

Adaptive Music for Fiction: Writing Multi-Sensory Short Stories in a Digital Age

by

John Maxwell Lichtman

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Spring 2021

Adaptive Music for Fiction: Writing Multi-Sensory Short Stories in a Digital Age

by

John Maxwell Lichtman

APPROVED:

Dr. Fred Arroyo, Thesis Director
Department of English

Dr. Eric Detweiler, Second Reader
Department of English

Dr. Philip Phillips, Thesis Committee Chair
Associate Dean, Honors College

DEDICATION

To each of you – may your creativity always weather the storm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project is entirely due to the guidance and support of my advisors Dr. Fred Arroyo and Dr. Eric Detweiler, the amazing faculty members at MTSU, my fellow writing tutors at the UWC, my family, and my friends; your presence in my life made me a better person. You all mean the world to me.

Special thanks to my wife, Dr. Elizabeth Myers – without your encouragement, support, and attention to detail, I would not exist.

ABSTRACT

Since 2011, it has become commonplace for individuals and large companies alike to attempt to create a more immersive reading experience on a digital platform. While their efforts have yielded interesting and impressive results, attempts to intersect books and soundtracks have never been generally embraced as a viable alternative to simply reading. Conversely, video games have been constantly improving the integration of music to encourage more immersive gameplay by using adaptive music that reacts to user input. Using this approach, I have written a collection of five short fictions entitled *Sheltered Home: Creaturely Stories* and composed accompanying music for each story using a vertically layered method. The objective of this creative thesis project is to combine short fiction with reactive music on a digital, eBook-like platform to encourage a more immersive multi-sensory reading experience.

TERMS

1. Adaptive music – music that changes rhythm, volume, and/or emotional mood based on a specified trigger.
2. Bitcrusher – an effect that reduces or distorts the resolution of digital audio in order to produce a variety of possible outcomes, such as “warming” the sound to give more prominence to lower frequencies while subduing higher frequencies.
3. Creaturely – having the character and limitations of a creature.
4. Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) - an application software used for recording and editing audio files. In the case of this project, the DAW I used was Reaper.
5. eBook – an electronic version of a printed book designed to be read on a computer or handheld device.
6. Game engine – the core software needed to build and run a video game.
7. Middleware – software that provides services to other software. In the case of this project, Wwise and FMOD would be adaptive audio middleware providing the functionality of adaptive audio within a video game production engine such as Unity or Unreal.
8. Plugin – an extension of an existing software that adds additional functionality to the host program. The previously mentioned Bitcrusher is an example of a type of plugin.
9. Reverb – an effect that models the decaying reflection of sound in order to make. In audio, it can be used to “fill” the perception of empty space.

10. Story format – Layouts used in Twine which offer different collections of functional rules and styling options based on the preference of the user.
11. Timbre – the identifiable quality or qualities of a musical sound.
12. Twine - an open-source tool commonly used for constructing text-based interactive fiction video games.
13. Vertical layering – an adaptive music technique where several tracks of audio, usually containing unique content, are played in sync to create a varied and immersive experience for the listener.
14. VST instrument – a type of audio plugin that usually emulates a musical instrument, such as a synthesizer, string ensemble, drum set, or choir.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
TERMS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
ADAPTIVE MUSIC FOR FICTION.....	5
CONCLUSION.....	9
I: “Distance”.....	12
II: “Speed Dial”.....	20
III: “The Obsidian Tail”.....	29
Issue # 732 – An Unstoppable Enemy?.....	29
Issue # 734 – Den of Snakes!.....	31
Second Pressing – Issue #285 – The Kindness of Strangers.....	34
Issue # 735 – Out of the Frying Pan, into the Breach.....	38
Issue # 740 – The Road to Respite.....	40
IV: “Opposites”.....	45
Purpose.....	45
Exchange.....	47
SNAFU.....	48
Dregs.....	51
Transition.....	54
V: “The Missing Piece”.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	63

INTRODUCTION

For my creative thesis, *Adaptive Music for Fiction: Writing Multi-Sensory Short Stories in a Digital Age*, I wrote five short stories focusing on the theme of creaturely experiences in a collection entitled *Sheltered Home: Creaturely Stories*. I also composed accompanying tracks of ambient music for each story which followed a vertically layered and reactive approach and collected the stories and music in a digital format that resembles an interactive eBook. While this project focuses on the combination of fiction and audio on a digital platform, the collected short stories can be read without musical accompaniment for a “regular” reading experience. I chose this project because it not only combines my interests of fiction writing and music composition, but also offers my own approach to the intersection of audio and reading.

Some of my all-time favorite fictions are written from the perspective of partially anthropomorphized animal characters who think and act in a way that pays respect to an established “inner voice,” as well as to their creaturely inclinations – think Rowf and Snitter from *The Plague Dogs*, who viewed the world through their damaged canine lenses. My love of these stories helped me to understand a fundamental crafting element for writing fiction: narrative point of view and perspective. There are plenty of fictions where an animal character’s interpretation of an event, or a concept, makes them sound like a human philosopher in a dog costume who peppers in token mannerisms to keep up the ruse. It becomes impossible for me to suspend my disbelief, and thus the fictional dream or imaginative space of the story is broken; I often abandon the story. Similarly, I have a problem with fictions that use animal harm in a pointless or inconsequential way, reducing them to mere objects broken for the reader’s emotional response. Articles upon

articles of animal abuse can be found in the news any day of the week; my perspective is that fiction should be used to offer some justice or a positive ending for abused/traumatized animals. Not only can fiction help keep one emotionally afloat in a sea of situations outside of our control, it can also develop empathy by offering insight into an animal's thoughts, motivations, and desires, removing the communication barriers that separate us. This is what a creaturely imaginary might offer – to help my readers to see the world anew through my fictions.

I decided to write five short stories, each differing in tone and format, with animal shelters appearing within each story. I am a staunch supporter of adopting over purchasing and felt this would highlight an emotional consideration of animals who end up in shelters. I wrote these fictions for an adult audience due to the language and content, which includes violence and substance abuse. While I intended for my fictions to be emotionally cutting, I remained conscious of how I was treating negative situations with these animal characters. Using domestic violence in my fiction “Distance,” for example, I made a point to end with the abused given some form of justice; while the result was not the most balanced or positive for Arthur and Chris, it did permanently remove a source of trauma from their world. In “Speed Dial,” a story that included forced substance use, I wanted to offer a vision of an optimistic future for an animal breed – the greyhound – that has been historically abused and exploited. Many creaturely stories I’ve read in the past tend to seal animals to their human-imparted fate, and I wanted my fictions to stand in opposition.

Among the many fictions that inspired me to pursue this project’s theme were recommendations by my primary advisor, Dr. Arroyo, which helped shape ideas for

content and structure for this project. Several notable titles were: *King, A Street Story* by John Berger, *Facing the Music* by Larry Brown, *Unnatural Habitats & Other Stories* by Angela Mitchell, *The Plague Dogs* by Richard Adams, *WE3* by Grant Morrison, and *Pride of Baghdad* by Brian K. Vaughan. Although several potential resources turned into examples of what *not* to do with my project, these resources served to justify my motivation to write creaturely fictions that recognized not only the animals' character, but their limitations as well. I did not want to drape a dog-shaped costume on a learned, worldly philosopher and poet; the animals in my fictions are flawed and traumatized unreliable narrators living in a world largely outside of their ability to comprehend. They have their own wants, needs, and lenses of viewing the world that pay homage to their personal experiences, such as Luna's background in campy comic books, William's government-funded conditioning, and the nameless shelter cat's long life of opulence. Likewise, their narration relies on their non-human strengths of sensory perceptions, such as their nuanced and detailed olfactory process rather than their vision's limited color range. In the end, I simply wanted these animals to be who they are: animals.

As a musician and lifetime player of video games, I have always been fascinated with the refined success of well-integrated music adding a level of immersion to the game's narrative. While almost any sort of musical accompaniment can increase levels of playability in a game, crafting the music to be supplemental in elevating – and sometimes directing – a narrative's emotional content, pacing, direction, and intent can be an incredibly difficult process. Some of my all-time favorite games are heavily or completely text-based, which leave an increased level of control to the player's imagination. Likewise, many of my favorite video game soundtracks use what is known

as *adaptive music* with their compositions, which reacts to a user's input within the game by fading between or building upon tracks of music. I felt that composing with adaptive music in mind, rather than composing set and linear songs, would bring my readers' attention closer to the emotional content of my writing while positively manipulating the overall length of the narrative, the story's intrigue and plot, and the resonation of empathy.

Each song I composed can be heard as a complete and intricate product – some parts almost clashing with the differences of mood and rhythm. When pulled apart, however, they become individual layers able to be combined to great narrative effect. The intended form/genre of the music I had in mind was ambient environmental soundscapes, sans vocals. Whenever listening to music while reading or writing, I noticed myself unconsciously locking into the lyrics and would inadvertently become distracted. Others I have spoken to over the years agree that too many musical elements can make multitasking difficult, which is why I opted to make the layers of music for this project more subdued in timbre, tempo, and activity. Aside from keeping the attention of the reader, I felt that these considerations would also help increase the emotional delivery of a fictional narrative.

While *Sheltered Home: Creaturely Stories* can be read in physical form as dark text on a white paper page, the ideal environment for readers experiencing these stories in their digital form would be anywhere they would feel comfortable reading while wearing a set of comfortable headphones. Individual/groups of tracks softly change at the start of nearly every passage in a manner that I felt was most appropriate for the emotional mood and setting. Readers can feel free to investigate each fiction at their own pace and even

linger on individual passages to take in the endlessly looping music; the audio only reacts when the reader requests to “turn” the page. I hope that this project provides readers with a new opportunity to experience written stories as well as encourages other authors and musicians alike to pursue multi-sensory projects in a digital age.

ADAPTIVE MUSIC FOR FICTION

The method of composing adaptive music that I used for this project is known as *vertical layering*. Rather than using other methods, such as horizontal layering, I felt that vertical layering would better support longer looped tracks (between two and a half and four minutes long each) and smoother transitions between layers. Vertical layering turned out to be the correct choice for the digital programming as well; I was unable to approach the programming using the originally intended adaptive audio middleware Wwise or FMOD, nor was I able to design an eBook environment using the Unity video game engine. I chose Twine 2, a platform normally used for the text-based video game genre of Interactive Fiction, because I had prior experience using it after taking Dr. Detweiler’s Video Games and/as Literature course. Twine allowed me to program the music in such a way that there was no delay between the individual tracks assigned to each fiction, effectively emulating the vertically layered effect as I originally intended with my project’s proposal. Despite the shortcomings and limitations both of Twine and my own knowledge of HTML programming, I feel that the result of my project is a successful proof of concept.

My approach to this project was effectively an about-face from where my dense, oppressive, and speedy musical ideas have been lately; I revisited individual songs and

albums that disconnected me from my usual compositional inclinations. My critical “reset” listening included several lo-fi “Chillhop” stations on YouTube (Chillhop Music, Lofi Girl) and ambient instrumental albums (most notably Brian Eno’s *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, Geinoh Yamashirogumi’s *Akira* soundtrack, and Ben Houge’s work on *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*). References were selected due to their qualities of being mostly unobtrusive from a compositional and timbral standpoint.

The music was mostly composed in MIDI using virtual instruments and effects; the environmental ambient tracks were obtained from royalty-free sound libraries (Soundjay.com and Freesound.org) and through my own field recording using a Zoom H4N handheld recorder. Virtual Studio Technology (VST) instruments and effects were selected from the Native Instruments Komplete 11 Ultimate collection, free Klangerhelm and FrozenPlain VSTs, and the stock Cockos plugins in my digital audio workstation Reaper.



Fig. 1 – A screenshot of my Digital Audio Workstation (Reaper) mix session and MIDI melodies for the song “Ear Fuzz” using an assortment of Native Instruments and Cockos plugins.

“Ear Fuzz” is the title of the music I wrote for my fiction “The Obsidian Tail,” about the courageous feral cat Luna who has grown up around stories of heroic comic book characters. As seen in Fig. 1, the different colors of the tracks represent the five separate layers of music that are used for the story: a happy/introspective melodic layer of synthesized keyboards split between lush chords and arpeggiated sequences (Big Chords and Arp), a foreboding layer of *bitcrushed* horns (Tone Texture Group), a dreamlike and dismal synthesizer drenched in *reverb* (Spooky Synth), and, finally, a layer of wind blowing through trees to establish the environmental setting when appropriate (Rendered Wind). I used these five layers individually and in groups in the completed digital version of “The Obsidian Tail.” Additional attention was paid to effects such as reverb (as

mentioned earlier), delay, pan automation, equalizing, bit reduction, and volume between passages. These effects not only make the layers more “musical” in terms of variation and motion, they also act as a soft cushion for the listener’s attention to fall into rather than a leash to drag it along.

To limit distraction for the listener/reader, I minimized the frequency range of individual tracks; excessively low or high frequencies tend to demand attention. Likewise, I felt that a noticeable rhythm was acceptable in certain instances but there was no need to include the thump or snap of percussion to take attention away from the reader’s focus and imagination. Each composed song was between two and four minutes long so readers could continue through several passages before the music would loop, making the end/beginning of the tracks to be less obvious. The near-seamless nature of the music was critical in keeping the fragile and sometimes fickle nature of readers’ engagement intact. Most of the VST instruments are synthesizer patches due to their depth of color and intentionally soft timbre; each track was sent through bitcrusher and reverb plugins to “warm” the sound and fill more sonic space. The environmental tracks used to frame the setting were also run through effect plugins to make them more subdued, almost as background noise.

I chose Twine 2 to “tie” the music and fictions together. Twine 2 publishes projects to HTML, which means that, theoretically, this project should successfully run on platforms able to use an Internet browser. I decided on SugarCube 2.34 as the story format due to its ability to easily handle the integration of audio with simple coding conventions. Since this program was not intended to be able to support the robust middleware enabling the use of adaptive music, I made do with creative use of volume

with individual tracks. When a fiction is selected in the menu, every track composed for that story is loaded and set to endlessly loop. The “active” tracks are loaded to 100% volume (with some variation) while the “inactive” tracks are set at 1% volume. This is due to a coding limitation – either due to my lack of knowledge or SugarCube’s shortcoming – where a muted track is considered “stopped” and will play from its starting point once activated again, rather than continue playing simultaneously with the other actively looping tracks. It was a primitive solution, but the 100% vs 1% fix allowed the music to move in layers and change at any part of the story I chose.

Being in a digital format, I also decided to fragment the fictions into shorter passages in Twine 2 rather than present them as full pages; many passages had multiple paragraphs of text while may have only contained a line or two of dialogue. This had an unexpected but pleasantly interesting effect on the fictions, where one could read the passages almost as micro vignettes existing within the story’s overall narrative. This brought additional considerations to where and how the music reacted, allowing me finer control over the feel of the adaptive audio and the more minute narrative details.

CONCLUSION

At points, this project has felt like a great idea, a pipe dream, an effort in futility—but I was able to prove that my idea could be realized. I have learned how necessary the revision process is with my writing; I tend to write lengthy and distant first drafts for my short stories that usually only come into present sharpness after several rounds of revision. Within these rounds I discover more about the characters and their motivations, the conflicts, the filled space, the blank space, and what becomes most

necessary for the story's message to be fully realized. It has taught me to be patient with being able to recognize when I *want* a project to be finished and when a project *tells me* that it is finished. As a musician, I was forced out of my comfort zone of stock approaches to composing and into a realm of untethered freedom. This freedom introduced brand new ideas and considerations that I will implement with further work while also teaching me new audio creation methods that I will refine for the rest of my life.

The experience of writing *Sheltered Home: Creaturely Stories* and composing music to support and elevate it has granted me a unique perspective for my future creative endeavors that I would not have had outside of this project. I've learned how limiting it can be to write or compose with one set of senses in mind and the vast number of elements that change when planning/executing a multi-sensory effort. It took me until the week of writing this particular section of my project for me to look back at the weeks spent without "producing" much content and realize that every little detail and choice adds up. Any corner cut or minor consideration ignored could have easily put me into a corner with this project, where the end result would have been simply an undergrad student's rehashing of a previously failed multi-sensory reading model. Every careful decision I made is reflected in the success of this project.

Looking to the future, I will continue guiding the momentum of this project toward implementing industry standard video game engines and interactive audio systems in order to be supported by current-gen technology. While it should go unsaid that I will continue using this multi-sensory platform when crafting new fictions, an ancillary motivation living in the back of my mind since the beginning stages of this project has

been the desire to offer this platform to other writers and composers still looking for a medium that better suits their creative needs. I am eager to look back on the deadline-stacked days of my undergraduate career with the knowledge that this project was only the beginning.

Sheltered Home: Creaturely Stories

I: "Distance"

I see myself on the floor, but don't feel the belt. Maybe I do – something's there – it's a dull reverberance, like it's happening in the next room.

Now, there's another one of those words that my past brother would use when he said he was studying. I think I'm using it in the right way. It's something you feel, right? Something that tickles the pads of your toes, or makes your fur stand on end? I think that's what it means. I'd feel it when his mom would make the house thunder with her music – the thump would make my insides do flips. They used to repeat sentences out loud together to help him remember lessons from school. What did he say for reverberance? Something like, "The reverberance of his screams were felt by everyone in the room." Did it mean that his voice was able to reach out and touch the others in the room? Was it more than that?

Right, sorry – I'm being beaten.

My coat looks like hell from this angle, more a dingy and sticky brown than the fluffy yellow it would be after a bath – like a well-used shag bathmat. I don't know how many times I've been in this position, curled in a ball like how some humans would watch their teevee. More discarded refuse shifting with the pivot of the swing. Look, there goes a soda can and some newspaper twisting beneath his shoes as he pivots again. I guess I made the dark spot between the crushed donut box and crumpled newspaper sheets – did I even make things worse? I can't look at him – I can't bear to see what's in his eyes. He knows that I need to go outside, or I feel like I'm going to burst. I would let myself out if I could work the door the right way. I never learned how. I didn't mean it, I promise.

Things are going fuzzy again. I wish Chris was here.

Arthur focused on the crack that spread across the ceiling as his eyes returned to his head. The thump extended far behind his skull, like a second heart beating somewhere in the dark recesses of his secret hiding spot. He could see the throb in his peripheral vision, squeezing in. Light peeked through the dingy living room window. Blinding. A golden hue and long shadows gave the potato chip bags and dirty socks scattered across the floor a more dramatic frame than usual. It was awful: the brightness, the trash, his head – everything. Standing was a no-go. His front legs wobbled, and his foot pads rolled on the nearly threadbare carpet. Sea legs on land. Upright.

Reverberance.

His mouth burned. It tasted like the salty coins he found on the shelter windowsill when he was a pup. Another horrible experience. He felt the drool matting his chin and neck, sticky and soaked through his fur, beginning to harden. Beneath him was damp – the mess wasn't under the donut box after all.

He waited for his vision to settle, nose bubbling, clogged to capacity, culminating in a painful and satisfying expulsion of viscous goop. The pervasive odor of artificial fruit smoke filled his aching, slightly clearer nostrils, in what felt like his sinuses being punched right in the soft patch. Arthur gagged. The smell clung to the walls with such potency that Arthur feared his insides smelled the same. It would take him hours to clean the stink from his fur without help. Arthur was thankful for his brother Chris, who kept

up with giving Arthur a bath at least once a week if there was anything lingering. Especially if it let Chris avoid history homework.

Fidgeting around the corner in his designated seat at the table was Don the tyrant, a monolithic sort of man in the sense that he appeared from Arthur's perspective as a looming block of pale pink stone comprised entirely of shoulders, torso, and shaven scalp. Arthur knew the crackling and bubbling in the other room came from a little sliver of hot coal that atop a percolating hu-ka lamp. It was Don's newfound penchant when Chris was out of the house, and—

Hang on – Chris. Chris has no idea he's coming home to danger.

Arthur's heart plummeted into his guts. He didn't want to rouse Don's attention, so he gently stepped back one foot at a time in retreat toward the stairs. He was betrayed by a crumpling can of beer as it was dented underfoot, which sent a surprised jolt through his leg and a yip from his mouth. His legs locked.

Fuck you doing in there, bitch?

No sound of the chair moving. Wisps of sickly-sweet vapor slithered from around the corner, transporting the hateful words up to the yellowed ceiling. Arthur wondered if Don's speech covered the whole house, burrowing in the cracks and cabinets like those delicious silverfish. The clink of glass on glass came from Don's little bottles, filled with something that would make men sway. Arthur knew their appearance – they heralded his worst days.

Chris, though, he was already late and wouldn't know about the bottles. Arthur bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from whining, crafting a plan to warn Chris while staying out of sight. He crept up the stairs and ducked into the bedroom on the right,

curling atop the small pile of dirty clothes in the corner. It was his favorite spot in Chris's room, a gently fermenting olfactory blend of antiperspirant and skin oil. Comfortable and familiar. The room was small, but it was all theirs: refuge during particularly bad days, a space where Chris could tell vibrant stories from his favorite books and video games while Arthur was powerless to do little else but fall in love with the idea of better things, better places. Together, safe.

As if watching a bouncing ball lose its spring, Arthur's eyes fluttered.

Arthur didn't mean to fall asleep, truly. He didn't trust dreams. He wanted to rest his eyes for a moment, certain he would hear the jingle of the keys in the front door and be down the stairs in a flash. Instead he was laying on soft grass, somewhere totally unfamiliar, surrounded by the scent of warm bark. Some movement to his right – a large butterfly, lazily flapping with no clear destination. Birds singing in the branches. Between trees he saw Chris, smiling and waving in a wide arch. Left and right, whoosh, whoosh. The crooked toothy grin in the middle of his tan face. Whoosh, taking over the breeze, bending Arthur and the tall weeds into a deep bow while rocking him out of his root. Whoosh, into a gale. Songs in the branches turn to scream of terror. The trees are too busy groaning and cracking against the oppressive wind, falling to crush everything down to the smallest blade of grass.

Wait. No.

Not birds or trees – downstairs, Chris and Don fighting. The dream imploded, snapping Arthur back in the pitch-dark bedroom. His thoughts raced, neck and neck with his heartbeat. Chris was on his own now. Arthur shoved his head in the pile beneath him,

the different textures of shirts and underwear renewing the tenderness of his aching face. He strained to understand the severity of the words one floor below. Something shattered once, and again on the other side of the room. More yelling, one side hysterical. Thunder up the stairs, two stairs at a time – Chris’s frustrated gait – with no stomps behind them. Arthur heard the boy burst into the room and plunge himself onto the bed, spinning around in the stale and itchy bedsheets – his own fabric chrysalis. There was no indication that he even noticed Arthur, unmoving and partially buried. The bed springs gently squeaked against the heave of sobs.

With a wrench in his belly, Arthur quietly excavated himself and crept to the side of the bed. His nose probed the quivering mass of fabric, careful not to poke too hard. Tear-saturated eyes revealed themselves from beneath the bedsheet, miserable and helpless. Arthur could just reach the salty streaks on Chris’s chin with his tongue - the faintest of smiles broke through, enough to coax Chris out from under the covers and upright. The pair examined Don’s cruelty in the mirror that leaned haphazardly against the wall – a streak of darkening welts crisscrossing thighs and lower back, oval-shaped imprints on the wrists. Chris turned to face Arthur, wiping away at his swollen cheeks.

Arthur, I can’t fucking take this anymore, Chris said under his breath. I don’t care if Momma don’t want us neither.

Chris scooped up his scuffed backpack and shook the contents out. Crumpled papers and pens weighed down by two hefty textbooks hit the carpet with a dull thud. He scrambled around the room collecting everything necessary for their escape: two shirts, the cellphone charger, the birthday money hidden in the back of his drawer, a half-eaten bag of nacho flavored chips they had been sharing from a few days ago, and oh my God

it's going to happening just like before – suitcases filled in a flurry, screaming from several rooms at once, my past brother in the hallway crying into his baseball mitt, all herded into the car, and just before Arthur was able to process any of it he's dragged out by his little clip-on collar and left in the middle of an asphalt field with white lines on the ground and the dust and the broken glass and nobody else.

Right now, Arthur. We're getting' out – fuck! Fuck all this bullshit and –

An explosion behind them – the door burst inward throwing splinters and the knob halfway across the room. Don stepped inside with the panache of a man who relished tearing down barriers between himself and his prey. Arthur's whole body was paralyzed in ice, groaning with ache, squished flat like a pancake into the dusty crumbs on the floor. He looked to his left at Chris and saw him encased in stone with his mouth agape and hands open, a kid-sized fountain statue. Arthur's eyes moved back to Don, tracing a line from the choleric rage in his expression down to the engorged veins in his arms, finishing at the thin strip of ugly, beaten leather dangling by his side. Belt.

He felt his eyes being pulling away from his head as his body broke though the deep freeze.

I didn't tell my legs to go, but I see myself launch forward, right into Don. I don't feel the impact of my head and his chest – it's a quick burst of bright light sprinkling into static as I'm slipping down the stairs with the hacking and gasping of Don behind me. I blitz right through the obstacle course downstairs, my legs moving wildly through boxes and against the couch and over cans and against the big table with the bad smelling thing

and into the door, scratching, howling. Sounds of rushing behind me and there's Chris, backpack and shoes on, running with his mouth open and – I imagine – the fear tearing through his whole body. He steps over me, fumbling with the door, and I peek out from between his legs expecting to see tree trunks attached to anger incarnate rampaging through the living room filling with a dramatic mist.

Only thin curls of air wrap around the corner as Chris solves the puzzle separating us from the crisp darkness outside. A single step on the patio and the peal of a siren cuts through the quiet, the house now informing the world of our escape. We hop down the gritty brick stairs that Chris and I used for so many warm summer nights to watch the impossibly distant stars. I follow as Chris weaves between the parked cars and crosses the empty street that I am never allowed to cross, a street with white lines and dust and broken glass, contemplating the significance as we pause behind a particularly large square van. Previously dark windows of nearby houses blink on. Don is miles away, screaming for help, for anybody. Was this my fault? Dark clouds vomit from the front door as bright, sharp tongues of fire jet in, out, and Chris is staring as if he's facing the unthinkable and I didn't mean to do it, I promise, I don't want to be left behind again, please don't leave me alone, please–

I love you Arthur. It's up to us now.

Arthur shivered as his swirling inner monologue was shattered by Chris's voice. The pair took to the sidewalk, limping a bit – aiming away from the flow of squealing sirens that flashed colors across the faces of each house they'd pass, away from the yellowed, cracked, silverfish-and-animosity-ridden walls crackling like coal.

He thought about what Chris had said. He let the phrase reverberate in his mind as it evoked the fantastic places from Chris's stories. They poured in with vibrant colors: lush foliage butted against whitecapped rivers, vast mountain ranges demanding reverent silence, the infinite possibilities of unknown outer space. Where would they visit first?

It's up to us now.

II: “Speed Dial”

My breath is short and sharp, and with every exhale a tiny puff of brown dust is kicked up from the corner of my thin cell. The scents of fresh cut grass and packed dirt hug my nose. Gruff chants, thumps against metal risers rattle the hinges. Once the door opens, none of it matters.

I close my eyes tight and focus on the space between my breaths. No distractions. In once, and out. Again.

Again. Again.

Again again again again again –

Hold last breath as the vest squeezes my torso. My limbs are taut, ready to snap into action. Lightning streaks through them.

I can feel saliva roll past my lips and drip silently on the ground. There’s a pound in my body, a swinging mallet that beats a pulse from my chest all the way back to my asshole.

This is what I am. My teeth ache.

Thump. All through me.

Click.

Doors open to a deafening roar – millions of human voices. I rip-rip into the loose earth, aiming forward and colliding with others as we catch our bearings.

Eyes on the prize.

For a brief second, I steal a look at one to my left – a frenzied snarl on legs with its gaze front and center. On my right, froth trailing behind light and dark vests, mainsails billowing atop a sea of crashing limbs.

We are all the same here, lightning running through our veins as the walls erupt around us. Gods with tails, Cain says. We are here to destroy ourselves, to do whatever it takes to win. He tells us so, and we obey.

Whatever it takes.

I dig in, moving faster than I have before, capsizing the other vessels in my wake. The rabbit is right in front of me, close enough to take in the lingering scents of previous victors. Inch by inch, at the speed of light. All mine.

Thump. All through me.

With a crash, it's all gone – the arena, the dirt, the froth, the bunny, and the glory – fading into nothing. The pulse-pulse-pulse softens in my mouth; the lightning in my chest is gone too. I look from left to right, eyes adjusting. White walls lit by a teevee with no sound. Plants on table, couch, soft pillows under me. No fence, or chain, or strap, or leash, or muzzle, or lock. It's just me on the floor with burnt lungs and a collar squeezing my throbbing neck back.

I don't like the quiet when he's home. Where is the noise coming from upstairs letting me know he heard? No lights flicking on from room to room. No feet running down the hall, past the hamper that reeks of outside and sweat. No screaming that rings into my toes. He hasn't screamed, not yet. What stops him? The ones before him would scream, all of them. They demand perfect, perfect. They tell me I'm no good.

No.

No more. Together, Dot. Keep it together for the others. For yourself. Tighten up shut and calm. This is the best home has ever been. Don't ruin it, even if he screams. It's all been taken away for less.

Thump.

Hey, Arnie! Hey man, this is Trev! What's –

No, no, it's okay man, I'm on my girl's phone! I've been dealing with some shit on my end too. Totally fine. So, I just picked up Armageddon Dottie here, and man, I don't know what I was thinking with this dog. She's like a fucking –

No, seriously man, that's her name. Dude, they're all named some wacky shit like that. You should've met the owner; the fucking guy was out of his mind. Calls himself Daddy Cain, answers the door in a bathrobe that had a .45 hanging out of the pocket. Can you believe that shit? And all his dogs have some weird Bible shit with names. Like, he was trying to sell me on another one he called Locust Wings.

No, it's –

Dude that's what I said! He told me that she's his favorite, that she crushes the others in training. Fucking tearing up and everything while he was telling me. Can you believe that shit? Fucking dopes his dogs and then doesn't think he's gonna get caught?

Hah, right! Dude, everyone down here is on it. My man wouldn't stop scratching the whole time. But fuck that guy, let's talk about this dog! Thing seems to be in good shape from what I can tell here – no limping, fur looks good. Dude said it has its rabies shots and all that, but who knows what kind of bullshit he's spinning. Gotta be honest, though, I think it was a steal at five hundred.

Yeah, man, anyway, the dog has just been freaking the fuck out from the moment I started driving. You think it's withdrawal? Man, I –

Hey, shut the fuck up back there!

Sorry – fucking, dog. I think I might still have some Gabapentin in here to

–

Right, no, you're right. So, I'll be there...phone is telling me two and a half hours, but that's bullshit. I'll be there in an hour forty-five – pick me up some Miller. Later!

With every blink, outside gets brighter. Chirps and motors. Music passing by.

Busy. Good.

I hear the chime and stirring upstairs, slowly moving from bed to shower to brush to clothes to hallway. Squeaky creaks on the stairs. My eyes have been open so long they might squeaky-creak the same way when they close up shut.

I am front and center when he rounds the corner of the stairwell, his first smile of the day. No scowl, good mood. Perfect. Hair to one side. Pointed collar. Button – one, two, three, four, five. Hands open, no fists. Strap with lock on hips. Legs in rough fabric. Socks at the bottom, the ones he leaves near the couch and soft pillows.

I like the pillows; too soft for me to say no, much better than sleep the carpet. They must smell like me by now, I think.

Ring, ring in his pocket.

My dread is too fast, it washes over me and drags my tongue with it. Don't move an inch, Dot. Eyes on the wall – one of the only lessons that stuck. Listen for words of leaving.

No “fucking finished.” No “broken.” No “neurotic.” No “too much.” No “mistake.” A good start. One mention of “changes,” I've heard that before. I dare to peek at his eyes. Phone down, he looks at me and smiles. Wide, with teeth, ridges near the sides of his eyes instead of down the middle between them. Happy. He pours out some kibble and sits next to me with his plate of eggs and sausage. We eat in silence. I keep my eye on him the whole time, even when he slowly lowers his last meaty bite into my bowl. This feels okay.

We go outside – the cold air hurts my nose. Dry stabs – makes me think of my teeth, the stabs meant fast. And hot! It's hard to get used to this cold. Cold doesn't makes me feel fast.

We pass another human with their dog, thin and lanky with floppy ears. They make me think of Cloud and Wing back home, each of us in our kennels or in the

backyard. They were taken before me, by different people – it hurts to think. My outside and inside hurts now. I'd like to go, please.

We round the tall corner shrub, hook past the plastic box that says 191 – R-E-E-D-E-R on the side. The door opens and I'm back inside. The warm carpet makes my feet tickle.

He says a few things I don't hear before he leaves. Door, car, gone. My eyes stay on the big window, where I can see branches of the tree in the front yard. No big palmy trees here, not like back home. No leaves at all. Just tall brown pointy pokes that scratch and scrape with the breeze. TIC-TIC-SKREEEE-TIC-TIC. Poking into my head, it feels like. Not today though. Good.

Sleep brings me back to an older house. Not mine, someone I forgot. I scratch against the door and whine. It opens – the floor is dirt again, stretching far into the distance. Eternity in front of me. One paw in, one paw out. Both paws in and...click! I rocket forward with a furnace in my chest, pumping the taste of iron and ash onto my tongue. I don't feel the earth move beneath me – I am above it all, moving at the speed of light.

A comet. Fire from space.

The rabbit is fast, very fast. I am faster – I must be. It shoots into the air, mocking, cheating – no matter, I am airborne as well, snorting fire as I chomp-chomp in its wake. So close. Push push push into it, push with my mouth open, spewing hell. There – I feel it! I feel it! Bite down, a crisp crunch, it's mine!

*I bonk my head against something invisible, stumble as the open air feels soft.
Carpet.*

Home.

There's a sparkly spider's web in the middle of the big window. The floor is covered in dirt and broken pieces of mosaic – his favorite dish that held his favorite plant.

My jaw drops. A soggy bundle of green falls out.

As panic crept in, I remembered movies with Cain. He always watched disaster movies when we were young. All of them. Obsessed. I remember a common thing for humans to say in a situation like this – a disaster, like in the movies – was “Oh, fuck.”

Oh, fuck.

Kevin, baby, you need to get your ass over here and pick up this damn dog, right now! It's been–

No, I don't care how long! It doesn't listen, just howls and runs away when I try to come near it! Broke a stack of Nana's plates running around like a maniac – how can I get any work done if can't leave the damn dog alone for two seconds without it wrecking the house?

Baby, how in the hell am I supposed to do that? Matter fact, I'm about to let this thing outside and have God handle it. There's no–

I said I don't care what kind of a 'deal' you got on it – I told you, I.

DON'T. HAVE. TIME. FOR. THIS. Full stop! This was a mistake, Kevin,

and you need to get home and take care of your business or I'll put you on the curb too!

Oh, of course, it's always Mr. Ternary's fault you can't leave early!

Convenient, every time I need your help – you both can kiss my ass!

No scream. Or beat. Or push. No words of leaving.

Opened door, dropped keys, sunk to his knees to ask me if I was okay. I've been frozen to this very spot, muscles aching terribly, trying to push my forehead into the carpet littered with my misdeeds. I have no answers. I certainly can't look at him.

I let him wipe away the track, the dirt, from my paws and coat. I can feel his eyes on me as he steps over and around my bunched-up form. I don't understand. Please don't make me wait. I know it's coming.

He makes me wait through his shower. Through vacuuming the floor and putting a sheet over the big window. Through dinner, where I eat only what my clenched guts allow. Through brushing his teeth, telling me good night and he loves me, and heading upstairs to his room. I suppose I'll have to keep waiting until tomorrow. I don't understand. If the plant was his favorite, why wouldn't he care for it first?

I can't see the brown tree, but I can hear the pointies softly TIC TIC TICing away on the glass. The room is different – less shapes in it for the teevee to light up. Quiet. Sleepy.

I am too tired for the race tonight.

The white walls were here from the start, the carpet and couch too. Not the pillows – they came later. His shoes by the front door. The umbrella he takes when it rains. The little table where his keys and wallet live, where he sometimes puts his phone down to listen to other people speak – the first conversation I heard after calling this my new home.

Hi Mr. Reeder, this is Amy calling you back from Backyard Heroes Animal Shelter. I just wanted to let you know that your foster-to-adopt application for Dot has been approved! We have just a bit more paperwork for you to sign in the office and after that she's all yours. Give us a call back when it's convenient for you and have a great day!

III: “The Obsidian Tail”

Issue # 732 – An Unstoppable Enemy?

Midnight-black fur blending in with the familiar woods under the cover of darkness, The Obsidian Tail scrambled over broken branches and under felled trunks. She dodged all manner of obstacles in her daring escape from a new infernal enemy. Her hind leg throbbed, warm and wet.

What manner of evil was this? No clearly defined monsters, ghosts, ghouls, or otherwise – no capes or robot legs either. Only a group of young humans at the edge of the woods earlier, but they were so far away. What harm could they have done? Racing through the foliage, The Obsidian Tail tried desperately to imagine what could have been missed and came up with no answer. None that made sense, anyway.

Ow – I know a hero should never run from danger, but Mom would insist I get to safety. I am in trouble...

She ran so hard her heart pounded against her ribcage like a prizefighter beating a heavy bag, On the edge of the woods, The Obsidian Tail found a bald and rotted Goodyear tire half submerged in cakey mud. She climbed inside and allowed herself to catch her breath, swiveling her head to watch the woods behind her. Satisfied, she allowed herself to slink into a crouch beneath the overhanging lip of rubber. Her leg pushed past intense pain into numbness. She was afraid to look down, fearing the damage – but who was she, The Obsidian Tail or The Obsidian Tail-Between-Her-Legs?

She peeked down and involuntarily whimpered. It was a deep wound, pooling dark and sticky even in the brief time of her pause. The droplets traced a line over the ridge of the tire and far back into the woods.

What's is that – and that smell? Oh, no, it must be – Th- The Copper Trail! It will lead the evil directly to me. I can't stop – I must keep moving!

She leapt out of her hiding space, the pain more present than before. It felt as though she was being held down by manacles. She needed help.

In a time of great emergency, like this, Mom instructed her to seek out a human very carefully for aid. The best thing would be to search for evidence of empathy for cat-kind, like empty containers of food nearby. Experience had developed a caveat in this regard. While she learned to generally trust the humans who left food for her small colony-family, as she could maintain a comfortable distance from them, sometimes they would leave behind metal boxes smelling of the finest meals, invariably leading to the disappearance of another of her kind when the boxes were taken away. Snap, clap, that's a wrap. Just like Mom. No, The Obsidian Tail would never be tricked like that, even if they would give her aid. She would seek help on her own terms.

She ran as fast as she could limp until she found a place to rest near some houses and tucked herself in the darkness beneath a shrub. All quiet. *You must be careful, little one*, Mom used to say. *I have felt both love and pain from humans, and it can be tough to know what is behind their eyes when they approach. Trust your senses and you will live to fight another day.*

Luna, The Obsidian Tail's alter-ego, grew up with many stories of Mom's past life spent indoors with her human family, especially the young boy Arin and his fondness

of reading his collection of comics aloud, including the “Smack!”, “Pow!”, and “Ka-blash!” parts. Mom enjoyed these memories and retold them well.

The wafting smell of oily food snapped The Obsidian Tail back in her fur. Her olfactory reconnaissance revealed a smell coming from a torn white bag leaning against the house. She knew the pain in her leg wouldn't allow her to jump in and investigate – dash it all! – but knowing food was potentially close allowed her to look for the most logical outpost for safety. Her own Zone of Justice, or at least the closest thing to it. She passed on hiding near the large vehicle as it might prove to be too dangerous, so she decided on an empty space beneath some nearby bushes. She would be able to blend in before the dawn and figure out her plan from there. Her leg felt like it belonged to another cat.

Issue # 734 – Den of Snakes!

The great Obsidian Tail made her way through a dense patch of thin, leafy trees, slower than ever before. She noticed a repugnant odor following her – henchmen of The Copper Trail no doubt. Could it be an invisible adversary? Some sort of tracking device? While she pondered, she bent over to lick the matted brown and dark mass that sat above the ridged depression in her leg and nearly retched – the smell was repugnant, a mixture of rancid meat and sickly-sweet green puddles she would sometimes find in the road. The damage was severe. She had no backup, no sky-signal or communication crystals. Help may have to come from a creative or unlikely source.

Or did it? Her exceptionally sensitive nose picked up something familiar – the smell of other cats. Maybe they were like her old family, living in the woods and

protecting one another? She pressed on, closely following the scent's trail. She began to find small leaf piles covering waste and the rough outside of trees stained with territory markers. *Even this area is marked for safety*, she thought, swelling with hope. *If these cats are kind, perhaps I might take shelter here. It is a good plan.* The path ahead was crowned with a pile of old tires. A spire of refuse that punctuated the declaration of defense. Here be dragons, and such. She wasn't but a few feet from the hill base when screams filled the air.

Intruder – away! Away!

Many streamed in from behind the spire while others came from further out in the woods, slinking their way into view with low, long strides. Their eyes held neither benevolence nor sympathy. At the spire's highest peak, a tough, striped cat in tatters from a lifetime of violence made itself known with its deep and throaty grunts. The screams from the periphery died out when it spoke.

Death awaits for you, intruder. Death to the weak. Many of us, one of you. Our land, not yours.

The Obsidian Tail's heart raced. Her eagerness had failed her, and instead of apathy she accidentally stumbled upon outright hostility! With the courage she had left, she puffed up her chest and raised her chin up high.

P-pardon my intrusion, good folk! I am c-called The Obsidian Tail, and I've been gravely injured. I am no v-v-villain, nor a threat to you. All I need is –

Atop the spire, the tattered cat croaked its interruption. *Ask nothing, unless ask for death! Our land! Piss on you, intruder!* Its statements were met with roars from the surrounding ferals.

The Obsidian Tail tried to cut through the ear-piercing din with desperation. *P-please! I am no family of yours, but are we not stronger together? I have nothing left, I'll – I'll be no burden. Please allow me shelter, or I'll be doomed. I'll die!*

The spire cat jumped down to descend the hill, stopping mere feet away. At this distance its deformities were more pronounced: a severed left ear, torn lip, dead eye, cuts crisscrossing the torso...it was a walking warzone. Like Dark Abrogator, but in real life.

No family here. Stay or leave, no difference. The cat made a sweeping motion with its paw. *Death surrounds you!* The cats of the woods threw their heads back and erupted in a caterwauling symphony of territorial intimidation, a sea of undulating devils. Even the voice of Mom, usually filling The Obsidian Tail's ears with comfort and guidance, was absent. She dragged herself away from the pitchy jeers and threats that rung long after the spire was out of sight.

Slogging through mud and filth, she saw the edge of the woods at last meet a flat circular expanse, black, with sharp-peaked human domiciles illuminated from the inside out. Like teeth surrounding a pit ready to swallow her whole. Where else could she go? One paw at a time, she moved herself toward the closest home and its uniform grass. The way the grass flexed under the weight of her paws surprised her with its softness. It may have had something to do with how light she felt, like a cloud or a mote of dust – like Marvelous Mote Girl, resting on a bed of chartreuse blades.

Here, The Obsidian Tail's body decided that enough was enough. She collapsed on her side, hoping to release some tension. She noted the shallowness of her breath and ripples in her vision. Above her was brilliantly spinning sky filled with twinkling stars, like fireflies in the hot summer, moving around and around and around...

Luna narrowed her eyes as she watched the movement at the far end of the woods. They were tall, in a small group and with no difference in markings for her to determine a leader. The other cats kept their distance while watching the humans, making no effort to obtain a closer look. Luna hadn't seen them come this close to their territory before, and she was concerned about the safety of the others and herself. Branches and leaves crackled under heavy footed steps.

Ah, they're back. Mom's voice came from behind Luna, who was startled into a small hop. *Calm, Luna. It seems there are more good ones after all.*

Mom, what's happening? Why are there humans here? Are we in danger? Luna could feel her hair standing on end.

It is possible, said Mom, *sighing, but I think not. Look, they bring food for us. Maybe they are like my old family, Arin and the others. That is our judgement to make.*

But Mom, haven't the humans hurt you before? How can you tell if humans want to hurt us?

With a soft blink, Mom broke her attention away from the humans to face Luna directly. *With your eyes, little one, and your heart. What is seen and what is felt. I have been hurt before, yes, but such was my lesson to learn.* She leaned over and gave Luna's head a soft tongued lick. *"Justness is performed, not promised" is something heroes say and believe in. The greatest embody this idea. If you wish to be a hero, this is something you must embody as well. What you do and what others do means most.*

Luna reflected for a moment. She turned around to watch the humans. They seemed to be just looking at her and the others, moving their heads to get a better look

between the branches. Her nose caught the delightful smell of new food first; she watched as it crept under the nostrils of every cat around, prompting even the most nervous and unsure to slowly make their way around her and Mom.

The humans, apparently satisfied, walked back toward their large vehicle, entered it, and left. Starting with Mom, the cats moved as slowly as they could be while surveying left and right, until they were satisfied that no other predator creature was nearby. Five flat discs lay in a row, filled with a spread of something chopped and delicious. The little horde consumed with caution – bite, pause, look; bite, pause, look; bite, pause, look – until every bite was gone.

Later in the evening, while most of the others continued their post-meal rest, Luna walked over next to Mom, who sat on a felled tree trunk that lay disheveled across the leaf-strewn forest floor. *Why do you think the humans gave us food when we're able to catch meals ourselves? Why do this for us and then leave?*

Mom flicked her ear and blinked deeply before crouching into a more comfortable position. *I cannot presume to know, little one. I once thought I knew them before they assured me that they can be unpredictable. What I know is that there are those who intend to cause harm and others who intend to keep us from it, and it takes a keen eye to detect the difference. The more eyes there are, the better we can stay alive.*

Mom? Could you tell your last family meant you harm? Luna had always been afraid to ask this question. It was one of the last unknown parts of Mom's life story.

Luna, I... no, I did not, said Mom with a softening voice. *I thought that the family I had with Arin and the others was something unrivaled, unparalleled – a perfect fit. I do not know who began these series of events. It started with fighting between the family*

members. Not Arin and I, of course – he and his brothers. There was damage to the home. Violence. His cherished comic book stories were torn to pieces while he wept on the floor.

Mom swallowed to try and dissolve the growing lump in her throat.

*I thought it best to hide, but the tall brother found me. I refused to claw or bite because they had never harmed me before. He took me under his arm as Arin screamed for me, I – I can still hear them, the screams. His sadness. I was put in a vehicle just like the ones we see on the roads and we left. I could see Arin run toward us, trying to catch us with his speed, like *The Human Isopod*. His eyes were hollow, pleading. He disappeared in the dust of our departure.*

Mom leapt up, her mouth turning into a snarl. Some of the other cats who had been lazily eavesdropping flinched, locking their eyes on the storyteller without subtlety. Breathing heavily, too fired up to notice, she continued.

The tall brother yelled. Slammed his hands on the seat and wheel in a rage. He looked at me, and I saw in his eyes what I did not see before. Harm. Pain, to be shared. He was no longer what I thought him to be, and I was afraid it was too late to defend myself. I made myself bigger, I hissed with intent. It was of no use. When he reached for me, I met him with force. Blood and flesh in my mouth. He screamed like Arin, threw me around as the vehicle swung. He grabbed me by my neck with his other hand, removed the glass between us and the fresh outside air, and showed me that I will never be able to fly.

The low hooting of an owl came from far away. Every cat within earshot held rapt attention, wide-eyed and speechless – Luna among them.

Mom...I don't...why do you still –

Why, Mom interjected, looking over the faces of the other cats listening, do I still stand by the goodness of humans? I do it because that is what I was raised to believe, and that is what I experienced after that horrible day. Once on my own, I became half starved to death; I had not learned to scavenge for myself. Danger was all around me. Before finding this family here, I survived on food left out on little discs, just like earlier today. I was allowed shelter beneath parts of their homes. Human kindness helped me survive not only the danger but the loneliness as I travelled from place to place. Make no mistake, I have since seen humans with negative intent in their faces, in their movements. That aside, if I had not trusted myself enough to look for the kindness within them, I would not be here among you today. She turned to look Luna dead in the eyes. And neither would you.

The words fell on Luna like snow from a gently shaken tree, chilling her to the bone. Maro, with his short stub of a tail, shivered. Rena chewed on her claws, trying to focus elsewhere. Luna felt guilty and sad. Small. She mourned what had been taken away from Mom, the parts of her old life she left behind to survive.

Mom and Luna curled up next to one another when they were both tired enough to rest. Though Luna could see the lookouts at their posts, she still felt uncomfortable. *Mom, I'm so sorry. I want you to know that I trust you. Just show me how, and I'll try to trust them too.*

I cannot promise anything other than to do my best, Mom whispered. She was exhausted. Know that I always will be with you, as will my words. See with your eyes, but

trust with your heart. Be the hero. She sniffed. *Speaking of hero, did you come up with your super name to match your super powers?*

Luna grinned. *Mom, I decided I am...The Obsidian Tail! The light in the night and defender of justice!* Mom huffed a tiny laugh.

The Obsidian Tail. Perfect.

Issue # 735 – Out of the Frying Pan, into the Breach

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dark. She was safely on the ground, back at the edge of the woods. Home.

Relief soaked through her limbs. She looked around her, over the plastic storage boxes and tires used as shelter – abandoned, effectively, aside from her own residence. A smile crept over her face, lingering until she thought of the others. She missed them all.

A sound from the far end of the woods – human voices. Six in a cluster, coming from the long road. Tall. Long clothing, different colors. Faces shrouded in shadow. Hands empty, no discs or food. Why did they look so familiar?

Movement on her left, smooth as silk, advancing under the cover of the trees. The Obsidian Tail was unprepared for an interaction this close. She froze into a glacier, holding her breath as the creature crept out of her peripheral view. Front and center, it paused in a spot where the moon shone unbroken on the ground. The Obsidian Tail gasped as she faced her own reflection.

This...this is impossible! I've seen these humans before, and that – that's me! A doppelganger, a fraudling mirrorself! Hey – you! Who do you think you are?

The mirrorself did not react. It lowered its head and continued its walk toward the group of humans at the end of the woods as the scene finally fell into place for The Obsidian Tail.

No...something is wrong here. Where am I? Stuck in the past, or some sort of time loop?

It unfolded as she remembered, and this time she kept her eyes on the humans. Their actions seemed to slow as one human slid something from a pocket, a short, dark, almost square thing – something like the Tele-Nullifier Ray from Mom’s stories? Did this...did this mean that The Copper Trail was unleashed by the humans after all?

Stop – you’re not safe! The Obsidian Tail tried to shout, to run toward her mirrorself to no avail – she was rooted to the spot. *Luna, The Obsidian Tail, Look out!*

She watched helplessly as the humans took aim, chattering excitedly to one another, and initiated the device. She had almost forgotten the sound it made – no “Zap!” No “Sha-plow!” Not even a rising “zoooooOOOOP!” A simple crack easily mistaken for the snapping of a large branch. She saw the force of its impact, unveiling the start of the dastardly Copper Trail and the origin of her injury’s enigma. The humans’ horrible laughter followed her mirrorself shrinking into nothingness in the distance, swirling and eroding, merging into an indiscernible mush.

Her own breathing came into focus. Twitching her whiskers, she felt smooth surfaces very close to her face. A redness increased behind her eyelids; she opened to a disconcerting brightness. This was no longer a past vision or some dream – she was alive. She survived. The air was filled with scents she was unable to separate, a complex, intoxicating blend never experienced before. Urine, excitement, and so much more.

Slowly, she flexed the toes of her front left paw. The surface was cold, informing her that sensitivity was still intact. Her other front paw followed, gently reaching further out to find more cold smoothness. She put weight behind her outstretched legs to prop her front half, moving to place her rear legs but was unable to find footing. And why was her belly so cold and bloated? It wasn't the usual dark fur when she looked, but naked and pale with a dark strip down the middle – a wound of some sort. Adding to this, she still could not feel her hindquarters.

She reached down with her front paw to check – one, fine.

Two – two? – she patted the other side, only feeling the rough edges of tightly wrapped paper. Her hind leg was gone.

Issue # 740 – The Road to Respite

From within her recovery chamber and prison cell, Luna lived under the scrutiny of humans and animals alike. The humans, faces covered, hands smelling of foul chemicals, would poke and prod. They ensured her a soft resting area, food, and changed her cloth covering every day. Since she had not been interrogated after her capture, she suspected that the humans were unaware of her secret identity. It was impossible to tell if the humans worked with any villains or were villains themselves, so she kept her information secret.

It took her some time to learn to stand without wobbling like a newborn, even with the humans' encouragement. Her strength grew, and with it her resolve and determination. While she couldn't begin to understand why her leg was taken away, she knew that she had to be prepared to escape if they came back for the rest of her.

During her recovery, the other animals were more welcoming and encouraging than any of the cats she had ever known – aside from Mom, of course. In this place were fellow cats, dogs who frightened and intrigued her, and several other types unknown to her. Some were permitted free reign to walk around with little to no supervision by the humans, which comforted her. Some animals would sit outside of her cell and chat about themselves, where they had been, who they had met. Luna listened more than she spoke, which didn't seem to bother the others. She must not have been an uncommon inhabitant.

One cat she met was a large fellow with striped fur, tail constantly bobbing and swinging like an excited squirrel. *Yur here t' get betta, yeh? I came sick, dyun' and hungreh. Humans fed, make strongah. What feh ya here?* The cat nodded its head at Luna's wrapped leg stub. *Ya missen som'tn, there. Wher ya lose i'?*

Luna scoffed. *I did not "lose" my leg anywhere. Humans hurt me and then my leg was stolen.*

Eh, said the striped cat. *Yur be okeh. Plenny othes like ya come through. Heal, den picked by family – righ outta here. Yur be findin' a new home soon.*

It didn't take more than a few minutes of conversation for Luna to warm up. Ernest, the revealed identity of the large striped cat, insisted on introducing her to every other cat and dog who would talk to them. Most were very open with their conversation - Luna listened with rapt attention as they detailed stories of their hardships and struggles that led to them here, which she learned was called a shelter.

Each human in the shelter looked a little different when they smiled. Mary's smile was massive, full of soft gums, and always present when she came with morning food. Sue was all chubby cheeks. Rico's grin revealed the space between his two front teeth.

He would toss around a toy mouse, crudely constructed of some fabric and string. There was a whistle in his laugh that Luna couldn't help but associate with some harmless, skittering field rodent; it tickled her.

None of the humans moved quickly. None expressed any negative intent with their actions or their movements. Every day they made her feel better. Attended to. Safe. Every time smiling, gap-toothed Rico threw the little twine-and-tinsel-wrapped fabric mouse, she would run and get it. Again, his smile, again with her mouth full of the fuzzy toy and warmth in her chest, again, until the light clicked in her head and she saw the outline of Mom, who spoke softly.

Now, you see.

The day she was claimed by a human family, she felt great. Hop-running around and even roughhousing with the others a little. Three new humans poked their hands in her cage to rub her head, which she allowed. Their hands smelled like a fading meal, some sort of savory thing with meat that was eaten recently. She risked a small lick to taste the remnants, which was met with a positive response from the humans. They stood holding a small cage of their own, in which she was placed inside. When the door clicked shut, she stretched her paws on soft, clean fabric. Looking out, she saw Ernest from across the room flaunting a warm grin and flicking their tail back and forth.

Doldya, girl. Keep da' brave self.

Luna thought that the inside of human homes would look like the shelter – she was very mistaken. There were slick hard floors, springy soft floors, and steps that went up and down. It smelled clean, like the morning after a night of rain. She wondered if Mom's human family had lived in a place like this.

The house also smelled like another cat. Just one – clean, like the home itself. No waste or markings anywhere, not even any visible territorial identifiers aside from a few chewed and clawed fabric toys. The cat, a tiny grey ball of fuzz, was introduced by the humans as Ashen Queen – Ash, for short. Ash came off as timid but friendly, keeping her head down to sniff the air near Luna’s paws. Ash’s comically large eyes moved over every square inch of the floor.

The humans were content with the interaction and spread to different parts of the home, allowing Ash and Luna to speak freely to one another. Luna learned that Ash had been chosen to be a member of the family only weeks prior, picked from a litter born under another human’s outdoor storage container. The openness put the energy back into Ash, who began to leap and roll around. She explained that the humans were treating her very well – they play, they laugh, the small one named Asa likes to run in the grass outside, they come together as a family and eat and run and jump and chase–

Ash! Luna raised her paw to yield. I get the picture. Everything sounds wonderful here.

Ash complied with Luna’s request. *Oh, I... sorry. I should tell you now, so it doesn’t become confusing. My name isn’t really Ash. I mean... it is, yes, that’s what the humans call me, but also, it’s not my name sometimes.* She looked to the ground and fidgeted her paws. *What I mean is that...well, the big human Dad likes to watch TV with Asa, and their favorite story to watch is about a...spy. Do you know what a spy is? It’s a human who sneaks around gathering clues and making others safe, so when they find the enemy they do big things! Boom – explode!* Ash leapt up into the air, landing almost gracefully. *They save the day! So I, well...I like thinking that one day I’ll save the family,*

or something, so I call myself by my spy name – Officer Greyfur! It's not too confusing, right? Is that okay?

Luna listened in quiet astonishment. She had the faintest wonder if this was part of her earlier dreams from weeks ago, quietly comforting as she expires from her injury on the grass. If such was the case, she determined, then why not finish things with a story of the ages?

Ash...I mean, Officer Greyfur. I understand how you feel. In fact, I have a great story that I think you'll love to hear.

Ash's eyes lit up in excitement. *I love stories! Is it a spy story? Are there explosions? Please tell me!*

It is something like that, Luna said with a rising warmth in her throat.

A long time ago, there was a hero called Mom...

IV: “Opposites”

Purpose.

Like his mother and father. Like his sisters Sylvia and Anne, and his brothers Eliot and Hawthorne. Like the ones before his parents, existing like legends, the ones who he wondered about but never knew. Like his breeders, owners, trainers, who carried their own pedigrees with pride. William was born to be great.

He inherited his mother’s rich chestnut brown and his father’s large dark patches – he wore the colors of a Malinois well. His ears were constantly perked, his head twitched from side to side whenever curiosity took the wheel. Curiosity was a stronger pilot for William than any of his siblings – drills and orders blocked out everything else. *Go Ahead, up the lane! Go Out! Dive in and Track! Track!* For William, there was no room for thoughts in a head full of prep. Before being shipped off to Monesburg, away from the rest of his family, he seemed to discover something new and exciting almost every day. A spongy round ball left behind in the grass, or the wafting aroma of a rich meal, full of fat and grease. No more. It became grey office squares, white walls, ugly furniture, and the uniforms. Work, work, work. Disappointing.

He was resting upright in the training facility’s far-stretched field. The breeze moved the grass with his fur, gracefully passing by to continue through tall chain link fences that bordered them on all sides. William watched his handler Flathead scribble in his binder, his chubby neck quivering by the stroke. This wasn’t really his name – it was Jameson – but William stuck with this name due to the man’s plane-level haircut and ultra-rigid demeanor. The uniform did Flathead no favors – lightly greenish brown on top with a slightly different brown and dark stripe running down each leg, like a human-

shaped toad crowned by a cube with a face. The buttons down the front seemed stretched to their load-bearing limits, where a hearty laugh might've ended in unimaginable disaster. He looked like a sausage, eaten by a toad, shaped like a person. How did the sausage get to be inside the toad – rather, the man? Was it eaten? Was he, in fact, the sausage casing? Sizzling and snapping, if cooked? Would he be as delicious as the Sunday breakfasts William would have with his –

“Stand!”

William shot upright, snapping himself out of whatever thought spiral he was in. He fixed his eyes on Flathead.

“William, what the fuck? I said Stand!” Flathead’s bulging neck somehow seemed bigger when he shouted. Toadlike, even. Flathead pointed toward the far side of the field where the other man was standing in his funny suit, looking like a big squishy chew toy.

“Track! Go! Go!” As if out of a barrel, William shot down the length of the field, becoming the breeze in the grass. The human-shaped blob grew larger, nearly within leaping distance. He heard Flathead behind him shouting the next command.

“Bite!”

William latched onto an arm with a full-mouthed chomp, scraping his gums on the rough material. The man-shaped mass tried desperately to yank away, pulling William off the ground. *Become the predator that destroys the prey. Overwhelm and triumph*, drilled into his head over and over again. B-I-T-E. It bounced around in his mind, fragile as could be, chipping away into smaller shapes. First went the *e*, now bit – still holding meaning, still holding on, like the old whitewall Firestone tire hanging from

a rope in the backyard of his old home. It felt so good to chew. The *b* cracked away – what *was* it, though? The flavor of warm rubber on a sunny day, little bits breaking off and tickling his tongue? The huge oak tree shading him from the full sun as Sylvia would chase Hawthorne and Eliot around the parked truck? He let go of the tire, smacking the ground with a thud that he heard as much as felt. The impact snapped the two-letter word in half, reduced to only a single letter which dissolved when William realized he was staring at the disappointed face protruding from its bulbous suit.

I...am in trouble, he thought.

He sat quietly in his kennel in the back of the van during the long drive home. Flathead took phone call after phone call with words so harsh that William had to try and ignore them. In his heart, he knew that he continued to disappoint Flathead and all the other uniform-clad humans by not being exactly what they wanted.

I wish I had a choice in the matter, he said with a soft bark.

“Hell no, you are not going to start with that fucking barking now,” hissed Flathead, stealing glances at William in the rearview mirror. “Not after all that.”

The rest of the ride was silent.

Exchange.

William’s new family was nice. They didn’t have uniforms or badges. They lived in a house with more color and shape than the grey squares. Jason and Patty were happy – when the sun was up, he played his guitar and cooked meals while she was away working. Bailey loved to put bows in her curly hair before she had to leave for school just as much as she loved throwing William’s rubber ball around. Morning and evening walks

– sometimes even a run if Jason was up for it. William was encouraged to investigate new discoveries in his little corner of the world.

Before Patty lost her job, before Jason started making the rest of the family sad, before meals got smaller, and before the smiles disappeared, William felt that life was beautiful.

Simply beautiful.

SNAFU.

William noticed something whenever Jason would put fire to his stick of glass. It reminded him of the shelter dogs. Not the ones who would leap into the air in excitement at the prospect of being taken outside for a walk on the shoddy Astroturf – more the dogs who would lick themselves over and over again. Even with a cone strapped to their neck, they would try to rub through the plastic with their raw sandpapered tongues, like a compulsion. Jason wore the same compulsion on his face, as if the spicy clouds and the sparkly pile were never big enough.

William saw the spark dim in Patty's eyes whenever she saw Jason huddled in his ratty blanket on the patterned, dusty sofa in the garage, surrounded by buckets and boxes of all sorts. Sometimes Jason would mumble nonsense, which on better days William found to be funny and playful, like hearing a human describe their daydream out loud. On the worst days, Jason was intense. Paranoid. Determined to prove that anything he did was already set in stone. He didn't play guitar on these days. He didn't say much to Bailey, either.

Jason shot up from the table with wild eyes, giving William a shock. Until that point, William wasn't sure if Jason even knew he was in the room.

“He’s always listening, William. Always there, happy to watch me drown. Don’t you see that this is all connected? Everything is cyclical. This proves that we can promise anything we want, and we still wind up right back at where we started. Square one, like a reset. But this time it’ll be different! You’re here. Bailey is here.” He coughed and rubbed part of his teeth with his little finger. “Patty is still here. There’s a reason for this. All of this. Fuck, boy, don’t you see it? I can fix it. We can fix it. We’re here. You’re here. Just tell Jesus to give me a fucking chance to do this my way. Fuck!” He slammed his clenched fist down on the musty cushion next to him, unleashing a small plume of ancient dust. He jumped to his feet with the threadbare blanket still draped over his head and shoulders, like a filthy wizard.

The door to the house opened from inside. Dark streaks ran down the curve of Patty’s cheeks as she stood in the threshold, sniffing, before she exploded in rage. She and Jason were shouting horrible things with fingers pointed in each other’s face – you said this, you didn’t do that – when William saw Jason’s features change. His cheeks bloated and neck turned rubbery. The stored buckets and boxes around them turned greenish brown, all straight lines and snappy folds boxed in by gray walls and Wanted posters, staring down at him in silent disappointment. His heart was pounding straight through his ribs, the shame unbearable. William, in horror, saw Flathead’s square yet toadlike profile – where had he come from? – unleashing obscenities at defenseless Patty.

Family.

William broke, howling mournfully, apologetically, releasing everything into the world.

It all happened so quickly. Part of Flathead's soft arm was in the back of William's jaws in a split second. The taste was not a tough fabric, more an acidic and bitter meaty flavor. Static surrounded the screams of *Bite! Bite!* as William felt thuds on his head – bonk, bonk. All four of his legs left the ground. He wouldn't let go. Nothing but the magic words would release him – he would hear nothing else.

Wouldn't this make them proud? At long last something he was able to –

glass breaking

– do without messing up? How would his family- Sylvia and Hawthorne and the rest, what would they say to him controlling the situation? Would they finally admit that he was worthy of being –

kicked in ribs, ow

– part of the family name? Would Hawthorne give his blessing and say that William was on the right –

“William! Release! Release!” Jason's voice.

William obeyed. Jason dragged himself away, leaving dark streaks of blood on the concrete. Patty helped him up gingerly. They both hurried back in the house and slammed the door behind them. Their voices were muffled and undistinguishable, moving further away from the garage. William sat down and looked around, confused, taking in the whole disastrous scene. Broken knickknacks and upended boxes were spread across the floor, some flecked by Jason leaking.

Was this a success? At last he was able to show humans that he could be trusted to listen and to act. Jason would be proud, wouldn't he?

Dregs.

William woke with a yawn, stretching over the square take-out boxes from last week that littered the floor. Every morning he would think about the different homes that he and Jason had lived in over the last three years, how they all gradually shrunk. Where they were now, this place with bare white walls and dented doorknobs, was the smallest yet: one room for his little bed and Jason's big bed, and one room for the couch, kitchen, and the water dish. Jason cried after his guitar was taken away. It was a few months ago. They were eating food that needed a can opener, but after that, Jason brought home McDonalds for them both.

The inside reminded William of the shelter – he had never shared a cage with another dog, though. The house dynamic had grown stale with the two of them being so close to one another. Jason would go days without saying more than a full sentence to William. Other times Jason would not offer to go outside for their walk, despite William's urgent warning. In these scenarios there was no alternative other than William being forced to go right in the room where they slept; Jason would take care of the mess in a day or so. Other humans would arrive at their home with frequency. The one called Enjo was the friendliest to William; he never failed to greet and pet William whenever he stopped by. William didn't trust his stink, nor the fact that he would jitter and twitch in bursts. In fact, the last time Enjo came over he would not stop commenting on the state of William's coat and skinniness.

“Fuck,” Jason scoffed, “you gonna pay my vet bills? Also, you're one to fucking talk, Enjo. When's the last time you took your anorexic ass to a doctor?” The conversation dropped and the two went on with whatever it was they were doing that day.

William tossed and turned in his bed, trying to find a comfortable position that didn't exist. He was emotionally exhausted by so many days being the same. His legs and back ached even when he did nothing. Jason and a few humans were loud in the other room, so loud that the closed door between the rooms didn't help. William wished Jason would take his friends elsewhere, even just for one night.

A thunderous crack from the other room, much louder than Jason and his friends. William was speedily upright, his aching legs tensed. Beyond the white wooden door was shattering, rapid movement, growling, and a new blend of human voices yelling. As if pulled from a dream, the voice behind the door screamed out familiar commands rooted deep in Williams psyche, commands that locked him into a state of proud purpose. The voices were right outside the door now.

“Breach it! Track! Track!”

The door exploded inward, mere feet away. It was tall and shaped like a human but covered head to toe in black, all flat reflective and pointy matte with a long tube pointed directly at William's head. From between the human's legs, a blur of brown and black launched itself right at him, pinning him to his bed with its paws. It was like staring into a snarling, rage-filled mirror, the pattern around its jaw and snout telling him everything.

Hawthorne?

The dog's growl reduced to a simmer. *William, is that you? It's been a long time.* Hawthorne grinned cruelly. He was solid and broad, much bigger than William had remembered him to be. Strapped to his body was a black helmet and vest with letters spelling out the word POLICE. Hawthorne's grin dropped, but his teeth remained

exposed. *You smell like the enemy to me. What's happened to you? What purpose do you serve now?*

I am not your enemy, William insisted, I am your family! These humans are not enemies! They are flawed and require kindness to heal, like I did. I found so much more, if only—

Shut up, Hawthorne snarled. You still sully everything with your words. Spouting the same nonsense from when we were pups. Have you not grown?

My eyes have been opened, William pleaded, I never wanted to hurt! There must be some part of you that ached for more than to be led by command. Hawthorne, please be honest with yourself!

You are mistaken, Hawthorne said. We were born to follow orders and I continue to fulfil my duty. My life, the life of my providers, depend on my obedience. William swore he saw a hint of sadness in Hawthorne's expression, for just a moment. I still dream of the days we were all together, in the sun without cares. But those days are long over. I accepted my duty. And now I see you, a reflection of the path I denied – frail, sickly, and living in squalor with the enemy. AS the enemy. I see you, William, and I am filled with pride, for I know that I chose correctly.

William sagged beneath the weight.

The black-clad human in the room, holding a rope attached to a long silver stick, looped it around William's neck and tightened until it was secure. William was led through the completely upended room, walking over his last remaining possessions. Jason was nowhere to be seen.

Transition.

The van delivered William outside of a little grey and glass building. He was handed over to a small human with long blonde hair and glasses. Her clothes had round flowers on them, but the air around her smelled like fresh laundry and other dogs. She knelt next to William with a friendly smile, extending an open palm for him to sniff. The look in her eyes made him think of the first time he had met Bailey: curious, with an inviting grin that fit her soft features well. He took in the depth of her scent – of other dogs, cats, animals he had never interacted with before, scared and happy alike.

“Hi buddy, it’s great to meet you! My name is Katie. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Why don’t you come inside and meet some friends – we have many other friendly pups just like you. We’ll take good care of you here while we wait to find you some new parents.” Her voice was soft. Her words, fuzzy, like the worn and dirty tennis ball from the park, like the tickle he would get in his feet on cold morning runs, watching squirrels leap between the branches. Her voice felt like days that went right.

He peeked over her shoulder and through the reflective glass, following the outline of four-legged and two-legged movement inside. Some were very small; he had never seen a cat in real life before. William’s thoughts swirled as Katie gently took up his leash, leading him toward many new discoveries.

V: "The Missing Piece"

Ding-dong, it's 7 again, and I know the number well.
Short arm down to the left, long arm up toward the ceiling.
7 meant that a meal was imminent.
I would wait by the big clock in the side room.
Almost everything in there was bubinga, crystal, and breakable.
Did you know I was owned by a Queen?
She was smooth and wrinkly, and always clad with silver.
Sparkly dresses and furry coats filled her closet.
I was fed by men and women in black and white suits.
Fresh-cut tuna was great, but not as great as chicken liver.
Either was best paired with a nap on the warm hardwood floor.
Fifteen years and twice a day I followed this routine.
Ding dong, it's 7 again, and my owner is dead.

The driveway gravel crunched beneath their thick tires.

A dozen white cars pulled in front of the house like some spectral centipede.

The occupants walked in a line, adorned with black hats and sadness.

Her sons and daughters yelled a lot when names were read.

I listened by the big clock in the side room.

My ears perked up when I heard my name.

It came after the Bentley and the family silver.

The first thing he said was hell no.

He had no interest in collecting another mouth to feed.

Tough shit, they replied, it's part of the deal.

We hope your Benz has space for that litter box too.

I asked if I could have the Queen's feather boa.

He tossed me in the carrier without response and away we drove.

We got along like vinegar and milk.
His home was filled with leather and thick carpet.
Smells of shoe polish and old flesh waltzed in the air.
They tickled my nose but sharpened my claws.
His bedroom was off-limits, as was the rest of the house.
When he left, the lavender orchids in the sill somehow fell.
I think the broken pottery came from his late father.
He expressed his disappointment when he found out.
He threw my food dish and litter box out the back door.
I didn't hide well enough behind the pockmarked sofa.
Anxiety made my belly do flip flops in the carrier.
The heat and his driving made me sick.
Curdled vomit dripped onto his unblemished seats.

The front door yelped once when we passed through.
The waiting room stunk like a hundred anxious animals.
Piss and saliva hid in corners and under chairs.
I never thought I'd miss fresh linen or French perfume.
He told the people behind the desk awful things.
His smirk told me good riddance.
I must have been a brindle monstrosity to him.
They set me up in a furnished high-rise silver apartment.
I could see the rest of the city through the bars on my window.
New tenants again, said the wandering eyes of my neighbors.
The blanket in the corner stuck between my toes.
My food came on a paper dish and stunk like yesterday's tilapia.
I had far too much to say in a single meow.

After a week I knew their routine.

They checked their wrist clocks to be sure, their own 7.

The women wore blue vests and matching pants.

Glasses and side-part wore a long white Mackintosh every day.

I saw it as a working-class gown without sequins or lace.

She was Queen of the Commoners, perhaps.

The Slumlord of Pissy Corners and Cramped Quarters.

A place where great sinful monsters like me were left in exile.

Yet, our jailers provided us with moist food and fresh observations.

We were given space to roam and meet the other inmates.

Toy mice were left on our beds like some fabric-wrapped crème de menthe.

This was no château sporting a reflecting pool flanked by fluffy hydrangeas.

After two months I realized it wasn't so bad.

My life was spent as an only cat.

The other residents' lack of culture surprised me.

How could I explain Deco design, or the feeling of cold marble on toe pads?

They were homeless or hopeless, the lot.

Wild orphans listened with longing in their eyes.

You could almost hear the envy growl in their gut.

I learned to listen.

Their tales came straight from some unwritten *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.

Malevolence crept between the trees and hid behind parked cars.

Blinding-hot cigarillos pushed in their fur, chained to a stake in the falling snow.

Their stories finished before they could develop the moral.

Listening made my jaw hurt.

I had never felt rage before.

I learned more in my fifteen years than I realized.
My brothers and sisters followed my lead.
They learned that every surface is a new prospect to claim.
Occupy every window, even if they're filled with orchids.
I encouraged them all to view humans as different.
Some are Queens, I said, while others can be a blight.
Prior to me, this place existed only as a port of call.
A space of changing hands, collar colors, and names.
There was an empty plot where support should have been.
Vacant and desolate, an unacceptable model.
Someone had to take on the task of shining light across cresting waves.
I had never held a job before.
It turned out there was more that I had to give.

Peace arrived after I gave up my past.

In truth, I didn't much like the slick, chilly marble.

Nor did I enjoy having to tiptoe around the delicate flowerpots.

I will miss my crystal bowl at 7.

So many arrive here with nothing, or worse.

It's up to me to let them know something better exists.

When they depart, I wish upon stars to never see them here again.

If Polaris listens, I know its shine will guide them home.

I have no expectations to depart myself.

They remind me to keep the faith.

One day, they repeat, it'll be your day.

I tell them that I know what it means to have everything.

Here, I've found what was missing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Richard. *The Plague Dogs: A Novel*. Ballantine Books, 2007.
- Adams, Richard. *Watership Down*. Avon, 1975.
- Aesop. *Aesop's Fables*. <http://www.taleswithmorals.com>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2020.
- Auster, Paul. *Timbuktu*. Picador, 2009.
- Barthes, Roland and Richard Howard, "The Reality Effect." *The Rustle of Language*, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 141–148.
- Berger, John. *King: A Street Story*. Vintage, 2000.
- "Booktrack." *Wikipedia*, 29 Jan. 2021. *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Booktrack&oldid=1003457379>.
- "Booktrack: Just A Horrible Idea. Really Horrible." *TechCrunch*, 5 Sept. 2011, <http://www.techcrunch.com/2011/09/04/booktrack-just-a-horrible-idea-really-horrible/>.
- Bormann, Daniel, and Tobias Greitemeyer. "Immersed in Virtual Worlds and Minds: Effects of In-Game Storytelling on Immersion, Need Satisfaction, and Affective Theory of Mind." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, vol. 6, no. 6, Aug. 2015, pp. 646–52. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1177/1948550615578177.
- Brown, Larry. *Facing the Music*. Algonquin Books, 1996.
- Ceraso, Steph. "(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences." *College English*, p. 22. JSTOR, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/stable/24238169>
- Ceraso, Steph, and Kati Fargo Ahern. "Composing with Sound." *Composition Studies*, no. 2, 2015, p. 13-18.

https://compositionstudiesjournal.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/cs43n2_all_final.pdf.

- Church, A. Timothy, et al. "Need Satisfaction and Well-Being: Testing Self-Determination Theory in Eight Cultures." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 44, no. 4, May 2013, pp. 507–34. *SAGE Journals*, doi:10.1177/0022022112466590.
- Cowdy, Cheryl. "Grammars of New Media: Interactive Trans-Sensory Storytelling and Empathic Reading Praxis in Jessica Anthony and Rodrigo Corral's *Chopsticks*." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 56, no. 1, Mar. 2018, pp. 20–27. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.1353/bkb/2018.0003.
- Eno, Brian. *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. Polydor Records, 1978.
- Gold, Benjamin P., et al. "Musical Reward Prediction Errors Engage the Nucleus Accumbens and Motivate Learning." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 116, no. 8, National Academy of Sciences, Feb. 2019, pp. 3310–15. [pnas.org](https://www.pnas.org), doi:10.1073/pnas.1809855116.
- Houge, Ben. *Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura, Original Computer Game Soundtrack*. Sierra Entertainment, 2000.
- Howe, Fanny. *What Did I Do Wrong?* Flood Editions, 2009.
- Hutchings, Patrick, and Jon McCormack. "Adaptive Music Composition for Games." *IEEE Transactions on Games*, 2019, pp. 1–1. [arXiv.org](https://arxiv.org), doi:10.1109/TG.2019.2921979.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Anchor Books, 1995.

- Lehmann, Janina A. M., and Tina Seufert. "The Influence of Background Music on Learning in the Light of Different Theoretical Perspectives and the Role of Working Memory Capacity." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8, Frontiers, 2017. *Frontiers*, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01902.
- Mitchell, Angela. *Unnatural Habitats & Other Stories*. WTAW Press, 2018.
- Morrison, Grant, and Frank Quitely. *WE3*. DC Comics, 2014.
- Phillips, Winifred. *A Composer's Guide to Game Music*. The MIT Press, 2014.
- . "LittleBigPlanet 3 and Beyond: Taking Your Score to Vertical Extremes." *GDC Vault*, 2015, www.gdcvault.com/play/1022122/LittleBigPlanet-3-and-Beyond-Taking.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Destiny Books, 1993.
- Stanton, Andrew. "The clues to a great story," *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, Feb. 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story/transcript?referrer=playlist-the_power_of_fiction_1
- Stein, Garth. *The Art of Racing in the Rain*. Harper, 2008.
- Underriner, Chaz. "Mimesis, Murakami and Multimedia Art: Parallel Worlds in Performance." *Leonardo Music Journal*, vol. 29, 2019, pp. 31–36., doi:10.1162/lmj_a_01059.
- Vaughan, Brian K., and Niko Henrichon. *Pride of Baghdad*. DC Comics, 2006.
- Viskontas, Indre. "How music made me a better neuroscientist." *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, Oct. 2016,

https://www.ted.com/talks/indre_viskontas_how_music_makes_me_a_better_neuroscientist/transcript

Yamashirogumi, Geinoh. *Akira: Original Soundtrack*. INVITATION, 1988.