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J. N. Andrews Honors Program
Andrews University

HONS 497
Honors Thesis

Constructing Short Fiction: The Creative Writing Process

Mark Joslin

March 31, 2014

Advisor: Dr. Scott Moncrieff

Primary Advisor Signature: _____

Department: _____

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Abstract:

This project explores a creative fiction writer's process through writing four pieces of short fiction. Documenting his progress along the way, the writer uses peer-revision to refine his work. This method is intended to improve early drafts by both interacting with readers and utilizing the examples of well-known authors. The writer's stories will be considered successful if their plot moves at a bright pace, if the characters and settings are authentic, and if they come to a satisfying conclusion. The project will consist of these stories and an accompanying writer's notebook, which examines certain revisions representative of a move to good fiction writing.

Introduction:

Common knowledge holds that writers are creative people who, once gifted with an intriguing idea for a story, put it down on paper and send it to the publisher. For most writers, this is not the case. They come up with an idea, scribble down the first chapter, throw it away, try again, change it, throw out the idea altogether, attempt writing the last chapter first, switch perspectives, and so on. To paraphrase Anne Lamott, a writer has to become accustomed to producing appalling first drafts. Writing successfully then, means being able to evaluate and revise the early drafts.

The aim of this project is to view creative writing this way. I have wanted to be a writer for a long time, but this project has been my first serious attempt at moving beyond the misconception that writers transcribe their inspirations in immediately publishable forms. In attempt to reflect a realistic writing process as accurately as possible, I've assembled this project to contain four short stories (in the following sections) as well as my notes on revision and the works of other authors (the two sections titled "Writer's Notebook). Consequently, at the advice of my advisor, a published creative author, and several books on writing, I've tried to demonstrate that writing is a process, much like pruning a fruit tree, where the original shape is molded over successive trimmings and seasons of growth into the desired shape.

The components of achieving this outcome are fairly straightforward. I write and rewrite something until I can no longer see how to improve it; then I offer it to other writers who can suggest ways *they* see to improve it. If this appears to be a trial-and-error sort of approach, it usually is. Damon Knight, author of *Creating Short Fiction*, observes that "writing can only be learned, not taught," and accordingly this project served as part of my "on-the-job" education. I

could almost say that this project is as much about learning to see what works in writing (the creative writing process), as actually writing (constructing short fiction).

Of course, this leads to the question that I am often asked in regard to writing: “How do you know when it’s done?” This involves the “seeing,” the self-evaluation that this project is about. Judging proficiency in creative writing comes from a substantial familiarity with examples of well-done writing. I am writing short stories in this project, so I’ve analyzed the short stories of published and accomplished authors. If I wanted to build a boat, I’d look at examples of seaworthy boats. Authors like Flannery O’Connor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Edgar Allan Poe have written intriguing and well-crafted stories that have stood the test of time and are still being read today. With the same goal for myself, my advisor has often reminded me to “read like a writer.” I’ve studied eleven such short stories by skilled authors in this project and made notes concerning what, as a writer, I can learn by observing the craft of professionals. These notes, beginning on page 31, are representative of the lifelong devotion writers have to remain aware of the goals in writing they’re striving toward.

Learning to evaluate my own writing comes with a second and integral element: peer review. Though good examples of fiction are useful for setting aspirations, those authors can’t directly give me feedback on what I’ve written. Thus, at the advice of Dillard and Lamott, I’ve given my work to other writers/readers to evaluate. These reviewers were former classmates, members of a local Writer’s Group, and my advisor. By their advice and suggestions I’d see both what readers are looking for when they read, another standard to reach, and what distances or distracts them from a story. For example, one reviewer told me she felt the character “B” in “Somewhere’s Gate” had repetitious dialogue. I received this criticism, evaluated B’s lines, and found her to be correct: B was keeping the conversation in a holding pattern, rather than

advancing the plot. After reading the same story, one reviewer offered many suggestions on how it could be more humorous. I hadn't intended the story to be particularly funny, so that suggestion went unheeded. Seeing what will work and what will not in fiction writing, especially in regard to evaluating my work, is the purpose of this project and the way in which I can judge when a story is "done."

Assessing my writing process is what Annie Dillard describes as being a "self-aware" writer, that is, one who understands what it takes for them to write well. In keeping with this approach, there are aspects of this project which I have found to very helpful or less helpful. Peer review worked very well in improving my short stories, though I did find that group situations were less helpful than one-on-one. Even in one-on-one reviews, I've observed that people feel more comfortable dispensing criticism or advice through email, where they can gather and express their thoughts carefully, rather than face-to-face where they might feel pressured to over-compliment or express not entirely formed impressions in order to keep the conversation going.

Furthermore, for my future writing projects, I will endeavor to read more specifically to the genre in which I am writing. I read very well-done short stories for this project, but few were directly in the same tone as the stories I've written. If I were to continue writing in the science fiction genre, as I did with "Perseverance," then I'd read more short science fiction stories to see what is considered good work in that genre, as it may assume different expectations from readers than other genres. Also, going forward as a reader, I'd include more contemporary short stories, in addition to the classic ones I read for this project, to stay current with what *is* being published and considered good fiction. These are modifications to the standard idea of a writer's process as laid out by Lamott, Dillard, and Knight, which I implement to make the process work better for me.

The four stories I have written for this project are the test of the level at which I'm able to evaluate my own work and improve it. If readers find the products of my project as good stories, intriguing and thought-provoking, then this project has succeeded. On the other hand, if readers are bored, confused, or unsatisfied with what they read in my project, then the project will convey to me that the writing process I've planned for myself needs modification. If I am able to publish these short stories after this project is completed, it will be another indication I've achieved the project's goal.

The process of understanding what it takes for me to write well creatively is something that I'll definitely use in my future as a writer. Although I've built a method of writing in this project, it isn't complete and there's always room for improvement. This isn't the first time I've attempted to write fiction, but this project is the first time that I've intentionally included peer review, extensive revision, and tangible notes on what I can learn as a writer from other authors' stories. The stories that resulted from this project are what I consider to be my best work in fiction up to this point. Applying what I've learned from this project can only take me higher as a writer in the future.

The Silence of God

The blasts had finally stopped shaking the earth. Reynolds slowly pulled himself out of the alcove in the trench wall, his ears ringing painfully from the punishment of the artillery barrage. Wiping the dirt and sweat from his face, Reynolds stood and looked down the trench to his right and left. Yesterday afternoon these lines had been filled with men, soldiers, who had grasped rifles with moist palms, who had sat waiting for the order to charge over the top.

Now an overcast morning had dawned over a different world, pitted and scarred, everything covered in an inch of loose dirt sent spraying by exploding shells. Perhaps it was his damaged hearing, but the field seemed utterly quiet, empty of life, and Reynolds quickly began to walk down the trench, stepping over the bodies.

Reynolds was a broad-shouldered, thick-necked man with a red face, whose footfalls landed with a tremorous thud. Before the war he had stacked barrels in a shipyard and boxed Irish boys on Saturday nights. His bull's voice and attitude of perpetual ill-temperedness made him a natural officer. Though Reynolds disliked the war, it did not surprise him, it merely occurred as an expected continuation of his brutish life.

"Help me! Anyone! I'm wounded!" cried a voice down the trench. "For God's sake help me! Medic!"

"I hear you, I hear you! Save your breath," shouted Reynolds, running. "Where are you?"

"Here, here!" called the other man, "I'm hurt, badly!" Reynolds hurried around a right angle in the trench, where a second trench formed an intersection with his. "If you're a God-fearing man help me!" cried a filthy man lying beside a mortar barrel, three meters on the left from where Reynolds stood.

“I’m here,” said Reynolds running to him. The man, with the look of a chaplain, was partially propped against the wall of the trench, pressing desperately on a dull red spot below his ribs.

“Help me,” the man said breathlessly, his voice cracking, “My name is Bridgewold. 42nd, Bull Company. They’re all dead, God save them! I’m bleeding.”

“Reynolds, Sergeant,” said the big man bending to remove the Bridgewold’s jacket and shirt. The chaplain had the look of man who had survived a poison gas attack, eyes red and watery. Bridgewold exhaled through clinched teeth in the painful movements. The wound was a jagged slice where a piece of shrapnel had glanced off him.

Bridgewold looked disapprovingly at his wound, “Not mortal I think,” he croaked.

“Messy enough though,” replied Reynolds. Straightening, Reynolds wadded up Bridgewold’s shirt and handed it to him, “Apply pressure with this. Hard as you can. I’ll try to find a medic’s bag around here if I can.” Bridgewold obeyed, and Reynolds moved off, picking his way through the corpses, kicking a body over now and then, or pulling one off another.

This task did not disgust Reynolds. This dirty horrible place was not his planet, and in his search, he did not recognize these forms, these man-shapes, as men like him. One of these was wearing a white armband, lying rigid on its side. The left arm was pulled up close to the chest, fingers extended. The right arm laid under its head, stretched, fingers curled around the leather strap of a medical bag. Reynolds roughly pulled the satchel free and swung it over his shoulder. Turning, he saw a figure crouching by the trench wall, shoeless and clad in dirty green fatigues, attempting to hide. Reynolds drew his pistol, “Move and I’ll blow you to hell,” he said.

The interloper, a German by his helmet and the Maltese cross on his left breast, halted. "Hello, Englishman," said the man in a German accent with a nervous grimace, "Don't shoot! Don't bother shooting. You wouldn't send me far."

"Say your words, soldier, and die like a man," said Reynolds with a solemn voice, training the pistol at the German's heart.

"No, no! Sergeant, do not shoot that unarmed man!" called Bridgewold with fervor from down the trench. "In the name of God remember our orders! All enemies are to be taken prisoner whenever possible."

Reynolds reluctantly lowered his pistol. The chaplain had it right. "Over there," said Reynolds, gesturing toward Bridgewold, "Stand and don't move. You're a prisoner of war now." The German stood with his hands in the air, and Reynolds, handing the pistol to Bridgewold, set to tightly wrapping the torn flesh with bandages. "Keep it on your prisoner there, chaplain," he ordered.

"Priest, you're a man of God, who teaches you killing me would be pointless," continued the German, with red-rimmed eyes open wide. He shuffled his bare feet in the dirt. "We're already dead. This is hell."

Reynolds did not look up, but Bridgewold stared hard. "No, no. None of that talk, soldier. It's bad enough down here already," said Bridgewold, shifting his grip on the gun, causing the German to flinch. Endeavoring to keep his voice steady against the pain, Bridgewold asked, "What's your name?"

"Wachowski, 101st infantry," responded the slender German proudly, "But where else could we be, Priest? Hell and us three alone on the earth. I've walked over miles of this field and seen

not one alive, my own, French, or English,” glancing to Reynolds. Wachovski, if that was his name, twitched sporadically.

“If,” Bridgewold exhaled sharply as Reynolds wound the bandage tightly, “If, as you say, we are in hell, how could we have arrived here without dying or facing God’s judgment? Do not mock God, Private Wachovski, or the devil, for that matter.” Reynolds snorted derisively but said nothing.

“We’ve died the second death,” said Wachovski after a moment, eying the pistol. “Maybe this is the cruelest punishment of all: never knowing where we are, allowed to hold a false hope, forced to endlessly commit savagery against each other. I’ve seen a man tear his throat out with his fingernails in the gas. You’ve seen it too. Tell me then, is this your God’s world, and therefore His war?”

“Yes, I have been under the gas,” answered Bridgewold, “but we are not dead!” he insisted, “God would not be just if he condemned His children without judgment.”

“It’s His mercy, maybe,” said Wachovski, “that we don’t remember. We don’t remember, and it allows us hope. We’ll never know. But we *are* dead already. And for your God’s sake keep your finger off the trigger.” The German lowered his tired arms slightly. “We are friends now, here in hell.”

“Keep the gun steady. You’ll bleed to death if I have to hold the pistol,” Reynolds ordered. “You, Fritz, hold your noise, or I’ll do it for you,” he said with menace.

“No, there’s been enough violence today!” cried Bridgewold. “This man is insane, sergeant, and fears hell. Soldiers do what they must, young man,” he said addressing Wachovski, “it does not mean we are in hell.”

“But we are,” said Wachovski calmly, “we all are. We’re evil, and we do what we’re told. And here I am, I’m not your enemy but if the Kaiser had asked me to fire the poison gas canisters myself, I’d have done it. We all would. We’re soldiers. Even you, priest.”

“I saved your life! Don’t you forget that! God does not forsake his own. I will not hear your blasphemy for one moment longer. I warn you to look to the state of your own soul, Private Wachovski,” Bridgewold frantically clutched his side, as a blaze of pain stabbed through it. “Confess your fears to me, young man, and feel God’s redemption in your heart,” sputtered the chaplain.

“Hold still and keep the goddamn gun steady or you’ll bleed out!” roared Reynolds. “And you, you goddamn antichrist...” he said, turning to Wachovski.

Both Reynolds and Wachovski saw the pistol sag in Bridgewold’s shaking hand at the same moment. But the German was faster. Wachovski wrenched away the limply-held gun and shot Bridgewold through the eye of his spectacles. “Join him in hell, Englishman,” he spat, pulling the trigger. The hammer clicked and Wachovski went pale. The gun had had one bullet. Wachovski’s eyes grew wide.

Reynolds squared his shoulders and put up his fists. This was the sort of fighting he knew. The slim German, backed into a corner, fought back desperately. In a minute and a half, one round, Wachovski lay dead with a broken neck.

Silence again took the field, and Reynolds was again alone among the bodies.

At that moment a squadron of bi-planes bearing the Maltese cross on their wings buzzed loudly overhead, flying in a V-formation. Reynolds looked up. Somewhere down the trench a whistle screeched, and a new regiment came tramping towards him at the double-quick. Wet with the blood of two men, Reynolds went to join them.

Somewhere's Gate

A: "God, I'm dead."

B: "God is with someone else right now, but He'll be with you as soon as possible."

A: "Will it be soon? I'm very anxious about what is going to happen here."

B: "There's no telling, He can spend any amount of time with each person. It depends on the case. They're rarely cut-and-dry, as you can imagine."

A: "I suppose so, but it's hard to just wait here like this. I didn't expect to wait. I wanted to be dealt with right away."

B: "Most people do, too. I don't understand the rush, wherever you go it's an eternity anyway."

A: "People say not knowing is the worst, and that makes them nervous I guess. I think that's happening to me."

B: "Indeed."

A pause.

A: "Do you know where I'm going? It's been so long. I'd really just like to know already."

B: "I'm sorry, I don't know. This is easier for you if you don't ask questions."

A: "I'm beginning to become very worried. God wouldn't leave me waiting like this, if I were good. What if I go to hell, what then? Please just tell me anything!"

B: "I don't know, and I wouldn't be able to say anyway. This may surprise you but I have this kind of conversation with everyone who comes here. All I can say is wait and be patient."

A: "I'll try."

A long pause.

A: "How did I die?"

B: "Your body ceased to function."

A: "Of course, but how did it happen?"

B: "Your house burned down when you were asleep. You inhaled the smoke and never woke up."

A pause.

A: "And my family, how'd they take it?"

B: "I can't tell you that, I'm afraid. You are no longer part of their world."

A: "How much time has passed since I died?"

B: "I can't tell you that either."

A: "What can you tell me? Anything at all?"

B: "Just wait and you'll see."

A: "How long is the average wait? How long do other people wait?"

B: "There's no time here. It would be comparing two infinities of nothing."

A pause.

A: "How long have you been here? You're an angel right?"

B: "There's no time here, as I said before."

A: "But are you an angel?"

B: "Are you a human?"

A: "I was. I guess I don't know what I am now."

B: "Exactly."

A long pause.

A: "I know what's going on here, I must be dreaming! It makes sense. This is pointless otherwise. I've been waiting forever now. Soon I'll wake up and be relieved. I feel much better now. I'm dreaming right?"

B: "No."

A: "Well that's exactly what you'd say if I was dreaming so that doesn't prove anything. Whatever this is, it isn't real. Waiting like this makes no sense."

B: "You can call this whatever you want, but it won't change what it is."

A: "I guess one can't question a dream and remain dreaming, so maybe you're right. I'll have to think about it."

A pause.

A: "I know what's going on now. This time I've got it. We're in purgatory, just like the Catholics said. I'm atoning here by being forced to wait for thousands of years. It's so tedious but at least it's not painful. So I'll be admitted to heaven soon right?"

B: "As I've said, you can name this whatever you will, but it remains what it is."

A: "This is punishment, whatever it is. It's not fair. Back when I was alive, we had the right to a speedy trial. Why is this taking so long?"

B: "There is no long or short or time here. You keep forgetting that."

A: "But realistically this waiting fulfills the same role as purgatory. I'm being forced to remember what I've done, who I've been, in infinite boredom. I'd say it's punishment, all right. So you're not going to say anything? Tired of saying that you said it before? Fine. By your silence I see I'm right."

B: "You can't guilt God into changing His plans, I hope you realize that. What you're saying can't make me do anything more than I'm already doing."

A long pause.

A: "I've been thinking over my old life. I apologize for badgering you before, I am just frustrated by this, and, honestly, very worried about hell. As you probably know, I wasn't a very good person. About as good or as bad as anyone else, I suppose, but that isn't saying much. I hated people and I knew it and I didn't care. I was proud of my hatred. I was proud of my pride, because I knew I was better than most people. I committed a lot of sins casually, too. I was sorry sometimes, I confessed now and then. I didn't really try to change though, not really. I knew I was bad though. You don't say anything? You hear me right?"

B: "I hear you."

A: "Maybe this is the point of this waiting. To acknowledge what a terrible person I was. I sincerely mean it, you know. If I ever had an epiphany this has been it, after I'm already dead."

B: "You probably are sincere, but what you've said to me makes no difference now. You decided your fate during your life, not after it."

A: "So you're saying I'm damned? I've said how proud I was."

B: "I haven't said anything either way. I wouldn't know at any rate."

A very long pause.

A: "I must be insane. This can't be real. I've been here an eternity without sleeping, eating or drinking. I don't feel warm or cold. This can't be real. I've been waiting so long. How long has it been? There's no time to tell. This is agony. How long must I wait? To be forced to think over my tiny collection of thoughts again and again? This is torture.

B: "God will spend in judgment however long He decides, including yours when your turn comes. Do not begrudge others that, though it makes no difference now, it will only to help you wait."

A: "I'll wait. What else could I do even if I wanted to? Would you send me to hell, as a reprieve? It can't be worse than this. I must be insane for such a request."

B: "I could not, though you do not know what you ask."

A long pause.

A: "What is God like? I'm realizing I have no idea anymore. Can you answer me this at least?"

B: "I know only a little more than you know, and I still know nothing. You can only wait and see."

A: "But you wait forever."

B: "There is no time or forever here."

A: "But how can I do this? I can't take this anymore."

B: "You've had your choice. You will be judged no matter what."

A very, very long pause. God enters.

God: "The time has come, my son."

A: "Oh, thank you! Thank you! I've been waiting so long."

God: "So have I."

The Work of the World

The rain droplets beaded against the high windows of the old house, the only noise Franco could hear. He had a strange and horrible fantasy that after blinking he would open his eyes to see the pair of bloody eyeballs sitting next to his right hand on the window pane. The cords trailing the eyes were all messy and tangled. Franco imagined this until it became terrifying, and then squeezed his eyes together very tightly, as if the pressure would push the nasty thoughts away. It took him several seconds to gain the courage to open his eyes again, and to his relief the pane remained empty.

In the chair across the room, his old aunt mumbled in her sleep. It was late afternoon on a rainy day and she had fallen asleep watching Franco. He swung himself off the window seat and ran across to the stairs. The house felt cold and dark, and he switched on every light-switch he encountered on his way toward Jammie's room. The whole way he held up his hands defensively, like a person groping in the dark. In Jammie's room he slid his hand inside the door first, to turn on the light before entering. Franco recoiled violently as his hand touched something damp among clothes in the hamper below the light switch.

The gate to Jammie's crib was down and bits of glass were still scattered on the floor. The bloodied blanket was stuffed into a laundry hamper next to the door. He had touched it. For a moment, Franco fancied that the pair of eyeballs sat on the crib, lolling around absently. Thunder crashed suddenly and Franco tore out of the room and down the stairs. He sat on the floor next to his aunt's chair until she awoke.

"Oh Franco, whatever are sitting there for?" she said after moistening her open mouth.

"I was afraid of the thunder, auntie," said Franco in small voice.

“Dear, it’s just electricity in the clouds, nothing a boy of your age should be frightened of. How late is it?” asked his aunt, rising. “Just after eight o’clock, we better get down to the hospital to check on your brother. Put your shoes on and get in the car, Franco. I need a drink of water.”

Franco slowly followed his aunt into the hospital room. His mother was sitting in a chair beside Jammie’s bed. Jammie lay motionless in bed with thick bandages over his eyes. “Oh dear,” whispered his aunt, clasping her hand over her mouth. “His poor little face. Celia, sweetie, oh my God, I’m so sorry. Such a little boy...” Auntie’s voice became hoarse and cracked. Celia and his aunt embraced and wept, while Franco stood with his hands in his tiny coat pockets, staring at his brother’s unmoving feet. He began to cry, too.

It felt like someone else had done it. Not him. Franco’s tiny chest was heaving with sobbing gasps, and he wept with the abandon of a child who feels no shame in crying. Already the guilt was forming into a hard stone in his stomach as he watched his mother weep with his aunt. Franco clenched his small fists. He could never tell now.

“Frankie, give me the whistle. It’s my turn now,” whined Jammie. Franco looked at him disdainfully.

“You don’t get any turns. You traded it for my car yesterday. It’s mine now and you can’t use it. You’re too little anyway.”

“But Frankie you said I could still use it! Stop lying! You always lie to me!” Jammie shrieked breathlessly, on the verge of tears.

“Stop it right now. You traded it so it’s mine and I say you can’t use it,” Franco replied matter-of-factly. “Now leave me alone.”

Jammie was becoming hysterical, choking out, “Stop lying! Come on, please! Stop it. Please,” groping toward his brother’s voice.

“Don’t touch me! You traded me! I’ll hit you Jammie! I promise I will.”

“Please Frankie. Please please please. You’re lying. Please!”

Franco felt a surge of repulsion and his brother’s open patheticness. “I’ll put you in the closet and lock the door. Stop crying right now Jammie. You can scream and no one will hear cause I’ll close the bedroom door too. Just keep on crying. See if I don’t do it.”

But Jammie kept stumbling toward him, hands outstretched. “Please! Frankie, please,” he kept sputtering.

Franco took Jammie violently and dragged him in the closet as Jammie struggled and shrieked. He forced him in and slammed the door shut, leaning against it so his brother couldn’t open it. Jammie screeched and cried frantically, pounding the door with all his might, while Franco taunted him about the devils that lived in the closet.

Suddenly, Franco hated the entire thing, wrenched the door open and hurled the whistle at Jammie. Jammie came toward his brother gratefully, but Franco ran out and down the stairs.

Franco sat at the dinner table with his mother and brother for the first time in a long while. His mother glanced sidelong in his direction every several seconds.

“God, Mom, what do you want?”

“Frankie, Mr. Moreno phoned today,” began his mother patiently, “you’re failing history and algebra. What are you going to do with yourself? If you would just-”

“Don’t call me Frankie. I’m not a little kid.”

“Well Franco, if you want to be treated like an adult, it comes with responsibilities. You have to earn it.”

“It’s my name, I don’t have to earn anything,” Franco spat defiantly.

“Frankie, why are you getting angry? I’m just trying to talk to you. Jesus, you get so defensive all the time.”

“Stop calling me Frankie.”

“Adults think about the future, Franco. And right now, you’re not doing that. You skip school and run out at night. Jammie has seen you and so have I.”

“Jammie doesn’t see anything Mom. He’s making it up to make me look bad.”

Jammie, looking smug, interjected sarcastically, “Don’t worry Mom, Frankie’s going to be a painter. He’s an artist. Like Michelangelo.”

“Now, Jammie-” she began to say.

“How would you know what Michelangelo looks like, Jammie? Poor little blind baby. Why don’t you go cry for Mommy?” retorted Franco savagely.

“Frankie! Stop that this instant!”

“Shut up! You don’t know anything about being blind!” cried Jammie, slamming his fist on the table. “I hate you.” He formed the words with bared teeth.

“Jammie!” shouted his mother.

“Are you going to cry you little helpless child? Oh, don’t cry. God, you’re so pathetic.”

“Frankie, that’s absolutely enough. I never want to hear this kind of talk from either of you again.”

“Mom, honestly, I don’t care much about what you want to hear. I’m leaving,” said Franco coolly, rising from his chair.

“Don’t you leave this table!”

Franco smiled mockingly. “Bye bye Mommy, bye bye baby brother.”

Heavy paint droplets slid down the torn canvas, leaving cloudy trails behind them as they dripped on the sheets covering his studio floor. Franco sat at his desk, with his hands folded under his chin, utterly exhausted. His hatred for those paintings had been the strongest feeling he’d felt in a long time, but he’d hated destroying them almost as much. The tiny black pupil stared at him from the shreds of canvas.

“God, I hate those eyes. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them.”

He couldn’t bear to look at that small black spot, and shut his own eyes very tightly, willing the horror away. There were wet beads of paint on the desk too. Franco smudged them loathingly with his finger.

“God knows my soul, He knows I didn’t mean it to come to this. He knows my soul. He knows I was just a child,” he muttered, as if chanting the Eucharist. Franco repeated these again and again as he rose and brushed the ever-present shreds of canvas away.

“God knows my soul. God knows I didn’t mean it. He knows. The truth.” He mumbled faster, shuffling on the floor, brushing and turning with both hands.

“He knows. Only him.” His frantic hands found the needle, there, next to the pupil. Franco returned to his desk chair, and held the needle with hands trembling in anticipation. “I hate them.” For the thousandth time he rolled back his sleeve and did it.

Strange chemicals swam in his blood, it surged like a torrent under his skin. The pressure behind his eyes threatened to burst his body as an over-pumped bicycle tire. Franco waited for

the moment to pass. This was familiar, and he knew its ways. There were probably no canvases left. All around him flew disembodied pairs of eyes, undulating with cords flowing behind them, comets of his effected state. He rose and moved toward his paints.

Partway to the paints, the weariness and the swarm of swirling eyes stopped him, flying too thickly to move forward. Franco lay down, but squeezing his eyes shut was no good now. The artist's easel was smashed and all the canvases torn to pieces, he saw helplessly, nothing to paint on. Nothing to work on.

Franco put his head back and closed his eyes, still seeing those eyes before him.

"Please, Frankie, please. Stop lying to me! Please!"

He jolted forward at the sound of his brother's voice.

"I deserve this! I deserve it!" he wailed. "But I was only a child. A jealous little child."

Franco opened his eyes, and the room felt clear again. This, as a thousand times before, was the time to reveal himself.

Franco ruthlessly threw aside the broken easel and the smashed track lights that stood in front of the long, white studio wall. Seizing his brushes, he began with shaking hands.

When sober, Franco knew he'd never have the courage to return the gaze of those ever-present, ever-watching eyes. But now he stared at them, into the pit of those dark pupils. Every time he'd come down, Franco had torn the canvases of his former trip into pieces, despising his weakness and fearing their discovery. He'd finish this time though, and make Jammie see.

Sweat flowed freely down his back as he made the long curving strokes of the two matching orbs, feeling that each moment more sets of eyes gathered to watch him. He was painting in a concert hall, then a football stadium, at the very locus of the universe with every

pair of eyes trained on his work of the world, every ocular nerve coursing with his creation and his sin. The curving circles doubled back on themselves and within themselves and wound deeper into the wall and out from it. The work exhausted him and blood pulsed in his eye sockets. The festering wound had been lanced, and all the nastiness was rising to the surface.

Franco injected again, feeling his courage waning, and once again. No longer perspiring, he felt chilled to the bone. But finishing this painting of his studio wall was all he could do, the only thing left to do, except lie in the shreds of canvas.

“Jammie, Jammie, Jammie,” thought Franco, “I was just a child. I deserve it. I did it. It was me, Jammie.”

The superintendent shuffled through his heavy ring of keys, searching for the one to Franco’s apartment. “Haven’t seen him in several months,” he was saying, “but some other residents heard a noise last night, so when you folks came in I thought it might be a good time to check it out,” he said, glancing at James and his mother.

“He left home years ago and hasn’t contacted us since,” replied James somberly in his dark glasses. “Frankie was staying with our aunt for a year or so, and she kept us updated, but he straight out refused to speak to us or even be in the same room.”

The superintendent nodded empathetically, and tried another key in the lock.

“We don’t know what got into him. We’ve simply decided that enough is enough,” said James’ mother tersely, “A mother has a responsibility for her son, regardless of what he himself decides.” She said it calm enough, but with the restraint accompanying something more painful.

The key turned in the lock, the door opened. All three went in, Mother’s hand on James’ arm. The musty smell hit all of them discouragingly, signally that something was wrong.

“I’ll check the kitchen,” said the super pointing left, “You two check the bedroom, through the hallway.”

“Oh my God,” began mother, putting her hand to her mouth.

“What is it, what is it?” asked James.

“This place is an absolute wreck, Jammie. I’ve never seen anything like it. Oh, Frankie!” she said as her voice cracked.

As his mother begin to pick through the shreds of linen, canvas, and paper, James turned out of the room into the hallway, feeling his way along. He turned into a room that felt big and breezy, and something like leaves rustled around his feet. A faint breathing came from across the room.

“Frankie? Frankie!” he called, hurrying across the room. Hearing his voice reverberate back to him more strongly, he knew he must be close to the far wall now. A croaking voice came from his left.

“Jammie. Jammie. It was me.”

“Frankie! Is that you? What’s going on? What was you? Mom! Come in here, I’ve found him!”

People came rushing through the shreds of canvas noisily, and went straight to Franco.

“Oh God, no. No, no, no,” cried Mother, “No. Frankie, no!”

As James tried to find his brother, he put his hands on something thick and gooey, smelling powerfully of oil.

“That’s a damn big pair of eyes, son,” said the superintendent in James’ direction.

“It was him,” thought James, seeing it for the first time, “Him, my own brother. Franco.”

From the edges of his sightless eyes, tears had begun to fall.

Perseverance

After all these years, the universe was still a marvel. Peterson gazed thoughtfully at the distant pinpricks of light through the grimy porthole window. He shifted on the cold metal bench. The detox chamber never warmed up very well anymore. The clock read thirty seconds remaining. Peterson looked down at his body clinically; skinny legs and pale skin, so dry and crinkled that it seemed like it would slough off at the lightest touch. “Not looking my best,” he said with a cynical grin. “Best looking guy out here though.” The alarm went off and he exited detox.

The heavier pressure of the command bridge made him feel even more exhausted and his thin legs like blocks of wood. Depleted muscle mass, dehydration, disorientation, and fatigue were all symptoms of prolonged artificial hibernation. Peterson sagged in the captain’s chair and waited for his strength to return. “I am the captain of this vessel, in a practical sense,” he thought. “By popular vote.” He attempted to chuckle but stopped. It was tiring, and the joke too dark. “They gave it up, waiting to reach this place. Gave up hope.” He sighed. “Maybe they were right and I’m the crazy one.”

Peterson hobbled over to the water filter. “God, you’re getting rusty. Ought to have a word with the maintenance man.” He drank the flat water greedily. “Tough crowd.” The monitors continued to buzz.

He put on a worn flight suit. Though he begrudged the additional weight, the warmth felt sublime. Plodding into the mess hall, Peterson slowly assembled and consumed an unsatisfying meal. The command bridge was a chorus of alert tones as he returned, sounds which he had never heard from the ship’s computer before. Peterson examined the screens closely. Ignorant of

the *Perseverance*'s navigation programs, Peterson had long been a passenger and observer as she plowed ahead on her predetermined course. Now something new had triggered the mainframe's alarms. He could make nothing of the screens. "What next, Captain?" he muttered to himself.

With some deductive reasoning based on his limited knowledge of the ship's computer, Peterson concluded that there were three possibilities. First, the aging mainframe had finally broken down. Or, the *Perseverance* was signaling that one of the many decaying components was worn down to a dangerous level, needing a repair that he'd be unable to perform. "If that was the case, alerts would have been going for years," he reasoned. These two possibilities however, in his poor opinion, seemed unlikely.

He allowed a modicum of hope to enter his strictly regimented mind for the final eventuality. Perhaps he was nearing the destination. The thread of courage that had hung on impossibly, refusing to let him surrender, now made his pulse quicken and his emaciated body beat with a memory of his former strength. Whatever his fate, it was near.

"The end, which they so cleverly termed the new beginning," remembered Peterson, "was supposed to be the 'salvation' of mankind." The *Perseverance*, loaded with passengers, to start a new Earth on a distant planet. "Maybe they've found salvation out there somewhere. They're together at least, wherever they are." Peterson cracked his knuckles. "Maybe I'm the coward. I didn't have it in me to do what the rest of the crew did and 'drink the Kool-Aid.' I couldn't leave this undone," he said out loud, "I have to see what happens at the end. No one will say I wasn't in it for the long haul." The presence of his loneliness returned to him. "There's nobody to say it, anyway."

The following days, if they could be measured as days, were both terrifying and exhilarating for Peterson. He exercised to rebuild his muscle mass, ate heartily, read manuals, and ransacked the ship for the items he'd need to survive on the new planet. Peterson laughed when he caught himself imagining green women coming to greet him. "Can't rule anything out," he quipped to himself. He watched the parsec instrument count down the distance toward his destination with utter fascination.

As the *Perseverance* slowed from its immense speeds, nearing its destination, Peterson was almost beside himself. After countless years in hibernation, mixed with occasional, disorienting awakenings for rounds on the lonely ship, he was almost *there*. He laughed at his old fears, pleased his old anxiety would soon be memories. The distant spots of light continued to light the man-made craft lumbering through the deep emptiness.

He sat in the captain's chair, constantly glancing at the parsec range meter. If he had felt better since leaving Earth all that time ago, he couldn't remember it. "I'm starting to believe this salvation of mankind stuff," he said in an ironic voice, "it's about time. Just to walk on land again. Smell sea water. Eat meat. God, I'm getting pathetic." He smiled. Peterson knew he was purposely trying to lower his hopes. "I can't feel bad today. It's all ahead of me now."

Except for the times he engaged in preparation for the "landing," Peterson found staring at the monitor screens in the command bridge daydreaming to be his only diversion. His hands were folded on his lap, and the ship was completely silent other than the buzz of the computers. The idea of a world with real, natural sounds seemed wonderful.

Suddenly, an electric crackle interrupted the continuous hum of the computer mainframe, with a dissonant clicking noise. This snapped him from his reveries and Peterson immediately began scanning the screens for any malfunction or error readout. To his bewilderment the usual

screen displays were quivering rapidly, cutting in and out with static. Peterson started from his seat and hurried around, checking the power connectivity and the ventilation fans, pressing buttons, but even in his limited knowledge of the ship's computer he found nothing amiss. The chop of heavy electrical interference came through the speakers. Then, all the screens went black.

Peterson's back streamed with sweat inside the heavy flight suit as he ran through the ship, trying vainly to discover what had happened to the mainframe. For one terrible moment of despair he screamed, "I don't know! I don't know what to do!" and sank onto the cold floor. He had always been powerless to alter anything on this ship, and only for the last few days had he been fooling himself by hoping. "The *Perseverance* and its prisoner will grind onward forever," he thought miserably.

In the course of what Peterson estimated to be several days, he spent nearly every hour trying to diagnose and repair the computer failure on the bridge. He barely slept or ate, underpinning fear driving him to try anything. Peterson was no technician, however. He'd been hired on, all those years ago, as security. That seemed ridiculous now. Peterson would have given everything he'd ever known about self-defense, firearms, or suspicious behavior to be able to fix the ship. The parsec instrument read all zeros.

To his horror, all other electrical systems began to fail one-by-one after the computers. Lights, heaters, respirators, and all the rest. Peterson could find no reason for any of their failures. Only the ship's most vital functions remained, and Peterson began wearing a full spacesuit for warmth and oxygen. His life, a small thing predicated on the delicate balance of heat, air, and water, was running short on time, every tank he consumed was another rifle shell

for the firing squad. Now, with the lights dead in the bridge, he could see out the immense, circular observation bay windows for the first time. The blackness, in its enormity, lay endlessly in every direction. Swiveling the chair, Peterson noticed the stars only lay behind the ship, none in the front. "I'm in it alone," he thought as the entirety of his loneliness penetrated him completely for the first time.

There was nothing to be done, so Peterson sat in the chair and used up the last of the food and oxygen, waiting to die. He never spoke to himself anymore, couldn't bear to hear the weakness of his voice in the eternal silence of space. It wasted oxygen anyway. He shivered constantly inside his suit, and the moments of changing oxygen tanks were sheer panic. Hope, warmth, and light all lay behind him.

Inside his helmet, for the first time since joining the *Perseverance*, tears ran down his face. "Oh, God, I don't want to die. Not out here. Not alone," he sobbed. Inside his mind, a thought clicked. Take off your helmet and go out the airlock. In fifteen seconds it will all be done. The physical strain of this thought seemed like a thousand-pound weight on Peterson's weak body, heaving with sobs from fear, forcing him to the ground. Still the ship lumbered on.

How long he had lain on the floor beside the captain's chair, Peterson didn't know. The moment, or the century, had passed. With the last of his strength, he climbed back into the chair. It was cold, and utterly black. All the stars were left behind for good. "I'll see it out then, I suppose, to the bitter end." His voice sounded weary.

Struck with a sudden idea, Peterson remembered the external, magnesium-oxygen floodlight and hurried to switch it on. Small and faint, it was better than nothing and ran on

chemical, rather than electrical, power. “At least I’ll see where I’m going,” he declared to no one.

What Peterson saw was something he never, if he’d tried since the ship’s launch, would have been able to describe. The floodlight lit what lay directly ahead in all directions. It was not really *anything*, but a sort of limitation. A curvature of the very space in which he traveled. A wall in four dimensions, that spread as far as the light illuminated. The end of the world. “The edge of the universe,” whispered Peterson. And the *Perseverance* going straight toward it.

With something like bravery, Peterson rose from his seat as the nose of the *Perseverance* pierced the oily blackness. With legs shaking, he clenched his teeth. “Meet it standing,” he thought.

As the bridge where he sat plunged toward the edge, Peterson saw something on his right, making a light of its own. In complete astonishment, he saw a second *Perseverance* moving closely in the opposite direction, coming from outside the universe. His blood ran cold when he saw himself, a second Peterson, standing in his own command bridge meeting his gaze in wonder. His back straightened as he realized the edge of the universe would not be the end of his story.

Writer's Notebook: Notes on Other Stories:

- **1. “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” by Gabriel García Márquez**
 - Villagers in a small town treat the abnormally large, drowned body of a man with reverence.
 - Unusual event – peculiar reception – change in village.
 - No actual characters and almost no dialogue, emphasizing the ordinariness of the villagers. They almost have no individual personality, and therefore Esteban seems that much more exciting.
 - Structured like a myth in that it contains strange circumstances, no outside or empirical information, or even proper names (other than Esteban). The body of a handsome drowned man becomes something of an idol to the simple villagers.
 - Parallels to the Christian story of Christ's death?

- **2. “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” by Gabriel García Márquez**
 - An angel crash lands into the house where its owners exploit him for money. Pelago and Elisanda charge others to come to see the angel. Eventually people lose interest and go to see a “spider with a human head.” The angel regrows his feathers and flies away.
 - Inciting incident – angel crashes; first plot point – he is exploited; second plot point – no one cares to pay to see him anymore; climax/denouement – the angel flies away.
 - Magical Realism – blurring boundaries between supernatural and commonplace. The events are described as if nothing is out of the ordinary, and though an angel is a curiosity, people eventually become bored of it.
 - Juxtaposition between the absurd and the everyday. García Márquez injects one unnatural element into otherwise ordinary lives.

- **3. “Wakefield” by Nathaniel Hawthorne**
 - A man leaves his life to observe it from the outside.
 - The reader continues to read in order to understand why Wakefield stays away and what he discovers – spurred by the oddity/extraordinariness of Wakefield's choice to leave.
 - Wakefield's income over the twenty years is not addressed (presumably he isn't working). This might have been a troublesome aspect for Hawthorne because Wakefield couldn't be working (at least at his former employment) and he doesn't seem to have means (unknown to his wife) to last for twenty years.
 - Wakefield's method of observation is never really described.
 - Another hint at Wakefield's vanity, hurting his wife to discover the extent she will demonstrate her suffering. Hawthorne implies partially through this that Wakefield continues to stay away in attempt to observe others' feelings about him stronger than what has been displayed thus far. Not sure if this is an important or intentional implication.
 - Why does Wakefield go away in the first place? To see how people act when he is not around, presumably, a “morbid vanity,” to eavesdrop. Wakefield's motive seems to be important, vital even, to the story, yet it isn't asserted as directly as I

expected. Perhaps this suggests that the *effects* of his removal are more valuable to the reader than his *motive*. In this way Hawthorne could control the direction of the story more tightly and preventing it from dragging on.

- **4. “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” by Nathaniel Hawthorne**
 - Four elderly people are given a magical draught which makes them temporarily young again, and they attempt to relive their evil youth.
 - Magical setting of Dr. Heidegger’s shop. Magical element of “fountain of youth.”
 - Many details given on the doctor’s workshop, many details on the oldness/repulsiveness of those taking the drink. Dr. Heidegger’s respectability.
 - Moralistic undertones: old age doesn’t necessarily make people more proper, just unable to do what they want; the Puritanical vulgarity of passion; human depravity. The story doesn’t have a specific “message” however.
 - Doctor is almost an outside agent in the story. Observes the behavior of “regular” people from outside.
 - The incompleteness of the drink’s effect makes the whole story containable within one hour/extended scene.

- **5. “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson**
 - A small town takes part in a lottery that concludes with the murder of the “winner.”
 - The lottery is a “conservative truth,” and a state-ordained sort of ritual. Builds the atmosphere in which such a practice would be acceptable. Small town formality.
 - Grotesque – young boys partake in stoning. Family of victim are relieved that they weren’t the one chosen. No one questions the ritual.
 - The events of the story conjure a strong image of scapegoating. Perhaps the ordinariness of the town suggests that scapegoating can occur under the guise of tradition and conservative beliefs; none of this mentioned or even specifically alluded to. Understated as a way of allowing readers to form their own understandings.
 - No main character. More of a description of the town square at a particular time.
 - Universal narrator.

- **6. “A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor**
 - A family on a vacation is murdered by an escaped convict.
 - Grandma continually reminisces about an idealized past – contrasted to Misfit who can’t remember the past. Connection – neither remembers the *real* past.
 - The family is entirely superficial on the way to the vacation, not interacting with the world. That will result, when they reach Grandma’s age, in not remembering the past. They are young Grandmas. The Misfit is the logical conclusion of this sort of lifestyle.
 - Regional dialects in dialogue allow many presumptions on the part of the readers. Location, backgrounds, etc.
 - Almost all characters other than Grandma and the Misfit are foils – few lines, little description. Only enough to classify the family, etc. as superficial.

- **7. “Greenleaf” by Flannery O’Connor**
 - Mrs. May has an incompetent farmhand, Mr. Greenleaf, who she blames her problems on.
 - Told from the superior, victimized perspective of Mrs. May, to show the reader the real differences between the honest and respectful Greenleafs and the privileged and bigoted Mays. The arc of the story is such that though it is told from Mrs. May’s perspective, we gradually begin to see that she is in the wrong and mistreats Mr. Greenleaf, i.e. “Imperfect Narrator.”
 - Story is character driven. Mr. Greenleaf – ignorant, simple, passive aggressive (responds to Mrs. May’s old fashioned demands by working slowly), his sons are hardworking and cooperative. Mrs. May – loves tradition of privileged blood, quick to become a victim, her sons are unaccomplished and complaining.
 - Language differentiates classes.

- **8. “Revelation” by Flannery O’Connor**
 - Mrs. Turpin narrates her discussions about the social classes while waiting in the doctor’s office, and it provokes one girl to attack her.
 - Dialect again determines classes among those waiting for the doctor.
 - Story Arc: Mrs. Turpin’s bigotry - the girl’s attack – Mrs. Turpin repeats the same sentiments at home – she sees a revelation about her actions.
 - Vision is counterpart to Mrs. Turpin’s ideas – “white-trash” and “niggers” are purified in heaven.
 - Like “Greenleaf,” an imperfect narrator. Everyone can see her character except herself. The lies/assumptions that keep Mrs. Turpin in this mindset are very important. What makes such an obviously bigoted viewpoint believable in this character?

- **9. “Parker’s Back” by Flannery O’Connor**
 - A shiftless man tattoos himself frequently, except on his back. He gets a large tattoo of Christ on his back to impress his wife.
 - Parker is trapped – tattooing is his outlet. Bad situation. Unloving wife.
 - Parker is self-centered, demonstrated by only having tattoos he can see – never on his back.
 - O’Connor makes a character resistant to change, very hard to change – then explores what it would take to change him. i.e. Parker is used to impressing women as a dangerous man due to his tattoos. He changes when his wife remains unimpressed by his Christ tattoo.
 - Character based. Once a certain character has been firmly established, what does it take to change him?

- **10. “The Tell-tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe**
 - A man hates the “evil” eye of his neighbor, and kills him. The thought of his neighbor’s heart still beating heart beneath the floor boards forces the murderer to give himself up.
 - Irony in that the madness that causes the murder also causes the confession.
 - Build-up of tension to the point before the murder – then lull of waiting.

- Very descriptive and passionate language. Poe describes the feelings more grotesquely than the violent actions themselves.
 - The madness remains mysterious but believable because of the instability of it. If the madness had made the murderer perfectly sane *afterward*, it would seem unauthentic. Thus, it is not understandable for the average reader, but the circle seems consistent. Important when using themes that are enigmatic – like insanity, fierce passion, etc.
- **11. “The Pit and the Pendulum” by Edgar Allan Poe**
 - A prisoner is trapped in a torture chamber where the only thing he can do to avoid a blade that will inevitably slice him is to throw himself into a bottomless hole.
 - The exploration of fear, in the Gothic genre, is important. It is not enough to leave it as “he was speechless from fear” or something to that effect, but it must move beyond it, to reveal how one handles himself in the face of terrible fear.
 - The explanations of the primary emotions are thorough.
 - The prisoner is almost entirely passive – the story is more of a description of the events and the emotions that are acting on the main character.
 - Little to no details concerning the origin of the torture machines or the prisoner’s crime. Not necessary and would slow down the story.

Writer's Notebook: Early Drafting and Revision Sample:

"Perseverance" Passages

First Draft

A million or so years ago (probably not that long, but he had no idea), Peterson had been part of the U.F.S.S. *Perseverance*'s maintenance crew, usually tasked with fixing coolant or oil leaks, before the unexpected promotion to captain, first mate, cook, and engineer. He still wondered sometimes what had happened to everyone, all fourteen hundred of them, all dead for a year or two when he had awoke. Between hypersleeps he looked through the medical team's records, scoured the ship, and studied the log, entirely fruitlessly. The phrase "act of God" sometimes entered his mind but he banished it with all the mental force he could muster. In spite of everything, Peterson would not renounce his firmly held belief that God, angels, demons, or any of that did not exist. Man, nature, and a whole hell of a lot of unexplainables existed, but in the end, everything had a cause and an explanation. Hurling through the universe alone, probably the last human alive, Peterson determined to go through with this as a man, without giving in to his fears and resorting to figments of his imagination for respite.

Self-evaluation: I'm trying to go into too much detail. I can't explain what happened to the ship's crew, the ship's mission, and Peterson's view of the supernatural all at once. Needs action and forward progression.

Second Draft

Long ago he had lost count of the times he woke up from suspended animation, only to put himself back under again. Ideally, a team of engineers, in shifts, would manually reset the preserver units, but Peterson was the only one left. That's fact, too, thought Peterson grimly, I checked each one. Nobody alive. Whatever had happened to the rest of the crew and passengers had left corpses all around the ship, which Peterson dutifully stacked in the airlock and systematically released. The thought of all those bodies laying around while he slept made his skin crawl.

Self-evaluation: Again, too much detail. Switching between past and present. If this is from Peterson's perspective, what would he actually be saying to himself? Dialogue helps this seem less monotonous than the previous draft however.

Third Draft

"The end, which they so cleverly termed the new beginning," remembered Peterson, "was supposed to be the 'salvation' of mankind." The *Perseverance*, loaded with passengers, to start a new Earth on a distant planet. "Maybe they've found salvation out there somewhere. They're together at least, wherever they are." Peterson cracked his knuckles. "Maybe I'm the coward. I didn't have it in me to do what the rest of the crew did. I couldn't leave this undone," he said out loud, "I have to see what happens at the end. No one will say I wasn't in it for the long haul." The presence of his loneliness returned to him. "There's nobody to say it anyway."

Reviewer comments on the third draft:

- For a while I've been wondering about where the rest of the crew is. Crew of one I guess. I think you're doing a nice job of building anticipation, giving the reader some information and withholding other stuff.
- Only one hang up- maybe you should kind of refer to where the crew and the passengers went - or maybe he was on the ship always by himself?
- When talking about the crew you were very vague as to what happened to them. Peterson wishes he could be as brave as them, and he wonders if they found salvation. Does this mean they all killed themselves or that they have taken different ships to increase the likelihood of humanity's survival. I know that you are purposefully wanting the reader to have to work for some of the answers and infer from your clues, it is just that there are several different solutions and I am quite curious. That is good though, you have certainly earned my curiosity.
- This really "clicked" for me. I got a better sense of what is happening and I like how you didn't reveal this right away. You first set the atmosphere which works really well.
- My only really burning question, which perhaps is not meant to be answered, is: what happened to the others? Are they dead? Alive? Why did they leave? In some ways, it may be good that it is not revealed, because it leaves it up to the reader to decide. For a while, I wondered whether Peterson killed them at their behest...

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