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### Critical Preface

In the fall of 2021, my third year attending this university, I took Dr. Alexander's 409 English class, titled Experimental Fiction. At the time, I still possessed a concentration in Creative Writing, and my experience in this class entirely reformed the way that I approached writing my stories. We were taught methods and modes of writing that deviated from standard story-telling practices, often taking a standard narrative element and experimenting with it. For example, where most stories are told in a linear format (past - present - future), or are told with clear divisions between time skips (present - flashback - present), we learned about narrative fragmentation, in which a story is written about the present without ever explicitly touching the present, jumping between the past and the future of the "present" event, often blending lines between the two. There were some lessons that I was not particularly fond of (such as our sections on metafiction, which I still fail to understand comfortably), and some that have remained in my writing to this day. In fact, had I never taken the 409 class, I never would have been inspired to write this story for my 490 project. One of my favorite lessons from that class was our last unit, on parasitic writing.

Parasitic writing's core is the concept of identity, representation, and insertion. It often involves taking a source material (such as an already written novel, or someone's artwork), and inserting one's own story into the text, usually with the purpose of creating representation that was not present before. One of the most well-known examples of parasitic writing is fan-fiction,

or fan-work in general. For most popular (and even unpopular) media, there is a thriving online community (called a fandom) that generates works based on whatever show, movie, book, or so on, that the fandom supports. These works range from written stories, to art, to even original or parodied music. A lot of fan-fiction involves LGBTQ relationships, an example of people searching to create representation where it may be formerly lacking.

As I am already incredibly familiar with the concept, my research into parasitic writing only involved one source. Author Megan Milks wrote an article that briefly and efficiently summarized parasitic writing, titled *Itchy Occupations: Towards a Parasitic Mode of Writing*. In the end of her piece, Milks lists classic examples of parasites, and how they might show up when implemented in writing. The main character of my piece, Amaya, briefly undergoes a parasitic transformation during the end of her mental break, transforming between planetary bodies. I used Milks' essay to decide which parasitic mode I should mimic for this transformation to take place, and settled on the tick. According to Milks', the tick will "find a sweet spot and suck until swollen" (Milks, paragraph 9) then goes to find a new host. I wanted my character to pull from certain aspects of each heavenly body (the metaphorical sweet spot) and gorge herself on it before moving on.

Another thing that largely inspired this piece is my personal journey and struggle with mental health. I wanted this story to communicate some of the struggles that I live with on a day to day basis, so I gave the main character some of the same mental issues that I myself struggle with. Through this piece, readers should understand what it might be like to live with doubts about one's existence, depersonalization, and related struggles.

My research into self doubt and identity led me to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, where I explored the entry on personal identity. Within, I found contents on the

*characterization question*, commonly known as the “Who am I?” question. When asking this question, identity is defined as “properties to which we feel a special sense of attachment or ownership” (SEP, Section One, Subsection One). An interesting implication of this definition, which the encyclopedia mentions, is that we can become attached to properties that we only believe we possess. As such, we may form our identities based on false beliefs simply because we fully possess the belief that we retain certain characteristics. I became interested in this concept, and it led me to the phenomenon known as Cotard's Syndrome.

I informed my understanding of Cotard’s with Hans Debruyne’s entry on the topic in *Unusual and Rare Psychological Disorders: A Handbook for Clinical and Practice and Research*, edited together by Brian A. Sharpless. Sufferers of the syndrome are of the belief that they are dead, despite still existing on this plane. Commonly, they might believe that they have no internal organs, and that their body is an empty husk. They also often believe that, despite being dead, they are immortal, and their body cannot be disposed of via normal means. They have fascinations with suicide and self-mutilation. These patients also tend to lack religious faith, citing that there are no gods or eternity after total death. The syndrome is often onset by a potential myriad of underlying disorders, such as severe depression or schizophrenia. I gave my main character a smattering of these symptoms, using the disorder to dramatize my own personal experiences. Much of the story quotes her struggles with her physical body and her disbelief in her own “life”.

Depersonalization is often critical to the onset of Cotard’s syndrome, and is coincidentally the other mental health struggle that I wished to tie into this piece.

Depersonalization occurs when an individual feels a lack of connection between themselves and their thoughts and experiences, and is often tied with derealization (that same lack of connection,

but related to one's environment). I suffer from depression, and often experience episodes of depersonalization when my depression is at its worst. I performed research on this disorder to inform myself on experiences outside of my own, and ended up with two interesting concepts that I wanted to reflect in my work.

My main character is posited as someone that is very self-aware and introspective, lamenting the time that she spent trying to get to know herself and feel connected to herself, yet failing each time. This juxtaposes a common conception of depersonalization, which is that individuals who suffer from it experience a lack of mindfulness or awareness. My interpretation is informed by an article titled *Mindfulness and Depersonalization: A Nuanced Relationship*, written by Kaitlin K. Levin, Akiva Gornish, and Leanne Quigley. The authors performed a study seeking to empirically link depersonalization with different facets of mindfulness, finding that the disorder tied into a complicated relationship with the concept. The study used a questionnaire designed to measure five facets of mindfulness, and found that higher scores relating to observing, describing, and nonreactivity correlated with depersonalization. As such, I allowed my main character to indulge in these facets, often having her describe things as she was experiencing them, both internal and external.

The other concept pertains to depersonalization as it relates to facial recognition. A study was conducted regarding self-facial recognition in individuals with depersonalization-derealization disorder. It was published as an article under the title of *An Experimental Study of Subliminal Self-Face Processing in Depersonalization–Derealization Disorder*, with the listed authors being as follows: Shanshan Liu, Yuan Jia, Sisi Zheng, Sitong Feng, Hong Zhu, Rui Wang, and Hongxiao Jia. The study found that healthy individuals (meaning those who do not possess the disorder) process their own face easier than those with

depersonalization-derealization disorder, who will often be slower to recognize their face as their own. I implemented this within my main character as well, having her be unfamiliar with her own reflection when she is peering into her bedroom window. She even perceives it to be another person entirely, rather than herself.

Together, all of my research was for the purpose of communicating the questions that I struggle with on a daily basis. This story was written in the hopes of others being able to temporarily inhabit the mind of someone who suffers from such extreme disorders, and how life may look for them.

## Scream My Name (Or The Universe Will)

Empty silence thickened the air, clinging to each of Amaya's shaky inhales and choked exhales, lingering against her skin in the uncomfortable way that humidity does after heavy rain. Of course, Amaya was unsure if her actions could even count as breathing, when there were no lungs to be found in her body, nor blood to carry oxygen, nor a beating heart to feed. Her body was barely more than a decaying husk, a lost ship carried by the tides with no passengers and no purpose. Somewhere along the way of middle school heartbreaks and nights spent emptying her stomach on her friends' lawns in highschool, those very organs had disintegrated, rotted out of her body. Amaya had died a long time ago, and yet somehow, she continued to exist.

Already dead yet still seeking its thrills. There was nothing after this "life" - no salvation for good deeds or punishment for bad ones. No higher power that could tell her what all of this was for. Just an eternal emptiness. Amaya had been dead for a long time, immortal to the kinds of wounds that would be able to kill others. She could not harm organs that she did not possess, after all.

Still, the bottle of pills sat open on her nightstand, a mixed bag of things she had collected from near-empty prescriptions over the past few months, with a honey cough drop tossed in for flavor. Next to it was the glass of water she'd poured herself upon coming home. In a moment, she would dump the pills into the water and gulp it down as fast as she could. With some luck, the water would dissolve the pills inside of her and they would together create a toxic mix that could decay her from the inside out. Sure, maybe she did not possess a liver to ruin or a bloodstream to poison, but it was as good a solution as any, and science had never been her strong suit.

Amaya sits at the edge of her bed for a moment longer, the thin blanket tangling beneath pale, bruised knuckles. Her gaze wanders for a moment before finding the window, the last remaining light in her room. Through the blinds, she can see the setting sun. Cotton-candy clouds reflect splotches of orange and pink across their undersides, the colors so heavy that she can taste them on her tongue, saccharine sweet to the point of near bitterness, a melting creamsicle on a hot summer's day.

Particles of dust float in and out of the light, and for a moment she thinks of the stars. Space had always been one of the few things to bring comfort to Amaya's listless mind, evidenced by the myriad of galaxy themed light sources she had carried from her childhood. The dust particles were as the stars scattered across their universe, drifting in and out of light and life, expanding ever outward until they escaped visible reach.

Despite the fact that Amaya would soon be willingly endeavoring into eternal darkness, the thought of enshrining herself in it prematurely set a chill across her skin. Both a comfort and a nauseating fear - her life had been full of dichotomous ends of a spectrum somehow melding together in the worst of ways. She tilted her head, breaking her focus, to glance at something else sitting on her nightstand. There sat a projector she had purchased for herself a few months ago, that would cast half-decent imitations of constellations across her ceiling each night before bed. She turned it on, half as a comfort, and half as an irony. It would be able to wish her a peaceful slumber one last time, it seemed.

Her resolve strengthened, fear giving way to enthrallment at the prospect of final release and a relief long ached for, and she crossed the room to close the blinds and draw the curtains. Moving back towards her bed, she fumbled blindly for the pills and the cup, pouring the former into the latter.

She lay back, propped slightly by her pillows, swishing the contents of the glass slowly in her hand. She knew this was unceremonious, differing from the way she imagined most people did it. Either with a dry emptiness, mechanic and automatic, unfeeling and unfearing from the exhaustion of life. Or with a frantic desperation, tearful and regretful, repulsed and magnetized, the act messy and half unplanned. Amaya mostly found herself giddy and curious, wondering if she had finally found a way to kill what had already died.

She brought her other hand under the cup to steady herself, fingers brushing her wrist for a moment. Uneven lines of raised skin met her touch. With a final deep breath, the cup met her lips, the chilled rim of the glass kissing her with a teasing promise to what death offered.

It started as a dull ache breaching the edges of her consciousness, pain that spread the way food coloring does in water. Amaya was barely aware of it, or anything at all for that matter, awareness hazy at best. She floated, held in suspension by something intangible, lightly twitching with every pinprick.

She performed a motion as if to inhale, and physicality washed over her in a blinding wave. She choked, body spasming, paralyzed, a scream burning out in the back of her throat. Her hands scrambled beneath her, shoving upwards, or at least she figured upwards - she felt disoriented. She felt herself tip over something, and she was falling for a brief moment, before she crashed into something solid, and lay there. Her body ached, a pain she had never thought herself capable of experiencing, lighting a fire across her skin and searing her veins.

Her eyes were open, but she appeared to be unseeing. There was nothing to greet her curious, pained gaze; whatever she had been suspended in appeared ink black and formless. Rolling onto her back, she brought up one of her hands, but nothing appeared before her, and



when she reached to touch her face, stinging numbness greeted her. Despite the pain she clearly felt, she was oddly detached from it, reaching blindly while it shrank further away from her conscious experience. She flung her arm upwards, and there was a phantom brush of sensation, but it was gone as fast as it had come. Her fingers curled around nothing, then her fingers were nothing.

Amaya lay like that for an indecipherable amount of time, unfeeling and unaware, until the blanketing darkness had sunk into her, made her into its home. With it came the realization, a whisper at first that she dared to doubt, before it hit her with its full force.

She had done it. Amaya had achieved the thing she had been chasing for years, her near cartoonish escapades with death meeting their final resolution. She had managed to dissolve her body from the inside out, which would evidence why she could no longer feel that body - she must not fully possess one. A spirit-like creature then. She could be fine with that. As such, she surmised she must also have been right about the end of life, that there was nothing here to greet her, no solutions or comforts for her questions and pain, no punishments for her failings and shortcomings.

The relief of it was rather short lived. She felt herself moving as if sitting upright. The disconnect between mind and “not quite” body should be discomfiting, but in truth, Amaya had felt this way for years and years. How many times throughout her life had she lived an experience, only to glance upon her memories and feel as if she were an intruding third party? How much time had she spent trying each and every day to write her own story, to make her existence mean something, only to look back at the end of the day and watch someone else live it? She could see that it was her body, her fingers ruffling her nephew’s hair, her tongue buried in

an ice-cream swirl, her feet digging into sea-soaked sand. But she felt no sensation, no connection, a her-but-not-her.

White heat seared to life where her stomach would have been, offering more sensation than she had felt in years. Was this really it? All of her endeavors, as disjointed as they might have been, all of her sufferings and efforts, all of it would end and be for nothing? Amaya had never in her life felt like she existed, or that if she did exist, she did so by accident. She was bound to the idea that she had taken someone else's place - that somewhere, deep in the universe, a collision occurred that wasn't meant to be, and someone else's matter had been separated to opposite ends of space, combining with pieces of failed moons and stars that had burned out too soon, until it formed her own existence. She had been so determined to make up for that, to apologize to whoever's slot she had mistakenly filled, to make it mean something that she had been there instead. She had ultimately failed, and then found out that it would have been for nothing anyway. That, at the end of it all, there was no justice for the stardust compacted into her feeble form, for nothing that could have been something, if only, if only, if only -

She opened her mouth as if to scream, but no sound came out, her spine arching until pulled taut, shaking with the effort of it. Even if she lacked a body, she would express herself as if she did, for the sake of allotting her focus into every other racing regret that she felt the need to placate.

God fucking *dammit*. She cursed every god and higher being that she did not believe in, knowing they were not real - for if they were, she would have met them by now. Everything had been pointless then. Every moment that she had spent driving herself mad over some small worry or another, only for none of it to mean jack shit at the end of the day.

She felt herself moving about blindly, somewhere in the endless void she'd been sent to. It did not matter where she went if there was nowhere to go. Wanting to make something of herself had always been bound to this outcome: absolute nothing. An unfinished story amounted to the same as never having written it in the first place. If she had known...

No, even then the outcome was unclear to her. Frustrated with her own indecisiveness as ever. Would she have killed herself sooner? She could have ended it all to avoid her pointless suffering, never having to worry about putting forth the effort to create something that would go unconsumed either way. A tree producing fruit in the middle of an uninhabited land, apples falling to the ground and rotting, purposeless. Then again, would she have lived life longer? She could have allowed herself more freedom, less critical judgment, moved forward with reckless and fearless abandon. At the end of the day, no one will see the apples that never fully ripened, the ones that turned out the wrong color, the ones with bruises and blemishes, the ones that have become home to the worms.

She had lived life ever unable to satisfy her itch to create, until she had been unable to create even herself, until she had rotted away. And there was no justice for her. She felt that she deserved it.

As the thought occurred to her, she swiveled around, startled when she found something there to see, where before there was nothing. Beyond her reach, there were stars. Small pinpoints of light making shapes that were so vaguely familiar it nearly caused her to itch. She stood for a moment, transfixed, left reeling by the unexpected sight. For a moment, she felt truly formless, fully blank as her mind scrambled to make sense of the phenomenon.

A smile slowly crept over her face until it was stretching painfully, lips threatening to split, skin threatening to tear. She curled inwards, unable to physically contain the rush of

emotion. The universe had heard her, somehow someway, it had heard her, and she delighted in it.

She held herself tightly, near hysterical, laughter spilling over her tongue, precious and refreshing relief. She could not be bothered that she may be wrong about how life ended, not when it was giving her the chance to right the injustice forced upon her. Her existence may have been incidental and accidental, but this would not be. She could do something purposeful

She could create her own universe.

The stars must have gotten there somehow. She had willed them into existence at some point, she must have. She just had to summon whatever it was and do it again, and again and again, over and over until she had written her own story, done something that mattered more than anything.

She began to shift once more, moving around within the rest of the emptiness. She would push and pull within herself until she found it. She summoned her thoughts, willed herself to remember how everything had been on the earth she had come from.

With a massive inhale, she expanded, willing her consciousness to reach outwards as much as she could bear, summoning to mind...Jupiter. Yes, she could be Jupiter. Massive, majestic Jupiter with its many moons. She would summon wayward disciples to her gravity, spinning them around herself tighter and tighter, until she consumed them entirely. She could envelop them the way that everyone in her life had enveloped her own being, her path set by other people, her achievements somehow their accomplishments.

She thought bigger still, and brighter, until she had become her own star, burning hot and bright in the expanse. She could provide the light that had felt out of touch for all these years, standing in the shade, fingertips extended towards a receding sunset, never quite far enough to

breach the shadows. She could burn so bright that she scorched, that her presence was undeniable and inescapable. She continued to grow, her light expanding out of control, so bright it was blinding, throwing her arms outward and chest upwards, arching and inhaling -

An explosion, a collapse. She fell, curled into herself, knees tucked to her chest, nails digging into whatever she could reach - shoulders, neck, back, scalp. She could become a black hole, a hidden danger buried somewhere in the center of a galaxy. Compressed but bigger than life, so massive that she drew in anything that dared to come close. Anything that dared to hurt her. She could swallow every pain that anyone had ever caused, and swallow them too, until it all ceased to be, until she was safe and unbothered.

She continued to think of the things she wanted, the way she wanted to exist, everything that she ever wished she had possessed the power to do when she still felt alive. She had finally been given the power to write her own story, and not to have it ripped from underneath her feet. She could not deny this, could not ignore the thing she herself would create. She would cement the evidence under her being - she would let herself be swirled in her own storms, let her skin be burnt by her own stars, let her bones collapse and compress beneath the weight of her own black holes. Consume, and be consumed. Create, and be created.

She felt her hands connect to something, and she snagged, tripping and dragging it down. There was a crash, and she looked up, eyes widening at the sight before her. Stars. So many more stars. The crash must have been the explosion of her creation.

She reached forward, eager to join and explore her creation, but found herself blocked. An invisible barrier, cold to the touch.

Her fists ached as she pounded against it, throat burning and tearing from her screams and cries. How could they? How *dare* they? Whatever had seen fit to give her this ability would not release it in full, disconnecting her from her own creations once more.

No.

Amaya refused to exist in space the way that she had been forced to in life. Every regret, every failed attempt, all of it culminated in this, whatever *this* may be. She had finally been given the chance to exist the way she had always wanted to. She would be damned if it were ripped away from her now.

She glared into the barrier, hands flat against it - and realized that the stars were not all she could see. Her hands were there, and between them a reflection - a face. Amaya stared at it, unseeing, unfamiliar. Who was this, on the other side of the barrier? Were they teasing her too?

She pushed, summoning the weight of her body, throwing it against the barrier as many times as she could. After all she had done, all she had been through, it was ridiculous that she should have to earn even this, but she would do what she must.

She could hear explosions at the back of her mind, rewarding her efforts. Distant supernova mayhaps? More stars generating just out of reach? A story she would soon unfold?

Something cracked, then shattered, and she felt herself startle forwards a bit, jagged pain splintering into her skin. But she could not care to pay it much mind, realized she'd created an opening. She crawled through it, gazes transfixed forever upwards, noticing hundreds more stars than what she had seen before.

The suffocating darkness no longer seemed to surround or cradle her, and when she dangled one foot forward, it no longer felt solid beneath her. But what is there to fear for one who is already dead?

She stepped forward.

A bedroom door bursts open, and three concerned roommates stumble into the room. They'd been pounding on the door for ages, unable to force the lock, throwing themselves into it until it would open. One reached for the light switch.

The room appeared mostly in order upon first, aside from a few things knocked over.

Except, the window was broken.

The blinds and curtains lay in a pile on the floor, as if torn down.

The night sky greeted their view.

And Amaya was nowhere to be found.

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