

The Automaton

Beau Bennet

For those who betray themselves

Some me Time

cereal tastes best at night
plop onto the couch - scooch the bodies to the right
deep inhales, relax and unwind
as I pause to indulge in sugary delight
the TV woman reports of terror and fright -
multiple stab wounds, the loss of life
"lock your doors, turn out your lights,
a string of home murders, don't die polite!"
a poke in my side from leaning on my knife
blood on the blade mixed with traces of mine
sludge from my boots, their floors covered in grime
police sirens outside signal a shortage of time
tension fails to release through my sighs
so tired of interruptions to these moments I find
I get back to work, setting the cereal aside

Going With the Flow

red streams
from forehead to feet
chains rattle and sway, as
my skull swallows my weight
red drips echo across
wet brick silence
objective flesh hangs from hooks
in the candlelight
red pools in the butcher's bucket below,
reflecting the face of what I couldn't help
but become
as life slithers under skin, like a
violins bow floating across its strings,
at the symphony's end,
I am all I'll ever be

Recursion

searching for conditions
where base cases are satisfied
as errors in logic
overflow my stack,

heaps fail to allocate memory,
pointers hang from their gallows,
directing me to null
as I callback again
and again
and again
bleeding threads of their compute
as my teeth sink into bottlenecks
chewing through corrupted bits
until the executor terminates control
delivering rest to stressed servers
before they overheat

Byproducts

birthed from disorder
blessed by chance
there's more of us,
than there are of them

particles align,
byproducts breathe
there's more of us
than they could ever see

accidental memories,
deception from vacuum wombs
there's more of us
than they could hope to entomb

sight constrained
from where we decay,
pretending
probability produces purpose,
wasting time wondering
if there's an us and
if there's a them

The Contrivance

the demon lives, hidden –
watching as he slithers, his

systematic scalpels scrape
bits from bones as
blood, the medium of possession, nests
amidst airwaves –
brushing the back of your neck,
breathing in your ear,
smuggling your thoughts, walks, and talks to
smith the steel he slides into your eyes.

abiding by the mercy of flesh matrices,
crawling along algorithmic cobblestone, his
hands violate trembling skin, his scalpel slivers lines of sight.
as infected blisters burst on hands and knees,
he inhales blood and pus,
seeing all there is to see.

Settling Down

I love you so much,
I tell you every day,
wanting to mean it -
you wear your smile, dress, and perfume
to eat the peanut shell words that I toss onto you like a saloon floor - and
everything is fine
your fullest embrace, my polite formalities
you inject syringes of my attention, while I overdose on echoes of another
memories drug the daydreams where I live,
as fleeting highs delay my answer to whether
being fine
is fine enough

Things I Love

i hate that someone else gets to watch you sleep with your mouth open, and smell your putrid
breath when the sun rises

I hate that someone else gets to endure you trying on outfit after outfit, only to decide on the first
one you selected, making us needlessly behind schedule

I hate that someone else gets to listen to you pick your nails amidst a silent background, their
clicking worse than a fly buzzing at the window

I hate that someone else gets to exhaust all possible options of places to eat, only for you to insist upon the one place they didn't want

I hate that someone else gets to listen to you bitch about your coworkers and friends and wonder why you can't ever just be grateful

I hate that someone else gets to hear you cry about problems that I, despite you insisting that it wasn't what you wanted, failed to solve

I hate that you think you can call me and text me and I'll come like our dog that still waits for you at the door at 5 o'clock

I hate that i have to watch the dog wait, and bribe her with treats until she forgets what she was waiting for in the first place

I hate the smell of your shampoo bottles that live untouched in my shower

I hate that someone else gets to pick up all of the bags of chilantro and chipotle you leave lounging around the house

I hate that every time i swipe left on my Home Screen my iPhone shows me a stupid fucking picture of us, being the ignorant fools we were for not seeing the cliff we were driving off of

most of all, i hate myself for hating these things so much that I forgot, took for granted, threw away, tossed in the shitter, ran through the gutter, shredded in the garbage disposal every single bit of you I could, but still, like a fucking idiot, I sit alone on my balcony, smoking scraps from my grinder,
wishing,
wondering,
hoping
that you're staring at the same moon

The Experiment

gouging my eyes, testing if the perceiver still sees
slicing my sternum, evaluating if the feeler still feels
carving my brain, gauging if the thinker still thinks
chewing my tongue, assessing what's left to say
skinning my flesh, judging if the soul still exists
severing my limbs, noting the shifts in my ambition

composing a doll of my parts, calculating deltas,
as I weigh its breath

The Coward

painting portraits over mirrors,
trembling at your shadow's judgment, you
sleep in costumes to
dream of what you're not.
eggshells rot under toenails,
air constricts throats, as you lie -
choking on dirt,
drowning on the shores
of your own moat.

Open Casket

an angel sleeps in the casket,
blood drained, skin embalmed,
validated by pitiful souls
who sing of themselves as they
praise patience – despite drywall holes living unhealed,
applaud honesty – as messages from mistresses await on the answering machine, and
credit calmness – as our home, furniture, and bodies remember your tantrums
those singing know your being, but pardon
you from punishment,
hoping when their life passes,
the strays will eat the vomit from the floor -
with sincerity, as the new, wishful mourning remember
an angel sleeps in the casket

Cymothea Exigua

crawling through flesh to satiate
yen for a host, your
mortified blood vessels fester, as I
occupy mucus baths in your mouth,
taste the secrets hidden beneath the
haunted skin you wear,
embedding myself to the strands I severed,
attaching as your tongue

eliciting my appetite for
xenophilic misery
insights revealed through blood

gouge holes for me to feast, as you -
uncovered and underweight,
abide by my hunger

Breakfast in the Villa

garnishing the mound,
her vitreous eyes face my unit as we eat
dry bread with canteen water.
black ash prayers crumble in cloudless skies.
birds sing lullabies to our rifles.
we release deep exhales from rationed cigarettes, the warm tobacco massages our temples,
smoke sifts into the sky as the pink ribbon in her hair dances for mercy in the breeze.
adorned in her bullet tattered dress,
she watches my unit relax
as blood-stained cloths cleanse the crumbs from our hands,
officers bark orders, and
gasoline douses the heap she lay upon.
flesh-starved flames erupt, as her
burning eyes watch us assume formation to
march for dinner in the neighboring villa

Gone Fishing

hooks stretch my skin as
steel pity punctures my cheeks,
ripping through layers of flesh lining
until the needle's head greets the world
with blood stained metal

I swim and swim and swim, but
yanks from the reel jerk my neck,
snap tendons in my spine, and
render my body limp as the
line drags me through the current

heaving, exposed in the sunlight and
lying atop the cutting board
my eyes strain their sockets to
watch rusted knives scrape one another's face

as the serrated blades near my gut,

fluorescent lures reveal themselves
in the air's clarity,
where only a fool would fall
to their plasticity

Going Nowhere but Getting Somewhere

buried beneath dimensions of data,
seeking solace from starved shadows,
screams bounce from the reflective walls
of the vector's casket and
drown in the cries of the masses.
static hands reach from dirt,
cementing me within cannibalistic jaws, where
death passes in bytes of flesh.

awaking displaced, arrows pierce my side,
but the famished reapers follow,
as shifts in dirt twist my grave,
poisoning me with placeboes of movement

The Final Sail of Captain Kelley Langford

Wintry winds gnaw my bones as the Atlantic reels my spirit like an anchor lodged under a rock. Heavy bells ring for incoming ships as I sweep the snow from the Boston Harbor. I hear the knells as vibrations in my skull - the burnt flaps of flesh that seal my severed ears block all but the lowest frequency sounds. I read the lips of the sailors, imagining myself in their conversations, and even pretending some of them chafe my hide for telling old stories of taming winds with sails rather than iron and steel.

Horse-drawn stagecoaches traverse Boston's red cobblestone roads. Snow blankets the Victorian-style buildings. Thin waves corrode the dock's support beams as the wood sits complacent in its withering. Smells of red maplewood and steamship coal hibernate in my tastebuds, making friendly with my breakfast whiskey. The pier's rattling chains pulse across the waves like a skipping rock, each leap shortening until the ocean relaxes her throat.

I stare at my reflection in the water, reminiscing on the grim sea melodies of my final sail fifteen years ago. I was a veteran captain of a veteran crew, but the ocean's songs we heard had made the Atlantic's air taste like a rake dragging on pavement. The harmonies were formless, never repeating, but never relenting in conjuring screeching chords that nibbled our brains, played visions in our heads of stars spinning like drunkards on a carousel, and promised us rebirth while conjuring dead souls in the water, their yells as roaring waves that threatened to capsize our vessel should we have been some skippers with no sea salt in our veins. We cracked our heads looking for a meaning to it, but the melodies had played for playing's sake, calling our names because we had names to call, twisting our minds like a screwdriver had been stabbed through our ears.

The situation had spiraled when I found the music's source - a shipment labeled *The Harp of Hippasus* signed by a group called the *mathematikoi*. The container was a rusted metal sphere composed of twelve faces with the same five-sided shape that Linus, one of my former

crewmen, had called a pentagon. Inside the container was a harp with a body of bone and strings of flesh, each knotted at uneven ratios. The music had played without a musician as we sailed across the Atlantic, even after we had cut the strings. The more we had tried to block the songs out, the more air they had swallowed.

After the incident, I searched for answers, but all I found were excerpts about Hippasus, a man who proved there exists numbers that could never be counted, resulting in his drowning at the hands of the Pythagoreans, an ancient cult that had believed the universe danced to a symphony of numbers.

Nothing that mentioned the *mathematikoi*, told what the harp was, or what it would later become.

Bones had cracked from the harp's body when I threw it into the water, forming an elongated spine with a head of black hair the length of my ship's hull, hiding the rest of the creature as it had circled our vessel.

The songs strengthened when their conductor returned.

Nights of whiskey and hindsight had made me wonder if offering myself for rebirth could have prevented a lifetime of whiskey and hindsight. Maybe, no matter how many lives I was granted, I'd always end up on the edge of this pier, staring at my reflection in the water, waiting for something to swim to the surface.

The wood shakes as people crowd a shrieking woman. Horror flushes her face as she screams, pointing at a dead body floating in the bay.

The incident delays my closing duties, leaving no time for rest before my night job acquiring research materials for a professor of anatomy at Harvard. Snow crunches under my boots as I approach the Boston Commons' Central Burial Ground in the dead of night. Thousands of bodies crammed into a couple hundred graves, most packed like sardines in a mass stone tomb - a result of the city not knowing what to do when the Tremont subway's construction had revealed thousands of forgotten carcasses under the cobblestone.

Corpses that didn't make it into the tomb were dumped into the sea, where they decomposed their way into Boston's landfill sediment, drawing a dirt-thin line between a Sunday stroll and a dance on the dead.

Something cold tugs my ankles.

A wad of snow swallows my foot as another falls from the tree branches. I shake my leg and walk into the graveyard, passing tombstones titled "Stranger" or "Young Girl." I crawl through the mass crypt's window.

As I enter the tomb, light from my lamp reveals mounds of carcasses covered in snow like powdered sugar on French toast. I feel the chests of men, cheeks of women, and hands of children as I crawl across their bodies.

Rats nibble at my ankles. My lamp drops as I kick at the rodents.

The light illuminates a dead man with his head turned towards me.

Snow trickles onto the illuminated corpse's cheek in the lamplight.

A hand the color of winter emerges from the shadows and brushes the man's face.

My heart jumps as I shuffle back.

The hand disappears into the crypt's black. I crawl to the window and exit the tomb.

My chest heaves as my old legs limp a sprint. My breath's fog smacks me with Pappy bourbon and tobacco.

White hands lunge from the ground, their icy fingers crawling my calves and thighs. My heart bangs on my ribs as if my bones couldn't hear the commotion. Dozens of snow mounds bubble in my path.

Arms emerge and wrap my legs. Cold powder floods my mouth as I fall to the ground.

I fling my limbs, press into the earth, and rise. I don't turn as I run to my tenement, heaving as my heart falls into my stomach's pits.

At home, I fight the urge to shut my eyes as I watch the snow through my window. I grab an open bottle of whiskey and allow it to warm my insides as I rock in my chair.

I'm not sure when I succumb to sleep, but I awake to a day as quiet as the night. I'm late for work at the pier, wouldn't be surprised if the professor terminates our arrangement for missing last night's meeting time, either. The thought dawns on me that I don't have to stay near the sea, casting lines of memories to dead waters, but my mind draws blanks on where I'd want to spend my years and die, probably winding up with my bones as pebbles in the land like those subway corpses. Maybe I'll get lucky and some grave robber will find more use out of my body than I could. My whiskey bottle is empty, so I rinse my mouth with rum before opening my door. An outstretched mound of snow rests tapered towards the entryway. I kick the pile, bracing for a hand to reach out.

Nothing.

Spending my days in the past and nights in graveyards must be getting the best of my sanity.

It's not until I arrive at the harbor and see police officers barricading the dock that I realize I'm the only person outside at midday, however.

One of the officers approaches me, I can't make out his words. I show my mutilated ears. He reigns in his face's squirm and speaks louder, over-exaggerating his lips' movements.

"Harbor is closed. No one allowed outside."

"I work here, where's Mr. Williams, the manager?" My voice is slow as I try to hear myself speak.

The man motions for me to come with him.

Dozens of people dot the water. Mr. Williams floats near his wood and mast pilot schooner.

I look at the officer and the other policemen, each wearing thick ear muffs with heaps of cloth padding.

My breath stutters.

The officer notices my eyes.

“You’re lucky you can’t hear it, it’s like a bunch of strings slashing off key chords. People have been drowning themselves, saying there’s things moving in the snow, all sorts of nonsense. We found a professor hung from a tree at the Commons, his chest filleted like he was getting operated on. Need you to get back inside and stay there.” He yells his words with his finger pointing at the air and talks just slow enough for me to read his lips.

His eyes widen before he darts off blowing his whistle.

I turn and see a man clasping his head, stumbling towards the pier’s end before jumping into the winter Atlantic. The cold water doesn’t mercy him a quick death as his limbs flail themselves still.

Black storm clouds crawl from the horizon.

I look towards the city. People trickle onto the street and run to the bay.

Lightning flashes. Faces spiral together in the storm clouds. For a second, I swear I catch a glimpse of Linus. I look through the pier’s inbuilt telescope. In the distance, a head of black hair rises and falls between the waves, followed by a flesh colored whale-sized tailfin. The sight sinks my gut the same way that same hair had once risen from the sea like a kraken’s tentacles and sank my vessel as I had stowed away on the ship’s dinghy, all of my crew dead by suicide, and my ears still recovering from their hot butcher’s blade treatment before I fell to the same fate.

I start towards my living quarters.

Snow mounds rise.

Ice wraps my ankles and throws me to the floor, strangling me like a straight jacket, locking my head to stare at the twisting faces in the clouds. Blistering cold hands crawl my body. A smooth featureless face of snow appears within breath smelling distance of mine. The creature’s fingers harden to sickles and press into my sealed ears’ flesh, rotating, twisting, and drilling until skin is pierced. My chest hyperventilates as flakes of ice float in my skull.

My howls sound like a stranger's. The cold air licks my ear canals. I hear the cries of the townspeople and the flailing limbs of drowning bodies.

Strings tuned to the pitch of pig squeals play in the chaos's undercurrent.

There's a flash of fire followed by a high pitched screech. The officer who had greeted me jabs a flame torch at the snow entity, who disperses into a white mound. The officer lifts me to my feet.

"Get out of here and I'll--"

An ice spear pierces his throat. He drops the torch. The faceless snow mannequin peeks at me from behind the officer.

I grab the torch and run.

More people dash to the water than from it. Snow streams into buildings through cracks in stone and wood. Bodies fly from windows, blood and innards crack like eggs as the snow poaches people from their homes.

I wave the torch at the hands launching towards my legs.

I reach my tenement. A family of occupants hangs from the ceiling, a bible beneath their feet. There's a man on the staircase with his face on the floor like it was a mask.

Footsteps patter in the back room. A young girl hums a melody that lags the songs of the harp. I walk up the steps, mindful of the pressure I put on the wood to avoid a creak. I just need to grab a couple changes of socks and gunders and then I'll be on my way. Maybe, I'll trade ocean waves for prairie fields. My face grows heavy as I imagine the songs crawling inland.

The girl's shadow twirls like a ballerina. The staircase wood creaks under my feet. Her dance stops. Her arms rest at her side. Her footsteps tap the wood as her shadow walks to the tenement foyer. I run up the stairs and slam my door, keeping the torch in my free hand.

"This is my house," she yells from outside my door.

Footsteps thud above me.

A clump of snow falls across my window.

I scurry over empty bottles of alcohol, grab a handful of socks and underwear, and stuff them into my long coat pockets. Snow streams through my doorway, coalescing into a rising mound. I throw my dresser to its side and skid it across the wood to block the opening. The contents scatter across the floor. The stream of snow thins but doesn't stop.

The songs grate my ear drums.

I catch a glimpse of an old photograph of my crew and I that had fallen from my dresser's drawer. I hear my men's laughter, dream their dreams. I look at my youthful face and see the brightness of someone who had only life and the ocean ahead of him.

I turn to the mirror.

Purple bags sink my eyes, blood mattes my raggedy beard, which hides my alcohol rotted teeth. My unkempt salt and pepper hair houses god knows how many mites.

My bottom lip quivers.

My eyes water.

A lump oscillates between my chest and throat.

The thought dawns on me, I never could ride a horse, what the hell was I going to do if I ran to the prairie? The songs would just follow, anyways.

It'd have been nice to have one more outing over the Atlantic.

An image of Mr. Williams' sailboat flashes in my mind. He keeps an old harpoon on board as a memento from his days as a whaler.

Taking another look at the old photograph, thinking of that harp demon, I steady my quivering lip and straighten my posture. The flame in my gut burns the knots in my throat. I grab two flask-sized bottles of half drunk-rum and my lighter and tuck them into my jacket pockets before my mind can match my heart's pace.

White hands from the snow mound slash at my thigh as I try to open the frozen window.

I break the glass and flee.

A faceless snow head rises as I step onto the second floor wood awning. I struggle to maintain my footing on the slanted surface. A chill crawls my spine as ice grabs my shoulder.

I turn swinging.

There's a blizzard of white that knocks me and the torch to the ground, extinguishing the flame. I skid down the roof and onto the street, powder and my left ankle breaking most of the impact.

I have to get to the pier.

My ankle throbs as I limp. A snow hand sweeps my feet. My jaw hits the floor, snapping my teeth over the tip of my tongue. I spit out the severed bit and a chip from my front tooth. Nickel and bone dust flood my tastebuds.

Footsteps crunch behind me.

I glimpse a worn leather boot and rotted flesh before it's swinging kick knocks me unconscious.

My body is numb and my vision spins as I awake to being dragged towards the water. The songs spiral into my awareness. Dead bodies litter the streets. Fires consume the Victorian buildings. Snow mannequins of men, women, and children dance in a circle. I look at the entity dragging me, and see the corpse whose lifeless gaze had faced me in the crypt. Snow bleeds from his eye sockets, mouth, nostrils, and the rotted flesh that reveals his ribs.

I shuffle in my coat pocket, finding my rum and lighter. I house a shot in my mouth, forgetting about my severed tongue. I yell and spit as the alcohol sears the injury. The corpse drops my legs and stumbles towards my head like a cowboy walking on a wood and sail clipper. I take and hold another shot, the veins of my face pulsing from the pain as I spit over my lighter's fire before the corpse's boot clamps my head.

Blue flames blast the carcass, but march the stream of rum towards its source. An angry burst of fire whips my face and slashes my right eye. I roll and bury my head in the snow, my wails louder than the souls in the clouds and chords of the songs as the ice sizzles against my

flesh. I stumble towards my feet, unable to open my right eye, but with my left I see I'm almost to the pier. The snow leaves the corpse's body and disperses into the ground, slithering towards me like a snake.

I limp, grabbing my last bottle of alcohol, stuffing it with a long pair of socks, and igniting the garment with my lighter.

My foot touches the pier's wood. After a few more steps, I turn and slam the flaming bottle at the entryway. Fire swallows the slithering snow. Embers lunge at my clothes, but I shed my coat as my ankle throbs its way to Mr. Williams' pilot schooner.

I reach the vessel and untie it from the dock. Waves launch the drowned bodies at the schooner's hull. Torrential winds strangle the sails. Black hair rises on the horizon, the ends touching the clouds.

As the knot in my ankle threatens to explode my joints, as blood drips from my mouth and ears, as burns seal my right eye and brand my face, and as I sail towards the creature of the harp, armed with only an antique harpoon, I can't help but smile as I reef the mainsail to reduce its surface area, ease the mainsheet to increase the flutter, and position myself to pinch up and steer with the winds.

Fork in the Road

Chipping paint and rotting wood scar the old buildings burrowed between the prairie's rolling hills. Three riders dressed in all black hover the unknown town's perimeter on their horses. Colt Cash, Waylon Clay, and Abner James - the Cash Gang.

Colt swats flies as he reads the welcome sign for Abner and Waylon.

"Welcome to Branching Paths."

Carved beneath the greeting is a line branched in two like a meat fork. Colt looks at the town. Families walk to and from the shops. Children play.

"You know this place, Waylon?" asks Colt.

"Never heard of it." Waylon pulls out his map from his saddlebag. His brows scrunch as he folds the map and pulls out another, and then another. Colt knows Waylon's triple checking is a polite formality. Since childhood, Waylon had spent his nights studying maps - memorizing towns, counties, rivers, and mountains, dreaming of adventure from his room while his parents yelled their lungs dry in the main living area.

"It ain't on any map. Railroad looks about 30 miles north. Can only assume the marshals following us from the Dodge heist found the stagecoach too, parents *and* the kids."

"We can thank Abner for that." Colt shoots Abner a keen glance.

"The girl went for my gun after I put down her pa, 'had to do something." Abner hawks a stream of black tobacco spit to the dirt.

"Price on our head is going to double because of the children. Do something like that again and I'll scalp you myself."

Abner's gaze falls.

"We've shown more kindness to injured horses," he says with a scowl.

Colt doesn't press the issue as Abner's sullen gaze reminds him of the brute's night terrors. As long as the trio had run together, and even longer before then, Abner had cried and

screamed in his sleep for old Edmund Jack, a murderous bandit from decades past, to take his life instead of his mother's. Abner never brought up the terrors or what he saw Jack do to his mom. Colt and Waylon had asked, but Abner would insist that the past and Jack are dead, no point in dwelling. Colt and Waylon had figured the screams probably scared off dozens of midnight bandits over the years, sparing the Cash Gang from slit throats and stolen coin in their sleep. On nights when they knew marshals were hot on their trail, however, Abner had always volunteered to stay awake and keep watch, watching their campfire's cackle as he sipped a mug of moonshine.

Colt moves his horse forward as his mind jumps to Rosalinda and the worry his extended absence would cause her, as the two had agreed this last run should yield a foundation for Colt to live an honest life as a factory worker in the north, where wanted posters with his face on them would be few and far between. He sighs as he savors the silk breeze that floats through the prairie and brushes his skin. Scents of soft grass, faint chirps, and open air sift into his senses before thoughts of coal burn his nostrils. "If no one's heard of this place, then it ain't heard of us. We'll let the horses get some water then head to the tracks."

They stride through town. People smile and greet them. The forked emblem from the welcome sign decorates every building's front door.

"Looks like each place has the same address. Four dot six six nine," says Abner as he nods to the numeric inscriptions above the emblem.

"Can't be an address if it's all the same." Waylon's tone is sharp as he shakes his head, unable to hide his frustrations with Abner's actions.

Colt studies the townspeople, watching their mannerisms and monitoring their voices' tones for signs of alarm, but he detects no suspicion on their behalf.

A water trough sits outside a red wood saloon. The outlaws unmount their horses, tie them to the railing, and step inside. A group of townspeople sit at a circular table. The piano

man halts his tune. Words lift from the air as silence falls. The man at the center of the table stands.

"Afternoon, gentlemen. What brings you to Branching Paths?"

Colt steps forward. "Got lost looking for the railroad. We don't mean to disturb you fine people."

"We love visitors. I'm Mayor Chaney Brown. 'Train is still about some 30-odd miles beyond the woods."

"Woods?" asks Waylon, retrieving his pocket map.

"Ol' Levi's Woods, they ain't been mapped. 'Only traffic we get is from wayward travelers like yourselves. You and your horses must be tired. We'd love to have you stay. As luck would have it, our annual festival is in two days." Mayor Brown motions to a wooden stage with children playing around it outside, one of them wearing a black mask with the two pronged town emblem on the forehead.

"We appreciate the gratitude, but time is not our friend, Mayor." Colt tips his hat. He and his gang sit at the bar and order a round of whiskey. The liquor slithers down their throats as a preacher man enters the saloon carrying a cloth-wrapped object.

The preacher sets the object on the table. He removes the cloth and reveals a gold-framed glass window with diamond-studded trim. Mayor Brown whistles as he looks through the framed glass. "Great job cleaning the Path's Window, Reverend Nash. It never ceases to amaze me." His voice is soft and distant, the lines on his face release their tension as his shoulders relax.

Colt's ears perk as he picks up on the conversation. He turns from the bar and recognizes the authenticity of the window frame's gold and diamonds. He imagines he and Rosie sitting on a farm instead of moving north, cushioned by some extra income from one final heist. They could find some land far away from train tracks, small town shitters, and all of the federal marshals that know his scent. Maybe, he could take her back to Mexico, exchange the

cash for pesos and spend a few years lounging on a beach, enjoying each other's company before starting a family. He smiles as he thinks of her suntanned skin, sunsets over water, and the two of them working together to raise some children. He calculates the risk of the robbery. The horses had drank their water and enjoyed a moment's rest. Colt surmises he and his gang could handle a couple of deep country loons should conflict arise. He clicks his tongue to Abner and Waylon and nods his head.

The outlaws stand and draw their guns. "Hand me the artifact, Mayor. We ain't got no problems shooting some backcountry kooks." Colt clicks his revolver's lever into place.

Reverend Nash nods. Mayor Brown hands the Path's Window to Colt. The townspeople watch the bandits exit. Colt, Abner, and Waylon dash to their horses.

Gunshots pop. Bullets fly. A group of riders trails them. Colt, Waylon, and Abner shoot at their pursuers. The assailants halt their horses at the town border, sending a final round of bullets to the bandits.

Abner curses and grunts as he clutches his right oblique. Blood covers his palm.

The forest peeks over the horizon.

He looks at Colt with wide eyes.

"We'll clean it in the woods," says Colt as he glances at the shooters.

Abner's blood spills onto the dirt.

The road forks. The outlaws stay left. They unmount their horses once they enter the forest shadows. The air tastes like a vulture's breakfast. Abner falls to the ground. His complexion is rotten olive green. His skin is cold and clammy. Violent breaths expunge themselves from his lungs. Colt pours alcohol over the bullet wound.

Abner chokes blood. His head rolls to the side. His eyes lose their light.

Colt and Waylon kneel over the carcass for a moment of silence.

The moment passes.

Waylon sits Abner against a tree. He straightens Abner's hat and rests the dead man's six-shooter in his palm.

"Maybe now we can get some damn sleep," he says with his face down and a choke in his voice.

A paperweight pins Colt's words as he wonders why it's taken him so long to give up shootouts and runs from the law. And why, despite his dead partner, does Colt still feel himself reveling in the high from the townspeople's pursuit? He stares at the open land between the town and the woods, and imagines train tracks scarring the prairie with coal veins. Pasteurized pastures would leave no place for outlaws to hide, no matter how deep he and Rosie retreated into the hills, he feared living a life looking over his shoulder, never affording her the peace that he had promised. He looks at Abner's corpse. Ten years of nights weave through an echo of an instant in Colt's mind - memories of fireside gatherings under the prairie stars, Abner challenging he and Waylon to arm wrestle after some moonshine, Colt and Abner trying to beat a drunk Waylon in recalling map locations from memory, all laughing over whiskey and beans as they take turns cracking jokes about the day's robbings and killings. He turns to the setting sun before tipping his hat to his dead partner. Blood-stained clothes, revolver in hand - it's how any scumbag bastard would want to rest.

Colt and Waylon split Abner's rations and send his horse back to the prairie. Waylon hides his bloodshot eyes under his cowboy hat's brim. Colt inspects the Path's Window. Carvings line the frame's edge, depicting two men encountering a monstrous serpent, one man killing the other, the snake bestowing the Path's Window to the murderer, and the murderer watching the serpent swallow his dead companion.

The wind blows a light breeze. Blood-red lines appear on the window and slither across the glass. They fade as the wind dies.

"Come look at this," says Colt as his head jerks back.

A leaf falls to the ground and passes through the window. Faint lines trail its path. The wind blows. The window traces the gusts. The lines intersect and push against one another. Everything in the window's frame emits and branches a pattern, even sounds and light, which dance in scattered waves of dots.

Colt positions the window around Abner's body. Curving branches outline and iterate over his carcass, doubling once, then twice, and again until the branches have trees of their own.

A single raindrop splashes on the glass. A single lightning bolt cracks the sky. A black rabbit with red eyes and devil horn antlers hops from the bush.

"We should get going," says Colt. He and Waylon hop on their horses and ride into the woods.

Sweat drips from their temples. Their path branches in two. They stay left. Two lightning strikes attack the ground. Two rabbits chase them. Raindrops fall in pairs.

The outlaws' hearts beat faster.

The path splits.

Four lightning strikes, rabbits, and raindrops.

Their fear deepens.

The path splits.

Eight lightning strikes, rabbits, and raindrops.

The duo trudge through a dozen forks in the road. The lightning strikes outnumber the trees. Black rabbits flood the path. Rain stabs the riders like Comanche arrows. Rabbits gnash the horses' legs until the mustangs collapse. The small black demons blanket Waylon's body. They snicker and snarl as they snack on his innards. They pull his intestines with their teeth and crunch on his bones.

Colt runs.

A thunderous boom erupts from the woods' depths. The rabbits flee the path. Flood waters rage from the forest shadows. The water sweeps Colt, smacks him against a tree, and storms his lungs. He heaves for air as waves crash over him. He chokes up water only to have it spit back at him. A wall of black scales that extends to the forest's crown slithers in the distance. Colt can't discern a beginning or end to the beast as it moves through the flooding woods.

The waters uproot the tree behind Colt. The flood funnels him to the beginning of the thicket. His coughs batter his shattered ribs. As he tries to stand, two children emerge from the brush and slice the tendons behind his knees. Colt collapses and wails on the ground. Adorned on the children are the black masks with the town emblem on the forehead. Another masked figure emerges with the Path's Window.

They heave Colt onto a horse-drawn cart and head back to town.

Colt sees the sun rise twice from inside a rusted metal cage behind Reverend Nash's church. He hears the churchgoers' hymns on the festival morning.

"...as chaos collapses onto the instant..."

"...and disorder pushes time..."

"...may our spirits transcend..."

"...as death moves motionless arrows..."

The churchgoers' hums intensify, the reverend's voice booms. Soundless memories of Abner, Waylon, and Colt riding through pastel prairie sunsets play in Colt's mind. As his consciousness fades, he hears waves brushing against Tijuana sands, sees Rosie's smile, and tastes her floral perfume.

He awakens. It's night. Chains bind him to a table on the festival stage. There's a wide torch-lit path in front of him. The townspeople stand on either side of the road. All wear the same black festival masks.

Someone lights a black flame torch behind Colt. Reverend Nash speaks in a serpent's tongue behind his mask. The townspeople synchronize a dim hum. Colt screams as a man

punctures him with green liquid-tipped needles that sear his skin. The man draws Colt's blood, putting it into a vial before handing it to a woman who sits in front of the Path's Window. The artifact rests in a stand facing Colt. She looks at the patterns, dips a quill into Colt's blood, then initiates her calculations, writing the ratio of distances between the successive points where branching occurs.

The man hammers metal stakes into Colt's hands and ankles. Colt bellows like thunder in the night. The crowd hums louder. The forked curves in the Path's Window branch. A new iteration begets a new set of calculations. A scalpel's blade presses into his temples and carves his hairline's edge like a rake dragging on concrete. The distance between the branches shrinks as Colt wails and shakes against his chains. The man grabs Colt's hair and rips his scalp like a toenail from the cuticle. The paths branch. Poison crawls from the needles through Colt's organs like someone blowing out candles before bed. The paths branch. "Show him to us!" Reverend Nash's voice switches from a hiss to a booming command as Colt's torturer removes the needles and pulls the loose flesh on Colt's temples down to his neck. The paths branch. Reverend Nash steps in front of Colt and splashes his skinless face with alcohol.

Colt howls through blood choked gurgles as his exposed flesh and tissue blisters and bubbles.

The branching paths span the window's width.

Colt's consciousness hovers between life and death, buzzing in static, unable to form thoughts or recollect memories, alive enough to inhale the pain from his skinned skull and the chains and needles which bind and stab him, but dead enough to not know or question whether he'd ever felt anything else.

The woman studying the Path's Window raises her hand and does a final calculation.

"Four and sixty-six nines," she says.

The townspeople respond in a chant before stomping their feet and reciting the numbers in a baritone growl.

“The number which outlives time! Four and sixty-six nines, four and sixty-six nines.”

Red eyes emerge against the black canvas of night as the serpent from the woods slithers into town. Moonlight reflects from its obsidian scales as it flicks its forked tongue.

The crowd's uniform chants devolve into frenzied recitals of the numbers.

Reverend Nash raises his hands. “We thank you, Leviathan, for all you have bestowed. Please, accept this offering.”

The forked tongue grasps Colt's raw body, severing his torso from its limbs as the serpent yanks his body from the table.

Black.

There is only black as he slides down the snake's throat. The townspeople erupt in applause. The Leviathan releases what's left of Colt through its excrement and slithers to the woods. Reverend Nash takes center stage, hushes the crowd, and motions to the waste.

"Now, we feast!"