

Absurd Lies:
Exploring Philosophy and Truth Through Fiction

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Introduction

Over the course of the last two years I have discovered that I have two strong interests: philosophy and creative writing. My goal for this project was to figure out how to bring these two interests together. Fortunately, I have found that philosophy and storytelling go together like cheese and crackers, so the work has been enjoyable, if not exactly easy. The end product of this labor is two short stories — “Sing Hollow Devil” and “Institutionalized” — that strive to highlight, illustrate, explicate, and explore some of the more interesting ideas I have encountered in my study of philosophy. Following the stories is a reflective essay that highlights the philosophical ideas I was trying to work into each story and how I think I accomplished it. The essay specifically breaks down some of the more important, complicated, or interesting metaphors and themes in the stories and shows how they work. Of course, if you take anything away from these stories at all, you’ll realize that the only person who can give them meaning is you. After the reflective essay I leave you, in the spirit of George Cohan’s famous line “Always leave them laughing when you say goodbye,” with a poem I wrote entitled “Life After the Capstone.” Good luck, and remember: it could always be worse.

Sing Hollow Devil

It had been the coldest winter anyone could remember, and although it was April the predawn chill turned Brother Lugeo's breath to mist. He stood atop the monastery's outer wall waiting for the sun to rise, as he did every morning, letting his consciousness wander out into the world he gazed upon. A light snow was falling, the fragile flakes mixing with ash in the air before settling on the ground. Very soon the sun would break the horizon and begin its desperate trek across the sky, then the snow would melt into the ash and become a gray sludge that would mix with the river and they'd have to tap into their reserves of drinking water. At the moment it settled on the ground, a gray-white blanket across the dark landscape reflecting the faint red glow of the city that burned on the other side of the horizon. It wouldn't be long until the Armies of the North reached the monastery, and it too would burn. For the moment, however, it was beautiful; such color was rare these days.

Brother Lugeo stood and watched the snow fall until the dawn's colorless light washed out the red of the distant fires, their glow being replaced by columns of dark smoke rising to the heavens. The Earth became gray again. Sighing, he turned and walked from the battlements. The wool cloak he wore over his habit sent snow and ash swirling around his boots as he descended the steps from the top of the monastery wall to the courtyard. He counted the crunches his footsteps made as he walked. Thirty-one granite steps down from the wall, then another two hundred twenty paces across the courtyard took him, as always, past the abbot's rectory to the door of the kitchen.

Each step he took left a fresh print in the ash-gray snow. Within an hour the snow would melt and the footsteps would disappear, washed into the river with the rest of it. As Brother Lugeo walked the rest of the monastery began to stir around him. Novices and monks shuffled past, each going about the same tasks he had each morning for as long as most of them could remember, each leaving his own fleeting footprints. Some muttered greetings or blessings as they passed Brother Lugeo. All ignored the smoke rising in the north.

Brother Lugeo entered the kitchen and waited just inside the door for the abbot's breakfast. It was warm and busy in the kitchen, and he counted the number of novices who paused and nodded as they passed him, scurrying from one task to another under the direction of the monastery's cook. After a few minutes the cook approached with the familiar silver breakfast tray. The plump little friar winked at Brother Lugeo and said the same thing he said every morning.

"Try not to chat the abbot's ear off this morning, Brother Lugeo. You know he likes peace and quiet while he eats his breakfast."

Brother Lugeo nodded as always, acknowledging the joke, and left silently with the tray. The wind had changed while he was inside and the faint scent of fire hung in the air. If he didn't know better, Brother Lugeo might have thought that some of the older children from the village had been camping in the monastery orchard. Or perhaps that his brothers were burning leaves in the garden. He smiled at the thought and made his way back across the courtyard, counting his measured steps as he took them. Sixty-seven paces brought him to the abbots' rectory door.

Brother Lugeo paused, as always, and knocked three times on the large oak door before pushing it open and wiping his boots on the straw mat. Usually, he deposited the silver breakfast tray on the heavy oak table in the center of the rectory. Sometimes Abbot Guerrero, still in his nightshirt, would look up from his letters and say “thank you, Brother Lugeo.” Sometimes the abbot was not there. Either way, Brother Lugeo would leave the tray and go as quietly as he came, out the rectory door and across the courtyard, one hundred and seventy-three paces to the chapel where he would kneel and try to pray.

This particular morning the abbot was not alone. He sat at the oak table across from an enormously fat man in cardinal's robes. Between them sat an officer of the King's Army. The cardinal and the officer turned to look at Brother Lugeo as he entered. Brother Lugeo ignored their stares and stamped the snow from his boots before he walked across the room and set the silver tray on the table in front of Abbot Guerrero.

“Thank you, Brother Lugeo” he said.

Brother Lugeo nodded and turned to leave, but the officer caught his arm as he passed him.

Brother Lugeo turned and stared into the officer's face. His tan and weathered skin and tight mouth gave Brother Lugeo the impression of stone and discipline and violence. His eyes shone with anger. Brother Lugeo smiled at him.

“Where I come from,” the officer said, “we respond when our superiors speak to us.”

Brother Lugeo remained silent and continued to smile at the officer. It was Abbot Guerrero that responded to the officer.

“Brother Lugeo does not answer anyone, Captain. He has taken a vow of silence.”

The officer looked at the abbot and released Brother Lugeo’s arm. Brother Lugeo turned and began to walk to the door, but was stopped once more by the cardinal’s voice.

“One more moment, please, Brother Lugeo.”

Brother Lugeo stopped and turned back to the table. The cardinal addressed Abbot Guerrero. “Has Brother Lugeo been here long?” he asked.

“Yes,” the abbot said. “He took his vows more than twelve years ago, just after I took over as abbot. He has not spoken a word since.”

“That shows a good deal of disciple and loyalty,” the cardinal said, glancing back at Brother Lugeo. “Perhaps he...” The cardinal trailed off and looked at Abbot Guerrero again. The abbot sat silently for a moment before answering.

“Yes, Your Eminence, I believe you’re right.” The abbot turned his attention back to Brother Lugeo. “Brother Lugeo, would you be willing to assist the cardinal and officer for the next few days?”

Brother Lugeo shrugged, then nodded.

“Good,” the abbot said. “Be at the entrance to the cellars tomorrow morning after breakfast. Someone else will take over your regular duties.”

Brother Lugeo nodded again, turned, and exited the rectory. One hundred seventy-three paces brought him across the courtyard to the chapel door. He paused with his hand on the handle and looked to the north, where the columns of black smoke

stretched into the gray sky like fingers grasping at the muted sun. Outside the monastery walls the snow melted, and the fallen ash washed into the river.

The next morning Brother Lugeo met Abbot Guerrero at the entrance to the cellars. The abbot greeted Brother Lugeo with "Good morning, Brother," but otherwise said nothing. Brother Lugeo waited beside him in accustomed silence and studied the cellar door. Like most of the doors in the monastery, the cellar door was constructed of heavy oak planks bound with black iron. He had never been through it, but it occurred to him that this was not unusual. Brother Lugeo's routines varied little and, for as long as he had lived at the monastery, he had been through few of its doors.

Eventually the fat cardinal arrived with the officer carrying a large leather bag that bulged at curious angles. Nobody spoke as they went through the cellar door and descended into a wine cellar, where they stopped and lit torches before following the rows of wine casks over the uneven stone floor into the darkness. Brother Lugeo counted fifty-one steps before they reached a worn tapestry hanging on the stone-brick wall at the back of the wine cellar. In the flickering torchlight he could make out a battle scene woven into the tapestry. In it, knights on horseback were hacking their way through masses of dark, spear wielding savages. Men on both sides laying dying on the ground, and the souls of the knights were shown ascending to heaven while those of the savages plummeted to hell.

Abbot Guerrero grabbed the tapestry and pulled it aside, revealing a door. It was smaller than the first door, but still built of the same heavy oak and iron. The cardinal produced a key from somewhere in his robes and unlocked the door, and the bolt fell

back with a thunk that echoed through the dark cellar. The door swung open and they continued down another staircase. Brother Lugeo noticed the air growing damp as he counted the spiraling steps bringing them downward. Eighty-six steps brought them to a narrow passage. The ceiling and the tops of the walls in the corridor were black with soot from centuries of burning torches, and the darkness seemed to grow heavier and press down from above as the black ceiling absorbed the torchlight.

They went single file. The cardinal went first, rasping and sucking air, his girth nearly touching the walls of the passage. Abbot Guerrero followed the cardinal, and Brother Lugeo followed him. The officer came last, wrestling the leather bag along in front of him.

Brother Lugeo continued counting in his head. They had gone two hundred and six paces when the corridor widened and they stopped in front of a door set into the stone on the right side. The corridor continued past the door into the darkness. The abbot pushed the door open and they entered a large chamber with massive torches burning on all four walls. The vaulted ceiling rose high above them, invisible beyond the flickering torchlight. Brother Lugeo looked up at it, squinting into the darkness, trying to make it out. He recounted his steps and estimated that they must be underneath the monastery's main chapel. Beneath the vast darkness that obscured the ceiling, the chamber was nearly empty. There was a wooden table against the rear wall, a bench by the door, and a single chair in the center of the room with an iron cauldron and a pile of firewood sitting beside it. The chair was large, constructed from dark wood and warped with age. The cardinal and officer set their torches in brackets by the wall and walked to the table. The officer set his leather bag down and addressed Brother Lugeo.

"You are aware, Brother Lugeo, that the Armies of the North are approaching. They have been resting for a week less than fifty leagues north of here, watching the city burn and reveling in their latest victory. We expect them to March again tomorrow or the next day. They will be here within the week. They will not pause at your Monastery any longer than it takes them to slaughter you and your brothers and set it to flame, and within a fortnight they will be at the capitol. There our army will stand against them. We will be defeated, as we have been defeated by the Northerners at every turn, and the capitol will burn and the King will die."

The officer paused. He seemed to be waiting for some reaction from Brother Lugeo, but Brother Lugeo just stared back and waited until he continued.

"At least that is what they will be expecting to happen. We're hoping to catch them off guard by engaging them here. The army from the capitol is already on its way." The officer paused again and removed his jacket, laying it across the table.

"There is something else. The Northerners have some kind of creature that fights with them in the battles. It bites and claws its way through our ranks at every battle, decimating our forces as soon as the battle is joined. We don't know how to kill it and we won't win any battles until we do. We have, however, taken a prisoner who we believe knows something about the nature of the beast. We have hope that he can tell us how to defeat it, but so far he has been unwilling to talk. If we can't get him to do so soon, we will all die."

The officer finished speaking and turned to begin building a fire under the cauldron. The cardinal motioned to Abbot Guerrero. The abbot whispered for Brother Lugeo to follow him, and went back out the door into the corridor.

They followed the corridor away from the exit, deeper into the catacombs under the monastery. The passage sloped downward as they went and the ceiling became lower. Small passages began to branch off from the main corridor. The floor became softer as they descended, and their footfalls made a quiet squishing sound. They passed three small passages on their left and turned at the fourth, one hundred and fifty-two paces from the vaulted chamber. The ceiling of this passage was too low to stand, and they continued bent at the waist until the passage widened again and ended suddenly at thick iron bars set into the stone. Brother Lugeo held his torch forward and peered into the darkness.

Behind the bars was a small cell furnished with a cot, a writing desk, and a wash basin. A bundle of rags and blanket lay balled up on the center of the cot. Abbot Guerrero spoke sharply to the ball and it uncurled itself and sat up on the bed, revealing itself to be a young boy, perhaps six years old. The boy shielded his eyes from the torchlight, obscuring his face with his hands. His clothing fit him poorly and hung from his thin frame like dirty rags on a line.

Brother Lugeo leaned in further and held out his torch, trying to get a view of the boy's face, but he only shied further from the light and buried his face in his blanket. Abbot Guerrero opened the cell and grabbed the boy's arm, pulling him to his feet and into the passage. The boy finally dropped his hand from his face and stood facing Brother Lugeo and the abbot. He glared at both of them with his chin in the air, his tiny body stretched as tall as he could make it. His light northern complexion was emphasized by a mess of brown hair so dark it was almost black. The torchlight reflected in his dark eyes, suggesting a fierce vitality that his small frame did not match.

"Brother Lugeo," the abbot said, "this is the prisoner. His name is —"

The boy interrupted him, his heavy northern accent mixing strangely with his child's voice as he spoke. "My name," he said, "is Eskel."

As they brought Eskel back through the passageways toward the chamber, Brother Lugeo counted his steps and half-listened to the abbot explain his responsibilities. Bring food, bring water, move the child from cell to chamber and chamber to cell. Their progress was slow; the abbot pulled Eskel by the arm the whole way, but occasionally the boy managed to sink his thin fingers into a crack in the wall and hang on, kicking and grunting as the abbot struggled to pry him from the crevice. These episodes lasted for minutes at a time and Brother Lugeo's irritation with the child grew, but he focused on the ceiling and counted bricks and remained calm.

By the time they got the boy to the chamber the cardinal's fat face was red and angry. The officer had started a fire beneath the cauldron which was now filled with boiling water. Abbot Guerrero hauled the boy through the door and shoved him toward the chair. Eskel stumbled forward, then stopped. He looked at the chair for a moment, then up into the vast emptiness that hung between him and the ceiling. He stared upward, eyes wide, then bolted. He was intercepted at the door by the officer, who grabbed him by the hair, dragged him back to the chair, and threw him in it. A brief surge of anger at the action swelled up in Brother Lugeo, but he quickly quelled it and sat down on the bench by the door.

He ran his hand along the bench's wood slats. They were cool and hard and smoother than he had expected. He watched as the officer removed thick leather

straps from the bag and secured Eskel's arms and legs to the chair. The chair and straps were clearly intended for an adult, and the largeness of the room, its invisible ceiling somewhere in the darkness above, made Eskel look even smaller than he had in the cell. The boy's arms were secured to the chair and Brother Lugeo focused again on the boy's face. His eyes still shone with life as they had in the cell, but now there was fear in them as well.

The cardinal, standing over the boy, turned to Abbot Guerrero. "Could you and Brother Lugeo wait in the passage, please?"

Brother Lugeo rose reluctantly and followed the abbot out of the chamber. As he turned to close the door he saw Eskel looking directly at him, eyes wide and mouth closed. The officer was wrestling something large and metal from the leather bag. Brother Lugeo closed the door.

Brother Lugeo and Abbot Guerrero waited in the passage for a long time. Their torches began to sputter and they had to light new ones before the door opened again. The cardinal and the officer emerged and instructed Brother Lugeo to tend to the boy and take him back to his cell. They were done for the day, and everything he needed was on the table. The abbot joined the cardinal and the officer going back above ground. Brother Lugeo went into the chamber.

The torches on the walls were still burning, their light straining upward and never quite reaching the distant ceiling. The fire beneath the cauldron was out. Eskel still sat in the chair, although his restraints had been removed. His small face was streaked with tears, his dark hair seemed pulled in every direction. His shirt had been torn and

there was blood on his upper arms. Brother Lugeo walked to him and looked more closely. A wide band of redness encircled each of the boy's arms above the elbow, and his skin had been punctured beneath the band. He went to the table and retrieved the supplies that had been left there. Some bandages and rags, a jug of clean water with a cup, and a loaf of bread. He brought it all back to where the boy sat and poured some of the water into the cup. The boy took it without hesitation, and as he drank Brother Lugeo wet one of the rags and began to clean his wounds. The boy did not complain.

To Brother Lugeo's relief, the walk back to the cell went smoothly. The boy climbed onto his cot without a word and curled up with the thin blanket, looking much as he had that morning when Brother Lugeo first laid eyes on him. Brother Lugeo closed the barred door and began walking from the cell back to the Monastery and the world above, where the sun rose in the mornings and a plump little friar cooked meals for monks who passed their days tending the orchard and praying. On an impulse, he paused and looked back at the cell. It was nearly beyond the cast of his torch, and he could barely make out the face of the boy in the dark, watching as he left him alone in the silent blackness of the catacombs.

By the time Brother Lugeo made his way out of the cellar the sun was setting. He extinguished his torch and left it on the ground outside the kitchen before proceeding across the courtyard. The smell of burning was stronger in the air now and sour; it could not be confused with the sweet scent of burning leaves. It was wood and meat and pitch that was burning in the distance. The ash-sludge on the ground was freezing

again and crunched under his feet as he made his way across the courtyard, one hundred and fifty-six steps to the chapel door.

As soon as he stepped into the chapel and closed the door behind him he was enveloped in cold and darkness. Sometime during the day the fire in the hearth behind the alter had gone out, and it was pitch black inside the windowless little room. One of the monks would be along presently with a torch to relight it, but for the time being Brother Lugeo left his cloak on and strode forward through the dark. Eighteen steps brought him down the center isle, past the unseen pews, to the alter steps. He climbed the three steps, took three more forward, then stopped and knelt.

He closed his eyes to pray, but no prayers would come. All he could think about, kneeling in the darkness, was the face of the boy watching him as he left him in the cell. He pushed at the image, tried to banish it, but it persisted. Even when he opened his eyes again he saw the pale little face, so distant in the flickering torchlight. Grudgingly he abandoned his prayers and left the chapel, but he did not retire to his dormitory. Instead, he went to the novices' quarters and found a few extra blankets and a lamp with a new wick. Then, on a whim, he made his way to the sacristy and searched through the boxes of old wills and sermons until he had found several blank pieces of parchment and a few broken sticks of charcoal.

Eskel was awake, sitting on the edge of his cot. He stood as Brother Lugeo approached and waited at the bars, glaring. He had removed the bandages Brother Lugeo put on him earlier and dried blood had crusted around the puncture on each arm.

Brother Lugeo put his torch in a bracket on the wall and pushed the folded blankets through the bars and held them there, waiting for the boy to take them. The

boy did not reach for the blankets, but instead glared into Brother Lugeo's eyes and spoke.

"I don't want your stupid blankets."

Brother Lugeo shrugged let the blankets fall into a crumpled heap on the cell floor. Then he lit the lamp and passed it inside the cell, setting it on the floor next to the blankets. Last he held the parchment and charcoal through the bars, waiting to see if the boy would take them.

"What are these for?" Eskel asked him.

Brother Lugeo waited, looking at the boy and holding the parchment and charcoal. Finally, he shrugged again started to withdraw the materials, but Eskel's hand darted out and snatched them into the cell. Brother Lugeo turned and left.

The next morning Brother Lugeo descended early into the catacombs. He had saved half his breakfast and added it to the bread and water ration the abbot had allotted for the boy. Eskel was curled up on the cot under the blankets Brother Lugeo had brought him the night before. Brother Lugeo woke the boy and gave him the food he had brought, then sat outside the cell and watched him devour it. When he had finished, Eskel took a piece of parchment from the writing desk and handed it to Brother Lugeo.

Brother Lugeo stared at the picture the boy had drawn. It was skillfully done, something any artist would be proud of, let alone a six year old boy. It was at once wonderful and beautiful and terrible to behold; a monster in the shape of a giant wolf, terrorizing a group of cowering men.

Eskel pointed to the monster. "That is Fenris," he said.

Brother Lugeo nodded, studying the picture. One of the men was fat and dressed like the cardinal. The other looked a lot like the officer.

"He will eat you."

Brother Lugeo folded the drawing and tucked it into his robe, then unlocked the cell door. He motioned to the boy, who came without protest. They walked together to the chamber with the massive torches that never quite illuminated the unreachable ceiling.

The day passed much as the previous one had. Brother Lugeo was asked to wait in the corridor, where he kneeled outside the door and waited in silence. When his torch burned out he did not bother to light a new one. After a time the cardinal emerged, the officer behind him carrying the leather bag. They headed up the corridor toward the cellar without speaking. Inside the chamber Brother Lugeo found Eskel slumped in the chair looking weaker and more broken than he had the day before. Tears streaked the dirt that was beginning to collect on the boy's face. Brother Lugeo washed and bandaged the wounds on his arms, which had been reopened. The boy ate slowly and they walked together back to the cell.

When they arrived back at the cell, Eskel went directly to the writing desk and began scribbling furiously at a piece of parchment with the charcoal. Brother Lugeo sat on the stone floor on the other side of the bars and watched him for a while.

Suddenly Eskel stopped his scribbling and looked at Brother Lugeo. He stared at him for a moment, then put down his charcoal and spoke.

"Why don't you talk?"

Brother Lugeo looked back at the boy and shook his head.

"Did somebody cut out your tongue? I saw that happen before."

Brother Lugeo shook his head again and stuck out his tongue. He thought he saw the boy smile for a moment, but he wasn't sure. It might have been a trick of the flickering torchlight.

"Did your King tell you not to talk?"

Brother Lugeo shook his head.

The boy smirked. "My King will kill your King."

Brother Lugeo shrugged.

Eskel looked at him curiously. He seemed to be considering this reaction.

"Did your God tell you not to talk?"

Again, Brother Lugeo shook his head.

Eskel sat quietly for a moment, staring at the parchment on the writing desk, then looked back at Brother Lugeo.

"You decided not to talk on your own?"

Brother Lugeo smiled, and nodded.

"Why?"

Brother Lugeo sat still and looked at Eskel.

Eskel waited for a moment, staring at Brother Lugeo as though he were expecting him to finally open his mouth and admit it was all a joke. When he didn't, Eskel picked his charcoal back up and went back to drawing. Brother Lugeo watched him for a while, then took his torch and left.

The next day Eskel had drawn Brother Lugeo another picture. Like the one before, it depicted the large wolf-like monster. This one showed it towering over a man who lay in a charcoal-gray puddle. "It's blood," the boy explained when Brother Lugeo pointed to it. The monster held the man's disembodied arm in his jaws. Brother Lugeo folded it and tucked it into his robe, then brought the boy to the chamber where he was strapped to the chair beneath the distant ceiling.

That night, Brother Lugeo once more sat outside the cell while the boy sat at his writing desk and drew. He pulled the latest charcoal drawing out from the folds of his robe and studied it. The most remarkable thing about the drawing, he thought, was the places on the parchment where the monster was absent. The beast was gory and awful, but it was somehow less terrifying than the negative space on the page around it. As terrible as the beast looked, there was something comforting about its *presence* that made the rest of the page even more terrible.

Brother Lugeo stared at the parchment until his eyelids grew heavy and his vision began to swim, and the passage around him fell away leaving nothing but the drawing. He stared until the monster began to move, its terrible jaw moving up and down as it chewed the arm, its muscles rippling beneath its fur. Then the monster looked at him, its dead charcoal eyes locking with his, and leapt off the page. Its mouth opened as it came at him, its teeth gleaming, its tongue eager to taste his flesh. Then it was gone and Brother Lugeo was left staring at the empty page where it had been. The terrifying nothingness of the empty parchment began to expand and darken until there was nothing in his vision except a terrible darkness. The emptiness became his world and absorbed him. He awoke with a start.

The torch on the wall behind him had gone out and the only light came from Eskel's small lamp. The boy lay curled on his bed, wrapped in the blankets, watching him. Brother Lugeo shivered and wiped the sweat from his brow, then stood to relight the torch. How long had he been sleeping? It was freezing down here. The boy sat up in bed and spoke.

"You were having a bad dream."

Brother Lugeo put a few drops of oil on the end of the torch, struck a spark from his flint and watched it ignite. Then he looked at Eskel and nodded.

"Was it Fenris?" the boy whispered.

Brother Lugeo started to nod, then stopped himself. He thought about the blank parchment expanding, overwhelming him. He looked at the boy and shrugged.

Eskel smiled at him in the torchlight. "Don't worry, Brother Lugeo. It's going to be ok."

Brother Lugeo smiled back at Eskel and nodded. It was the first time the boy had said his name. He found, to his surprise, that he liked the way his name sounded wrapped up in the boy's northern accent. He reached down and picked up the charcoal drawing from where he had dropped it while he slept. He folded it and put it back into his robe. In the cell, the boy unwrapped himself from his blanket and stood up.

"I have another drawing for you," he said.

Brother Lugeo nodded and held out his hand. The boy picked up a parchment from the writing desk and handed it through the bars. It was another drawing of the monster, only in this picture the wolf was not terrorizing anyone. The drawing showed a line of soldiers firing flaming arrows at the beast. The monster itself was ablaze, its

wolfish face twisted in agony. Brother Lugeo's inspection of the picture was interrupted by the sound of footsteps behind him. He quickly folded the picture and tucked it into his robe, then turned to find the officer coming down the corridor toward them.

"The Armies of the North are upon us," he said. "Bring the child. There is not much time." Then he turned and went back the way he came, toward the chamber.

Brother Lugeo turned and looked at Eskel. He stood in the cell, waiting, rubbing at the bandages around his arms. His little mouth was tight across his pale face, and the torch light danced in his eyes the way it had when Brother Lugeo had first seen his face. Brother Lugeo unlocked his cell and motioned for the boy to follow him, but Eskel did not move.

"I'm scared," he said.

Brother Lugeo nodded once, and reached out his hand. Eskel took it and stepped out of the cell, then looked up into Brother Lugeo's face.

"I'm scared to die."

Brother Lugeo paused. He wasn't sure how to tell the boy that he would be fine, that the cardinal and the officer did not want him dead, so he shook his head. The boy seemed to accept this and came forward out of his cell. They walked hand in hand toward the chamber, Brother Lugeo's eyes watching his footing on the slick stone floor, Eskel's eyes fixed straight ahead.

Brother Lugeo waited on his knees outside the chamber. He did not pray. He thought about the drawing of the monster, its fur ablaze from the soldier's arrows. And he counted, as always. He counted thirty thousand, one hundred and six seconds of

silence on his knees, images of the flaming wolf monster running through his mind, before the boy screamed.

Brother Lugeo leapt to his feet and ripped the door open, charging inside. Beneath the cavernous emptiness of the chamber's vaulted ceiling, Eskel sat strapped to the chair. Two thick leather straps that encircled his upper arms, each with hinged metal rods that arched from the front of the straps and plunged into his biceps. Rubber tools ran from the needles to a metal box on the ground, and then into the cauldron of boiling water. There was a long lever jutting from the top of the box. The cardinal and the officer stood with their backs to him, stripped to the waist, sweating. Eskel's thin, pale body shook and his wide eyes looked directly at Brother Lugeo.

"How do we kill it?" the officer screamed, then he balled his fist and struck Eskel in the face. The boy's head bounced off the back of the chair and his eyes rolled back into his head. The officer nodded at the cardinal, who grabbed the top of the lever with his meaty hand. Brother Lugeo opened his mouth to cry "No! Stop! He'll die!" but no sound came from his throat. After twelve years of silence, the muscles and tendons and nerves he had used so actively in his youth would not function. Unaware of his presence, the cardinal pulled the lever. The box screeched and a blast of steam erupted from the back of it. Eskel's body convulsed and went still.

Brother Lugeo took a step toward the chair. The cardinal turned and saw him, then motioned to the officer. Brother Lugeo turned and ran from the room as the officer charged him. He ran down the corridor, away from the world, into the darkness. He heard the officer and the cardinal behind him as they grabbed their torches and began to chase him. He ran past the passage that branched left to the boy's cell, ran further

down into the catacombs under the monastery. He didn't know how far he ran. He didn't have a torch. The sounds of pursuit stopped, and he turned blindly into a passage that branched right. In his mind he saw Eskel in the chair, unmoving, his eyes wide. He walked now, stooped over under the low ceiling. He was moving without direction, the stone was cold and wet under his feet. He stopped and crouched in the blackness. He tried to gather his thoughts, to understand what had happened. He tried to imagine himself in the chair, dead and unmoving, but the image wouldn't come. It didn't make sense to him. All he could think about was the ceiling in the chamber, so far from the torchlight.

He arose and continued walking, feeling his way blindly, going deeper into the catacombs. There was water on the floor now, and he kicked off his boots and waded forward. He felt a passage to the right, and he followed it. Then another to the left. His robe became heavy with water. He removed it and let it fall to the floor, a black heap indistinguishable now against more blackness. He continued, naked, feeling out passage after passage, water swirling around his ankles. The ceiling of the chamber, its obscene height over the boy's warm corpse, haunted him. It appeared around every turn like a ghost, the unseen becoming seen in the blackness.

He was moving without direction. How many paces since the last turn? Fifty? Seventy? How many passages and forks had he passed since then? How long ago had the passages become tunnels? He heard a noise ahead of him and he stopped and crouched again in the blackness. He thought about the wolf monster. What had the boy called it?

Fenris. He will eat you.

Brother Lugeo tried to gather his thoughts. He tried to focus on Eskel, but he could no longer bring the boy's face to mind. Only the still, limp body laying in the oversized chair. Above him, he thought Fenris must be gobbling up monks and soldiers as the Northerners overran the monastery. He thought he heard Fenris laughing a wolfish laugh, and it seemed to echo off the walls of the tunnel behind him.

Don't worry, Brother Lugeo. It's going to be ok.

In his mind the chamber was empty now; the boy was gone. All he could picture was the vaulted ceiling, just out of reach of the torchlight. He thought he heard the noise again in the tunnel. He listened; there was nothing. Eskel was not here. Fenris was not here. He was alone. He was completely, tragically, alone. He tried to stand, but the darkness had overcome his will. It lay on him like a wet blanket, pressing down and in from all sides. He could not move. He was on his knees now, and the cold water sloshed against his thighs. He bowed his head, but the prayers would not come. They had vanished with the boy's face.

He looked up, and the darkness above was as deep and black as the rest. It was pressing down on him, becoming heavier. He had no need for Fenris, it was the empty darkness that would consume him. In his mind he kept searching for the boy in the chamber, but he found nothing but the wooden chair. Then the chair was gone, and there was only the ceiling, far out of reach in the darkness. It mocked him, mocked his nakedness, mocked his fleeting presence in the cold dark belly of the earth as it pushed him down, further into the dead water.

Then there was no ceiling, and he saw that it had never been there at all. He searched the darkness one last time and found the boy's face again, but it was cold and

silent and dead. Brother Lugeo's throat muscles came to life, and he screamed into the blackness.

Institutionalized

The office building Greg worked in was an ugly concrete two story thing in an ugly part of Chicago. It was across the street from a Greyhound station where the buses idled all day and made the air stink like bus exhaust. It wasn't all bad, however. Two blocks down was a quiet little park that the homeless people seemed not to have noticed, and across from that was a little Mexican place with awesome enchiladas. When the weather was nice Greg liked to have his lunch on the patio there. He'd drink a couple of margaritas and gaze at the park and his afternoon would always be a little easier to deal with.

At the moment Greg sat motionless at his desk inside the ugly building, staring at the pen he held loosely between his thumb and forefinger. In the next cube over the new woman, Brenda (*was that her name?*) was chatting on the phone with somebody. He could only smell her perfume faintly now, but the scent came to him more powerfully in waves throughout the day, masking the burnt smells of the copier (he was sure all the toner would give him cancer, eventually) and the coffee maker, which was reset a dozen times throughout the day. He straightened the pen so that it was vertical to the floor. Behind him, near the break room, he heard the water cooler chug once as someone filled their little paper-cone cup. In the next cubicle, Brenda hung up the phone and resumed typing, her long lacquered fingernails beating a rhythmless *click-click-click* on her keyboard. The sound seeped over the top and through the cracks of the prison-gray cubicle walls for most of the day. He hated the *clicking* more than he hated the perfume. He tried to put it out of his mind and concentrate on the pen.

The pen. It was a glossy black tube with his company's name printed in red down the side, with a matching black cap. He focused, but still the *click-click-click* of the fingernails on the

keyboard gnawed at the edges of his consciousness. He visualized the pen twirling through his fingers, deftly spinning end over end between each finger and the next until it reached the end, then one big flip all the way back to where it started. After a moment he spun the pen up over his first finger, just like he had visualized, then over the next, until it reached the end and fell, clattering onto his keyboard.

"Shit," he cursed out loud. The noises of the office invaded his sense again and he grabbed the pen off the keyboard and hit the space bar. The starfield screensaver turned off and was replaced by a spreadsheet filled with a half-finished audit report. In the next cubicle Brenda stopped typing and her fat pink face, framed by a giant perm of orange hair, appeared over the top of Greg's gray wall. The appearance was accompanied by a waft of flowery perfume.

"Did you say something, Greg?"

"No, Brenda," he said, then glanced up. The woman was glaring at him. "I mean, sorry, I was talking to myself." She rolled her eyes and disappeared back into her cube. Maybe her name wasn't Brenda after all, he thought.

Sighing, he looked at his watch as the *click-click-click* resumed. Tossing the pen back onto the desk, he picked up a folder labeled "Third Quarter Audit" and opened it. He stared at the first page for a moment, then closed it and put it back on the desk, instead lifting the keyboard and pulling a crumpled white envelope out from underneath it.

Across the front of the envelope, in neat red letters, was stamped "THIS CORRESPONDENCE IS FROM AN INMATE OF THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS." He pulled the letter out of the envelope and unfolded it for what seemed like the eighth time this morning. He stared at the greeting for a moment. "Dear Greg," it said, scrawled in his father's

untidy handwriting, the all caps print pressed into the paper so hard they were indented. He scanned down to the fourth word on the second line. "Exonerated." God bless DNA profiling.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the monitor darken, returning to the starfield screensaver. He traced the words on the paper with his finger. Release. Friday. They had been pushed down into the paper like they were carved into stone. Friday, that was today. Greg hadn't seen his father in 26 years. His father had been an accountant, too. When Greg was a child, he would sit next to him when he worked at home, filling endless spreadsheets with countless numbers. Even back then his father wrote like he was punishing the paper. Greg used to close his eyes and trace the indent of the numbers his father had written, trying to read them with his fingers. Back then the spreadsheets were paper. Greg pushed the space bar again and stared at his own spreadsheet glowing in front of him. He folded the letter and put it back in the envelope, then returned it to its hiding spot under his keyboard.

Before he could pick the audit folder back up, the phone on his desk sounded three sharp chirps. He picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

"Hey man, you about ready?" It was Greg's friend Kevin. Kevin worked in engineering.

"Ready for what?"

"Lunch, man. Fucking enchiladas and margaritas. Janet just called, she's ready to go."

"Oh, yeah, right. Lunch," Greg said. "Who's Janet?"

"Janet from HR. The hot one. What's wrong with you man? You forget?"

Greg looked at the spreadsheet on his monitor. The cursor in the upper left corner was blinking at him. "Yeah, I guess. I don't think I can go."

"*Can't*? What do you mean *can't*? Is the Boss Man in your cubicle with a gun to your head? Come on, let's go."

Greg didn't answer. The cursor was still blinking at him and the cubicle walls seemed strange and oppressive. The *click-click-click* of Brenda's nails had stopped gnawing and begun to pound. He glanced out the door of his cubical. A shaft of sunlight, having found its way through the heavy duty blinds at the end of his row, cut its way down the center of the short blue carpet outside his cube. He reached out and touched the stone-gray wall of the cubicle. The cold metal felt strange, but he wasn't sure what he had been expecting.

Kevin's voice interrupted his thoughts. "You still there, dude? You coming or what?"

Greg stared at the blinking cursor. "I really can't. I've got way too much to do."

"Alright man, I guess I get Janet all to myself."

Greg hung up the phone. He looked at his watch again. Karen, his wife, would be at the prison by now. He wondered if there would be a lot of paperwork for her to sign. He looked around again. The strangeness of the walls he had experienced a moment ago had faded, and the *click-click-click* had stopped. Brenda (or whatever her name was) must have gone to lunch. He looked back at the computer. The damned cursor was still blinking at him. Greg sighed and looked at his watch again, then got up headed to the break room for a bag of chips from the vending machine.

Karen took a long, deep drink from her wine glass, then set it back on the coffee table. The *clink* that sounded when the bottom of the glass touched the glass table seemed to echo in the silence of the room. She thought, for what seemed like the hundredth time in the past two hours, that she ought to put on some music, or turn on the TV — something, *anything*, to fill the quiet — but she just wasn't sure. This man made her so nervous. She didn't know what kind of

music or TV he liked, or if he liked it at all. She could ask, she supposed. She had tried a few times to strike up a conversation, but he answered her questions simply and without elaboration. He was so awkward, she thought. Then there was the wine — she had opened an eighty dollar bottle of wine when they had gotten home. To celebrate, she told him. But he had smiled and turned it down, instead asking if he could have one of the Budweisers in the back of the fridge. Totally without manners or social grace. Even the way he looked, she thought, with his gray hair past his shoulders and wild beard, sitting on the sofa smiling like an idiot and looking around like he'd never been in a living room before. He kept reaching down with his empty hand and rubbing the fabric of the sofa. She realized she was staring and quickly looked away. He hadn't noticed. She wondered if he was retarded, but she was sure Greg would have said something about that.

And *Greg*. He was supposed to be home hours ago. She glanced at the clock on the mantle, picked her up wine glass again and drained it. *Hours*. He was supposed to be here when she got home from picking up his father. He was supposed to be making dinner. But all she found when she got home was a message on the answering machine: "Hey honey, I'm gonna be a little later than I thought." So she was stuck here alone with the most socially awkward man she had ever met. She stood and walked to the bookshelves by the TV where she and Greg kept their CDs. Fuck it, she thought. I'll just ask him. She turned and looked at him. He was reclining on the brown sofa with his beer in his hand

"What kind of music do you listen to, Albert?"

Albert smiled and shrugged.

Karen hid her grimace and turned back to the CDs. "Do you like U2?" she asked, her back to him.

"I don't know," he replied. "I've never heard of them."

Karen momentarily forgot the awkwardness of the situation and laughed. "You've never heard of U2?"

Albert smiled again. "They don't let you listen to music on death row," he said.

The awkwardness flooded back into the room, and Karen shuddered. Of course, she thought. U2 didn't exist in 1972. "Sorry," she said. "Stupid question."

If Albert felt awkward, he didn't show it. "It's ok, I don't mind," he said. "I'd like to hear it."

Karen pulled *The Joshua Tree* off the shelf, put the disc in the CD player drawer, and pressed play just as the front door opened.

"Hello?" Greg called from the front hallway.

Karen pushed pause on the CD player and the music stopped before the lyrics had started. "We're in the living room," she called back.

She heard him take off his shoes and drop his coat on the floor. She started to yell at him to hang it up, but changed her mind. She glanced at Albert, who had stood up from the couch and was standing facing the entry into the hall, beer in hand, waiting for his son to enter. Then Greg walked in, and he smiled.

Greg looked first at his father, then at Karen. Albert was smiling, Karen was not. Karen was standing by the stereo, hands on her hips, glaring. "Hey honey," he said, then looked back at his father. "Hi dad."

"Hi Greg," Albert said. The room was quiet for a moment while the two men stood looking at each other. Greg wasn't sure what to do next, so he stood there and waited for his father to say something. Something like "I told you I was innocent" or "Why didn't you ever come visit me?" Or, better yet, "I'm sorry you had to grow up without a father." But Albert just stood there smiling at him.

Karen broke the silence. "We're hungry. You were supposed grill those steaks before we got home."

Greg glanced at Karen again, then looked back at Albert. "Sorry," he said. "I needed to finish a project at work. Do you want steak, Dad? Or would you rather have something else?"

"Actually," Albert answered, "We had pizza on Christmas in 1983. I've been craving one ever since."

Greg laughed. "You've been craving pizza for 15 years?"

"Sixteen years," Albert said, looking serious.

"Well, I guess we'd better order a Pizza. What do you say, Karen?" Greg looked at Karen, who was still glaring.

"I guess I'll freeze the steaks," she said, and walked out of the room into the kitchen.

"She seems nice," Albert said.

"Thanks," Greg said. "I'm glad you're home."

"Me too," Albert said.

"So," Greg said, "You were telling the truth the whole time."

"Don't worry," Albert said. He was still smiling. "I can't blame you. *Nobody* believed me."

"Yeah. Does that piss you off?"

Albert shrugged. "Not any more. Fuck 'em."

Greg laughed and went to give his father a hug.

Karen called from the kitchen, "Did you order the pizza yet?"

"I'm doing it right now," Greg yelled back. He looked at his father again. "I'm gonna grab a beer. You want another one?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry you had to grow up without a father, Greg."

Greg shrugged and they walked into the kitchen. Karen was sitting at the table glaring into her Newsweek.

"I know," Albert said, taking another beer from the fridge and looking at Greg. "Let's do some father-son stuff. Do you remember when we went to the state park when you were little and hiked up to the top of Starved Rock? Let's do that again."

"Okay," Greg said. "I'm pretty sure that place is still open."

"We'll go tomorrow," Albert said.

Greg frowned. "I have to work tomorrow."

"No, you don't. Not really. You could call in sick."

Karen looked up from her magazine. "Yes, he does. Just because his father is home doesn't mean Greg can just stop going to work."

Greg twisted the cap off his beer and tossed it in the sink. "On second thought," he said, "I think I will call in sick. Let's go climb Starved Rock."

"I'm not going," Karen said.

Albert took a pull from his beer. "That's okay, you don't have to."

Karen dropped her magazine on the table, stood up, and went upstairs to bed.

The next morning Greg was surprised to find Karen waiting in the car. She rode silently in the back seat while Greg and Albert talked. After about an hour Albert announced that he was hungry, and he hadn't had a damned waffle in 26 years, so Greg exited the highway and pulled into an IHOP. Greg and Albert started to get out of the car, but Karen didn't move.

"I'm going to stay here," she said.

Greg put his head back into the car. "You're not hungry?" he asked.

"I don't like IHOP."

"Suit yourself," Albert called over his shoulder. He was already walking into the restaurant.

Greg shut the car door and followed him. It was late in the morning and there was no wait; they were seated immediately in a booth behind a fat old lady in a straw hat. She looked at them suspiciously as they walked by her to their table. They ordered coffee and eggs and Albert got his waffle with strawberries on it. Halfway through the meal Albert paused and put his fork down, looking at his son.

"Death row," he said, "changes you."

"Yeah, I bet," said Greg. "Everyone thinking you're a murderer, being treated like a criminal every day, being locked in a cage. I don't know if I could handle it."

"No, that's not really it. I guess you'd think it would matter what everyone thought. During the trial I worried about what people thought, I couldn't believe that everyone thought I was a murderer. Even when I'd been convicted, I still cared. I tried writing you letters, explaining what happened."

"Yeah, I remember those letters."

"But something changes when you're given a date and time. For your execution, I mean. You spend your whole life knowing you're going to die, but you never *really* know it. It's always something distant, something that's not quite there. You can say it's a certainty, but it never really seems that way. You always treat it like a unlikely possibility. You know you might die next week, or you might die when you're eighty, or a hundred. It's always a possibility, and you never come to appreciate it. Even people with terminal illnesses don't get that. Even for them it remains a possibility, albeit a pretty immediate one. They're given days, or weeks, or months. Sometimes even years. But it's always a prediction, a projection. And people beat those odds all the time."

Greg interrupted. "I think I got to understand death pretty well when mom died."

"No, that's different. You got to know loss. I thought the same thing when my father died, and then again with your mother. I thought I understood death. I grieved for both of them. Still, there was a little part of me that knew it was *them* that had died. Not me. Never me. The day I got the letter saying my execution had been scheduled and provided me with a definite date and time, that was the first time in my life I knew, really knew in a concrete way, that I was going to die."

Albert paused and picked his fork back up, then shoved a bite of waffle into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed it with a gulp of coffee.

Greg stared into his eggs and didn't say anything. He heard the woman in the straw hat clear her throat and realized she was staring at them. Staring at his father. Albert noticed too and looked at the woman.

"Yes?" he asked her.

"I am so sorry," she said. Her accent was thick, even for this far downstate. Greg wondered if she was from the other side of the Kentucky border. "I didn't mean to be eavesdropping. That's just such an amazing story you just told. I bet something like that really makes you appreciate all the little things. Am I right?"

Albert put his coffee down and looked the woman in the face. "You're going to die soon," he said. "Very soon. You're fat and old and your skin has sun damage and your clock is winding down faster than anyone else in this restaurant."

Greg watched the woman in the straw hat turn red and stutter, "well if I knew you were going to be rude." She started to turn back to her breakfast.

Albert picked his coffee back up. "Rude doesn't mean anything, woman. I'm telling the truth and you know it. Now go see if your bacon tastes any better." He took another gulp of coffee and looked back at Greg. "What were we talking about?"

Greg shook his head. "You can't do that, Dad."

"Of course I can. That's my point. When you know you're going to die, one of the things you realize is how much of your life you've spent dealing with bullshit because it was the socially acceptable thing to do. Besides, she's an idiot. Idiots always talk about the 'little things.' Anyway, what would you do if I told you that you were going to die today?"

Greg looked from his father to the woman in the straw hat. She had hurriedly put some cash on the counter and was getting up to leave, being careful not to look at Greg or his father. He looked back at Albert. "Well, I guess I wouldn't believe you. If for some reason the threat was really credible, I'd work pretty hard on trying to thwart whatever it was that was going to kill me."

Albert nodded. "I did the same thing on an off after I got the letter. I'd dream up ways to escape, but none of them were every really practical. I'd imagine that the governor had heard about my case and decided to grant me a pardon. I fantasized about a nuclear apocalypse that would decimate the population of the earth, and there'd be nobody left to carry out the sentence."

"That sounds extreme."

Albert laughed. "None of them were realistic. It was my way of coping. My fantasies always ended with me coming back to reality, back to understanding that I was going to die. I don't think the human mind is capable of fully and constantly understanding its own death. Not the sane mind, anyway."

"But you did get out."

"I did. Still, it changed me. I'm aware of my own impending death now in a way I never way before I was sentenced. I'm very aware that I'm constantly living towards my own death. My execution wasn't cancelled, it was just delayed indefinitely."

The woman in the straw hat was gone, and Greg smirked. "So I suppose I don't want to ask if it made you appreciate the little things."

"It makes you see the big things, Greg. It makes you see how lucky you are to experience anything in the first place. It also makes you realize that most people waste their entire lives worrying about the people around them."

"Yeah, probably." Greg looked at his watch. "Karen's been in the car for almost an hour. We should probably get going."

Albert took another sip of coffee and nodded. "Yup."

The entrance to the state park took them down a curving two lane highway that cut through the thick trees. Every mile or so they passed a yellow deer sign, but they didn't see any deer. They didn't see any other cars, either. After several miles they reached a booth guarding a parking lot, but there was nobody in there and the gates were up so they just drove past it into the big empty lot.

Karen got out of the car and looked up, snarling at the heavens. "Well," she said. "I wonder why nobody's here." While they were driving the sky had turned gray and threatening. The tops of the trees had begun to sway back and forth as the wind picked up.

"I guess we'd better hurry if we're gonna make the top," Albert said. He didn't look concerned.

Greg opened the trunk and pulled out a yellow windbreaker.

"Bring your jacket, Greg," Karen called from where she was standing by the head of the trail. Greg looked at the windbreaker in his hand and tossed it back into the trunk, then slammed it shut. He walked up to the where Karen and Albert were waiting for him.

"Where's your jacket?"

Greg looked at Karen. She was standing with her hands on her hips, glaring. "I couldn't find it. Let's go." He walked past them into the trees. They turned to follow.

The trail started out as a wide gravel path winding upward through the trees, but grew more difficult the higher they climbed. The wind grew stronger too, and before long they were being buffeted by wind and dust as they hugged the rock face on a narrow path edged by a

sharp drop into the Mississippi. The trail was silent except for the wind whipping through the branches, and the occasional scuff of one of their boots on the rock. Occasionally, Greg heard Karen cursing under her breath. This was usually accompanied by a glance at either the sky or Greg himself.

The sky grew darker too, and the first rumblings of thunder could be heard as they approached the top of Starved Rock. The temperature had dropped and Greg found himself wishing he had brought his jacket after all. They crested a final rise and found themselves on a flat sandstone platform that jutted from the bluff, hanging a thousand feet over the rocky shore of the Mississippi River. There was a single lonely oak that had somehow rooted itself in the stone, swaying with the buffeting wind. The site was marked by a bench and a placard on a post, and Albert laughed out loud when he saw it.

"We're here," he shouted at them over the wind. The dark sky flashed with lightning and thunder cracked, echoing off the rock behind them. Albert laughed again and walked to the edge of the outcropping, holding his arms wide and turning his face toward the sky. He rocked back and forth on the edge as the wind ripped at his baggy shirt and tossed his hair back and forth around his head.

Greg followed his father forward and stood a pace behind him, looking down at the river. Everything below looked as gray as the sky. The water was high and choppy, and there was some kind of old fashioned sailing ship making its way downriver. Karen came up next to him and clamped her hands around his arm like a vice. Albert turned and stood with his back to the cliff and looked at Greg. "This is where I proposed to your mother," he shouted at him. "You've gotta take control of your own life, Greg!"

As he spoke the sky collapsed into a torrent of rain. Karen squeezed his arm harder and yelled in his ear. "Get him away from there, Greg." Another crack of thunder and the wind made her voice nearly inaudible. "Get him back from there, he's going to fucking fall!"

Greg turned toward her to say settle down, he's a grown man, but before he could speak his wife's eyes widened and she screamed. Greg turned back around to the cliff's edge. His father was nowhere to be seen. Karen ran to the edge and looked over, then turned and started screaming and cursing at Greg. He closed his eyes and tried to block out Karen's yelling. He took a step back to sit on the bench, only to be surprised that it wasn't actually a bench at all but a long, low, flat boulder. He decided not to sit on it after all. Karen's words seemed to lift into the wind and fly at him, beating against his head harder than the rain. He looked at her again. Her wet hair whipped around her head in a fury, her face was twisted and red with anger. She was loud and her words all came to him clearly now, but they made no sense. She may as well have been yelling in Latin.

Lighting flashed again, close this time, and the thunder crashed against the cliffs as Greg felt the electricity in the air raise the hair on his neck. Karen had stepped to the edge again and was pointing out over the river, still yelling something. Greg stepped forward and grabbed her by the shoulders to pull her back from the edge. They needed to get off this bluff, back to the car. Then something happened. He meant to pull her from the edge, to bring her back to safety. When he reflected on the moment later, he was sure that's what he'd had in mind. Instead, he grabbed her shoulders and shoved as hard as he could. He saw the disbelief in her eyes as she twisted to look back at him. She stepped backward with the force of the shove and her right heel came down hard on the rock, then her disbelief turned to panic as her left heel came down and met only wind and rain. He stood with his arms at his side and watched as her

hands flew toward him, seeking assistance, something to grab, someone to grab her. Then she disappeared over the edge and for a moment there was only rock and rain and wind between the raging river and black sky.

Only for a moment. Then the hairs on the back of his neck stood, electrified, and the oak behind him exploded. Greg's world turned white and silent and warm. He was falling though pure light, the noise of the storm had been replaced with the ringing of a thousand tiny bells, and all the nuisances of his life — the blinking cursor and the clicking keyboard and Karen's nagging and everything else — was replaced by a dull warmth. He tried to close his eyes but realized they were already closed. Then everything was black.

When Greg awoke the storm was over and his head felt like it had been struck with a hammer. He was laying face down on the sandstone and his mouth tasted like blood. He pushed himself up on his fore arms and spit, then looked around. The sun was bright over the eastern horizon and everything was wet and glistening and bright. Blindingly bright. There was some object in front of him and he reached out and used it to pull himself to his feet. He closed his eyes again and rubbed them with his hands, then squinted them back open. He stood in place for several minutes and slowly his vision returned to him. He was a little bit surprised to find that the object in front of him was not, in fact, a flat stone. It was a bench. He turned his head to look at the damaged oak but it stood tall and healthy, drinking in the morning sun like the storm had never been.

Shuffling to the edge of the outcrop, he squinted down at the rocks below. There was no sign of Karen or his father, but that didn't surprise him. The river was high from the rain and he

was sure their bodies had washed away. *Had* there been bodies? Greg walked back and sat on the bench for a moment. Everything that had happened yesterday afternoon was so hazy. Either way the sun was getting hot and his head was pounding. His clothes were still soaked. He stood and began to head down the path toward the car, but his legs were tired and the wetness of his clothes made them heavy. He pulled his waterlogged yellow windbreaker off over his head and left it laying on the path as he made his way down toward the parking lot. The woods were alive with the chatter of squirrels and birds.

By the time he reached the trailhead his clothes had dried and he saw that the parking lot wasn't deserted any more. Eventually he found his car amid the others, but when he reached into his pockets he realized he didn't have the keys. Shit, he thought. Karen had the keys. Sighing, he turned and left the lot on foot, walking along the shoulder of the winding road they had come in on. Cars passed him regularly and he started sticking out his thumb, thinking maybe he could catch a ride.

Before long a blue Volvo slowed and stopped. Greg walked to the passenger window and looked in at a man about his age. The man spoke first.

"Jesus, man. You look like shit. You get caught out in that storm last night?"

Greg nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, where are you going?"

"Chicago."

The man laughed. "Well, I'm not going that far but I can drop you at the Greyhound station."

Greg shrugged. "Yeah, that'll work."

"Well, hop in."

The Greyhound pulled into the Chicago station a little after three. Greg got off the bus and, not having any better ideas, walked across the street to his office. There were usually people working, even on a Saturday, and he thought maybe he could catch a ride back out to the suburbs.

He walked in and was relieved to see Kevin standing by the secretary's desk. Kevin turned and looked him up and down.

"Hey Greg."

Greg nodded. "Hey man. Can I catch a ride with you when you leave?"

"Yeah, of course. But where have you been? Boss Man is pissed. I mean, I'm glad you showed up, but...what are you wearing?"

"It's kinda a long story. Why's he pissed?"

"Because you didn't show up this morning, dickhead."

Greg walked to the secretary's desk and looked at the calendar. It wasn't Saturday, it was Monday. Without looking back at Kevin, he turned and walked up the isle of cubicles to his desk.

He sat down and pushed the power button on his computer. Brenda's perfume was heavy in the air today. He sat and stared at the monitor until the computer booted to the spreadsheet he had been working on last week. The cursor was blinking at him. For some reason, the damned thing reminded him of his father. The phone chirped and he picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hi Greg."

Greg didn't respond.

"Greg? Are you there?"

"Yeah, Karen, I'm here."

"Well, I was expecting you home this morning. Why didn't you call?"

Greg sat for a moment. All he could think to say was "I don't know."

"Well, I'm glad you made it back all right. Is your dad there with you?"

"No."

"Oh, ok. Well you can tell me about what happened when you get home." Karen paused. "I love you."

"I love you too," Greg said, and hung up the phone.

The cursor was still blinking at him. In the next cubicle, Brenda's finger nails were *clicking* away at the keyboard. Behind him, the water cooler chugged. Greg picked up the pen from the desk and held it loosely between his thumb and forefinger, then turned and dropped it in the trash. Then he stood and walked out of his cubicle and down the row toward the front door. He opened it and walked back out into the sunlight.

Reflective Essay

I could sit at my desk and dream up metaphors and philosophical allegories all day. In both “Sing Hollow Devil” and “Institutionalized,” my challenge was not to tell stories that illustrate philosophical ideas and express existential themes, my challenge was to do this and at the same time craft the stories so that they are enjoyable in their own right. If one of my stories managed to recount the entire *Critique of Pure Reason* in twenty pages but, distilled of this, failed to stand on its own as a story, I would consider it a failure. Whether or not I succeeded in telling affective tales with engaging plots and interesting characters, however, is not something I will speculate on in this essay. Whether one enjoys these stories or not is a purely subjective matter. What I will share instead are my general philosophical motivations for the stories, as well as the intended meaning of various events and metaphors. Whether the meaning I intended is actually there, or whether the metaphors work, is again a matter of subjectivity. All I can do is recount my own subjective intentions in writing. What the *stories themselves* actually do as they are drawn from their resting place on the page, what they accomplish, where they lie and where they speak truth is, in fact, none of my business. That is a private dialogue that must happen between the story and the reader. That being said, here is what *I think* my stories are about.

On "Sing Hollow Devil"

From the first to the last line, "Sing Hollow Devil" expresses and explores existentialist themes. Some of these are demonstrated through circumstance and the choices of the characters, some through setting, some through metaphor. *Especially* through metaphor. Some of the metaphor is quite obvious, some of it is very subtle. There is so much metaphor in this story that I will not be able to write about it all. Rather, I will begin by exploring, line by line, the themes and metaphors in the first two paragraphs. After that I will skip ahead and highlight a few of my favorite moments throughout the text.

"Sing Hollow Devil" begins, in the first two sentences, with an expression of Sartre's modes of being. "It had been the coldest winter anyone could remember" places us, to start with, in the world of others. "Anyone," as used here, contains and expresses the concept of *everyone*. Thus, when in the second half of the sentence Brother Lugeo is introduced, he is already understood to be in a world of others, to be, in Sartrean terms, a *being-for-others*. As he is introduced — "although it was April the predawn chill turned Brother Lugeo's breath to mist" — he is shown to exist in the world, but here there is no relation to others. His breath turning to mist is a concrete image that places him firmly in the world of facticity. In this moment he is described in terms of Sartre's *being-in-itself*: he *is* a monk; it *is* April. The sentence that follows this pulls us back from the facticity of the world into Brother Lugeo's consciousness: "He stood atop the monastery's outer wall waiting for the sun to rise, as he did every morning, letting his consciousness wander out into the world he gazed upon." Here Brother Lugeo is, in his subjective consciousness, fully sovereign and free. He *lets* his consciousness

wander, he wills and projects himself into the world. He is Sartre's *Being-For-Itself*. He shifts his horizons at will, like Husserl who lets his attention wander from his writing table which "was just now seen and noticed, out through the unseen parts of the room... into the garden, to the children in the arbor, etc."¹

The next sentence leaves Brother Lugeo and moves into a metaphor for the temporality of existence: "A light snow was falling, the fragile flakes mixing with ash in the air before settling on the ground." Falling snow is often associated with youth and innocence. It is white and clean and pure as it settles on the ground; newly fallen snow is called "fresh" or even "virgin." It is a delight for children geographically lucky enough to have 'white winters': they pray for it at Christmas and play in it all season long. For adults it is not as much fun: it means crashed cars, shoveling, and ruined shoes. Snow is youth and innocence. In this story it represents the possibilities of the future, that-which-is-to-come. The ash, on the other hand, represents the past, that-which-has-been. What is ash was once substance and life. The ash is what is left over after a thing has burned up, flamed out, disappeared. It is a reminder of what is gone. Brother Lugeo witnesses the snow and the ash mixing together in the air. What he sees when he looks out, then, is the present, the intangible joining of past and future that lasts only for an infinitesimally brief moment, yet remains for as long as we are conscious.

In this moment of the present we see, always, the refraction of that future possibility which is not a possibility, but a certainty:

¹ Edmund Husserl, "The Basic Approach to Phenomenology," a selection from *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. by F. Kersten, *Collected Works*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), in *The Essential Husserl*, ed. by Donn Welton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 60.

“At the moment it settled on the ground, a gray-white blanket across the dark landscape reflecting the faint red glow of the city that burned on the other side of the horizon. It wouldn’t be long until the armies from the north reached the monastery, and it too would burn.”

The “moment,” that is, the mixed snow and ash on the ground, reflect death just over the horizon. Being-toward-death, to use the Heideggerian expression, is our fate. However, even as the moment is loaded with the promise of death, until it arrives the moment is beautiful: “For the moment, however it was beautiful; such color was rare these days.” It is, in a way, the certainty of death which makes each moment beautiful. It is because our lives are fleeting, because we are doomed from birth, that makes every moment precious.

In the second paragraph, Brother Lugeo descends from the wall into the Monastery courtyard. The two metaphors from the first paragraph continue to develop here. As Brother Lugeo descends, his cloak sends “snow and ash swirling around his boots.” What we see here is that the future and past do not simply blend and become the present on their own, we blend them. It is a construct of our consciousness, our way of understanding the progression of time as linear and our place in it. The death on the horizon returns at the end of this paragraph, only to note that everyone pretends it is not there: “All ignored the smoke rising in the north.” Instead of acknowledging the imminence of their demise, each person is seen “going about the same tasks he had each morning for as long as most of them could remember.” They have their heads in the sand. They are, as Heidegger would say, being inauthentic.

Additionally, the second paragraph introduces a new metaphor: "Each step he took left a fresh print in the ash-gray snow. Within an hour the snow would be gone and the footsteps would washed into the river with the rest of it...novices and monks shuffled past...each leaving his own fleeting footprints." This metaphor is somewhat more obvious than the snow and ash. Each of us, in that we are beings in the world, leave a mark upon it. This mark, however, is fleeting and insignificant; it is washed away almost the moment we make it.

Perhaps the most important thing that happens in these first two paragraphs and into the first few pages is that we begin to see the world through Brother Lugeo's eyes. We see the world in rich detail, not because I'm a fancy writer, but because this is how Brother Lugeo sees it. He is a man who does not interact with others in the same way we do. His self-imposed silence changes his access and ability to interact with the world, so he has begun to notice things that others do not. He counts his steps everywhere he goes, he counts seconds as they pass. He notices the wood the door is constructed out of, he takes in the tapestry covering the entrance to the catacombs. He senses the air growing damp as he descends into them and the blackness of the corridor's ceiling. What Brother Lugeo has become, through his silence, his bracketing off of part of life's experience, is a living phenomenology. Everything that passes through his consciousness is closely examined, we in turn are made conscious of his consciousness: we recognize the world that we know through his eyes, but it seems, at times, somewhat strange. The smoke in the north rises in columns, as smoke does, but in Brother Lugeo's world the "columns of black smoke stretched into the gray sky like fingers grasping at the muted sun." This statement, as is consistent with Brother

Lugeo's heightened consciousness, contains truth. The smoke rising in the north is not just smoke, it is death come to extinguish light and warmth for us all.

One of my favorite metaphors in the story, which is repeated frequently, is the ceiling above the torture chamber. On page 6 Brother Lugeo estimates that the chamber is located under the monastery's main chapel. The chapel is where God resides, it is the place that houses truth and infinity, it is transcendence. It is also forever out of reach: "The vaulted ceiling rose high above them, invisible beyond the flickering torchlight. Brother Lugeo looked up at it, squinting into the darkness, trying to make it out." The ceiling itself is never described, it is always as it is here: beyond the cast of the torches. The torches cast light, bring knowledge, but the absolute truth the chapel represents is forever invisible and unreachable. Even when Brother Lugeo visits the chapel from above it is filled with darkness and inaccessible.

The end of the story is, of course, where all the most important themes are brought to the fore. Brother Lugeo's flight into the catacombs is really a flight into his own being — or, more accurately, into his own lack of being. It is this lack of essence or fixed meaning, this *emptiness*, which gives the story its name. The "Hollow Devil" is that which we fear most. Beauvoir would call it our ambiguity, which is the same thing as our freedom. In the emptiness there are no monsters, no gods in which to take comfort. This is why, when Brother Lugeo dreams, it is the emptiness on the page which consumes him, not the monster. The same holds true for the end of the story: "He had no need for Fenris, it was the empty darkness that would consume him." Ultimately, Brother Lugeo is overcome by his lack of being. He forgets, as Beauvoir might say, that it is up to him to be his own meaning, and so his emptiness becomes nihilistic and he

drowns in despair. When the hollow devil sings it is not to exalt freedom of the subjective, but to scream in mourning for the absurdity of the external.

On "Institutionalized"

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard recounts the tale of Abraham on Mount Moriah, set to sacrifice his favorite son Isaac. Abraham, we are told, is the Father of Faith. He believes in the absurd. He is certain, in the face of all reason and logic, that even as he plunges the knife into Isaac's chest he will not lose him. Beauvoir tells us a different tale about the absurd. Her absurd is not the logical impossibility that requires a leap of faith, but rather the pointlessness of the world beyond our own subjectivity. The absurd is not the key to our salvation, the absurd is what haunts us when we refuse to face our own ambiguity. What happens, then, when Beauvoir's serious man is faced with Kierkegaard's absurd?

In "Institutionalized," we find such a man, Greg, atop a mountain making a sacrifice. Greg is not, to be clear, an idealized Beauvoirian "serious man." Rather, he tends to walk the line between the serious and a kind of abject nihilism. He is serious enough that he works hard at a job he hates, makes sacrifices for it, but at the same time he never seems entirely committed to it. It is as though he is grasping at meaning through his work, yet is at the same time aware in every moment that it is all absurd. He is, in a sense, a walking reflection of human ambiguity.

Greg is faced with a different kind of absurdity — a Kierkegaardian absurdity — on the mountain top. When the park bench turns into a stone altar, when lightning strikes the oak tree and leaves it unharmed, this is absurd. He finds that he is wearing his

windbreaker when he has left it in the car. Most absurd of all, however, is that he sacrifices his wife atop the mount, only to find that she is safe at home when he returns.

And who, exactly, is this father that returns to him after 27 years. He is, it is clear, a champion of the authentic and the genuine. He instructs Greg to face the inescapability of his death, somewhere in the otherwise uncertain future. Before he disappears on the mountain top, the last thing he yells into the wind is "You've gotta take control of your own life, Greg!" He is right. Greg needs to stop thinking in terms of "I can't" and "I have to." In Beauvoirian terms, he needs to will himself free.

At the end of it all, Greg is faced with a choice. He can take a leap of faith and accept what has happened, or he can write it off, tell himself that it was a dream or that he is mad. He is, in one way or another, set free by it all. It is not clear, however, in what way he has been set free. On the one hand, his experience on the mountain top smacks of revelation, it reads like a religious experience. On the other hand, he might think himself mad. Has he had a near death experience (with the lightning striking the tree), or did he just fall asleep? Did he really sacrifice his wife to the storm?

The result, whatever the means, is distinctly existential. He tosses the pen (nihilism) in the trash and abandons the blinking cursor (the serious), exiting his prison and entering the world, in one way or another, a free man.

Life After the Capstone

Under dreary amber illumination,
through the smoky haze of nicotine
and the bitter dark taste
and chaos of this place;

between hunter green felt and false wood
and the *crack* of a good break;

over droning conversation and corporate pop
and the *crack* of dropped glassware;

Concentration
goes the way of
conversation,
a desperate impossibility long abandoned
by the bitter dark denizens
of this place,
and still endeavored
by bright young amateurs,
training in the ancient, nuanced art
of lonely alcoholism.

Amongst them I linger;
different, judging, and the same,
drinking in the bitter dark brew
of handcrafted meaning.

Under dreary amber illumination,
through the smoky haze of intoxication,
I know joy
in the bitter disappointment of life.

