

Long-Form Writing Sample - Jordan Cutler

An excerpt from my upcoming dark fantasy novel titled:
"THREE"

Prologue

Have you ever encountered someone that shouldn't have existed at all? My reality was forever changed once realizing what haunting secret they had whispered to me. It was something so precious, beautiful yet forgotten, that was trapped deep in my soul gasping for air which she filled plentiful. The forbidden fruit had finally been discovered, tasting so incredibly delicious, yet vanished instantly when turning my back to it for only a moment. It becomes ever so hard to justify why things turned out the way they did, such betrayal on both ends. Once she exited my life completely, the unthinkable happened. The lingering memories of our sparse moments together cannot escape my inner labyrinth, draining all life and happiness once flourishing through this husk once called "body". Those words cannot be washed from this cursed mind, even to this day, and continue to habituate me as I travel steadfast on this endless journey.

I find my brain often struggles when attempting to remember the steps taken that led to this hopeless and isolated pit of despair. It's somewhat reassuring, however; The rare opportunity to fully begin anew, completely disregarding my past, which is now almost erased from memory entirely. The broadest strokes remain, but all fine details elude me, for better and worse. Perhaps it is indeed better that those once cherished are fading away like every star in this blackened sky, there's so much less burden.

The three mountain peaks surrounding me, piercing the heavens in a joint force, form a bowl of moonlight liquid with an island at its center. The area's calmness permeates the body in an indescribable way, for some it's a godsend, others it would drive insane in mere seconds. I

know not how I arrived here, but that I cannot make it to the island in my current state. My will would ultimately give some poor soul simple rags and a makeshift boat. Said rotten planks floating in this motionless sea won't last for much longer, leaving my only option to the depths below.

The cloaked figure puts his faith in the void surrounding him, only to be greeted below by countless ghastly arms grasping at his tattered robes. They rip and tear through said shoddy fabric, bubbles rising from decaying mouths as they pull the man deeper. Looking down, he is met with the millennium eyes of countless watery corpses. Their bodies bridge between liquid and solid, forming a freely maneuvering mess of black.

Embodying your trust into others is a deadly decision to make as it is the most valuable form of emotion to freely entail to someone. So many make this mistake only to be left withered once their human embodiment of happiness leaves. This scenario is the reason for my great odyssey into the unknown, only seeking a land in the distance where no soul is left to rest and no light shines in the day. These ancient grounds will ultimately be my final resting place as what is left of this empty existence exits a temporary form, transcending into the void of nothingness where only the damned reside.

The traveler eventually breaks free of the demonic parasites, gathering his bearings via a beam of light from above, and resurfacing near the island's shore.

Met with an initial layer of coarse, gray sand, followed by a ring of obsidian, jagged grass fills the rest of the foreseeable ground. There are no homes, no shelter for anyone to settle down, just thick woods and scattered ruins. The small island is illuminated by countless torches, all creating a streamlined path towards a gargantuan door at its center. Made of dark and light metal, each half respectively choosing one, the outer edges are etched with a zigzagged design. At the

top, a shiny fetus is depicted, a line connecting it to a child on the right. In the bottom center, an adult stands in lacking detail, connected to the elder on its left. In the middle of said circle are three vertical lines.

The mysterious man trudges out of the water and grabs one of the torches hanging on a ruined stone wall, subsequently pulling his hood down. His face is featureless. He has no eyes, mouth, ears, or nose but can use all senses freely. The shore is lined with countless indentions in the sand, as well as piles of charred timber. Once noticing this, the traveler quickly stops to listen for signs of life nearby, only to be met with absolute silence.

Upon making his way over to the wooded area of the island, the giant doors begin to squeak open with a metallic ring. Startled, he looks around to find no culprit present on either side. The doors crack open enough for a person of his build to squeeze through, but nothing more.

Beyond the entrance sits a long pathway leading to a hidden section of the lake, lit by thousands of fireflies on both sides, inaccessible from elsewhere. Their strobing lights bounce off the metal doors and onto the traveler's face, making him shield his nonexistent eyes.

He turns away from it entirely and begins to shuffle back into the thicket before being gripped by a strange aura.

“You will not find salvation here”, a voice from beyond whispers to the traveler.

Startled, once again, he looks around and finds he is still the only one present on the deserted island. The man turns back towards the radiating light beyond the doors, taking a cautiously defiant stance.

“I do not need salvation. You know nothing of me, nor my desires”, responds the pitiful being.

Unbeknownst to the traveler, his metallic reflection begins to move. It paces back and forth with an inquisitive index finger and thumb on its chin.

The bright bugs fluttering beyond the doors suddenly begin to converge into one mass, gathering at the passage's end. Below their spiraling swarm, the water begins to churn, quickly growing faster until a whirlpool forms. A low hum begins to emanate from it.

The man turns away, contemplating his next move, before a singular firefly catches his distant gaze. He creates a landing platform for the pulsating insect with his flattened palm, which it happily rests on. Before he is able to close his fist, generating true handheld sunshine, several others join the party until his hand is covered entirely. With each insect, the watery noise grows louder, scratching the back of the man's skull with such intensity.

Unable to stomach the increasing vibration any longer, he looks backwards. Without any indication of movement or change, the traveler finds himself at the edge of the pathway, as if teleported. He stumbles, dropping his torch in the process, which scares off his tiny friends.

The souls of the damned, and similar demons from before, cry out in the whirlpool of darkness below the man, creating a cacophony of despair that hypnotizes his every emotion. The screaming corpses begin to grind against his last thread of humanity, withering it down to dust. Before it evaporates before his fleshy eyes, a final flash of memory, cherished times from the past, sting through the man's entire body. He grabs the sides of his head, digging straight into his skull, and begins to waver over the pathway's edge.

"I disagree", says the disembodied voice.

Three words, the last still lingering within the traveler's soul, fill his vision as he falls into the whirlpool, joining every other depraved soul left to rot.

It did not happen.

Denial

A loud, repeating, ring echoes through the traveler, restarting his heart. He awakens on an altar-like structure consisting of an old wood and marble mix, surrounded by candles, in a tall, empty room. The man's body aches as he sits upright, examining the strange lexicon and various inscriptions covering the surrounding walls.

A painting adorns the ceiling above him, showing three large figures sitting next to an interpretation of God, who is pointing downwards to a figure in prayer. In front of them is a white palace surrounded by clouds, the aforementioned beings looming menacingly above. The connecting walls have layers of writing, spaced six feet apart exactly, which start at the bottom of the room and end at twenty-one feet. Sleek steps on the side of the altar, along with a velvet carpet, guide anyone atop it to a door across the room, which is slightly cracked open.

Picking himself up, the bald man runs his hands along the words while muttering aloud. Approaching the wooden door, it creaks loudly as he cautiously steps into the unknown beyond.

“Hello?”, he quietly echoes.

The main hall of a church sits before the traveler, walls lined with white stone and discolored metals, with the painted ceiling above depicting some version of heaven. A large statue of “God” stands watch in the center of the building over the countless chairs and mats that line the floor around it, all in a circular pattern. There’s an upper level accessible from elsewhere, its walls lined with bookshelves, desks piled with money, and scrolls sprawled about. A hanging humanoid swings to and fro via a chandelier-attached leg at the very top.

A squeak from the main doors, opposite of the man, disturbs the silence and conscious emptiness of the room. A woman stands there, locking eyes intensely, with one hand on the exit.

A silky white gown blends perfectly with her body, long curls of black hair cover most of her face except for piercing, sunken, yellow eyes and blue lips. Her bare, bleeding, feet are worn, stained with dirt and peppered with bruises. The emanating waves of pressure from her insatiable beauty almost causes the man to collapse to the floor, something that ceases once she quickly slips outside, closing the door behind.

Something about the tall woman triggers a distant sense of familiarity within the deep recesses of his miserable existence.

I need to talk to her again.

The man picks himself up and begins to walk towards the door, each step growing quicker until he begins to jog, eventually transforming into a mad dash. He quickly grabs the metal, v-shaped, door knocker and swings the wooden heap open, revealing a foggy exterior.

As the door slowly closes behind the traveler, a silhouetted figure chuckles from behind stained glass on the upper floor of the cathedral.

The moonlight shimmering fog extends in every direction the eye can see, covering the decrepit village that surrounds the large church. Homes, if you can even call them that, are

littered throughout the flat landscape, all with orange lights emitting from their windows. Most of them look like a child's soggy creation on the beach, except made from mud, metal, and stone rather than sand. Dozens of people walk the streets, all zombie-like, with the mysterious woman nowhere in sight.

A bright light illuminates the empty sky, almost as if an angel had just taken a picture of the planet without turning off the flash. The air grows still. All of the street dwellers stop what they're doing completely, looking upwards in pure terror before sprinting as fast as possible back to their homes. Some of them simply collapse, curl into a fetal position and sob. The orange lights illuminating the village all dissipate at once, in unison, blanketing the town in ear-deafening silence.

A loud crack of thunder claps in the far distance.

Moments after hearing this, all lights and people resume their previous state of being, as if nothing happened.

What sort of insanity have I fallen into?

A loud cackle resonating from one of the nearby, pitch black, streets breaks the traveler's confused state, making him examine its source.

A strange looking person sits atop a stack of boxes next to, what seems to be, a street market of sorts, except there are hardly any vendors. The jester cackles once again from behind his comically large mask, adorned with a giant smile and empty eye sockets. He wears tattered rags, all poorly dyed to match his multi-colored face, a shimmering ring contradicting all else. His shoes are curled at the ends but are done poorly so with a combination of various materials holding them in that state. One of them snaps back into place, breaking his laughing fit as he struggles to reattach everything, grumbling to himself.

What a lowly being, albeit less so than those in comparison. Maybe he knows the woman, or possibly where she may have gone.

The traveler walks closer to the joker, attempting to get his attention with a derogatory scoff. He continues to fumble with his shoe before finally forcing it back into the curled state he desires, seemingly snapping his foot in the process. He winces, trying his hardest to play it cool and not to yelp in front of the stranger.

“You should’ve seen the look on your face!”, exclaims the jester.

He pauses and thinks for a moment, examining the traveler’s barren head.

“Well, you know what I mean”, he says sarcastically before chuckling.

“Have you seen a pale woman in the area? She left the church just moments before me”, the bald man promptly asks.

The clown rocks back and forth while examining their surroundings.

“I can’t say that I have, good sire. Even if I did, I would save such a prize for myself after all. Not many women in the area, you see”, he jokingly says while waving his finger.

The traveler, disinterested in games, turns and begins to walk towards the village center, or what seems to be. The jester, in shock, starts waving his hands, motioning the traveler back towards him.

“Wait, wait! I may be able to help if you give me some time to jog my memory. I became a bit distracted watching those that fear the storm”, he desperately says.

The traveler turns back to the clown sitting atop his throne of crates, who has shifted into a studious position.

“Why is that exactly? Seeing as you have nothing to lose in its wake, that is”, questions the man while motioning around.

Upon hearing this, the clown twitches slightly while adopting a more serious stance, gazing down judgmentally at the bald man.

“You are correct, we do not live lavishly, but we cherish what we do have. Lightning does not strike the unfortunate, but rather, the deserving”, the jester mutters sinisterly.

He lifts his mask to reveal an empty face, featureless, same as the traveler’s.

“You are here for a reason. Do not disappoint. Do not step out of line”, he continues before pulling his mask back down.

He breaks out into another burst of laughter and hops down from the stack of boxes, landing gracefully next to the traveler.

“Come on, I may just know how to help find your lovely lady”, he says while wrapping his arm around the traveler’s shoulder, which is quickly dismissed.

The two wanderers glide through the shady, yet quaint, village, all passerbys shyly glancing towards them before quickly retracting. Collectively, they resemble the various decomposition stages of mortality. Most, but not all, are rotting away both physically and mentally, some of the poor souls struggling to maintain sanity as they stumble through the streets. Every block or two, a high-functioning being is either conversing, attempting to fight, or trading merchandise with another resident. One of the latter rushes over to the duo while holding out an assortment of items.

“Ye shan’t pass on such things this time jester, else you’ll regret it once again”, the merchant spits out though little teeth.

He glances down to the shiny objects through dark holes, staring intensely under dim lighting.

“Rubbish”, the clown says while waving away the walking corpse.

It retracts its belongings, moving quickly back to the heap with zero customers.

“I’ve warned ye”, it exclaims while dumping everything onto a shoddy, grounded cloth.

The joker chuckles boastfully while looking for a nonexistent audience of admirers, his partner the only being partially listening.

“I run most of the trade around here, you know. You just witnessed but an example of my high importance”, he gloats.

The traveler looks over to his temporary companion puzzlingly.

“How much further until our destination?”, the bald man asks.

Disappointed in his avoidance, the jester sighs.

“You’re looking at it”, he mutters while pointing to the left.

A brightly lit building stands in contrast to the neverending grime surrounding it, two broken, wooden doors shielding its intriguing interior. It is composed of similar materials to the rest of the town’s lodging, the only exception being the quality and abundance of said pieces. A green banner hangs across the upper portion of the structure, black scrawls across it in various languages, few familiar. A collection of individuals are scattered around the entrance, some hastily counting their possessions before retreating into the darkness while others stand guard or linger around. Bounding in the opposite direction, one, striking, figure grasping a sack crashes into the entry with a loud thud.

“Ah, good timing”, the jester says before clapping his gloved hands together.

Several of the beings menacingly begin to rise as the duo approaches the outpost, some of them reaching into pockets or fumbling under robes. Noticing this, the jester holds his hands up in a casual manner.

“Either you lot are new here or you don’t recognize me behind the smile. I suggest moving aside or else my friend and I will become quite the opposite”, he says confidently.

He steps one foot onto a nearby barrel, gazing out upon the dirty crowd as if they were his subordinates. His foot slightly slips as he does so, but makes a graceful recovery.

“I would hate to cause a commotion and delay things, he’s in quite a grumpy mood you see”, the jester whispers loudly while tilting his head towards his acquaintance.

The traveler quickly looks back and forth between the two, glaring at his soon-abandoned partner intensely. As he is about to say something, he notices several beads of sweat rolling down his frillish neck.

“My informant is just inside, we-”, the jester manages to get out before being interrupted by another loud slam of the entrance doors.

The running figure from before shoots out to the streets, a large man emerging from its source. Shadows shroud the man’s face as all light catches his large, shaved dome. He wears a baggy smock tightly wrapped to his short, stocky body with a leather belt. His dirty boots loudly pound the ground as he approaches the discarded being, its previously-owned sack now in the possession of the broker’s meaty fingers. Stained from his dripping, bloody hands, he holds it outright, emptying its contents onto the unfortunate entity.

“Short”, he grumbles as coins rain onto the ground.

Immediately after saying this, he tilts his head slightly before crushing theirs with a mighty stomp. Jumping back, the jester points a singular finger upward before looking at the traveler, both speechless.

“Rather unfortunate. We should be on our way now”, he says sheepishly.

The beefy mass of a man turns his head slowly to the duo.

“Clown. What good timing”, he grumbles under coarse breath.

“I could not agree more... you very narrowly beat me to dealing with that pesky rat myself”, the jester responds happily.

He looks down to the corpse beneath the broker, regret and absolute sadness drenching his poker face.

“This your new victim?”, the stub responds as he wipes his bloody boot on the ground.

“Absolutely not. I simply seek information, something this man seems to now lack to an even greater degree”, the traveler interjects.

The broker laughs while stepping towards them.

“Partnerships typically do not end well with such a slithery individual, he owes great debts and others pay for it”, he says while glaring at the comedian through shadowy eyes.

The jester stands silent.

“Pick up what is due and finish it”, the broker grumbles as the nearby townsfolk begin to gather.

Quietly walking over to the corpse, the clown is kicked to his knees by the dealer. He picks through the body and collects most discarded coins, placing them in the bloody sack. One in particular seems to fall out of his long sleeve, much stranger and more mechanical in nature than the rest but of similar size. He grasps both sides of it, twisting it into two separate pieces, one of which he sticks to the underside of the bag. He places the other half back within his clothing and tops off the collection of currency with more from his own possession.

Picking himself up from such a humiliating display, the jester makes his way back to the broker and hands him the money.

“I threw in a few extra for good measure”, he says in an unbearably friendly tone.

His entire demeanor has been reset, almost as if nothing had just happened in the deadly square.

Grumbling to himself while looking back and forth between the two, the broker locks deadly eyes with the traveler.

“Only those worthy are given what they seek”, he says before sighing.

The jester slowly turns head to the words just spoken, his reluctant partner contemplating them thoroughly.

Worthy?

All of the surrounding figures retreat, resuming their previous positions as the dealer begins walking inside.

“Too bad”, he says whilst looking back at the two men.

As he enters the building, the standstill air in the surrounding area begins to circulate once again, malfunctioning nerves and hearts now active once more. The jester skips past his companion, gleeful of their survival.

“I see it as a favorable outcome”, he says while holding up his hands.

“Also your last option I presume. I wish you the best of luck... you’ll need it”, the traveler says before turning his back and walking away.

Exhaling loudly, the clown jumps directly in his path while holding up a finger.

“Unfortunately, that is not the case”, he responds.

“Why is such a thing unfortunate?”, the traveler asks while crossing his arms.

“While his words do hold some truth, many would argue that he misspoke. Not given...”, the jester says a bit more seriously.

He pulls his half of the coin-like device from his tunic, flipping it over his fingers. Upon making a full rotation, the other side reveals itself, the disc now fully intact once again. Attached to the previously split piece is the underside of the informant's sack, which he grasps quickly before its shiny contents spill out.

“Shown”, he says.

The clown tosses the bag to a nearby citizen groveling in the streets. Realizing its contents, it smiles back and bends down in prayer, hands grasped together.

Seemingly traveling fruitlessly throughout the town, the traveler's eyes peeled for a white gown and matching skin, the duo take many obscure twists and turns within the alleyways. Crouching under various obstacles and climbing on rooftops, the jester seems to have an odd destination in mind, something that both piques and worries the bald man. While standing on top of one of the countless homes, he looks out upon the horizon.

Beyond the foggy veil lies absolute nothingness in all directions, the singular exception being a handful of dirt roads housing caravans. No other features, even remotely, appear in the faintest detail, a truly empty existence encapsulating the village.

Eventually reaching a more secluded part of town, collapsed and decaying homes surrounding them, the duo stand in the meager presence of a large mansion. It is roughly two times larger than the other buildings, at least the portions still intact, yet over half of it sinks into the dirt. Two large doors await the first visitor in what appears to be centuries, a lonely and dim red light shining in one of the windows above.

“Here we are”, the joker grumbles distastefully.

Briefly taking on a different, sulking persona, he seemingly musters courage from within his deepest recesses. The jester grabs onto one of the rusted door handles before them, extending

out his other to the traveler. He winces slightly, reconsidering his choice of companionship before grasping the clown's offering.

“Don't blink”, says the monotone joker.

They stand in silence, hand-in-hand, for several moments before the other door begins to creak open. A golden light emanates from the slit until it fills the vision of our “heroes” completely. The traveler's senses are overwhelmed entirely, his entire being experiencing pure ecstasy on an infinite ascension.

Is this enlightenment?

A loud slam rings through the streets and startles a nearby citizen of the ashen borough. They look towards the noise and slightly raise their tattered hood to find the mansion sealed tight, neither clown accounted for.

Now alone, the traveler stumbles, attempting to grasp the holy light before it returns to heaven. It quickly separates itself from his senses and becomes a tangible source, gliding through the air to the infinite void above. Without the lights embrace, the traveler's reality is now filled with absolute darkness. The sea of neverending black is only slightly illuminated by the swimming yellow stream, which begins to swirl into a ring.

Once solidified, the golden circle descends to the man's eyeline and begins to flash images: a sleek throne in the sky, a decrepit castle sitting atop a lone mountain, a rotting cell filled with screams of the guilty, a grand cathedral with bountiful food and riches, and a woman in white.

A woman in white?

He reaches out to the woman, a single tear running down her face before she screams bloody murder. The traveler is sent flying backwards, a crimson light gleaming in the far

distance. He twirls and spins through the air, the red light slowly surrounding him as he collides with a wall, bringing him back to reality in a bloody room.

A figure sits at its center, tall in stature but lacking in definition. The jester sits across from the traveler in a heap, sobbing. The room itself is a rotting, putrid green, color illuminated by a pattern of circular, crimson candles around the shape. The dome-shaped ceiling seemingly expands into infinity, runic symbols and bundles of flame float vertically as far as the traveler's filled sockets allow. At the top, a faint glimmer of the transcending light from before shines.

“Why!?”, the clown exclaims loudly, subsequently slamming his fists onto the unkempt floor.

He lunges forward, grasping the figure's red robes.

“How many times m-must I come here?! How many times m-must I see this?!”, the jester stammers loudly.

He releases their clothing, staggering backwards, nearly stumbling onto the floor.

“It really doesn't matter... does it?”, he asks helplessly.

The cryptic figure begins to laugh in a strange, echoey manner. It slowly pivots towards the two men, revealing a massive, hunched over corpse. The oracle's decomposing flesh detaches and scatters with every motion, further adding onto her bloody cloak. She is crouched down to the floor, her long legs extending upwards to further bolster her strange choice of clothing. Between her long, archaic, fingers sits a black staff extending upwards to the peak of her current being.

The oracle's cackling ceases once seemingly locking eyes with the traveler.

“Come”, her voice booms.

As her vocalization ends, the traveler shoots forth into her torn presence. Her boney fingers release one side of the staff and land on the traveler's barren face. She mutters to herself while caressing the outcast's cheek and forehead before returning to her previous, statuesque state. Her obscured, sunken skull snaps upwards, revealing a large head with three faces competing for dominance. They occasionally gaze upon one another, whispering secrets or incantations before seemingly going dormant.

"How long shall it be until you reveal yourself?", the middle mouth echoes.

The jester breaks out of his trance for a moment, turning head slowly towards the traveler.

"What am I to make of this? What have you done?", the traveler questions both figures.

The three-faced hag cackles once again.

"You have been given a godly gift", they sputter while looking upward.

Two hidden arms slip through the large corpse's cloak, extended outward towards the holy shard far above.

"Purpose", she booms, both arms subsequently gripping an upper portion of the staff.

"I do not seek such gifts, particularly from a God", the traveler affirms.

The crone's right face squints at the traveler, her left one lightly conversing with the middle.

"What is it, exactly, that you seek then? Do you even know?", the right face barks.

The tall hags inch closer to the traveler, gripping the long staff tightly.

"A woman of the church perhaps?", the left face mutters sinisterly.

Their grip tightens around the black pole, teeth gritting with rage under a slight grin.

"Yet you deny the grace of our lord?", the middle face echoes before cackling once more.

The jester places his hand on the traveler's shoulder, pulling him away from any sort of potential confrontation.

"The fates have spoken. Hopefully you now have peace of mind", the monotone jester says.

Shrugging it off, the traveler begins to pace around the dimly lit room, no exit in sight.

"I cannot emphasize your lack of judgment enough clown, this is absolute madness", says the wanderer.

Finishing his extensive investigation of the room, the traveler throws his arms up in a smug manner.

"What are we to do now?", questions the outcast.

The jester begins to reach his arm out to his rejectful companion, quickly reconsidering the move and returning to a limp state of being.

"I was only trying to...", the joker says sheepishly.

The oracle stamps the long, black staff into the ground, creating a loud boom which startles both men to their core. The shockwave quickly echoes around the room, traveling upward and sealing the dome.

A singular droplet of black falls from above and lands on the tall stick's peak. The hag's head swivels around in a trance before quickly going limp.

Yellow light emerges from the oracle's entire being, particularly from her several mouths and eyes. She slowly glances up to the two men before her, an entirely different, pungent aura filling the room.

"The two destinies before me are intertwined", the three heads bellow.

The jester glances over at the traveler, who only returns a careless side-eye.

“Regardless of your cooperation and faith, you will be guided to the next step on your set path”, the golden mouths echo.

She turns towards the jester, squinting beyond his mask, examining both mind and soul.

“My, my...”, she whispers softly.

Locking eyes with the traveler, she does the same.

“What an interesting pair we have here...”, she says before giggling.

Both sets of arms release the staff, which begins to slowly float upward, emitting a faint black aura.

“Will he...?”, she mumbles while examining the traveler’s barren skull.

She subsequently grips the dark staff, slamming it to the ground.

“Begone!”, the crone booms before suddenly evaporating.

The pure chaos held within is unleashed into the physical realm, enveloping the strange room in darkness. It consumes the traveler’s sense of being until he cannot stomach consciousness any longer, slipping into the infinite void once again.