

**TROUBLED PILGRIMAGE TO THE GROTTA: EXPLORING THE
DECONVERSION NARRATIVE IN FANTASY**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
DEDICATION.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION.....	5
1.1 Motivation for the Antithesis.....	5
1.2 Atheism’s Absence in the Field.....	6
1.3 A Creative Method-Of.....	6
2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS.....	12
2.1 Historical Context.....	12
2.2 Literature Review.....	15
2.3 Relevance of Genre and Category.....	17
3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT.....	23
4. REFLECTION.....	25
WORKS CITED.....	27
APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT.....	29

ABSTRACT

Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto: Exploring the Deconversion Narrative in Fantasy

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Since the inception of literature, religion has been a dominating thematic force in the field and with it- conversion; however, a survey into the related literature reveals such popularity stands counter to a lack of variety as the reverse narrative, deconversion remains under examined. Deconversion is not a new spiritual path but only recently has it been considered seriously as a valid endpoint rather than a hurdle to overcome. This is especially true in fantasy literature which, for reasons central to the genre's elements and development, is particularly sympathetic to texts favorable to spirituality. However, as similar methods which defend belief can be employed to incite unbelief, true parallel texts can be produced, with care to the aspects of the genre which implicitly support belief over unbelief.

In recognition of and response to the disparity between positive and negative depictions of unbelief this creative thesis *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* presents a deconversion story in which loss of religious adherence is recognized as a valid spiritual path. It addresses in narrative form theological problems such as religious pluralism, historical inaccuracy of religious mythology, as well as further developing issues such as the problem of evil, etc. in narrative back

and forth. By presenting extended arguments that ultimately culminate in unbelief, a balanced presentation of ideas can be achieved while still furthering the broader agenda of filling the niche of unbelief in theological fiction. This important step may help further interest and study in an underdeveloped sub-field.

DEDICATION

To my Aggie Creative Collective group for never pulling your punches, my advisor Dr. Jason Harris and mentor Dr. Elizabeth Robinson for guiding me as a scholar, and my friends and family for support as I balanced research with social lives.

Lastly, to Mr. Roel Prado who will never read this. I hope you found what you were looking for.

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1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 Motivation for the Antithesis

Something of a vacuum for atheism exists in the realm of fantasy. Despite the recent increase in atheist authors and more balanced treatment overall of unbelief, it seems like progress towards a balanced landscape, necessitating some rigorous theological fiction, is overly slow at best and like the genre is actively thwarting that effort at worst. It being true that such a situation exists the question naturally arises how one might construct a work which fills the opposite niche of what currently exists. In a strange symmetry, more of the same technique, applied on at least one greater level, is required; argument against argument naturally produces counterargument, which leaves the initial problems that theological fiction attempts to solve without solution and fundamentally changes the nature of the work.

When understanding the rationale for the creation of theological fiction, which conveys intellectual weight that can be combined with fantasy, one might turn to those who have created such works before, inevitably running into the titan that is C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. In doing so, they might discover a striking quotation of Lewis' "I am aiming at a sort of pre-baptism of the child's imagination" (Sayer 192). This motivation is self-evidently motivated by Lewis' religious commitments, for what other reason could spur a desire for pre-baptism. In this way theological fiction can serve to educate, to explicate difficult matters through storytelling that any lay person, even a child, can begin to understand the grander points of theological matters and subconsciously begin assenting or dissenting to the position. This principle is perhaps best captured by Lewis himself in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* "This is the very

reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there” (Lewis 541).

1.2 Atheism’s Absence in the Field

In light of this, it can be clearly understood that the motivation for writing a work such as *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* should similarly have foundations in a desire to explicate a position, in this case one that is at best underrepresented and at worst under attack. The seeds of Christianity are sown in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien and stretch backwards to the tales of George MacDonald, and in each of these, unbelief is certainly undesirable if not actively harmful. The brutal treatment of atheists and apostates in *The Last Battle* of Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia is almost comical when viewed from this perspective. The literature of unbelief is scarcer and more contestable, as authors like Terry Pratchett and Phillip Pullman deal less with the philosophical or theological aspects of atheism than the practical concerns of the world’s interaction with religious institutions. In this way a vacuum exists where “the anti-*Narnia*” should be, although Phillip Pullman’s His Dark Materials trilogy tends to be attributed with that honor and *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* might be more accurately described as the anti-*The Princess and Curdie* due to its deconversion focus (Bethune). This literary gap is to be partially filled with this thesis.

1.3 A Creative Method-Of

Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto follows the deconversion story of a young member of a religious order falling out of line and eventually out of belief with the faith he was raised under. The first task is to identify the pitfall of creating an unbalanced spiritual landscape and intentionally avoiding it. The second is clearly explicating the deconversion journey. Whereas other works utilize creatively represented apologetics to solve issues of doubt, this work will

further complicate those defenses, extending the dialectic and presenting a realistic, rational path towards unbelief. This path is similar, although not identical to, the average path of spiritual growth.

1.3.1 Atheist Theological Fantasy

It was aforementioned that *The Last Battle* is particularly viscous towards unbelief, but this is driven by necessity and should therefore not uncritically be attributed to malice. The two clear atheists in the novel, Ginger the cat and Rishda Tarkaan, are made to suffer dearly, in the case of the former with the loss of their mind and the latter with banishment to a thinly veiled version of Hell after a self-serving conversion to what is in principle unknowing devil worship. The devil is the Calorman deity Tash who serves as a double allegory for the other gods of our world in contrast to Aslan being the stand in for the Christian God. The obviously problematic nature of making the vaguely Middle Eastern country in the world of Narnia worship the devil allegory and attack the good Anglo-Saxon coded Narnians and Archenlanders bears mention, but it is only adjacent to the point being made. A group of apostates, dwarves that are a race of Narnians with a complicated history regarding Aslan, are trapped in a prison of their own making, refusing to “let anyone take [them] in” after becoming murderous traitors (Lewis 748). Of course, there is no serious grappling with the cause for this terrified and stubborn resistance to belief. It was brought upon by an elaborate falsehood which convinced effectively all of Narnia; once the dwarves, en route to be enslaved, were freed and told of the deception, they lost faith in the authority structures their race has historically had issues with, the king and Aslan. Whether or not this makes them deserving of their limbo like fate is not critically examined in the text.

To further exacerbate the situation another, this time true believing, unknowing devil worshiper named Emeth is forgiven as Aslan appropriates all good he did in the name of Tash as

“[Aslan] and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to [Aslan], and none which is not vile can be done to him” (Lewis 757). I mean not to state that Emeth is undeserving of his happiness but to make bare the brutal ends possible when theological positions are given the power of fantastic justification. Of course it appears that Lewis’ theological position is correct in the text, due to the nature of fantasy Lewis can place the living god in the story to demonstrate such.

The same problem can occur in magic systems where the supernatural truthmaker is not directly seen if the magic system itself without caveated confesses their existence. If the invocation of a deity causes magic and that magic cannot be conducted without invoking a deity, only the most unreasonable of skeptics can deny such repeatable indirect evidence. In all these situations, the religious beliefs of every character involved are unfairly presented because the justifying force of the fantastic is so unfairly apportioned. A balanced atheist fantasy can have no such lopsided allotment of the fantastic alongside ideological lines without implicitly using the force of the genre to prove the position correct. This may be one reason atheist fantasy is seemingly nonexistent, it is too easy to justify a character or ideological position by making the magic system agree with them.

1.3.2 The Deconversion Journey

The steps of the negative spiritual journey are on their face similar to the well-trodden positive steps; however, there are key differences in representation of these steps. The ordinary world as referred to in the hero’s journey must include some sense of spiritual inadequacy, known or unknown, that must be filled or cast off. Such inadequacy need not be a complete failure, but enough distance must be put between optimal spirituality and the status quo that a spiritual rehabilitation is necessary. The aforementioned Curdie begins his spiritual journey from

a state of subtle inadequacy, not a presence of poison to be removed but a lack of truth. Although Curdie's father and mother are depicted as relative paragons of virtue in the duology, they only retroactively give Curdie insight into the spiritual goings on of the world. After Curdie rebukes the Princess Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*, responding to an attempt to provide him with spiritual insight, he receives a lesson from his mother in the form of "something [she] saw [her]self once" (MacDonald 158). The importance of this plot point rests on the fact that Curdie ought to have acted differently, but lacked the spiritual education from his parents necessary to do so. Here a spiritual inadequacy, specifically of education, is impressed upon even in the most ordinary of worlds.

C. S. Lewis doesn't address the spiritual state of the human world outside Narnia much at the beginnings of his stories; however, in *The Last Battle*, the final Narnia book, Susan is said to no longer be a friend of Narnia, having fallen victim to the superficialities of society and suppressing memories of Narnia in the process (Lewis 741). One might consider this a poison to be cast off; however, it is not inherently present in the character of Susan to begin. As a developed trait, Susan's turn may be better analyzed as analogous to the fall of Curdie when he lacks spiritual education with the acknowledgement that Susan has received this education and yet falls short of it. This more developed struggle matches the more developed narrative location Susan finds herself in. This, alongside the seeming necessity of visiting Narnia to get to know Aslan better, alludes to the inadequacy of earthly existence. That said, Narnia still is not Aslan's country, the ultimate end goal, therefore the journey of the Chronicles of Narnia can be characterized as largely incremental steps towards spiritual development.

In this vein, *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* recognizes the spiritual inadequacy of the ordinary world in two ways. The Chimebury, a monastery like institution, has instilled in Kuro

both spiritual baggage he must overcome and has found itself incapable of properly guiding him towards magic, reflecting both the aspects of active impairment and passive inadequacy which can taint the ordinary world. The reversal here lies in the fact that Kuro is already a religious adherent, so the position of inadequacy is flipped and the poison to be overcome becomes more likely.

From here, the journeyer must grapple with spiritual truths, likely an intellectually and emotionally difficult process. The theological fiction novel *Silence* has the main character struggle with oppression, the silence of God, and the difficulty of missionary work in a hostile Japan inching ever closer to apostasy. In theological fantasy, the spiritual truth can be conflated with the fantastic elements. Interaction with the magical goddess-like Irene sets Curdie on his path of spiritual growth after a revelatory experience. It is by interacting with Aslan that we receive theological formation and piety by the human and Narnian characters. The primary tactic taken in *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* is to question the validity of what Kuro has been taught and is being told as well, as the problems of multiple deities with comparable evidence and the problem of evil.

Finally, the adherent must come to a new spiritual position. They can, after their dark night, become stronger and more convinced in their beliefs having better reasons or personal experience to hold on to. Should they move from some lack of faith to a marked increase in faith, this is generally positive. Finally, if they apostatize or deconvert, the spiritual experience might be considered more of a tragedy depending on the writer. If realistic it will likely leave the character fragile with loss. This dichotomy of gain versus loss is the reversal of the endpoint of the conversion experience. If the experience is to be portrayed in a positive light, a focus on the

loss of shackles or gain in something else is necessary. In *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* Kuro gains intellectual consistency, but he remains fragile after his experience.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

2.1 Historical Context

Situating the creative artifact in a historical context proves complicated because there are overlapping traditions which govern its creation, some of which are notoriously difficult to cement. Three aspects in particular are important to understanding the artifact in terms of its predecessors: fantasy, theological fiction, and young adult fiction.

2.1.1 *Fantasy*

Clute defines fantasy literature as “a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it (> Perception); when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms” (Clute, “Fantasy”). While this definition seems strong he also acknowledges that “fantasy's specific location in the spectrum of the fantastic is a matter of constant critical speculation; there is no rigorous critical consensus over the precise definition” (Clute, “Fantasy”). It is for this reason that fairy tales, horror, surrealism, and most relevantly myths that make up religious works can be in the broader realm of the fantastic and feed into fantasy without crossing the barrier into fantasy proper. Brian Attebury’s description of fantasy as a fuzzy set anchored by example goes a long way in reflecting the blurry edges of genre, so his understanding should also be kept in mind to keep both structure and flexibility.

With Clute’s definition to anchor fantasy and Attebury’s to qualify it, fantasy can be recognized as taking form approximately in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Clute, “Fantasy”). Some of these earliest authors include George MacDonald and Edward Plunkett,

better known as Lord Dunsany. These trailblazers are deeply tied to both other fantastic literature and Christianity; the former can be linked to fairy tales and the latter with myth (Clute “Dunsany, Lord”; Langford “MacDonald, George”). Their influences are felt in more or less all subsequent great fantasy writers in the western tradition, representative are C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien firmly in the 20th century. Modern writers include Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson, and it should be noted that all the formative authors mentioned in this section thus far have been religious. When searching for atheistic writers Phillip Pullman and Terry Pratchett are forefront, two modern authors, though if the scope is expanded to fantastic literature more broadly others can be found. From even a quick overview, the historical context of the fantasy genre is clear.

2.1.2 *Theological Fiction*

Defining theological literature as literature engaging in religious or spiritual discussion renders it potentially ancient. It cannot be the oldest of literature as religious myths must precede the discussion they bring about, but such a tradition can extend deep into the past. One may go back to Plato’s *Euthyphro*, popularizer of the Euthyphro dilemma. This approximately 24 century old text would fit under the category easily. Theological fiction would then be the fictitious subcategory of this, engaging in this discussion using fabricated events or characters. If one subscribes to the notion that Plato was intentionally writing ahistorical events, an argument can be made that *Euthyphro* is likewise theological fiction.

Philosophus Autodidactus by Ibn Tufail is a 12th century text, and likewise can be understood as theological literature. It is deeply allegorical and engages in the conversation surrounding revelation’s seeming opposition to reason. It eventually concludes that there is no opposition and profoundly influences Islamic and then Enlightenment philosophy.

Other works like the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis are likewise trying to parse out issues like the technical ramifications of the Christian afterlife, the place of evil, and apologetics. They also influence philosophy and theology like those works before them.

There is little through line with these works in terms of influence beyond each of them generally influencing the intellectual tradition. They might best be understood from the circumstances of their creation. A difficulty in the religious tradition was discovered, fiction was used to work through the issue, generally leading to a new understanding, and the ideas present in the work tended to become part of the philosophical conversation surrounding these issues. There is plenty of historical precedent for theological literature; however, the important aspect of the genre is that it is fundamentally timeless in nature, as it does not necessarily have to be in direct conversation with itself.

2.1.3 Young Adult Literature

Deriving a line for young adult literature is a complicated proposition. It is a label that often, instead of being subject to the material content of the text itself, is an age category that may or may not reference the ages of characters, intended audience, and/or themes of relevance for the new and nebulous category that society calls young adults. These works are still in a sense new, so the form seems to shift as what a young adult novel is parsed out. Novels for young adults might be best thematically categorized with recognition of character ages and audience being secondary relevant factors. Themes about coming into one's own as an individual and not finding one's place in a familial structure are important. Resolution of issues either alone or as a semi-independent party are the culmination of this. Some works may straddle the line between finding one's place and finding one's self, so we should recognize that the line between childhood and young adulthood is fuzzy at best; this is expected.

The importance of the young adult category to my research is almost demographically evident. According to Streib and Keller “Deconversion is predominantly linked to adolescence and young adulthood”, so it would be strange to start elsewhere (187). This dominance can be seen in the relative ease with which contemporary young adult novels with atheist protagonists and with atheism as a plot point are found. *Godless* by Pete Hautman and *Heretics Anonymous* are two such novels. The first deals with the creation of a false religion and the consequences of flippancy regarding belief. The protagonist Henry is potentially unpleasant, but he earnestly doesn’t believe in his father’s Catholicism though by the end of the novel is unsettled. As his father states, Henry’s atheistic road is long and lonely, but too paraphrase Henry’s response: it is his.

Heretics Anonymous deals with the restrictive and intolerant nature of the school our protagonist finds himself in. A ragtag group of ‘heretics’ with not much to connect them aside from their opposition to the school’s restrictive Catholicism work for change, some positive and some negative, some outright disastrous, but the atheist protagonist Michael ends on a mixed positive note. He doesn’t wind up believing in a god, but he does believe in something, the relationship he has with his significant other and this brings him a kind of absolution.

In both novels the protagonists aren’t necessarily spiritual juggernauts at the end, and they are in questionably good places psychologically; however, they have independent thought and a unique brand of self-assurance. This is a tangible reason why atheism can be tied to young adult literature.

2.2 Literature Review

I used a number of works to synthesize an understanding of the young adult atheist theological fantasy, because I could find no perfectly similar work. The closest is C.S. Lewis’

Chronicles of Narnia and they lack the important atheist component necessary for the deconversion story.

Important works for building up my theoretical framework were Clute and Grant's *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, available in electronic form. It catalogues most important aspects of fantasy from concepts, authors, critics, works, etc. Both the ideas presented in the encyclopedia and the referenced material are invaluable starting points in understanding all aspects of fantasy. Brian Attebury's *Strategies of Fantasy* lays out a method for thinking about fantasy literature in nuanced terms. Of unmatched importance is the attribution of the fuzzy set to the fantasy genre. Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller's "The Variety of Deconversion Experiences Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research" is a grounding force for the literary conversation. It helped outline motivation for research as tangibly impacting individuals in the world as well as connects the theoretical conversion/ deconversion experience to demonstrable demographics. They also have a theory of deconversion which helped me develop the multifaceted deconversion of my protagonist.

A wealth of novels have been important to analyze in order to formulate conclusions about style, genre, plot points and themes. These include theological fiction like *Silence*, and the Chronicles of Narnia which in many ways serves as my cornerstone set of texts for this project. Although not explicitly theological fiction, religiously informed fantasy metaphorically representing conversion stretches into the Princess duology by George MacDonald. Contemporary young adult literature with atheist protagonists was sought out turning up *Heretics Anonymous* and *Godless*. Finally, Pullman's His Dark Materials Trilogy, although ultimately not quite what I had in mind with this project, is widely regarded as atheist fantasy and the anti-Narnia, so this paper would be incomplete without its mention.

2.3 Relevance of Genre and Category

The genres that the creative artifact touches are summarily fantasy and theological fiction. The category of young adult literature also holds thematic relevance when discussing deconversion. The intersection of these three groupings brings extra importance for the subject of deconversion as each of them have direct impacts on the feasibility of the deconversion in the creative artifact. The fantasy is an oppositional force, the theological fiction is magnifying component, and the category of young adult literature is important for realism and real-world impact.

2.3.1 *Incorporating the Religious Fantastic*

Fantasy as a rule lends itself to the religious experience. Clute, when distinguishing fantasy, refer to fantasy's nature as resting in "perceived impossibility" (Clute, "Fantasy"). This contrasts science fiction's grounding in "the presumption that they are *possible* – if perhaps not yet" (Clute, "Fantasy"). However, "perceived impossibility" is not sufficient to constitute a coherent division when religion, especially religions with omnipotent deities, gets involved. We must ask, perceived impossible by whose standard?

Despite the importance of impossibility in defining fantasy as opposed to science fiction, it may cause confusion when discussing theological fantasy with respect to the monotheistic world religions. The monotheistic world religions tend to ascribe omnipotence to their deities, so claiming any sort of impossibility is a dubious endeavor. Therefore, incorporating this basis in contradicting the real world to the definition may sound like a tacit admission that certain aspects of these religions regarded as theological truths, if included in works, must either be considered realistic or recognized as impossibilities of the actual world. Naturally, this places all involved in

a bind; fantasy trades in impossibility, but one must by necessity hold that their faith in what would otherwise be fantastic is possible.

This may be better parsed out using the example of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia. The Magician's Nephew* depicts Aslan, a clear stand in for the Christian God, creating Narnia. C. S. Lewis holds to the omnipotence of his deity, theoretically making Narnia a possibility in Lewis' understanding of the real world. If a strict interpretation of impossibility is maintained, this would seemingly render the otherworld of Narnia science fiction or alternate history, being that it is technically a possible world in Lewis' worldview even if he believes it untrue, or flatly impossible. This would either categorize C.S. Lewis' series in a manner so unintuitive the categorization ceases to describe what it is meant to or cause issues for his religious conviction in an omnipotent deity. Clearly, impossibility cannot be strictly understood as "constituted so as deliberately to confront or contradict the "real"" without further defining the real (Clute, "Fantasy").

This dilemma is fixed simply if we apply methodological naturalism to the real world. Irrespective of any individual's supernatural beliefs, be it author, reader or researcher, the real world is held to be naturalistic for the purposes of defining fantasy. If the "real" Clute speaks of is recognized as naturalistic reality, it allows for religious supernatural claims, believed in a wider sense possible or not, to be included in theological fantasy without issue; they do "confront and contradict" naturalistic reality (Clute, "Fantasy"). This further entrenches fantasy as fundamentally, now definitionally, supernatural and science fiction as at least perceptually natural; however, as this divide already practically exists, this interpretation doesn't change much and soothes the tension present from believed naturalistic impossibilities.

All of this is important to defining the terms of what is fantasy in conversation with religion. The Abrahamic tradition has been focused on, but this conversation equally determines whether or not aspects of other religions like Shinto and Paganism can be understood fantastically, especially if written by a Shinto or Pagan author. If we as scholars of literature do not wish to pass judgment on the impossible nature of any given religion when we label a work fantasy, we should treat the real world as naturalistic methodologically and draw lines of possibility from there. By divorcing the religious fantastic from an overly simplistic understanding of subjectively perceived impossibility by author or reader, all previous structure used to understand fantasy can be maintained; much like methodological naturalism preserves the sciences and history, it can preserve the study of fantasy as well.

Belaboring this specific point may seem pedantic, but it is important to firmly place and justify the creative artifact within the traditions of both theological fiction and fantasy, as well as understand the nuances of what may be the most striking example of theological fantasy currently published. It is also important to unbiasedly understand religions in fantasy. There are those who practice Wicca, Heathenry and Hellenism, and it is just as important to construct a definition of fantasy that doesn't disparage them while not collapsing under the weight of omnipotence. Finally, as we are merely agreeing to work on naturalistic ground, irreligiosity is likewise made secure.

2.3.2 *A Realistic Depiction of Atheism*

Atheists are a fairly small portion of western countries United States, but as they often share positions with agnostics they can together account for about a tenth of the western population. In the east this number tends to be higher, but religiosity remains difficult to study in countries like Japan as belief and practice are more separate than in the west. This might be one

of the reasons research about the atheist experience is still developing, but some models for deconversion, the process by which people become atheists from a state of religious belief have been offered.

The elements of deconversion which Streib and Keller outline in the psychological literature match both personal experience prevalent in the common day and representations of atheism in literature, so I have no qualms using their five commonalities of deconversion experience. They note the “Loss of specific religious experience”, “Intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement”, “Moral criticism”, “Emotional suffering”, and “Disaffiliation from the community” as important parts in defining deconversion experiences. In the creative artifact, all five of these in some degree factor in to the protagonist Kuro’s decision to leave the faith at different times forming a compounding effect.

2.3.3 *Grappling with Apologetics and Counter Apologetics*

The final aspect of genre that must be discussed is the fairly blatant apologetic work in theological fiction. If the Christ allegory in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* was thinly veiled, apologetics in theological fiction is a runaway train, as long as you are familiar with the territory. This lack of veiling makes sense in realistic or historical fiction like Endō’s *Silence*, where direct conversation regarding the nature and place of the Christian religion takes up large page counts and apostasy is a major plot point. The book ends with the line “Even if he had been silent, my [the protagonist’s] life until this day would have spoken of him” (Endō 204). What makes less sense is the obvious and potentially unhealthy nature of apologetics in Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the character of the Professor gives the two oldest Pevensie children a lesson on logic which actually turns out to be a reapplication of

Lewis' trilemma. He states in reference to Lucy's story about there being a magical world at the back of the spare room wardrobe, "There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn't tell lies and it is obvious she is not mad. For the moment then and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth" (Lewis 131). Lewis' trilemma is famously the problem that Jesus must either be a liar, a lunatic, or honestly the lord God. The questionable validity of this argument by itself aside and how well it maps on to the Pevensie situation, the striking parallels are too clear to be coincidental. Here Lewis begins the apologetic quest, to defend the faith, early.

This practice becomes more concerning in *The Silver Chair* where the evil green witch is acting as the voice of skepticism and is arguing with the friends of Narnia. Placing seemingly fair questions regarding how the children have come to know truths and how real creatures, people and events can be expanded into falsehoods into the mouth of a literal snake and a liar who directs the questions towards phenomena like the sky and sun as well as Aslan, who has the force of fantastic justification behind him, is unbalanced at best (Lewis 632). Still, that is not the most bizarre instance of defending the faith in that chapter.

Puddleglum, conceding for the point of argument everything the witch just said, gives this speech:

All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder... So I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one thing more to be said, even so. Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one... That's why I'm

going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. (Lewis 633)

When juxtaposed with the rest of the text, it is easy to be distracted by the evil and gaslighting of the witch, but Lewis' apologetic argument in this section is that the facts of the situation do not matter. One should continue to follow Aslan irrespective of Aslan's existence. Again, we must separate ourselves from whether or not this argument holds water and recognize that regardless this is a bold apologetic claim that is injected with no scrutiny because after this moment the witch turns to violence. Lewis is famously not subtle, but this is something beyond.

This is the style of theological literature. It is a blunt and obvious tool. When repurposing this style for irreligious use one must engage in counter apologetics. The position taken need not be an actual stand at all times. Sometimes, it is enough to poke holes in apologetic arguments and leave the doubt to fester. This is one method how Streib and Keller's intellectual doubt can be bred. Sometimes a counter proposal can be used when a position does need to be defended. The witch actually does this fairly well when gaslighting the children about the reality of their world. The difference being that it should not be done with malice or active deceit but instead legitimate inquiry leading to a proposal with serves to undermine a belief. The style of theological literature is perfectly acceptable; *Silence* is a great example of a fairly balanced but firmly committed work. If that is the goal, counter play and intellectual honesty are key and that is what *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* strives for.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

This work was presented at the Texas A&M Undergraduate Research Symposium held online through video submission. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in person venues and platforms were unsafe and so some concessions had to be made. Interaction between presenters, viewers, and reviewers was limited as live Q&A was not possible. Although the opportunity for live Q&A was missed as well as the ability to public speak in front of an audience, reviews of my presentation were still made available and experience with self-recording was gained, a different but no less valuable skill. Resources used involved a laptop with the Zoom application to record and a powerpoint to aid in my presentation.

The presentation was approximately 10 minutes long and consisted of an explication of the research as well as a reading of a segment of *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto*. Time was roughly evenly divided between research and the reading. Noting that there were only 10 minutes, I planned to hit on the core ideas of the deconversion story and the absence of atheist fantasy. This presentation was uploaded to Youtube through that the Symposium website. The video was available to anyone who logged into the symposium during its run and a minimum of two viewers were guaranteed to review the project. More viewers saw the presentation, but they remain anonymous and their reactions are unknown. As my presentation consisted in large part of a reading of creative work, the online format was perfectly adequate, and the main concern remains asynchronous feedback.

On the feedback, it was overwhelmingly positive. Criticisms included over rapid speech and enunciation, which I recognize and pin down on lack of comfort with the format. With experience I hope to steady my delivery and make it more natural. The slides were also identified

as an area of improvement. This thesis was not only about the research being conducted but growth as a scholar and that includes efficient and clear delivery of information. Finally, both reviewers requested a deeper dive into the research while one praised the delivery of the reading. Time constraints were tight, but more efficient use of the powerpoint and organization of the presentation as a whole may help to more densely pack information.

Overall, I learned much from this formal presentation of my work and hope to have the opportunity to take what I have learned and demonstrate development in the future. The process of public presentation is not the easiest either in application, planning, presenting, or reviewing feedback and analyzing the presentations of others, but it was an important trial by fire. I am proud to say that for the first official time, it went well.

4. REFLECTION

As the creative artifact took form I began with the idea, a young man loses his faith over the course of a journey to find the unshakable core others around him seem to have. I wanted to write it in a style loosely inspired by haibun as an homage to Bashō's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* as a way to explore the relationship between prose and poetry. Eventually the narrative force of the deconversion overtook my initial idea for research and supplanted it. This grew and morphed as I became convinced that nothing exactly like what I was trying to do existed before, though some stories were close. Instead of noticing the dearth of examples and refocusing to something more easily analyzed, I threw myself headlong into synthesizing multiple genres to make the exact kind of literary work I wanted and what follows is the excerpt of work derived from that labor.

The main principle when creating *Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto* was to create a kind and evenhanded depiction of religiosity, and although the perspective character of Kuro has his own opinions, I tried not to misrepresent the beliefs of any of my characters in the segment presented. Hard rules for writing in pursuit of this were to neither confirm nor debunk the existence of the divine in the fictional world, to remain in Kuro's head so it is clear that no omniscient judgements were being passed, and to draw when possible from real world religious practice to inform honest representations of all involved.

To generate that honesty, extreme amounts of research into a variety of topics had to be conducted, not all of which can be distilled into an academic presentation of facts. Listening to publicly available spiritual experience through youtube to gain try and accurately capture the feeling of faith I no longer have was important to make the work for a diverse audience. Honesty

also includes tackling the darker sides of religious history and practice, as well as the sometimes underdiscussed dissatisfaction that atheism brings. One of the clear messages that rang throughout the research is that regardless of the position on religion that is held, not every part of it is unimpeachable.

The research into the nature of fantasy and its complicated relationship with religious belief was originally a tangent meant to be a side note, but it became very important as I had to grapple with the nature of science fiction and fantasy as I questioned if atheist fantasy was an oxymoron. I realize that having the strange modernized haibun style sets the work apart from both the past and present stylistically, but this might be a good thing; the fewer preconceptions and expectations we go into these topics with the better.

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APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Troubled Pilgrimage to the Grotto

Many great tomes have been writ outlining the lives of holy men. Many contain rich allegory, myth, legend, falsehoods...

Truth.

I make no claim that this story deserves a place amongst the others; however, in an effort to avoid another writing this narrative for me, be they loyal student or bitter rival, I have been persuaded to record it myself.

What follows is my best recollection of events as they occurred. When possible, details have been verified with the memory of others present. Interspersed you will find reflective poetry in line with Zephyr practice, the only contemporary documentation of the events in question.

I offer to you reader, searcher, seeker -

Pilgrim,

The Journey of Kuro of Clayguard: raised by Zephyrs, taught by Leviathans, born of Lions, friend of all, and bound by none, as told by himself.

“Become the wind to gain insight”

“See his face if you want the light”

“Believe in storms though still’s the night”

Lord let magic in my life - I ponder as the day grows bright

I stepped under the arch just before dawning, feeling the gust of wind passing through the tunnel. I was running low on options and believed that a new location for a training session could help me discern the face of the Lord with Wings — and finally bring me magic. I stretched alongside the breeze, allowing the wind to dictate my motions until I was ready to begin. I started with a few flips, willing the wind to hold me up for just a bit longer to no avail. I raised my arms to the breeze and spun to avoid the largest gusts.

I thought back to Kibu’s words. ‘Does the seed fight the wind?’

“No, it doesn’t.” I said aloud, dancing in accordance with the gale.

‘And the wind rewards it with a journey.’ I could almost hear him say.

I only wish that the seed was rewarded with magic. I stopped at the center of the wind tunnel. It was time to try once more. I raised my left arm and undid the cloth binding my forearm. Binding with nothing underneath. Tying the cloth to my wrist I raised my left hand and bid the gale increase. After a few moments of average gusts an especially strong squall overtook the tunnel hitting my back. I felt by ends of the cloth binding whip around my outstretched hand. Full of heart, I tore open my eyes — only to see my arm bare.

“How is your training coming?” I heard a familiar voice bellow from behind me.

“Not well Head Zephyr.” I said raising my arm to him.

He gave me a slight smile. “Come now Kuro. The morning draws on. Would you like to accompany me for tea?”

I more wanted to continue training, but I gave Kibu a smile. Nodding, I walked towards him while untying the knot around my wrist and rebinding my forearm. After telling him that I left my journal in my room this morning, I was assured that we would retrieve it before tea. He put his arm around my shoulders and began softly singing.

A man went to find the Lord with Wings
And saw his face in the storm.
He bound below his wrist, as a promise,
And gained the shining mark of the morn...

I sat with Kibu in his study discussing the difficulty with discernment.

“Head Zephyr, I still can’t make out the face of the Lord. I can’t feel him.” I said.

“You feel him with every gust of the breeze.” Kibu said.

“Please... Kibu.” I softened my voice. “Not as my mentor but as the man who’s raised me for all these years, what’s wrong with me? Why don’t I see him? Why haven’t I received magic yet?”

The thin old man lowered his head. “I do not know Kuro, but many a great Zephyr struggled at first. Remember Zephyr Gust and Jura. Both were much like you.”

“Yes although...”

I could not help but feel in that moment very different from Gust or Jura. Each was a hero in their own right, exemplars of the wind, even if they started fairly late in life. I stared steaming tea not conscious of the obvious pain written on my face. Kibu asked me to pull out my journal.

“Be mindful.” he said. Raising his left arm, I saw his bindings slightly glow. A soft breeze went over my teacup causing slight ripples in the drink.

“Begin.” He said.

I nodded. Mindfulness is a training in its own right.

Raised by a tea cup
A wisp of steam rises higher
Grasping empty air

He read over my work. “Try again.” He said. I sat for a few minutes before taking a sip of tea and pulled a face. It was unpalatably cool. A thought took my mind and I smiled.

Unready to drink
A Zephyr watches his tea
Soon to be too cold

Kibu looked up from my journal and gave me a sad smile.

“Have faith Kuro. You are the hope of us old Zephyrs. You will take our place when you are ready. I promise.” He softly laughed, “And your tea won’t be too cold.”

Without attempting to finish the tea, I rose from the mat and bade Kibu farewell.

“Will I find you in the library?” Kibu asked.

“No, I will go by the ponds to train and reflect. I have to be close.” I said.

Answering with a smile and a nod, he gave me leave. He pushed some hair out of his face. Strings the color of tea smoke. I passed few other Zephyrs walking the halls of the Chimebury on the way to my room, all grown with either white or greying hair. I took a breath as I grabbed my bag reflecting on taking their place.

Training to discern the tempest’s grace
Dandeline Pilgrims, O’er water race
The wings of my soul try to keep pace
With balance lost, I land in a lake.

I sat disoriented in the pond while someone near laughed hysterically. A sharp gust of wind had knocked me down. Wiping the water out of my face I called out.

“You should not laugh at other's misfortunes.”

Looking up, I saw a man with shiny black hair, no doubt older than me but still noticeably younger than the Zephyrs back at the Chimebury. He wore a plain shirt with long sleeves and brown trousers, similar to my own. He stood cackling, but now making an active effort to suppress his laughter that he might be able to speak. He failed to do so for a few moments, but eventually, through fits of giggles, he explained.

“You shouldn’t balance on one hand by a pond if you can’t brave the weather.”

“That was a completely rouge gale. I could not stay up if I wanted to.” I said.

The man reached out his hand to help me out of the pond, and I was struck by the smile that beamed on his face. “Fair enough, but I doubt you could’ve kept a straight face either. My name is Roel. Does a would-be Zephyr happen to know a good place to stay around here?”

I remained seated in the water, not convinced I should continue to share another shred of the morning breeze with the stranger in front of me. I looked at his hand, then his face which never ceased that infuriating smile, and then his hand once more. Shaking my head, I felt an involuntary grin find its way onto my lips and took Roel’s hand. I told him it would run contrary to the path if I refused but asked him to let me dry first. He gave me a smile and a nod and, in that moment, felt very familiar.

Roel left to gather food and left me to my writing. He returned with a slightly fuller pack and a ridgeroot in hand. Then the stranger began to ask questions and I became more interested in the man who seemingly knew much and yet little.

“Is that journal for fun or for training?” He asked.

“It’s supposed to help me be more mindful, so I can discern the face of the Lord with Wings.” I continued

“You must be having some serious trouble if you have to train for it.”

“Its traditional to do so.”

“I figured as much.”

We continued to sit in silence. The sun took its time to lift the water off my clothes. Eventually Roel stood and began to climb the cliff side.

“What are you doing?” I called out.

“Training. Want to join?”

I had no idea as to his purpose, but a general workout was nothing but good for the soul. I chased after him to climb.

Sheer cliffs made up much of the ravine we were in. Small ledges and plateaus began soon off the ground. I was dry of pond water only to we wet with sweat by the time Roel had his fill. I could not tell how high we had come, but looking towards the ground made me nauseous. We sat on the ledge and Roel turned to look at me before deciding to jump off. A moment of panic overtook me until I saw he had safely landed on another ridge. Then another. And another. It was a dangerous game that I sat watching. After a few more leaps he called back up the cliffside.

“Come on. It’s like flying downward.”

I shook my head and gulped. He shrugged his shoulders and finished his descent before looking up at me from the bottom. I stood up and took a deep breath. ‘Training’ I thought. The jumps were not too difficult. I had done worse. My fingers buzzed with nervous energy as I swayed toward the edge. ‘If this stranger could do so, a Zephyr could as well.’ I took the first jump to my left trying to keep the wind on my back and felt my stomach drop, but I made it. The breeze grew unsteady as I kept jumping. It changed in intensity ever so slightly with every hop. However, the wind was always at my back, almost as if apologizing for earlier. Roel remained on the floor with arms crossed smiling at me. Not moving even once.

The task became easier as I continued. I might have even become a little careless. Near the bottom I missed a jump and a wave of dread passed over me. My muscles tensed as I braced for impact, but a rogue gust blew me near enough to grasp the ledge I missed with my hands. I looked down at the stranger as stricken with fear as I was, and he gave me a shrug in return. Although my legs were shaking, I finished the final few jumps without issue.

“Feel like flying?” He asked with a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“It felt like falling.” I said.

“That was a really lucky gust of wind.”

“Really lucky.” I traced the binding on my arm and smiled. A relieved laughter echoed in the canyon walls, but it was a second before I understood it to be my own. I leaned back and laid on the dusty ground, happy to feel the wind’s breath on my face. Roel leaned back with me.

“So, want to go again?” He asked.

“Absolutely not.” I laughed.

“Maybe later then.”

We laid there for a few moments more before I took him back to the Chimebury. My clothes were finally dry.

A seed falls to the floor
Deathly scared to crack
But by some windborn grace
It still remains intact

Hearing Holy Chimes
So soon after departing
Homeward I am bound

“The Chimebury is further this way.”

I led Roel from road to road. Some Chimeburys are very easily found, one need only follow the ringing, but my home was slightly different. Still, I had walked this path so many times. I did not have to look up at the cliff faces all around us or try to locate the direction of the soft ringing

that permeated the canyon like an audible fog, but Roel looked all around, mouth agape as if he had never seen such a place before and never would again.

“You will have to wait at the gate until I get one of the Zephyrs.” I said.

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll have too much trouble.”

Though he may have been overly confident, Roel was correct. It was doubtful that a Chimebury would deny a few nights lodging to any traveler. We then fell into a quiet walk. My focus drifted towards discernment as the world fell away. While I wandered in the labyrinthine canyon that was my mind, my body turned instinctually when encountering the forks in the physical canyon we found ourselves in. Eventually, a remark from Roel brought me out of my stupor.

“It’s a beautiful view.”

I looked up as the shrine came into view. The distant, white and gold Chimebury glistened in the light as each brass pipe flashed a beam on the brown and orange canyon walls. It had been a long time since I stopped to look at the sun rise over my home, and in that moment, it was difficult to understand why I had not taken the time to do so in such a long while.

“Welcome to my home.” I said.

“Thank you, little Zephyr. Now what’s there to eat?”

We came to Chimebury gate where Gura and Dian stood watch. The vast doors were almost always open, a symbol of every Zephyr’s freedom and gesture of goodwill to those travelers who might need a bed, of course Roel was the first traveler who had stumbled into the ravine in a long, long time. The white wall of the Chimebury was mostly flat and only went up forty or so feet, but beyond the top of the flower shaped archway which housed the gate, a great tiered

building and tower loomed, casting a delightfully cool shadow on me and my visitor. Still, the walls of the canyon rose even higher.

“Who shares your breeze Kuro?” Asked Dian.

I wished Gura had asked instead. The creak in Dian’s thin voice revealed his age in a way that the body of even an ancient Zephyr did not. A strict diet and training routine kept most every Zephyr I knew not looking more than 50, though some marks of an ailing body were not so easy to beat back. Gura was only 48.

I opened my mouth only for Roel to say,

“A traveler on wing looking for a place to set down.”

He stepped between the Zephyrs and I.

“Roel let me announce you and get perm-”

He cut me off again and looked over his shoulder.

“Little Zephyr, trust me, we can skip the permissions.”

He turned back to Gura and Dian who were beginning to raise their left arms.

“A Passer Bird from the archipelago requests a room and an audience.”

Roel raised his left sleeve revealing a cloth strip wrapped only a palm wide. It wasn’t like mine or the other Zephyrs in the Chimebury, but it was clearly a Zephyr’s binding. In an instant I reflected on the events of the day, and they began to make more sense.

Dian’s eyes narrowed while Gura stiffly nodded. The older Zephyr pressed his lips together. Gura gave Dian a sideways glance, and then proceeded to speak.

“Your request is acknowledged,”

My ears sharpened, preparing for the vocalization of what everyone now knew.

Gura finished, “Kuro can assist you with whatever you need. Welcome home Zephyr.”

A Sparrow reveals it can fly
For what reason did it hide?
The Passer Bird takes to the sky
To roost with one who's yet to rise.

We walked through the gate into Chimebury proper. The towers and tiered buildings which peaked out behind the wall came into full view. The impossibly wide ravine housed the entire Chimebury on its floor and built onto its cliff-sides. All of it white walled with golden rooves and accents.

Between the main building and the outer wall were a number of gardens, smaller buildings and fountains. Hanging ropes and rope ladders swayed from the balconies, and bronze chimes hung on every building and filled the air with a soft ringing that echoed, and echoed, and echoed.

“Where’s the gathering hall Kuro?”

I pointed towards the third tier of the main building.

“Fantastic. I’ll race you there.”

I felt the wind still and saw Roel ready to run, but grabbed his arm. A gust of wind propelled us forward, but we quickly slid to a stop.

“Wait. Why didn’t you tell me you were a Zephyr?” I said.

“Everything’s discovered in its time. The proper time just happened to be now.”

“Those rouge gusts of wind, the training, the cliffside... the pond. That was all you?”

“And it isn’t the time for those questions. Maybe if you can beat me to the meal hall I’ll-”

And Roel leapt away. With the wind at his back and below his feet he covered three times the length I could with even my most powerful jump. I sprinted after him. A part of me was annoyed

at nearly losing my charge mere moments after he entered the Chimebury, but something else burned in my chest as well, a feeling similar to when I had been coaxed into cliff hopping. Besides, I knew this Chimebury well enough; my chances at winning were not bad. Climbing up a rope ladder to the roof of the provisions room I began to walk on a series of ropes which connected the kitchen to provisions. We normally used them as a lift system moving ridgeroots and other vegetables more directly, but they were also convenient shortcut when I was late for a lesson.

Taking care to keep my balance amidst the subtle storm going on beneath me as Roel ran to the main building, I saw Zephyr Bruco tending the garden. He looked up at me with a smirk, shaking his head. I knew from experience that he would scold me for crushing the crop if I fell. In a courtyard to my right Anku, Muraq, and Aab seemed to take a break from some action to watch the commotion, probably going through slowed standard forms; they were getting too old to train at full speed.

I was three quarters across the lift when Roel reached the doorway of the first floor. I could still beat him with a little time to spare. Then he positioned himself underneath the lift and jumped. The first time he came up short a few feet. He had to have been using magic to support himself all the same; the lift was almost 50 feet up at its highest. Not wanting to fall, I grabbed kneeled down and grabbed the ropes. I felt that the Zephyrs around would catch me at this height, but there was no need to risk it. Roel grasped the ropes on his second try which sent vibrations to my feet, cushions of air helped me stay on. I looked around at the Zephyrs beneath us, but it was not clear any of them were responsible.

Roel shuffled to the kitchen window and sat on the sill. He gave me a wave and a smile before bringing his hands up to his mouth and shouting

“So, are all the other acolytes around here as slow as you?”

I grimaced at the loss and began walking over, with less haste than before. Roel jumped into the kitchen and held his arm out for me.

“There are not others, and I would have had you.” I said.

“How do you feel? Lighter?” Roel asked grabbing my hand and pulling me into the main building.

“Yes, I do. Was this supposed to be training as well?”

Roel flashed another grin. “Another great question for later.”

The victor asked many questions about the Chimebury as we walked through it, about the composition, the painted walls, the Zephyrs.

“People do not cross this way much. The gathering hall is down this hall.” I said as Roel remarked on the distinct lack of acolytes.

“This Chimebury was built during the Horizon Conflict, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“How could you tell?”

Roel gestures to the walls. “I’ve been around. The glyphs are remarkably well preserved, but they’re definitely not new.”

Sitting while sipping water,

I have no desire to eat

Right to my left, a swallow

With gusto has a feast

I sat with my guest in the gathering hall where ridgeroot stew was being eaten in what could have been dead silence. Of course, the silence was continuously broken by Roel scarfing down both our bowls of stew.

“You sure you don’t want any?” He asked in between inhalations.

“Yes, besides you really need it. Using so much magic has to have left you tired.”

I did not usually have morning meal in the hall this time of year. Various Zephyrs sat far away from each other. The three long tables spanning the entire room remained mostly unfilled, but not every Zephyr was at morning meal. Some still slept. Some were studying. Some were out on morning strolls and still others began their chores early. However, a fair amount of the Chimebury was in attendance.

The plain ridgeroot stew was mildly disappointing. The sapberry bushes were ripe this time of year, and I would have foraged some if I hadn’t gotten sidetracked. The sweet and explosive red pearls could make anything taste good, or at least the ridgeroots I had for most meals. Before starting on my bowl, Roel asked once more if I wanted any.

“No.” I said.

He continued to eat. Although I was a little hungry, I preferred to let him have his fill. After a time, he rose and asked where the kitchen was. He wanted to wash his plate. After directing him, he remarked, “I didn’t finish that bowl if you’ve changed your mind.”

I looked over at the bowl while he walked away. On top of the stew was a small sample of sapberries. I reached to grab the bowl a little too quickly then heard a snicker coming from Roel’s direction, but he denied doing so when asked.

Roel requested to speak with the Head of the Chimebury soon after he returned. I was growing more confused. Any Zephyr was supposed to be welcome at a Chimebury, no announcement or request needed, yet he covered his bindings and made such a large show about asking for boarding. He clearly knew more than he let show, and I still had not pieced together his reason for secrecy. Still, I had no reason to deny him. After introducing him at the private study of the Head Zephyr and receiving allowance for the visit, I offered him entrance.

“Thank you, little Zephyr. This might take some time. Meet in the hall where we ate in a sixteenth of the sun?” He asked.

I nodded as he closed the door behind him. Once it was shut, I immediately rushed up some nearby stairs and climbed onto the balcony of a window. Shuffling around the corner, I reached another window leading to rafters above the Head’s private study, covered by a thick golden-yellow curtain. After slipping inside, I gently stepped from rafter to rafter in the dark. The faint glow of the candles far below me was like a beautiful field of stars but scarcely let me see. I steadied myself on a crook between rafters and watched the strange meeting unfold.

“... journey of yours. Where are you going?” I heard Head Zephyr Kibu say.

“I want to know how to get to the Master’s Grotto. You see—”

Roel raised his left shirt sleeve and undid a previously hidden bandage that covered his forearm. A piercing indigo light flooded the room, and I was momentarily blinded. When my eyes did adjust, I saw that Kibu was blinking as profusely as I was and wiping tears from his eyes, but Roel stood unflinching, as if he had seen the light many times before. The purple color was indicative of dark magic. It took yet another moment to make out another peculiarity of his arm. Around magic stone, the center of magic, the arm had weakened and purple cracks seemed to grow from the source. In all that I had read, I had never known any either of magic to do that.

My master spoke. “You are very hurt. What could you be hoping to find at the Grotto? Have you lost sight of the storm or —”

“My connection with the Lord is strong,” Roel raised his voice, “Stronger than ever even.”

The young Zephyr sighed. “Forgive me, but I am not a member of your rite. We understand pain of the heart to be more complicated. It is a daily struggle, but I’m in control.”

“I do not doubt the complexity, and I meant no disrespect. We will help you on your way, but I must confess — you do not seem alright, and we will have to discuss revealing the Grotto further.”

Kibu gestured to the table and both men took a seat. The indigo haze made the dark room brighter, but the newfound obscurity of purple tinged dust made it equally difficult to see. However, as Kibu readied two teacups, Roel raised his eyes, crooked his head, and stared directly at me. I nearly fell off the rafters. Not knowing if he truly saw me or not, I quietly rose with shallow and nervous breaths. Just as I prepared to depart, he continued talking to the Head.

“Can I stay here for the night?” He asked.

“Of course, now, before getting on to the business of the Grotto, we should discuss provisions.”

Under my breath I sighed, expecting him to reveal my presence to Kibu. Not wanting to take another risk I left the room.

High up in the rafters dark
This young Zephyr did embark,
Eavesdropping from a secret spot.
Well... secret until I was caught.

I waited in the gathering hall for almost an eighth of the sun before Roel came back, and for the first time in the few hours I'd known him, he looked unhappy. I suggested a walk amongst the grounds and some sparring; he agreed only to the walk. Still, we spent the rest of the day together, and I learned some more about Roel, that he became a Zephyr in the Modern Rite for instance; although I didn't fully understand the distinction. There were a few chapters on the schism which created the rites in one of the books in the library, but I had forgotten which one and never paid it much mind. Roel did not offer up much information willingly though, whatever caused the meeting with Kibu to run long also appeared to sour Roel's spirit. As of yet, I do not know if he discovered my presence at the meeting. When pressed, all he would tell me about his talk with Kibu was that the Head Zephyr needed stronger candles. Eventually he asked me to show him to his room, as he was tired. I wanted to make a joke about his earlier overexertion, but something about Roel's dour demeanor made the mood too heavy for joviality.

After showing him to his room, I sat in my own. I felt that something in discussions about the Grotto did not go well. I did not understand the problem, the pilgrimage to the Master's Grotto was a journey I had spent as long as I could remember preparing for. I was ready to leave as soon as soon as I discerned the lord's face. I needed more information, and, with luck, there was a book in nearby tower which might house it.

Despite not receiving explicit permission to leave the Chimebury last night, I readied to go. After packing my bag, I headed to sleep, only to wake up with Roel at my door bidding me farewell. He gestured to the travel bag at my bedside and asked me if I was taking a trip.

“I thought I might take a pilgrimage the Master’s Grotto.” I said.

“What luck,” He smiled. “I am headed that exact way. Would you enjoy some company?”

“Certainly.”

Early this morning
A future sensing swallow
Has flown to my door

Over morning meal, we spoke of the things we had heard about the Grotto. We spoke of its beauty, of its significance. I had read and heard amazing things about the Grotto, but Roel seemed to describe the site with a longing.

“The Grotto is more than the central home for the Lord with Wings, more than the first Chimebury. It’s home to all of us. We can always find family there, and I can’t wait to go back.” He said.

We continued to eat and speak, until it was about time to go.

“I need to go retrieve some provisions the Head Zephyr readied last night. I’ll meet you at the gate.” Roel said.

I nodded and, after washing my bowl, made my way to the courtyard. It appeared that nearly all of the Chimebury had gathered, and Kibu stood in the gateway with a scowl on his face. I approached him and outstretched my hand.

“Good morning Head Zephyr. Did you come to see me off?”

“I did not give you leave Kuro.”

He spoke without looking directly at me, and my good mood dissipated. The doors were open, and I decided to wait for Roel outside the Chimebury.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “I’m sorry Kibu. Your way isn’t working. I’ll discern his face out there, on my own.”

“No Kuro. I’m sorry. You’re not ready to go.”

I looked around at the other Zephyrs. They all began to unbind their arms and golden yellow light began to flood the courtyard. I walked past Kibu and then began to run. A tempest slammed into me, I was knocked back and off my feet. Standing back up, I dusted myself off. Dust was being swept up by the air and I could almost make out the wall of wind keeping me inside.

“I’m getting through that door Kibu!”

“No,” he said unflinching, “you’re not.” The head Zephyr began to undo his bindings and raised his left arm to me. I ran at the door once more and was knocked back again. I threw myself at the wall of wind again and again. Each time I was repelled. After a particularly poor attempt, I hit the ground with a thud and began rolling. It took me a minute to rise again, and I was on shaky footing. Looking up at the man who raised me, I noticed tears in his eyes.

“Please Kuro. I do not want to hurt you, but it is too risky to send you on your own.”

“Stop acting like my father Head Zephyr. You are not.” I instantly regretted the words, but I could not back down. I felt a hand on my shoulder and the wind calm. Looking to my right, I saw Roel’s face. All around were the signs of a tempest still raging, but around my new friend the storm had calmed. Inside his sleeve was a violet glow.

I felt cold seeing Kibu's crying scowl turn to a glare. I had never known him to anger, but I am sure in that moment he felt rage. Roel let go of my shoulder and began walking; I followed close behind. As we took steps toward the gate, the Zephyrs we had gathered rebound their arms. It was over. All I needed was a few feet of still air.

We were past the gate when I heard Kibu yell.

“Zephyr Roel! Come here.”

Roel turned around and went back to the Head Zephyr whose head was hanging low. The two spoke softly for a few minutes; I did not hear what of. Eventually Roel returned and said it was time to go. We walked side by side as the weight of the morning's events hung in the air. It was Roel who broke the silence.

“Say, what has two wings but can't fly?” He asked.

Shrugging my shoulders, I responded. “I do not know.”

“A bird that has eaten too much.” He stifled a laugh that I found infectious.

I could tell it was the first of many terrible attempts at humor to come. He has told two more such jokes since then.

To find a break, I had to break.

I know it in my soul.

To magic free, I had to leave,

So why do I feel so cold?

After Roel and I left the Chimebury, I felt lighter. Though I still did not know how to fly, I felt like a bird free from its cage. In the soft morning breeze tufts from the dandelion fields fell

and caught on the same inner ravine wind that powered soft chimes behind us. Sunlight danced on the walls and the ground, illuminating both boulder and pebble as I left the only home I had known behind. The beams reflected from the brass pipes in the Chimebury to the brown rock faces on either side of us, but I didn't look back. I would not look back until much, much later. We had turned the first corner leaving the dancing lights behind when Roel asked where exactly the dandelion tufts fell from. It was time to properly set off.

“The Dandelion Prayer?” I asked.

“What else could I be referring to?”

“I just have not seen it before. We do not receive many Travelers, and it has been a while since I last saw a new Zephyr.”

“What are you talkin about,” Roel grinned as if he was going to do something wrong, “you met me just yesterday” I let out a sigh, but then his face hardened.

“Actually, we probably shouldn't be waiting around. Kibu might throw a fit, and I'm sure that it's not the shortest of journeys.”

He was right; it was not. It would take over five months in order to get where we were going, and by the way Roel spoke, he sounded as if he did not know the way.

“Did Head Zephyr Kibu not give you directions?”

Roel stopped walking a moment. After a time of thought he faced me and replied.

“He gave me you. You've been preparing for this trip for years, right?”

I nodded.

“That's just as good if not better.” He turned around and continued walking down the massive ravine glancing up occasionally. “Now which wall is best to scale to get to those dandelions?”

I sensed a falsehood in Roel's words, an unhappiness below the surface, but I did not make a show of it then. I was on my pilgrimage, had a travel companion, and I finally felt I was on the path to discerning the lord's face. There would be no sense causing discord in such a good arrangement, especially so early on in the journey.

"Just this way."

We took the next two left forks in the ravine. The barren and rocky ground giving way to shrubs and bushes and small pools of water as we left the grounds of the Chimebury. The Zephyrs did not maintenance the ground this far away. In those bushes were sapberries and within a few feet of them ridgeroots. I wondered if I should pick a few of each before leaving the canyon; I had eaten them most of my life, perhaps I would miss them. Of course, we had plenty of root bread, flour, biscuits, oil, and even a little mash, but a few raw materials could not hurt.

We came to the wall the Zephyrs carved out for me when I was getting too big to be carried. Using the wind, they eroded ledges and alcoves that I might access the area around the canyons on my own. Where once it took me the greater part of the day to climb all the way up, I could now take the ledges two at a time; although, I no longer could curl inside the alcoves to nap. As I climbed, Roel used the wind to jump up large distances. Then he would sit down and wait. No sooner would I pull myself onto a ledge that he would be in the air, starring down at me. With no real opportunity to ask Roel for a break, I just kept climbing. Occasionally I would lay down on the ledge and rest for a few minutes, take a drink from my waterskin. During these short respites I would feel a cool breeze on me, and I would turn to see Roel staring up into the sky.

I made it in record time, a fourth of the summer sun, and I was thoroughly exhausted. Roel also looked to be mildly annoyed, but he did not say anything. He stared into the horizon instead of at me apparently trying to see the dandelion fields.

“It... is....” I gulped in air and wiped sweat from my brow. “a thirty-second... of the sun... that way.” I pointed backwards along the direction we came, only now the canyon was below us and to the left.

Scraggly green plants on hills and mountains, if mountains they could be called, dotted the land around us. The ground cracked and rose at odd angles, curved, spiked and shattered, as if earthquake after earthquake ravaged the area. When I first asked Kibu about the unnatural looking landscape all he said was “It happened during the war”. That often his response to questions he looked pained to answer. “It is because of the war.”

Frustration overtook Roel’s face when he heard we would have to backtrack, but after looking back at me, panting and soaked through with sweat he softened. Roel handed me his waterskin and took mine.

“Is there fresh water at the field?”

I nodded.

“Rest here, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He left in a blur, making giant steps and leaping over the difficult terrain. I walked over to sit under the shade of a weathered spire, finished Roel’s waterskin and dozed off. When I woke over a sixteenth of the sun had passed, and Roel had evidently filled both waterskins once more. He looked a little tired now, certainly used magic on each trip.

“You should get something to eat.” Roel said pulling a roll of bread from his backpack.

“I can eat on the way.”

When we finally reached the dandelion field, the sun was at its zenith. We had traveled so little for all the morning, and I grew disheartened as I heard the sound of chimes get louder.

We waded into the white and yellow field, and neither of us said a sound. Roel kneeled, plucked a white tufted dandelion, and motioned for me to do the same. He undid his binding; purple light surged from the gem in his arm, but it was mostly outshined by the sun. Then it remained at a steady glow, as did the purple cracks extending from his covenant stone. He placed the dandelion in his left hand, outstretching that arm, and it began to float. It spun around in the air, and the dandelion seeds formed a ball around the stem. Roel began to sing.

*They might tell me of a journey with a different end,
Of paths wet, stony, and wrong,
But I know that a Lord with a promise kept
Waits for my final breath to join his song.*

*A bird in flight can brave any storm
And soar o'er any ocean long.
I know that the wind will never abate
And my final breath will join his song*

*They tell me that the day will be clear and bright
Though the night's shining haze appears strong,
Salvation in the grace of his cloudless embrace
Adding my final breath into his song,*

Taken as my final breath into his throng.

Wait for my final breath to join your song.

Roel released the tufts, and they caught the breeze. The stem fell gently back into his hand. He gently closed his fist around it, knelt down and buried the husk. He turned to me and nodded.

“Roel I can’t...”

He smiled. “Just take a deep breath and blow.”

Feeling ridiculous in comparison I caused by eyes, inhaled deeply and blew on the flower. I managed to get every seed off, but they were quickly falling. Roel raised his arm and caught the tufts pushing them along until they caught up with his own. I knelt and buried my stem.

“Thank you.” I rose and wiped a stray tear from my eye. A strange swell filled my chest, and I became conscious of my every breath.

We stood there in silence for a few moments until Roel asked, “Are you ready?”

I nodded and pointed in the direction we needed to go. The village of Hillcrest was almost a week away. Then we officially began our pilgrimage, a journey that might take two whole seasons if we made good time. We started walking in the very same direction that our dandelions had been sent.

Beyond flesh and wing

Inside the sparrow’s feather

Lies what will survive

The meaning of our short lives

To join one never-ending

A young Zephyr grows
Although having made progress
He's not ready yet

The plains were vast after leaving the vicinity of the ravine. After spending my life looking at cliff faces, dandelions, ponds, and craggy spires, I could not help but be struck. I felt the urge to run, to jump, to walk in a huge circle. I needed to prove to myself that there were not any more walls. The muscles at the bottoms of my feet urged me forward, but my head kept them at heel. I might have been 14, but there was no need to act like a child. I stood staring until I felt a pair of hands grab my shoulders from behind.

“Are you doing alright Kuro?” Roel asked breaking me from my thoughts.

“Huh. Oh, yes Zephyr. I just did not realize that—”

“Ok rule number one,” Roel stepped in front of me and shook his head. “I’m not one of those old guys, so you don’t have to talk to me like you’re being examined. Drop the formalities. Now you didn’t realize what?”

I stared hard at him trying to tell if he was serious, but he kept walking forwards. The distance between us grew from steps to bounds before I replied.

“It is silly. I merely, I did not— didn’t realize that so much land could be so flat.” I called.

“This isn’t even that flat, I mean just look at those hills. What are you talking about?”

Roel looked at the landscape and then back at me. I felt my face get a little hot.

“When you said you’ve never left I didn’t think...” He looked once more over the gentle mounds before hanging his head. The Zephyr flashed a grin and turned back at me.

“Say, you’ve never played chase before have you?” He yelled.

I shook my head once more. Our clothes billowed around us as the wind began to rise. The force of the gale grew as Roel’s smile widened. I saw him come at me riding on air and brought my arms up to my face to keep the gust back until the wind went instantly silent. He was just one step in front of me.

“We take this road for about six days, and we’ll reach a town called Hillcrest. I’ll assume that’s where you’ve been guiding us.”

He paused. Perhaps for affirmation; however, despite how I left things with Kibu, my master was wise. If he decided against giving Roel proper directions; it was probably for a reason. Now I had two seasons to discover if that reason was good or bad.

Roel nodded his head.

“Well that is the only thing over there and the cobble path doesn’t split until the city, so let’s play a game. I catch you and you start chasing me then if you catch me we switch and so on. Whoever is being chased when we reach Hillcrest wins.”

I thought about it with my lips in a tight smile. It was a game I was designed to lose, just like the race from earlier. That said, I did nearly win that one. Without breaking eye contact I nodded. Roel placed his arm on my right shoulder grinning madly. Before I understood his plan, Roel was gone over the first hill.

I ran after him though my travel bag hung heavy on my right shoulder and bounced on my thigh. I held it still to run, realizing that I would need to fix it tight if Roel insisted on continuing with these games. Imperfect circumstances aside, I did enjoy the opportunity. Hitting my stride, I

felt like my heart had wings, flying along the cobbles before hitting a wall of air. I fell backward processing the increasingly frequent occurrence.

“Really?!”

Another gust of wind shoved me up a hill, less like a guiding arm and more like I was being carried. Landing on the crest, I looked down. Roel was surrounded by 12 men with a 13th standing some bounds away. Immediately I noticed that their clothes weren't uniform. Some wore tunics and belts, some were bare chested. There were shorts, bandanas, cloaks, and had a style of footwear I have never seen, boots. They wore different colors as well. The Chimebury always had the same two tones of matte brown cloth brought in bulk to make clothes with. These people had greens, yellows and blacks. Then I noticed their swords.

The wind died down, and I could make out some of the conversation.

“-we don wanna hurt cha-”

“-you bringing tithin' to-”

“Would the lord really-”

“Make way for-”

It became silent as the thirteenth member of the group made his way for Roel.

“I have nothing to steal good man, but I have something to give if you wish to turn away from your actions here today.”

“You speak well birdie, but I'm far beyond that point.”

The two got closer each other and I crawled forward to try and hear better. The breeze seemed to bring the sound towards me.

“Who am to disagree with one blessed by magic, even a clipped layman, but it does not seem to me that one can be beyond redeeming.”

I tried to see what Roel was referring to. The man had no bindings, just a long scar where a covenant stone might have been.

“Your bag.”

Roel handed his satchel over and the man searched it. An extra pair of clothes were thrown to the ground. Then a few ridge roots. A sack of flower, some cakes, and then the satchel itself.

“There is a Chimebury down there. I am sure they would take you under condition you leave your weapons.”

“Be a birdie.” The man howled. “Did you hear him boys? We could be birdies.”

“If you don’t like that idea, my home is in Santin, you’d probably like the modern rite better.”

The man stopped laughing. I thought that he was taller than Roel at first, but now he seemed so small.

“The lord — wouldn’t like — would he?” Roel whispered but I couldn’t make out all the words.

Roel’s mouth continued to move but the wind had totally stopped. Then suddenly...

“C’mon boys.” The leader yelled. “This man has nothing for us.”

He raised his sword pointing off the path and the twelve left at once. The thirteenth man lagged behind taking a moment to look back at Roel before leaving. I waited for a few minutes before running down and grabbing his arm. Roel was already finished repacking his bag.

“Roel, are you okay? Were they,” I remembered my argument with Kibu. “...brigands?”

“Relax Kuro. They were probably just some hurt people following a hurt man. They couldn’t truly have done anything to me if they tried.”

“Well if they could not hurt you why did you not do anything?”

“I did do something. I kept you safe and took the opportunity to go after a lost brother of ours.”

“But he didn’t have a covenant st-”

“Not at the moment, no, but neither do you.”

I did not have an answer to that. The Zephyr looked up for a few moments.

“Okay, we’re not going to put our game on hold, but you better stay closer to me from now on. I didn’t think things would get this serious so soon.”

“I thought you said they couldn’t do anything to you.’

“Yes, a well-trained Zephyr can go almost wherever he wants, but the same isn’t true for you. Now come on, we’ve already wasted a 16th of the sun.”

I kept close behind Roel. His words were designed to bring confidence, but his breathing was rattled. I was at a safe distance the whole time and was definitely not being told me the complete truth, but it was put together that men with large blades were a negative, even when not familiar with the concept of a bandit. Roel told me that I was meant to guide him, but perhaps it was the reverse.

A swallow watches over the flock
Both under his wing and at his claw
Fierce is he though soft he caws
And trembling is his down soft

On the crisp morning breeze, I caught the scent of saltwater. We were still so far from the coast that I thought the scent peculiar. Taking a pause from my training, I returned to our campsite. The ash from the previous night's campfire was almost dry and wisps of powder on the wind spiraled below Roel's hammock. I nudged him awake. Yawning, the Zephyr turned over in his hammock, and I could see the ash storm he was kicking up die down.

"Good afternoon." He said.

"It's morning Roel."

"Unfortunately." He laughed and glanced at the sun. "Are you already done training?"

"No, but- we are still far from the coast are we not? I thought I smelled salt on the wind and-"
“

Roel bolted up and began to sniff intently at the air.

"Yeah," his eyes widened and rose from the hammock. "You're smelling Seeing Salts. We should hurry and get packed."

We were travel ready in minutes. I occasionally asked Roel why we had to move so quickly and what Seeing Salts were, but he ignored me for the most part, focused on his task. Then on the road he became evasive. Even as the smell of salt grew stronger. Coming to a fork in the road I stopped. Roel turned to me with a confused look.

"Come on," He said. "We don't want to take too long."

"Why not?" I asked.

"That's not important right now."

"I came on this journey seeking knowledge. If I wanted to remain in the dark I would have remained in the Chimebury."

Roel looked down as if my comment stung. “You didn’t learn much about the world in the Traditional Rite did you?”

“Only what the Zephyrs would tell me, and what I read in books.”

Roel looked down the path parallel to ours at the fork. He summoned a gust of air towards us and the salty breeze got stronger.

The Zephyr sighed. “Start a fire. We’re going to have a guest soon. What have you been taught about the lord with fins and the Horizon Crisis?”

An enemy is strolling down the path

As I am quickly briefed

A Zephyr must be hospitable,

While steeling themselves for grief

We met our guest soon after placing redberries in the boiling pot. Largely she looked like us, but there were key differences I was quick to notice. Her clothing was plain like ours, but it was all various shades of blue. She wore pale bands that covered her left forearm, dark trousers that cut off just below the knees, a sleeveless shirt, and simple sandals. In one hand she carried a staff with a tightly woven basket hanging from the top, and around her neck a stone pendant resembling a fish’s tail. Aside from the pendant and the staff, she looked like a zephyr born of the ocean. Straw-like hair and all.

Reaching our small camp, she spoke with audible disbelief.

“Zephyrs? I’ve not seen one of your order in- Are you on a pilgrimage?”

“Yes.” Roel took the lead. “Would you like to join us for a midmorning meal?”

She warily glanced between us and the sweet-smelling pot.

“I could never turn down such an offer.” She flashed a forced smile.

I heard Roel exhale as if he had narrowly escaped trouble I did not notice. The tension was palpable from the moment Roel passed the woman some bread. Pleasantries were exchanged. We learned her name, Shantie, and just like Roel had warned me the two were on edge, as if each awaited the other to make a mistake of some kind. While Roel deftly conversed with our guest, I replayed the information he gave me regarding the identity of our guest. A Leviathan following the lord with fins. Despite our history on opposite sides during the Horizon Crisis, our mutual beliefs kept things tensely cordial. I repeated the information in my head like a silent mantra as I analyzed the situation. I had finally gotten to meet our old foe in person, and, coldness aside, she seemed nothing like the dense or heartless people I heard of at the Chimebury.

We spent some time eating syrup and bread, and the tension wore down amongst Roel’s attempts at humor. I began to enjoy the company of this stranger, and wondered whatever could have caused the infamous Horizon Crisis I heard about growing up. Then, Roel seemingly innocently asked what direction Shantie was going, and I could feel the air still.

“North to Plainsedge.” Replied the Leviathan.

“We’re headed northeast to the Howling Bay.” I chimed in.

“I suppose that we will be sharing a road for the foreseeable future... Zephyr.” She hung on the last word, as if loath to say it.

“He isn’t a Zephyr yet.” Roel interjected with a carefree smile on his face.

“Maybe there is some hope for him to pick the right lord.” Shantie said with a snicker.

It did not seem like she made such a joke maliciously, but quiet overtook the meal. We sat in silence and tore away at the bread for only a few moments more. Shantie stared uncomfortably at Roel who merely returned a grin back at her. I am not looking forward to these next few days.

A fish and swallow
Cautiously share in breadcrumbs
While awaiting war

Shantie and Roel continued the tension from their first meeting on our travels, but Roel's instruction remained largely unhampered, occasional interruptions excluded. Our days became like well-oiled chimes... that were slightly rusted. At a yet unpredictable time, Roel would assess my knowledge and understanding of the Zephyrs and the Lord. The questions were easy at first.

“What is the first principle?” Roel asked.

“Wind is the domain of magic.”

“Why is the wind the domain of magic?”

“Magic is a gift with which we are meant to emulate the Lord. He gives us breath and so we shape it.”

Then Roel might go silent for a time, or issue a corrective, or launch immediately into another question, and eventually the questions became more difficult. Earlier this morning Roel asked,

“How many official rites of Zephyrs are there?”

Having never thought about the rites beyond learning that Roel was of a different one than me, I was caught off guard, “Two?”

“Five actually, but the other three are so far mainland, you probably won’t meet them.”

“Why are there so many? We are all basically the same, are we not?” I asked

“For the most part. The largest split occurred during and after the Horizon Crisis, some decisions that were made in the war forced my rite and yours apart. The fracturing never really stopped after that.

“Why Zephyr,” Shantie began to ask a question and I saw Roel breathe deeply to blow back the rising tide of his frustration. The Leviathan decided to interject rather early this morn, “how about the unrecognized rites? How many are they?”

Roel gave Shantie a sharp smile. “Great question. Of course, you know that it can’t be answered so we’ll just move on to -”

“Kid,” the Leviathan continued looking at me now, “there are hundreds if not thousands of those who follow your Lord out there who don’t quite line up with one of the recognized rites, and the further away from a central Chimebury you are, the worse it gets.”

“The Leviathans are in the same position of course.” Roel shot back.

“But it doesn’t bother us when we admit it.”

Roel shook his head and chuckled. Flashing me a unfazed look he gave a small shrug as if saying I need not take her too seriously. Then he went silent for a time. I glanced at Shantie it looked like she was awaiting a response from me.

“Well, they are the same for the most part, so I am sure there are not any truly important differences.”

The Leviathan gave me a wry look and her slate grey eyes stared victoriously. Before we slipped back into our more comfortable traveling silence she whispered.

“You’d be surprised.”

Quarreling teachers

A fish and sparrow fighting

Impart even more

After a few weeks on the road, the near ceaseless travel began to take its toll. We would wake in the morning, I would wake early and train, then walk and conduct lessons until lunch, or until Shantie sufficiently grated on Roel, set camp in the afternoon, train further, eat dinner, and then sleep. As sure as the Seabreeze comes in the afternoon we would repeat, save for the occasional stop at a town on the road.

I began to tire more easily, slowly worn down from the strain and monotony, and it is on this day when I was weary, having entered Mosepan’s Forest which marked nearly a third of our journey, that it happened.

Shantie and Roel had both left for their own meditations, with my teacher leaving me instructions to return to our camp before sundown to start on dinner. They would be along soon after. Shantie walked back to a river we had passed not long ago and Roel went to scout the forest for a swaying tree.

I went further along the path looking for a clearer area to train. It was not long after I left that I realized the weight of my feet and eyelids. Resolved to make the best of the locale I found myself in, I dragged myself onto a low branch and began to envision the leaves of the tree rustling. Too tired to even undo my wrapping, I sat on the tree limb with eyes closed.

“C’mon Lord. I’m really trying here. Give me some light... please.” I looked up at the sun barely peeking through the canopy, and my eyes sealed once more. “Best hurry, I’ll be out of daylight soon.”

I do not recall when I slipped into sleep, but I knew when I woke to the darkening forest it was past time to return. I woke with a start, not remembering a dream but left distinctly with the feeling I had a momentous one. Like a fog at the back of my mind I remembered crashing waves, or maybe it was wind, a singing bird, or perhaps some other whistling animal, and a powerful sound like a Canyon Cat’s growl but more ferocious that seemed to still resonating deep inside of me. Wiping the sleep from my eyes I felt tears, yet I felt the best I had in ages. For napping in a tree, it was remarkable comfortable respite.

Shaking the distraction of the dream away, I ran back only to see Roel laying in his hammock.

“Lost track of time?” He said stretching his arms.

“I fell asleep.”

Roel slid off his hammock and began walking away.

“Get the fire started. I’m going to check on that Leviathan.”

“She is most likely fine.” I said digging around for the flint.

“I know. I’m not really worried, but still... that river isn’t a short walk and it’s dangerous to walk alone in the dark. Besides, I don’t want her lecturing me on manners.”

I still could not find the flint when Roel disappeared into the dark. Turning over my shoulder to the awaiting twigs and branches which would comprise the fire, I sighed.

“Why can’t you just light yourself?”

At the word light, I thought I saw an ember glow somewhere in the pile. Had I turned my head back to searching just a bit sooner I might have missed it. I kneeled before the fire and hesitantly said, “Light?”

Nothing happened.

I felt my cheeks burn with warmth. This was stupid, delirium from residual exhaustion. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the spark, just to make sure I had not imagined it. I heard a crackle, and the warmth on my cheeks spread across my face. It felt more real. I cautiously opened my eyes.

And staring back at me was fire.

With my mind now clear and shaking hands

By light of a mystic firebrand

I undo the cloth, my Zephyr’s band

There’s a shine only magic can grant

We found our way to the town of Veldensplace just as it was turning dark. At Shantie’s recommendation, we checked into an inn. I noticed a fishtail statue on his desk, so it did not faze me when the innkeeper seemed wary to rent to us; however, once Shantie made the request, he showed us to three rooms. We said our goodbyes before bed as we did not expect to see each other the next morning. It seemed our stay would be mostly uneventful. It was not.

I woke early the next morning to the sound of strong winds and slamming shutters yet had no gale outside my window. Running to Roel’s room I found a tempest. As he laid there, seemingly

tormented in his sleep, furniture was shoved by the gust and the shutters groaned on their hinges. Forcing my way through the whirlwind I grabbed my travel companion by the shoulders. With no more than a touch, he awoke. Sweat covered him and his breathing was ragged, but he seemed to have all his senses. I surveyed the room. Despite the displacement of the furniture and plenty of knocked over objects, there seemed to be little in the way of permanent damage.

“Roel? Are you okay?” I asked.

He didn’t answer me, instead placing his head in his hands. He looked tense before lying back down and continuing to loudly breathe.

“We’ll... leave later. I’ll go find a place to get supplies.” I said.

There was no response. As I left the room, Roel turned over in his bed, appearing to go back to sleep, and in the hall stood Shantie.

“I will show you where you can get supplies, but first you tell me what’s wrong with him.”

I nodded, not knowing what else to do.

The whirlpool awaits me in the hall

After the swallow has had a fall,

Now it’s up to me to make a call.

Kibu, is this why you warned of squalls?

The conflicts between Shantie and Roel had been getting worse ever since the incident at Veldensplace, and despite Roel’s protestations to the contrary, I knew Shantie meant well. Roel had gotten more irritable as of late and Shantie was more intent to discredit him, swaying me, than ever.

Until one day, Roel rose his arm to quell some harsh winds which threatened the cooking fire we sat around during our morning meal and Shantie said,

“Careful Roel, maybe Kuro should take this one. There is no need for you to tax ailing powers.”

Roel was unfazed; he finished answering a question I had regarding finer control of salty breezes and then relied.

“You know what Shantie. How about a little bit of sparring?”

The Leviathan put down her porridge and stared at him. “Trying to start another war Zephyr? Maybe looking to blame your wayward stone for knocking me off the bluff?”

“So, you’re saying I could knock you off the bluff? Is that what you heard Kuro?” Roel grinned.

He looked like he was getting back to himself, and it had been awhile since Roel baited some action to occur so I went along with it.

“I think I did Roel, and we did sleep in this morning; training is past due.”

He nodded his head, “Of course, but if Shantie is too afraid—”

The evangelist for the sea glowered at us. “Fine, but we take things slow. No need for Lightning here to crack.”

The two positioned themselves on the beach below the bluff to no small amount of teasing from both sides. Insults of wanting to be further away from the ocean, closer to the ocean, knocked off the bluff again, etc. took up almost a sixteenth of the sun as our group walked towards the beach and the duo climbed down the bluff. I was positioned on a corner of the bluff above the half-moon cove where the match was about to start. Shantie and an ocean on my left,

Roel and some open air on my right. Significantly behind him, the cliff faces which made up the walls for this bout.

Roel extended his left arm to shake Shantie's hand. I noticed both of their bindings were still on as Shantie began to take his offer. He ducked to one side and lifted Shantie in a vortex a few inches of the ground and spun her. He looked in my direction and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "I warned her", but Shantie wouldn't concede the contest to a joke.

She whipped Roel with some ocean water, and he lost concentration; her sandals lighted on the sand. Running away from Roel and towards the ocean she took a step onto the water, and she did not sink. To her left and right she raised columns of water like geysers, spirals and spheres and pyramids were formed at the tops.

"Stunning display, but I'm afraid it isn't very practical." Roel shouted out. Shantie dropped the pillars as Roel brought his hands low to the sandy terrain. The wind began to kick up a spiral around him and bit by bit, he began to float. The look of concentration on his face was intense, but he rose many feet into the air. I couldn't remember Kibu ever flying.

"That looks like a waste of energy as well. How about we get started?" said the woman on the waves.

The two seemed to get more serious. Roel set down and launched a gust of air at Shantie who was still standing on the water. She broke it with a wave and then created whips made of the sea. She was in perfect control of the entire cord and extremely accurate, so it became a competition between blasts of air and whips of water. Roel got nicked on the shoulder and pulled both his arms back before slashing them forward and causing an arc of wind to stretch the full length of the cove and outward towards Shantie, an arc of dust tracing its path.

The Leviathan dove below the waves before rising up again now walking onto the shoreline, her feet being lapped by the tide.

“Guess standing on water is a waste huh.” Roel said. I couldn’t hear his breathing but I could see his shoulders move as he gulped the air. Shantie was in a similar state. This battle was already running long. They were simultaneously expending an equivalent amount of energy that might be used in real combat, but actively not trying for terrible blows. The fight hadn’t gotten real, but it wasn’t just showing off anymore. Someone had to end things fast. I felt my shoulders get tense and stood up in a vain attempt to calm my nerves.

Shantie pulled a sword from the waters. It still whipped around and changed shape slightly, but the more static form must have been easier to maintain. Roel took a similar tactic and brought his arms up and close to his chest. He’d be throwing quick but short-range jabs from now on. When the two ran towards each other and began to collide once more, things began to look vicious. Shantie’s blade cut Roel’s leg, and drops of blood began to stain the water of the sword. Roel hit her hard in the stomach with an up-close squall, and Shantie staggered back to spit out some blood. The sky became dark as winds and seas grew upset. The clouds blackened, and it began to pour.

They kept going at it, accruing injuries, and I froze at the bluff. I desperately wanted to do something, anything, but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even call out. I could only watch two people I had grown to care about descend further into a mad contest a spring and summer in the making.

Then they took things too far.

I don't remember who pulled off their bindings first or who began to amass power but a tidal wave was forming behind Shantie, and a tornado was being called down with Roel as its eye. I looked to my left and shouted.

“Shantie, don't you think this is enough?!”

I got no response.

“Roel, I get she's annoying and things haven't been the best recently but isn't this taking things a little far.”

I got no response.

Somewhere past the wind and rain I began to sense the surging on the air and sea more than I could see it. My mentors had become natural disasters, and the horizon had become a vortex that enveloped me. I crouched down preparing for the impact, but as I felt the earth on my knees and held on tight with my hands, the stability of the rocky crag, I thought I heard something. It might have been the wind or the rushing of the waves, but it almost sounded like a growl or a rumble or a —

“STOP!”

I was moving before I knew it. My band had disappeared, and I was off. I just couldn't watch them fight anymore, and a piece of me that was unafraid, or perhaps just reckless, ran into the middle of the conflict, a Leviathan summoning a thirty-foot-high tide on my left and a Zephyr calling forth a tornado on my right. Each adherent amassed their disaster, and as I got closer to the sandy beach, I saw a grim look of resolution on their faces.

I caught both by surprise and threw the wave into the air. My mind swam in the suspended water as I separated the droplets into mist. At the same moment I tore a stream off the growing

tornado Roel was producing, which teetered as if he might lose control but held together all the same.

I envisioned Roel's wind coiling around me. I grasped it with my thoughts and twisted it around my midsection, like that Kavandu Priest was doing with the snake. Coming from the right, it wrapped its way behind me. I kept it close to my hips and guided it up and across my torso, under my right arm and perched like a cobra above my left shoulder. Without serious thought, I propelled myself into the air by quickly raising the ground directly beneath me. As my pillar of sand crumbled I brought my left arm down. The force of the tornado dispersed on the beach, and a sandy haze filled the air.

As the dust settled and the crater I was now in began to fill with water, I climbed out to see Shantie and Roel pushed far away from me, knocked off their feet and so rattled by the impact they were only beginning to rise.

I panicked and ran to check on them, nervous about what I had done and how I had done it.

"I'm sorry. I just didn't know how to get you to—"

Shantie spoke first as she helped Roel get up.

"It's fine. We're fine." She looked both disappointed and inquisitive. "That was some trick you pulled with my wave. Not bad but," she looked at Roel "that thing with his tornado might've been just barely more impressive. For wind magic."

She began walking back in the direction of the campsite pulling her arms close to herself.

"Roel are you?"

"I'll be fine little Zephyr." He looked like he wanted to say something else but shook his head.

“We should probably drop this incident. I’ll talk to Shantie later. It’s long past time we worked things out. See if you can’t —” he waved his hand around us, “fix some of this.”

The cove was a mess. Besides the crater, mud, rocks, erosion, and not a few now flopping fish evidenced the battle that had just been fought. I gave him a bewildered look, but he smiled so I nodded. Seeing his binding behind him, I brought it to me with a small breeze and handed it to Roel. When he slipped it on, I thought I might’ve seen a small sliver of golden light even if the cracks in his arm hadn’t seemed to change. Then he started to leave.

I called him before he got too far away, and he turned around. An unclouded sky crowned his head, as he was on the lip of the crater, backed by the bluffs.

“I used improper magic. To stop that fight. Am I gonna...” I motioned to his arm.

He laughed. “Do you feel absolutely horribly about it, as in a terrible beyond terrible.”

I shook my head. “I had to.”

“Then you’re probably fine”. He kept walking then stopped once more. “You know, technically, the Free Defense Encyclical was never rescinded after the Horizon Crisis, so you didn’t actually do anything wrong, even by the Traditional Rite’s standards. In fact, —”

He lectured me on the Encyclicals all the while I cleaned up the beach.

Who knew that the dam would burst
Which kept peace between fish and swallow?
Now that I’ve seen them at their worst,
Shouldn’t I be scared to follow?

But still I do not fear them.

Having seen the ford be rattled,
I am so much more terrified
Of accepting their age old battle.

Roel and I walked in file along the path. I ran my hand across the cliff-face to my left and traced the stone up to the sky. It was a stormy twilight. I couldn't tell when the sun had disappeared over the cliff, but we probably had a few hours of dim day left. The cliff might have been a dizzying height to others, but I had climbed taller. It provided a vain comfort, keeping my mind off the raging ocean just a few steps to the right and 12 counts down. If I fell off this pass before obtaining my magic, I could have easily drowned. I wondered if Kibu ever expected me to make it this far. The roaring waves could not overtake the silence of the road without Shantie. Listening to the water, no matter how violent, made me miss our conversations. Without needing to defend the Zephyrs against her at every step, I was left to defend them myself, against myself. An intellectual duel I was guaranteed to lose. I didn't feel at all like a Zephyr anymore, but my right hand clutched the stone pendant around my neck. I wasn't about to take my wings off.

I turned my eyes up to Roel. He was within arm's length, but against the seemingly endless road my friend felt a boundless distance away. He'd been looking worse for wear since Jack's Haven, but I only noticed in retrospect. All he had to do was laugh and smile; it would convince me that he'd be alright. Roel might be hurt, his magic might still be a deep violet, but somewhere in the middle was a bit of sunshine. There had to be. He was like the cliff standing against the ocean; despite the furious waters, he was firm ground.

Then he stumbled.

I reached forward and caught him. He laughed and smiled, said he was just tired. So we kept walking. It was only a few weeks to the Grotto now. We could be there in days if we had the wind carry us, but there was no need to cut short our trip together. Roel lagged back and hit my arm.

“Your turn.”

He sprinted ahead. It had been weeks since we talked about the game of chase. Did he actually keep track, or was he just making it up and hoping I didn't keep track either? I'm not sure it mattered at that point. The ground was slick with ocean spray, and I didn't think it was a good idea. But a skilled Zephyr can travel where they please. I ran him down in seconds. He slowed down, heaving.

Then he stumbled again.

He went from his stumble into a handstand. I wondered when he learned to walk on his hands, and why I had never seen him do it before. I didn't think to feel out the wind to see if he was using pockets of air to keep his balance. It wasn't as if such information was important to find out, to remember or record. I laughed as he sprung off his hands and landed with the aid of the air. His tan shirt puffed up as the wind caught him, travel cloak falling over his shoulders. Light as a feather, light as always.

He stumbled to the right and fell over the edge.

I jumped after him. I heard the Salamanders in my head, the count starting at one. He was facing up with his back to the water as we hurtled towards the waves. I parted the water straight down to the seafloor to buy time as I bid the wind to slow our descent. Sharp rocks were at the bottom, so I scattered them. It took 12 counts, then we passed the crest of the now parted sea.

Next came a cylinder perfectly pressed into the now flat seabed. Sand naturally started to fill in, and I made up the difference with water. 7 more counts and we hit the hastily constructed pool with a thud. My eyesight blurred and the air was gone from my lungs, but I grabbed the shadowy silhouette of Roel. I propelled us to the surface with the water. I had lost control over the ocean and it collapsed. After surfacing I gripped Roel with one arm and dug into the sheer cliff with the other. Only then did I feel myself breathe.

With no limits to my power

I did as I was able

No time to be concerned with sin

When death is on the table

Leaping with wind and digging in to the cliff face with my hands and feet, I climbed like a frog scaling a tree. I charged the wind in bursts, just like Roel did when he dashed off, and when we finally reached the road I bore out a cave to stay in for the evening and night. First a small door to keep out the now ferocious storm, then a large room where I laid Roel down. I felt into his lungs and gently pulled the water out. I conjured fire in a silhouette above him, just like I saw the Salamander healers do. I made stone bowls so I had multiple containers. I boiled rainwater and condensed the steam into freshwater clouds that I caught in our water skins and in the bowls. I used heated air to dry our belongings placing our now dry extra clothes under his head. I started cooking with hopes he would wake up to the smell. Nothing was too frivolous.

I waited. For seemingly hours I waited kneeling next to him, listening to his slow breathing, to the pounding silence inside my head, to the deluge outside. I was confident he would spring

up with some wise crack when he woke. He'd stir, maybe mumble, but it wasn't until the darkest part of the night that he rose.

"I'm starving. What's for dinner?" He said.

I laughed and sighed. Stopping the silhouette, I pressed some warm stew his lips. Everything was ruined except for the last bit of ridgeroot powder I saved a lifetime ago.

"Absolutely terrible." He chuckled as I set the bowl down. He had already gulped down half of it. Attempting to sit up I wrapped my arms around him.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. I just-"

"No you're not!" I yelled.

He sat without response before raising his hands and patting me on the back.

"Ok. Ok. But I'm not any less okay than before."

"How bad has it gotten? How much weight are you carrying?"

"Relax." He motioned to his binding. "It's the lightest it's ever been. I have you here. Great memories of Shantie. What more could I want?"

I stared hard at him, refusing his answer.

"Kuro. I could be doing much worse. Trust me."

And I did. Implicitly.

He looked around the dome shaped room. At the hanging fires in the air.

"You've been busy." He said.

I waved my hand away and a few of the fires died down.

"Well, Free Defense Encyclical and all that."

He nodded, his mouth still slightly agape.

"Of course - I'm sure this is what they had in mind."

He pushed my arms off of him and began to stand.

“You should keep lying down. Is there anything you need?”

He spun around taking in the room before landing on me. He sighed.

“Maybe a room away from the weather?” He joked.

I undid my bindings. Ignoring the flash of light, I walked to the wall and slammed my fist hard on it. A door with another room behind it opened up. Picking up the makeshift pillow of our clothes, I lead him in. I pressed my hands to the ground. As comfortable a stone bed as I could imagine rose from the floor. It was shaped so he would slightly sit up while in it.

“Anything else?”

Roel looked at me with a happy face and sad eyes, but they weren't all sad. I didn't ask him what the look was for. We'd talk about things the next day.

“Nah. I'm good.”

He laid back on the bed, handing me my clothes before putting his own underneath his head. I turned back from inside the doorway. He was already asleep, smiling, looking happy.

He looked happy.

Resilient is the sparrow

As it soars through the storm inside

It rolls 'round every tumult

And always returns to the sky

I woke late that morning. It was like any other morning. I rushed my exercises a bit, skipping a few of the older ones and focusing on forms I learned in Jack's Haven. I called out to Roel. We'd have to go find some breakfast somewhere.

“Roel.” I called from the main room to no answer. He was undoubtedly still sleeping. I walked into his room and didn’t see him there. The air was still. I lit some fire in my right hand. His clothes were on his bed. One set was folded up as his pillow. The other was flat, as if he had laid them out — or evaporated out of them. My eyes widened.

“Roel?” I slowly walked to the bed. My limbs were lead. I was moving like the automatons Gideon helped me animate. “Roel... Roel?!”

I fell to my knees. My arms shook as I felt the clothes atop the stone smoothing them out. I tried to think of other explanations. There couldn’t have been a struggle. It wasn’t as if someone came in during the night. Everything was pristine. My eyes rested on a lump in the binding on top of Roel’s shirt. Soft streams of tears ran down my face. Trembling fingers reached inside Roel’s binding; they didn’t feel like mine. In my hands rested a dark purple gem.

“Roel!” I screamed.

I gripped the last token of my friend in my hand and screamed and sobbed. Over and over I shouted “No! No! It’s not fair!” I punched the dividing wall and tore it down. Then came the entrance to the shelter. I blasted a hole in the rock. The skies were dark but calm, the water was still as could be. Looking at the peaceful landscape I yelled, “No! You don’t get to be fine!”

I slammed down on ledge where I stood. It collapsed from under me, and I fell into the water. It wasn’t enough. I screamed under the water, but it couldn’t muffle the sound. I rose on a water spout looking at the blown open cliff and damaged road. It wasn’t enough. I landed on the top of the cliff and glided on to it. I brought down my heel and the whole cliff crumbled. I commanded the water through my sobs and turned the still ocean into white water. I turned back and processed that the plateau was home to a flowering forest.

“You don’t get to be growing.” I ran in and tore every tree I touched to splinters. It wasn’t enough. I burned it to ashes.

I tried to fly, just like Roel had shown me, but I couldn’t focus. I created a tornado instead. As it grew all the destruction was caught in its wake. Shards of rock and tree, a forest on fire, raging water, everything was caught in the tempest, but I couldn’t keep it up. There was desolation all around me, but it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. I had nothing more to do than sit with my knees up to my eyes and cry.

What’s the point of taking off

If after you fly you fall

Clearly now I understand

There’s no loving lord at all