

TOLLBOOTH AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

A THESIS IN
Creative Writing and Media Arts

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis in creative writing is a manuscript of poems that examine and deconstruct death, mortality and the apocalypse. It is the product of extensive research, workshops and collaboration with the professors and students of the University of Missouri-Kansas City English Department. The poems draw from the knowledge attained from the studies, lectures and texts made available in the classes required in the Master of Fine Arts program. The contents of the poems as well as the form and style presented are representative of the skills and aesthetic mastery achieved through participation in the program.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Tollbooth at the Edge of the World,” presented by Andrew Reeves, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Introduction

I started writing the apocalypse series during my second year in the program. I had read a magazine article about sulfur killing thousands of fish in a lake in Indonesia. The picture that accompanied the article showed the surface of the lake covered with the floating, dead bodies. The image was so ominous, and it reminded me of a news story I had seen a few years earlier about a town in Arkansas that woke up to hundreds of dead birds all over their lawns. It occurred to me that at a certain point in our history these events would be interpreted as omens or supernatural signs. Simultaneously, I was working on a poem about the ice storm that left most of the Ozarks without power for weeks in 2009. I was trying to capture the vulnerability I felt as I drove through my hometown in absolute darkness. In order to raise the stakes of the poem, I decided to set it during the apocalypse. All this produced the earliest two poems in the series: “Apocalypse: Nevada” and “Apocalypse: Utah.”

Though the setting for “Apocalypse: Nevada” remained the same throughout the drafting process, the content of the poem changed significantly. In the earlier drafts, the poem rotated back and forth between images of a boat working through a lake full of dead fish and strong religious imagery. The original ending of the poem was even the infamous Jesus quote: “Forgive them, they know not what they do.” In retrospect, I see that ending as so heavy handed—the poem’s speaker comes off as incredibly condemning in those earlier drafts, even referring to the human race as a cancer. After putting the poem through workshop a few times, it was clear to me that the power of the poem relied more on what it

wasn't saying than explicit statements. If I allowed the speaker to be quietly introspective as opposed to accusatory and let the images do the work, the poem became far more evocative.

This revision process was informative because it taught me two things that I then applied to the rest of my work routinely. The first is that I tend to excessively rely on religious imagery and themes. While I agree that “obsession in a poet is nothing less than a blessing” (Hoagland, *Real Softistikashun* 81), I noticed I was bombarding poems that weren't even about religion with religious imagery—it was a habit instead of a choice. I learned that even a subtle reference to religion could be far more powerful than an abundance of religious language. In “Apocalypse: Nevada” I ended up leaving in the line: “We were the hunger that opened the earth's entrails / sang hymns / fishers of men,” which *suggests* religious presence. The poem is balanced enough that I feel these lines enhance the metaphor and imagery in the poem instead of distracting or pulling the energy in a different direction.

Which leads me to the second point: implication is almost always more powerful than judgment. I noticed when I was nearing the end of a poem I would compulsively leap to a large, sweeping statement in an attempt to get the point across to the reader. I now feel that subtle implication is a far more evocative move. The poems that stay with me are never explanatory. For a poem to truly be unsettling it must allow the reader to face a scene and then wrestle with their emotions without the speaker addressing those emotions. I think of a book like Prufert's *Churches*, which tackles war, terrorism and economic collapse—the imagery in that book does so much of the legwork while the speaker mostly stays out of the way. This is a lesson I keep learning over and over, and lobbing off the last few stanzas or lines of a draft is now a routine part of my revision process.

Originally, I had the idea to write about the apocalypse as it occurred in different locations across the country. But early on I ran into some complications conceptually. Particularly, what does location have to do with the end of the world? How can the poem address the issue of location in a nuanced way? I wanted to resist writing poems that would mention staple landmarks for merely the title's sake—for example the Golden Gate Bridge appearing in a poem set in San Francisco, or the Grand Canyon if it's set in Arizona. I felt such an approach would seem forced at its worst and kitsch at its best. The revision process for "Apocalypse: Mississippi" not only helped me find a solution to that problem, it also opened up the potential for the project as a whole. The solution was to focus on the content and imagery of the poem first, then allow the setting of the poem to establish itself naturally and subtly without overstating the assumed. For example, I had a poem about people piling bodies in a dried up river for mass burnings. Titling the poem "Apocalypse: Mississippi" felt evocative without being overly obvious.

But the early drafts of the poem made me face a different problem. At the time, I had several poems that all felt very similar in content—mainly apocalyptic scenes full of fire, violence, and chaos. They were so similar they started to bleed together, so I attempted to glean off the best images and combine them into one poem. So, when I first took "Apocalypse: Mississippi" to workshop it was a three page poem in three sections. Out of all the imagery (people wearing surgical masks and swimming goggles, mass burnings, walls of churches covered with the names of the dead) readers consistently resonated with a single couplet: "We used to bury each other / in gold cuffs and makeup." This was a breakthrough because the problem I was facing was how to write about the end of the world without every

poem hitting the same notes—death, disease, desperation, etc. I already knew I didn't want to approach the subject from exclusively that angle—there are enough books and films already doing that. So when I revised “Apocalypse: Mississippi” I turned it into a single page poem made of seven couplets and a monostich, using the above couplet to ground the poem. Through that revision process I found a voice that felt unique in its reflective tone. The speaker was not describing the end of the world as it was happening, but reflecting back on it. This voice relied on a *then* and *now* comparison: “We used to bury each other / in gold cuffs and makeup // How strange to find us here— // a vacant planet full of bodies.”

As I moved forward with the project, I attempted to keep capturing this fresh tone. The key seemed to be relying on the uncanny to elicit an emotional response. Viewing something commonplace or familiar through the lens of the apocalypse allows the poems to complicate their subjects. For example, “Apocalypse: Billboards” takes current advertisements found on billboards and through the process of erasure creates a new kind of apocalyptic advertising. Similarly, “Apocalypse: Dictionary” imagines new definitions in light of the end of the world. Even “Prompts” relies on a similar premise. The “prompts” begin in an expected way (“Go to the poetry section of your local bookstore...” and “Fill a notebook or journal...”) then twist at the end and grow more and more surreal as the poem goes on.

As the project grew, I realized the poems were focusing less on the chaos of the apocalypse and more on what the end of the world might say about humanity—how our mortality might define us. So the more I wrote about the apocalypse the more I focused on revising and writing poems about the death of people and animals, mental illness—even

religion served as a template to deconstruct mortality and the afterlife. There are still many poems in this manuscript I want to push further in that direction—so the project as a whole feels more cohesive. But I have a strong sense of the direction I want to take the project and the voice that could make this take on the apocalypse fresh and unique.

Finally, possibly the most important thing I've learned through working on this manuscript is how form can be used to enhance content. Before working on this project I think I often used form somewhat haphazardly—or at least without clear, direct intention. The more I read, edit, and workshop, the more I see how effective form can be when used skillfully and how distracting it can be when used randomly. I think of D. A. Powell's skillful use of white space in *Cocktails*, or the way he constantly plays with line breaks and double meaning. I'm deeply indebted to Traci Brimhall's *Our Lady of the Ruins* for my affinity toward couplets. I found the way she uses the energy of couplets and the psychic leap of a stanza break to pace the poem on the page incredibly effective.

Further, I adopted Claudia Rankine's directorial use of the second person pronoun "you" in *Citizen* for many poems. I found this device allows readers to experience the images of a poem and react to them in a visceral way. Cynthia Lowen's *The Cloud That Contained the Lightning* made me think about the poetic series in new ways. The poems take on multiple voices and the result is a poetic series that refuses to ignore the complexity of its subjects. Michael Dickman's *Flies* taught me how to effectively create a system out of list poems. The book is almost entirely composed of monostichs, which gives the poems a measured yet intense tone. I also found his use of anaphora in the first line of each poem in a poetic series an effective way to push and expand my material. Finally, Nick Flynn's

condensed and sharp imagery in *Blind Huber* influenced the pacing of many poems. I was struck by how much he could pack into such small space.

There are poems in this manuscript that are still not in their most effective form. One poem in particular that I've wrestled with formally and will continue to wrestle with is "Apocalypse: Kansas." The version that appears here is certainly the strongest draft of the poem, though I sense that I will continue to revise it. As I revise, I keep in mind the lessons I've learned that allow me to generate the best material possible. I've taken Dr. Boisseau's insistence that poetry comes from the body—the rhythm of the breath and heartbeat—and her advice, "If you can't write, walk" to heart. Dr. Bar-Nadav's emphasis on *how* a poem is made has taught me how to continually deconstruct and revise my own work, as well as analyze the work of others and learn from their aesthetics and techniques.

Speaking to revising the manuscript as a whole, I'm hoping to push for more cohesion thematically. As I started putting this manuscript together, I spent a lot of time thinking about how these poems were in communication with one another—which poems felt very intimately connected and which felt isolated. While I think a project that deconstructs religion and the apocalypse simultaneously could be very interesting, there were times during the drafting process that I felt like I had two different manuscripts on my hands. As I continue to revise, I believe it will become even clearer which poems are essential to the project and what can be removed (and/or put toward a different manuscript). However, I feel many of these poems are very much in communication with each other, and are speaking to the same themes. I'm confident with time and perseverance those connections will only grow stronger, and I will find new ways to widen the scope of this project.

I

“And how should we behave during this apocalypse? We should be unusually kind to one another certainly, but we should also stop being so serious. Jokes help a lot. And get a dog if you don’t already have one... I’m out of here.”

—Kurt Vonnegut

Apocalypse: Prologue

We open on a man watching the world end
with a 100-day-sober coin in his hand.

Apocalypse: Mississippi

We piled bodies in the valley
where the river used to be,

planted rows of stones—rock gardens
sprouting plastic flowers.

Some days we walk around outside
pointing at end dates.

We used to bury each other
in gold cuffs and makeup.

How strange to find us here—

a vacant planet full of bodies—
some in cement boxes,

all dolled up and waiting
for the resurrection—

some petrified
in a river of ash.

Self-portrait in Divinity

The artist is depicted here lying
on a pile of past selves who point

just beyond the frame—creaks of laughter
pouring down their cheeks. The artist sips

spiked lemonade and winks at no one
in particular. Illuminated, his hand

offers a blessing to the viewer
and reveals a massive god

complex. A pack of dogs watches the scene
from the background. They seem less

than entertained—a silhouette implies
that one has used his leash

to hang himself in boredom.

Apocalypse: Hollow

One by one, the trees rot from the inside
out—strip and fling themselves

into the arms of their still
living brothers.

Their spines moan
under the weight
of the fallen.

From here, it sounds
like the valley is singing

a battle hymn. A chorus
of bodies breaking

and filling trenches
for miles.

Capgras Syndrome

I always think things twice.
You wear a new disguise—

what gives you away
is in your eyes—not

in what you say. When
you kiss me good-

night, you don't taste the
same—I have to spit it out

in the sink when you aren't
looking. I have to think twice

about taking back the breath
you steal in your sleep

and each morning I
wake to her singing

only to find it's you in
the kitchen cracking up.

Jacob

Fingernails stained and reeking of life
he excreted on himself. *Sorry*, he murmurs

at blonde nurses—sanitizing youthful hands.
Some people make too much of breathing.

His scabbed head jerks at the weight
of my hand on his shoulder. Yellow

eyes gloss with film and search
for meaning out a window—his brain

loops—skipping. Frantic
hands—bulging with purple

veins—find mine and grip them
hard to wring out the youth. His name

is Jacob Christian. As a joke, I ask
what Isaac was like as a father.

My father was a drunk, he growls. *Hard
to get over that whole potentially-being-used-*

as-a-sacrifice thing, I think. He studies
the languid lawn lying just beyond

the glass and announces, *Hell!*
Them birds move quick, don't em?

Like something's comin'! Mindlessly
I echo, *Something's coming,*

and he laughs for no reason.

Apocalypse: Teleprompter

Since Thursday, the tide has risen to 39th street—all exits to the south have been closed—remember to reroute your commute accordingly.

A local social worker was arrested yesterday when authorities confiscated gallons of purified drinking water from her home. Authorities were alerted when a neighbor saw the woman watering plants through her window.

Of course we urge you to contact the authorities immediately if you suspect anyone has illegally obtained purified water or may be hoarding more than the legally rationed amount.

The Red Cross is distributing gas masks to communities located near the river in light of the routine burnings that will commence as early as next week. Officials demand a total evacuation of the area despite local resistance protesting the burnings.

Daylight savings is here once again. Don't forget to set those clocks one hour forward and, if you're like me, get to bed early!

In celebrity news, fashion icon Ingrid Swensen claims she has constructed a fallout shelter beneath her Los Angeles mansion and has announced that she will be conducting interviews to select candidates for the purpose of repopulating what she refers to as "the New Earth." Many are calling the claim a publicity stunt associated with a new reality television show Swensen is set to begin production on in the fall of this year.

At the top of the hour, a local pastor claims he has received a warning from God about a coming plague, and the new post-apocalyptic thriller *The Final End* hits theaters this weekend; tickets officially go on sale for preorder at midnight.

The bodies of three teenage girls were found early this morning with multiple organs missing. Reportedly the girls broke the city-sanctioned curfew to attend a meeting organized by the terrorist splinter cell, known as “The Cure,” responsible for multiple attacks on hospitals across the country. We will have more on this tragic incident as it develops.

Ekbom's Syndrome

My skin boils like a sea—
a thousand infants

twisting and rippling
under the surface

in little wombs.
My hive body

humming like a city
or fluorescent bulbs—

whiteheat pupating through
nests of pores.

A household brimming
and disconsolate

will not stand, so
I pinch each small sac

down my wrists and out
my fingernails.

A matchbox full
of razor shavings, stomach

heavy with pesticide,
I can feel each child in me

crowning, I christen them
with salt and lye.

Top 20 Sounds in a Therapist's Office

1. a person sighing
2. the word *I*
3. the word *fuck**
4. the sound of a person clearing her throat
5. the word *me*
6. the phrase *I don't wanna talk about it*
7. the word *mother*
8. the phrase *do you want to talk about it*
9. the word *clitoris*
10. the sound of sarcastic applause
11. the word *FUCK***
12. the phrase *beautiful drapes*
13. the sound of air emptying a body
14. the phrase *he handcuffed me*
15. the word *erection*
16. the sound of a person laughing
17. the sound of awkward silence
18. the sound of footsteps
19. the song "*The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*"
20. the phrase *our father*

*usually in reference to intercourse

**usually not in reference to intercourse

Prompts

Go to the poetry section of your local bookstore. Take a book off the shelf. Rip out and eat the first page. Repeat until there are no pages left.

Write a letter to your mother. Read it aloud to her abandoned voicemail. Tell her you regret being born.

Fill a notebook or journal with your most intimate thoughts and observations. Burn it. It doesn't mean anything.

Let someone fuck you both literally and metaphorically. Collect your general impressions in a dream collage.

Get high on a Sunday morning and watch videos of public executions online.

Lie in bed for four days. On the fifth day, go outside. Bury your face in the soil and scream. Come back in two months to see if anything grew.

Sit in the shower until noon just to see how many layers of skin you can peel off your hands.

Call your father and ask him to describe his most disturbing wet dream in specific detail. Keep a pen and paper nearby to take notes.

Take a long walk. Do not return until you have forgotten your language.

Go to the grocery store and take off all your clothes in the frozen food section.

Do not attempt to preserve your liver.

Go to bed. Leave this poor page alone. In the morning, you won't remember what you were trying to say anyway.

III

“The end approaches, but the apocalypse is long lived.”

—Jacques Derrida

“Oh, I think about the big one, W.W.I.I.I. Would we ever really care the world had ended? You could hold me here forever like you’re holding me tonight. I think about that great big button, and I’m tempted.”

—Josh Ritter, *The Temptation of Adam*

Wasp

There's a wasp hanging
on my porch screen door

as if it's the last
thing she'll ever hold.

Her antennas droop
as if to say, *Sad,*

Solemn or *Enough.*
It's cold out and death

drones on, relentless.
I left a large gap

in the door hoping
she'd fly out and find

what she's looking for.
But she refuses—

just stares faithfully
into the night sky—

much braver than I.
Willing to admit

her place in this—
learning how to die.

Apocalypse: Kansas

When a storm comes, we dance naked
in the fallow fields. We line the porches

with glass vases and pitchers—place
buckets underneath downspouts.

Children squat in the dirt and eat
the surfacing worms. First one by one,

then frantic handfuls—writhing
in their clay-caked mouths.

We lap at the sky with moldering tongues—
lather our blistered skin in mud.

When the last drops fall, the air clots,
and the sky goes white. The children scream,

The light, the light, and we recede
into cellars before the sun can

blind us with her swollen eye.

Cotard's Syndrome

I. Germination

Though I walk through the uncanny valley,
I should fear no legion of lesions. Thy rod,

thy staff—a crutch suspending my hollow
husk—a resurrected vacancy.

Your overflowing cup is wasted on my blood-
less veins. Your table prepared with no innards

in me to feed—each plate seasoned by dust
and putrefying as I pray: Your green pastures

have no use for a sporeless seed—make me
lie down in quiet waters and bury me.

II. Blooming

My leafless spine juts up crooked and insolent
amidst an abomination of cacti. My tonguestone

ever-lapping at ghost lakes glistening in the gap
between sky and sand—boiling and brimming

with cochineal. Mother, lead me to those unstill
waters, and I will drink until I fill this vacancy

so I can sink and take root in the uncanny valley
of the Son of Hinnom. When you return,

find me eminent and towering—an amaranthine
fossil—always drinking and impossible to fill.

III. Chronic

Stones planted in rows like a garden
of rock cacti, sprouting plastic flowers

in celebration of the place you made
each body finally lie down, in a green pasture

where they may sink in relief—shed their bleached
skin onto silk sheets in gilded boxes

the earth pulls closer and closer into her
embrace. I will keep searching for my name—

in faith—because I have time on my side,
and I was told You are forgiving.

Apocalypse: Utah

In the third week without power,
water stopped dripping from the sink.

We filled the bed of the truck with soup cans,
batteries and 20 lb. propane tanks—

drove through the desert toward Moab.
You gasped sharply each time the headlights

caught the reflection of a vacant window
or street sign. The road abandoned us, the axels

froze in a drift. On foot, before frost bite
could sink his teeth into our skin

we found a house with the front door
slammed in. I checked the raided kitchen

cabinets out of habit—lonely ant traps
lined the corners. We sat on the couch

and watched our breath curl in the beams
of flashlights. You found a landline

in a closet, called the voicemail of your dead
cellphone. No messages. So we dialed

any numbers we could remember and listened
for hours to the pulse of the ring tone.

Self-portrait in a Mirror

In a suit and tie, you are not that kind
of listless charismatic who lights up
a room (a candelabra) or even cracks

one up (some song-and-dance-man). Get
a drink, scan the sequin dresses and pull
your leash until it's taut. You, too, beg for
someone's touch—fixation. Jerks

in drag. This nerve of yours—on top of
everything—is what will finally do you
in. Drag that nerve on top of
anybody's touch. Fixation jerks

your leash until it's taught you to beg for
a drink. Scan the sequin dresses and pull
one up—some song and dance. Man, get
a room, a candelabra, or even cracks

of lost charisma. Who lights up
in a suit and tie?

You are not that kind.

Enough

The woman who lived in the apartment
beneath us is gone. I can see the bare
walls through the windows. In a moment

of narcissism, I wonder if we are
to blame—if she'd finally had enough
nights of us flooding the tub and our

bathroom floor—water leaking through
her ceiling. Enough of our dog digging
holes and pissing in her garden. Enough

Sunday afternoons of guitar chords ringing
over badly sung pop songs. Enough nights
of sleepless pacing—the same board creaking

every time we pass the table. Enough fights,
enough dinners burnt and smoke alarms,
enough moans coming from the bedroom right

after a make up. We didn't mean any harm,
but, still, I wish I could apologize or explain.
Surely she, too, once fell for someone's charms

and found herself young, in love, and vain.

Apocalypse: Home

You want to go back to the house you were raised in so you can press your elbows against your bedroom window and cover the glass in long breaths—trace your face or leave a message: *We were here*. You want to pace the halls and run your fingers over the bubbling eggshell paint, wrap singed sheets over your tiny twin bed, clean the leaking kitchen sink. You want to lie on the blistered linoleum bathroom floor and listen to water whisper through a pipe—course and flux. You want to wake in the morning to the salty intimacy of sweat and vinegar breath—a body, a dying. You want to nail every picture back onto walls, fill your stomach with sheet rock, inhale the resin of the blackened doorframe still standing like a tombstone with a crooked epitaph: *We were*

Peter Returns to the Temple

In your passion, the whip
bit even me. Hard

to separate wheat
from chaff with muddy

eyes. I never asked
for an apology, and we

never spoke of the scar:
three pink welts—

one for each nail,
each thief,

each denial.

Apocalypse: Revelation

2:3-6 NIV

~~³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ⁴Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.~~

Peter Returns to Galilee

When my feet pierce through
the silver surface of the sea

and distort the reflection staring
back, I sink onto my knees.

There are graceless seas to cross
that you never taught me to walk,

and the ghost of you that lingers
cannot calm the storm of my doubt.

Me of little faith.
You who never knew me.

Soil

I.

Beneath the streetlights, toothless men dance with the stench of heaven on their lips—
the moon cackles in spite of himself. I am going to bury my face in the soil and scream,

let the rain wash my feet because we have wasted too much time trying
to convince each other we are finally tipping the scale in the endless weighing of our souls

and the graceless density of the word: *success*. I am going to rip the bandaids off the valleys
you carved in your wrists—bury my breath in your shoulder blades

and tell you our eyes alone can cause or recant the universe. Listen, we keep believing a lie.
I'm going back to the town I grew up in—back to the church where I gave birth to myself

a second time—so I can pour this mason jar of sweat I've been collecting for the past
26 years over the stained glass window that still sits numbly depicting a portrait of Jesus

rubbing mud into the eyes of a blind man. The same scene I sat beneath at age eleven
as I said a prayer that begged God not to hurt me forever.

II.

I'm sprinting on a road headed to Damascus but there's no light blinding me
only my tears because the image we were made in is so ugly it's beautiful.

I'm going back to the town I grew up in—back to the church where I gave birth
to myself a second time, and I'm taking my mother so I can ask her

if that birth hurt half as much or was half as beautiful as the first one. Listen,
we keep believing this lie. I sold my innocence to a dogmapiety that threw

crumbs from the holy table, and I held out hoping I could consummate
redemption in my belly—but that's the tricky thing about redemption,

you can't birth it by yourself. So, come on, wake up, we're going out
to the desert. Bring your guilt, we're starting a bonfire—we're cooking cactus

and applauding smoke signals for the stars. Eat up and dance.

III.

I'm going back out to the desert—back to the church where I gave birth to myself a third time. I'm taking all the bottles I've buried myself under for the last five years,

and I'm filling up the baptistery so my father can baptize me like he did when he buried me with Christ at age eleven under lukewarm bathwater. I'm going to ask him if it hurts

half as much or if it's half as beautiful—I mean it just seems like we're all trying in our simple little ways to cope with this thing we call *existence*. Beneath the streetlights,

toothless men are singing—tongue's swollen with heaven's spit. I'm going to throw this glass against the wall, beat my fists into the soil, and try to learn their song.

Apocalypse: Billboards

virgins water
Sell us your ~~ear~~. Get ~~eash~~ today.

inequities
Next time you want to toss something, start with your ~~excuses~~.

desolation
No games. No gimmicks. Just real ~~value~~.

left
God ~~loves~~ you.

death
Happiness is only one ~~mile~~ away...

memories
Place your ~~advertisement~~ here. \$350/month

infect infects
Change the way you ~~see~~ the world and the way the world ~~sees~~ you.

hungry end of
Go ~~vegan~~ for the ~~holidays~~!

timebomb
Trust our experts, test your ~~ticker~~ today.

baby
If you wouldn't eat your dog, why eat a ~~pig~~?

disease
Fall in love with our new ~~stores~~!

p
Help end ~~home~~lessness.

Do you believe in God?

Apocalypse: Infection

We take hospitals in shifts. Confine the infected to inner rooms on upper floors, chain the medical staff and bolt the doors. The sanitizers soak the walls in gasoline. After ignition, the post-ops wear headphones to drown any outbursts coming from the flames. Some days we listen to Zeppelin—others Wagner. We control the burn—extinguish any vestigial cells. The clean up crew stays overnight to ensure an effective extermination. At dawn, we leave our diagnosis painted on the walls: *We are the cure.*

III

“At some point in your life, this statement will be true: tomorrow you will lose everything forever.”

—*How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*

“You are alive and living now. ‘Now’ is the envy of all the dead.”

—*World of Tomorrow*

Apocalypse: Nevada

The fish all went belly
up in the lake—

the surface lit up
with their silver legion.

The belly of the boat went *thwap, thwap, thwap*
against their mouths and spines.

The rudder carved a tributary
of blood behind us—

painted the lake
like a laceration—

and we were singular like a bad cell.

We were the hunger that opened
the earth's entrails, sang hymns—
fishers of men.

We beached the boat, left
the wide-eyes to gawk and rot
beneath the swollen sun.

When Jacob Died

the hospice nurse checked his driver's license and said, "He's an eye donor. Check the freezer for ice packs."

The EMTs were working on wedging a gurney through Jacob's slender trailer door as his body sat defiantly

drooping all over itself in a recliner. The tv chirped on in the backdrop as a fly celebrated over the remains

of a microwaveable dinner. Another nurse came in from the kitchen holding two frozen burritos,

"This is all I could find in the freezer," he said as his face wrinkled up. "Bowels definitely released,"

said the other, "Those'll have to do." The nurse balanced a frozen burrito vertically over each of Jacob's lifeless eye-

sockets—the burritos made a hissing sound as they melted into Jacob's puce swollen face. "Get that fucking gurney

through the goddamn door!" the nurse yelled. "This guy's gotta go now, else his eyes'll cook on the drive into town!"

The nurse looked around the trailer: an ironing board sat in the kitchen covered with the innards of a disassembled

watch collection, an army service uniform hung in a plastic sheet in the closet, a bookshelf full of cheap spy novels wedged

beside the bed, no pictures on the walls. The nurse looked back at Jacob's corpse as one of the sagging burritos slid

off the face and made a *thwump* sound as it hit the linoleum floor. "Death be not proud," the nurse murmured,

and the other nurse laughed—whistling along with the tv as the theme from *Sanford and Son* entered the room.

Apocalypse: Seer

Just before dawn, a speckled trail of blood leads you to a Seer's camp.
In a singed raincoat, she squats over a bed of coals, prodding

the blackened carcass of a tortoise. You ask her for a match,
and she tells you all the prophets died with their prophecies

smearing on cardboard in the bowels of cities. If you listen closely,
you can still hear the cloverleaves folding themselves

on top of each other. You show her notes you found under rocks
in the desert: *Only move at night*, and *The sun is no longer accepting*

prayers. Her stained teeth crack her face into a smile
as she pulls out one of her own: *Before the ground stopped*

speaking, it would tell us where to go. Her bloodshot eyes only
meet your gaze when you tell her you are lost. *No one is lost*

anymore, she murmurs. She pulls a bottle cap out of a tin
lunchbox, flips it in the air and points toward the horizon.

Rabbit

In pang of winter,
a rabbit ripped through

the white static trees
into a clearing—

a mountain lion
sprinting close behind.

The snow sputtered
from their riven path

like confetti. As
the gap between them

slowly closed, the legs
of the rabbit went

spatspatspat against
the ground. When fated

exhaustion sank in,
the rabbit started

whipping its head back
and forth—its eyes wide

as the cat's embrace—
ears still listening

to bones splintering,
perked as if to say,

I don't understand.
I don't understand.

This isn't the way
I thought this would end.

Apocalypse: Dictionary

Now: a memory you won't remember making.

Memory: a smell you can't name that makes you think of childhood.

Childhood: a room that grows smaller in ratio to a loss of innocence.

Innocence: a sky devoid of jet trails.

Sky: a hole in the jar that changes colors as a metaphor for time.

Time: a deflated balloon that reads *Happy Birthday* caught in the broken arm of a tree.

Beauty: the dense, disorderly production of nothing becoming nothing.

Production: *see 'Industry.'*

Nothing: absence of redemption.

Redemption: the sound of laughter dancing in an air vent, *see 'Religion.'*

Industry: the petrichor of sewage in the name of currency.

Currency: the way asphalt tenderly clings to skin.

Tenderness: *see 'Community.'*

Skin: vessel.

Community: the comfort of seeing someone you know in the supermarket before she sees you as she turns and walks in the opposite direction.

Comfort: the sensation of statically charged hair and skin the second before an explosion.

Sensation: *see 'Redemption.'*

Religion: the futile war against dust.

Futility: *see 'Now.'*

War: *see 'Nothing.'*

Dust: *see 'Skin.'*

Apocalypse: Home

You want to curl up in the corner of your first apartment where the plants you could barely keep alive stained the carpet. Breathe in (the shadow of their soil). You want to wake in the morning on the mattress you kept on the floor to the thick smell of soap—clean laundry hanging from every doorway like curtains. You want to cook eggs in the kitchen too small for one and let your little black dog clean your plate. You want to walk in after a double shift, step around the plate and fork still on the floor, shower in the tub clogged with your hair, giggle at the cloudy water coming up to your shins and sloshing each time you swing a foot. You want to lie at night and listen to the drone of the vacuum from the lady upstairs—the only sound that keeps her baby from crying (and some nights you as well). You want to smoke on the porch while your dog whines and wags at each passerby. You want your grandmother's quilt. You want to go back to when you knew the day and date—when there were years and time was not a cracked commodity slowly spilling out.

Clot

My grandfather as he was
passing thought his nurses

were a gang of bikers. He tried
to fight, kicked and collapsed,

his tubes tangling as he writhed
and tried to stand—the blood clotting

in his legs. His wife and sisters
cluttered his room, bickering

and discussing the size of his daily
bowel movement as casually as his brothers

discussed the baseball game in the waiting
room. I've never seen a man in my family

in a hospital gown unless someone was
about to die. So, when we lined

the sliding walls of his interim
room, my mother took my grand-

father's hand and gave him
permission. Then we watched him

choke on his snot and flat-line
like a batter striking out.

Apocalypse: Anxiety

You still pace on crippled sidewalks.
You still feed your dog.

You still rock in the distended moment—
take a step for no reason, take it back.

You still drive around without a destination
when you feel the room getting smaller.

You still find music on the radio you don't care for,
and preachers still shout through the static—

asking for money in exchange for little vials
of holy water. You still watch the numbers pile

up in the odometer—always rising but never
spilling over. You still catch yourself looking up

at the sky for a cue. You still swallow
your spit when nausea hits, still imagine

yourself floating in a cool, limned spring.
You still sit alone late at night and bite

your nails. You still drink too much.
You still lie down in the bed you conceived

in—revolvers under each pillow. You still lie
in the black silence and remind yourself

how to fill your lungs with air then release
again. You still distract yourself

from the fallow ache of memory
by counting the spilling seconds—

one for each time the blinking clock
lights up with the number *1200*.

Apocalypse: Revelation

13:1-4 NIV

The dragon stood on the shore of ~~the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.~~ ² ~~The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.~~ ³ ~~One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast.~~ ⁴ ~~People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who could wage war against it?"~~

Apocalypse: Mother

Mother, when you fucked us
into existence you did not stop

to consider our thirst,
and now we have swallowed

every ocean. We fed on dead
whales in an endless desert

and baptized our children
in boiling oil. We descended

the mountains the tide
undressed when it receded

and did not return. Mother,
when you first conceived

of us you did not consider
our contagion, and now

we have travelled
to the deepest part

of you—to return
to your womb

and eat through.

Tollbooth at the Edge of the World



At the edge of the world there's a tollbooth
St. Peter sits inside. He passes the time by rolling

infinite-sided dice. Some rolls determine how someone
will be born—others how someone dies.

For example, a roll of -0.00784935 and 27
results in an infant born with lymphoma,

while a roll of 334.6 and π results in a death
by autoerotic asphyxiation.

Peter only has two jobs:

1. Monitor the gate to keep people from falling into the void
beyond the edge of the world.
2. Continue rolling the dice until a roll of double zero,
which will result in the end of the world.



On the last day
you are alive,

you will be surprised
that so few people

came to see you.
You will wonder why

you always imagined
a hospital room full

of warm flush faces.
You will wonder

why it never occurred
to you that most everyone's

last meal comes
from the cafeteria

of a hospital
or nursing home

or prison.



On Sundays, Peter slides back
the little glass window on the side

of the tollbooth and peeks out into
the void that lies beyond the edge

of the world. He puts away his dice,
flips over the little laminated *closed* sign,

and counts his register (usually easy
because hardly anyone wants to pay

to walk off the edge of the world).
As Peter counts the memories

in his register, occasionally he shines
one off and holds it up to the fluorescent

light. He finds it odd the memories people choose
to cling to—never particularly poignant events

or personal revelations or wounding tragedies—
but typically a short moment on a random day

when the weather happened to be nice,
and they briefly felt very small and happy.

Sometimes they are at a dinner party or looking
out a dirty window at the sunset or sitting in traffic

on the overpass thinking about nothing.



On the last day you are alive
people will say a lot of stupid things

(which won't be all that different
from any other day). They will say

natural at you over and over again.
You won't be able to tell them

that you can feel your body becoming
more and more unnatural with every

clock tick. You won't be able
to tell them you can feel the earth

rejecting you like a virus. But,
you will still be alive (which is more

than a lot of people can say). You
will wake up and the alive part

will just happen to you. You will try
to remind yourself of the trillions of people

death already happened to—this thought
will not make you feel less alone.



Peter places the memories in the air lock
at the back of the tollbooth. He locks the door

and ejects the memories out into the void beyond
the edge of the world. As the memories depart,

they begin to burn and twist around each other.
They inevitably collide and explode

into a thousand tiny points of light.
Peter lights a cigarette, pulls

out his drawing pad, and draws the constellations
he sees in the little specks of light before

they fade into the darkness beyond
the edge of the world. St. Thomas

(who works at the tollbooth in the center
of the universe) believes this process destroys

the memories. But Peter believes the constellations
he sees are reflections of the memories

that will funnel back into the universe.
Peter believes this is the source of all life.



On the last day you are alive you will die, and no one will be there to explain why (the dying part will just happen).

Then you will arrive at the tollbooth at the edge of the world. Peter will slide open his little window and ask for your name.

But you won't remember what people on earth called you. You will only know the name you were given before

we invented time. Peter will open his attendance book and find your name. He will ask you if you'd like to pay

to open the gate—the cost is your memory. If you do not wish to pay, you may return to earth without your body.

No one knows what happens to people who return to earth without their bodies. If you choose to pay, Peter will lock

your memories in his drawer, pull out his drawing book of constellations, tear out a page, and hand you a picture—

perhaps of a woman being awakened by her cat in the raw hours of the morning, or a little boy with a stick by a slow

spilling creek. Then he will tell you he does not know what happens to people who walk off the edge of the world.

If you still wish to proceed, Peter will smile, cross out your name, offer you a cigarette, then lift the gate.

NOTES

Capgras Syndrome is the delusion that one's family, friends or acquaintances have been replaced by imposters, duplicates or doppelgangers. Often, victims are able to recognize voices but not the people themselves.

Ekbom's Syndrome, also known as delusional parasitosis, is a delusion in which victims believe their skin or body is infected with parasites. Victims often compulsively fill matchboxes with "evidence" removed from their skin.

Cotard's Syndrome or Walking Corpse Syndrome is a delusion that one is dead or does not possess bodily organs or blood. Often, victims believe they are immortal and have been cursed by God with an inability to die. The three medical stages of the disorder are "germination," "blooming" and "chronic." In 1996, a patient who suffered a head trauma from a motorcycle accident claimed he had died during recovery. He moved with his mother from Scotland to South Africa shortly after the accident and claimed the heat of the desert was proof that he had been taken to hell. Many victims of the syndrome frequent cemeteries, claiming it's the only place they feel they belong.

VITA

Andrew Scott Reeves was born in Springfield, Missouri on September 23, 1987. He received a public education and graduated from Bolivar High School in 2006. He graduated from Southwest Baptist University in 2010 with a double major in Philosophy of Religion and English Literature with an emphasis in Creative Writing. He then spent three years working as a bookseller and private music instructor until Fall of 2013 when he began pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing with an emphasis in poetry at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He began work on his thesis in Fall of 2015. Upon completion of his degree requirements, he plans to continue to pursue his education on a doctoral level.