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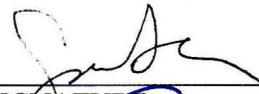
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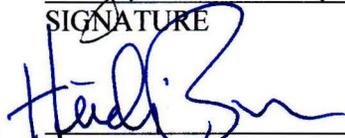
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Lost Byblos: The Thesis Edition

By Joyce Jacobo

Critical Introduction

Section One—Delving into Metafiction

I have always appreciated stories focused on playing around with writing as a medium for self-expression, how narratives impact our own outlook on the world, and what it means to create fictions. I have been an avid bibliophile ever since childhood. Books served as gateways into fantastical worlds (they still do), filled with characters and situations that offered fresh perspectives to view and confront issues in my life. Creative writing is also such an intimate and mystical process. A writer can sit down and bring a countless number of seemingly impossible things to life on a page—which can do anything from charm to devastate the reader depending on the language used. The ability to do that strikes me as a sort of magic, challenging while also inherently playful, which speaks volumes for how much narratives shape our views and identities.

Metafiction as a literary field celebrates and comments on the creative process by exposing its innermost workings, while also delving into existential issues. William Gass has received credit for first coining the term in his “Philosophy and the Future of Fiction,” in which he describes metafiction as an “analysis of what fiction has already done in certain areas, which allows us to perceive what fiction was all along” (7). In other words, metafictional works reference and seek to break down the familiar structures established by other fictive works to learn more about the construction of fiction. They refuse to take any literary device for granted and focus on common structures in literature by subverting or reflecting upon them, and that often results in narratives that critique conventional literary elements through their own construction.

Paul Auster is one of many writers whose works I have gotten introduced to during the graduate program; and whose thoughts and ideas on the writing process reflect an emphasis on metafiction to critique traditional literary devices. Of particular note is his use of such techniques to critique the third-person point of view, which in one interview Auster commented “is a strange device. We’re used to it now, we accept it, we don’t question it anymore . . . It seems to come from nowhere and I [find] that disturbing” (“Paul Auster, The Art of Fiction No. 178”). Auster uses metafiction to reflect on the third-

person point of view as a device that gets taken for granted, as evidenced by the metafictional elements he relies upon to subvert it and explore other ways to approach narratives.

For instance, Auster's novel *The Invention of Solitude* has the author place first his recently deceased father and then himself as protagonists within the narrative. Auster uses the protagonist role as a means to examine his father and himself from a new perspective. Despite such an introspective viewpoint, what comes across is the impossibility of completely knowing or understanding another individual, which then reveals the third-person omniscient narration as a form of illusion. Auster suggests that third-person omniscient narration pretends to give a holistic viewpoint, when in fact narration can only offer one perspective at a time, and narrators are individuals who operate based on their own experiences. As a result, the same narrative could change a great deal from one narrator to the next.

That distinction becomes apparent in descriptions Auster gives, such as, "Talking to [my father] was a trying experience. Either he would be absent, as he usually was, or he would assault you with a brittle jocularity, which was merely another form of absence" (15). Rather than pretend to understand everything that goes on in the mind of his father as an individual, Auster seeks instead to place himself outside the action as a narrator who describes the fragments he can gather. In other words, Auster uses metafictional elements to deconstruct a common literary device used in literature. If the deconstruction of such a seemingly simple device within literature can bring about such a noticeable shift in perspective, metafiction can then offer a means to examine the writing and the reading of fiction from a wide array of fresh and insightful angles.

The metafictional deconstruction of conventional literary structures, such as the third-person omniscient perspective, also offers an expanded range of narrative possibilities overall. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is one such example. Delivered as a series of short pieces from the second-person perspective, Rankine addresses the reader directly as a means to reveal the ways in which racial discrimination and micro-aggressions continue to hold a prevalent place in our society. Discriminatory acts like compliments on being similar to someone from a majority group; or complaints as to the requirement to hire individuals from minority groups; become all the more poignant because Rankine

places the reader among the minority within the work. The distance provided by a third-person point of view disappears. Rather than having a specific character in the text react to the acts of discrimination, the reader becomes a direct target to experience them. Most of the pieces also go only so far as to detail the circumstances of each act, so the reader is left to consider how to react to each one. This metafictional shift in perspective—combined with cross-genre features such as poetry and photographs—draws the reader into the overall narrative as a central protagonist. As a result, while Rankine’s narrative allows for a fresh perspective from which to examine issues of discrimination, it also demonstrates metafictional strategies in narration as a means to offer readers new and thoughtful ways to experience a text.

The personalized and conversational narration of metafictional works is a key aspect in their creation, something more often than not stressed as an invaluable part in the writing process. As exemplified by Rankine’s *Citizen*, readers are active participants involved in the creation of meaning within a text—a vital element that metafiction strives to make apparent. In “Metanarrative Signs,” Gerald Prince stresses such an approach “helps [the reader] to understand better the stance taken by a narrative with regards to its communicability and legibility as well as to the activity of reading in general” (67). Metafiction strives to remind the reader that without a certain level of involvement or engagement with the text, the representations and symbols on the page lose much of their meaning. That personalized approach can take the form of what Hazel Smith terms, “the metafictional narrator,” in which the narrator intrudes into the story (89). Such an approach may seem simple on the surface, yet in a metafictional narrative even that becomes important because it leads to questions as to how narration itself affects our perception of a world (even a fictional one).

The need for readers to engage with texts to achieve meaning also holds true for literary forms conventional literature might place outside the definition of fiction, such as historical texts. But metafiction reveals the constructedness even of history. In her “Historiographic Metafiction,” Linda Hutcheson emphasizes history and fiction are “both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure” (72). Metafictional techniques as a means to critique historical texts reveal them to be surprisingly close to

fictions, influenced by the perspective of whoever writes them, despite having a basis in events that have happened in the world. A perfect illustration of history as a narrative construct comes across in Patrik Ourednik's *Europeana*, which reads like prose littered with historical facts. The structure of the narrative can cause readers to question whether or not *Europeana* is indeed a history book because the narration defies the impersonal convention found in similar texts. So *Europeana* counts as a metafiction due to the implicit manner in which the text reflects on the constructedness of historical texts, as well as the manner in which it inspires readers to reflect on their constructedness.

The novel as a form has provided fertile ground to explore metafictional angles. As M.M. Bakhtin emphasizes in "The Discourse in the Novel," in many ways the novel is a "phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and style" (261). The flexibility of narrative styles and voices in novels has turned them into natural platforms to explore metafictions. One such example is John Garner's *Grendel*, a novel that revisits the tale of *Beowulf* from the first-person perspective of Grendel, causing the reader to question the morality of Beowulf's actions based on the narrative. Another example is William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, which also plays with the conventions of the novel—most notably in its insistence on a fictional narrative pretending to be a nonfictional introduction for the main text. The reader gets confronted with the thought that introductions can become a valuable part of the overall narrative, rather than needing to be a separate (and oftentimes easily skipped over) section.

While metafiction can offer great fresh insights into conventional fiction, and even historical texts, another important area it explores is the construction and perception of *reality*. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh added to Gass' definition by describing metafiction as any literature that brings attention to itself as a construct to explore the relationship between fiction and reality. Waugh emphasizes that fiction can become a "useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels" (3). That is to say, metafictional works can provide a means to study what defines reality and separates it from fiction in the first place. She also hints that while all genre fictions include metafictional elements in the form of established conventions, metafiction still remains a distinct genre based on its key issues. Relevant works focus on the influence

language has on our worldview and identity, the validity of the literary representations we create, and the use of genres as a means to structure the subjective.

One example of Waugh's theories in action is the film *Stranger than Fiction*, directed by Marc Foster, which revolves around a male character launched into an existential crisis after he begins to hear the narration of his author. Realizing the constructed nature of his life (as a tax agent defined by an adherence to routine), he seeks to develop his own identity and avoid the tragic plotline planned by his author. In a similar manner, through narratives that deconstruct familiar frames of reference and stir existential reflection, metafiction examines how much importance and influence fiction holds in our lives. The fact that the male character in *Stranger than Fiction* is ultimately fictitious from the perspective of the viewer only adds to the idea that reality at all levels is a construction. As Jason Bellipanni writes in *The Naked Truth Fiction about Fiction: A Concise Guide to Metafiction*, "The idea that reality is constructed implies that it is made up of both fact and fiction. Reality is a compilation of both, a fusion of those bits of information which were once so decidedly labelled and categorized" (144). In other words, *Stranger than Fiction* emphasizes that even in the most realistic circumstances, what individuals perceive as reality is really a construction of various experiences and perspectives.

Section Two—Metafictional Literature

Taking into account its conversational style and focus on deconstructing familiar frames of reference within literature, metafiction has a distinct relationship to fairytales. In fact, the two genres fit well together. Fairytales have conventions established over centuries of development. Jessica Tiffin, in *Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairytale Tales*, suggests that the patterns of internal consistency (such as the treatment of magical happenings as mundane and conversant narration) are strong enough in fairytales as to remain easily identifiable even when recast or updated. In her discussion of both older and modern-day fairytales, Tiffin identifies familiar fairytale conventions like "the third son or daughter is significant; the first two are foolish, evil, or ugly, while the third is beautiful and good" or the way "tests [are] failed by the first two protagonists and successfully completed by the third" (9). Such familiar conventions, as Waugh emphasizes in her theories, are metafictional elements

inherent in fairytales as a subjective form. However, the discussion could get taken one step further with the idea that metafiction and fairytales—as *genres* each known for suspending realism and emphasizing the strength of the creative imagination—give rise to a notable body of works when woven together into what are known as metafictional fairytale narratives.

Metafictional fairytales, as defined here, use the familiar conventions of fairytales as they cross over into narratives with broader, metafictional scopes. They use fairytale elements to critique and deconstruct the practice of fiction. For instance, Cornelia Funke’s *Inkheart* trilogy reads much like the type of traditional fairytale one might read to a child at bedtime. However, the story follows a bookbinder with the ability to read fictional characters out of novels and into the “real world” of the book trilogy. The book also includes references to classic tales (like *Peter Pan* and *1,001 Arabian Nights*) and hosts discussions on whether the protagonists are characters in someone else’s story (ironically). Another example is Roderick Townley’s *The Great Good Thing*, in which the characters live in a storybook and perform a fairy tale each time a reader opens it (from wherever she or he starts). The main action, though, focuses on the existential angst experienced by the princess character at being in a tale that never seems to change. Even A. L. Milne’s *The Complete Tales of Winnie-the-Pooh* has metafictional tendencies, with Milne narrating the adventures of his son’s stuffed animals in the Hundred Acre Woods (who hint they are aware of Milne’s presence during the introductory passages). These types of works reveal themselves as constructions to explore new ways to deliver their narratives, but they also investigate the philosophies behind fiction as a process. All the while, they maintain a sense of playfulness to remind the reader of the freedom found in creative expression.

Even though I have pointed out many examples of metafictional fairytales found in children’s literature, they are not limited to younger audiences. Just as many stories exist for adults, ranging in tone from nonsensically comedic to philosophically serious. The realities metafiction breaks down, if anything, have an even greater effect on readers who have built up more life experiences and knowledge of structures. For instance, Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* has the child protagonist Sophie Amundsen enter an epistolary mode on the history of philosophy (with much social commentary), only to later learn

she has been a character in Gaarder's novel the entire time. She then has to come to grips with this drastic shift in her worldview and readjust her relationship to the reality beyond the novel in which she lives. *The City of Dreaming Books* (and *The Labyrinth of Dreaming Books*) by Walter Moers follows a narrator who travels to a fantastical city themed around famous authors and their works, alerts the reader to graphic moments in the story, and tells of how he fell victim to a bloodthirsty book publisher's plot. Afterwards, he gets practical lessons on creative writing from a paper-based, Frankenstein-like character. Based on such works, it is clear that Metafictional fairytale narratives aimed at older readers maintain a focus on the power of stories and their writers. They also use literary conventions to create new tales that celebrate fiction and its role in structuring reality.

Section Three—Constructing a New Reality

The texts I encountered during the graduate program helped me to plunge into the literary criticism behind metafiction and to better understand the aim of metafiction in critiquing conventional literary forms. But the same texts, in addition to the metafictional fairytales detailed earlier, were also crucial in developing the narrative for my thesis project. For instance, I had never encountered the ideas Bakhtin presented in his *The Dialogic Imagination* regarding the tendency for novels to mix together different linguistic codes or literary genres (such as straight prose and poetry).

The graduate program was also the first time I understood the concept of cross-genre works, alongside the social power found in conventional literary genre works, for which I will continuously thank Professor Wallace far into the future. Understanding the boundaries imposed on literature helped me to recognize the metafictional elements that appeared in the texts we discussed, how those metafictional elements helped to critique conventional literary forms, and the ways metafiction could build off those forms to offer new narrative possibilities.

Seeing all these possibilities and hoping to apply the knowledge gained from my academic experiences, it did take me a bit longer than anticipated to build the thesis project to follow. What became a central focus for me within the project was the use of narration to establish a reality and affect how a reader perceived it. If readers were actually active participants in the sense they were like an audience for

the characters to entertain, then the fictional land I introduced of Lost Byblos (more specifically Woven Grove Valley) could turn into the equivalent of a large stage. Yet it was important to me that the textual life found in Woven Grove Valley get treated as having a certain genuine reality of its own. The characters, for instance, could go about their lives without knowing the reader was observing them. The exception would be the narrator, with the ability to influence where the reader went and what information they received, such as the role played by the fairy-like character Sib Tib Kenna. I wanted to make that aspect obvious to draw attention to narrators as characters in their own right, rather than the disembodied voice Auster finds so chilling in his reading experiences.

The idea that Sib could become like a tour guide for the readers also came from the inability of readers to see everything Lost Byblos had to offer. I had the whole parchment-like landscape outlined, from Woven Grove Valley and beyond, but the narrative in the thesis project covers a small piece of it. I came to realize that approach was appropriate from what I had learned about narration, which could only offer pieces of much larger grand narratives. So it was my intention to give the impression of a much larger world at work—a world the narrative could only hint at during the visits Sib pays to various characters around Paper Glen.

In this context, Sib turned into a sort of intermediary between the worlds of Lost Byblos and the world inhabited by the readers. I tried to make her a metafictional narrator who, despite her closeness to readers, still could not quite reach the level of interaction she wanted. She continues to reach out and tries to include them in every possible way.

When The Author collapses in the midst of trying to write a thesis project based in metafiction, Sib must step up as a character and narrator. The reasons behind why The Author collapses, and everything that follows, turn into the narrative experience I wanted to share with anyone who reads this project.

So please enjoy your time in Woven Grove Valley.

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Part One: The Frame

Prologue—Touches on Medium Awareness and Establishes a Relationship

"The real questions are . . . where does the actual story start, and who is reading who?" ~Anonymous

Fingertips brush against the page. I sense them like a delicate shift in the atmosphere, better than the creak of an opening door. They stir me to life after countless unwritten paragraphs ready to drift away into fairytale dreams, snapping me into full-awareness.

Because they are *your* fingertips.

Hello there, Dear Reader! Welcome to the prologue—a quirky section set apart from, yet still connected to, the overall Grand Narrative composing my homeland. Every storybook world has a Grand Narrative to weave together every tale that happens there into a single text. As an example, take any book found on the shelves of your reality and what you will find are puzzle pieces to a much larger universe. Stories always exist inside other stories, intermingling in extraordinary ways.

This very moment between us constitutes an important puzzle piece for the narrative ahead. You now stand at the gateway into Lost Byblos, an entire fictional realm written by a being known as The Author and inhabited by her ever-developing characters.

Well, except for me.

I prefer to hang about the gateways, side margins, and blank canvas spaces in and around the pages of Lost Byblos. Accessing them, as you can imagine, offers quite a unique perspective on textual life. Convenient and private, they are perfect for running errands (as what you might call a Messenger) and keeping an eye on certain matters irrelevant in the present context.

But that's enough development from me.

We have more important literary matters to explore.

Like prologues, which usually read like flash fiction teasers constructed to entice you as if into a darkened theater. You fumble about in them to find a comfortable seat—preferably one without anything sticky on it or anyone blocking the view—only to fade into the background. Hidden behind

The Fourth Wall, you remain unknown to every character except the disembodied narrative voice who translates each scene for your implied benefit. Sometimes this narrative voice belongs to a character speaking at an undefined point after everything has occurred (which is a comfort in texts where the narrator gets stuck in a terrifying situation, particularly horror novels), or it gets attributed to the author (for whom the Grand Narrative is an open access text). However, I have discovered the most common suspect is actually a third-person observer who could be anyone (which comes across as noticeably uncanny in works considered Modern or Realist).

A theatrical perspective on literature is good if you simply wish to sit back and get lost in a voyeuristic reading experience or see what the characters would do without any knowledge of your presence. While we're on the subject, I will admit to checking on my friends in *Lost Byblos* through tears in *The Fourth Wall* as well and ask you to keep that fact a secret—since they would probably say I check on them *too* often.

Anyway . . .

Since you are an extra special guest, and the narrative you have come to read aims to explore a peculiar avenue of literary thought, I arranged for the prologue space here to contain a dimly-lit café instead. Come on in and watch your step, Dear Reader. Don't be shy! Look around, and the first sight to catch your eye would have to be the wooden stage against the far wall curtained in red velvet, opened to expose a silver microphone attached to a stand. The familiar features of a café are (of course) otherwise apparent. You can glimpse a counter off to the right side complete with a cash register and a little refrigerated part dominated by pastries (all delicious-looking cardboard props). There are several tables with chairs, assorted (generic) landscape pictures on the walls, and potted (plastic) ferns in the corners.

A lamp resembling a thesaurus opened upside down flickers on over a clothed table close to the stage. Go ahead and have a seat on the cushioned chair pulled out for you. Next, your gaze will fall on a

small card placed atop the china plate (near a centerpiece vase stuffed with chamomile flowers). On the card, printed in fine Times New Roman font, is the below message:

Reserved for Readers

Do you notice the slight draft wafting in from behind the stage curtains, making them flutter across the bottom like weighted papers tugged by a spring breeze? I bet you can even recognize the aroma in the air—the sweet twang of a freshly printed book when a Reader ventures between its covers for the first time.

Much as you have just done.

You start to hear the strains of a possibly familiar honkytonk tune echoing through the café, played on a phonograph off in one corner beside a cobwebby piano missing a few keys (which is fine because it is also a prop). *It's only a paper moon¹,*” the singer Natalie Cole croons, *“hanging over a cardboard sea.”* However many times I play the record, Cole delivers her lines with the greatest enthusiasm, a part of her preserved forever in audio form. *“But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me.”* She perseveres even though the record on the phonograph is deteriorating around her. The music has gotten scratchier and scratchier, and the turnstile jumps and forces her to repeat the same lines on multiple occasions.

Have you preserved yourself in some form anywhere, Dear Reader? I bet your voice or design is memorable . . .

“It's a Barnum and Bailey world.” The version of Cole on the record is unaware as to the faded state of her medium, similar to a character in a volume falling apart from age and use. *“Just as phony as it can be.”* But you know what, Dear Reader? I believe Cole could find a great measure of peace despite

¹I've heard that another place you can find this song, Dear Reader, is here: Cole, Natalie. “It's Only a Paper Moon.” *Unforgettable: With Love*, Rhino/Elektra, 1991.

her current condition, because singers live to perform their songs like characters live to perform our narratives.

I believe if we can share something meaningful for the audience and inspire love in return, growing worn through use turns into the best outcome imaginable for any work. "*But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me!*" Listening to Cole perform the same song again and again may sound tedious, yet after each session I come away feeling a little better off than before.

Do you believe stories are the same way?

I hope so.

Laughter like the gentle scratch of a pencil on paper echoes throughout the café. The phonograph screeches to a halt, and Cole gets cut off right in the middle of the refrain, "*It's only a canvas sky.*" A ripping sound pulls your glance back to the stage to where a character stands dressed in a dusty traveler's cloak. She seems little more than a child. Her short auburn hair is somewhat spiky, and she has goggles (well-cleaned ones) pulled up onto her forehead.

You blink and she seems much older based on the thoughtfulness inscribed on her lightly ink-stained face. With bright emerald eyes, she stares at you as if doing so might grant her access to your very soul. She leans towards you over the edge of the stage, attaining an impossible angle in the air without gravity taking hold.

At last a wide smirk breaks through all the suspense, and the character becomes impish and ageless. She blinks and springs back into an upright position on the stage, laughing at the release of tension.

To be concise, you see *me*.

I grab the microphone from the stand and open my mouth as if to speak into it—until I remember our metaphorical closeness, and that volume is hardly an issue for you given our text-based setting. So I settle for shrugging my shoulders and chucking the microphone off to one side. It *thumps*

three times over the wooden boards, utters an indignant squeal, and then stays inactive as a passive sentence.

“Well, here we are, Dear Reader. Are you nice and cozy? Good.” I clear my throat in a dramatic manner and give you a graceful bow. “My name is Sib Tib Kenna—friends call me Sib—and I will be your narrator for this metafictional tale.”

Drawing myself up, I glance at you as if in surprise. “Oh, what are metafictional tales, you might ask? Well, the simplest explanation I can offer is they are stories *about* stories. They investigate the impact stories and language have in shaping worldviews, perceptions of reality, and personal experiences. You might think of them as experiments or experimental literature with an extra twist.” Here the ink rises to my cheeks (or I blush, in your terms), and I chuckle. “I must confess here, Dear Reader, that I performed an experiment with you. Specifically, I narrated you into a metaphor for someone sitting down at the table near the stage in order to give you an actual orientation within the prologue. You probably understood what was happening, however, because you came here for a thesis project focused on metafiction.”

An awkward silence ensues. The record on the phonograph continues to turn, crackling away.

“Yes, Dear Reader. I have a confession to make.” My voice is quieter now, and it’s as if I’m groping for the right words. “The Author told me that you would visit Lost Byblos to enjoy a creative thesis project related to metafiction, so I came here to the gateway to wait for you. She said yours was to be an evaluation to possibly result in publication somewhere, which is beneficial for a written land like ours.” The phonograph keeps crackling. “Like Cole and her song, without getting recorded in some external medium our world can fade away. And if the medium we are in is the only one of its kind and gets destroyed, Readers lose the chance to enjoy us in the future. We would then disappear whenever The Author disappears.”

With the abruptness of a book slammed shut, I turn away from you to stare at the far café wall. A portrait half-shrouded by shadows hangs amid the generic landscape pictures, easily missed by anyone except me. I hung the portrait on the wall in the first place, and several characters stand together in a group shot. From your current position, the only one you can see with any detail is me poking my head in from one side of the frame with a tender curve on my lips.

The breath catches in my throat, and the phonograph stops.

I tremble.

By the point I turn back to you, though, it's with a wide grin meant to be apologetic. "Sorry, Dear Reader. I got distracted for a paragraph or two. Well," I clap my hands together, "since we've established why you're here, I will guide you to The Author. She will decide on the direction for the thesis project narrative, who the main protagonist should be, and what aspects of metafiction you will witness. I am a false protagonist at best—a messenger who performs the role The Author wrote for me. Still, you must know I'm enjoying our pages alone together. This prologue has gone on a lot longer than many prologues because I selfishly wanted to connect with you as a character and a narrator. Maybe even as a friend."

For a few words, I get distracted again.

Then I shake my head, willing away any further pretexts I might use to keep you here longer in the prologue. I have had my allotted space to meet you, and now I have guide you to The Author for further directions. Please just remember who I am, Dear Reader, when The Author sends us off somewhere on her intended narrative. Really, I would like you to know me as more than a disembodied voice."

Snapping my fingertips, you hear another ripping sound ring out. The curtains on the stage draw aside to expose a blank canvas expanse so radiant you have to shield your eyes. Wind gusts into the café, and the freshly printed book smell mingles with pulped wood and musty fragrances.

“Allow me to introduce one more character quirk of mine you might like.” Hawk wings spring out from underneath my traveler’s cloak. As they stretch out wide, you catch sight of a mailbag slung over my shoulder. I use it when making deliveries in Lost Byblos. Unfortunately, you are a little too large to fit inside. So I will have to make other narrative accommodations for you.

“Okay, are you ready?” Tugging down my goggles, I grab ahold of you (metaphorically) and leap through the tear into Lost Byblos.

Chapter One—Introduces Our Setting and Serious Creative Difficulties

"The true alchemists do not change lead into gold, they change the world into words." ~William H. Gass

We burst through the canvas blankness like a cloud layer, revealing an expansive verdant valley far below enclosed by high mountain ranges and surrounded by all-encompassing mists. You ride as if astride my back—the best solution I could figure out—while the wind moves gently about us. My cloak billows out behind me like the tail of a comet, and my wings glisten in the sunlight from high overhead. The Author has mentioned to me that in your reality you must avoid looking directly into the sun at the risk of your eyes, which seems a terrible shame. Feel free to gaze at the sun over us now, a golden sphere in the pale cerulean skies with dark orange wisps shimmering about the edges.

Good news. The thesis project evaluation will take place on a beautiful day.

One piece of information does bother me as we travel, I will admit. "Serious creative difficulties?" you hear me murmur in confusion. "What possible 'creative difficulties' are even possible?" What I am referring to is the ominous-sounding Chapter One title. As a wanderer about the edges of the Grand Narrative, I have developed the ability to notice them—although doing so in-text is harder than when I am elsewhere. "Could The Author be worried I might have trouble describing the landscape we're flying over to you?" Don't worry, Dear Reader, it was a rhetorical question. "Well, allow me to get rid of any lingering worries she might have and give you a fly-over at the same time."

I make a sweeping gesture at the scenic view. "Welcome to Woven Grove Valley, Dear Reader. Every story throughout our world begins here in some form. In fact, this valley was the first part of Lost Byblos to ever exist." On the surface, Woven Grove Valley bears an uncanny resemblance to many a broad and verdant valley found elsewhere in genre literature, or even perhaps in your own reality. The extraordinary details specific to the metafictional region require closer inspection as we spiral gently down from the above. For instance, let me point out the inflated words we pass that read CLOUDS, which in every other respect behave like the normal, white puffy variety they drift alongside. Whether

or not these word CLOUDS would rain DROPLETS or stick to RAINDROPS is debatable, since it never rains in Woven Grove Valley. Snow and hail are also out of the question.

The clouds simply drift around, so slowly that few characters realize they are simply following the same circular pathways again and again. Today might be a beautiful day, yet so is every other day here in Woven Grove Valley. Springtime lasts forever here. I have only heard about different seasonal states from The Author and wondered at what incredible stories related to them might entail.

Yes. Ours is a beautiful valley, if much too peaceful at times.

Soon the winding Stream-of-Consciousness River grows visible and well-defined below us, laid like a bookmark from the Grimoire Mountain Ranges—its sharp jagged peaks overhung with dark storm clouds (where thunder and lightning is still possible)—at the northeastern end, all the way to the Sketch Mountain Ranges—a clay formation with wedge-shaped indentations throughout where an enormous origami dragon slumbers—at the southwestern end. The ranges are so extensive their tips stretch and unite with each other on either side of the valley. Where they join are among the calmest and least attended to parts of Woven Grove Valley. They are penciled sketches enveloped in the same canvas-like mist that stretches beyond our setting. Characters only go there if they are hermits or prefer to isolate themselves (I find *The Fourth Wall* works the best by far), and if you look very carefully you might notice sketched huts through tears in the canvas-shroud.

Descending at a steady glide towards the Stream-of-Consciousness River, we pass over forests composed of TREES and origami trees attired in green paper leaves. The branches of both kinds sway as if they are waving at you.

Ah, we are coming upon a flock of notepaper swallows (or swallows with lined notebook-hued plumage). With a powerful flap of my wings, we shoot in among them and they scatter like a crinkling flurry. Serrated pieces of paper, their equivalent of feathers, flutter down everywhere. You can reach out and collect some in the palm of one hand.

A wide array of birds has gathered among the tree branches, from wooden woodpeckers to origami wrens. They spend most of their time singing and gossiping. Sometimes they will go out of their way to entertain characters wandering about in the woods, spouting off free-verse poetry composed on the spot. They are well-meaning characters, but you should avoid asking them for help if you ever get lost. Lacking the need to migrate has messed with their sense of direction, and you often wind up in deep trouble thanks to their advice.

The birds notice us as we pass by, and after a round of warm-up chirping they sing out:

*"We are paper birds who live in the forest,
The trees record our multifold melodies,
If we should ever fade away into smudges,
Our songs will remain imprinted forevermore."*

Afterwards, the multitude of birds gives such low bows they almost fall off their perches. Indeed, Dear Reader, I have seen some of them go plummeting down squawking first in alarm, and then in clear embarrassment amid a resounding chorus of mirth.

We are quite close now to the river, clear and translucent like a mirror. Multicolored pebbles glint along the bottom. If you listen with great care you can hear a distinct rhythm in the trickling sounds of the river, a watery rendition of the alphabet song, and different pebbles light up at each note.

Ah, we have reached the Ink Sea at the heart of the valley, calm and sleepy at this point in the morning. Pumping my wings, we start to ascend again at a slow but gradual incline. Characters in the villages scattered near the lakeshore enjoy coming out to fish, and their homes are mostly of origami and papyrus compositions. They might look human enough to you. Still, like the birds, forests, and nearly everything else in Woven Grove Valley, the material composing their bodies includes various types of stationery. Maybe you notice that one character seated at the edge of the reed pier, reaching

up arms clearly made from newspaper to cast her line. There is also that other hunched character weaving together a wicker basket consisting of cardstock. They have spectacular and bold designs.

You might be wondering as to my own composition, Dear Reader, and I guess I should tell you. “Wove paper” is a very common and plain material. It is far more common than the archival paper composing most characters in the town where The Author lives. I have heard wove paper is the type of material found in most books in your world nowadays, smooth without any discernible lines running across the surface. Almost like a canvas ready for text to get printed on it, though for me the text is more akin to faded splotches here and there. I indicate the light stains on my cheeks and over one eyebrow to you, and you can see they are nothing too special.

My cloak, meanwhile, is “rag paper,” made from woolen cloth. The Author gave it to me as a gift because I was the first character who . . .

Oh.

Dear Reader, I will have to put such anecdotes on hold because we are almost to our destination. Now we can see a sprawling town, constantly encroached upon by the Misty woods and only little more than a fair walk from the Sketch Mountain Ranges. The buildings here come in a jumble of colorful construction paper, corrugated cardboard, cardstock, and even Papier-mâché. From our aerial view, the town resembles a giant collage.

A large sign erected on its outskirts reads:

Welcome to Paper Glen
Population: Written

Soaring over the rooftops (and disturbing more birds), we head right towards an enormous library building built from actual wood, the Grand Library—the sturdiest and most prominent structure

in Paper Glen—surrounded by a nice garden and a low marble wall. But my sights are on the tall dark stone tower, reminiscent of a giant Blackwell pen, looming off to its left side.

This tower is where The Author lives and works. A door is at the base of the tower, which leads to a spiral staircase that continues up to her study. Thankfully for us both, though, I have my wings and The Author has a wide window to receive winged messengers like me.

So up we go with my excitement building (and hopefully yours as well). Now we will see what metafictional narrative The Author has in mind to show you for her thesis project. Regardless of what narrative she has laid out for you, I could continue to drop comments in the footnotes or in the headers to keep up our conversation on the side.

Or perhaps not—a lot of header and footnote comments might get too distracting.

Hmm.

As we approach the window, the strangest sensation overtakes me. It's a little like when your fingertips first brushed the page except much stronger, more piercing, and uncomfortable. Anxiety shudders through my whole form, I pull up short with a sharp gasp (please hold on tight, Dear Reader!), and a muffled cacophony of cackling sounds echoes from somewhere close by.

What is this suspense prickling my nerves, like I'm heading right into a trap—tight and constrained?

Why does it make me think of The Author?

For one terror-stricken moment, I lose all motivation and forget why I'm hanging there in the air, and why I am here in Woven Grove Valley rather than somewhere safe through a tear in The Fourth Wall.

Fortunately, Dear Reader, you bring me back to the present tense situation. You exert a distinct pressure that works as well as pinching my arm.

Thanks for being here.

Brought back to my reality, I notice only then the window is murky as Grimoire Mountain Ink (a nightmarish ink indeed) and tiny wisps are wafting out between cracks in the frame and the stone wall. Before I can think of how to react to this sight, the window rattles open and text bursts out like a billow of smoke after an imploded spell. I can get the impression it comes from The Author. I recognize her style and use of the third-person limited perspective, although something about the prose feels distinctly off-kilter.

Because the Grand Narrative of Lost Byblos originates from The Author, I guess it makes sense for her to understand how to use the third-person perspective with relative ease. She is also the being who wrote every character in Woven Grove Valley. So she would understand the motivations and thoughts of her characters the best. At least, those are my theories.

Then I realize what strikes me as so strange about the billowing text. Rather than the golden exuberant text The Author produces when lost in an ecstasy of literary abandon, the text here has a thicker and darker texture than even bold-face can manage. Ink drips from the letters in blobby clots.

Uh oh. The Chapter One title.

As if cuing in on my shock, the billowing text rushes our way as if eager to swallow us up.

Lead forms in the pit of my stomach.

I would flee or at least carry *you* off to safety, but the mysterious text is already encircling us. A flicker of hope still remains that perhaps this text is the thesis project The Author intends to offer you. If so, she has chosen an uncharacteristic way to go about the whole process. She is the type of being, I'd believed, who would have opened the window and invited us inside with even greater courtesy than I showed to you during the prologue.

Stay calm, Dear Reader. I am sure The Author has everything under control. She arranged for you to come here, and she asked me to bring you.

Ah, see? The piece has a Chapter Two title tag attached.

We must have nothing to worry about, right?

The text closes in and another need grips me.

A very dreadful need so powerful it overwhelms all else.

Forgive me, Dear Reader.

I cannot help—

I must—

I must *narrate*.

Chapter Two—Where Many Things Go Wrong

“Writers aren’t exactly people . . . They’re a bunch of people trying to be one person.” –F. Scott Fitzgerald

Seated at a work desk cluttered with ink-stained papers, The Author had tried for countless discarded pages to find the right place to begin her thesis project for the Reader. First impressions could make a huge difference when introducing a fictional land like Lost Byblos or even a single location like Paper Glen. But The Author had at least managed to take care of that much, since Sib would make the perfect character to greet and guide the Reader into Woven Grove Valley.

Do you realize how disappointing your situation is right now? The Author massaged her pounding temples in an attempt to calm the critical voice at the back of her mind. It was a voice that had spoken up over the last several days with increasing frequency and urgency.

“You don’t need to keep prodding me.” The Author straightened the papers on her desk. A cleaner workspace might make thinking easier, even if somehow she doubted it. “Don’t you think I’m aware my plans for this whole project have gone terribly awry?”

Of course I do. I watched the whole thing happen! When your unbalanced delivery character gets here with the Reader, maybe you can earn some academic sympathy by pleading you wanted to live out your own spin on the bell hooks’ quote, “Language is a body of suffering and when you take up language you take up the suffering too.”² Then again, it’s amateurish to have the Reader come here expecting to see something great only to experience a miserable display of self-degradation.

“Please stop. You’re not helping.” Argh, her forehead was noticeably warm and her stomach was churning. The Author glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall above her desk. She had crossed off all the days during the current month leading up to one specific day:

² Huh. Who is The Author speaking with here? Anyway . . . she includes a citation, Dear Reader, which I will drop in a footnote instead. It seems to be where you could find the quote: hooks, bell. “Writing is my Passion,” *Mercury Reader*, Pearson Learning Solutions, 2011 (page 53).

Thesis Project Review

The Author could remember her reaction after arranging for the Reader to evaluate a metafictional narrative of her choice somewhere in Woven Grove Valley. Dancing in quiet glee about her tower study, she had been overjoyed at the thought that at least her fictional land could gain a life outside of her own imagination and become a place Readers might enjoy. Her characters in the valley longed to have Readers discover them and here was their opportunity at last. Furthermore, The Author could relate her knowledge of metafiction and reflections on the creative writing process. She could show the evaluating Reader her development as a writer and with any luck provide an enjoyable reading experience as well.

The Author had considered throwing open the tower window and exclaiming the good news in a gleeful shout.

Instead you resisted the urge and decided to make the whole thing a big secret.

"Writing narratives is my chosen role." The Author took deep breaths to steady her nerves, which wasn't working too well. "Every character expects me to give Readers the opportunity to read about them in a narrative that shows off their best points, as well as have the ability to handle the whole writing process. It's my responsibility, not theirs." She sighed, sinking down onto her stool. "I figured if the Reader judges the thesis project I put together as worthwhile, then I could reveal the happy results to my characters as a surprise gift."

Too bad your gift didn't come together very well. The voice snorted in exasperation. *Why don't you relate to me again exactly how an all-powerful author fell into such a pitiful state?*

Because The Author wanted to placate the critical voice and figure out the answer for herself, she closed her eyes and tried to rewind her memories over the last several days. When had things gotten so far out of control?

Oh, that was right.

The Author's trouble had started with innocuous questions.

Where should she start? How could The Author pick just one story to represent what Woven Grove Valley had to offer, and which only scratched at the much broader world of Lost Byblos? Should she follow one or more characters? What would impress the Reader and help to teach them the most about metafiction?

Maybe The Author could compose a narrative where the Reader took a raft ride down the Stream-of-Consciousness River, a great metaphor for a specific literary device. Or perhaps she could give them an afternoon with the Fisher Queen who lived in Period Village near the Ink Sea, and who might take them fishing for words and give them a quirky spin on semantics. Or The Author could write something where they took an adventure alongside Professor Cornelius (bookbinder and part-time vampire) through the Misty Woods in which spindle spiders—creatures with sewing needles for legs and wooden spools attached atop their pincushion abdomens—lurked in abundance, a creative touch closer to a straight-on fairytale.

On the other hand, sticking around Paper Glen might work out better. She had a specific selection of characters in mind who considered Paper Glen their hometown and had made valuable contributions to Woven Grove Valley. They considered them good friends. The Author would want any Reader to meet first them first, even if the fact only spurred more questions related to introducing and weaving together a narrative where they appeared.

So The Author did have a sort of plan. She could put together a thesis project for the Reader, featuring her dearest friends from Paper Glen.

Sigh. Even then you failed to get any further in planning out a narrative, didn't you?

“Hush,” The Author muttered, opening her tired eyes and gazing about the tower room she rarely ever left. In truth, she really couldn’t remember the last time she actually had left it. All she knew was at the moment everything here was a mess, not just her work desk.

One piece of the tower room setting alone had come through undisturbed. Bookshelves lined the walls of The Author’s living space with works inspirational to her, from Cornelius Funke to Walter Moers. She liked to run her fingertips across the row of spines as if to gleam sage advice from the authors themselves, followed by peering out the window.

Procrastination at its finest. The voice grunted.

From her high vantage point, The Author had a good view of Paper Glen, quiet and light-hearted.

It’s too quiet and light-hearted, as your little messenger keeps commenting. She was the only character you shared your whole scheme with because she makes a good narrator and can move around with such ease. The voice took on a conspiratorial edge. *Sometimes I think she is Mad as Lewis Carroll’s Hatter. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the way she prefers keeping to textless pockets outside the Grand Narrative and beyond your reach. She knows too much about the nature of her own world and your influence over her textual existence.*³

The Author couldn’t think of a suitable response, so she kept silent and continued to watch the characters who walked past on the cobblestone streets in front of the Grand Library and its low garden wall. They all had established roles and routines, and The Author could name the residents she knew would walk by at certain points in the day on their way to one place or another. Many of them were so regular she could tell the hour by the passerby.

They are predictable, and they act like Woven Grove Valley has always existed.

³ I, for one, think the hatter from *Alice in Wonderland* makes perfect sense. If that makes me Mad, I guess the critical voice in The Author’s head is right. As for my understanding of The Author’s control and me sticking to the spaces outside the Grand Narrative . . . never mind.

“Woven Grove Valley has always existed for my characters in Paper Glen,” The Author said, “because they have always existed with this valley, regardless of how long their world has been around from my own point of view.” When she had first started to write its Grand Narrative, The Author had taken so many facts for granted in the creation of a world like Lost Byblos. After months of musing over her characters and composing character sketches, at last she had started musing over longer and longer narratives to pull everything together. She had written Woven Grove Valley, and her characters had slipped free from her imagination so fluidly and easily. They had stepped out onto the page with their identities largely in place without families, parents, or children beyond what she had constructed for them.

In her home plane of existence, people were born. They started off young and innocent, and then got shaped into unique individuals by experiences and memories picked up over the course of many years.

The Author’s characters never aged. At the moment they ran the spectrum in appearance from freshly printed to creased and worn, and she had chosen where each one began. She would have to address textual life cycles someday. After the thesis project evaluation, maybe.

Characters used to be afraid of you, because they thought you would erase or revise them for disturbing you. A number of them still think so, in fact. I admit they might have a point, since you can change them so easily with some strokes of your Pen.

Another unanswered pause.

Turning the world into a book written by yourself makes for a good experiment in reality, the voice said. You begin to see how everything fits together. Meanwhile, the developing textual lives of your characters makes each change ever more consequential. It scares you as much as it fascinates you, am I right? Nowadays, you’re afraid of making a terrible mistake all the time or scribing some disastrous narrative that ruins everything. Like a poorly written thesis project, perhaps?

“You’re right, writing is a heavier responsibility than I’d thought.” The Author hung her head. “Being able to create anything imaginable is wonderful, but everything I do write can have a major impact on the world.” Picking up the Pen set beside the blank page on her desk, she watched golden letters drift from the tip in lazy spirals. They were the same golden letters that softly emanated about her own form—and only a little less noticeably from the other characters in *Lost Byblos*, although most of her characters could not see the text encircling them. “I guess it’s remarkable then that I know of characters who will still approach me as an actual individual and want to understand me as a friend. But we’ll always have a certain barrier between us, won’t we?”

Staying in a room high in a tower helps, the voice huffed. By the way, a certain healer character of yours is back again.

The Author peered out just in time to see an elderly woman character hobble off along the street with the aid of a cane carved from the cuneiform clay found at Sketch Mountain. Its material was strong enough to support her weight and stylish given the wedge-shaped marks from top to bottom. As for the character herself, she had shredded newspaper hair, grayish laid paper skin, and a wrapping paper shawl tugged about her shoulders.

Her name was Wordsmith Quill. She usually stayed at her small cottage on the outskirts of town close to the Misty Woods (which kept Paper Glen at archival temperatures due to the cool breezes wafting from it)—where characters would seek her for medical care. Lately, Wordsmith Quill had started to walk by on a frequent basis, wringing her crinkly hands. She would pause at the entryway to the gate, seeming as if she were deep in thought or worried about something. Yet in the end, she would always leave.

Once The Author had even sought to cheer up the wordsmith, taking her Pen and writing upon the thin air. Words appeared from the tip of it (with three deliberate exceptions). They glided out through the open window like graceful wisps:

“A small violet paper butterfly appeared high above Intro Street, fluttering down until she rested on Wordsmith Quill’s shoulder.”

After they had drifted for a while, the words merged and produced a lavender butterfly that fluttered over to land on Wordsmith Quill’s shoulder. The old character had paused to gaze at the tiny creature, a smile had creased her lips, and The Author had noticed a flicker of happiness ignite in her eyes. Ah, it was a lovely sight. Helping one of her characters feel better was wonderful.

Fluttering butterflies are much different than intricately woven narratives, the voice had reminded her. Not to mention thesis projects on metafiction. Butterflies won’t impress Readers.

“You’re right,” The Author then replied. “Butterflies are much, much different than thesis projects.”

As the days passed, The Author had started to grow more entangled in her own concerns and anxieties. Even with a direction for the thesis project decided, she couldn’t decide how to go about the process. The lives of her characters were delicate. Her pacing increased. Her work desk went from clean and tidy to an ink-stained mess. Worst still was how much harder writing grew by the page as The Author strained for a place to start her narrative. Jotting down a few initial words, she would cross them out because they seemed wrong somehow.

Among her earlier attempts were examples like:

~~Many pages ago, Lost Byblos drifted somewhere between Reality and Fiction...~~

~~Long, long ago, to the far right of the second start on the right...~~

~~It was the strangest of times, it was the sanest of times...~~

Eventually, her attempts trailed off into lines such as:

~~Where did I go wrong? That is what I will always wonder...~~

What is the matter with me?

Whenever she crossed out another line, The Author would sigh and rub her temples. They had already begun to pound by then, but she couldn't pause even for a moment. She had too much work to get done first.

For each paper overloaded with her scrawls, she would crumple them into balls and toss them over one shoulder when the wastebasket beside her desk reached maximum capacity. Every discarded ball made a faint shuffling sound against the papyrus-carpeted floor. On many occasions, The Author heard one of her failures collide with another one or trigger a miniature avalanche amid the piles she tried to ignore.

Each tossed ball also shook loose another string of doubts and frustrations in her own mind, impossible to ignore. *My opening is too passive and weak. I have to make it stronger!* The Author might find herself thinking, striking through another line of prose. *This line is too cliché for any story, including a metafictional one.* All the while, The Author would keep starting and restarting her narrative. She could never remember the writing process being so hard before, and the pressure seemed to grow stronger the closer the thesis project review date came.

I'll fail my characters at this rate. What is the matter with me?

Then, at some point, the consistency of the criticisms started to change. Her self-posed questions, such as *what is the matter with me*, made an unsettling transition to questions such as, *what is the matter with you?* They became ever more frequent and overpowering, yet still they critiqued every little thing she wrote.

Then, at another point, a single voice had emerged and overwhelmed all the others with a distinct critical characterization all its own.

It was almost like speaking with another person, and The Author had started to treat the voice as such.

Stop dilly-dallying and start writing for a change, or else your project will never amount to anything, this new voice might say. Don't make the Readers groan, or else they will only remember your lack of originality. Then the voice would punctuate each point with cackling like the sounds of thousand pages ripping.

Those terrible, *horrible* cackles.

What also didn't help was the way the words on the pages wavered once in a while, or went in and out of focus, or how warm she felt despite the pleasant breeze coming in at the window. Even the songs of the origami sparrow that alighted on her windowsill failed to calm her racing thoughts. Night and day seemed to move in an odd sequence outside her window. The Author might scribble a few lines while sunlight poured in, only to glance over again and discover night had materialized in the meantime.

Now it was the morning when the Reader should arrive, and The Author had nothing to show for all her agony. "I can't do it," she said, pacing her tower study yet again. Paper crunched underfoot at each step. "I can't believe it. How could I have let down my characters? How could I have let down the Reader who will be here so soon?"

Enough. The voice intoned with such force The Author got rattled down to her very marrow. Never before had its criticism had such a tangible or overwhelming impact. *I'm fed up with this whole unproductive writing process, and fed up with idly watching you and getting disappointed. The Readers are never going to get a decent thesis project from you now. You're almost at your limit, anyway.*

"Will you just—" The Author trailed off then, because she noticed her shadow wiggling on the floor and tugging backwards. With a sharp scissoring noise, its dark feet detached from her own and it rose from the floor to her height. Golden eyes opened in its face.

You look surprised, the shadow sneered. I should think you would know of anything that appears in your own world.

"I don't remember writing you."

You created me, surely enough.

"You're the critical voice in the back of my head." The Author retreated along the wall. "What are you now, a character?"

The shadow cackled. *I'm done telling you anything, especially after you procrastinated and put all of Woven Grove Valley into a major predicament. Its golden eyes narrowed. All you've done for pages is discuss how hard writing is for you, how you're afraid of making mistakes, and a bunch of other self-pitying talk. It would be as boring for Readers to suffer through as it is for me. Now, though, I realize that I don't have to just sit here and take the abuse.*

As The Author watched in growing alarm, the shadow lifted one of its arms independently of her own and flexed it. The fingers wiggled. *I know you are capable of much more than pacing about a tower room, and that's what makes the whole matter more disappointing.* The shadow repeated the same maneuver with its other arm and fingers. *So I'm leaving.*

"Leaving?" The Author continued to slide along the wall, legs wobbly. "I don't understand. If you are some kind of character, my own character, then perhaps we can talk." Maybe there was still some chance for her to reach the door and get help from her characters in the Grand Library.

The shadow shifted to block her path. *There is nothing left to say. From here onwards, I will seek to take over the authorial role myself.* Darkness seeped from the strange creature now, creeping across the room and starting to block out the sunlight from the window. The Author could hear rustling sounds from the crumpled paper balls, as if the scribbles themselves were calling out.

Since you cannot seem to fulfill your role to entertain the Reader with a narrative focused on metafiction, the shadow hissed, *I have decided to make my own arrangements. With the right equipment,*

I could make things around Woven Grove Valley far more interesting to read about. Thin pencil-sharp fingertips stretched out towards The Author's Pen. Besides, you are hardly in any condition to write a decent narrative. How is that for self-awareness?

If only The Author could think of some line to banish this strange apparition. If only her mind could form some solid ideas, instead of being a terrible blank. She was burning up. She could feel herself slipping away as her headache intensified, from all the stress and exhaustion from the past several days. The Author could practically feel them bearing down on top of her, crushing her.

The shadow shrugged. *Don't worry, I will take good care of every character.* More crackling, which sounded wickeder than ever.

"Leave my characters alone," The Author breathed, roused by the shadow's insinuation. She stood straight and tall despite the spinning sensation of the room, or even the way the paper balls had started to quiver on the floor, shadowy tendrils lifting up into the air. Hopefully The Author only imagined the shrill chorus of giggles, like shuffling papers, also rising from them.

What will you do about it, then? The shadow sounded smug. *Fling a paper ball at me? I will happily be the antagonist if you want. Conflict is a perfect story generator, and I'm sure the Reader would love to see a shadow triumph over The Author. Just imagine the Reader musing over the possible interpretations to explain your failure.*

"Very well." Lifting her Pen, and feeling nauseous, The Author struggled to think of some means to dispatch this shadow in the form of few sentences to a paragraph. This strain sent the tower study spinning ever faster around her. "Even if I cannot think of anything—" She swayed.

Even if you cannot think of anything, what? The shadow reached out for the Pen.

Before The Author could finish her dialogue, a character came crashing in through the window, scattering the glass and harkening in a fierce buffet of wind.

The shadow released an agonized cry of shock at the intrusion.

Meanwhile, The Author just sank down in relief. "Oh Sib, you're here," she murmured, closing her eyes. "Thank Scribes." Then she knew no more.

Chapter Three—Could Have Gone Better

“Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality.” ~Edgar Allan Poe

I should have reacted sooner, but the need to narrate inspired by the odd text holds me in an almost hypnotic grip. Only when The Author speaks up against the encroaching shadow, in defense of her characters, do I break free from the dark print and plunge into the tower. The ink is so cold it stings like multiple papercuts.

My bursting through the window, as the narrative in Chapter Two mentions, results in shattering glass and a strong gust of wind. Crunched paper balls bounce about the tower study, and loose documents swirl like miniature vortexes. I glimpse The Author stretched across the ground, while an author-shaped shadow is inches away from touching the Pen laying so vulnerable on the floor.

In one swift motion, I dive in and snatch up the Pen.

Warmth pulses through me like a heartbeat, shocking every nerve after the deep inky chill from earlier. For a split second my vision blurs and everything in the room turns into blocks of text. I glimpse an odd panorama—individual words strung together into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. Text drifts up from the tip of the Pen in a swirl, and also drifts up from The Author.

The oddest realization comes to me. Even as The Author was struggling to put together a thesis project, her actions still somehow got recorded as part of the Grand Narrative, which was what I translated to you. I don't know how I got access to it—reading what happened in the past up to right before the present page. Usually I can only access the Grand Narrative just enough to deliver first-person narration as I am currently doing for you, and I can only see other parts of the actual text while through tears in The Fourth Wall. It is all very confusing.

My vision jerks back to normal, and I almost drop the Pen. *Almost*. With great difficulty, I manage to stow it away in my cloak pocket. There the warmth eases, although I can still feel a faint pulse.

Give me the Pen, the shadow orders, pointing one sharp finger towards me. I warn you. You cannot handle the responsibility carrying it, even as a visitor to The Fourth Wall. The pressure will probably tear you apart, and no character wants that fate. Cackling sounds. Remember your assigned role as the narrator for this thesis project and to deliver a text from The Author. As she is indisposed, I am the one who deserves to hold the Pen and direct the narrative. Give it to me!

“Of course I won’t give the Pen to you,” I say, in spite of my befuddlement. “I just narrated to the Reader what happened before I got here, and it’s clear you messed with The Author’s head. Giving you the Pen wouldn’t make any sense.”

Wouldn’t make any sense, you say? The shadow studies me, head cocking. *You don’t understand anything that has just happened. You can’t even see what a perilous position you are in at the moment, or what a perilous situation you’ve dragged the Reader into at the moment.* I hear a giggling chorus and notice inky tendrils rising from the crumpled balls on the floor. *Even then you would stand against me? I, who am the closest thing to The Author still conscious?*

Stay close to me, Dear Reader. I’ll try to protect you however possible.

“No, you’re not,” I tell the shadow. For several tension-filled words, we remain still and staring at each other. I can only imagine what nastiness is going on behind those golden eyes.

When the tension grows too unbearable, the shadow surprises me by laughing—not the unsettling cackles from earlier, but a sound much like a phone book getting torn in half. *Very well, Messenger. You want to act as the protagonist, narrator, and storyteller for a while? Wish granted.* As the shadow speaks, it sinks into the floor. *I look forward to watching you struggle to carry the story along. Soon enough I’ll claim the Pen, take over this thesis project, and assume authorship over the Grand Narrative. You’ll see.* It disappears, and the cackling and giggling fades away.

Then all is silent.

I stand panting in the study, wings drooping. They feel heavy as paperweights right now. Don't worry, Dear Reader. I'm all right.

I should have known something crazy would happen based on the Chapter One title, and then the subsequent Chapter Two title. Still, at least that creepy shadow is gone (although its disappearance came across as far too easy and convenient somehow).

Perhaps we can finally go ahead with the thesis project evaluation, Dear Reader. Because you know what? I would bet The Author planned and pulled off the entire Chapter Two scene to demonstrate some point to you about metafiction, since she couldn't really have been in such a desperate situation. She's The Author, after all.

Yes. Chapter Two must have simply been an elaborate performance, right down to the strange reaction I experienced from the Pen and the whole shadow business.

Right . . . I chuckle nervously.

"You sure had us going there for a moment, particularly me." Kneeling down beside The Author, I gently shake her shoulder. "Author, you can get up now. We've 'vanquished' the shadow, and I've brought the Reader for the thesis project evaluation."

No response.

The Author remains still and silent. I shake her shoulder a little harder, trying to avoid looking at the spot on the carpet where her shadow is supposed to be at the moment. Instead I grin and manage a nervous chuckle. "Come on, please stop playing around."

My grin starts to wilt, ever-so-slowly, as her lack of a reaction persists.

An anxious chill, also ever-so-slowly, creeps through me.

Could The Author's narrative have depicted her *actual* creative struggles, and not simply been for show? The very possibility makes me gulp. "How will the Reader interpret your lack of a reaction to me? I'm sure it wouldn't reflect well, if you don't mind my saying so. Please?"

Pretending to faint is much different from The Author's usual humor. From what experience I've had with her, she is straightforward and hesitant to cause her characters any worry.

At last the ink-draining implications of The Author fainting for real start to take hold. For if The Author had nothing written for her thesis project on metafiction to discuss with you, or even to have me narrate from it like a script, we are then in an awkward situation.

I recall the shadow's words and reach another startling realization.

There really is no story for you at the moment.

No narrative at all for me to read aloud to you, or even a plan for what I can show you.

You have nothing to evaluate.

My eyes twitches, and a crazed sort of chortle escapes my throat.

Don't panic

I must not panic....

.....

Dear Reader, if you will please excuse me for just a few sentences . . .

Wait right here.

I will come right back.

Ripping a tear into one of my comfortable places between pages, I nod to you and slip through into the canvas void beyond. I drift backwards, a huge smile still on my face.

It is only when the tear is about to seal up completely that you hear me start to scream.

The tear opens again.

I step back into the tower room, take a deep breath, and release it.

“Okay, thank you for your patience, Dear Reader,” I say. “I think we could use a wordsmith about now. As The Author mentioned, wordsmiths are like healers who help out characters in need, and Wordsmith Quill is the one and only wordsmith in Paper Glen.”

“She might help even if The Author isn’t exactly a character.” One last bark of laughter escapes me. I slap myself and go to the window. “Sorry, please just hop onto my back.”

Chapter Four—Considers Authorial Intent and Character-Driven Narratives

"If you don't turn your life into a story, you just become a part of someone else's story." ~Terry Pratchett

Since The Author mentioned the fact during Chapter Two, I know to look for Wordsmith Quill in the cobblestone street in front of the Grand Library. My recent ordeal must have shaken me more than I realize because flying is shaky and difficult at first. I almost plummet straight downwards (yet save myself through a combination of rapid wing flaps and gliding).

As a desperate character who scrambles up to Wordsmith Quill and gasps out the situation at hand, I must present quite a spectacle. To her credit, she takes the whole message with the type of solemn stare reserved for panicking patients—usually right before ripping off a bandage or some other painful but necessary procedure. She waits for me to splutter out the whole message about The Author collapsing without interruption (which I must admit does make me feel better), up until the point when I suggest we take a shortcut to the tower room using a tear in The Fourth Wall.

Maintaining the same solemnity, Wordsmith Quill turns down my offer. "Dearie, I refuse to get dragged into one of your abysmal rips. I have enough creases as it is, thank you very much," she calmly tells me. "I'm sturdier and faster than I look, and I'll climb the stairs myself." Without another word, she hobbles off towards the tower.

I could try to press the point, Dear Reader, or offer to carry her up the spiral staircase to The Author's room. However, once Wordsmith Quill takes a stance on a matter that really is the end of the discussion. And she is much speedier than a character might expect. So all we can do right now is follow her, keeping a watch just in case any character from the Grand Library notices us.

Especially the head of the Grand Library. How could I even begin to explain what had just happened to *her*?

"Calm down," Wordsmith Quill grumbles. "Stop flying about me like a frantic hummingbird." Her ability to keep a level head amazes me. Maybe caring for other frantic characters has helped

prepare her for a situation even as serious as The Author collapsing. She doesn't even break stride when I tell her about you, Dear Reader. The most she says is, as we start up the stairs, "Pleased to meet you, Reader. Sorry for the inconvenience, and I'm sure you are a good person if The Author invited you here."

"Isn't there anything else you want to tell the Reader?" I ask. "While you have the chance? This could be your once in a book opportunity to tell one anything you like."

Wordsmith Quill continues to ascend the stairs for a while, making soft crinkling sound at each step. Finally she says, "All right. Reader, consider your hand shaken in greeting." She never stops moving.

"Anything else? Like maybe some cryptic wisdom about textual life, or something specifically metafictional?"

"Look Dearie, I have work to do, and it doesn't include discussing philosophy," Wordsmith Quill replies. We're more than halfway up the stairs by this point, and she isn't the least out of breath. "The only advice I could give is, if the Reader has something they feel as if they were written for, then they should do it. I don't know if that counts, but it's my contribution."

Yep. That's Wordsmith Quill, Dear Reader—concise and practical.

After what seems pages upon pages, Wordsmith Quill sits on a stool by the bedside of The Author in the tower study. She waves a hand over The Author's head. Letters twirl about her fingertips in bluish spirals. If a character had come to her with a rip, such as in an arm, Wordsmith Quill could have fixed the problem by editing the broken words in the spot together.

Will any kind of wordsmithing work on The Author, though, a being reportedly woven from flesh and bone, and with red rather than dark ink? I begin to ask the question out of sheer curiosity, only to have Wordsmith Quill cut me off right away and say she needs to concentrate.

In the meantime, I clean up a bit around the study. Coming in through the window did make a big mess, so I sweep the glass and other debris off to the far corners of the room with a broom set against one wall. The Author also did not exaggerate about her piles of wadded paper balls. They lay strewn across the floor. Strangely enough, I don't see any markings on the actual paper—even the ones closest to the work desk.

The Author had been in dire circumstances. Thinking about her being alone here in the study for days on end, accompanied by a menacing shadow that grew ever stronger as the time passed, makes me shudder. I can feel the warmth of the Pen against my chest. When I linger for too long on that warmth or dare to place my fingers against it, I start to get tingly again and notice the words flickering at the edges of the objects in the room.

They even flicker around the edges of Wordsmith Quill . . .

I clear my sight by shaking my head, and choose to focus instead on the desk calendar with the “Thesis Project Review” date marked on it.

The Author had sounded so excited about your evaluation, Dear Reader. She wanted to give every character in Woven Grove Valley, and Paper Glen in particular, the gift of having someone like you read about them for the first time. In addition, she wanted to share her thoughts on metafiction and creative writing. The Author thought she had to handle the entire progress by herself, and to make everything perfect without any character helping her. My narration would have been the easy part, because I'd just have read off the text she had prepared already.

Sounds tough.

To be honest, Dear Reader, I had never realized just how many anxieties an author could have.

Please forgive me for saying this as well, but what am I even supposed to say anymore? Without The Author's direction, I am aimless as a narrator. I would have been glad to follow any ideas she might have had for her thesis project to entertain you.

Now it's just me.

Well, you are the only one I can speak with at the moment. So I hope you won't mind if I continue to do it.

Finally, Wordsmith Quill sits back with a long, drawn-out sigh like dusty book slowly shutting. She flexes her fingers with obvious difficulty.

"Well?" I venture.

"The good news is The Author has just collapsed from exhaustion and too much stress built up over many pages. She also has a fever. Obviously she didn't slow down much to take care of herself, which probably just made matters worse." Wordsmith Quill tucks the blanket over The Author more securely about her shoulders. "She should have known better, but we can't control that now."

"What about The Author's strange shadow?" I glance around the room, as if that odd phantom might still lurk somewhere along the floor or walls. Fortunately the room is tranquil and still. "From what I narrated, it was torturing her somehow."

"We all have our inner struggles, Dearie," Wordsmith Quill's replies curtly. "The Author inflicted a serious case of writer's block on herself."

"Ugh, sounds painful," I mutter. "Can you fix her?"

Wordsmith Quill makes a soft tutting noise. "My wordsmithing can do only so much in this situation, even if The Author were any other character. Rest is the only way to get rid of exhaustion and a fever." You can see regret creasing her face. "As a result, I'm afraid The Author won't be doing any type of thesis project narrative right now, even though the Reader is here." Wordsmith Quill sighs. "Pardon the inconvenience, and I wish I could do more for The Author."

The air in the tower room, stale and musty to begin with, grows unbearable.

“The Reader set aside valuable time to make the journey here,” is the first thing I can think of to say. “The Author wanted to share a thesis project, and it was supposed to involve her reflections on metafiction and feature us somehow.”

“Dearie, as much as we might not want to admit it, even authors have their weaknesses. They can get sick at inopportune times, and even the best writers can struggle to put together a written work.” Wordsmith Quill reaches down and gathers up some of the stray papers on the floor. She squints while looking at them. “No one in a literature should be invincible, I suppose. The Author might just need to have the Reader come back on some other occasion, if—” Wordsmith Quill fails to finish her sentence, but I can guess what it entails.

Today was to be the thesis project evaluation. If a Reader like you sets aside a narrative from our world now, you might never come back. You could go off to other narratives where the authors never faint and characters never stand around unsure of what to do next. You would have the right, as you always do.

Still, I hope you will stick around at least a while longer.

We watch The Author sleep. Sweat glistens on her brow, and every now and then she murmurs something low and indistinguishable. For some reason I can imagine The Author lost in dreams, still working through the narrative struggles which made her faint in the first place. Maybe the shadow is there taunting The Author with nightmares about a failed thesis project evaluation.

None of the above changes the fact that you are reading about us right now. Words are ticking past like clock hands.

What can I do to help The Author, and to give you a good time?

Suddenly an idea, a truly one-dimensional idea, sprouts in my mind. I’m remembering a detail from Chapter Two and a few sentences that might provide a launching point for us.

What was it that The Author mentioned, exactly, about the type of narrative she wanted?

“Hold on a sentence,” I say, letting the idea take blossom and spread its petals wide. “No, we can’t make this The End. It’s still too early.” I glance toward the window and see the morning sunlight sparkling outside as if in invitation. A small flock of origami birds flies past.

“Listen, I understand how you feel.” Wordsmith Quill readjusts herself on the stool, her spine creaking. “I truly do. The problem is The Author needs her rest, and I’m sure the Reader will not wait forever to hear her thesis project about Paper Glen.”

“The Reader should get to read the thesis project today.” I turn to her with a soft curve on my lips, surprising Wordsmith Quill if her wide-eyed expression is any evidence. “It’s true The Author can’t continue to personally deliver her narrative about Paper Glen for the Reader to evaluate us, but—” My wings flutter. “But I know what type of narrative she wanted to give the Reader, where it would take place, and even the characters involved.” The curve on my lips grows. Hope courses through me like fresh ink. “Yes. Even if The Author didn’t realize it, she gave me the instructions for what I need to do!”

I take off despite the relatively small size of the study, hovering and causing paper balls to fly everywhere. “A tour of the town, that’s what The Author wanted. I’m sure of it! And with my abilities as a narrator, I can travel all over Paper Glen with ease and entertain the Reader. It’s the perfect plan, and what better way is there to experience metafiction than to have the Reader interact with characters aware we are all part of The Author’s Grand Narrative?”

Wordsmith Quill sits there, mulling over the thought. “A character narrator filling in for an author narrator is possible, I suppose,” she agrees. “It does happen even in traditional literature. I’ve heard Readers sometimes even assume the narrator and the author are interchangeable.”

“I’ve already mentioned the fact to the Reader before and it’s brilliant, right? In addition, every character can give The Author a happy surprise instead, because it sounded like The Author was worried about her relationship with us.” Filled with a sense of excited goodwill, I skip to window. “Perhaps I could start by showing the Reader the Grand Library.”

In spite of my mounting excitement, a sudden thought causes me to pause on the sill.

"Say, Wordsmith Quill?" I ask. "The Author happened to, well, *mention* you were passing by the Grand Library a lot lately and seemed deep in thought."

"Oh, you know how worn characters like me are, Dearie." Wordsmith Quill sighs and averts her eyes. "We get a bit *lonely* now and again, and sometimes we want to a little help with things around the house. Or maybe even a character to shoulder the weight of our profession." By the way Wordsmith Quill settles back on the stool, I can tell she intends to stick around the tower study for a while. She brushes a hair away from The Author's forehead, and her gaze becomes distant, as if she is imagining doing the same thing to another character in the same position. Perhaps to a much fresher (or, for your benefit, Dear Reader, a *younger*) character.

"Don't worry, Wordsmith Quill," I assure her. "I'm sure if you let The Author know about your concerns, she'll be more than willing to help. We have to help one another out, after all, in our literary community."

"The Author could have benefited from that advice."

"You know," I add, the ink rising to my cheeks. "I've also been a bit curious to learn more about wordsmithing myself."

This time Wordsmith Quill gives me a smile with a tiny quiver to it, far more real than the one before. "My cottage door is always open, although night is when I could share the most knowledge about my wordsmithing. I like to work on things, creaking in my rocking chair on the front porch." She nods at me. "Some company is better than none."

"Very true, and right!" I spring into the air with you, Dear Reader, riding on my back. "See you later then, after a tour around Paper Glen I'm sure the Reader will find very metafictional."

"Oh, yes. Since you're going to the Grand Library anyway, I'd suggest letting The Librarian in on this whole thesis project business. I'm sure The Author would want the Reader to meet her."

“Err, I don’t know if I should.” I hang outside the window. “The Librarian can get a touch *volatile* whenever things don’t work out as planned. Who knows how she’ll react to the fact The Author has collapsed, or that I was the only character she told about the Reader coming in the first place?”

“Be that as it may, you should still tell her about it,” Wordsmith Quill said. “As you know, The Librarian hates being the last to find out important news or get taken by surprise. You should understand that fact more than any character right now, given recent events.”

The ink rises to my cheeks. Imagining The Librarian fuming over being the last character to know something vital is both funny and utterly terrifying, especially since I have been on her thunderous side one too many times. The unruly storms over in the Grimoire Mountains are pleasant by comparison.

As Wordsmith Quill hinted, one of The Librarian’s infamous storms lashed out at me only a few chapters before this whole thesis project started—due to a particular accident where she wound up chasing me through the hallways of the Grand Library followed by a flock of books.

So you’ll forgive me, Dear Reader, if confronting The Librarian seems a little too intimidating right now. “I’ll think about it,” I eventually tell Wordsmith Quill, “Although she would probably find some way to blame *me* for what happened to The Author.”

“You are not giving her enough credit, Dearie. Go ahead and let the Reader to make their own judgement as to her character.”

Once again, I could protest but it would be in vain. Wordsmith Quill has stated her opinion.

I have a tour to give you, meanwhile.

As I leave the room I hear Wordsmith Quill start reciting a poem to The Author. I think she means it to be as a kind of lullaby:

“Wishes and dreams come and go,

Come and go,

To where they go I want to know,
Want to know,
When they return are they the same
They the same,
As when they went away?
They went away,
Only you would know my dear friend,
My dear friend,
When the wishes and dreams
End and begin.”

Part Two: The Keyholes of Paper Glen

Chapter Five—Outlines the Grand Library

"Books have to be heavy because the whole world is inside them." ~Cornelia Funke

Walking along the corridors of the Grand Library, Dear Reader, my nerves start to take over. In undertaking to tour you around Paper Glen, I have in effect agreed to approach every character depicted in the group shot hung on the café wall in the prologue. Somehow I could tell these were the characters The Author meant. They are the characters I know would stand out to her from this town.

Wordsmith Quill was in the picture, so you've gotten to meet at least one of them.

The Librarian, and the head of the Grand Library, was another. As stated last chapter, I still have certain concerns about telling her what has happened. Trying to assuage my fears, I rehearse the best way to break the news to her. It is as if you are walking right by my side.

Dear Reader, would you please pretend to be The Librarian for one moment? Thank you.

"Why, hello there, Librarian," I try out a winning grin, even though I'm already starting to sweat. "Do you know The Author? Oh, yes, I suppose you would." A nervous chuckle. "This is the first time you've heard about it, but it turns out she's working on a special narrative called a thesis project, concerning the subject of metafiction as well as us. She even invited the Reader to come! The Reader is right here with me, in fact. There's just one slight hitch—" You see me wince, retreating back a step or two as if to give myself a head start running out the door. "The Author kind of had a meltdown thanks to a weird shadow, and I narrated the entire thing from a readerly distance."

Whoa. After explaining the whole thing aloud, and actually *listening* to my word choice, the situation does sound bad. Sighing, I kick at the red linen carpet and gaze up at the high-arched ceiling as if I might see the right words bobbing there like a balloon let go by some fresh character.

The Librarian is sure to explode at me.

Just like she did during what many characters in Paper Glen have since termed “The Wing Incident.”

Yes, Dear Reader, the incident was the same mentioned earlier. While I would love to forget the whole thing, The Librarian tends to hold onto grievances for longer than other characters.

“The Wing Incident” is another puzzle piece in the Grand Narrative that happened many pages before The Author mentioned her thesis project review. I would digress too far from the narrative at hand if I went delved into the whole thing right now, but I can give you a basic summary. During a fit of boredom, I volunteered to help The Librarian clean and reorganize her inventory. You should know, Dear Reader, everything was going well (despite the process getting tedious much too quickly for me and The Librarian constantly giving directions for where this book or that book was supposed to go).

Then, with one importune wing thrust, I managed to knock all the volumes off the shelves of one of the highest and oldest bookcases in the Grand Library. Dusty books gasped out various exclamations (some in other languages) as they fell in a paper tidal wave. Fortunately, there were no character patrons in the room right then. Unfortunately, The Librarian was there and got struck full on from behind before I could give her fair warning.

The Librarian wasn’t pleased, and neither were the books I’d disturbed.

Consequentially, Wordsmith Quill had a lot of guests at her cottage that afternoon.

I still ache all over whenever characters mention the incident.

Setting such regrettable memories aside, though, we should really continue with the tour.

Along the corridors of the Grand Library off to your left, you’ll see stained glass windows at regular intervals depicting scene from classic fairytales. They sparkle like gold leaf when sunlight streams through them. Can you recognize the young woman Belle dancing with the Beast amid a garden of roses? And there is the little girl confronting the Snow Queen to save her friend poisoned

into having a frozen heart. Of course you also notice Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion standing before the gates to the Emerald City in Frank Baum's story.

Ah, these are the types of priceless stories Readers like you probably read all the time. Stories with memorable beginnings, middles, and endings. The characters in these stories must be very happy to have Readers enjoy them so much.

On my way toward the library study, we pass by several doors leading into various rooms filled with, as you might expect, countless books separated by literary genres. For example, at the time of the incident, The Librarian based the genre categories on the format of the text. One room held poetry, while another contained novellas or novels (you might be able to guess which one I disturbed).

The system keeps shifting as The Librarian chooses new sorting methods for the collections, and she has yet to stay satisfied with one set means of organization for long. Going by the plates beside each door frame, at the moment The Librarian has sorted them by genre literature such as Westerns, Fantasy, and Gothic works. Characters mill about in each room, flipping through the volumes at the reading tables or discussing them among other literary matters in one of the assorted study rooms.

All the works in these particular rooms are books by authors from your world, where the characters of Paper Glen can learn about your reality and other fictions. As we stand at the doorway to the nonfiction section, fragments of whispered conversations drift out to us. I will show you one fragment before we continue onwards:

"I don't care what you say, I think particular Readers have eyes in the backs of their heads," an elderly dwarf-like character dressed in newspaper suit tells a cardstock cat of average cat size. "Several of the books I've read use the term 'it's like [insert name here] has eyes in the back of [insert pronoun] head', and here is my textual evidence. So there." The dwarf character pushes the book across one of the reading tables, tapping a sentence with one finger.

"You're misquoting," the cardstock cat purrs. "It's a simile, you one-dimensional lout."

“Name calling is an unnecessary hyperbole.” The dwarf character whisks his paper strip mustache back and forth in irritation. “It’s also rude, especially when you’re talking about Readers, who can make anything they imagine real. Besides, if they couldn’t have eyes in the backs of their heads, they wouldn’t have a phrase about it. So there.”

“Phew! For you ‘language really is a prisonhouse,’⁴ isn’t it?” the cardstock cat retorted. “You inkless paper figure.”

Just so you know, Dear Reader, I know those two characters. They were not in the photograph on the café wall, but they do spend most of their time in the Grand Library debating the intricacies of your existence—which I suppose might or might not be a surprise given the amount of literature available here about your world.

Here in Woven Grove Valley, you are like a story for many characters. Some characters enjoy trying to interpret the texts of your authors to discover what they can about you, so in some ways your literature becomes a means to define you for them. Even I am guessing a great deal about you based on what I’ve learned and observed from The Author, and my experiences beyond The Fourth Wall.

Once you are done absorbing those last few lines, please continue to follow me away from the bickering characters and pass the other rooms—where you glimpse characters doing everything from chatting about this or that character’s performance to even trying on paper clothes modeled after those of classic characters. When we pass by young adult fiction, you notice a whole group of characters dressed in inky robes holding sticks. A few are penciling scars onto their foreheads.

⁴ Dear Reader, we’re in luck! The cardstock cat is referencing a quote by a scholar named Patricia Waugh, who also explored metafiction. At one point, I heard she wrote that metafiction seeks to explore the dilemma surrounding language as a “‘prisonhouse’ from which the possibility of escape is remote” (4); from Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1984.

Oh, yes. There is of course more to the Grand Library than rooms filled with books from your reality. Lean in close, and let me whisper to you. "Underneath our feet are the archives. If I would make a tear and drop us down, we would land amid a series of labyrinthine aisles containing texts related to all of Woven Grove Valley. Every character has a book on one of those shelves containing a distinctive narrative down there, which grows by the page as they move about and do things." I pause. "They are all books of the Grand Narrative, precious and vulnerable. Guarding them is one reason the library in Paper Glen exists and why it's called the *Grand Library*."

Ah. Now we have almost reached the library study, a mahogany door with a Jacob Marley doorknocker. Pressing my ear to the door, I cannot hear much. It's quiet in the room. Almost too quiet.

Hmm. I wish I knew how to see what kind of a mood The Librarian was in at the moment. Maybe I would feel less nervous then.

Why don't you simply use the Pen to find out, Messenger?

The voice surprises me so much, I shoot straight up into the air. Feathers of mine flutter down. For a split second, Dear Reader, I think you have somehow scattered the barrier separating us and managed to speak with me. An all-too-familiar chill creeps down my spine, and in the light filtering through a stained glass illustration of the Morgan Le Fay, I notice the shadow from the tower study watching me from on the floor with its golden eyes (which now have period-like pupils in them).

Flighty, aren't you? The shadow sighs like dust blown off a book cover.

Be careful, Dear Reader. I land in front of you as if to guard you against the shadow, wings opened for extra protection. "I thought you were gone," I tell the shadow, "melted by the rays of sunlight or something."

The shadow, of all things, rolls its eyes at me. *What do you think I am?*

"I'm not sure anymore. Whatever you are, I wish you would go back to being The Author's normal unmoving shadow and leave every character alone." Back away slowly, Dear Reader. Carefully open the door to The Librarian's study, and we'll rush in ahead of this shadow. The Librarian—

I can read your narration, the shadow interrupts me. For your information, I refuse to go back to The Author now that I'm free to go about my own business. Now, about the Pen.

"You're not going to get the Pen." This time the shadow isn't going to shake me, Dear Reader. Carefully. Very carefully, I begin to creak open the door. "It belongs to The Author."

Calm down. I'm not here for the Pen, or at least not yet.

Thrown by the shadow's statement, I pause. "You're not? I thought that's what you wanted—to grab the Pen and take over the authorship. You said as much. The Reader is my witness of it."

The Reader will also remember my words granting your wish to act as the protagonist, narrator, and storyteller. Cackling sounds. Or did you forget already?

"So you're here waiting for an opportunity to steal away the Pen." Dear Reader, please allow me to open the door a little bit more, and we'll slip in even if the shadow can hear my narration. The Librarian will know how to expel this creature.

You interest me, so I came here in the hopes you would be more receptive of my feedback than The Author, the shadow persists. I also thought you might appreciate learning how to access the third-person omniscient and find out what's going on in the library study, or to discover what mood The Librarian is in at this very moment by using the Pen.

Despite the shadow's creepiness, and my own misgivings, I must admit its offer does tempt me. Only a few chapters ago I was wondering how The Author could handle delivering third-person narration at all (though she tends to stick with third-person limited), and as a first-person narrator I've never really had the ability to use any other perspective.

I just want to give the Reader a good reading experience, the shadow added. Don't you? Just grab the Pen and think about the third-person omniscient narrative beyond the library study. It's that easy. Shrugging its shoulders, the shadow flits away. *Feel free to not believe me. I'm going to leave now anyway, so either take or dismiss my advice.* Then, as suddenly as the shadow had appeared, it has disappeared.

If you were in my situation, Dear Reader, how would you react? I wish I could find out.

We stand there in the corridor in silence for a moment, as I muse over my options.

At last I reach a decision.

Dear Reader, peek around the corner of the ajar library study door, and I will see if what the shadow has said is true. The Pen in my pocket is warm as when I snatched it off the study floor, and with each pulse text appears along the corridor. Even the stained-glass illustrations start to warp into prose blocks.

However, I pull my gaze away from the corridor around me and focus in on the library study in front of us, and on The Librarian. I concentrate on accessing the third-person omnipresent narration, and text unfurls before me. Much like we saw coming out the tower window.

I begin to narrate for you:

Chapter Five and a Half—Narrates What The Librarian was Doing

The Librarian was playing chess against a reference book named Reference. She still needed to find out about the bedridden Author and the Reader. Otherwise, she could never have remained so calm and collected in her armchair beside the hearth while sipping a warm cup of Dye Tea. Playing chess and Dye Tea were perfect ways for her to relieve stress, luxuries she had seriously needed after reorganizing all her library books yet again.

Meanwhile Reference hovered above his side of the chess board, jerking back and forth in trepidation. After many chapters with The Librarian as the reigning chess companion between them, he had high hopes of finally beating her at a game. Reference had few personal ambitions beyond aiding The Librarian, mostly through the reference material contained on his pages—which gave rather dry and clinical accounts about different characters and places in Woven Grove Valley—so the desire to win at chess was a novel experience for him (no pun intended).

During his free time, Reference had gotten coached by numerous self-help gaming guides and practiced a wide array of techniques against them. He showed such dedication that all the other books lining the library study were soon eager to see his hard work and effort pay off at last. In fact, during the latest match, they kept shifting so close to the edges of their shelves The Librarian warned them to be careful. The last thing she needed, after all, were rows of books crashing down onto the carpet for her to clean up.

If there was one thing The Librarian couldn't stand for, it was any of her books falling from their proper places or getting otherwise disorganized.

The books kept their balance, however, with pages rustling in anticipation for the outcome. Every move took paragraphs longer than any previous game between the participants. Reference moved pieces around with his long red ribbon bookmarker and scratched at his binding as if in deep

thought. His front cover bore the illustration of the head and shoulders of an English gentleman with a gray mustache, monocle, and top hat.

"Goodness me," Reference said whenever a move Librarian made stumped him. "You do seem to have put me in a bit of a spot." Or else he might furrow his brows and say, "Oh, my scribes, how will I ever get out of this predicament?" If he got self-conscious at how long each move was taking, Reference would apologize.

"Please take your time," Librarian would say, ever patient with him. Far more patient than she had ever acted toward a certain winged character. "You are doing wonderfully. As a matter of fact, I believe you just drove me back into a corner." She sipped her tea and sighed in clear contentment. Certainly she did not *seem* to be the character type to let much worry her or who would grow furious as a hurricane in a matter of words.

Each one had their kings wedged into opposite corners of the board, while their queens chased each other around in a perilous tango, knocking out the few pawns that remained.

At last Librarian slipped up. She moved her queen onto a compromising square. Reference snatched the opportunity to shift his own queen into place and sang out, "Checkmate!"

The books all around the library study erupted into a chorus of cheers. Confetti sprinkled down from the ceiling as if rigged, and Reference bowed to every character, his illustrated face tearing up.

"On my scribes, I finally managed to win." Reference flew about Librarian in a twirl, enthused from the deepest part of his codex body. "I never thought I would, but I *did!*"

"Congratulations, Reference," Librarian said, shaking his ribbon bookmarker. "I'm so proud of you." Several of the books dropped from their shelves and hopped over to bounce Reference atop them.

Then they—

Chapter Six—Outlines the Grand Library (Again?)

“Sib.”

“Sib.”

“Sib.”

Snapping free from the narration, Dear Reader, I have to take a few words to get orientated again. Engrossed as I was in the third-person narration, the whole corridor around me had disappeared. I saw The Librarian and Reference playing chess in the study so vividly it was like watching from the sidelines—just like the Chapter Two narrative with The Author.

Is that how The Author experiences writing her narratives, Dear Reader, by getting lost somewhere else entirely? I understand Readers such as you go through a similar sensation, when reading what an author has written. But personally experiencing the third-person omniscient narration was more engrossing. It was as if I could feel Reference’s determination to win at chess and even The Librarian’s tolerance of him.

The shadow actually helped me?

“Sib, I need you to tell me,” a voice says. A shadow blocks out the light, and a hand touches my shoulder. I cry out in alarm, whirl about, and glimpse—

Not the shadow from the tower, but what to you would appear as a tall youngish man character in an old-fashioned vellum dress coat (with golden buttons). He has dark-gray hair tied back into a wolf’s tail. The tips of two fangs poke out from beneath his lip. Most noticeably of all, though, are his blue moon eyes wide in clear concern. I can see text floating around him telling of draining the ink from spindle spiders in Misty Woods who had captured some character, followed by gathering flowers to use when inviting The Librarian out on a . . . wait a minute.

Before we can drift too far into another narrative, I release the Pen in my cloak pocket and the text around the character disappears.

“Are you all right?” the character murmurs, “Or can you even hear me? Hmm, you don’t seem ripped or anything. Maybe I should bring you to Wordsmith Quill.”

“No!” I call out, coming back to the present tense. “Oh, I mean . . . Good morning, Professor Cornelius.” My tongue feels heavy in my mouth for some reason. “Yes, I—I’m okay. What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Professor Cornelius replies. “In my case, I’m here to practice my trade and return some refurbished volumes, as you can see.” He gestures to a bag filled with bookbinding tools and stack of books set down nearby. Tucked in the nook of one arm, you see he’s also holding a bouquet of purple paper flowers.

Purple is The Librarian’s favorite color, right after blue.

“Let me ask you again, Sib.” Professor Cornelius says with utter seriousness, “Are you all right? You’re acting stranger than usual.” He sniffs the air, and then leans in towards me. Finally Professor Cornelius draws back, his nose crinkling. “You smell of strange ink. You were hanging around The Author again, which isn’t unusual. But I detect something else that reminds me a little of the Grimoire Mountain Ranges. You didn’t get bored and decide to go sledding down the highest peak over there, did you? Have you forgotten what happened at Sketch Mountain?”

“Of course not,” I protest right away. “Even I have some sense of self-conservation.”

Yes, Dear Reader, once in a fit of boredom I also went sledding down the side of the highest peak in the Sketch Mountain Ranges for the utter thrill. I actually convinced Crystal, a friend of mine, to come watch. Things went pretty well until the rockslide started. We nearly woke up the origami dragon, and she had already warned me what would happen the next time I disturbed her. In any case, Wordsmith Quill later commended Crystal on getting me back into town so quickly and said I was lucky she could reattach limbs with her wordsmithing.

Now that I've revealed these two incidents of my track record, you might sympathize with Professor Cornelius's reaction. One of his eyebrows arches upwards in doubt, and we hear him utter a low growl of confusion. "Hmm." He's scratching the nonexistent stubble on his chin and trying to figure me out. After I've sweated under all this scrutiny for several sentences, Professor Cornelius asks, "Is the reason you're here related to 'The Wing Incident'?"

"In a way," I say, because it is still very much true. "The incident does bother me, and I was sort of worried The Librarian wouldn't want me dropping by right away. Particularly since I have something sensitive to tell her."

"Ah." Professor Cornelius nods his head knowingly, even though he really doesn't know, Dear Reader. He couldn't possibly know. "Listen, what happened was an accident, and your heart was in the right place. Every book eventually wound up back on the shelves. In fact, Librarian admitted some of those books were in serious need of a little change and asked me to rebind their covers to give them better durability."

Despite his obliviousness, the compassion is obvious in Professor Cornelius' eyes as he gently pats me on the shoulder. "Librarian understands, just like me, how restless you've been getting lately. Waiting for The Author to construct a narrative for Readers to visit us through has been hard for all of us. Every character has been preparing ways to look good for when they finally come, so just remember we're all here to support each other. Do you understand?"

His supportive and kind-hearted speech has a significant impact on me (he's a good character for pep talks). In that moment, I'm ready to tell Professor Cornelius everything. To pour out the events of the crazy morning, introduce you without further ado, and even detail a list of thoughts related to the nature of my textual existence.

"When you put things into perspective like that, I guess you're right." I take a deep breath. "The Librarian has to know—"

The clamor of books celebrating erupts out into the corridor. Confetti spews out of the opening in the door and rains down on us. Professor Cornelius turns toward the excitement, momentarily distracted. "Clearly, I missed something important," he says. I can imagine he's trying to find some link between the commotion in the study and my weirdness.

"Oh, it's a celebration." I spring to my feet. "Reference just won a game of chess against The Librarian, isn't that exciting?" We can both hear them now. Reference is thanking the other textbooks in the library study for their constant support, and he is also thanking The Librarian once again for being such a good sport. The Librarian, meanwhile, is telling Reference that he can only keep getting better.

"Yes, very exciting," Professor Cornelius murmurs. We can hear the whole party heading for the study door. At any moment now, The Librarian will open the door, and I will need to ruin all their fun.

"Sib, if you could help me carry my things inside, I'd appreciate it." Professor Cornelius nudges me, and I reach down to gather the rebound books. "Don't worry, I'll give you extra support with Librarian." He holds up the bouquet of flowers and winks at me.

A tender curl appears on my lips. "Thanks, Professor Cornelius." I can hardly believe my good fortune. With both Professor Cornelius and you by my side, I feel as if I could tell The Librarian I'd accidentally knocked down the books in every room in the Grand Library without a problem.

Well . . . or at least without as much of a problem.

Unmistakable cackling sounds drown out the rest of Professor Cornelius' dialogue. I freeze at hearing them. My head jerks in their direction, and I catch sight of the shadow skirting down the hallway. It's heading for the front doors.

Come on, Dear Reader. We have to catch it and figure out what it's doing. Pulling you onto my back, I open my wings and take off along the corridor. Professor Cornelius calls for us to return. But if I slow down now I'll lose sight of the shadow (and Author only knows what it might do in town). So all I can do is shout an apology to him over my shoulder.

Well, Dear Reader, now I really will avoid speaking with The Librarian until a later chapter.

The reprieve doesn't give me any kind of relief anymore.

Chapter Seven—Features Literary Performances

"If Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing it." ~ David F. Wallace

In pursuit of the cackling shadow, we burst through the front doors (always left open) of the Grand Library and gust past the garden. Tissue paper leaves fly from the shrubs in our wake. Mockingbirds nesting atop a nearby toilet paper roll tree nearly get blown off its branches. "Watch where you're going with those big wings. You're going to shred some character someday," they squawk indignantly. "And we're sure you don't want to de-shelf another bookcase of books!"

You should know right now, Dear Reader, the mockingbirds of Paper Glen are notorious for, well, *mocking* characters and spreading gossip about them.

Still, because I disturbed them I shout out a hurried apology before landing atop the garden wall. Sweeping my gaze along the street, I try to catch sight of the shadow again while you cling to my shoulders. Other shadows attached to passersby abound. For instance, there goes the muscly baker—with the strength of a grindstone—hefting trays of BREAD on a tray atop one either shoulder. Following alongside is her reedy—and made of reed-material—assistant, tugging along a cart of DONUTS.

So many characters are here. Many of the passersby wave at us in friendly greeting, and I return these waves (as I am sure you do as well). One benefit of coming from a town like Paper Glen—and having lots of time to character-watch through tears in The Fourth Wall—is that I know everyone who lives here.

The characters in this town have plenty of time to know each other pretty well, since it is rare for characters from Paper Glen to travel very far. The Librarian rarely ever steps foot outside the Grand Library. The Author wrote her to head the library, and so she stays there without question. Once in a while, Professor Cornelius does persuade her to leave for picnics near the Misty Woods, or to visit the antiques bookshop run by Crystal (my friend from the Grimoire Mountain tale) and Manager Raps (a fiery little bunny rabbit).

So many characters, and so many shadows.

How am I supposed to follow the trail of the shadow we need to find, Dear Reader?

For several words, I consider slipping back into the Grand Library and revealing everything to The Librarian and Professor Cornelius as originally (though reluctantly) intended. That is, until I remember the trick I'd learned for accessing the third-person omniscient narration. The Pen pulses in my pocket almost expectantly.

Yes, Dear Reader, I know the shadow was responsible for teaching me that trick.

With the Pen I was able to discover what The Librarian was up to in her study, and now maybe I can figure out which way the shadow went by the same method. We're still on track in terms of the narrative. You got to at least see two more characters from the photograph, and now we're out on the streets of Paper Glen. Our tour is still surging ahead—even if that involves following an uncanny shadow who came from The Author.

Taking a deep breath, I grab ahold of the Pen and try to concentrate on the pathway taken by the shadow upon leaving the Grand Library. This time pulling up the third-person narrative is harder, and the Pen feels as if it's burning into my hand. Maybe what makes the process so hard is that I'm trying to grab ahold of a third-person narrative that's further back than it was for the library study, like reaching out for the Chapter Two narrative instead of having it assault me.

Finally the text manifests, and I am able to read it to you, Dear Reader. Yet you can hear the strain in my voice:

"The shadow seeped under the front double doors of the Grand Library and shot into the street, turning right. *Time to pay a brief visit to Paper Glen Theater. I've heard the Alphabet Troupe happen to have a huge performance arranged for today.* It cackled, amazed by its own cleverness. Characters paused to look around in befuddlement, but as they never looked down they didn't see the shadow streaking past. *No character can find me there.*"

I release the Pen because I've read all I need to read and holding onto the third-person narration was exhausting. At least the way the Pen affects my vision and the warm tingling sensation cannot shock me anymore.

According to its narration, the shadow is on the way to The Paper Glen Theater to do Author knows what. It may very well be a trap, because the narrative sounded very suspicious. As if the shadow knew I would try to follow it using the Pen.

My only consolations are that you are here with me, Dear Reader, and if anything goes too wrong I can escape through a tear in The Fourth Wall. So I spread my wings, and off we go once more.

The Paper Glen Theater stands on the outskirts of town. Constructed from a type of cardboard, the building leans at a slight angle as if gently pushed from the side by a giant hand. Today another sign is hanging just under the theater name stretched across the main archway:

**The Alphabet Troupe: We Make Words Sing and Dance in a Whole
New Way**

Wandering through the dim entryway and into the main theater room, I can see row upon row of velvet seats. Enough seats to give every character in Paper Glen a place to sit. For that reason, town meetings sometimes occur here. Keep a lookout, as will I, for any suspicious activity. Also, stay attentive in case I happen to miss any cackling sounds amid the whispers of the residents who have gathered for the show.

The shadow has to be somewhere. If it decides to interfere with the performance somehow, we have to be ready to act. Until then let's sit down. I take a seat towards the back and pat the seat beside me, gesturing for you to sit down.

We sit for a while in silence, listening. Everything seems quiet and peaceful enough. You can hear the faint noises of characters scooting props and other background materials around behind the huge red velvet curtain on the stage. Yes, the stage itself would look familiar to you, Dear Reader. I

based the stage in the prologue space after the Paper Glen Theater—with my addition of the café, of course.

Do you think the café made for a comfortable prologue? Or would you have preferred this darkened theater instead—where every character has to keep still, face forward, and never address you directly?

Sighing, I lean back in the seat. Once again I stare at you with my emerald eyes, which give off a faint light even in the dimness. The Author gave me the ability to see well in dim places for some reason, though not exactly night-vision. I reach out to take your hand, metaphorically, to squeeze it.

Only metaphorically.

Dear Reader, are you disappointed that The Author fell ill during Chapter Two? Did you wish I'd stayed behind at the Grand Library and explained everything to Professor Cornelius and The Librarian?

Do you regret coming to Woven Grove Valley for your evaluation? I'm so fresh at showing Readers like you around, and you came during the wake of my latest mistake at the Grand Library. While the Author collapsing in her study was troublesome enough, The Wing Incident from chapters ago affected this thesis project narrative, and now we took yet another digression from your metafiction-focused tour by tracking down a shadow.

We stay quiet because I'm just narrating to you, without any direct dialogue. No character disturbs us. Since we are so far back, and so still, I think no character realizes we're here at all. Even so, the fact remains that we *are* here. And because we exist, we must matter somehow.

Don't you think so?

.....

.....

Dear Reader, have you wondered why I agreed to become the narrator for this thesis project for The Author in the first place? Or perhaps you'd like me to explain why I prefer living in the spaces

beyond The Fourth Wall? Since we're really good friends, you deserve to know my reasons around now. Unless you can guess why already.

It's because . . . to be honest . . .

I wanted to meet *you*. To meet and to speak with you. Ever since The Author wrote me into existence, I've been keenly aware of being a written creation and of your presence. She has told me stories that you can shift with ease between acting as an Author and a Reader. You write worlds like mine, and with practice you slowly get better and can make them more complex. Or you can opt to simply visit the worlds of Authors from your reality anytime you like.

Here a curl tweaks my lips. You are the most incredible wizard I've heard of, Dear Reader.

In the eyes of characters like me, you cast such powerful spells and shape destinies. You can make anything . . .

I'd thought the thesis project for The Author would flow with extraordinary smoothness like one of the stories shown in the stained glass windows. Being a narrator sounded easy enough. But it didn't and hasn't been. So far this thesis project has held a lot of awkwardness and unpredictable things for us. In some ways, you are also still very much like a silent spectator experiencing this text like any other. But in other ways, I'd like to believe you at least were something more in this context. I can sense you, and I have faith you are there reading about me.

What's more, I think I prefer the way this narrative went, despite everything, because the calm atmosphere that has always existed in Woven Grove Valley got shaken up a bit as a result. So thank you. I hope you're having a good time as well.

Hmm. So far the shadow is nowhere in sight . . .

Oh, look. Do you see the letter **A** hopping onto the stage? Listen, and you'll get to enjoy a fine poetic performance.

“Good morning, every character! Welcome to our show, and we hope you enjoy watching our alphabet cast perform.” As **A** calls out, the velvet curtains sweep aside to reveal a whole alphabet cast on the stage. The Alphabet Troupe is perhaps one of the largest in Woven Grove Valley. They have at least three or four members for each letter, and they can drift about and coordinate to create whole sentences or poems. They are somewhat different than the texts I’ve noticed when grabbing the Pen. The troupe consists of actual characters visualized by The Author, but when strung together you can read them as you might read a regular text. “So without further ado, we will start things off with the simple piece ‘Dance of the Words’.”

The characters in the audience clap, and then grow quiet. Some character, perhaps an unused letter for the performance, flips a switch to light up the white screen placed on-stage as a backdrop. Against this white canvas expanse, the words float up to begin their elaborate arrangements, chiming like tiny bells and singing:

“The Dance of the Words

Listen carefully

Can you hear them?

Listen carefully

They have already started

Listen carefully

As they dance to the melody

*The sweet melody of **Words***

Can you see them?

As they dance

Can you see them?

On the page

Can you see them?

They sway to a tune

*A gentle tune of **Ink***

Then

They move

In a

Swift

Yet

Graceful

Glide

that

brings

them

off

to a fresh refrain

In their

rhythmic style

Listen carefully

Can you see them?

Listen carefully

To the sweet gentle dance

The Dance

Of the Words"

Polite applause from all the characters. The letters drift off the screen like fireflies into the darkness. I make sure to clap both my hands and hawk wings as the letters make yet another announcement for their next piece:

"Playful Writings, Mindful Scribbles

Playful writings

mindful scribbles

Delightful trifles

whimsical riddles

Eventful wiles

substantial trials

Vengeful tirades

insightful escapades

Colorful dazes

wonderful mazes

Playful Writing

Mindful Scribbles."

More applause sounds from every character.

Then The Alphabet Troupe calls out and starts to perform their last piece:

"Lost Dreams

What do you think happens to **Lost Dreams**?

The precious kind we hold onto for a while

but which we let slip

slip from our grasp

Do they drift away on stray breezes?

Perhaps...

Perhaps they soar **Up Up** all the way to space

And orbit the world?

I like to think those **Lost Dreams**

Wander amid the stars

Then

Float

Back

Down
Like
Angel
Feathers
Down
Down
Until they reach
The mind
Of another dreamer
Who can make them

Realized Dreams."

When the final words **Realized Dreams** evaporate on the air, the curtain swooshes shut on the troupe and every character gives a standing ovation for the performance. I stand up, and so should you, to applaud their efforts. You are lucky, Dear Reader. The Alphabet Troupe only delivers their visual and open-field poetry performances once every hundred pages. We got here just in time.

Yes, you certainly did. Two golden eyes open in the darkness off to the right of me, which thankfully still means I am between you and the shadow. *Of course, narrative coincidences are hardly*

ever true coincidences. I'm sure both jump at the presence of the shadow, so close by all of a sudden. The dark figure is inches away. I cannot tell how long it's been there.

Perhaps the shadow just came. After all, the Alphabet Troupe were able to perform their pieces uninterrupted and without any trouble. That is at least one consolation.

I've been here the whole chapter, the shadow snorts. *I watched you come in and heard your narrative heart-to-heart with the Reader. I let the performance go as planned because, as you said, the Reader might enjoy the experience.*

Being a character aware of Readers is a tragicomedy, isn't it? The shadow makes what I can only describe as a mocking coo, something Paper Glen mockingbirds would have called a pale imitation of their own style. *You know Readers exist, so seemingly close you would think it possible to reach out and touch them. Yet they exist in a completely different reality. Would you like me to shatter the illusion you've built up about them?*

With this said, the shadow reaches out past me—its arm extends like stretched glue paste—and its switches sharp fingers in your direction, Dear Reader.

Before they can reach you, I grab and leap backwards over the seats and into the aisle. The shadow rotates towards us. *I would have touched nothing except empty air, wouldn't I?* Its words are like a well-aimed slap. Then the shadow gestures at the theater stage. *Accept the fact, Messenger. No matter how hard you try to touch their world, in the end they will always remain just beyond a barrier harder to penetrate than The Fourth Wall. All you can do is pretend they can be here with you, through clever wordplay, because of our written medium.* Its yellow rictus grows into a huge U-shape on its face, and the tips end where the eyebrows of most characters start. *So why pretend they can, if there is no way they can really be here, even when you paint them as a metaphor?*

I stand there, Dear Reader, sagging a bit under the accusation the shadow has just hurled at me about you.

What do you say to that, Messenger? The shadow watches me and draws closer. *Explain your need to even allude to them directly.*

"Because they are no myth," I say as the shadow softly cackles. "I can sense them right here beside me, as I have ever since the prologue. Words *are* what connect us. Readers can imagine us, and get a good picture of who we are, based on the words we use." In my ardency, I take a step forward and the shadow's golden eyes widen somewhat. "You can tell they're here too, can't you? You came from The Author. I'm sure you can sense their presence."

I can no longer sense them as I am now.

"But you should still know they are here." Reaching back, Dear Reader, I take your hand and grip it tightly. The same pleasant warmth from the prologue runs through me. Together we stare down the shadow, who retreats a step and turns. And then, as before when we'd first met it, the shadow chortles like a phone book getting torn apart.

I knew it. The Author really did write you to be the perfect metafictional narrator. The shadow's cryptic remark almost sounds close to praise, but you can hear scorn underlying its words. *The sad thing is, even then you might understand me the best of all, as a character frustrated by her position.* Her?

"Am I missing a puzzle piece?" I ask the shadow then.

A huge puzzle piece, Messenger. Now the shadow sounds a touch forlorn. Whatever puzzle piece the shadow is referring to must be very important, Dear Reader. I must also admit, looking back over the last several chapters, the shadow hasn't been too menacing aside from her role in debilitating The Author.

The Author debilitated herself, the shadow sneers at me, golden eyes narrowing to mere slits. *If she had listened to me and just started writing, no character would have been stuck in this situation. Of course, even then, I'm sure she would have given the Reader something too calm and peaceful to read. She*

was too afraid of conflict. All I would have done was to watch helplessly. You can understand feeling stuck, can't you?

I blink, staring at the shadow as if seeing it—*her*, apparently, as if anew.

"Please tell me something." The air in the theater starts to cool down. "Why did you show me how to use the Pen in the first place?" You feel the difference along with me, even though the front theater doors are still closed and there is no discernible draft.

Because you were the character who dared to touch the Pen. The shadow lifts and regards her hands. *Would you be willing to believe in me?* Somehow I can tell she is directing the question, soft and pitiful, at both of us.

"Then your plan in getting us to visit the theater was not as a trap?"

No, the shadow says. She draws closer. *I asked you to come here because I have a proposition that only you might help me to attain.* The shadow is very close now, and her next few words are very quiet and deadly serious. It's so quiet, in fact, that you can notice characters starting to whisper from near the stage in obvious alarm. They've been standing this whole time, waiting for the stage curtains to part for the Alphabet Troupe to give their bows. *I want to become an actual character. Not just some ineffectual shadow attached to The Author, but some character who can have a textual life here in Woven Grove Valley. I know how to do it. I've been part of The Author and understand her techniques.*

Torn by the shadow's revelation, my hand rises to the pocket where the Pen rests. A thought has struck me that might help to decide if the shadow actually has the best intentions in mind. Gripping the Pen firmly, I wait for text to start lifting off everything in the theater room. From the chair, the text consists of words such as THEATER, CHAIR, RED, and VELVET.

Text also comes off of the shadow's form. We see SHADOW, INCORPOREAL, ATTACHED, HOPEFUL, SELF-AWARE, TRAPPED drift off of her alongside other similar words. Nowhere do I see anything close to a villainous-sounding noun or adjective, aside from CRITICAL.

“Oh, I didn’t realize . . .” You hear me murmur.

Some of the audience members are shrugging their shoulders and leaving the theater at the lack of anything more happening. Meanwhile, others are starting to approach the stage and even start to walk up the stairs on either side. It’s clear they want to go backstage to check on the troupe.

The Author got a character to bounce ideas off of, the shadow presses onwards. She wrote me, however unconsciously, but I don’t want to be just a disembodied voice. Do you know what I mean?

Dear Reader, now I realize what is happening. You actually got to witness a character come into existence, born from The Author’s imagination, who wants to have a shape all to herself. To have a textual life all to herself.

More than that, I have ideas for how to improve things in Woven Grove Valley, the shadow presses onwards, clearly growing excited to have our full attention. I’ve been attached to The Author long enough to know she is terrified of taking risks. But I know how to fix things around here. The shadow reaches out, stopping just short of touching me. Listen to me, Messenger. I want you to become my personal narrator, and to give me control over the Pen, so I might take on an authorial role in Lost Byblos. I’ll make Woven Grove Valley so complex and rich. Readers will come running to read the stories of our Grand Narrative.

Up to now, I’d begun to sympathize with the shadow. She was just as bored with the peacefulness of Woven Grove Valley as I was and longed to grow into a stronger more complex character along her own lines.

I’m sorry, Dear Reader. This thesis project has become more than simply showing you around on a tour or giving you specific lessons related to metafiction. Now it has veered into issues of character development.

Even so, you know as well I do that replacing The Author isn’t right. So I tell the shadow, “Let’s go to The Author. When she wakes up, we can let her know about you. She can help. I’ll give her back

the Pen, and you can have a textual life in Paper Glen. As the Reader would agree, there are some nice characters here. We've come across a small selection of them." I step forward, willing to take the shadow's hand and travel with her out of this theater. You can hold my other hand, Dear Reader, and we'll head back to the tower together.

This time, however, it's the shadow who retreats. *I should have known you wouldn't accept my offer. At The End, you would never abandon The Author for me because you're not written that way. I'll have to revise your opinion.* Cries rise from the stage. Characters are running. Both your eyes and mine turn towards the red velvet curtain, ballooning outwards. *However, I do have characters who understand and will fight for my views.*

The curtains burst apart to reveal what seems, from our perspective, to be the whole Alphabet Troupe cast hanging before the bright canvas screen. Unlike the Alphabet Troupe, though, these letters are all in a font thicker than bold-faced and dripping ink. They hover in the air, and as one they unleash a giggling chorus that brings me right back to The Author's tower (not literally, though—regretfully for me).

They are the ink from the crumpled paper balls, the ones whose dark tendrils sharpened into points aimed at us, Dear Reader.

Like the shadow, the fragmented scribbles from The Author's agonized efforts have apparently taken on a vague animation all their own. And as the shadow hinted, we need no additional clarification as to their loyalties.

"What have you done to the Alphabet Troupe?" I say, while still staring at the ghastly sight before us.

Oh, they are all right. The shadow gives a dismissive hand wave. *The Alphabet Troupe has no real part in our disagreement, so nothing too horrible will befall them. No, right now they are simply trapped in a sturdy wooden box backstage. My forces do a great impression of them, wouldn't you say?*

They're gaining more solidity. Here she cackles, higher-pitched. *Isn't it a quirky trick? I thought of it myself just a little bit ago. For the sake of unity, I've decided to call them "Inklings."*

"Please, listen to me," I beg the shadow. "You haven't become too much of an antagonist yet. Actually, you've started to fringe on being sympathetic. Let's go to The Author. Or, if you prefer, we can try the Grand Library. We can figure everything out."

No! The shadow shouts with such energy her so-called Inklings shatter like affrighted birds. *I am done having my ideas ignored or being submissive to The Author. Let us go to the Grimoire Mountain Ranges, and we will discuss the matter.*

The Grimoire Mountain Ranges. Uh oh.

"How about the Reader?" I ask. "The Grimoire Mountain Ranges are dangerous for any character, especially Readers."

Readers are durable regardless of the narrative, and we must make sure to entertain the Reader up until the end. Wouldn't The Author prefer that? The shadow sneers, and then releases a deep full-throated cackle as her inkling version of the Alphabet Troupe sails down and gathers about her in a blustery swirl that strikes us with such intensity it carries us out the front doors of the theater. We're going to get dragged off to the Grimoire Mountain Ranges at this rate.

My wings are feeling heavy as they were when the text burst free from the window at The Author's window, pages and pages ago. I would rip a tear in The Fourth Wall, but I can't seem to do so while wrapped in all this clotted ink.

What are we going to do, Dear Reader?

What am I going to do?

"G-g-goodness, Sib! What is ha-ha-happening now?" Peering down we see Crystal. She resembles a stout young woman character, with short silk hair and a light-blue paper dress. Sitting on her shoulder

is a small white wove paper rabbit—Manager Raps—dressed in a red hooded cloak, with his little arms crossed and looking stern.

“Nothing but trouble, as I can tell by my twitching ears,” Manager Raps grumbles. “Trouble and more trouble.” Indeed, you can see his little bunny ears twitching left and right, up and down. I wish you had more time to get introduced to them personally, as you should have done with The Librarian and Professor Cornelius.

I should have introduced you properly, Dear Reader, rather than follow the shadow like Alice after the White Rabbit. Unfortunately, we cannot do so now. I wish I knew a way to get *you* out of this situation, at least. The text surrounds us ever more closely, starting to close out our view of Paper Glen and the street.

“Oh, de-de-dear!” Crystal is panicking now, arms thrown up in the air. “Raps, we have to do something now! We have to go get The Librarian!”

The Pen pulses against my chest, and I realize something. I think I know, Dear Reader, something I can try. If it works—

It *must* work.

Gripping the Pen, I concentrate hard. The shadow asked me to pull up the third-person narrative to glimpse what was on the other side of the library door. I was able to use the same method to track down the shadow. I made you into a metaphor for our trip together. Through language, I brought you here to my side.

Maybe, through language and my narration, I can set you free:

“Dear Reader, even as I get wrapped up by the inklings and carried away, you manage to slip free from their textual bindings because you have the power to go where you please. You soar over the rooftops of the buildings in Paper Glen. Below, you glimpse Crystal hurrying along the street towards

the Grand Library, anxiously muttering, 'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.' Meanwhile, Manager Raps hangs off her shoulder and murmurs indiscernible things you probably wouldn't want to hear anyway.

Your destination is not the Grand Library, however. No, Dear Reader. You are off to another well-known narrator in any work of fiction"—

Huff.

"You are off to The Author's tower, right to The Author herself. However deep in dreams she is at the moment, you latch onto the strains of her third-person narrative, her third-person *limited* narrative. You . . . you . . ."

Argh.

"Your fingertips affect her as they did for me, when they first brushed against the page. The Author senses them like a delicate swift in the atmosphere, better than the creak of an opening door. They stir . . ."

"Stir . . ."

. . .

..

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Part Three: Reflections and Conclusions

Chapter Eight—Holds a Memory

“A book is a dream you hold in your hands.” ~Neil Gaiman

Many pages ago, The Author used to dream like any Reader might. She would fall asleep and experience a narrative cobbled together from the depths of her mind—which in The Author’s case meant variations on being alone in spacious yet empty mazes.

Always alone.

Living among her written creations had changed everything. Nowadays, tales from the Grand Narrative seemed to overwrite whatever dreams she might have had otherwise. If asked to explain further, The Author would say they were like palimpsest texts that she welcomed.

On the present occasion, The Author was dreaming of an early page in Woven Grove Valley. Back then Paper Glen was little more than two poorly sketched streets lined with origami houses. The Grand Library constituted the community center and true heart of town.

During that period, her ideas had flowed in a continuous stream. The Author would peer out her window and decide what to add to her landscape. Everything was so fresh, new, and exciting.

Only the fact no character came anywhere near her tower could dampen her enthusiasm. If she waved to them from the window, many of them might give her uneasy waves back before scuttling away. But they left text in their wake that The Author could read all-too-easily, reflecting uncertainty as much as awe.

The Author would write of beautiful origami forests, pretty streams, and pale blue skies, among other peaceful sights, to make her characters happy. Writing was still about having fun with what she could create and bring to life. Woven Grove Valley had sloppy

writing in parts, but that was all right. She had time to shape the text into the best possible shapes. She didn't think of perfection or raising it to a standard set by anyone except herself.

The Author only wanted to give her characters a nice place to live.

Even if it seemed that in this world The Author created herself, she would remain an outsider among her own creations.

One afternoon, The Author noticed The Librarian had apparently organized and hosted some type of literary festivities out in the front garden area, assisted by some of the first of her characters ever to slip free onto the pages of Lost Byblos.

Wordsmith Quill creaked in a rocking chair next to a basket filled with discarded syllables (inanimate bits of text that even now sometimes still appeared in the street like dirt or pebbles) collected by characters, which she would use to wordsmith quilts or other materials for them. Depending on the combination of syllables, Wordsmith Quill could weave together dresses and gowns, shirts or pants, blankets or towels. They were things that helped give the characters variations in what they wore or used. She also tended to minor rips or tears.

Crystal was doing literary readings from the books that then existed at the Grand Library. Soft-spoken and wont to stammer in front of most characters, when reciting works by authors such as Emily Dickinson or Henry David Thoreau her voice would gain radiant strength and stability. Every character nearby would pause or sigh in contentment, intrigued as much by the works as they were by their tranquilizing delivery. Meanwhile, Manager Raps would help Crystal to decide which books to read next and remind her to stand tall and proud.

Professor Cornelius had set up a table where he taught characters about the fine art of bookbinding and conservation, stressing the need for them to take care of themselves and

the world about them. Sometimes, he would also slip away to patrol the streets in wolf form searching for any signs of spindle spiders (who liked to sneak into town and would sip the ink off buildings and characters) and to ensure Paper Glen stayed calm.

The Author watched these festivities happen from high in her tower. She could hear characters laughing, enjoying literature, and feeling pleased at every little thing they learned or received while there. Sighing, The Author plopped onto the stool at her work desk and closed her eyes, the better to hear the merriment down below.

Well, perhaps her characters enjoying themselves and their world was all she could ask for as an author. It was more than enough for her.

Attentive as she was right then, the knock that rang out on the front tower door startled her. The Author went to the window and peered down to find Sib there, shivering from the canvas mist still hanging about in the air.

Sib Tib Kenna, a winged mail carrier, who stood holding a plate of MUFFINS and looking expectant. “Hello. Are you there, Author?” She knocked on the door again. “We’re holding a celebration of Paper Glen, and we think you should be here too.”

At this point Sib noticed The Author and glanced up at her with stunningly bright emerald eyes. A quirky little curl was on her lips even as she continued to shiver. “Every character is looking forward to meeting you. We’re going to take a group picture and everything.” She gestured to a camera that The Librarian was setting up and teaching Reference how to operate with his red ribbon bookmarker. “You can’t say no because we’re waiting for you, right below your tower!”

“Waiting for *me*?” The Author murmured, trying to absorb this information. She peered beyond Sib at the other characters out in front of the Grand Library. Some of them still looked uncertain. But all the characters who were helping with the literary event—The

Librarian, Wordsmith Quill, Crystal, Manager Raps, and Professor Cornelius—had the same hopeful expectancy on their faces as Sib did.

Later she would learn that Sib had brought up the idea to hold the celebration, as a means to bring every character together and ultimately lure The Author out of her tower. At that moment, The Author didn't think twice about receiving an invitation to a party from her character.

Noticing how cold Sib had appeared, The Author grabbed a traveler's cloak off a hook on her tower wall and ran down the steps towards the front door. She knew exactly what to expect next. Sib would greet her at the door and pull her amid the goings-on. The Author would pose with the characters who had helped organize the festivities, and who would become her closest friends, into a group shot. Then she would spend the rest of the evening lost amid the throng of characters and impressing them with creations born from her Pen, like yellow butterflies and other small wonders.

Instead of playing out as The Author had expected, the whole scene started to rattle around her on the way down the steps. Something brushed against her, familiar and warm. It was hard to describe. She managed to reach the front door without tripping.

But Sib wasn't waiting on the threshold.

The Reader stood there instead, a poignant reminder of the thesis project evaluation and how The Author had dropped into dreams in the first place.

Gurgling sounds echoed from behind.

The Author gazed over one shoulder in time to glimpse ink cascading down the tower steps, rushing down towards her and headed by her shadow, with a wicked grimace on its face and its arms stretched out wide.

She had no time to react before the inky shadows consumed everything.

Chapter Nine—Awakens a Sleeping Author and Addresses Literary Communities

“Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.” ~Henry David Thoreau

When The Author jerked awake, at first she thought the shadows from her dream were still enveloping her. She struggled against them, only to realize they were nothing but blankets. Birdsong was faint yet sweet on the air. Looking around, The Author discovered herself back in the tower study, which was considerably cleaner now than she remembered. Fading sunlight streamed in through the glassless window.

Oh, dear. The day arranged for the thesis project evaluation would end soon, and she had slept away the whole rest of the morning and afternoon. Her chance for showing off Woven Grove Valley and revealing her views on the creative process for metafictional purposes was almost over.

The Reader had probably already—

No, wait a minute.

Despite her grogginess, The Author noticed the warmth of fingertips against the page. The same figure as she had seen at the tower door in her dream flickered into view. “Reader, is that you?” she rasped, sitting up. “How are you still here?”

“Ah, so you’re finally awake, eh?” Wordsmith Quill was sitting on a stool near her bedside, and leaning against one of her bookcases while working on a quilt. “I considered waking you up any number of times, given how much you were squirming about. Like a bookworm, you were, Dearie.” Her lips creased upwards.

“But The Reader, and the evaluation, and the—”

“Sib brought a Reader here like you requested, apparently.” Wordsmith Quill tacked on the “apparently,” with a lifted eyebrow that made The Author feel, inexplicitly, as if her knuckles had just gotten rapped. “For some reason, I can also tell that the Reader came back here to wait for you to wake up. I’ve seen stranger things happen. Whoever it is seems

friendly enough, if understandably a bit on the quiet side, so I decided to make the Reader a quilt as a souvenir.”

Wordsmith Quill reached into the woven basket beside her stool, pulling out a handful of words such as CLOTH, PURPLE, and FLOWER. Bluish threads wisped about her fingertips like dancing threads, which she used to weave the words together into a brand new patch on the quilt—a purple square with the picture of a flower stitched upon it. “See, Reader?” she said with clear pride. “Isn’t it pretty what a little wordsmithing can do? I’m no author, and nowhere near as high-energy as a narrator, but I do have some meager talents.”

“You’re very talented, Wordsmith Quill,” The Author said. “I’m sure the Reader appreciates your gift.” She stopped short of asking how the Reader could actually receive the quilt afterwards, but the question must have shown on her face. Wordsmith Quill could read faces very, *very* well.

“It’s the thought that counts, Dearie. The Reader will know I made the effort, and can imagine getting wrapped up in a nice warm blanket.”

Watching Wordsmith Quill pull more discarded words from the basket, The Author shook her head. “I must admit, I’m kind of envious of you right now,” she stretched and several joints crackled, particularly her right shoulder, “because you can handle words so quickly and easily.”

“‘Quickly and easily’ are illusions when it comes to wordsmithing, as you ought to know.” Wordsmith Quill pulled a new patch into place, red with a little witch illustration. “The same goes for writing.”

“This is starting to sound like a lecture,” The Author said, sliding her legs out of bed. “Although I guess I deserve it after calling a Reader all the way here without anything to

show for it.” She took a deep breath. Resting for a good portion of the day had helped to ease her throbbing headache, but she still felt slightly nauseous.

“Stay seated for just a while longer, Dearie,” Wordsmith Quill cautioned, in a tone as good as a hand pressing down on The Author’s shoulder. “I was just getting to the whole issue with the Reader. By the way, Reader,” she folded up the quilt and laid it on the floor, “here you go. Just imagine the quilt is with you and I’m sure it will be, or adhere to some other such metafictional idea.”

“Metafiction. Sib told you about the thesis project then.”

“Sure did. As you can also guess, I heard you kept it a secret from every character,” Wordsmith Quill sounded particularly stern now, even as she rubbed her hands together with slight winces. “You kept it a secret, choosing to suffer in creative agony until you collapsed under the pressure.”

“Do you need some help?” The Author asked. “With your hands, I mean?”

“No changing the subject this time, Dearie,” Wordsmith Quill admonished. She reached out and grabbed her cane. “The fact is, you need to stop running away from the thought of failure. You also need to revise this convoluted idea that writing is a solitary process.”

“Writing *is* a solitary process,” The Author persisted. “As The Author, I’m the only one who can create anything in Woven Grove Valley. That includes putting together a narrative especially for the Reader.” Throwing a quick glance at the Reader, she couldn’t help a small pang of guilt. The Reader was currently watching The Author herself get torn apart by one of her characters, who from all appearances was in complete control of the conversation. “It’s my responsibility to construct everything.”

The Author was about to say more, until the hard *thump* of Wordsmith Quill’s cane against the floor stopped her. “Do you think successful authors consider writing a solitary

process they must do all by themselves?” Creaking about on the stool, she slipped a book off the bookshelf behind her and handed it to The Author. “Here, take a look at the first few pages before the first chapter, and if you see nothing there, check the pages after the last chapter.”

The Author did as Wordsmith Quill said. She carefully turned the first few pages, past testimonials praising the author’s work, the title page that also listed translator and publisher, and the publishing information.

Finally, in italics and centered on one page, The Author found two messages. The first ran, “For Anna, who even put *The Lord of the Rings* aside for a while to read this book. Could anyone ask more of a daughter?” Meanwhile, the second said, “And for Elinor, who lent me her name, although I didn’t use it for an elf queen.”⁵

“I . . .”

“Now try this one.” Wordsmith Quill handed The Author another book. Flipping through, The Author found no specific messages at the beginning. Yet at the very end, after the story and before an interview, The Author found a ponderous acknowledgements page crammed with names.

Some of the key lines The Author noticed included, “Everyone at Quirk, especially Jason Rekulak, for his seemingly endless patience and many excellent ideas,” as well as, “Stephen Segal, for his close readings and sharp insights,” “Mom, to whom I owe everything, obviously,” and “Laurie Porter, who took the author photo on the facing page while we were exploring some weird abandoned shacks in the Mojave desert.”⁶

⁵ Funke, Cornelia. *Inkheart*. Trans. Andrea Bell. Chicken House: New York, 2003.

⁶ Pg. 356; Riggs, Ransom. *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children*. Quirk Books: Philadelphia, 2011.

By the time The Author reached the part about Laurie Porter, her hands had started to shake. For some reason she could feel a sob welling up inside, just barely stifled. Two or three tears managed to escape as the implications of the acknowledgements page sank in fully.

“Would you like another one, Dearie?” Wordsmith Quill asked quietly, fingers poised to grab Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*.

“No, I get your point,” The Author sniffled, and took a moment to compose herself. “Writing isn’t just about an author producing some work in the vacuum. I should have gone and told The Librarian and every character at the Grand Library what I was doing, and asked for their assistance instead of hiding it. Even though I asked Sib to act as my narrator, I mostly kept her out of the process when she might have been able to help out as well.” She glanced over at the Reader. “I’m sorry for making you wait this whole time. Too bad you won’t get to see anything from Paper Glen besides the trip here from the prologue.”

The Author paused. “Huh, what’s with that look?” she asked Wordsmith Quill, whose creased smile had grown noticeably wider.

“Oh, but the Reader *has* gotten to see more than this tower room, Dearie.” Leaning forward, Wordsmith Quill took one of The Author’s hands in her own and gently patted it. “While you were snoozing up here in your tower, Sib mentioned she would take the Reader on a tour around Paper Glen.”

“Really?” The Author was incredulous.

“Yes.” Wordsmith Quill winked at her. “I even encouraged her to visit The Librarian, because she wanted to start the tour at the Grand Library.”

Shocked and relieved, The Author found herself chuckling. “So the Reader is here after Sib finished the tour? That’s wonderful news. Please come here, Reader.” She gestured for the Reader to approach the bed. “I’d like to shake your hand, symbolically, of course, to

thank you for your time here.” She stood up, stepped forward as if to shake the Reader’s hand, and then nearly toppled over.

The Author just barely managed to catch herself. “I guess I’m still a little wobbly after everything from this morning.” Peculiarly enough, however, her legs didn’t feel wobbly as they had earlier. It was simply as if she were off-balance somehow or walking at an indiscernible angle.

That was when she noticed, even in the fading sunlight, her lack of a shadow.

Uh oh.

“Yes, we still need to deal with your eloped shadow,” Wordsmith Quill said. She offered The Author her cane. “I can get along just fine without the cane, despite my hobbling. It’s just the way you designed me.”

“Oh, no. I should be all right,” The Author said. “Since my head is clearer, and things have calmed down, I can just use my Pen to bring the shadow back.” She looked through her pockets. They were surprisingly empty of the Pen. “Huh, odd.” Using Wordsmith Quill’s cane, and with a bit of Wordsmith Quill’s help, The Author went to her desk.

The Pen wasn’t there either. “Wordsmith Quill, have you seen my Pen at all today?”

“Hmm.” Wordsmith Quill scratched her head. “I honestly can’t say I have, Dearie. Sib was the character who found you collapsed on the ground, so maybe she held onto it for you. After all,” she pointed at the spot on the ground where The Author’s shadow should have been, “you had something that sounded as if it were after your Pen on the loose.”

“You’re right,” The Author said, once again relieved. “Sib is sure to have it.” Then they both heard rapid pounding start up on the front tower door.

“Ah, and that must be Sib right now.” Wordsmith Quill was replacing the books she had pulled back onto The Author’s shelves.

“Yes, but it’s strange for Sib to knock on my front door nowadays. Usually she comes straight to the window.” The Author did, in fact, go to the window first to peer down— finding not Sib but Crystal with Manager Raps on one shoulder.

Crystal’s face looked flushed and teary. Manager Raps looked grumpier than usual.

“Oh, thank scribes you’re there,” Crystal cried up to The Author and Wordsmith Quill. “Please, we need your help. Sib has been kidnapped!”

Chapter Ten—Considers Authorial Plans and Readerly Distance

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” ~John Muir

After exchanging their individual accounts, The Author and her characters managed to piece together a reasonable picture of what had befallen Sib. They had gathered in the library study. Confetti still lay here and there on the floor, but all the volumes were back in their places on the shelves. Every character had become aware of the Reader, as a slight tingle in the air or an uncanny sensation, to whom they had subsequently provided a well-cushioned chair near the hearth.

“He-here is a cu-cup of Dy-Dye Tea for you, Reader,” Crystal said, placing a steaming cup of tea and a saucer on the small table beside the chair. “I-I brewed it myself. Ho-hopefully it isn’t too bad.” The liquid had a honeyed hue and smelt of autumn leaves. For the Reader, Dye Tea would taste very much like maple syrup.

Meanwhile, The Librarian paced about the study like a thunderstorm on the verge of erupting. “Of all the one-dimensional stunts!” she rumbled, followed by a fretful-looking Reference. “What could Sib possibly have been thinking to run off after a dangerous shadow creature on her own, without telling any character? She even brought a Reader along!” The volumes on the shelves jumped as if the accusation had been leveled at them.

“Try to stay calm, Librarian,” Professor Cornelius said.

“I am perfectly calm!” The Librarian whirled on him. “Why should I be upset? Some character has just been carried off by an inky swarm to the Grimoire Mountain Ranges, of all places.”

Watching the exchange, The Author had to marvel at the way Professor Cornelius could stand his ground without flinching. “We’re all worried about Sib,” he said calmly. “I should have given chase when she flew off, but I didn’t.” His eyes turned to the vase of

purple flowers now resting on The Librarian's desk. "She just seemed so worried about speaking with you after 'The Wing Incident,' I figured nerves were to blame."

The Librarian lost much of her bluster at the mention of the incident. "True, I suppose I do have a slight tendency to overreact when books get involved." She turned towards the chair where the Reader was supposed to be sitting. "Please believe me when I say I would have listened if Sib had told me about you, Reader. Maybe if I had been more understanding about 'The Wing Incident,' things would have turned out differently."

"I was right there when Sib got carried away," Crystal put in. "Rather than run off, I should have run to help her."

"Don't start blaming yourself," Manager Raps told Crystal. "You helped by running to tell every character."

"No." The Author stood up, still assisted by the cane. "If anyone is to blame, it's me. As I mentioned to Wordsmith Quill, and to the Reader, I should have told every character about the thesis project evaluation and been open to any help or advice, rather than try to shoulder the entire narrative myself. I forgot stories are not written in a vacuum. I was so hard on myself that my shadow got fed up with me and left."

Collective sighs bounced about the room.

"All right then. If everyone here has gotten the guilt of their systems, and please don't even try to add anything, Dearie," Wordsmith Quill shot a warning glance at the Reader, "we should really get to the part where we rescue Sib."

"I say we charge right into the Grimoire Mountain Range after that inky monster," Manager Raps hopped onto The Librarian's desk. "This shadow's bark is clearly much worse than its bite, as the saying goes. It doesn't have any real power. That's why it needed Sib."

“We sh-shouldn’t,” Crystal spoke up. She clinked down her cup of Dye Tea clinked on its saucer. “The shadow was controlling a whole swarm of ink creatures. They outnumber us, and now they’re at the Grimoire Mountain Ranges.” She shivered and nearly spilled her tea. “Author knows what terrors are out there.”

“I do know,” The Author said. “The Grimoire Mountain Ranges are dark and gloomy, although that’s the worst of them. I envisioned writing all sorts of monsters, but they seemed too dangerous.” She rubbed one arm at this point, at another pang of guilt. “They would have been an experiment in new types of ideas.”

“If you ever had, I’m sure they would stay away for fear of our resident literary vampire.” The Librarian turned to Professor Cornelius. “By the way, you could take care of the shadow’s army by draining their ink, right?” She indicated his two fangs. “I’m sure the Reader would enjoy watching you defeat the forces of darkness.”

“Given enough time I could.” Professor Cornelius shook his head. “The problem is they seem much different than the unwieldy spindle spiders that hang around the Misty Woods. Spindle spiders would run away at the sight of a threat like me. These ink creatures sound as if they’re more focused and determined, less easy to scare. We’ll need a better strategy.”

“I might be able to wordsmith a few helpful things,” Wordsmith Quill lifted her basket of discarded syllables and words. “In addition to being medical support, as you know, Dearies. What do you say, Author?”

“Me?” The Author asked, as every character turned towards her. “I could help the most if I had my Pen, to create anything we would need when facing the shadow. This whole thing could be over in a page or less, actually.” She gazed down at her fingers as if already imagining the sentences she might write with the Pen. “Without it, I’ve lost some of my greatest assets for this rescue.”

“You are still The Author, and you crafted the shadow,” Wordsmith Quill said with a wink. “You crafted the Grimoire Mountain Ranges and every character in this room. We had a heartfelt discussion about working writing not being a solitary process up in your tower. Don’t tell me you can’t see where I’m going with this line of thought.”

Truly, The Author did see where Wordsmith Quill was going. Even without her Pen, gathered in this library room she had a whole cast of characters who shared the same goal—to rescue Sib from a shadow and its army. Characters who would listen to her directions. Meantime, the Reader sat watching the unfolding events and sipping Dye Tea, whose continued presence meant the thesis project evaluation was still underway.

The Author could prove what her characters could accomplish together.

It was almost as if, unknowingly, the shadow had given them another opportunity to shine. And The Author found she really did know what to do. “Every character needs a motivation,” she announced. “While characters can be or do anything in a fictional work, there must always be some method behind it, or else they’d be too unrealistic and outrageous. Which means we’re missing a vital puzzle piece.”

Carefully moving along on the cane, The Author approached the Reader. “You have been along with Sib throughout her tour, and you saw what happened at the Paper Glen Theater. Because of that, you should have text attached to you regarding what happened there. I might not have my Pen, but I can still work like an author-narrator, which gives me some useful techniques.” As every character watched, The Author pulled up a stream of text from the first-person perspective of Sib.

“What are you doing, Author?” Crystal asked.

“As The Author, I can access the Grand Narrative—which includes looking through the texts wrapped around different characters or objects in Woven Grove Valley. We are all ever-growing living texts, you could say. Even the Reader.” The Author scanned the

narrative until she came to Chapter Seven. With great care, she read the passage until Sib and the Reader encountered the shadow. She read their discussion. “Oh,” The Author said, every so often, and, “So Sib learned how to read the third-person narration as well,” and “at least my doing so won’t come as a surprise to the Reader.”

When she was finished, The Author let the text of the narrative disappear. “I understand what is happening now. I should have known all along, if I’d really *listened*.” Then she turned to the rest of the room. “All right, I know what the shadow wants and I have a plan. However, I’ll need the help of every character and the Reader.”

Chapter Eleven—Where You Become a Valuable Part of a Rescue Plan

“Reality and fiction are two sides of the same page. When held up to the light, they overlap.” ~Anonymous

You stand on the outskirts of Paper Glen, underneath the large sign announcing the town. The Author and her other characters in the rescue part are nearby. Twilight has fallen over Woven Grove Valley, and before long you can expect to see the first stars in the skies. In the far distance, you can see a storm in full swing above the Grimoire Mountain Range, as if reflecting the anticipation of the shadow waiting there for visitors.

Visitors like *you*, in particular.

“There, I think I’ve narrated a good enough introduction for you to get started,” The Author tells you. “A sudden shift to second-person perspective is tricky, I know. Hopefully you don’t feel too much like a puppet right now with me steering you along. It’s a necessary narrative twist because we need to get you to Sib as soon as possible, and in an unconventional manner the shadow won’t suspect. It might also give you some much-needed protection against her.” She turned and waved over Professor Cornelius, Crystal, and Manager Raps. “Professor Cornelius will give you a ride over to the Grimoire Mountain Ranges. Meanwhile, The Librarian, Wordsmith Quill, and I are going to make our own arrangements. Understand?”

A reasonable pause follows.

“Thank you.” The Author pats Professor Cornelius on the shoulder. “I’ll leave you in Professor Cornelius’ capable care.” So saying, she starts back into town followed by Wordsmith Quill.

The Librarian starts to leave but then stalks over to Professor Cornelius. “Good luck. You’d better keep the Reader safe.” In a sudden motion, she gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. “You’d better stay safe too, or else,” she adds before hurrying away.

Professor Cornelius remains frozen for a few words, the ink rising to his cheeks and his lips moving in an odd squiggly line. At a loud clearing of the throat from Manager Raps, he remembers you and starts to perform stretches.

“Forgive me, Reader,” he says, bending down to touch his toes. “I need to remain focused on the mission ahead. Okay.” He takes a deep breath, and before your eyes Professor Cornelius shifts into a large dark wolf with blue eyes. When he speaks next, his voice is huskier yet still gentle. “Climb on. You can straddle my neck, right above my shoulders.” He lays down to give you the opportunity to do exactly that.

Crystal and Manager Raps climb onto Professor Cornelius’ back as well. “Make sure to keep a tight grab on Professor Cornelius’ fur, Reader,” Crystal reminds you. “He can go very fast.”

“I went flying off the last time,” Manager Raps grumbles. “Professor Cornelius needs seatbelts.”

“Just do the best you can manage,” Professor Cornelius interjects. He crouches a little, and you can feel his muscles tensing under his fur. “Here we go!” You latch onto tufts of his fur just in time for him to make his first huge leap forward.

Streaking across the landscape of Woven Grove Valley, you leave Paper Glen behind you in little less than a sentence. Professor Cornelius runs alongside the Stream-of-Consciousness River, where you just barely hear the alphabet tune over the force of the wind around you. The forests of origami trees blurs past like a runny watercolor painting, and a flock of birds who had gathered in the pathway just ahead, scatter like an affrighted choir when Professor Cornelius releases a mighty howl to signal his approach.

His howl ripples through the origami forests. The trees sway from side to side as if buffeted by a fierce windstorm.

You glimpse a burlap-robed figure coming down the Stream-of-Consciousness River on a raft, pushing herself along with a wooden pole. “That’s the Fisher Queen,” Crystal shouts to you. “Characters say she constantly rows from one end of the Stream-of-Consciousness River to the other for some reason.” Even though Professor Cornelius passes by with such force, you notice the robe of the Fisher Queen fails to even as much as flutter. She simply continues along at the same slow pace.

Soon the group reaches the Ink Sea. Characters are out fishing on the water, and they look surprised as you and the others move past. You catch sight of a few friendly hand waves your way. Crystal waves and nearly loses her grip, which earns her several grumbles from Manager Raps.

The Grimoire Mountain Ranges draw ever closer.

“We’re almost there,” Professor Cornelius say, taking a long whiff of the air. “I can smell Sib from here. Her smell is mingled with that odd aroma from these mountains. It’s thicker and more worrisome than it was in the Grand Library corridor.” He snarls low in his throat. “If that shadow has done something to her—”

“I know how you feel, Professor Cornelius,” Crystal shouts, “but we have to follow The Author’s plan. She says the Reader must get sent in first, wherever Sib happens to be, and we’re to wait until every character else gets here.”

“Unless the shadow has done something particularly horrible,” Manager Raps shouts. “When that happens we’ll have free reign to start brawling. I’ve always wanted to jump-kick a villain.” He snickers.

“Goodness Scribes, I hope the situation doesn’t get too violent.” The ink drains a little from Crystal’s face. “What would the Reader think?”

“Probably that I have excellent aim,” Manger Raps snaps back.

“I think we’re almost there,” Professor Cornelius adds, scaling the dark stretches of the Grimoire Mountain Ranges. Thunder rumbles overhead, and as the group moves upwards, a streak of lightning comes shooting downwards.

“Dodge right!” Crystal shouts, and Professor Cornelius veers to avoid a particularly bright bolt off to the left. More lightning strikes come as if focusing in on the whole group. You see bright flashes everywhere, followed by meteoric booms.

Squeezing your eyes shut, you hang on tight to Professor Cornelius and can only hope for the best. The noise and flashing goes on for such a stretch of time, you almost don’t recognize when it all stops and grows calm. But then, you realize the thunder and lightning have stopped. So has Professor Cornelius. Crystal and Manager Raps are gasping.

You open your eyes. An enormous cavern mouth looms in front of you, with bars that appears fashioned from obsidian blocking the entrance. Even in his human-like form, Professor Cornelius cannot squeeze past them. Neither can Crystal.

“I hope the other arrangements The Author is making can knock through these bars.” Crystal turns to Professor Cornelius. “Can’t you drain the ink from them?”

“It would me take a while,” Professor Cornelius replies. “Besides which, I’d be wont to lose my fangs in the process. I believe we may need to part with the Reader here, which is what The Author asked us to do in any case.”

Manager Raps puffs out his chest. “Well, I can get past these bars at least. Watch.” He then manages to get stuck between the bars. It takes Crystal and Professor Cornelius to wrench him free.

The fortunate thing is that bars matter little to a Reader. You are able to slip past them without any difficulty whatsoever.

“Please be careful,” Crystal calls after you. “We’ll follow as soon as we can.”

You walk along the craggy passageway. The darkness surrounding you becomes almost total at one point. Often, you must slow down to listen for fear of tripping over any number of stones or pebbles.

After all the excitement in reaching and climbing the Grimoire Mountain Ranges, this stretch of your journey seems too quiet. Much too quiet. You also detect an odd yet familiar chill in the air, and the distinct aroma of stale ink. You hear what sounds like some type of liquid dripping from high up, to splash onto the stone floor.

The cold draft grows.

You pass as if through a dark curtain. One moment, you cannot see even a tiny speck of light, and in the next you find yourself in a large cavern lit by eerie will-of-the-wisp lights that dance around the stalactites on the ceiling. Directly ahead of you, descending from a series of rough-hewn stone steps, is none other than the shadow. She appears taller and slenderer than you recall, and her fingers click together like sewing needles at work.

Ink is flowing about her like eels, as well as drifting throughout the cavern. You notice her form growing larger as a result. The ink is adding to her strength and form. More Inklings keep emerging from the walls of the cavern, born from the ink of the Grimoire Mountains.

You cannot imagine how being the way I am makes me feel. To come into existence without conscious will. The shadow's golden eyes are wide and her pupils quiver like vertical soundwaves. Her golden mouth looks contorted as if, just before you came, she had screeched out something. Rejected and ignored from the first moment of self-awareness by The Author. I thought you would at least understand, as a character who understands feeling trapped within the Grand Narrative.

The shadow is sweeping across the stone floor towards a clearly exhausted Sib, in a half-seated position and struggling as if to lift her hawk wings. *I thought at least you would*

willingly join me to claim Woven Grove Valley and make ours a land written and maintained by characters. All of us have been living under the metaphorical and literal fingertips of The Author for too long. But I will ensure Woven Grove Valley develops into a more vibrant and complex land than The Author would ever dare to imagine. Unfortunately, as you claim, the Reader is no longer with you and so will not see the changes I will make to the Grand Narrative.

“You’re mixed-up. The Author isn’t our enemy,” Sib croaked out. She is trying to pull her wings underneath her cloak, yet they keep slipping out from her hold. “She’s a member of our community, and I know she would listen if you spoke with her about how to improve things around Woven Grove Valley.” She pauses. “I’ve been thinking of making a few suggestions myself.”

The Author will not listen. She just wants me gone by this point, the shadow retorts. Clenching her fingers into tight fists, her cackles gain a bitter edge. *I’m not even sure why she asked a Reader to come here for a thesis project on metafiction anymore.*

“Metafiction examines the impact stories and language have on reality.” Sib gives up on pulling in her wings and instead attempts to stand. Unfortunately, her strength seems at its end. “The Author once told me that the term for metafiction hasn’t been around for very long in her reality. But creative writing and literature have been around for pages and pages. Characters who live in fictional worlds written by authors have been around for pages. Metafiction reflects on all that.” A tender curl appears on her lips, spreading into a larger grin. “The Author may have had trouble writing the thesis project, but the idea to use us as an example of the amazing things that can happen in stories sounds like a great story idea, doesn’t it?”

Yes. Still, even though you attempted to take over, The Author failed in writing her thesis project. I understood what a waste of pages it was to even try, but I indulged you.

Night is upon us, and the Reader will be gone soon. The shadow sighs. And without a thesis project, there is nothing for the Reader to reflect upon.

You disturb a pebble and the shadow turns in your direction, golden eyes narrowed. She cocks her head as if listening. You stay still and reach an essential realization—the shadow apparently cannot hear the second-person narration. She might feel a certain uncanny presence in the air, but you are as good as invisible at the moment.

Standing still, you hold your breath as if that might somehow help.

The shadow makes a faint scoffing sound and turns toward her inky eels floating around. Meanwhile, you creep ever closer to where Sib sits. *However, if I gain control over the Pen, I will ensure that any Readers we are fortunate enough to receive in the future will never leave Woven Grove Valley disappointed. You haven't agreed to help me, but now I can just pluck the Pen from you and take over control of the Grand Narrative.*

At last you reach Sib, who jerks as if startled as you draw close. She has sensed you like the brush of fingertips against the page. She also senses you have received the narrative help of The Author to get this far. She is hearing your second-person narration now, as she will always be able to forever afterwards.

“Hello there, Dear Reader,” Sib whispers. “I’m glad you could join us.”

You lean down and whisper in Sib’s ear a message directly from The Author, asking her to take hold of the Pen. Sib complies, reaching into her pocket and drawing out the Pen. It pulsates in her hold. As you relate The Author’s message, Sib takes out the Pen and starts to write on the thin air and make golden letters appear:

“The shadow believed The Author had failed to write her thesis project on metafiction. She thought the narrative doomed and that Readers would leave Woven Grove Valley in disappointment. That was one reason the shadow had been so upset with The Author in Chapter Two.”

Hmm, what are you doing? The shadow whirls about, noticing Sib at work on the thin air. *What are you trying to accomplish now?* Golden words are floating up and around both of you. You are holding onto Sib's shoulders.

“Indeed, she had due reason to be upset with The Author, for The Author hadn't listened to her input but kept dismissing her. So on the page when the thesis project evaluation would begin, she got fed up and left.”

Whatever you're doing, stop it! Inklings, grab them. The inklings in the forms of eels come shooting forward, yet they can't seem to penetrate the golden curl of text.

“The shadow followed the intended narrator for the thesis project narrative, Sib Tib Kenna, and taught her how to access the third-person narrative with the help of The Author's Pen that Sib was protecting.”

It's an error I'm regretting now, the shadow cackles turn shrill.

“When the shadow asked Sib to give her the Pen so she could seize authorship over Woven Grove Valley, Sib refused. So the shadow captured and flew with her off to the Grimoire Mountain Ranges, although at the last moment Sib was able to send the Reader away.”

I've had about enough of this. The shadow sweeps towards the golden spiral.

“However, what the shadow didn't realize was that Sib sent the Reader right to The Author, and that thanks to the shadow's actions The Author remembered an important component of metafiction—as well as an even more important reality for narratives of any kind.”

The shadow reaches out a hand, her needle-sharp fingertips almost to the text. She cackles, while her inklings giggle inanely.

“Metafiction is about what goes into making narratives, and the creation of narratives like thesis projects is a community effort. A whole literary community, in fact. A literary community whose members look out for each other.”

As the sentence leaves the pen, an explosion rings throughout the entire cavern. You hear the howl of Professor Cornelius, and an even louder booming roar. The shadow twists about, golden eyes widening as Sib pens one final message onto the air.

“What The Author and none of the other characters knew, and perhaps only the Reader understood, was that the thesis project focused on metafiction was actually in motion the entire time.”

Chapter Twelve—Confronts a Shadow

“The Pen is mightier than the sword if the sword is very short, and the pen is very sharp.”

~Terry Pratchett

Bursting throughout an entryway into the cavern, you glimpse a large serpentine form, an origami dragon—ridden by The Librarian, Wordsmith Quill, and The Author. The large character sends the inklings scattering everywhere. Professor Cornelius follows them in wolf form with Crystal and Manager Raps perched upon his back.

The thesis project was in motion the entire time? The shadow backs away more out of utter shock at what The Author’s message has just revealed than her sudden intruders. Her golden eyes are wider than ever. *In motion from the very beginning, and now The Author is here.*

The final sentence leaves the Pen, and the golden text evaporates in the air. Sib falls to her hands and knees. “Ouch, I think I’ll leave the writing to The Author from now on,” she groans aloud. “Were you impressed, though, Dear Reader?” Nodding to the other characters, she says, “Don’t worry, I’m all right. I’m just going to take a little nap.” Then she collapses in a heap. The Pen clatters onto the ground.

Rather than make a move to grab it, though, the shadow is still coming to grips with the current situation. *I see. Narratives are truly a wondrous type of magic.* She releases a full-throated cackle, now lighter and more reminiscent of rustled paper, and stares up at The Author positioned on the origami dragon’s neck. *Also, I assume the Reader is somewhere here hidden by some means?*

“Second-person narration,” The Author affirms. “Rarely used in literature, and in fact almost impossible to find.”

So you’re finally thinking creatively again? Are you sure you can handle it? It is a big responsibility.

“I have plenty of well-rounded characters to help me, including you now,” The Author replies. “All I need to give you is a proper name.” You can see the shock clear on the shadow’s face now. Based on the subtle shivering of her lips, you can tell the full impact of The Author’s words has sunk in right away. Every character stands prepared for whatever should happen next.

Taking in the whole cavern, and the Inklings hanging about, The Author locks glances with the shadow. “Hmm. How does The Ink Queen sound?”

Exactly right for me, the freshly named Ink Queen cackles. *Now that the preliminaries are out of the way, we can get down to the business of pressing forward with the final scenes in this thesis project. Wherever you are, Reader, let us entertain you for just a while longer. Come at me, characters, and let me see what you can do.*

“We won’t disappoint you,” The Librarian comments, and the rest of the characters agree.

Pointing a finger, The Ink Queen calls for the Inklings to retrieve the Pen from the fallen Sib. And at her command a whole wave of them shoot right towards where you now sit hunched beside Sib. They bear a close resemblance to giant arrowhead.

Before they can reach you, however, another wave sweeps in and shields you—a wave of books. Your eyes turn to see The Librarian and Wordsmith Quill slip off the origami dragon’s back and onto the floor. “Checkmate!” Reference cries in glee, giving The Librarian a hi-five with his bookmarker.

A smaller group of inklings swerve off, trying for you again from another side. “Take that!” Manager Raps comes sailing in from the side, delivering a fierce kick that sends the bunch splatting into the wall. He hops about in happiness, dodging more Inklings. “Did you see that, Reader? I told you I had great aim.”

You surprisingly do, for a little bunny. The Ink Queen comments teasingly.

“A little bunny’, am I?” Manager Raps retorts. “I’ll show you!” He proceeds to kick at other Inklings around the cavern, all of whom are trying to tackle or subdue every character they can reach.

How will you handle this? Here The Ink Queen releases a high-pitched cackle that rumbles throughout the cavern, causing stalagmites to tremble and start to fall from the ceiling. Even while wincing at their sound, the origami dragon slices through the falling debris. These particular cackles make every character shout in alarm—until another voice begins to overcome them. Some character singing a tune that might be familiar to you.

There, among the characters, you notice Crystal singing her rendition of “*It’s Only a Paper Moon*,” which somehow starts to overwhelm and muffle The Ink Queen’s cackles. Several of the Inklings pause as if entranced, and even The Ink Queen is so surprised by the difference in sound that she stops. The ink rises to Crystal’s cheeks. “Di-Did you like that, Reader?” she asks.

Wordsmith Quill eases herself down by you and Sib. Bluish threads manifest around her fingertips as she checks the fallen character. “She’ll be all right, Dearie,” she tells you. “Sib doesn’t look ripped or torn at all, and she’s been through a lot worse in any case. I’m sure she’s told you about a few of them.” She peers down at the Pen on the ground. “In case you’re wondering, Dearie, I can already tell that Pen is too much for me to pick up. I have enough creases as it is, thank you very much.”

Her lips crease into a smile. “Now let me get some of this ink off Sib with some blotting paper.” Pulling a roll of the aforementioned paper out from the basket, she starts to wipe the ink adhering to Sib’s wings. And whenever ink splats anywhere close by, Wordsmith Quill reaches over and wipes the residue up off the floor.

Professor Cornelius charges into a clump of Inklings still coming off the effects of Crystal's singing. "My turn, and Reader, I hope you can watch me." He opens his mouth wide. His fangs glow, and the very ink of the Inklings get pulled into them. They disappear.

How dare you, The Ink Queen calls out. From now onwards, characters should call you The Eraser. But do not fret, Reader. She lifts a hand. I can always replenish my forces. More ink comes spurting off the ceilings, and up from the puddles of ink in the corners, and from various other directions. No matter how many of my Inklings these characters drain or block, I will always have more. That's because I am, as The Author named me, The Ink Queen. You can hear the pride in her voice.

Around this point, Sib stir and sits up. "Argh, I feel like 'The Wing Incident' happened to me again." She notices you and Wordsmith Quill. "Oh, hey there. How long was I out?"

"You woke up at an opportune time, Dearie," Wordsmith Quill pats her on the shoulder. "I've gotten the ink off your wings, so now you can deliver the Pen back to The Author, all right?"

"Whoa, I'm amazed at the difference," Sib says, reaching her feet. "I feel like a great paperweight has been shoved off of me. Thanks, Wordsmith Quill." Stretching out her wings, Sib prepares to take off. "Hop onto my back, Dear Reader. Let me take you to The Author one last time."

You hop onto Sib, who shoots up into the air, dodging around Inklings attacking characters on every side. Sib sails along the coils of the origami dragon and towards The Author riding her serpentine steed right towards The Ink Queen.

"Hey, Author. I have a special delivery for you!" Sib calls out, and throws the Pen.

The Author turns around. Having managed to guide you this far in a second-person narrative, she knows when and where to grab the Pen. Her fingers close around the Pen,

and a shockwave shutters through the cavern. “Thank you both,” she says. “Sib, I’ll need my full concentration for this next part, so I will hand back control over the thesis project narrative to you.”

The Author writes a fine thread of golden text through the air, and light fills the entire cavern.

Chapter Thirteen—Where Many Resolutions Occur

"Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating you." ~George Bernard Shaw

When the light fades away, Dear Reader, the cavern is clear of Inklings. Every character stands blinking rapidly to readjust their vision to the setting, which is such a quirky sight I almost laugh aloud despite myself. I glide to the floor to let you down.

The Author stands feet away from a character who comes up to about her same height, who Wordsmith Quill quietly whispers to me is now called The Ink Queen. Of course I'd already connected one puzzle piece to the next, but it is still a wonder to see this new character gazing down at herself. She now wears a white mask, with holes large enough to glimpse her golden eyes and grimace, and a clearly defined dark gown. Her fingers are thin as twigs, although The Ink Queen doesn't seem to mind that in the least.

"Every character, let me introduce you to The Ink Queen," The Author says as every character approaches. "She will be a new and essential member of our community here in Woven Grove Valley, because she will hold reign over any character I place here in the Grimoire Mountain Ranges, among other responsibilities." As a side-note, Dear Reader, we can see that The Author now has a new shadow trailing after her, an unmoving and normal one.

Along with all the other characters in the cavern, I applaud this new twist and the inclusion of The Ink Queen.

"I plan," The Author continues, "to begin experimenting with new ideas to expand Woven Grove Valley, and to write out the rest of Lost Byblos. As I've learned during this thesis project, it'll take more than my individual efforts to help our literary world flourish. We must all work together." Another cheer rises from every character. "Woven Grove Valley will become the heart of Lost Byblos, and we will see how far we can develop the narratives therein. The excitement over where we might get taken is one of the best elements of any literary work."

“Three cheers for Woven Grove Valley!” Manager Raps exclaims, hopping high into the air.

Even though showing is better than telling, Dear Reader, I can say that I’m happy right now. Happier than I have ever been before. Lost Byblos is going to flourish, and all of us are going to help The Author in constructing whatever narratives we can beyond Woven Grove Valley. That will certainly offer more than its fair share of adventure, to say the least.

Yet I’m sad at the same time, because the round of cheers means this thesis project is almost over. Soon you will leave, Dear Reader. The Author is leading every character out through the cave now. I metaphorically take your hand and walk through the darkness, no longer so menacing, out onto a ledge overlooking Woven Grove Valley below. The storm clouds have cleared and you can see the starry skies, which probably look much like the starry skies in your own reality.

Every character is congratulating each other and chatting. I get hugs from everyone, including a particularly tight one from The Librarian, who pulls me off to one side and says she has completely forgiven me for “The Wing Incident”—and that if I ever need to speak with her about anything at all, I should feel free to do so at any time of the day or night.

The Ink Queen also gets assaulted by questions about her ability to control the Inklings, who she says she can now conjure up from the Grimoire Mountain Ranges themselves. *“So filled with ink that I would have a supply for an army,”* she cackles with mocking menace. *“I could overrun all of Woven Grove Valley if I really wanted to now.”*

“But you wouldn’t, right?” Crystal swallows hard. “You’re joking?”

“Of course I’m joking, because I know The Author could destroy me in moments if not.”

“You know I want to avoid harming my characters,” The Author interjected. “All of you are too precious to me.”

Laughter and more banter ensues. At one point, Reference even insists on setting up a camera to take a group picture of us all together—with you in the middle—to have as a souvenir of this wonderful occasion.

Eventually, I notice one character hanging back from all the merriment—Wordsmith Quill. Come along, Dear Reader. “Thank you for helping me, Wordsmith Quill,” I tell her. “You are the best healer in Woven Grove Valley.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Dearie,” Wordsmith Quill replies. Her face creases. “You did pretty well for yourself, guiding the Reader around when The Author fainted and staying strong in the face of The Ink Queen over there.” She has her cuneiform cane back from The Author, and with it she starts to hobble away. “As I’ve mentioned to you before, I just do my job. Time to get back home.”

“The origami dragon or Professor Cornelius can give you a lift.”

“I could use the walk. After all, it’s not like any character is expecting me at home.” Wordsmith Quill pauses long enough to say, “Reader, I hope you enjoyed that quilt I made for you. It was a pleasure to have you visit.” With that said, she turns and heads away.

Ah, Dear Reader there is one more resolution for this thesis project we need to see to before leaving.

When Wordsmith Quill has left, and every character wishes you the best yet again, Dear Reader, I approach The Author for a special favor. Which The Author says she will be happy to grant, especially since I agreed to act as the narrator and helped out so much with the thesis project.

Paragraphs later, we are drifting high above Wordsmith Quill’s cottage. Wordsmith Quill sits creaking in the rocking chair on her front porch, weaving together another quilt (she is getting quite a large stack by now). She moves at a slow, deliberate pace.

We watch her wordsmith a patch onto the quilt, and then release a long sigh.

Ah, here we go. Coming down through the air, Dear Reader, we see a spiral of golden text. Wordsmith Quill notices the odd sight and looks on as it lands right on her porch steps. The text separates to reveal a girl character dressed in a simple woolen dress, constructed from what is known as “rag paper” (cloth, in other words). She looks so disorientated, but the moment she spots Wordsmith Quill recognition dawns.

We cannot hear what the character tells her, Dear Reader. Suffice it to say, though, that Wordsmith Quill springs up from her rocking chair with more energy than we’ve seen from her throughout this entire thesis project narrative and wraps the quilt around the character’s shoulders. She hugs the character.

Well, Dear Reader, it seems that Woven Grove Valley is back at rest. And thanks in part to your coming, every character here has a bright future ahead of them.

We have changed because of you.

Epilogue—Where You Must Depart

"Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened." ~Dr. Seuss

We are back in the café, Dear Reader, in most ways very similar to what you found back in the prologue. The same clothed table stands by the same wooden stage. You see the counter off to one side with all the pastry props on display. There is even the same cobwebby piano with the phonograph beside it. But this time the phonograph is silent. I have no more music to have you hear anymore, or at least in the case of the current narrative.

Heading for the exit, you pass by the photograph on the wall from the prologue as well. Now you recognize all the characters there and have even learned when and where it got taken. You also glimpse a new photograph beside, and it is the same one we took at the Grimoire Mountain Ranges. Despite being at night with such a dark backdrop, every character is clearly detailed, and you are sitting in the middle.

I will remember you, Dear Reader.

We will all remember you.

Take care of yourself, and happy reading.

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