



THE HONORS PROGRAM

**Caffeination and Loop:
Approaches to Literary and Science Fiction**

*An Honors Capstone Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with
University Honors*

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Abstract

Griffin O'Hara's critical introduction to two of his original stories discusses the author's merger of two genres, popular science fiction and literary fiction. Previous experiments with this combination appear in the novels of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren*. O'Hara's analysis of Foster's and Delany's influences on his stories delineates the strengths of both science fiction and literary fiction and explains how the merger results in expanded communication between author and reader. The two original stories resulting from his experimentation and illustrating these ideas are "Caffeination" and "Loop." "Caffeination" is a work of fiction that follows the imagined history and the imagined future of the humble coffee bean. "Loop" is a short story that focuses on the interplay between making memories and recollecting them.

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Critical Introduction

The English alphabet has been a part of my life as long as I can remember; I don't speak of the days I played in the mud, or spent at a baseball field as a child, but I speak of the days I spent in bed, reading. Every reader knows the urge to write, the urge to create and let loose something powerful. This urge has been consistent throughout my life, irritatingly so. It is not an urge that reminds me of what I need to do, but of my failure to do it. I have failed to write. The urgency grows. This project is an attempt to satisfy that urge—or at least, put me on the path towards doing so.

I will write a collection of cohesive stories, focused on my urge to write something that plays with established concepts, that slips between the cracks—in short, I want to write something that reminds me of myself. I will write a collection of short stories that frustrate and then give way to understanding, either in the way they're written, what they're written about, or what they communicate to the reader, and I hope to accomplish all of this by combining the most useful parts of Science Fiction and Literary Fiction—experimenting with elements of both genres such as chronology, textual splitting, or the structure of a story. This experience of consciously adapting genres to communicate with the audience will serve as a formative reference from which to develop my professional creative writing skills.

In my opinion, writing is perhaps the most intimate of the arts; in no other art form is there a dialogue between the artist and the audience that requires mutual lowering of the proverbial floodgates. Writing and reading are acts of mutual trust between the reader and the writer. The writer must trust in the fundamental human-ness of the reader, that the reader will understand—espouse a deep down, human reaction to—anything written down, even if he or she disagrees. In a similar way, reading is a conscious agreement on the part of the audience to allow

the entrance of somebody else into their head ("to suspend one's belief"); and the author must completely denude him/herself of pretense and trust him/herself to the audience.

The writer wants to be understood, the reader wants to understand; they both are two halves of the fundamental contract of literature. Reading and writing is an attempt to bridge the solipsism that any human being feels from time to time, yet I feel this is a self-limiting contract. We feel lonely, we attempt to bridge said chasm, and—with the very finest writing—we may, for a time. Yet the connection is so brief, I wonder if there's a way around the implied, almost mandatory (the end of a chapter, a book, or a reading session) brevity of such a connection.

A convenient way to draw the writer and the reader past the forced brevity of the ending of a book is to play around with what may be typically established in a story—otherwise known as "genre conventions." With the alteration of what is typical in a story, the writer and the reader are both forced out of a kind of mental complacency and made to examine and investigate the newness of the altered conventions.

An ideal way of altering convention is by simply picking and choosing from different genres, in my case, Science Fiction and Literary Fiction. I'm primarily drawing from these two because I think that they suit me most, stylistically and in their ability to express the issues I want to express.

For example, I chose both Science Fiction because of its imaginative capacity (say, a world full of talking hedgehogs that have cool laser-pistols and are adepts at genetic recombination) and Literary Fiction in its search for a shared understanding and deeper communication., which is one of my goals. These two genres of Science Fiction and Literary Fiction differ in contextual ways: readership, publication, critical and public opinion. However, it is in the literary elements of the respective genres that I am most interested in: namely variations

between their plot, setting, and character development. Through a combination of the two genres, I hope to confuse the reader's expectations (stemming from familiarity with the individual genres of Science Fiction and Literary Fiction) and then build a better relationship between reader and author by exposure to the synthesized product expressive of a unique vision.

The ways I combine the two genres are best represented by two authors who present the extremes of their genre—and more importantly—hint at the potential of genre integration, both Samuel Delany (Science Fiction, *Dhalgren*) and David Foster Wallace (Literary Fiction, *Infinite Jest*).

ESTABLISHING THE DEFINITIONS OF LITERARY & SCIENCE FICTION

In this proposal, Literary Fiction and Science Fiction will occupy all my attention. The goal of this work is to better understand both genres, how they compare, and how I seek to manipulate their genre conventions for better communication.

First, literature is not Literary Fiction. Literature is a broader category than a genre. As Fowler says, “‘Literature’ refers to a certain group of genres, whose exemplars are therefore by definition literary, at least in aspiration. These central genres comprise the poetic kinds, the dramatic, and some of the prose kinds” (Fowler 5). Literary Fiction is a genre; as defined by Joyce Saricks, it is “critically acclaimed, often award-winning, fiction. These books are more often character-centered rather than plot-oriented. They are thought-provoking and often address serious issues” (Saricks 177).

Literary Fiction can also be contrasted to what it is not—Popular Fiction. However defining both genres is a bit tricky, as both Literary Fiction and Genre Fiction have no distinct topographical lines, no easily-identifiable division, but instead seem to fade into one another, like an estuary flows into a river. Instead of only basing a definition on the less distinct tropes of a

genre one can start with the distinction that exists between Literary and Popular Fiction: the audience that reads it. Although it is not the aspect that most occupies my creative work, it does explain the difference most easily. This is the aspect that Ken Gelder uses when he interprets French critic Pierre Bourdieu's writing in the context of an opera and soap opera analogy: Opera is highbrow and compares to Literary Fiction, while soap operas are lowbrow and similar to Popular Fiction:

Bourdieu characterizes high or highbrow cultural production (works of visual art, opera, experimental media, art house cinema, all kinds of avant garde cultural production, etc.) as 'autonomous': indifferent to the buying and reading/viewing public, often openly contemptuous of the marketplace and the demand for profit, underwritten by a sense of 'creativity' and 'originality,' and using the language or discourse of 'art.' High cultural producers are self-identified as 'creative artists;' by doing so, however, they position themselves in what Bourdieu calls 'the field of restricted production', necessarily directing their work at small audiences, fellow-artists and like-minded or similarly trained social-cultural groups. By contrast, a form of low cultural production such as soap opera is described by Bourdieu as 'heteronomous': open to mass audiences and necessarily caught up in the logic of the marketplace, which means it remains *conscious* of its viewers/readers, and is determined to please them. It usually doesn't draw on the language of art to define itself; more commonly, it uses the language of industry and production instead, engaging positively and enthusiastically with 'worldly or commercial success' (Bourdieu 1996: 218). It values conventions over originality. And of course, usually (but not always) it is positioned in what Bourdieu calls 'the field of large-

scale production' –with a potentially immediate, broad-based distribution. (Gelder 12-13)

The difference between audiences of Popular Fiction and Literary Fiction is not only who buys or how many buy the book, but also who the author is writing for—what Gelder calls the purposeful autonomy of Literary Fiction or the heteronomy of Popular Fiction. Gelder may be overly simplistic in his assumption that genres are only differentiated by audience and production, but he indicates another important point, namely that Popular Fiction and Literary Fiction are products of authors adopting a genre's expectations regarding audience—not the other way around, or not simply what audiences expect from a genre. In the sense that Gelder uses it, a genre is a taxonomic classification—it separates the novels produced on a large scale from those produced for a restricted audience. My discovery is that genre results from evolving communication between author and reader.

As a small aside, sales of the respective genres superficially prove Gelder's and Bourdieu's point behind the separation of intended audiences (the audience whom the author wrote for, whether “restricted” or “large-scale”): the total sales of each genre, placing Romantic Fiction first with the largest audience of all the genres, accounting for 1.358 in total grosses and a 13.4 percent market share, as compared to Literary Fiction, which only garnered 455 million, the smallest gross of all the major genres (or as Gelder might put it, the only genre that writes for a “restricted” audience) (RWA 1). Literary Fiction's autonomy is evidenced by its market share, indicating its ignorance of a larger audience—thus demonstrating the choice of autonomy over heteronomy.

However, I do not believe a genre can be distinguished simply by the audience's purchasing a certain type of book over another type. Genres are more than just taxonomic

definitions; they play a role in the creation and consumption of a novel itself. As Alistair Fowler says, "Genres are often said to provide a means of classification. This is a venerable error. And so fine a critic as Graham Hough can write that 'in abstraction the theory of kinds is no more than a system of classification. It is given content and positive value by filling each of its pigeon holes with adequate description and adequate theory.' The likely concomitants of such a view are puzzlement whenever a work does not fit, vexation when partitions cannot be found, and despondency when the holes themselves shift" (Fowler 37). As Fowler says, at its simplest, a genre is a system of classification, but classification must fail when writers and audience become aware of the classification system and adapt their perspective accordingly. A genre fails to be a classification when it becomes involved in the creation and reading of the work itself. Fowler goes on to explain this point, saying that "A literary genre changes with time, so that its boundaries cannot be defined by any single set of characteristics such as would determine a class. Here the notion of type is introduced to emphasize that genres have to do with identifying and communicating rather than defining and classifying" (Fowler 38). The awareness and manipulation of the classification system is how writers and readers use genres to identify and communicate.

A genre is not a taxonomic system, but a communication system, as Fowler said. However, the method of communication is modified according to each individual genre. As for Literary Fiction itself, it is a failed attempt at total communication, because "No matter how one may attempt to write a contingent, open-ended, and incomplete work of fiction in order to mirror reality, the novel still comes to an end, even if it merely breaks off on the last page before the binding" (Murphy 218). It will recall its generic conventions to some degree or another. There is no way to completely communicate everything in a novel way because a book must end, so

Literary Fiction must be written in ultimate cognizance and recognition of its own failure as a unique mode of communication. Literary Fiction then is no longer simply a genre, but a way of self-aware communication; Literary Fiction acknowledges its failure to perfectly communicate, but in its acceptance of its failure to communicate is its real value. As explained, “each new stage of experimentation creates laws of narration that must be broken by the next generation,” thus Literary Fiction is valuable to writers and readers because it recognizes itself (Murphy 218). Some might say that it is the very degree of genre violations or modifications that decide highbrow or Literary Fiction.

I seek to use the self-reflexivity and emphasis on communication in Literary Fiction to my advantage in my stories. Specifically, I take advantage of how Literary Fiction is expected to be critically acclaimed and award-winning “serious” writing, and depend on that. I play with the established notions of Literary Fiction to emphasize what I want to communicate to the reader depending on what I adjust in my stories (chronology, textual division, and story structure, among many). Some of these experiments involve using elements of Science Fiction, which has its own established values, and I wish to manipulate those in my favor as well.

However, before delving further into Science Fiction, it is important to realize that its value as a genre is equal to all the others, as Roberts says “there has been a reaction to the perceived ‘ghettoisation’ of SF, by which the literary establishment in America and Europe dismisses texts by category, privileging so-called ‘literary fiction’ over so-called ‘genre-fiction’ as if the category ‘literary fiction’ were anything other than a genre” (Roberts 3). In this context, it should be noted that the distinction between Literary Fiction and Popular Fiction (hence Science Fiction) in terms of heteronomy and autonomy does not indicate the quality of a genre.

Landon states the view of Theodore Sturgeon (a noted Science Fiction writer), a view that has become known as “Sturgeon’s Law”:

Ninety percent of everything is crud.

Corollary 1: The existence of immense quantities of trash in science fiction is admitted and it is regretted; but it is no more unnatural than the existence of trash anywhere.

Corollary 2: The best science fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field.

(Landon 3)

As a category and not a measure of quality, the strict definition of Science Fiction is stated in *A New Handbook of Literary Terms* by David Mikics: “Science fiction considers, in fictional form, the influence of scientific advances on human life. Frequently examining the possibility of existence on a higher plane, or in a future world, it instills fantastic literature with rational plausibility, and attends to the ‘technologically miraculous’ (Northrop Frye)” (Mikics 273).

Expanding on this definition, I argue that Science Fiction’s consciousness of its readers translates into the text differently from other genres, because this consciousness of the readers manifests itself into the very purpose of Science Fiction—the contemplation of humankind. This contemplation of humankind is shown by William S. Bainbridge’s citation of John Campbell, who defines Science Fiction by saying:

Science-fiction doesn’t fit into the mainstream of literature, and, so long as it is science-fiction, won’t. The fundamental difference is this: the mainstream serious novel tries to show the effect of experiences on the individual who is the central character. Science-fiction tries to explore the effect of experiences on the group-entity—culture, race, or confederation of races—which is, in fact, the central

character. Note that this must be presented through individual eyes—but while a man may be the viewpoint character, Man is the central character. (Bainbridge 13)

This prioritization of humankind over a single individual indicates the fundamental difference between Science Fiction and the rest of literature. I believe that this prioritization of humankind over the individual best allows the author to think in broad, idealistic terms—to imagine the future; as Delany says, “Science fiction isn’t just thinking about the world out there. It’s also thinking about how that world might be—a particularly important exercise for those who are oppressed, because if they’re going to change the world we live in, they—and all of us—have to be able to think about a world that works differently” (Ghansah 3). Delany’s conviction in the ability to imagine a world that works differently supports Campbell’s belief that “Man is the central character” in Science Fiction, because Delany emphasizes the change done by society as a whole, and not as an act of individual change.

Science Fiction as a genre moves beyond the weaknesses of any single individual, and seeks out the weaknesses of a whole society, as Ray Bradbury states, “As soon as you have an idea that changes some small part of the world you are writing science fiction. It is always the art of the possible, never the impossible” (Weller 2). Science Fiction is the fiction of ideas; it is the fiction of possible change.

Science Fiction is different from Literary Fiction in my mind by the way it creates a unique ideology in its text. This ideology is the (imagined) future in its own terms, creating a world that exists independently of the one the reader knows (“a world that works differently”). The separation between “a world that works differently” and the world as we know it is easily identified by Science Fiction’s use of tropes like the “technologically miraculous” and a world set in the future.

The simplicity of identifying Science Fiction contrasts with the difficulty of defining it; as Norman Spinrad says, “science fiction is anything published as science fiction” (Roberts 2). The easy identification of yet difficulty defining Science Fiction is a product of its emphasis on changes and ideas (e.g. the future, better technology). Because Science Fiction is a more forward-looking genre than most (as necessitated by its plot tropes), this inclination towards the future is expected in the reader as well, as Schafer describes: “As I ingested reams of sf [science fiction], I was eaten by it too, in mutual communion. As if by transubstantiation, I was taken over by ideas and events in stories” (Landon 35).

Following Schafer’s thought, then this “mutual communion” in Science Fiction—and its readers—is an opportunity to address more directly moral issues that plague humankind as a whole, because this mutual communion forms a united outlook between the author and the reader. A writer points out the moral issues that plague humankind, and the reader visualizes it. This becomes an outlook that embeds itself in the reader’s consciousness, as the reader is transubstantiated into the “ideas and events in stories.”

This forward-looking tendency in both the reader of Science Fiction and the literature of Science Fiction allows for a greater communicability between the reader and the writer of Science Fiction. This degree of communication is unique to Science Fiction, because of Science Fiction’s tendency to use the future—and its society—as a backdrop for moral problems that transcend the individual, a habit which Delany and Campbell have previously mentioned.

Science Fiction comes into its own as a genre of literature in its treatment of the future in its own terms. This treatment of the future is not only a genre trope, but more importantly, it allows the separation of the individual and society—or man and mankind, as Campbell puts it. The separation of man and mankind essentially allows the proliferation of ideas, because Science

Fiction focuses on the values of mankind, rather than an individual—again bringing us to Bradbury's statement that Science Fiction is the art of the possible.

The separation of man/mankind and the resulting art of the possible is the difference between Science Fiction and other genres. However, this is not to disparage Literary Fiction, or other Genre Fiction, because I believe that each communicates differently. For example, David Foster Wallace says:

There's a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. It doesn't happen all the time. It's these brief flashes or flames, but I get that sometimes. I feel unalone—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don't with other art. (Miller 2)

While in Science Fiction, the inverse is true: Science Fiction puts its world first (the future, its technology, and the moral outcome of said technology); Literary Fiction puts its people first. If Science Fiction were written as a world populated with humans, then Literary Fiction creates a world out of its people. In this sense, Science Fiction seems the more imaginative genre, while Literary Fiction seems the more intimate genre, concerned primarily with people, and placing context somewhere further down on the list of priorities. Literary Fiction, as David Foster Wallace describes it, concerns itself with the relationship between human beings—and on a deeper level, a communication between the reader and the author, a quality that no other genre possesses.

Each genre offers a different way to communicate, as though each genre were a different wavelength of light—one genre creating colors that another doesn't possess. My belief is that the

combination of Literary Fiction and Science Fiction allows for an optimized communication between reader and author—focusing both on the quality of being “unalone,” as well as focusing on the possibility of ideas. Thus, an ideal combination of Science Fiction and Literary Fiction will combine both, to synergistic effect. For examples of this combination in action, one need only look to David Foster Wallace and Samuel Delany (in addition to many others, of course, but these two are major influences on my writing).

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND SAMUEL DELANY

The two authors identified as my influences, Delany and DFW (David Foster Wallace) fit into their genres, but also extend their books past their respective genres. In this sense, they overlap both the Science Fiction and Literary Fiction genres, so that their work is unique and—in my mind—all the more powerful because of this overlap. Delany is categorized as a Science Fiction writer, and DFW is considered a Literary Fiction writer (as well as a postmodernist); however, I think the appeal of either writer lies not in his predominant genre, but how he has “crossed over” to (or imported from) the other genre.

While both Delany and DFW occupy the same inter-genre space, they accomplish this differently, both starting from their own genres and extending into the other. In Delany's *Dhalgren*, a character known only as “Kid” traverses through the ruins of a city called Bellona—ostensibly a Science Fiction set-up. The novel is set in an unspecified future, with varied Science Fiction tropes such as two suns, an abandoned city, technological advancement (holographs).

In addition to the Science Fiction grounding of *Dhalgren*, Delany extends into Literary Fiction via the focus on character and themes that do not inherently draw attention to a comparison between the world he writes of and the world as we know it. Instead, Delany focuses on the main character of *Dhalgren* via first person narration for much of the book, and in the

later stages of the book, the “Kid” even takes to commenting on his own entries in the book, transforming the work into something that seems to understand Literary Fiction’s priority of communication between the reader and the author.

In essence, *Dhalgren*’s themes do not involve a world that the reader knows as one would expect in Literary Fiction, but, like Literary Fiction, the novel’s themes are self-involved, far more intimate, and relate to the reader more than the typically far-reaching embrace of all “humankind” in Science Fiction. For example, the reader understands sex through Kid’s understanding of sex; the way sex is addressed in *Dhalgren* is identical to the way it is in real life: from individual to individual. Sex in *Dhalgren* is not something that concerns the future of the human race, but is simply the Kid trying to find his own identity. This realistic treatment of thematic concerns is what I think gives *Dhalgren* the emphasis needed to cross genres.

In DFW’s novel, *Infinite Jest*, by contrast, the author’s focus is not on a recognizably “real world” as in Literary Fiction but on the strange and “caricaturized” quirks of the people who live in it. The way the novel is fragmented (each fragment focuses on a specific character) indicates the importance of being human, as this is a novel about all-too-human fallibility. This focus on characterization aligns the novel with Literary Fiction. For example, note the encyclopedic care that DFW takes in constructing character backstories, as indicated by the multi-page endnote (Wallace 985) on James Incandenza’s Filmography—a character (Hal Incandenza’s father) who has committed suicide before the book begins.

However, DFW crosses over into Science Fiction with the placement of the novel in an alternate world, as Brian McHale clarifies, saying that “postmodernist writing has preferred to adapt science fiction’s motifs of temporal displacement rather than its spatial displacements, projecting worlds of the future rather than worlds in distant galaxies” (McHale 66). Further

supporting this extension into Science Fiction is DFW's usage of subsidized time (years have been auctioned off to the highest bidder, and a given year—say 2012—is now known as The Year of Glad, or The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment), which places his text in a world that shares qualities with this one, but does not state clearly *when* it is. This “spatial displacement” is one of the central tropes of Science Fiction, and DFW's decision to place a Science Fiction element so prominently in his text proves that he did combine Science and Literary Fiction in this way.

Experimentation with the text is traditionally a more Literary Fiction trope as Science Fiction seeks to experiment with the future and technology instead. Of particular fascination to me is how both novels have used postmodern techniques in the fragmentation of their stories, offering alternate texts—DFW's foot/endnotes and Delany's split text—and unreliable narrators (in DFW's case, just a nontraditional combination of an omniscient/intimate narrative voice). It seems that this literary experimentation gives greater leeway to both authors in their ability to cross genre conventions. I believe that both books would not have become what they are, had they stayed within their respective genres; both used experimentation to test the bounds of what the reader and author can reach together.

DFW AND DELANY IN MY WRITING

So far, I have multiple stories, but two of them are the most developed: *Caffeination* and *Loop*, and, and I think both of them can be compared to their respective influences in ways that indicate their general influence on my writing as well as their particular influences on these two particular stories. With *Loop*, I aimed for something that seemed familiar to *Dhalgren*, and *Caffeination* is more similar to *Infinite Jest* than to *Dhalgren*. Put simply, *Caffeination* : *Infinite Jest* :: *Dhalgren* : *Loop*.

My writing shares the fragmentation of both books—in *Dhalgren*, the novel is broken into seven volumes, and each volume has smaller numbered segments in it; towards the end of *Dhalgren*, the novel itself seems to come apart, and a page is often vertically split in two—one half narrating as usual, and the other half commenting on the events as narrated. While this in itself is not extremely unusual, the way the book begins and ends is, because it begins and ends with what could be the same sentence, a technique used to enfold the book in itself, turning the act of finishing the book into an act of revelation and reconsideration (of the text itself). The only novel to do that before *Dhalgren* is James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

At the beginning, the book reads “to wound the autumnal city,” and at the end it reads “Waiting here, away from the terrifying weaponry, out of the halls of vapor and light, beyond holland and into the hills, I have come to.” By establishing a sentence that finishes the first half, Delany implies a looping structure to the book, a similarity I try to establish in my short story, *Loop*, except not in such a straightforward fashion. In *Loop*, I use the memory (or lack thereof)—similar here to The Kid in *Dhalgren*, who suffers amnesia and periodic loss of memory—of the narrator, and use his search for his own memories as a way to imply a kind of loop. This loop is repeated often in *Dhalgren*, which I replicate in *Loop* as well, in which the pursuit of memory, the remembrance of memory, and the attempt to preserve memory in the form of journals all form their own feedback loops, therefore modulating the end result.

In this sense, the connection of memory to the main character allows for experimentation with a Science Fiction convention, because excursions into memory involve the past, instead of the future (nobody can have memory of the future)—which allows Delany to address simultaneously the future (for the reader not living in *Dhalgren*), the present and the past. Delany does this in his book *Dhalgren* through two different ways, first: by splitting the text into two

side-by-side columns, one of which comments upon the other, as though the book is being re-drafted and commented upon as the reader reads it, and second, through the alteration of The Kid's memory, which allows Delany to narrate the present without an assumption (by the reader) of what went on in the past. My purpose in the alternation of the past and the present in *Loop* is to evoke a similar goal to Delany's, allowing me to communicate with the reader in a broader context, hopefully provoking more thought and curiosity than a linear novel might. In addition to this purpose of broadening context, experimentation with time and linearity also allow for greater, less context dependent experimentation in which Science Fiction is not only the fiction of ideas in its consideration of the future, but the fiction of reflection, in its consideration of the past. *Dhalgren*—and hopefully—*Loop* both explore the influence of the past, a time usually only observed or implied in a traditional Science Fiction novel without any exploration of the influence of past on present or future.

While *Loop* takes its influence from *Dhalgren*, David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* and my short story *Caffeination* bear comparison to one another. Instead of a Science Fiction novel inverting convention like *Dhalgren*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is a fiction novel using Science Fiction's conventions. This significance is recognized best in David Foster Wallace's use of subsidized time (for example, Y.D.A.U. in the book refers to Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, in place of the actual year, say, 2011 or 2012) to construct a timeline in the not so distant future. Establishing *Infinite Jest* in the future gives David Foster Wallace greater leeway, as he is no longer bound to the present as the reader knows it—in some realistic sense, but is given creative freedom to develop the setting of his novel however he sees fit.

In my short story, *Caffeination*, I attempt to do the same thing as David Foster Wallace does in *Infinite Jest*: to poke fun at established convention, and hopefully to enlighten the reader about things he/she might not ordinarily see if my short story were set in the present. Just as Science Fiction uses the future to present an idea, David Foster Wallace—and hopefully me too—inverts the role of the future from something meant to present an idea (as is Science Fiction's wont) to something meant to magnify and “caricaturize” the story, by more fully distinguishing it from the reader's idea of the present. In the short story, I focus primarily on coffee, but the presence of the story in the future frees my story from the restraints of Literary Fiction, and simultaneously focuses the reader's attention on *why* the story is set in the future (the story being a kind of garish, over the top, “this-is-what-happens-if-you-go-too-far-in-one-direction” joke), instead of being a story just about coffee. The same advantage in placing the story in a distinct time period is inherent in avoiding the convention of a strict Science Fiction story (in which the future is only a device to draw attention to the difference between the reader's present and the time displayed in the novel) but that the future in *Caffeination* and *Infinite Jest* serves as a way to bring the reader's attention closer to the point and intent of the story, rather than serve as a dividing function, as time does for Science Fiction.

Altogether, I hope that the short stories I've written do not imitate so much as repurpose the functions of chronology I've found useful in both *Infinite Jest* and *Dhalgren*. I've chosen both novels as models for my short stories because they seek similar goals: the investigation of communication. For, as I've stated before, my goal is improving the fundamental communication between the reader and writer using whatever tools I have at my disposal, and I believe I've done that with both short stories.

CONCLUSION

My desire to combine genres is partially attributable to my extensive reading and fondness of postmodernist literature; however, I believe the desire for a greater, optimized ability to communicate is fundamentally human. My desire to communicate is traceable to my unique grasp of language: how I do not find any language to be mine. I feel uncomfortable speaking, and I feel uncomfortable signing, yet I interact with two communities—the deaf and the hearing—who are fully familiar with their respective languages. As a hard of hearing individual without grounding in either world (for example, I do not claim to be more hearing or more deaf), my frustration with language has led me to seek out the best possible way to be understood.

As a result, I wish to develop my own way to communicate with an audience, and I have taken to writing fiction because I believe that fiction is the most intimate form of art in its involvement of an author with just one reader at a time. Sometime in between writing and probing my own familiarities with language, the two goals combined. Now, as a result, I believe written English to be my language, to be the language in which I'm understood most effectively, and is now the language I'm most comfortable communicating in as well.

Science Fiction and Literary Fiction tie into this goal of communication, because I am most familiar with these two genres. I'm familiar with the quintessential humanity and feeling of being understood that David Foster Wallace talks about, as well as being familiar with the dreams and ideas of the future of Science Fiction—because I do nothing else in my spare time. I dream, and I long to be understood, perhaps to my personal detriment—but not to the detriment of my writing.

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Caffeination

A coffee bean starts as a green berry on a small tree.

High in the mountains, there are people who live only on coffee. They are as skinny as you are, and shorter yet. They live at the very back of the very blackest caves. Nobody has spotted one of these coffee-people in hundreds of years, but they're still there, because every year, they place a fresh cup of coffee in front of a small skeleton. They've replaced their old gods with coffee. They worship the cup and everything in it. Their trees are holy, and their beans are sacraments of the earth.

They say that they're short and brown, wrinkled from drinking so much coffee; that their coffee is the strongest in the world—the soil and the altitude combine and grant immortality in the form of the humble coffee bean. Their ferocity is legendary, remembered from the time when they began to move up the mountains. The occasional trader would stop by their villages—when they still lived in the public eye—and try to barter for some beans. They demanded nothing less than a child for a sack of their beans.

People quickly found out that these sacks were valuable, and began to make the pilgrimage to their mountain villages, carrying their children with them and offering them in return for the keen awareness of time caffeine -added to their lives. Eventually there were people at these villages all day, children swaddled and strapped to their backs. At least, until the villagers completely disappeared one night, retreating to their grove of hidden coffee-trees, leaving the children-bearing people behind.

They started as ordinary folk. Just like you and me. Somebody found coffee, and people took note of how it added more minutes of alertness to the day. It allowed regular people would stretch out their lives a bit more. Some people figured their lives needed a bit more stretching than others. They would carry coffee-beans with them in small pouches, and make coffee whenever they needed it. They would argue about the best quality beans, and forget to leave leeway for opinion when they boiled their water.

Despite their differences, they were united by a common love for the bean. They grew closer and closer, closing out those who wished to drink the beverages for what they deemed menial reasons. For them, coffee was the god-beverage, and not everybody deserved to drink it. They moved further away from us normal folk and grew their own beans, still arguing about the correct temperature and best fertilizer. Eventually, they moved up into the mountains, to better grow their coffee, coming back down only on special occasions. Then, they just stopped coming down altogether. Nobody has seen them since.

People have tried many times to find them, only to reach the back of an empty cave. Nobody knows where they live, for if they did, we'd all be immortal. They say that they're still alive in the caves, hiding, drinking their coffee.

The sheep were acting unusual tonight. They were skittish and scattered across the pasture. The dog shuffled at the back of the herd, its tongue lolling out, eyes wide with a frenzied tiredness, halfheartedly attempting to gather any stray sheep back into the flock. The sheep seemed to behave without reason, darting in front of each other, the occasional half-chewed

mouthful of grass aspirated with a loud baa into the pelt of another sheep. Their eyes lacked their typical brown complacency and seemed almost flinty and calculating.

Gideon stepped back warily as the sheep swarmed around him, forcefully exhaling air through their nostrils in impatience, butting his legs with their heads. He pushed them away and worked his way to the back of the herd, trying to sight any stragglers from the top of his hill, next to the looming mountains. The sheep followed him, listlessly gnawing at his linen cloak and audibly communicating various desires. He looked away, and at the mountains. He had heard that people lived up there, kept a small village of their own, and rarely came down. Gideon was a lowland boy, living in the hills by the mountains, and he had always wondered about the lives of others, the men in the mountains.

Over time, a coffee berry ripens to a deep red, and is hand-picked. The higher quality beans are processed via a “wet” processing method; where the berries first have their hulls removed, and then are left to ferment in water for a couple of days. This completely removes the mucus around the bean, leaving it exposed. After this, the coffee bean must be dried out, preferably on a drying table, so that fermentation is halted and uniform dryness is ensured.

Caffeination is a state of existence for the members of the council. Their bodies are continually aging, just slowed by the caffeine. All of them are several centuries old, the metabolic breakdown of their bodies kept in suspension by coffee. There are no young people at

the city of coffee, immortality granted by the bean, and fertility taken—an exchange most of them comply with. Should they stop drinking coffee long enough to allow the caffeine to exit their bodies, they would die—a punishment reserved for the very worst offenses.

They walk slightly faster than normal, senses heightened by caffeine to a near superhuman level, and are immune to pain and disease. Because of their excessive consumption of coffee, their skin is tanned and dark—calloused where their fingers hold their coffee cups. Years of coffee consumption has stunted them, to half the height of an average human, and a quarter of the weight, because they eat nothing except for the occasional cream and sugar in a cup of coffee. Their teeth are stained mahogany, prominent and large in their faces. Their lips tight over their teeth in skeletal grins.

Some of the higher ranking members of the guild have evolved to require a certain type of coffee, their bodies responding better to the nutrients in the coffee. Kenyan, Ethiopian, Indonesian, one even prefers Kopi Luwak (and keeps cats for the coffee in his home). Over time, they adopt the names of their favorite coffees; their preference in coffee a reflection of themselves—Kenyan is bold and robust, Indonesian lower in acidity and strong in body.

—

Found in a cup of coffee, caffeine is among one of the most addictive substances in the world. Withdrawal occurs if a frequent drinker of coffee stops drinking it suddenly, often in the form of migraines, headaches, or general shittiness and a hatred of life.

—

Now, espresso break was over. Every fifteen minutes, the council-members skittered across the floor, twitching towards the nearest coffee-cup with a crab-like walk. The pattering of tiny feet, like those of children, made its way to the table.

“This is enough!” Sumatra slammed his espresso down on the table. A collective gasp arose as some of the drink spilled out onto the table.

“I apologize for my anger, comrades, but we must act. The soda cartels are rising, and about to unite. There is murmuring by those in charge of alcohol about doing the same. We are-- so to speak—being french-pressed from all sides. It is time. We must caffeinate the water supply. Addiction of the masses is our only solution.”

“Sumatra, you know how I feel about this. We cannot do that. Immorality and heathen behavior cannot be associated with the guild of coffee. We must be as clean as the notes in the first cup. We cannot force naysayers to convert. This is dishonorable and lowly behavior you speak of.”

“I understand, but there will be no coffee to speak of if we continue among our neutral path. We must grow as bold as espresso. Take over the figurative palate of the world. They are razing our trees in every continent. Soon coffee will be extinct. Do you want to go down in history as the ones who allowed that? We must put a stop to this destruction, and the only way we can do this is to create dependence upon caffeine. The masses must require coffee instead.”

“How will we do this, then?” Ethiopia asked.

“We will start strategically, hiring several designated caffeinators and placing them close to municipal authorities of different cities. Caffeine will be subcutaneously injected in those who we wish to place under our control. They will be injected with purified caffeine. Habit-forming

and powerfully addictive, the only drug known to be impossible to relinquish addiction from.

Once an addict, permanently an addict.

We will assume control of Hong-Kong, New York, Moscow, London, Bombay; all from the ground up--their water supply. All will be assimilated into our greater plan once our people create dependence among the appropriate municipal authorities.

After the appropriate municipal authorities are addicted, we will have them give us access to their cities' respective water supplies. Then we spread the seeds of global addiction. Water supplies will be treated with a synthesized, flavorless version of coffee--not dissimilar to an instant-brew Folger's. Thus, they'll drink the water and develop a subconscious physical need for coffee."

"They don't drink coffee, they die."

"... Well, that's a bit of an overstatement."

—

The coffee-dwellers worked relentlessly on their solution for the perfect human. Coffee was a part of it, as they, by their experience and relationship with the bean, knew. Coffee was not just a beverage, it was a way of elevation, of ascendancy to divine heights. After centuries of caffeination, they were finally able and ready to pass down their holy knowledge, but they knew any change would not be readily accepted.

"We must create the perfect human. Productive, promising, hard-working, relentless. But it is not always easy to tell people they are wrong, when they're unaware there was a problem in the first place."

“Humans and caffeine were meant to exist together. They are a harmonious whole. Each elevates the other closer towards perfection.”

—

Gideon kicked the ground nearest him, and fended some of the sheep off with his staff, yanking it back when they began to snap and gnaw at it too. He was not imagining their strange aggression. Their bellies were distended, and their faces taut, bearing an almost urgent expression. The sheep followed him with little mincing steps as he tried to think about where they had been last. Perhaps he had led them to a patch of wolfsbane and unbeknownst to him, they had masticated their very lives away. Soon their bodies would seize and they'd foam at their mouths, toppling over.

The livestock weren't even his, he had been paid to keep the sheep away from the villages until it came time to shear them again. The deaths of several score of sheep would weigh heavily on his head. The price for theft or a careless killing of one sheep was the first two fingers of each hand. To pay the price for the sheep he was in charge of, he'd be chopped down to a bloody nubbin before the herd was half-atoned for. A missing lamb was not a trifling thing.

The time was real. It was time to run. He would take the dog and take off somewhere north, where it was colder, and people were quieter and further apart, and he'd try his luck in the villages there. Before doing that, he'd take the sheep somewhere sheltered to die, get rid of them quietly, so that he could get a head start before leaving.

He brought them to the forest, expecting them to collapse at any moment, but they snuffled eagerly at the roots of the trees, looking for something to eat. They were decidedly not

dead, and in fact, still looked perky. Suspicious, he tried to clear some space for his sleeping pad, but the sheep kept milling about; poking their snouts against his thigh, slightly harder than normal.

After a largely frustrating struggle to get to sleep, Gideon kicked off his blanket and fiercely strode away from the campfire, towards the break in the forest. As he walked past the final trees, he saw a few sheep nosing about a smaller tree, eating the berries on the ground. He had never seen that tree before, and walked up to it, scattering the sheep. He picked up a few of the berries, and looked at them in his hand. They were dark red, almost purple, and smelled like all groundfall fruit—slightly overripe and sweet. He gathered a few more and put them in his pocket, before making his way back to camp with some more firewood.

—

The pattern of coffee-drinking follows the basic template of any addiction.

1. A cup of coffee is mentally used as a reward (it'll wake me up, or it tastes good, etc.).
 2. But tolerance builds and the desired effect is lost (eg. caffeination),
 3. Then the addict begins pursuit of the desired effect by increasing consumption.
1. Tolerance is improved with increased coffee consumption.

—

The committee reassembled, gathering around the table adjusted for their caffeine-shrunken height. The clatter of a gavel rung out at the head of a table. All heads turned to look at the noise.

“It has been decided. The Caffeination Project will be put into effect immediately. Kopi Luwak will be put in charge of executing the program. Recommend your best people to him.”

The room was silent, tense—nobody dared make eye contact, instead choosing to rattle their cups against their saucers. This was history. They would take over the world, and everybody's figurative cups would be rattled.

—Later in the day—

“Sumatra. Look in your heart. Do you think Gideon would stand for this?”

“No, no, I do not. But these are different times. Weaponized times. We can no longer afford to ask for customers, we must take them hostage—the best way to get their money is to take it from their wallets ourselves.”

“Different times or not, morals still apply. Gideon would not want this. This weaponization of Coffee is not how he intended it. Remember when there were cafes? Small stores dedicated to the livelihood of the black bean. People served and drank coffee because they enjoyed it. Not because they were addicted to it.

Those are times we should repeat.”

“No. This cannot be done. Think about how long it has taken us to get here. Companies have been slowly seizing ahold of the customers' minds long since we hatched our plan. Think of advertising, captive markets, price manipulation.”

“But must everything go out the window, in order to ensure victory?”

“Yes. They have been slaves for longer than they have known.”

“It is not our lot to decide.”

“They've forgotten how to decide. All their decisions are made for them. It is the next best thing.”

—

Walking back into camp, Gideon noticed the sheep eagerly sniffing at the pocket he had filled with the small fruit. He pushed them off, and drew one of the berries out of his pocket to examine. The berry was waxy and firm. He broke it apart—it divided into two pieces, the hull and a kind of pit inside. He nibbled at the hull and spat it out; it was so fibrous as to be impossible to chew. The bean itself was a pale flesh color, and covered with slime. He put this in his mouth and spit it out. He would wait, and see if anything happened to him.

If the fruit were indeed poisonous, his lips would likely swell, and he would know for sure that the sheep were not much longer on this earth. But if he felt okay, then he would investigate the fruit further, and try to determine the cause of the skittishness in the sheep.

The berry was not poisonous. But the sheep were still nosing around the base of the small tree, and others like it nearby. They were still in a state of unrest, bleating loudly and trampling what remained of the campground. Now even more curious, Gideon took a handful of the berries, peeled off their hulls and popped them all in his mouth. Chewing through the bitterness, he swallowed and waited.

—

After stripping the beans and drying them, the beans must then be roasted. The average coffee bean transforms from dried bean to roasted bean at about 200 degrees Celsius, though beans can be roasted to varying degrees of completion-- from a light roast to a dark roast.

“Sir, we’ve managed to convert the authorities of Tokyo and Stockholm. I’ve received word that the authorities of Bangkok, Moscow, and Los Angeles are soon to be introduced to coffee.”

“This is good news. Large amounts of the beans have already been prepared. Report back and tell Luwak that I give permission to start the dissolution of small amounts of coffee in the water supply.

We’ll pair their increased ability to drink coffee with a renewed advertising campaign on the health and thirst-quenching benefits of coffee, as well as temporarily mark down the prices of imported beans in those countries. This should be all the encouragement they’ll need to start their addiction.”

“Yes sir. I will tell Luwak.”

“Do that. I believe I’ve already informed him of my plans on advertising. See if he knows any particular demographic or location we should be targeting.”

The urge to stand up was overwhelming. Now that Gideon was up, why not go for a walk? Or a gentle jog? The world seemed so nice. He wasn't tired anymore. In fact, he felt revitalized, almost magically so. He looked around at the sheep, and then back to the berry-casings that littered the ground. It was the berry that was making them act so oddly. That was it.

He got up, and with his newfound energy, quickly walked over to one of the small trees and picked all the berries off of it, putting them in his pouch.

He would no longer be derided as the man who had killed a whole flock of sheep, but as the savior who brought energy in the form of these magic beans. He could return to town safely at this point, and barter with the beans for whatever he needed. A house. Livestock. All of this was within reach.

—

“Look upon him. Gaze. This man is the human we all must aspire to be. This man is the ideal human. His perfection is what we must nudge the mass of humanity towards,” Kenya pointed towards a glowing mass at the back of a cave. There was a faintly humanoid shape to the glow.

—

Several weeks have passed. Gideon had used up all the beans on the smaller trees by the edge of the forest. He would collect more beans before heading back to town. There were more beans up in the mountains, where the sheep had come from that first day. Over the course of the afternoon, Gideon drove the sheep back that same way. The mountain's teeth tore at the sky.

The coffee trees were within sight, illuminated by the setting sun, short and bowed with green fruit. Small scrub nestled in the foothills of the mountain, just before the terrain gave way to rock. The sheep stayed below, and grazed on the grass.

Gideon took his backpack off and took out the things inside of it, throwing aside what he deemed unnecessary. He then stood up and began to pick the berries from the trees until they filled his pack. The sky darkened, and Gideon did not stop. There was still space. The sheep settled down to sleep. Gideon made a fire and took a branch for a torch. He walked around the coffee orchard—not picking so much as looking, planning.

Weariness was held at bay by the beans. Eating a few of them from every handful, he worked through the night. Day came again, and his backpack was full. Gideon sat awake, a handful of beans in his palm. A few of the beans had spilled beside the fire. He ate the rest of the beans in his hand, took a sip of water, and snatched some more beans from the pile by the floor. He yelped and threw the beans down. They were charred and black, and smelled sweet and aromatic. A couple had gotten into his water and were staining it brown, giving the water the same smell.

Gideon took a sip of the brown liquid and knew.

—

Coffee is now the number one beverage in the world, consumed even more than water. Addiction has dug its claws in most of the civilized world, becoming a new addition to the trinity of water, food, and air required for life. People complained and yelled and protested, yet still,

they drank coffee. A few went on strike and refused the bean, choosing instead to poison themselves with abstinence. They were ignored.

Coffee is consumed daily by the public, a ritual to be adhered to at the cost of death. Though the promise of death by negligence of coffee is ignored by most, postponed by smaller worries: whether their beans were fair-trade, or how to refine the Maillard reaction during roasting, or the correct amount of foam in a cappuccino. Coffee was a commodity like gasoline. People moaned about the climbing price of a sack of beans, and organized ineffective boycotts, yet they ignored their own dependence.

Coffee shops have taken over the corner of every block, like mold that works its way across the entire loaf. Dunkin' Doughnuts and Starbucks colors proliferate. Refinement has given way to a cheap need and good coffee has become a parody of itself, an oily knockoff redolent of the paper filter, bitter and thin-tasting. People chug their coffee, like they take medication--with expressions of disdain and immediate self-assurance that it'd "do the trick."

Coffee is sold in tiny 500 mg capsules, in epi-pens for the direst situations, in patches worn throughout the day, in nasal-sprays, lozenges, syrups, and as enemas for those who preferred a swifter kick of caffeine. Coffee is misted throughout the home as Glade-plug-ins, used in cooking oils, dryer sheets, and laundry detergent; sold as instant, as concentrate, and every form in between.

—

Gideon hasn't slept since he had spilled the beans into the water. No sleep for three years. He had been spreading the gospel of coffee far and wide. Everybody across the land knew of the

miracle beans of Gideon, and every town had a tiny satchel of the beans, unprocessed and ready to be planted. It was Gideon's dream that the world sprout these miracle beans, so that everybody may realize the power of the beans.

He had chosen a cave to shelter the night in, a cave which he had visited often, and had brought a considerable store of coffee to, to further spread the gospel of the bean, and to replenish his personal stores whenever they grew scant. A halt to the endless marching would be needed tonight—he had drunk nothing but coffee for a month

But tonight it seemed he had taken it too far: too much coffee, too much walking. Gideon's entire body was shaking. It felt as though he were vibrating, disintegrating into the very air. Coffee beans spilled from his hands. He collapsed to the floor of the cave. This is it, he thought. This is it, when I become one. The sheep gathered nearer and nearer to him. The cave became brighter. The faces of the sheep seem almost human. They open their mouths to talk. The universe speaks. The universe is speaking through the sheep.

I am becoming one with the world, Gideon thought idly, as the sheep spoke of sheep-things like chewing clover and the manyfold pleasures of sheep sex. Gideon began to shake more violently. His face flushed. It was the beans. It was the beans. His body began to hum, audibly oscillating. His feet left the ground. His mouth and eyes filled with a great light. The sheep stepped back from the spectacle, murmuring empty profundities and whispering of enlightenment.

He flung his arms out wide and began to glow throughout his body. The cave filled with his heat. He spun around in midair and then collapsed onto his sacks of coffee, unmoving.

Loop

She sat by the fire and fed pine twigs into the flames. The fire was tall and prominent against the dark—the night of a quality only found outside the cities. She wore a seafoam green linen dress, a color that has always reminded me of very clean bathroom tile, and not actual seafoam itself.

The twigs she fed into the fire smoked and popped, giving off a resinous smell. She seemed an apparition in her dress—something I'd wake to in the middle of the night and be uncertain the next morning whether or not she was a dream.

“Charles. Charles?”

I stopped whittling. “Yes?”

“Charles? You mustn't.”

“What?”

“You mustn't.”

I turned away and rose.

—

I don't remember when it first happened. I'd always imagined forgetting as something violent, like the crack of an ice cube, but instead it reminds me of the fog—I forget things slowly, not even realizing that they're missing until I see the fog all around. And like the fog, too, I lose myself easily.

—

“Charles? You mustn't.”

“What?”

“You mustn't.”

What mustn't I?

“Hide the car. Hide it, goddamn it. Hose it down and hide it in the shed out back.”

“What about...?”

“Nevermind that. Hose the car and hide it. We can't do nothing else.”

“What will you do?”

“I'm going back.”

“Why?”

“I don't need this stuck in my head for the rest of my life.”

“It wasn't your fault,” she said, holding the door open as she stood underneath the lintel.

“It wasn't my fault...” I said. “Doesn't matter. I'm gonna go see her.”

“Charles, don't. Don't. It wasn't your fault,” she says, throwing the door open and rushing towards me.

“Doesn't matter. Don't want this in my head.”

“You mustn't drive. You mustn't drive. Mustn't drive. You mustn't. Mustn't.”

Each memory is made up of a proportion of mis-memory as well—of degradation, or wishes never come true. Belief forms reality; if I believe my memory to be true, then it is. Both memory and fiction are mine; both life lived, and life remembered. I'm unsure whether the fog rises or descends. Life seems more distant with every recollection.

It is as though I am not human anymore. With the loss of my ability to distinguish between recollection and fiction, I'm as much a creature of my own as I am a product of the past. I am a chimera. To be a chimera is to claim two wholes as my identity, to be a supercomposite. I am not a part, nor a whole, but two; a creature of mythology, double-headed and fire-breathing.

Memory, try your best.

I remember the smell of the campfire, of the cold earth beneath—different from the soil in the day. The smell of pine, the bark and its sap, the trees themselves sweating faintly over the campfire—all distinct.

And then later, the scent of her. Of motor oil and the heat of the engine, the dust risen from the road. The dust falls slowly, and the scent of things is shockingly crisp and new. It smells like morning, but with motor oil and tumbling dust.

“You need to leave. Or they’ll know it was you. Blame someone else. Let them take the fall.”

“No.”

“Nobody’ll know. You mustn’t do it. You mustn’t tell anybody.”

“They will. They’ll find out. Where will we be, then?”

“But that’s just it. Us. We can run. We’ll leave. We’ll run. Like those desperadoes in the books you read. What about us?”

“Books. This is real. What do I do?”

“Leave.”

“You were my wife. You are my wife.”

—

I found another journal. I hadn’t realized I had another. It was lodged in between shelves, fallen off. One of my older ones, still haven’t read it.

Or I don’t remember reading it. Either way.

I cut my hair. To start over, the shame of what I had done turning into furious self-effacement, I went to the hair parlor and told the stylist to cut it all off.

Do I really remember cutting off my long hair—I wore it long once (or so I remember)—or do I remember the agony in the faces of women as they told me of the time they had cut their hair? They had cut away a piece of themselves and found that they wanted the piece back.

I’ll remove myself, scrub away what I can. I’ve thrown away all the photographs of myself. I do not need to be remembered; I, and what I’ve done, must be forgotten. The brown locks of my hair fell heavily to the floor, sticking damply to the eggshell tile.

How long was my hair, and what did it feel like? What did it smell of?

The heat and humidity felt close and smothering. I looked at my hair on the floor and the bitter taste of nausea rose to the roof of my mouth. The transition between the state of life to being lifeless always seems accidental--a terrible tragedy.

Perhaps I confuse things.

—

I remember.

She is dead. I went to her funeral. She is dead. My wife. She is dead.

—

The radiator was lipsticked red with her blood and hot to the touch. The windshield cracked, a thin division cutting across the driver's side. Her dress was looped around the tire, a seafoam green ruff. She had been dragged to the side, her limbs in strange positions, head twisted to the sky, mouth and eyes open.

The violence of the scene should have been loud, but it wasn't, it was quiet—the aftermath. When things are still being made sense of, heavily fitting themselves in the gut, where they'll stay, only crawling out when most inopportune.

When she hit the car, it wasn't sudden and unexpected. The thump of her body, the staccato percussion her limbs made as she snapped back against the hood.

I always felt like a human life would leave more loudly. But it didn't. She was quiet as the tires rolled over her.

—

I've forgotten to shave this morning, the day of her burial.

She died in the wreck. I wasn't there for her.

She told me not to drive. I mustn't. I mustn't. "You mustn't, you mustn't." But I did. I don't remember things entirely. The night diluted by alcohol, existing in a place halfway between dreams and memories. I remember the squeak of the car seat beneath me, the heavy thump of the door closing. The glass rattling when I slammed the door. The fading of her dress in the yellow headlights as I backed away.

I can feel the leaks. Some leaks are slow, and only drip water, the walls beaded with moisture. Some trickle urgently into the puddle at my feet. It doesn't take long for things to fill up with water.

I can still see her in her billowing seafoam dress, as though she's learned to float. I back away, even in my aquarium of memory. I can hear the motor idling heavily, and recall the warmth of engine grease, though I didn't look under the hood that day.

My headlights cover less and less of her as I back away, and she recedes into the watery deep, soon only a faint glow--and then even less than that.

"You mustn't."

But I've forgotten to shave today.

They'll stare, and offer me weak smiles like cups of tea. The rattle of china in the mornings when she drank her coffee. The clink of her spoon against the mug, and the brown

whorls on the bottom like rings of a tree. Dusty sediment on the bottom if the cup had been left out too long.

I expect I'll laugh soon. Death brings strange humor when it's near. I've forgotten to shave and she'll leap out of the coffin, feel the coarse skin of my chin and proclaim her prank.

"You haven't shaven!

The younger kids were solemn, picking up on the adults who nervously ambled away from the black coffin. The coffin. Who had chosen the coffin? Lacquer black. She wouldn't have wanted that.

She always wore red shoes, never black. "Black is for widows," she said. Putting on her shoes, she'd teeter uncertainly the first few steps, like a toddler. I'm still alert to the clip of her heels on linoleum, in the sleepy afternoons after work. Black is for widows, she said.

The empty folding chairs arranged like tombstones, like the teeth in her grin when she concealed her anger. She never wore lipstick. Only red shoes. I asked her to, and she said "I don't like seeing my prints on everything I touch."

I wonder what the etching of her lips would look like on a glass. I'll never see. Only her opaque fingerprints, like melting snowflakes on the side of the glass.

What were her last words?

—

"John. John? John?..."

"Yes?"

"John? Are you alright? John?"

"Yes."

"John?... What happened?"

"I'm alright. I understand."

"John. Listen to me. Are you alright?"

"I am."

"What are you doing?"

"Writing in my journal."

"You aren't writing in your journal."

"Yes I am. I'm alright."

"John... Do you know where we are?"

"Home."

"Where?"

"The apartment."

"No, John. You're not in the apartment. You're home, but you're not in the apartment."

"Doesn't matter. I am what I remember."

"Do you remember how you got here?"

"No. I am now. I am here."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"You killed her. You hit her. You killed her, and hid the car out back. I went back to check. I saw her lying there. You hid the car out back. You weren't on the road."

"No, you were driving. You hit me and then you killed me."

The pull of memories as I push them away. They stretch like bubblegum; pink, chewed by children. The inside of my pockets had tiny balls of lint, a little spool of worn thread. She must have washed these pants before. Pull the thread at the corner of my pocket tight; release of tension in my stomach with the break of thread.

After, it was like smoothing out a patch of dirt, brushing away the dirt until the darker earth was laid bare; each pass of the hand seeming to leave it exactly the same as it was before—but for the indentations his fingers would leave if he pressed too hard.

It is time to write again. To find a journal and copy it, word for word. I rewrite, because in rewriting, I create.

—

She's dead, isn't she? My wife. My lover, my ache, my need. She is dead, and I had not known. She's dead and I had not known.

I imagined her. I'm not sure what parts of her are real and what aren't. Doubt sets in, an old friend. But how will I talk to her again, imaginary or not?

The weights inside of me sink. The woman I remember, she is gone; the woman I spoke to, she too—the same.

But oh, I remember. I remember. I remember.

I killed her.