do. "Shouldn't he be here for a briefing about being the new Vice President?"

"That is the standard protocol," said the secretary, "but he has not. I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Why hasn't he?"

"I do not know, ma'am. I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Has he said when he *will* be in?"

"He has not. I'm sorry, ma'am."

I wondered if she was lying to me. If she was told to turn anyone who wanted to contact the Vice President away. Understandably, they wouldn't want anyone waltzing in. Especially after what happened to Mr. Rufus.

But I may never get a chance like this ever again.

“Ma’am, I will not be turned away,” I said. “I’m talking to Simon Rufus whether you tell me the truth or not.”

The secretary’s face didn’t change. “Simon Rufus is not here, ma’am. That’s all I can say. I’m sorry, ma’am.” Then, her lightless eyes returned to her screen.

I was ready to push harder until she let something slip, when one of the elevator doors to my right slid open, revealing a man and woman, both suited the same. They both wore reflectionless black sunglasses. The man walked to the front doors and the woman walked over to the secretary. She paused, her head facing blankly forward, then turned to me.

“Do you need something, ma’am?”

“N-no. I was just heading out.”

The woman nodded, and continued to face towards me, waiting for me to leave. Trying not to show my reluctance, I turned around and headed for the door. I opened the door, leading with my gaze so I could catch where the man was. He was standing by the side of the road, facing away, waiting.

I slipped out of the door, disappeared behind it, and let the door swing slowly shut behind me. The door bumped the heel of my shoe, and I slowly drew my foot forward, hoping the two inside would think the door had fully closed. I stood there frozen for a bit, listening for any hint of a voice to slip through the tiny crack in the door. Eventually, I heard the woman begin to talk. I carefully pushed myself against the door, opening it just a hair more, and listened.

“He has not, ma’am,” I heard the secretary say. The suited woman sighed, though it could have been the wind.

“Alright,” I heard the woman say in a low tone. “We’ll go check on.” Silence followed, but I thought I could hear tapping sounds periodically. After a few seconds, there was the *ssbbb* of paper on table and the woman said, “This is his address, just in case.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Then, footsteps approached the door.

I slid my body back as quickly and quietly as I could manage, then stepped to the side, out of the door’s way. Moments later, the woman walked through and towards the man. As the woman approached, a black car pulled up in front of the man. The man opened the back door and slipped inside, leaving the door open for the woman to slip in after him. In her seat, she reached out for the door and pulled it shut. I have no way to know, but I felt her eyes on me as she closed the door.

I watched the car drive off until it turned a corner and vanished behind a building. I poked my head back inside the office. Everything was the same, as if I never came in before. Except, now, a small piece of paper laid on the front desk. I knew I need the paper. But I couldn’t just walk in and take it.

“Ma’am?” The secretary was looking at me. “You may come in.”

I pushed the door open, careful with every step. I was wary of a potential trap. But nothing happened. I made it to the desk. There, laid the paper with an address scrawled on it.

“You were looking for Simon Rufus, correct?” the secretary asked. I nodded. She looked to the paper. “That address will take you to him.”

I didn’t take the paper. It had to be a trap. Maybe the paper was laced with a toxin. Maybe the address was wrong and would lead me to some backstreet building where they’ll make me disappear like the others. But then I looked at the secretary and saw her eyes. Her lightless eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. I took the paper and left the building.

I expected the taxi to take me to the Upper Echelon. The driver started driving towards home – towards the Lower Echelons. I asked if this was really the direction towards the address, to which they said only, “Yes, ma’am.” Within a few minutes, we arrived at a secluded suburban-styled house. The trees and foliage grew just right to make the house disappear if you weren’t looking. As we approached, I was tempted to ask if this was the right place. That temptation was curbed when I saw a man and a woman get in a black car. As if trading spots, the black car pulled away and down the road as we pulled into driveway and stopped. A bit disoriented, I realized we had parked, and the driver was looking at me through the rearview mirror. Dull eyes. I handed them the cash and, with a quick thank you, exited the car.

Once again, I felt that curl in my gut. Simon Rufus couldn’t live here. Could he? I tapped my kaleidoscope and there danced those smoky ghosts. What kind of man was he? I walked to the door and rang the doorbell. The muffled chime rang inside. Then, nothing. I rang again. Still, nothing. I wondered if he wasn’t here. I remembered the black car. Maybe they already took him back to the office. Was I too late? I stood there for a while longer. Still, nothing. He wasn’t here. I turned around, the curl in my gut rolling flat and sagging in a kind of sadness.

But as walked away, I heard something. I turned around and something glowed on my kaleidoscope. A deep blue aura coming from the second floor. He was here. I walked back up to the door and knocked.

“Simon Rufus?” I shouted. “I’m not with those suits. I’m here on my own. I just wanna ask you a few questions.” I heard nothing for a moment. Everything was still. And then a series of slow footsteps pounded their way through the house.

The curl came back. It raised through my esophagus. As if I just summoned a wicked being and my own body was trying to keep me quiet. I backed away from the door, ready for whatever may be lying on the other side when it swings open. The steps bounded down and down. The aura

descended from the second floor. And then, it drew nearer. And nearer. I clenched my jacket to keep me calm. The locks clicked and the door swung open a crack. There, in the crack, face cut in face by the chain between the door and the wall, was a man wore a white t-shirt, a bathrobe, and pajama pants. His hair was a black mess. His cheeks looked stained wet. And his eyes. Dull. Gray. Lightless.

“Who are you?” the man said.

“Uh, Pedious Pawn, sir. I wanted to ask you some questions about being Vice President.”

His tired squint turned into a glare. “Get the hell off my porch.”

I said “Wait!” and shoved my hand into the door, the full force of the shut slamming on my fingers. I retracted my hand and cursed. My fingers immediately beat red and pulsed visibly. There was the hurried sound of a chain shifting and then the thunk of metal against wood.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, are you okay?” And there, on the porch, stood Simon Rufus.

Out of breath, I mustered, “Yeah, yeah,” followed by a loud sip of air. I don’t know if I lost my breath because of the pain or because of Simon.

“Should’ve used my foot,” I said.

Simon let out a single airy chuckle. The slightest smile appeared on his face and just as quickly disappeared.

“Miss Pawn, right?” he said.

“Pedious is fine.” Something felt wrong, him calling me ‘Miss.’

“Already, well, Miss Pedious... I’m sorry for slamming your hand in my door, and I’ll gladly compensate you with something.” This was the perfect chance to interview him. “...But asking me anything can’t be an option.”

I shook my hand out. “I came out here all this way just to get no interview and my hand slammed?” I joked. He didn’t smile this time.

“Miss Pedious, do you realize why you want to interview me?”

Was this a trick question? “Because you’re the new Vice President?”

His sigh was unnervingly deep. “You may hear, ‘new Vice President.’ What I hear is, ‘You’re dad is dead.’”

I forgot about the pain in my hand. My eyes met his. They looked more lightless than ever.

“I don’t want to talk about him, nor his role within the company. So I must ask you to leave.” He looked at me one moment longer, and then turned to reenter his house.

“Then let’s not talk about that,” I said. He stopped. “Mr. Rufus.”

He turned and brushed away the name. “That was my father.”

“Then, Simon,” I said, “you still hurt my hand. Could you compensate a different way?”

Fractal, kaleidoscope, eye shit

“Nobody can be let in at this time, sir,” said the guard at the front gates. The architecture and length of the fencing around the building, you’d think we were trying to enter a palace.

“Not even an employee?” said Simon.

“Unless you’re security, which, by the looks of things, you’re not.”

“What about Vice President?” The guard’s eyes narrow for a moment, then grew, worried.

“Mr. Simon Rufus! I’m sorry, I didn’t recognize you. Uh, give me a moment.”

He shut the window, turned his back to us, and hunched over what must have been a walkie talkie. We waited for a minute or two, then the automated gates creaked open. The guard didn’t open the window, he just turned to Simon and nodded.

Simon parked close to the building and we walked in together. When we stepped inside, we faced a swarm of people and chatter, chaos and disarray. Papers flew fluttered here and there; people rushed in and out of the lobby, coming and going who knows where; suits clustered together, squawking with noticeable anxiety or panic. Simon and I squeezed our way through the madness to the front desk. The people there all had a phone pressed to their ear, the other hand either scribbling something on paper, typing on the keyboard, or plugging their other ear to block out the mess around them.

Simon didn’t wait for any of them to finish.

“Excuse me, I’m Simon Rufus,” he shouted. “We need to see President Labouré.” The room quieted after he spoke. I didn’t have to check to know that people were looking. The three receptionists all paused. The one in the middle, a woman, said, “I’m sorry, I’m going to have to put you on hold,” pushed a button and put the phone to the side. The other two continued with their business.

“Mr. Rufus, I need you to attend an important meeting. It’s already in session, it’s on the ninety-second floor.”

“Not before I see Labour. There’s someone else here to see him.” I stepped forward so she sees me.

She froze.

“You’re— Are you...”

I didn’t know what she meant, so I answered, “I’m a reporter. I must speak with the President.”

She remained stiff for a moment, then her shoulders relaxed. Her eyes shut tight and she shook her head. She stared at me. I tried to keep my face stern, not backing down. There was a silent panic in her eyes – the kind you can’t hear or feel or even see, but you can sense.

Finally, she looked to Simon. “You can let her up – the President’s at the top. But you have to go to the meeting. It’s urgent.”

“Can’t I just go after I meet with the President or have someone fill me in later?” Simon said.

“No, you cannot.”

“Why not?”

“Because you can’t meet with the President!” There was a desperate frustration in her tone. “You can’t. But she can.”

I could tell Simon had the urge to say something back. He was quiet for a moment.

“You said floor ninety-two?”

The secretary nodded.

“Come on,” he said, and walked to the elevator.

When the doors slid open on floor ninety-two, Simon said, “Good luck,” and stepped out. That was the only thing that was said during the ride up. The doors shut and I was alone. I realized

just how quiet everything was. The ringing in my ears was louder than the hum of the elevator machinery. A soft ding sounded, and the doors opened. Floor one hundred. Before me was a hall, lined with wall lamps and semi-circle tables, each with a vase. At the end of the hall was a set of double doors.

Every step reverberated through the hall. I felt I might lose my footing and knock over one of the vases. I thought about the panic a hundred floors below me. I thought about what the secretary said. *You can't meet the President.* What did she mean by *can't*? *Can't* as in *shouldn't* or *not permitted to*? Or *can't* as in *not possible to*? What happened to the President? What did he do?

A familiar pain twisted my stomach. It felt like I could vomit at any moment. With what energy I felt in my arms, I let the excitement push me through the door. There, a few feet from the floor, was the President, hanging from the chandelier.

To the Top

Toby's excitement kept me present enough, like waking up again and again from a dream. But it couldn't shut out the looming feeling of Orator John's eyes darting over and over to the empty spot in the pew where I always sit, judging.

But he would understand that I left because I was with my little brother, who wanted to watch the shuttle launch, but wouldn't be able to if I didn't go with him since children's worship wasn't meeting today. And he would understand that I didn't want him to miss such a monumental moment in human history. I mean, we were going to space! He would understand why I had to leave... right?

Toby gasped – my throat closed, and my lungs seized for a moment. In the next, he was beside me, pointing at the screen.

“It's him!” He goes in front of the chair as if to sit down, but he bounced instead.

I then noticed the applause sounding from the TV like a crash of waves. On screen stood a man with distinct rectangular glasses: Adam Omnia.

My legs began to fidget, like I might also start bouncing beyond my control. He stood there, saying nothing, only smiling and surveying the crowd, until the applause settled into the ambience of open air. Then, he spoke:

“When the man returned, the people of the village flocked to him and asked, *Did you make it? Did you scale the Tower?* The man said, *Yes, I did. And with me I have brought back the wisdom of the Tower.* The people said, *Please tell us this wisdom so we may be like you, so we may be like the Tower.*”

“This ancient story has formed a collective conscious that is our culture and civilization. But despite this, over the centuries, more wars and conflicts than most know exist have conjured from disagreement after disagreement over this very story. Over this very Tower that stands behind me

now. It is for one reason that this cruel irony persists to this very day: we do not know the truth. We are conflicted in our interpretations and guessing and ignorance, and we will remain forever conflicted if we can never unify in the truth. Though the man who scaled the Tower – the Omnia, my own ancestor – was once here, we did not learn the truths from him. If we did, there would be no wars or conflicts. There would be no separation in thought and interpretation. All there would be is the one truth.

“But the role of revealing the truth was not abandoned. The responsibility was passed down from generation to generation in the Omnia line. Each made their pilgrimage to the Tower and attempted the same journey. But many have failed. I, being among Omnia’s descendants, intend not to fail. And I shall not fail, as I have a new plan. A new pilgrimage. Today, it is not I who will make the journey, at least not in the traditional sense. My journey has already been complete, and the fruit of that journey stands beside the Tower, ready for launch. There will be another man to make the physical journey. The first man in space will be the new pilgrim to the top of the Tower. And upon his return, he will be the new wiseman. The new Omnia. With him, he will bring us more than knowledge and discovery: he will bring us truth. And in that truth, the nature of the Tower’s peak, we will be brought salvation!”

I remembered I wasn’t a part of the crowd when my claps reverberated around the small Children’s Worship room. My hands froze just after. Embarrassment dissipated when I saw Toby clapping too.

When he stopped, he said, “Is there a top to the Tower?”

Something in me dropped. “Well, there’s gotta be, right? The Omnia himself said he made it to the top, so.”

“But Miss Mary said that one of the truths Omnia told people was that there is no top. So which is it?”

I rummaged my mind through the years of worship and oration; through all the lines of reason and argumentation I’ve had with myself; through all the moments I felt best in life, sure of myself and the world – in search of an answer. But there was nothing. My mind felt claustrophobic with thoughts bumping into one another, flying by like a crowded train station. And yet, at the same time, it felt peripheral; a noisy chaos taking place on the brim of the universe. The infinity within those brims held nothing. And in that nothingness echoes Orator John’s voice from the main hall of the chapel.

...those who mistake ascension for climbing can only hope for the best of possibilities: to neither rise nor lower. For the worst of possibilities is to descend to the lowest depths with each stubborn stair step up.

“Peyton?”

I looked at Toby.

“I don’t know,” I said. I don’t know what the face Toby made was. It expressed the same feeling I felt – and I don’t know what I felt.

“All systems are go. T-minus – seventeen seconds to launch.

“Twelve. Eleven.” Toby joined in the count down.

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

As the shuttle rose, so did the roar of the rockets. I worried Orator John could hear. Toby and I watched silently until the only sound that came from the TV were the occasional comments of the news reporter.

Toby jumped out of his chair and started talking about the launch as if I hadn't seen it.

“It was so loud! My ears would have exploded if I was actually there. And did you see the fire? Some of it was blue! It was like an explosion! What do you think they'll find in space, Peyton?”

I felt tired watching the launch, but Toby's question exhausted me. I didn't want to respond, not even with an 'I don't know.' That would be worse – because it'd partially be a lie.

Eventually, I said, “I'm not sure what they *will* find. But I hope they get to the top.”

As I flipped through the pages, the whole situation felt surreal – these familiar words and stories, ones I've heard so much they seem scrawled onto my mind, I'm only now seeing written. They seemed more false, more veiled than the oration. But at the same time, I felt they were revealing something to me. Something that was always there, but I just never noticed until the words were laid in front of me; plain and without another's prescriptive tone.

I found the section:

“Please tell us this wisdom so we may be like you, so we may be like the Tower.”

The man said, "I will say all that I have gained, the truths I have learned. But the first of those truths can only take me and you so far."

The people were confused.

He continued, "The most fundamental truth is truths can be known through another, but can only be understood through the Self."

The people said, "What does that mean, sir? We don't understand."

The man laughed softly and said, "I know, that is what I said. Listen to the other truths I have learned and perhaps it will become clear." So, the people listened.

"Another fundamental truth is we are each our own manifestations of the Fractal. The Fractal is everything, and everything is the Fractal. The Fractal is all the potentials of reality, all those that have occurred, all those that have not yet, and all those that can. You are a potential, as am I. But, we are not the same potentials. You and I are different in this way, though we are from the same source.

"Imagine an ocean and an infinite number of vessels for holding liquid, each one with a different shape. The ocean is the Fractal, and the vessels are potentials. For those potentials to become real, the water of the ocean must fill the vessel. Though the water is the same in each vessel, the vessel shapes the water differently. In the same way as the ocean and the vessels, though we are all One with the Fractal, we are different potentialities of forms the Fractal can take. In this way, we are different."

The people said, "But what does this have to do with the first truth?"

The man answered, "The same as how water from an ocean molds itself to the shape of its vessel, how the Fractal molds itself to the shape of our potentiality, so too does truth mold to our being. The two – the Fractal and potential, truth and being – are the same. To know the truth is to know the Fractal. To understand the truth is to understand the Fractal. The Fractal is the truth. Because of this, to be is to understand. They are the same as well. To be and to understand: this is

what it means to Realize. And in this you should find the greatest comfort, the greatest wisdom, the greatest and truest salvation.”

The people were once again confused. “But climbing the Tower is where we will find the greatest comfort, the greatest wisdom, and the greatest and truest salvation.”

The man said, “That is true. But you misunderstand. If to know the truth is to know the Fractal, and the Fractal is within all of us, then we need not go any other place to find the truth. What we seek is within us! The highest truth is at the top of the Tower, but you misunderstand ascension for climbing. And those who mistake ascension for climbing can only hope for the best of possibilities: to neither rise nor lower. For the worst of possibilities is to descend to the lowest depths with each stubborn stair step up.”

After the man said all this, the people said, “We still don’t understand! Stop speaking in metaphors and simply tell us the truth!”

To this, the man said, “Remember the first truth I told you. Speaking of the Fractal requires me to speak with metaphor. If you wish to know more of the truth, listen to me, among other things. But if you wish to understand the truth, I can do nothing. For that requires your Realization. And no one can Realize for you but yourself.”

Quantum

While Erwin Arjuna was cleaning up his workspace for the day, he glanced out the window and he saw himself outside. He was at the front of the building two floors below, and Erwin believes he saw his coworker there too. Erwin paused when this observation sunk into his mind. Confusion and something like panic began to whirl within him. But then, a moment of clarity shocked those emotions out of him.

What am I thinking? It's just someone else.

Erwin looked out the window again to reassure his mind. But when he saw the two figures standing below, arms motioning and mouths moving, his initial thought solidified like concrete. It was him. He just knew it was.

Everything else fell away from Erwin. No other space or time existed. Only this scene. Only these two and their unheard conversation. Erwin thought, *What is this?* He thought, *How is this happening?* He thought, nothing. His mind revved and spiraled, and was silent. The other Erwin walked away.

Suddenly, the world collapsed back in on him. He was back in his lab, back on the second floor, back at the end of his workday. The other Erwin was gone.

Erwin sprang from the window, grabbed his coat and bag, and burst out of the lab. He bounded down the stairs, nearly tripping with each flight. When he reached the lobby, the coworker walked in, not from the front doors but from the opposite staircase.

“Hey, what did I say to you just now?” Erwin’s words reached his coworker before he did. The coworker took too long to reply, so Erwin spoke again. “What were you talking about out there?”

Erwin gasped for breath.

“What are you talking about?” said the coworker.

“Just now, outside. You were talking to me. Well not actually me but—What did I say? What did you two talk about?” As Erwin gulped down another breath, his ridiculousness became clear.

The coworkers face was some unusual mixture of emotions. Concern? Confusion? Fright?

That didn’t matter right now. “Never mind, forget it.” Erwin rushed past his coworker and out the door.

He looked down the street. He could just barely see him, or at least what Erwin thought was him. Erwin bolted. He kept his eyes on him. He might disappear.

Erwin drew closer. He knew for sure it was him. Erwin’s run become a jog and then a brisk walk. He didn’t want to scare the other off like a deer. When there were just a few feet between them, Erwin was walking just slightly faster than his double.

He reached out his hand as the gap closed closer and closer. The pace of his stride slowed, but his mind continued to whirl like a hurricane and his heart thumped stronger and faster. Erwin took deep silent breaths, but his throat felt tight and red. His hand slinked back when he was an arm’s reach away. Every breath was a wave crashing. Every heartbeat was a base drum. His hand raised to his shoulder. And tapped.

But his hand touched nothing.

Erwin tried again, assuming he missed. But the tips of his fingers didn’t squish upon contact. There was no contact. As if the shoulder wasn’t there.

Erwin jabbed his finger forward. He needed to make sure. His finger went right through.

Erwin waved his hand around inside the other Erwin’s shoulder. His body dissipated around his hand, like a school of fish breaking formation—swim around a passing shark.

Erwin ran in front of him. He didn’t react at all. Walking backwards, Erwin waved his arms, snapped his fingers. He just kept walking, occasionally looking around.

“Hello?” Erwin tested. Nothing.

Erwin stopped. The other Erwin walked through him, as if he were nothing more than still air.

The energy that shot Erwin down the streets, curious and bewildered, morphed into something different. It clumped in his stomach, in his legs. It weighed him down. His ligaments and muscles had calcified. Yet his mind exploded with thoughts—he couldn’t understand any of them. They whizzed by—electron-like—swirling around a center he could never identify. They collided into each. They whirled hurricanes in his mind—and this whirling stirred his gut, masticated it into mush.

Erwin turned.

There he was, still walking.

Erwin struggled to catch up. His limbs felt like they lost their rigidity and coordination. But once Erwin was beside him, he was able to keep his pace without strain.

As Erwin walked, he was granted a brief moment of silence. No thoughts. From the silence came a realization: *He’s walking back to my apartment.* Erwin was so transfixed on this other, he hadn’t noticed what path they had taken until now. It was the same one Erwin took back home every day. Erwin supposed this made him feel relieved, knowing he wouldn’t need to go anywhere strange or illegal to follow him. His mind became manageable—clear in the same way electrified water is clear.

This clarity brought his attention to his satchel. Erwin scrambled it open to check if he grabbed the book. He let out a deep breath when he saw the navy-blue spine, and let the flap drop close. He thought back to work, checking if he forgot anything else. His mind drifted to his

coworker. *What did I say to him again? 'You were talking to me, but not actually me,' something like that.* His stomach churned once reliving the scene with a clearer mind. *I didn't even say sorry or anything.*

His stomach churned again when he thought about him running down the street. He whipped his eyes behind him, across the street, far forward, into the building windows. He saw no one—but someone still could have seen him. Erwin's arms tucked in and his hand hid his cheek. *If my coworker didn't know what was going on, why would others know? Could anyone else see him?* His palm rubbed into his cheek as the image of his body flailing down the street replayed in his head.

Would anyone figure out if they saw me like that? Embarrassment tweaked to panic.

Eventually, Erwin glanced to the other Erwin beside him. He couldn't help but study his face. It was surreal. It wasn't anything about the face itself—it was a normal face. Everything was where you would expect it to be, nothing moved or shifted. But it was *his* face. Erwin had only seen these angles of himself in photos or videos, maybe the mirror if he stretched his eyes to the side. But now that same visage was on something else, something Erwin could walk around and study.

Erwin looked at his eyes. They were undeniably human. It couldn't be an imitation. Erwin felt uncomfortable calling this horror a "thing." But he also didn't want its tempting his curiosity to lure him into hidden jaws.

Erwin walked the rest of the way teetering between silence and a cacophonous mind.

Erwin's apartment complex was the kind of place you smell before you'd see it. There was no rot or mold or death, nothing gross. But there was the distinct smell of age. Every time you enter the building, this waft hits you in the face and then disappears. It's to be expected from cheaper rent.

Erwin slowed his pace to let the other enter first. He grabbed the door handle and pulled back, but the door didn't follow. He walked right through the door as if it had been opened. Erwin remembered he wasn't really with someone, just this strange ghost. Erwin grabbed the handle and it follow through this time when he pulled back. The waft puffed in his face. He smelled the age. He still wasn't used to it. *I won't have to deal with that much longer*, Erwin thought.

Erwin's suspicions about the other were more or less confirmed when the man at the front desk greeted him. He gave no surprised looks, no comments like, "I didn't know you had a twin." Just a glance up and "Hello."

The other Erwin pushed the button for the elevator, and Erwin quickly pushed it after, remembering again that he was really alone. The button was a piece of plastic that felt too loose. The metal doors slid open to an empty lift. A constricted chime sounded—the kind of whine electronics make when death is closing in. They stepped in, pressed "3," and the doors scraped close. Erwin's stomach lurched when the elevator moved—then lurched again when it stopped. The elevator whined and the doors opened.

Erwin let the other step out first and trailed just behind. Erwin lost his breath for a moment. He had to remind himself that he wasn't going into anyone else's home. It was *his* apartment. Erwin was just going home. Still, Erwin's heart couldn't help but quicken. He had the kind of anxiety that accompanies the anticipation of discovering something dreadful.

The other Erwin was at his door. He slid the key into the handle, twisted, and pulled it out in one slick motion. He turned the handle and disappeared into the open doorway. Erwin stopped. He crept forward until he stood just at the edge of the doorway. The door was slightly ajar. *How...* was all Erwin could manage to think.

He didn't know what to do now. He just stared back into the darkness of the opening, hoping not to see something staring back.

Erwin heard a wump. He spun around. The hall was still empty. He realized the sound came from his room. A sigh was let out in the room, as if he were holding his breath.

Annoyance or overwhelm or something like that welled up in Erwin. He lost all caution and pushed the door open.

This wasn't his apartment. It might have been the other Erwin's, but it certainly wasn't him. The layout was all the same: living room area front and center, a kitchen nook to the left, and two doors to the right—one the bathroom, the other the bedroom. But everything else was different. The furniture was entirely gone save the couch the other Erwin was slumped in and a coffee table. The couch was the color of a wet dog and the cushions sagged in weird places. That was the reason Erwin replaced it a year ago. The coffee table was littered with a few cans and it had a black imprint. That's where the TV should have sat, but there was none to be seen. The washer had moved back into the kitchen, sharing space with the dishwasher. The fridge and stove were not the stainless-steel ones Erwin bought six months ago, but the white ones he inherited from his parents years ago. They felt more like plastic than metal. Even the strongest of magnets couldn't hold on for very long. Nothing lined the walls—his bookshelves were gone and all their contents with them. Erwin's heart lumped most when he noticed. He didn't know why. The picture frames were gone too. There weren't many frames before and he barely recalled what they were, but his mind struggled to realize his diploma was among the missing.

Nothing about the room was dirty or rancid or broken. It was just bland—with no sense of personality, accomplishment, life.

The Erwin on the couch shifted out of his half sleep. The strap of his bag draped over his neck when he fell asleep. He pulled it off him and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath. His exhale sounded upset, like he was preparing to get opening the bag over with. When he was ready, he flipped the flap over and pulled out a plaque. He held it in both hands, elbows on his

knees, and looked at it for a while. His brow furrowed into a concentrated sadness. It was the kind of look that tried to cast certain emotions out and compel other, happier emotions to take over. But at no point did the hint of guilt leave his eyes. Erwin felt empathically sick seeing that look on his own face.

Seeming to give up, the other Erwin rocked himself up onto his feet and ambled to the bedroom door. Erwin followed closely behind. The bedroom was the same as the main room. His old bed was still there, but with only one sheet. The nightstand had only the alarm clock—no book or remote to accompany it. Across the bed still stood the dresser, but the TV that once stood on top was gone, just like the coffee table.

The other Erwin squat down and pulled open the bottom left drawer. Inside was what looked like a mess of metals and paper, but before Erwin could get closer, the other placed the plaque inside, closed the drawer, and walked out. Erwin watched as he stretched and went into the bathroom. Moments later, there was the burst then hiss of the shower, muffled by the walls.

Erwin looked back at the drawer. He sat on his knees and eyed the handle in the dim room. He felt some hesitation to touch it. His hand might just go through it. But what if he can open it? Would the other notice? Lethargy washed over him with these thoughts—he'd rather just do it than think any more about all this. Erwin reached and grasped the knob. He wasn't sure if he was surprised or not. He pulled the drawer open—still cautious not to make a lot of noise.

Inside, Erwin saw he was right about the metals and paper. But now, he saw that the metals were other plaques, little medals, mementos of some kind. And the papers were envelopes and letters, framed awards, pamphlets, itineraries, drawings, mementos of some kind. Erwin pulled a few out at random and grabbed the new plaque.

He brought the armful to the couch. He placed them on one of the cushions, still unsure if he would phase through. He tried to keep them stacked, but the cushion's lack of shape made them

slip. When they felt stable enough, Erwin carefully sat himself down on the other cushion. Erwin's panic spiked a moment when his weight shifted back quickly and he felt no seat, but the sag of the couch just made the seat lower than it looked. It wasn't so much uncomfortable as it felt off, somehow.

Erwin tried to ignore this and turned to the leaning stack. On top were five paper awards, two framed, three not. They all had intricate borders, a date, signature from someone, the title of the award, and the print name "Erwin Arjuna" in the middle. [volunteer title stuff here]. All the dates were some time after his Master's graduation. Even the framed awards were frilling at the edges from lack of care.

Next in the pile were envelopes. Erwin picked one at random. The back read, *Thank you, Erwin*. The seal was ripped, shredded in the way when the envelope doesn't rip cleanly. But there was a piece of tape pulling the flap down, like it was meant to fix an impossible mistake. Erwin peeled the tape up and opened it. Unsurprisingly, there was a letter inside. But it was crinkled, like it had been wadded up, thrown in the trash, and then unwadded out of guilt. It was handwritten, something he hasn't seen in a long time. It still held a formal air, though. Erwin read:

Mr. Arjuna,

We are grateful beyond words for all you have done

[not complete yet]

It felt wrong to read any more letters. Erwin folded the letter, slid it back in the envelope, and pressed the tape back into place.

All that sat next to him now was the plaque. Erwin picked it up. The layout was basically the same as the paper awards. The title read, *Most Prolific Volunteer*. Underneath were listed the volunteer roles he took up, the ones on the paper awards appearing here too.

Erwin stared into the plaque, a hand on each side, elbows on his knees, hunched over. His eyes scanned the letters, as if recutting the metal with laser vision. *What did he see?* He felt the frame in his palms, under his thumbs. It felt like something else. He turned around to see the empty spot on the wall, where his degree should have been hanging. He remembered the day he got it. How he sat on his couch—his new couch—and cradled his accomplishment in his hands. It brought a sense of lightness in him, only rivaled by moments in the lab when everything was, just, right. Then he returned back to now, to the plaque in his hands. It was heavy. Compared to his degree, it could make his arms quiver trying to keep it up. He supposed that was something to be proud of. He was supposed to be happy bare something so heavy. The weight was his accomplishment.

Erwin sat there, unsure if he was grounded or if he was sinking. Was he the boat held still and safe by the anchor of service? Or was he the anchor, drowning at the bottom of the ocean so others don't have to. He sat there, thinking. Waiting for the raining shower to stop, so he may ask himself.