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People Eater

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PEOPLE EATER

by

Lilas Verrill

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Chemical Engineering)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Monsters have persisted in literature throughout human culture serving the role as the living embodiment of our greatest fears. Based on that definition, we should have no reason to want to offer them our sympathy, our understanding, our love, yet we see them written with depth, complexity, even humanity, time and time again. The monster is more than just what scares us. They can be difficult to understand - foreign and strange, but if we take the time to look a little deeper, we may find part of ourselves staring back. This thesis explores the role the “monster” plays as an obstacle to empathizing and connecting with the “other”. The creative work of this thesis consists of four short stories featuring various “others” that have been labeled as monstrous, but within each of them sits the capacity to see yourself in their thoughts and feelings, and only then can you choose to give them your understanding - your empathy.

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PEOPLE EATER

Carved From Her Thigh Bone



“All rise.”

The Judge strolled in proudly, ornamented with golden sashes, swaying as she walked upon her hind feet. The small metal scales that were weaved into her hair and pierced through her flesh caught the courtroom’s light. Her shoulders, tensed with coiled muscle. On her neck hung the teeth of past judges, run through with twine.

Ele steadied her breathing, but her heart thundered away; her throat

clenched, exposed. Her fear, exposed. *Disgust*. Something she expected to see in the faces of the crowd. Not the *judge*.

“Please be seated.”

Her voice sung with a conviction as hard as diamonds, reverberating off the marble walls.

“The accusations against Ele, of Second-Sun, are as such: Harboring a known criminal sentenced to Death, Lying towards his Whereabouts, and Inconveniencing the Executioner. How do you plead?”

“Innocent, your honor.” The quaking in Ele’s voice felt pitiable by comparison.

A single eyebrow raised in response. The Judge shuffled through her pages. She stood and addressed the crowd.

“Two weeks ago, I presided over a case concerning the murders of War and Talon, of the family of Bone-Etched, two sisters who had only pieces of them recovered after having been torn apart by their brother, Flesh, of Bone-Etched. A foot there. An arm here. He ate parts of their remains.

War discovered that her brother had not, in fact, been stationed with the Search and Rescue Department of the Black Hall. This was easy for her to prove as the Black Hall does not have such a department. Flesh learned of this and decided that if she could figure that out, she would quickly learn that none of the other jobs he had were real and that he had been stealing from his family for months, faking a debilitating neck injury all the while. His solution to being caught in a lie? Tear out his sister’s throats and dispose of their bodies. If those who had learned he lied were no longer alive, then he considered himself safe. Foolish. He was tried and I determined he was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Reasonably, sentenced to death. Yet by the end of the day, he was not dead. The Executioner could not find him. She tracked him to the house of the Accused, Ele, where she was told he had last been seen fleeing towards the Black Hall. This was untrue. But

why would the scent lead to the house of our Accused? What motives would the Accused have to lie? To *protect* him? Simple. Ele and Flesh are *friends*.”

Ele hissed under her breath.

The Judge passed letters to the crowd. Next came Ele’s favorite harness and satchel that she left at Flesh’s home the last time she stayed over. Then a knife he gifted her, a week before he was charged with murder. It was of his own handiwork. The whole Bone-Etched family were craftsman, but Flesh was the best. Better than his vain, inconsiderate sisters. This knife, he told her, was made out of the thigh bone of a very inconsiderate monster indeed.

The booming voice shook her back to her senses. “Not only were they friends, as you can see from the pleasant little letters they wrote to each other when the Accused was away for work, but belongings from one were found in the other’s home. The harness was found in the home of Flesh. “Ele. This belongs to you, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And why was it at Flesh’s house?”

“Because I forgot it there. My mistake. I hadn’t gotten around to getting it back before his trial, and I wasn’t going to try and break into his house while he was gone.” The sarcasm slipped from her lips with white hot malice.

“And this knife, did he give this to you?”

“Yes. For my birthday. Three weeks ago.”

“Do you know what it’s made out of?”

“Bone. What else?”

“Do you know who it’s made out of?”

Ele looked at the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she could feel the Judge’s gaze burrow into her skin.

“Who..? His last dinner I assume.”

“Correct. It-”



The courtroom door swung open, and the Judge shot her furious gaze towards the intrusion, only to tilt her head in surprise. The Executioner entered. She had many names: “The Howler.” “Conjoined Fury.” Few regarded her by her birth name, Yavessah, as it was considered too elegant for her, but her two conjoined sisters always called her by it. The Executioner walked right up to the Judge, prize in hand: Flesh’s head, still bleeding

and nearly twice the size of her own. Ele gasped. The hulking beast was untainted and

unscathed. Her left arm attachment wasn't even a knife or blade, but the prosthetic she used to run with.

Your honor, I found Flesh. He was trying to get into Ele's house, which was locked." Her voice grated harshly, lips cracked and dry. The sisters' shared body stood upon its hind legs, forcing her head and neck into an awkward upwards angle, and she squinted into the overhead flames. All these years and that was the first time Ele had heard her speak.

What were the other sisters waiting for? *Defend me!* Ele stood frantically and addressed the head below Yavessah, Nahlise, her face hidden within her slick, black hair. She was forced to face forward while they stood tall, and she was desperately averting her gaze.

"Nahlise! You saw it. He wasn't in my house! I wasn't harboring a criminal! I didn't even know he made knives out of his sisters! Please! You have to... you have to testify."

Nahlise pushed Yavessah's braids out of her face. Her eyes were devastated as they met Ele's, yet she forced a smile. Spokes, the last sister, who unfortunately faced backwards, even turned her head to look, her antlers jamming Yavessah's head over to make room. The head snorted in discomfort yet said no more.

"You know the rules, dear." Nahlise gestured to Yavessah. "She's assigned to your case. Even if she doesn't testify, our words may influence her work."

"*Her work?* What about *our* friendship?" Ele snapped back. "What about *my* life?? You were at my house when he was sentenced to death! Your testimony would prove he wasn't hiding there!"



Spokes abruptly turned back around.

The tip of her tail tied itself into anxious knots. Nahlise was silent.

Ele bristled. “That’s it then? You’ll let me die just so your *psycho* of a sister can earn her cut. Do you befriend

people expecting that one day your hand might be tearing their head off? If she hadn’t taken such a dangerous job, you would all still have your arm! Did she not consider how her job would impact the lives of those she shared a body with? Is all your empathy and kindness and love just a formality? Or do you get some twisted joy out of seeing others think they’re safe from *her* because they’re friends with *you*, you cruel thing.”

Nahlise’s mouth hung open, her eyes watered. She glanced down at their prosthetic.

Ele realized her mistake.

“No, Nahlise, I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. Your sister has a job to do.”

But she wasn’t really.

Nahlise didn’t even breathe. Just waited.

And the contempt slipped through Ele’s lips. “Just wish she picked a different occupation...”

Ele barely caught Nahlise’s face twist into a snarl as she dropped to all fours; Yavessah’s braids covering her from view. The expression on the Executioner was more than its

usual vacantness as they turned to leave the room. Spokes craned her neck awkwardly to avoid looking back at Ele as they lumbered out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

Ele sat down, defeated. It took her a second, then she remembered where she was. The crowd was silent, staring at her. She looked up at the Judge who was perched on the podium in front of her chair. Her tail swished behind her in excitement.

She was grinning. Like when you've set up a joke and get to watch the victim blunder right into it.

The Judge let Ele leave without another word.

Yavessah had the verdict. She had the sentence. She had the scent. Nahlise had nothing to say. Now no longer crying but shaking with anger. Spokes looked uncomfortable as usual, pushing through her urge to turn away again, and was desperately trying to console her sister. Yavessah contemplated switching out the running arm for a knife.

“I don't think she'll be running. She probably thinks she's safe.” Spokes piped up.

Yavessah looked down at Nahlise. She had never seen her shake like that, her teeth cutting into her tongue. Spokes was looking too. They looked at each other and switched the prosthetic to the running arm.

Storming into her home, she clawed off her professional attire. She sunk her teeth into the leather and imagined it was the neck of that judge. Her smug grin. She *likes* her job. Probably enjoys letting the guilty leave knowing well that they'll be struck dead soon. Her pet guard dog at her heels.

Many miles away, something heavy was running.

Ele fumed. The town freak, of course the other sisters would sit and watch. They probably *like it*. Why would they let any sister take such a profession? The others have normal jobs. Spokes practically faints at the sight of violence. Ele reached for her knife, knuckles white, chest shaking, but could not find it. Right. Still in evidence.

Her rage ebbed into a strange grief. She sunk onto the floor.

So then, it's gone too. That's all she had of Flesh. Really, all she had of his entire family. He was a good friend. He would have testified at her trial. Well, maybe it would be better if he didn't. He was a liar and was bad at it. That's what got him killed.

Fifteen feet away, there was a shadow on the door.

Ele didn't hear the heavy plodding over her sobs, but the three voices cut through the air. In that instant, she now knew her sentence had been death.

“You were both *terrible liars*.”

Untitled

The days were often calm. She would help her sister down from the tree and they would both rest quietly against its trunk. That's when they'd sleep, in the warmth of midday, the sun burning through the oak leaves. It was the perfect shady spot, and for a moment, it would almost seem like a dream. Then her sister would start telling stories- always pleasantly morbid. Grimm's fairy tales: the way they were originally written, and maybe some new ones she'd make up. Her sister always had such a dry voice. It didn't matter how much water she drank, she always sounded like she had been staring at the sun, open-mouthed, like a plant in the summer.

Then She would leave her sister behind to go out and check the traps, collect berries and nuts, and boil the water. She had her fill, so all the food could go to her sister. Her sister insisted on boiled water, but She didn't care. Straight from the river, cold, was how She liked it. She would tend to her sister's broken leg. Unwrap the bandages, soothe the wounds with aloe leaves, and make sure the splint was in place. The girl healed strangely, that was for sure. Some tissues repaired themselves, while other bits practically rotted away, like a radiation burn. Just when She thought bone would show, strange, tough skin grew in its place. She didn't mind looking at it, and just as long as they weren't infected, her sister's health did well. They'd pass the time with little games.

The sky would shift to orange and pink, the clouds would glow red, and She would help her sister back up the tree; drape her in the pelts She was getting quite good at drying.

Help would come. The number of makeshift flags and flares was getting obnoxious, but help would come.

Every night, there were ~~people, intruders~~ ^{wolves} wolves.

Their ~~words~~ howls echoed in from the trees. She imagined their glowing eyes and wicked fangs. They circled her sister, smelling her weakness. Why couldn't they just leave them alone? She trapped many small creatures. Surely there were bigger things for the wolves to eat. What were they doing out here anyways? She swore wolves lived in Yellowstone. Not here. But they showed up regardless. Some nights they kept their distance, circling, howling, growling. On other nights, a lone one would enter the clearing. She always knew they were coming. She would strike when they least expected it, their faces flashing with fear. They provided good meat, but eating the wolves always made her sister cry. She hated the human sounds they made as they died. It drove her mad. As if taunting her, tormenting her with the idea of their inevitable defeat at the hands of the cruel indifference of nature. They would bark and yell. "You'll never be rescued! No help will come! Run for your lives! It's got me! Someone get it off!" In her frustration, She would mimic their noises.

"It's got me! Someone get it off! God, it's got me!"

Dmitri then went silent save for some gurgling noises, followed by the distinct sound of a body being dragged through the dry grass.

“It’s got me! Someone get it off! God, it’s got me!”

But that wasn’t Dmitri. The beast was repeating his dying words. Many of their people had been lured away by the sounds of their dead loved ones.

It had moved so suddenly... no one quite saw the beast strike. Sofia was the closest, standing behind Dmitri, holding the burning stick high over her head so they could both see. She figured the fire would scare it off. One moment Dmitri was in front of her, then in a blur of fur and fangs and the sickly-sweet smell, he was gone. The others pressed in close around the torch, spears lowered, facing outward into the shadows that threatened to close in around them. The flame flickered uncertainly. Everyone held their breaths.

The smell came back. Sofia wanted to gag and her eyes watered. Like rotting, fragrant fruit. A pair of eyes glinted from the dark. Head-height. It was silent. It too was holding its breath.

Seconds passed before the eyes retreated into the dark. Heavy steps. The dragging sound again. They collectively began shuffling backwards as the smell faded; finally. Only now did they dare to breathe.

“Dmitri-” was all Sofia managed to utter as she looked back into the trees. She was silent for days.

This was the furthest She had ventured from her sister. And the longest. So long She left her up in that tree, just in case. Her sister couldn't leave the tree anyways,

Her leg is broken. fused into it like she was. She didn't like coming out this far, but her sister had insisted.

Said the adventure and change of scenery would be a nice change of pace. To do it for her. If she couldn't move, the least a good caretaker could do would be to share the adventure she just went on. Live vicariously through her... yada yada.

She left the treeline they called home. It was grayer out here. The leaves, the bark, the dirt, the sky, all gray, all unwelcoming. Across the creek with the twisted, strange fish. They weren't a favorite of the pair. She couldn't quite place it, but it felt like they weren't supposed to have that many eyes. Fish have that many eyes, right?

Always looked like that. Right? Some different image of fish was faint in her mind, like from a dream. And seeing her reflection always bothered her...

Now her head hurt, and She stopped thinking about the fish.



Over the crevasse. An easy jump to make. All the bones at the bottom though... maybe they weren't nearly as good a jumper as She was.

She stumbled upon a building, decrepit, partially collapsed. No doorways were left, and the glass had been blasted out of all the windows. No shards on the ground; the force came from outside. She didn't want to climb through and land in that mess, instead opting for a window that had been boarded up long ago. The wood came apart easily, tasted like cedar, splintering on her tongue. It smelled mossy in here. She craned her neck to gaze at the sunlight streaming in from the holes in the roof, the light refracting in the cool mist. In her awe, She failed to notice the floors had holes too. Her foot fell out from under her and She tumbled into the dark.

Sofia hadn't been inside this building in ages, well before she knew Dimitri. She wouldn't think about him here. The rain fell, an imposing sheet of water, like dropping a river on top of the land. It would crush most living things. The lower parts of the building will flood in minutes, but she knew she'd be safe under what little of the roof still held together. Good. She was in no hurry to get home.

It was a peculiar structure, its purpose long lost to her people. Strange, uncomfortable metal beds littered its halls, the floors were cold and slick. She could tell food was never stored within these imposing walls, but that was the extent of her conclusions.

Not much had changed. Even with the impossibly heavy rains, plants had long since consumed most of the crumbling walls. What remained was in slow decay. Sofia kept to the middle floors to avoid wading through the flooded lower levels or upper roof collapses from the torrent.

Something caught her ear. A distant wail echoed up through the hallways from somewhere in the basement. She stood at the top of the stairwell, her ears strained hard to pick up something, anything, over the rain. It came again, the voice of a young girl.

“I can’t swim!”

Sofia threw herself down the stairs. She wasn’t thinking, the rational long gone from her mind. The ground floor was flooded up to her ankles, the water streaming out from the low, broken windows and from under boarded up doors and out of the building. Finding the stairs to the basement was nearly impossible in this dark. The railings sprouted out of the floor, just visible, but not for much longer. Sofia clung to the railing and slid down backwards, not daring to test if her feet would grip the rungs in that current.

The basement was worse. Up to her waist. Her heart began to race as her chest worked to breathe against the water pressure. She was not a strong swimmer.

“Is someone down here?” Sofia would not let go of the railing.

“Yes! Yes!! In this hole! I can’t swim!”

The relief and terror in the girl’s voice. Sofia forced back tears and tried to focus.

Hole? Pit? Focus. Something was drawing a massive amount of water down through the floor. It would rain for just a few minutes, but it was enough water to fill a lake. She did not have long.

“Where is the water going?” She called out, confused.

“Draining into a grate, I think. Please! Hurry!”

Sofia looked around in the dark. No windows. She couldn’t kick a wall out and divert water underground. Water wasn’t going anywhere else.

“Hold on! I’m going to find something to pull you out with.”

The girl let out a strange, desperate whine as Sofia crawled back up the railing. She scoured the dryer floors collecting plastic cords. She’d pull her full weight on them to see if they’d give way. Ones that held were tied together. With a sinking realization, it occurred to her that she had no idea how deep the pit was. Panic started to set in and her hands, already chilled by the water, started to shake uncontrollably. The fear choked in her throat as she struggled to tie the cords together.

Back into the basement. The water levels had not changed.

“Grab on!”

Still clinging to the railing, Sofia tied the cord bundle around her body and tossed the rest into the current, the water wrenching it exactly where she needed it to go. Moments later, a sharp jolt nearly tore her from the stairs.

“Stop!” She could barely cry out, partially screaming in pain, as the cord pulled horribly on her, crushing her ribcage. “You’re too heavy...” The pulling stopped and she gasped violently.

“Hurry! Please! The water’s at my feet! My sister can’t walk! She’ll die without me!”

That was all the motivation Sofia needed. She strained against the current, pulling herself and all the cords up the railing where she anchored them to the rusty metal.

“Can you still reach? Try now!”

The rope went taut and the railing flexed. Terrified it would give way, Sofia grabbed on and pulled back with all her might. Her lungs screamed.

She held that position for 2 minutes.

The slack loosened up. The girl must have made it out of the hole, working her way to the stairs. She could make out movement in the line.

“Are you out?”

No response. That sickly-sweet smell hit her nose. Her heart almost stopped.

From the gloom and through the water, those pale, small eyes glinted. She had never seen the beast in the light. It would lunge forward and catch the cord with horrible, human teeth, pulling its hulking, hairless body behind it. Paw-like hands with small, human thumbs scrambled for the stairs. Finding no purchase, it fumbled and caught the railing.

Sofia’s heart restarted at a thundering tempo. She backed away from the stairs. She couldn’t outrun it. Not like this. Its head slowly rose into view, covered in patchy strands of human hair. She started to weep as the smell overwhelmed her. It was shaking harder than she was.

“Sorry, I can’t quite see yet. I was down there for days. Thank you.”

Its lipless mouth, like a skinned wolf, would open and shut randomly, a sick mimicry of speech. Sofia could just make out that inside the first mouth sat another, with lips, unpleasantly human, made those sounds instead.

“You’re welcome.” Sofia kept backing away. She spotted a partially boarded-up door that she could squeeze through. That would at least slow it down.

“It’s kinda funny. You smell weird. Like wet dog. Like those awful wolves.” It let out a guttural, wet growl. “*I hate* wolves. They attack me and my sister *all the time*. For no good reason.”

Sofia was almost at the door. The creature kept moving towards her, its pinprick pupils avoided the light from the windows as it searched for her.

“Maybe you’re smelling yourself.” She retorted, barely hiding the contempt in her speech. The malice and bile in her stomach churned.

Its head whipped towards the direction of her voice, tilting to the side. “Why would I smell like wet dog?” It laughed playfully, “Kids don’t smell like wet dog.” Its eyes landed directly on her; met her gaze, and in an instant, Sofia could almost see the girl’s mind shatter as those uncanny eyes widened with a madness like no other. This conversation was over.

Sofia took a deep breath. The rain outside stopped as suddenly as it started.

“*Wolf!*” The beast screamed. It lunged forward with a snarl that evaporated the human sounds from its voice. Sofia dove under the boards in the doorway and swam as hard as

she could. The splintering thud of teeth on wood greeted her ears as she resurfaced. She had hoped it was exhausted and starved enough to not bother chasing her, but the screaming told her otherwise. She couldn't run like this. Clambering to her feet, she faced the doorway.

It was noticeably winded and almost confused to find her staring it down. With a ravenous snarl, the hellish thing pounced. Sofia fell to the side, the creature, unable to correct in time, landed behind her and its feet gave out in the mud. *Up again! Get up! It pounces carelessly!* Her ribs were screaming. Back inside, she waded over to the stairs and collected some cord. As fast as her shaking hands could work, she looped the rest of what had been tied to the stairs into a snare. *Pounce at me again, I dare you.*



It was back, undeterred, stalking ever closer with a low growl thundering in its chest. Sofia searched desperately for the little girl in those eyes.

“What is your name?”

It stopped.

“Where are your parents? I don’t want to hurt you or your sister.”

The mouth hung open, head shaking in protest. It seemed briefly conflicted, until its head lowered and looked her dead in the eye before repeating: “It’s got me! Someone get it off! God, it’s got me!”

It leapt for her with an unshackled ferocity, and Sofia stood her ground, both with murderous intent in their eyes.

Sofia left it dead, and with its head, she went limping back.

She was welcomed home a hero. The beast’s head was skinned and mounted by Dmitri’s brother. It was kept at the center of the camp, a triumphant victory over the demon who had plagued them for generations. The grief still bit at Sofia’s throat, and she wasn’t open to celebration.

It still haunted her how the mutant victim had mentioned a sister. The creature seemed deluded and confused, but the girl she was talking to never lied. Her compassion and voice were human, real, not just predatory mimicry.

In the light of day, a hunting party returned to the grove where so many of their tribe had lost their lives attempting to map, explore, or forage in it. They were expecting something distortedly human of equal ferocity, wounded and pissed off.

The grove was littered with old flares and signs calling for aid, like someone was expecting help from the air. Nothing much flew here anymore. Definitely not people. All they found in the center was what at first appeared to be a tree. Maybe at one point it was, but now it had been merged with a human girl, her organs and bones twisted and weaved throughout the bark. She had been rendered immobile in a prison of toughened flesh, another victim of the scourge. By the looks of her she had lived that way for decades, her life torturously prolonged by mutations. Someone had been feeding her. Feeding her people. There were ribbons in her twigs and a variety of pelts draped over her trunk-like body for warmth. Some appeared to be made out of human skin, maps of the area crudely sketched in the dried flesh with berry ink. The tree-girl's wounds were meticulously bandaged, and roasted nuts stored in clay pots sat at her roots. The group discovered jumping jacks, slinkies, and even a complete, weathered deck of cards. The sun settled in the horizon and the clouds lit up with golden hues.

The girl had starved to death.



And Back Again...

Oct 13- I don't sleep. Busy all day. Up all night. I shouldn't be on guard duty. I have a business to run. Can't keep doing this. Tell Iffy tomorrow; need to hire a security guard

Oct 15- Blasted luck: no mutual friends interested in the position. I need to genuinely consider hiring a stranger. Oh dear.

Oct 18- Application has been sent to the paper. I've been keeping the serum on my nightstand in the hopes that when I toss in my sleep, and hopefully it'll hit the ground and shatter. No luck yet.

HELP WANTED

Security Guard, Night Shift- Hershel Confectionaries Unlimited, Ltd. 153b Rowland Sq.
Sunset to sunrise. Must be diligent, watchful, comfortable with handling fire. Love of sweets and an adventurous palate appreciated, not required.

Raymond chuckled. Half-snorted. He almost couldn't resist the intrigue compelling him to apply. *Handling fire? What on earth would I be doing?* Webster meowed quietly, pushing himself between the paper and Raymond.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t suppose there’s any harm in givin’ it a go.” He muttered to the cat, eyes wandering to the moon out his window. He could feel the bags under his eyes, and god was he tired, but he knew sleep would not come tonight.

Oct 19- 2 interviews today, one has a family and the other cares for her ailing father. No good: have obligations.

Oct 20- 1 interview today, I can smell the deceit on him, reeks like burnt bread. No good: has ulterior motives, likely profit.

Oct 21- 2 interviews scheduled for today. From what I’ve read, both possible candidates. They will be given a tour and tested on the quality of their character. People in their places. My heart in my throat. I’ll mix the serum in with a fruit jelly. It waits for the candidate. As do I.

Raymond watched the sun sink below the rooftops as he walked; the autumn breeze whipped through his jacket. *Shoulda worn something heavier.* The cobblestones under his feet were still slick from the afternoon’s rain, and there was barely anyone on the street at all. The lit windows around him looked so cozy. He wondered what it must be like in there, all warm and pleasant. He was pulled from his thoughts as someone in a coat, face hidden by the collar, stepped directly into his path from an alleyway. Raymond jumped.

“Why do you solicitors always pounce like you’re waitin’ for me or somethin’?”

“You know about the kinda stuff Mr. Hershel keeps in his little storefront over there?”

An annoyingly high-pitched voice, like he was faking it.

Raymond kept his distance. “I’ve heard rumors. Nothing more.”

“I’ll pay you somethin’ fierce if you get me into the *magic* candy shop, good sir.”

“Cute. Stealing candy, are we?”

“No, good sir-Magic! The man has magic! Candy that lasts forever, changes your nose shape, makes you three inches taller or shorter! If you won’t get me in there, get something as you leave!”

“Call it magic if you will. What that man does is good work.” Raymond pushed passed him with a huff. “If you want something from him, pay for the damned thing.”

Raymond had turned the corner and at last he could see it.

The candy shop, cheery as always, made him smile as it beckoned him in from the cold. The door’s bell chimed. Everyone inside jolted and began moving about, as if they were

all just standing around, waiting for a que. One of their numbers didn't move. A man in a white suit stood in front of the counter, posture straight, shoulders back, his small goatee-meticulously groomed He looked tense, reluctant even, yet seemed to shift in demeanor when their eyes met.

"You must be Mr. Hershel." Raymond straightened his clothes, his brain catching up to the situation and acknowledging that the interview had officially started. He shook the man's hand. "Raymond Gage."

"A pleasure to meet you, Raymond."

Not the voice Ray was expecting. He had imagined something smooth, like chocolate-not this guttural, throaty sound. It was like the man gargled rocks every morning.

"So, you folks looking for a security guard, eh? I'm not too fit, but I couldn't doze off if my life depended on it."

"Insomnia, Mr. Gage?"

"Yeah, how'd ya guess?"

"You got any obligations at home that might cause you to rush home in a hurry after a shift, Mr. Gage?"

“Just my cat, sir. But he can care for himself for a few days. Why?”

The door swung open behind him before he could get an answer. The man from the street stood still, nodded deliberately at Mr. Hershel, and darted towards the back of the store. Raymond noticed that the other employees were watching intently, and when they caught his eye, they returned to their tasks hurriedly. No one was smiling. Just... tense. With anticipation almost. Ray rolled a shoulder and tugged at his collar.

“Everyone’s been acting mighty strange this evenin’.”

“We’re all just eager to have a new member to the crew. We’re all friends. First time hiring someone we haven’t known for years. Follow me upstairs, would you. This is the area of the store that requires the most watch.”

Some offices on the second floor, but only one *really important* file cabinet Ray wasn’t even supposed to go into. A few workstations where people hand-made *all* of the candy they sold. News to him. He didn’t realize what a family business this place was. *I’d rather be a janitor than do labor as tedious as that.* The real treasure, Mr. Hershel was proud to announce, were the laboratories.

“This is where the magic happens, Mr. Gage. Where the money is made. Where I spend most of my time.”

Raymond caught a flash of exhaustion in the man's face and only now noticed the makeup under his eyes. Harvey's low voice dragged his attention back again. "Would you like to try something new?"

Raymond lit up. "Really? Yes please!"

"Chewy mango with a chili jelly filing."

Raymond ate it gladly. "Mff- You make this stuff from scratch?"

"You'll learn quite a bit more about the process later, but yes, we do. And for the record, we can afford to keep some candy cheap for kids with pocket change 'cause we got more lucrative deals with the desperate folks."

"Yeah, I've heard bits here and there. You folks do wonders here, I hope you know that."

Mr. Hershel silently raised an eyebrow and squinted with skepticism.

"I mean it! Cheaper than the risky types of surgery! If someone isn't happy with their appearance and wants a new nose, more hair, different body and has the cash, they don't got to go and risk their lives in some doctor's office where they might never wake up. Just pop some tasty morsel in their mouth and call it a day. Your stuff made me happy

with my body for the first time in my life. I'd like to help see you makin' a difference in this town."

The man started to look panicked. "I don't recall ever selling anything to you before... I keep records! How'd you slip through..."

"Oh no, no sweat Mr. Hershel. My sister bought it for me. We're identical twins. Red hair, freckles, maybe you remember her. She married so we don't got the same last names now."

The panicked ebbed away into outright despair, and he sunk to his knees. His eyes grayed over, like cataracts.

"God, I was too impatient!! A fool!! Should have done my research! Iffy told me... she told me... too late now..."

"Woah, woah, relax, Mr. Hershel. What on earth are you going on about?" He frantically patted his shoulder, desperate to console yet frightened by the reaction.

"There are... conditions... that come with this job." Mr. Hershel regained his composure, straightening his jacket as he stood. Color returned to his eyes. There was an earnest pain behind them that Raymond couldn't quite place, yet the man's body tensed in uncertain anticipation. "I'm terribly sorry for what's about to happen, Mr. Gage. I didn't know..."

Oct 22- Oh my. Applicant gained consciousness about 01:20. He had one of the quickest physical recovery times of anyone who's taken the serum.

-Complete and precise control of all his limbs nearly instantly.

-Four wings and a second pair of hind legs that face *backwards*. I would describe his walk as a scuttle.

-Mass on lower abdomen. Can't tell if it's a new organ, fat, or some undesirable growth.

Won't let me get close to investigate.

-Teeth unsettle me a little bit: needle-thin, mesh together like whale baleen. Metallic, grating sound.

-40 minutes in: Has realized he can no longer speak. Appears to be in moderate distress over only this and nothing else.

-Eyes are perfect for low-light environments.

-Serum perfected: the transformation was stable. Not "stuck" between forms. I envy him.

-Greatest the serum has performed on a subject's mind. Raymond can barely recognize that he has become something else.

Raymond gave up on trying to talk. He had been upset about it at first, but now he couldn't remember why. He could understand Harvey, and Harvey could understand the noises he made. *Why can he understand me?* Why bother talking? Pointless waste of breath.

Orientation day. The real deal now. Raymond had a very important job, Harvey told him. He had to guard the shop at night. Stop the people coming in to take what wasn't theirs. Easily done. Raymond decided he would just eat them. He learned the smells of those who were allowed in the store at night. They all smelled nice, but he liked how Harvey smelled the most. *He smells like me.* He quickly found a substantial supply of fish in one of the fridges. A fine form of payment for his work.

The best part of the job was learning he could breathe fire. Like a dragon. Liquid fuel in a special organ, Harvey called it. If he used it all it would come back after a while. Harvey insisted that he wasn't technically breathing fire, just vomiting up fuel and then sparking it with his metallic teeth, but Raymond didn't care for the semantics. He could close a second pair of eyelids that allowed him to see without being blinded when the fuel ignited. It felt normal and that was all that mattered.

Harvey Hershel slammed the door behind him, leaving that hissing mass of legs and fowl intent to guard his store as he collapsed into his room. He was shaking uncontrollably.

It was harrowing. The man within was gone from that creature's eyes. It called itself Raymond, but that wasn't Raymond. The child-like curiosity combined with the glee he expressed in the idea of roasting an intruder alive and then eating the remains... Harvey noticed his eyes were tearing up with dread.

The emotions loosened his feeble control on his form; his bones cracked, and muscle shifted, eyes glazed into pupil-less white pearls. Smooth scales and powerful jaws that could crush bone. His claws were talons. Draconic but not unrecognizable from humanoid. This had been an older version of the serum. Less potent. Not permanent, but also not reversible. Years ago, he thought it was unfair, to be trapped between forms like this, any spurt of emotion and his humanity would be wiped before his eyes, but compared to Raymond's fate...

Harvey struggled to his feet, balancing out his strange bulk. He opened a window, bundled up in a scarf, and made himself some tea. His hands soon steadied, his breathing evened, and with a sickening popping sound, he returned to his human shape, his mind concluded. He'd make a better serum. Bring Raymond back. If it all went well, maybe he could turn a profit on this.

Oh, what people would pay to turn into a draconic monster and reliably become human again.

He worked through the night, only occasionally distracted by Raymond hissing to himself in the halls.

It took more than one overnight cram session to refine a solution. Iffy volunteered to test it. A generous soul. She often volunteered. She was spared Harvey's unstable existence for being able to change back and forth at will as Harvey's second test subject.

The staff was thrilled. Iffy was completely and permanently human. A resounding success. Every one of Harvey's friends and colleagues who had been tested on leapt at the cure. They all lost their ability to understand the draconic language they had adapted, which would be a pain for navigating sales with shady or dangerous clients, but right now was time for celebration.

Except for Harvey.

His body rejected the serum entirely. It didn't sting nearly as much as watching all of his friends jump at the opportunity to regain their humanity without a dash of hesitation.

Blasted. Now for Raymond, who was asleep upstairs.

Raymond stared at the cat. The cat stared back, bristling in fear, before retreating to some corner of the space. The smell of this place was familiar, but a distant memory. *Who's cat was that?* The people at the store told him he was going home. This must be it then, home. He stumbled in, exploring on uncoordinated legs. He knew it was supposed to be normal, moving up and about like this, but he couldn't understand why he kept trying to crouch to the floor to walk.

The next few days were hell. First was the desire to eat the cat, and the vague memory that he missed the taste of vegetables, bread, and cheese, of which the cat was not. The small creature wouldn't let him get close.

Then the nightmares. The screams of people engulfed in flames, their necks in his jaws, the thrill of the kill. He would wake up in a cold sweat, how real slaughter felt lingering with him all day.

He couldn't remember the cat's name. The last coherent memory, that he was going to do something because he needed a job. *Did I quit my job? Is that what this is? Some sort of memory wipe? What in god's name was I doin' at that candy shop?*

Then it was a completely different type of hell. He was barely functional enough to even look for a job, let alone interview for one. Plagued by vivid nightmares, he wasn't sleeping. He was missing *months* of his life. The cat still wouldn't let him get close.

He didn't know why he did it, whether it was out of curiosity or desperation, but he found his way back to the shop, following the smell. All the staff turned to him in stunned silence. They all smelled familiar. Someone looked scared.

"I want my job back."

....

Iffy went to Raymond's apartment later that day and picked up Webster. He rubbed affectionately against her leg. "Missed me, little guy? Come on, let's get you home."

Well I Know, I Know, I Know

“Ellie?!”

No response. Wilson stared out of the tree line and into the field. The grasses rose above his antlers. He couldn't see if she was out there. A thick fog had settled over the cool morning sun. The grasses rose *above his antlers*.

He pushed into the reeds, and they parted politely around his body. The only sound was the gentle crunching of his hooves on short grasses.

“Where are you?” He called a little louder. His ears twitched as the wind passed by.

He didn't think he sounded very brave.

“This isn't fun anymore. I'd like to leave.”

Then, far off.

“Wilson?”

To his right!

He broke into a trot, but a shuffling on his left stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Ellie?”

He turned to face the noise.



Nothing. He didn't want to call out again. He just kept moving forwards.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, the constant rustling.

Him and the wind.

The wind didn't sound very brave either.

He could smell the wood before he saw it. An old barn came into view through the fog and grass. He caught himself smiling. Cedar. His

parents built it when he was a calf. He and Ellie had spent many lazy afternoons here. He reared up to peer over the grasses; he couldn't see the trees anymore. His heart sunk and he stopped smiling.

“Where are you?”

“Over here!”

Much closer. He pressed on until he reached the treeline again. “Ellie??” This is where it came from. “Hello?”

“Wilson~”

Back into the field. He completely lost sight of the barn and trees, stopping. He turned around a few times. Nothing but grass, then some distant shuffling behind him. The sound led into an extensive clearing. Trotting to the middle, he didn’t know what he was hoping to find. Nothing here.

“El-“

Something was moving just behind the fog. *Thud-thud thud-thud*. Heavy. Rustling as it parted the reeds, and Wilson could just *barely* make out movement-*well above* the tall grasses. It didn’t move into the clearing. It was circling him.

He wasn’t sure why he called out.

“Ellie?”

Loudly. He knew what moved just out of sight wasn’t Ellie.

“Ove^r here.”

Behind him! That was Ellie.

He backed out of the clearing, until he felt safe enough in the grasses to run.

A fence! Same craftsmanship, and now he *knew* where he was. She must be by the pond. They would practice throwing stones into the water and then lifting them back up into the air, as close to the water’s surface as possible. If you could make the water ripple, but not get the stone wet, the loser had to-

The shuffling of the reeds. Heavy, fast footsteps behind him.

“NeEE^d help?”

The thing sounded almost like him. On four massive, long legs, he couldn’t see above its body through the fog.

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

“Ellie!” He called.

“Ove^r h^ere!” It called back. It wasn’t running. It didn’t need to. “Thⁱs w^AY!” Ellie’s

“voice” came from behind him, and ten feet overhead.

Pause for dramatic effect.

And he was never seen again...



The earth shuddered, dozens of hooves stomping in applause. The storyteller bowed, kneeling low and tilting her antlers. As she left the stage, she found a bound in her step. She joined her yearling friends at the back of the amphitheater; the master storytellers tilted their heads her way. This was the first time they had acknowledged her after a performance. She would remember this day well. There were celebrations to be had.

See these creatures performing here? Well, they look a lot like deer. Thin, elegant legs on two-toed hooves, so far not too weird. Strong chests, long, fluffy tails, and wicked tusks. Not to be trifled with, they make short work of danger, leave it a bloodless husk. And great, big antlers, where between two prongs sits a large pearl. Beautiful things, these crystals are. In the sun, every color, a twinkling star, and a deep, jet black to get lost in. To wonder where you are. It hums faintly when they use it. For they aren't just deer. They can move objects with their minds. With those crystals, it's clear. You can build without thumbs, you know. Just as long as you think hard. And they do build. They build homes and silos and fences and tools and sheets of paper so when they sit on their stools they can write with quills and ink under the candlelight, sheltered in their homes from the dark of night. Who needs thumbs? Not the Eltz.

They keep to their families most of the year. Sometimes, when the weather is good, they gather. *All of them.* And then they trade. They trade knowledge, new spices, or recipes made. They trade stories of heartache or pain. When the sun sets and the lightning bugs come out, dancing stars darting between the branches of their antlers, they settle with



their families. Their friends. The Eltz at peace, resting in the woods, sleeping safe and sound knowing the Gladekeeper watches over them tonight. Nothing will bother them.

When the young ones' horns grow in, their parents take them to the Gladekeeper. Well, really it comes to them. Perhaps it smells a change in the wind. Or is in tune with the magical well they draw their power from. But it appears. Towering over on tree-trunk legs. It's small set of arms crossed politely. It sits,

with some effort, and the head with the drooping face lowers down, until its sad, sad eyes meet the young one's gaze. The other heads seem bored.

“Animal ghost, now is the time. No more sleepwalking. Silence your eyes.”

Then it shuts its sad, sad eyes; its small left hand taps the crystal. Just like that. The newest empowered member of the Eltz. The parents always cry and smile. The fourth head sometimes drools. The other two heads look like someone's told a joke and they're trying not to laugh. Everyone's always too overjoyed to notice.

A family settles down in the shade of the pines, the soft needles beneath their bodies. In the distance, someone else takes the stage to tell another dramatic tale, but the ones

gathered over here are tired of such theatrics. The young watch their father, wide-eyed, crystals not yet grown in. He blinks slowly, smiles gently.

“Settle down, settle down. Let me tell you all a story, of a young calf, just like you, who got to talk to the Gladekeeper.”

The calves gasped. “The Gladekeeper talks?!”

“Yes, they all talk. It’s a very knowing thing. But don’t walk up to it expecting a conversation. It must decide to talk to you. The Eltz who get to talk to the Gladekeeper and then share the story are very, very, very special.” He tapped each of their noses with his hoof in turn.

One piped up. “Just like you!”

“Just like me.” The father’s eyes a briefly distant. “But the reason why I got to talk to it wasn’t something special. Wasn’t fun at all.”

He had their attention. Even the adults had begun to settle. Everyone was listening.

Sam cowered, trying to stand to their shaking hooves, ignoring the blood. Lazlo's antlers hooked into theirs as he pulled them up off the ground. Falling back onto his haunches, Sam was pulled into the air, arching over him. The antlers separated and Sam went flying, thudding loudly into a tree trunk, crying out at the impact. Lazlo kicked the ground, snorted, and pointed his antlers at Sam. His message was wordless, but clear; Sam did not try to stand up again.

Lazlo turned his back to leave, tail held high, eyes focused behind him, just in case.

"Mom won't like to hear about this, you know."

He let out something that sounded like a scream, rearing up and pawing at the air. Before Sam could blink, Lazlo slammed his antlers into the tree behind them, catching Sam's neck and pinning them in place.

"You don't LISTEN. She'll listen to you! Nobody listens to me! ...Nobody listens to me. No one cares what I have to say. All of you shut me down, all. of. the. time."

"Shut up! No, we don't!" Sam tried to stand but was only able to partially get out of a kneeling position. "What is your problem, Laz? You lash out like we're your enemies or something. Why can't you be a normal member of our family, huh? Ever since we were young you've always been saying-"

Lazlo wouldn't hear it any longer. He yanked his antlers from the bark, leaving Sam stunned but un-gored. This time he did not look behind him as he ran into the trees.

Sam stood as quickly as they could, listening intently, just in case the yelling had attracted unwanted attention, before they trotted back home. Whichever way Lazlo had gone, it wasn't back this way. A thought passed Sam's mind. Off on his own like that. Those could have been their last words to each other. He slowed and thought about tracking him down. If only to make sure he was safe. Then the pain in his side as he turned persuaded him not to. Sam shuttered, tusks bearing. To treat his older sibling like that! If only to give him a taste of his own medicine, at this point, Sam thought, any injury he befell, he deserved...

...

"You left him alone?!" Their mom was charging out of the house before they could blink. Sam could barely keep up. They could hear their dad and uncle thundering behind them, slower and heavier, branches cracking in their wake. She wouldn't look at Sam and no one said anything more.

They all practically fell on top of each other when they stumbled into the grove or birch trees. Lazlo was lying down, wrapped protectively in the Gladekeeper's tail, the beast

resting next to him. He was sobbing silently, his chest heaving to catch his breath. The leftmost head seemed to be crying too. The rightmost head noticed them first. Once Lazlo did, he stood up quickly and hid behind the bulk of the creature.

Everyone was quiet for a while. The Gladekeeper just watched.

“Lazlo, it’s time to go home.” Their mom finally broke the silence, but she did not move.

“I don’t think I want to.” Something in the way he said caused an expression of fear and realization to flash across the crying head’s face, but no one noticed.

“Sam said you two had a fight. You really shouldn’t hurt anyone like that. I won’t ground you. Just come over here.” She would not move towards her son.

Their dad and uncle were starting to panic, the whites of their eyes visible.

“I’ve told you this before. The fact that your crystal doesn’t work isn’t our fault. Lashing out at family won’t fix it-”

Lazlo reared and made that screaming sound again, making the second head jump. He ran to face them, skidding to a halt and making them brace to run.

“YOU wouldn’t listen when I told you something was wrong. I was ‘too young to know what I was talking about.’ ‘No, Lazlo, there’s nothing wrong. You’re just nervous. Everyone gets their magic.’ Well, the Gladekeeper here tells me that, in fact, one prong grew in warped. If it had been corrected, oh, I don’t know, **when I brought it up**, I would be able to do more than *poke* at things with my hooves.”

“Not our fault it grew in crooked.” Sam mumbled under their breath.

Lazlo’s body sagged.
What was twisting his
face into a grimace
vanished, expelled, and
his eyes glazed over. But
they did not see. He
turned back towards the
beast. “You all can go
home now. Forget about
me.”



“Think about how you’ve treated your sibling. Get it out of your system and be back home for dinner, dear.” His mom walked away as she spoke, thankful to be leaving. All

of the Gladekeeper's heads had been watching them, and she didn't like the intensity. The rest of her family followed eagerly.

Lazlo settled on the soft grass. The Gladekeeper had hardly budged during the confrontation.

"Didn't feel like helping me out, eh?" He asked.

"What makes you think we would have an easier time getting an apology from them than you? They all looked like they were about to run for their lives. They would have said whatever you wanted to hear if we so much as bared a tooth." One head spoke up.

"Suppose you're right. You all saw that? I'm not losing it, am I? It's surreal how they really just cannot fathom why I'm so upset, let alone understand that they are the reason."

"You don't have to convince me. You have every right to be upset." "I can't tell if they're in denial, oblivious, or what." "Not a twinge of compassion. All I smelled was fear."

The temperature dropped, sucking the heat from the ground as it started to drizzle.

"I'd like to see you happy, Lazlo. You suffer the symptoms; you've located the cause. Just leave them. Family isn't everything"

Lazlo smiled slightly at its ignorance. “Tell me, then what would I do? Out on my own like that. Something would eat me. You don’t know family like the Eltz. But then I suppose I wouldn’t mind that. Maybe it’s for the best...”

“I’m not encouraging a death sentence. Find a new family if you don’t want to be alone.”

“Would anyone want to take me in?”

“Here’s a deal. I’ll- We’ll *all* keep you safe while you search for a new family. If someone wants time to get to know you, you’ll be safe with us for the while.”

“You’d all do that for me?”

“Well, either you’ll find a family, or we’ll get hungry. Either way, it’s not going to take too long.”

“What do you mean by hungry?”

And it didn’t take too long at all.

And so there you have a solemn tale, of grievous woe and haunting wails. Of found family and friends, where empathy prevails, and what hope listening to another can bring. The Eltz are funny little things. Just like us, in many ways, including the part where they are prey.

DISQUISTION

Introduction

Monsters. I love monsters, I am good at writing and drawing them. I write short stories, so I will do that. Good practice, and it forces me to share my work and get outside perspectives. Monsters are so much fun.

Steeped in passion and affection, this creative thesis was not “work”, but a delightful and challenging creative pursuit. I have no background in writing studies and I was never formally taught in any capacity- it did not need to be an honors thesis, but I saw it as a learning opportunity and a challenge I was willing to take on. But why? I had a medium, characters, motive, but what was I trying to say with “short stories about monsters”? I sat on it for ages. The committee meeting came and went, and only then did I finally figure out what the purpose was. I want to get the reader to care about people they may not want to care about, and challenge their understanding of this foreign perspective. As Ellen Weinauer phrased it: “activate your empathy”.

The use of monsters in stories is not a coincidence- they still continue to develop and grow alongside our culture. They are an essential part of it. Monsters help us practice empathy and emotional intelligence in preparation for the real world. A good example (that I will expand upon in the “Literature Review” below) is the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. It starts out so pure, innocent, and gentle that it is easy for the reader to care about it. It is a victim and has not harmed a soul. By the end it has become murderous and violent, killing Victor Frankenstein’s family members to punish him for not granting it companionship. After the turn in its character, how we feel about it may

change. We now recognize it as a threat but, crucially, we can understand why it is behaving that way. Its plight has activated our empathy with the monster and allowed us to imagine the world from its perspective. We might even ask if we would lash out in a similar manner. There are consequences associated with failing to empathize in a complex real-world social situation such as being ostracized, abandoned, or cut-off entirely from a person or group of people who no longer see you as a compassionate or likable individual. Those who care about these ramifications have, to some extent, practiced their empathic abilities before. Much like how our motor skills develop leaps and bounds over the early years of our lives, our empathetic abilities develop as well. The earliest milestone a child makes is learning to point. This indicates that they understand other people perceive the same surroundings they do- that we share a reality. However, an eighteen-month-old child cannot yet understand why someone feels hurt or sad, or even identify what those feel like in themselves. This develops with age and experience but is facilitated by exploring these concepts in a more easily understood environment where making important empathetic connections may not come easy. It can be in many forms: from watching movies to reading fiction, there are smaller, safer situations for us to explore who we empathize with and why. This is the core purpose behind my works. I want the reader to empathize about something the selfish side of their instincts may not initially want to care about, and possibly attempt to see the world through this new perspective that may feel wrong or different from their own.

As to why a chemical engineer like myself would take on a creative thesis when I could have dropped honors or picked a topic related to my major, some people have creative-driven brains, others more calculating and orderly. I have something in between

that has allowed me to succeed in an engineering degree and develop an artistic skill. I am passionate about writing but understand my limitations and so I continuously seek to improve. Writing brings me joy and satisfaction, allows me to process my emotions, and serves as a creative outlet. I do not want two engineering capstones, especially when my passions and career aspirations lie elsewhere. I have never particularly fit in with the personality archetypes chemical engineering tends to draw in, but that does not worry me, as being defined by not fitting into either group creates a new one, just for me. This work is a testament to my oddities, and I am quite proud of what makes me strange.

Literature Review

I would like to begin this literature review by defining what the “Monster” is in a literary context. In the article “What if We’ve Been Misunderstanding Monsters”, Cody Delistraty (2021) proposes that there is a clear divide in the types of literary monsters and that failing to acknowledge this divide results in a complete failure to understand the role that monster plays in the text. Delistraty defines “Biblical Monsters” by the lack of the moral gray area: embodiments of evil, malice, or corruption with no humanizing aspects, redemptive qualities, or traits with which to empathize with. Delistraty explains that “when depicted as wholly and unchangeably evil, the classic monsters of literature and myth help make sense of a complex world... The existence of pure evil implies the existence of pure good” (Delistraty). Sauron from *Lord of the Rings* is cited as a more modern example of a biblical monster, but in general, any pure evil monster designed to warn the audience against the corrupting power of greed or against committing a sin, is a biblical monster. If you are ‘good’ you go to heaven, and if you are ‘bad,’ like these monsters, you go to hell.

Delistraty then proposes another type of monster, the “post-Enlightenment” monster, defined by a morally gray area; often the monstrous nature of these figures is a result of failing to conform. Of their *otherness*. For older post-Enlightenment monsters, Delistraty argues that Dracula from *Dracula* is queer-coded, as this behavior was seen as ‘deviant’ and was likely considered frightening in the late 1800’s. The key difference that makes Dracula a post-Enlightenment monster is the very human quality that ‘others’ him: sexuality. Understanding the differences in monsters posed in my work is essential for understanding the driving forces behind my thesis: using post-Enlightenment, morally gray monsters with distinctly human characteristics with which to empathize. The biblical monster is often used as a challenge to be thrown at the protagonist to be “vanquished”, where defeating it is seen as victory over evil itself. A post-Enlightenment monster can be “at odds” with the protagonist, driven by similar motivations such as protecting or providing for a family, much like competing species. If one achieves victory over the other, it can be more tragic. Extinction. A preventable death. Predators do not hunt because they are evil. They hunt for their lives. There is simply more room for compassion when I am working with something that isn’t the living embodiment of evil. Without that capacity for empathy, the goal I am trying to achieve would be lost. Dracula defined many aspects of the vampire as we know it today, but the legend of the vampire and its role as a monster has changed in subtle ways throughout the ages. The earliest appearance of the vampire was the 18th century, where they were not monsters because they were social deviants, but rather because they were mysterious, moving, disease-spreading corpses who doomed their victims. Michael Pickering (2014), the author of Chapter 3 in *Unnatural Reproductions and Monstrosity*, analyzes the various

interpretations of the vampire as a monster figure throughout the ages- one innately tied to diseases. Pickering selects a text from a collection of works documenting vampires in Serbia as far back as 1725: *Documentary and Detailed Relation of the Vampires or People-Suckers* and paraphrases how in one incident, a man who had been dead for ten weeks was reported to have “returned from the grave and to have killed nine people by throttling them in their sleep”, killed not by the throttling but rather because they were infected with a “malaise that killed them within twenty-four hours” (Pickering 73). I cannot help but notice how similarly this plays out to how Dracula attacks his victims. When he chooses to turn a woman into a vampire, sucking their blood is not enough to kill them outright, but rather is a slower process that weakens them into shells of their former selves. *Documentary and Detailed Relation* also recounts witnesses in Serbia reporting that those attacked by vampires were doomed to become one upon death. This account is even more overtly similar to how Dracula corrupts and transforms his victims. The Serbian vampires could even conceive living children, again doomed to become vampires postmortem. For this village, vampires were a slow, insidious disease that does not make its presence known until its victim is dead, only to keep them unnaturally animated. Something like rabies or anthrax. This version of vampirism was for the Serbian villagers of the 1700’s what today’s fear of nearly untreatable and lethal disease has become. Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* more than 100 years later, but that disease-based origin is still present. Dracula feeds upon his victims in a way that drains their life force, like cancer, dooming them to unnatural reanimation upon death, all while the victim’s loved ones watch helplessly.

Another post-Enlightenment monster, but this time one that did not exist in mythos before, is the Creature from *Frankenstein*. In “The Monster and the Humanities”, Eric Meljac (2018) deconstructs Mary Shelley’s creation by observing how the Creature can both recognize its monstrosity via the contrast between its appearance and the humans it encounters and seek to overcome this divide by reading and studying the humanities. Meljac quotes Melissa Bloom Bissonette, and both notice how college students are quick to sympathize with the monster. They each use Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a tool to teach the students to learn from the monster. Meljac also references the work of Andrew Burkett’s “Mediating Monstrosity: Media, Information, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*” in order to draw the conclusion that monsters like the Creature are essential to “create” students who have the skills for creative, critical thinking, are armed with self-consciousness and the ability to break down their own humanity and role in society, and, most importantly, are able “to nurture a sympathetic imagination”, which does wonders in our political, turbulent world where empathy and not “othering” groups of people is the key to harmony (Meljac). Meljac noticed how all students could see the curious, early nature of the Creature as something that was not monstrous, and took it a step further, sympathizing with the misunderstood Creature’s treatment by those around it, nurturing their imagination to more easily identify similar dynamics or mistreatments both in future stories, or in real life. It is easier to identify behaviors when you have been exposed to them a few times before, and that exposure can come from literature with just as much effectiveness as other experiences. These ideas sum up the claim I propose with my thesis: that we need monsters like this to unlock the

true extent of our empathetic nature as social creatures, and to prepare us for the real world when the ability to empathize can change the course of history.

In conjunction with the theory at play in my thesis, in “Keeping the Monster at a Distance: Artificial Humanity and Victimary Otherness”, Andrew Barlett (2007) analyzes the monster’s objectives throughout the story first to integrate into the DeLacey family, and when that inevitably fails, to get Victor Frankenstein to make it a companion to end its loneliness. The first point Barlett makes is that because Victor failed to create a human, the failed creation will also fail to make itself a human. “He cannot make what his maker could not” (Barlett 1). The second point is that while we as the reader sympathize with the Creature’s pain in failing to find a family or companion, making him a “human” victim of Frankenstein dehumanizes the creature more. Barlett postulates that the Creature is a symbol for the victims of our world: persecuted people, mistreated animals, victims of disease and defects, making it deeply sympathetic. We as humans can easily recognize unfair treatment that leads to someone being victimized, and many will stop and think about how they would feel if they were being treated that way, even if we haven’t been victims of that exact situation before. This combination of recognizing the victim and then understanding and being angered by how they are treated drives that empathetic connection, and most people will do this to the Creature of *Frankenstein* when it is abandoned by the creator that should be responsible for loving and teaching it, and then is attacked by villagers because of his appearance. On the other hand, later in the story, the monster is the voice of vengeance. It torments Victor Frankenstein and murders his family, punishment for being victimized with no one to stand up for its unjust treatment. But in its murderous outburst, the Creature may lose our sympathy, for now it

is victimizing others in turn. The Other *demands* to be recognized, and to do so would risk dissolving the divide between us and the other; when the Creature does not get that recognition, the revenge he enacts upon Victor removes him of his victim status altogether, allowing the reader to redefine the line between monster and human. A cautionary look into how “othering” someone can make them a victim which we desire to sympathize with, removing their “other” status, but if the victim demands their “other” status be removed, we are inclined to do the exact opposite. Why must the “other” be subjected to “our” definition of it? Because the “other” is never the group with the power to set these definitions. It is the powerful group that draws the line between “us” and “them”, and when the “them” attempts to change those definitions, challenging the power of the “us”, it creates a resistance similar to what many will experience when the victim of the Creature begins victimizing in turn. This concept is critical in how and when empathy from the reader may be extended to the characters I write about. Someone may start out as the victim of another’s cruelty or malice or monstrosity, inciting the reader to hope for their success, before the victim’s own monstrosity is revealed, changing the dynamic and challenging the reader’s empathy. This empathy may stay and they may continue to root for this new monster or change paths entirely and find themselves caring more about the initial monster.

Monsters are monsters through the fact that they are not like “us”, making them the “other”. All of the monsters featured in my works are monstrous through how they differ from the reader, whether by appearance or behavior. Zuleyka Zevallos (2020) in “What is Otherness?” defines otherness as the result of social identities. Citing the American philosopher George Herbert Mead’s *Mind Self and Society*, these social

identities are not something we are born with, but rather develop through our social interactions with each other and the self-reflection we perform afterwards. The goal of these interactions and self-reflection is to establish areas of similarity and difference. A group of similar people cannot exist unless everyone else is established as different and therefore does not belong. Zevallos notes that these group vs other dynamics are cast as binary opposites: man or woman, enemy or friend, stranger or native, and are all set up to create a relationship with power. Zevallos quotes Andrew Okolie to establish that these power dynamics have rewards and punishment, gain and loss. One group has the power to define the *self* and the *other*, and the *other*, from the perspective of the power-holding group, cannot make these definitions, perfectly complementing Barlett's argument postulated earlier. Simply put, the group in power defines what is normal and what is other, and all differences are judged against the norm. The notion of the other is essential to define a monster. If we other a group of people and refuse to understand their nature, that lack of understanding allows room for distrust, uncertainty, and fear to build. Something that does not look human is othered by appearance, and something that does not behave as expected is othered by action, and if enough fear or threat of harm is present, you have yourself a monster. As I will later describe, this is how I create my monsters. I prefer to pick appearance as the method for othering, while giving them the threat of harm, resembling an apex predator for example, to make them a proper monster. If not othered in appearance, their actions should be foreign, dubious, or extraordinarily selfish.

The literature discussed so far has been in the medium of the novel. Now we must understand how the amount and complexity of information divulged over the course of a story impacts the reader's capacity for empathy. While a longer novel would allow the reader a deeper, more complex *understanding* of a character than a short story, that does not necessarily mean the reader will *empathize* with them. Sometimes less is more. "One Reader Writes" by Ernest Hemingway is a prime example of Hemingway's Iceberg Theory. The idea that giving very little, but symbolic surface prose allows for a more profound layer to exist under the written word. The human imagination loves to fill in gaps in information, creating a reading experience unique to each perspective creating it, and a variety of Hemingway's short stories exercise this phenomenon. In *One Reader Writes*, rather than give every detail about the wife's character, what her father is like, and how her husband may have contracted syphilis, Hemingway simply does not divulge this information; instead, he but allows the reader to interpret and create it from the small details he does share. For example, in order to portray the wife's turmoil and near hysterical state, he can convey it simply through her singular action of writing a letter to a doctor she saw in a newspaper than confide in her family. Altogether, this allows the reader to formulate a story much, much longer than "One Reader Writes".

This technique is a favorite of mine, long before I knew it had a name. It is the crux of how I write my short stories, forced partially by the nature of the medium, but also an aid in the claim of my thesis. Without the length of a novel, I simply will never have the word count to convey 100% of a character. At the same time, allowing the reader to insert the more minute details about a character's personality, appearance, thought process and state of mind permits more intense empathy as the reader will likely

insert what is familiar to them, and will find themselves relating more to the character they partially created rather than if I created the entire thing and showed it to them. Much like the real world, we will never know 100% of another person, and often the version we keep in our minds is slightly different from the real one. Perhaps this version is more caring, has similar interests, or thinks in a similar way, and we like this creation slightly more than the person in front of us.

Though I could have written one slightly longer short story and prioritized more prevalent and complex illustrations, I chose to do a collection of stories. For clarification, there is a difference between a collection of short stories unrelated to each other and a collection that is related. I have created the former, with each story existing in isolation of the next, but there is great artistic significance in changing the collection from unrelated to related- significant enough to require its own extension to the short-story genre. James Nagel (2001) in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* defines a short story cycle as a collection of short stories related to each other in some way. My short stories are not related in the way Nagel discusses, but the ideas he proposes on the tradition of the short story cycle as a medium and the role it plays in American literature history connects to my work. First appearing in the early nineteenth century, the core definition of short story, Nagel argues, is a collection of related sketches and tales has remained unchanged for years. The greatest re-definition of the genre came in the twentieth century: universality. It is a multiethnic tradition, according to Nagel, as the root of the short story, oral storytelling, is present in cultures around the world. Nagel proposes that the novel is not as universal as the short story, for a novel features a primary protagonist as they experience an extended plot, while a short story cycle is

composed of related episodes featuring a group of characters with each tale having its own resolution, the latter being the more universal medium. Nagel focuses on more from the twentieth century, looking at Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* featuring twenty-five stories in a volume as a bridge between novel and short story due to its central character present throughout, marking another evolution in the short story cycle. The themes in this work focus on "submerged lives" (Nagel). The central character may be important at allowing the narrative across the stories to progress, but it also allows the reader to glimpse into the lives of other characters and imagine what more there is to see. Naturalistic and familial themes were prevalent in the 1930s, showing not just multicultural but multi-ranged within a culture. The appeal of the short story cycle is also strategic for writers. James Nagel notes that publishers want "blockbuster novels", making it more difficult for a writer to jump straight into the novel literary market, and instead will publish individual stories for something like a magazine and form them into a cycle, or collection, for publishing later (Nagel). The short story cycle should not only be recognized for its nature as an ancient tradition that predates the novel, but also for its nature as a universal medium used by writers cast into minority roles in our modern era to express their voice and publish great works of gender, ethnicity, and identity. The short-story cycle's inclusion in this discussion is to define what my thesis work is **not** by contrast, but also to clarify what it has the potential to be. I feel a short story cycle is the next logical progression in my growth as a writer, and it was only by researching the short story genre that I was made aware of its significance in jump-starting the careers of writers attempting to get their foot in the door.

In her article “The Short Story”, Susan Lohafer (2012) looks at the short story as a genre. Rather than focus on collections of related stories as a descendant of oral storytelling traditions, she prioritizes understanding the singular short story. She compares two groundbreaking works: “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” by Jerome Salinger and Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”, both published in 1948. She describes both as “sparse and concrete, yet riddled with meaning” (Lohafer 5). These two stories are compatible opposites, both the result of post WWII America, the former a master of self-expression where form renders feeling, lyrical, and the latter showing a firmly defined narrative that gives the story meaning, or a riddle, with the simplicity of both as the token appeal of the genre. Like Nagel, Lohafer credits the magazine with the flourishing of short stories in the early twentieth century, and textbooks containing the works of authors across all spectrums of humanity allowing the points of ethnicity, gender, and identity that this genre tackles to be maintained and preserved through the decades. Her conclusion is that it is not just this publication method, but the flexibility of the genre that has allowed it to thrive. Unlike the novel, a short story must be quick about what it is trying to say. They hit hard and fast with their points and can be created quickly enough to be more flexible in the topics they cover. New concerns, old concerns, whatever the story tackles, it shortens the perspective and can get its point across more effectively in the words allotted than a novel could.

As Lohafer puts it, I need my thesis work to be “sparse and concrete, yet riddled with meaning”. I do not have the word count to take things too slow. I have a point I want to make, and I want to make it quick and powerful. Human interactions are brief, with layers of subtlety, and from that perspective the novel is unrealistic with its slow

complexities. I want you to practice just how quickly you can empathize with the “other” and I need a medium that mimics human interaction in that way. How much can you learn about a person in the few minutes of conversation you observe between them and a friend? A novel would simply not allow you to answer that question like a short story can. Taking what I’ve learned from Nagel with understanding the American short story cycle, it gives my thesis a more precise definition. While my stories are completely unrelated with no central character, the fact that I chose to write multiple short stories in a collection as opposed to a novel is an important distinction. The short story cycle is simply appealing in its universality and allows me to explore notions of identity, humanity, and empathy in a flexible way, giving each story a full narrative arc and tackling more concepts, specific to the ideas in my thesis, than would be possible with a novel and its one central protagonist. Now novels can be flexible, maybe by following multiple protagonists or telling different stories across their breadth, but I am trying to get people I do not know to experience empathy activation, and assuming that will occur within one narrative arc would be foolish. It establishes a need for a medium that allows multiple narrative arcs that are wildly different from each other, resulting in a greater chance the reader will connect with one story or character, but these narrative arcs need to be coalesced in a way that is not jarring. Putting a title between each narrative arc turns it from a novel with disjointed and unrelated plots into a collection of short stories.

Choice of Medium

The choice of a short story and not a novel was about as clear-cut of a decision as it gets for multiple reasons. Even before I had settled on a thesis claim, I had to look at myself as a writer and settle on a thought process. I have been writing informally for years. I

know that I do not have the focus for a novel. Some ideas will only have my full attention for no more than three weeks. The full process must fit in that time frame, from conception to character development to what story to write before I even begin writing. But this restriction of mine does not limit me to only short stories. Something I was never exposed to until the research phase of this thesis was the idea of a short story cycle, as discussed in the “Literature Review.” It fits my writing style so well that I am keen to try it for whatever I write next. A variety of characters that share the same world, each with their own little story, where the new challenge for me would be to connect those separate stories into a complete cycle. However, I am simply speculating for my future exploration into the short story genre as I still have more to explore.

Once I had settled on an idea of what my thesis claim would be, the choice of short stories as a medium became an excellent choice for a more calculated reason. First is the matter of their flexibility. As Norman Friedman discusses in his article “What Makes a Short Story Short?”, there are two fundamental reasons behind why a story is short, either because “the material itself [is] of small compass; or the material, being of broader scope, may be cut for the sake of maximizing the artistic effect” (Friedman 3). The latter of these is the reason I used to make my stories short. It is not about what is presented, but how. Short stories are unique in that they can tackle one concept or goal and do so with maximum efficiency and potency. Something like eliciting pity can be accomplished in one conversation, leaving the reader with nothing to distract from the misery a character is experiencing. Friedman then splits short stories into static or dynamic in reference to changes in the story. A static story gives just enough information about a situation or state of being “to reveal to the reader the cause or causes of which

this state is a consequence, while a dynamic story brings its protagonist through a succession of two or more states and thus must include the several causal stages of which these states are the consequence,” resulting in a longer story than a static one would need to be (6). With these definitions you can classify my choice of short story as dynamic, resulting in a longer text, but often with only one or two state changes, making them shorter than other possibilities for dynamic stories. The short story medium is conclusively adaptable to fit the specific needs of each author. At this point in my research, I did not know where each story would go or what I would be using them for, and that flexibility is palpable in how different each story is formatted and in how the state changes play out. I was not constrained to any specific format that would reduce the impact of what I wanted to convey.

There are drawbacks to this medium. A short story will never have the word count required to convey 100% of a character. Often readers want a comprehensive conclusion, and short stories tend to start or end in the middle of things: they are left wanting more from the world or characters. I have felt this myself reading short stories by Lovecraft, wishing the horror continued just a bit longer, but that would risk dampening the impact of what the author is trying to instill in the reader, be it horror or otherwise. But making the reader understand 100% of a character was not my goal anyways, and this drawback quickly became an essential attribute. Not divulging all aspects about a character’s personality, appearance, thought process, and state of mind permits the reader to fill in those gaps. If given that brevity, readers will tend to insert aspects from their own lives, making the character more empathetic to each individual reader than something I could have designed. Much like the real world, we will never know 100% of another person,

and often the version of them that we keep in our minds is slightly different from the real one. Perhaps this version is more caring, has similar interests, or thinks in a similar way, and we like this creation slightly more than the *real* person in front of us.

Using multiple short stories as I have done in place of a similarly long novella was also a calculated decision. I need more than what one short story can offer me, even with its flexibility; I need multiple attempts. The odds that the critical connection a reader has to make with a character are slim if the narrative follows a few characters in a novella, especially if I want to test the limits and see just how much of a monster someone will connect with. If I go too far and no one cares about who they are reading about, the rest of the novella becomes a waste. Character development or peril means nothing if the reader is not invested. I needed more opportunities to test the bounds of your empathy, and to adjust for just how different each reader is from the next.

Methodology & Process

The role a character plays in a fictional story changes from writer to writer. For some, they are tools through which to show a world or idea. Isaac Asimov and his short stories are an excellent example. The focus is on a robot-reliant world and the logic problems that arise, not necessarily the characters inhabiting it. Then you have the other extreme where complex characters pull the drive of the story, which is set in a very familiar universe to our own, so there is no need for explaining foreign concepts. My preferred style is somewhere in-between. I enjoy a compelling, nuanced character, but often there is some central concept or difference in their world that I am exploring. The challenge then for me is to give these characters room to breathe and not make them feel like mere tools through which I “show off” a concept or idea, while also not downplaying the

strangeness and interesting corners of their world. My solution is to develop the characters and then write the story around them, giving each aspect ample time to flesh out.

I do not write anything down until I am confident in who I will be using to tell the story. I may not know the plot or how the characters will develop, but who they start out as has been set in stone for possibly *years*. Raymond's draconic appearance and personality is from December 2019. The two nameless, mutated sisters started as a dream from high school but were cemented in February 2022. The most recent addition is Yahvessah and her conjoined sisters, from June 2022. By far the most interesting tidbit is that none of these characters were created with the intention of using them in this thesis. Not even Yahvessah, who came into being well into my research phase for the general topic of monsters, was thought of in the context for telling a written story. My characters must at first be free of the expectation that they will be a storytelling tool. It allows me to work out who they are, their motivations and desires, as if they were real people. In real life, stories happen to us, and the outcomes change depending on how we react to the events. Often the creatures I make do not start out as monsters, as there is no situation for them to be monstrous in. Their characters just have an untapped potential for monstrosity. This process has made this project slightly more difficult than it needed to be. It would have been easier to come up with the story I wanted to tell and then make monsters to tell them. For example, I had an idea about including something that tackled monsters in the form of mental illness, inspired by *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, because Jekyll's behavior throughout the story is similar to someone with depression or manic-depressive phases, but I do not have that kind of character in my arsenal, and this was late

into the research phase, so I was worried a last-minute creation would feel forced and underdeveloped, so that type of monster is never tackled directly.

To adjust for this strange creative process approach, I must figure out what kind of situation would portray a character as a monster. Ele is only a monster because she feels cornered and betrayed. Harvey is only a monster because he feels trapped in a desperately miserable situation and is sleep deprived. There is less room for flexibility within each story, but this tactic also allows for endless reusability. I can write different stories with the same characters, as they do not exist in the vacuum of the one story that they were designed to tell. The only downside in using characters this well-established is that I often must leave out aspects of their character I enjoy and save them for exploration in a later piece if they show up again.

I'm not a big planner when I write. I do something more akin to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which was a collection of bedtime stories he told to his children that were then refined into a novel over the years of practice. Once my characters are defined, I tell myself actual bedtime stories, or while I am outside on a walk. In my head, the story repeats over and over again, morphing as I drop parts I do not like and add in some aspect from a video I saw, or a conversation I overheard. There is no pressure for them to be good, narratively complete (because I often fall asleep in the middle), engaging, or interesting in any capacity. They are given room to breathe, free of expectation and the pressure that it brings. They shape slowly into something I get so passionate about that I must write it down. In a way, no written "first draft" is technically the first time that story's been told. I will tell it to my friends, sometimes just run various versions of the story to see which ending they like best. While in the process of writing, I still tell myself

the story when I am doing something else to see what works and what I do not enjoy anymore, and so they are edited as I go. By the time I have produced a first draft, it is narratively complete. Any further edits will be made for clarity's sake, or to change word choice, or to fix a part where I did not follow through with "show don't tell". None were rushed from concept to creation. This may seem like a slow process, but while I write, often brand-new characters and stories begin swirling in the back of my mind. To use some Process Control terminology, it is a production line, where I can work on all parts of the creative process simultaneously, and so many stories are in different phases of development at any given time.

With this distinct separation between how I create characters and how I create stories in place, I'll take a closer look at character creation. It is a paradoxical philosophy between "humans are boring" and "write what you know". I do not want my characters to be basically the people I interact with every day. That would be boring. But I am also human, and my writing is at its best if I am portraying humans, so I have compromised. I have always had a natural inclination to make them monstrous. I prefer to pick appearance as the method for "othering", while giving them the threat of physical harm, resembling an apex predator for example. In past creative endeavors, I tended to "other" my characters in their appearance, but this project has forced me to think about "othering" by behavior rather than appearance more than I normally would, which has been particularly fun to do. Now, keep in mind these characters were already established before I started writing, so the challenge for me was to figure out what situation could make non-physical monsters "othered" by their behavior. The mom in the third part of "Well I Know, I Know, I Know", Ele from "Carved from her Thigh Bone" and Harvey

Hershel from “...And Back Again” are examples of this “othering”, even if they are also physically “othered” from humans. I feel these are also some of my strongest characters, and that focusing more on the behavioral “othering” allows for stronger writing in general, as I do not yet have the skill to juggle conveying very foreign worlds and monsters alongside complex and human characters. This will be developed in time, but it is good to be aware of where my strengths lie.

Most stylistic choices were made to aid in clarity of storytelling. The use of strange font sizes in “Well I Know, I Know, I Know” and “Untitled” were inspired by ergodic literature. This kind of literature accounts for works where *effort* is required to “traverse” the text. It will not be the normal, expected left-to-right eye movement from the top to the bottom of the page. A good example of this type of formatting is in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, where the way the words sit on the page are as much of the story as word choice. I needed to convey something that sounded like it was trying to mimic a familiar voice, yet not exactly right, like a distorted recording. NeEE^d h.l,[?] is too strange on the page for the reader to gloss over and assign it the same voice they use for normal dialogue. It is familiar but distinctly wrong. Then, retroactively, the reader could decide to check back through the story to find out when Ellie’s voice changed from normal to mimicked and spot when exactly the monster got to her. As hinted at from my passion to write a murder mystery, I love continuity in my stories. Where a character is in reference to another, if some item has been moved, little details like that are important to me, and I needed a way to confirm where the monster and Ellie were as Wilson was moving through a circular field. For “Untitled,” I needed a way to make the dog sister’s delusions more apparent to the reader. The first draft had everything from her perspective

described as if she was completely lucid. It did not even occur to me to make it more apparent that her reality was warped, and that failure is partially to do with how I process the world. I am deeply untrusting and paranoid, as well as hyper aware of how an individual's perspective distorts their world, and it results in an unhealthy amount of skepticism. *Everyone* is an unreliable narrator. After sharing this story, it was made clear to me that others trust the sister's reality, hence the choice to cross out the real world with the delusion she is perceiving. I also added a slightly larger and capitalized version of "she" whenever the mutated dog sister was referencing herself, partially because I needed a way to clarify the difference between "she" in reference to herself or in reference to her mutated tree sister, but it also helps pique the reader's attention early on that something is not quite right, and thematically follows with her distorted perception of herself.

The addition of illustrations is a must have. My skills, motivations, and inspirations to draw have paralleled my growth as a writer. For example, much like how I only write short stories, I only draw with pencil and paper, but recently I have been branching out into pen work or long-form stories. My inspiration to begin writing and drawing was to convey what played out in my head in a medium other people could see and understand. They are one in the same in my passion and affection for the art form. Their inclusion was primarily for clarification purposes. Working with such foreign creatures, with odd body plans or multiple heads, just including a brief sketch of what it looks like can ground the reader, and in doing so, it clarifies what this creature looks like and serves to remind the reader that this is not a human. Illustrations also help to confirm that the creature hunting Wilson in "Well I Know, I Know, I Know" is also the same creature helping Lazlo just a few pages later without having to stop the story to clear that

up. Where illustrations are added on pages is sometimes out of relevance. The description of the Judge is preceded by the appearance of the Judge. Other times it is for dramatic effect, like Wilson alone on the page listening for the thing hunting him. Sometimes it is to add small character details, like Ele's furious, uncaring scowl as she talks down to her only friend. I did not originally want these drawings to be seen as part of my thesis claim, but I have come to realize that in an effort to remind the reader that they are not reading about humans, I am creating a possible obstacle to empathetic connection. It is easier to rationalize something so foreign being "barbaric" or "inhumane", and in doing so we deny them the humanity required for us to connect on that powerful, emotional level.

Future Endeavors

I did have intentions of narrating "Well I Know, I Know, I Know", with the first section being narrated by me, starring the voices of two of my friends as Ellie and Wilson, just so it would be absolutely clear who was speaking, and then switching over to just me voicing the second and third parts of the story. This primarily serves as a stylistic choice to amplify the horror of the first part where the Gladekeeper toys with Wilson by mimicking his friend's voice to confuse and disorient him before hunting him down. The mimicked voices sound like distorted audio recordings, so I was willing to capture that effect quite literally. At this point the reader is unaware of the cultural significance of the Gladekeeper, initially establishing it as a frightening threat, so then later when it is revealed that this same beast is protecting and caring about the emotional wellbeing of another individual, it creates this empathy conflict. Does the reader see the Gladekeeper protecting Lazlo as an earnest display of concern, or is there skepticism towards their intentions? Back to narration, for the second part of the story, the rhyming of words and

rhythmic patterns to the sentences may not be intuitive unless someone prompts you to read it that way, so narrating it myself would make that segment feel more like an animated adaptation of a Dr. Seuss or Lewis Carroll. Remember, I tell myself these stories in spoken form, so they are written with how they are read out loud kept at the back of my mind. For the third part, the narration would simply “show don’t tell” Lazlo’s anger in a very specific way that I feel is hard to convey in writing.

I expected I would have to drop narration due to time constraints, as the original plan was for five short stories, drawing, and narrating one. The extra short story *was* dropped for time, but the narration was dropped because I felt it was no longer necessary. I had gained enough confidence in my abilities as a writer that the narration was not a crutch I needed to rely on. I had doubts that I could accurately convey the off-sounding mimicry the Gladekeeper uses in written words, as well as the emotion of the family of Eltz in the third part of the story, but not anymore. The only thing I do worry about is that some readers will miss the rhyming cadence of the second part of the story, but it is not essential to my thesis or even the overall narrative. It was a creative choice to give the Eltz a more whimsical presentation, like how Dr. Suess would introduce the Whos of Whoville, as well as to establish enough context about their culture to help the third part of the story make sense.

During the editing phase of the creative process, Jennie brought to my attention a theme of creatures eating other creatures, something that becomes extremely obvious when you read all stories back-to-back. This theme was not added consciously and is not addressing any thesis claims. This motif slipped in as throughout the writing process I was processing the ending of a toxic friendship in my own life, specifically, the kind of

toxic where it feels like you are being eaten alive. In our society, we use such consumption-heavy, monster-focused vocabulary when expressing feelings of exhausting, all-take/no-give relationships- language so ingrained that it can seep through into art. “He’s eating me alive”, “energy vampire”, phrases like that. Other motifs to notice as a result of my personal life include a fair bit of very angry dialogue, the narrative frequently ignoring the misery of a character, and expressions and reactions from one character going unnoticed by another. I did not catch onto these until they were pointed out to me, and now it is obvious which sections bleed this hurt. It is easy to get used to seeing a text from one emotional perspective, but once a different one is pointed out to you, it is impossible to go back to when you were oblivious to those trends or themes. As a developing writer, it is important to be aware that readers may catch on to themes that you did not intend. In most situations, this is not an issue, unless that theme is particularly unappealing for a certain person to read. Some things may bring back past trauma or be disturbing, and if the reader doesn’t pick the book up expecting certain unpleasant themes, it could completely ruin their experience, or prevent them from reading further. Jennie is deeply uncomfortable with cannibalism in storytelling, but after discussing its prevalence with me (which I was initially not aware of), I realized that it stemmed from my active emotional turmoil and stress from a personal event, and this realization completely changed how Jennie perceived the stories, switching the cannibalism from literal to symbolic, allowing her to read more comfortably. I have learned how fruitful it can be to have these writer-reader discussions. It is unrealistic to try and have these with the masses, but for someone you know who is reading for editing or similar purposes, these kinds of discussions are extremely helpful- for establishing the

difference between literal and symbolic motifs whose distinctions may have gone unnoticed by the writer, or for identifying how certain aspects that I may be comfortable with would drive someone else away. With my knowledge and these types of conversations, I can comfortably include advisories at the beginning of a story I know could cause some people distress, just to clarify symbolic motifs so that they read them with a different perspective, or avoid them altogether.

A large part of this creative process was discovering that the most difficult part of writing these stories was learning when to give more information. The trade-off of working with characters or narrative beats I have known for years is that it is genuinely difficult to put myself in a perspective where I do not know what is going on. Yet I also want some of the details of what is going on to remain unclear. It is tricky. Conveying that one sister is a dog monster and the other fused into a tree without giving any explanation as to why is not easily done when you cannot get yourself in the perspective of having none of the context that I do. If you have ever had a habit or tradition that you have always done and cannot even remember how it started, and then someone points out how odd it is, and you are almost in disbelief that they *don't* do it, that is what I have gone through. I have been practicing my own empathy, and all for a thesis that forces the reader to practice their empathy.

I do genuinely seek a career in writing, something similar to what I have done here; short stories, and possibly taking on a short story cycle or even novella. I may not have the courage to feature my illustrations on the pages as well, simply because I feel that my art style is not quite traditional. I am eager to give it a try. This will likely never be a full-time career, but if it becomes prominent in any capacity, that will make me very

happy to see. As this small thesis has proven, when I take on new projects, I will always learn something new about myself as a writer and even as a person. My struggle to convey enough information was not something I was expecting to see, but my desire to master that skill is stronger than ever.

Conclusion

On a more personal exploration, this thesis has allowed me to define the bounds of my empathy more clearly. More specifically it has highlighted the difference between perspective and empathy for me. For many years I never particularly understood what empathy was, and I had the vague notion that it was the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and see from their perspective, but it may not be that clear-cut. A short article on empathy research called "Editorial on the Research Topic Cognitive Empathy and Perspective Taking," by Renate Reniers (2022), splits empathy into two categories: cognitive empathy, also known as "perspective taking", and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy was my long-held understanding of the concept: being able to imagine what someone else is feeling but putting yourself in their perspective. I was missing the other side of the coin- affective empathy is the response we get when we sense others' emotions. Two people do not have to go through the exact same thing and see the world the same way to completely relate to what the other is feeling, or to sense that something is bothering them. It does not need to be a perfect match. We are humans, not robots, and being able to connect on that emotional level does not have to be perfect. The aspects of this thesis that I have struggled with the most have actually been about cognitive empathy. I cannot imagine a perspective that does not completely understand these characters, or one that is not suspicious of everyone around them, or one that does not

enjoy specific morbid concepts, but I can understand the confusions someone feels when they do not know what is happening in a story, and I can understand that squeamish, uncomfortable feeling when you have to read something you find icky. I have come to realize that affective empathy is what allows people to connect through their differing perspectives, and it can be used to acknowledge that your perspective may be very different from others, and that gives you the power to stop and question it, or the power to adjust for another person. If I go back and apply that new understanding to my monsters, then once a reader's affective empathy has been "activated", they can now relate to an emotion a character feels, even if the reasons and perspective for that emotion are different from their own, getting past any barriers in their cognitive empathy. Just in the editing process and working with my advisor, Jennie particularly empathized with Raymond, but from the specific angle of how she felt he had his life taken over by his job, and it reminded her of her own experience with the work/life balance. Jennie felt emotions similar to Raymond, and, her affective empathy activated, applied her own experiences, be it *very* different from his. Cognitive empathy would not have worked in this situation, as Raymond's experience being turned into a dragon is not easy to accurately imagine. This empathy connection was unique to Jennie's interpretation, and my college-aged friends, whose lives have been more focused on school than work, did not make this connection. I can neither control if someone empathizes, or what they do with empathy once gained. As the writer, I simply open the door for everyone. It doesn't always fit them, and some may simply choose not to enter, but since I did not design my characters to exist solely to be empathized with, this does not feel like a failure.

The function of monsters in fiction is to provide us with a safe environment to practice our abilities to empathize with others and see from their perspective. Often in real-life social situations, individuals may empathize with how an ostracized, bullied, problematic, or unpleasant individual may feel, but expressing that empathy could put the person at risk of being ostracized themselves. And sometimes people are afraid to try and view the world from a perspective they view as “bad” or “problematic”, for various reasons. Maybe they are scared they might agree with it. Regardless, fiction is not reality, and we do not have to navigate the social consequences of rooting for the murderous creature by the end of *Frankenstein*. You are allowed to care about things you would not normally value caring about. We do not want to care about the things in our lives that scare or threaten us, but we should, and monsters serve to familiarize ourselves with that conflict, by using our empathy to overcome the barriers that prevent us from choosing to see from another perspective.

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Lilas Verrill was born in Charleston, South Carolina on May 14th, 2001. They were raised in Duluth, GA where they graduated Duluth High School in 2009. Lilas followed in their father's and grandfather's footsteps and attended the University of Maine to pursue a chemical engineering degree, but along the way took up improv comedy at UMaine's Improv-In-Sanity as well as an Honors thesis.

Lilas will be moving to Madison, WI by the end of the summer with a high school friend who attended Georgia Tech. Lilas hopes to land a job with the Forest Products Laboratory there, but will 100% keep writing on the side.