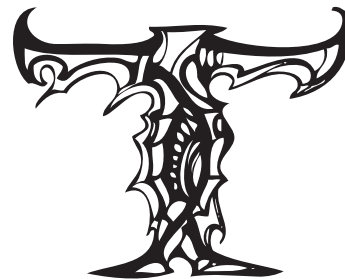




# That Which Makes Up the World



he articulate sound of the school bell's conclusive note awoke me from my hazy hell. It came as if with swift reckoning—a domino effect to my distant self that lived the same moment fractions of seconds earlier and fractions of seconds later. Perhaps even a transfer of consciousness occurred, shifting me between universes via the

cracks of unnoticeable time.

After the ring faded, I could not even recall what I had been speaking about. But before the children in my kindergarten class could leave, I quickly addressed them and gave them my tidings. Then they were gone, and I was left alone to the quandary of my day.

I was a good teacher, for the most part, but the days were beginning to drag. On and on they went, baffling my orientation within the world and my permanence within my thoughts. There was nothing within me to hold me still and keep me in tangibility. There was not a child that deserved my best; there was not a future that deserved my wisdom. I was fading away.



When I got home, I put on the record *The Flawed* by Jersen Stagecry and hopped in the shower. After I was clean and somewhat refreshed, I ate a bowl of cereal. Then I was wholly ready to collide with my bed and enter the dementia of the unconscious self—so I did.

The sun had not even set.



I awoke in the middle of the night, perfectly rested and perfectly alert. In the darkness, I stared into the ceiling for a time—not at it, but beyond it, to whatever there lay. I thought of horrible things: the end of the world, the end of my life. And following, in an attempt to redeem those thoughts, my mind went to my students, to each one of their faces and names. I played through

the seating arrangement I saw every day to remember each and every one of them. There were the good and the bad, the behaved and the mischievous, the smart and the challenged, the talented and the boring, the loud and the quiet. They were all there; they were all unique. But I had no pride for these children; I had no pride for myself.

I got out of bed, put on some workout clothes, and headed outside for a jog. The air was damp and chilled and I could see my breath.

My run led me to a bluff that overlooked the ocean. I ran along the edge while gazing at the moon's shimmer upon the water. Distracted by this allurements, I grew oblivious to a sudden change in the contour of the bluff. I was soon running directly towards the open space beyond the edge's hold.

An impossible hand reached out and grabbed me, stopping me from running to my death. In that moment, I saw where my next step would have led me.

"Dare you dream that such things should come true," the possessor of the hand told me with a male voice.

Too shocked by what had suddenly occurred, I could not yet reply to these bizarre words.

The man who had saved me was in mildly odd attire, but the way in which he wore these clothes was yet stranger. Mainly in black, he wore boots, slacks, a collared shirt, and a hooded cloak that was tucked into his pants along with his shirt; it made him look like a hot air balloon. He had a near-perfect smile, although his dark brown hair was amiss.

"Where'd you come from?" I finally muttered.

"Not far away; I never am," the peculiar man replied. His answer was no answer at all to me; I was just as perplexed as the

moment before. He could see this in my face. “I like the night,” he continued. “I’m normally out and about at night. I saw you running on the edge of this dangerous terrain, so I stayed nearby just in case you should lose your way. My name’s Teoy W.”

“My name is—” I began.

“No, no—no need,” Teoy said, interrupting me. “A name is a sacred thing.”

He paused to look curiously into my eyes, and then said, “I’ll let you get back to your run. Have a good night.”

And then Teoy was gone—he briskly walked off towards the road a half a mile inland.

I immediately ran home.



When I entered my classroom that day—after the sun had risen and before the children arrived—there was a small black box resting on my desk. A white card lay atop it with the inscription:

### PLAY FOR THE CHILDREN

And beneath the card, carved into the lid of the box were the words:

### THE END OF YOUR WORLD

I opened the lid to discover that it was a music box. On the outside, the box was plain and made of finely sanded wood. On the inside, there was an intricate array of cylinders and combs; surrounding them was formed, in artistic design, a black lake.

Upon this lake, a goblin sat rowing a boat. One end of this lake had an edge and this edge led down into a pit of stars—a small, cosmic oblivion carved in the corner of the inside of this box. It was toward this location that the goblin was rowing.

I closed the lid and wound the key inserted into the lower right side of the box. Just as I was about to open the box again and let the tune emanate from within, the children started entering the classroom. I ceased my action and placed the box at the corner of my desk.



I felt better that day. I was more focused and more determined. But I kept staring at the box, longing to hear its melody. The children noticed the attention I gave to it.

“What’s that black box?” one of my students asked, and then others along with her inquired about the box as well.

“It’s a music box,” I replied.

“Play it for us,” another student demanded. And as just before, other students joined in, asking for the music to be played.

“I will, I will,” I told them. “You have naptime coming up in a little. I will play it then.”

That got them excited; it got me excited as well.



The time then came when I held the little black box in my hands, ready to open it and unleash its sound. The lights were off and each and every pair of the children’s eyes anxiously looked upon me from their positions of rest. The anticipation of what music



would come forth was touchable, perhaps even tasteable.

I opened the lid.

A flood of dissonant sounds barged forth.

I quickly closed the box.

The children whined, to my bewilderment. They wanted the music to go on, but to me, the sounds were horrid, violating. It struck chords within me I did not know could be struck. However, I feared for the children's sensitivity more than my own, so since they desired the music, I gave it to them.

I opened the lid. The dissonant ruckus resumed.

Then, before my very eyes, the children ascended from their seats and began walking around the classroom.

"Hey," I sternly addressed them, but they ignored me. There was nothing I could say to obtain their attention. They were lost to some unknown control.

Like cattle, they stomped about the room, marching in every direction while changing paths often as their ways were impeded. There were two children who were unaffected by the inglorious enchantment; they stood in place, rooted in torrential terror while tears leaked from their eyes. They looked at me for help, but I did nothing.

I could have stopped the music instantly, just as I had initially, but something had now changed within me. There was curiosity; there was desire to let it all unfold.

This chaotic parade went on for an hour—with the astounding longevity of the music box's first windup—before the bodies of these children could bear no more exertion. They began either falling or lying down, and once upon the ground, they continued their march—feet moving in air, arms shifting, but their eyes were now closed. The two children who had been paralyzed

amongst the spectacle now ran to my desk at the front of the classroom and hid beneath it. I was standing in the corner of the room, mesmerized.

The music still played on.

While the children continued their motion-filled, non-distance-traversing procession, the ground began to tremble. And with its trembling, a doorway of falling, brittle ash cracked open within the ceiling. The ash poured down upon the children, covering them in soot and degradation.

Ash continued to fall from the portal, but it eventually lessened, and when it did, a husky monstrosity fell from the beyond. It landed with two acute feet on top of two of the children—on the back of one and the stomach of the other. The two children frothed a mixture of saliva and vomit from their mouths when the impact occurred, but still they did not break from their trance. There the thing resided for a few moments. Its legs were slender and insect-like and flexed in a compound of dense, compacted muscle. Connected to these powerful legs were its hooved feet, and despite this small-surface-area foundation, the creature's balance was impeccable—almost unreal; it stood with the stillness of death.

The torso of this fiend was thick—much thicker than its slim legs—and was covered in millions of smoldering follicles. Ash fell from these follicles as if there were an endless supply of meat inside the creature that combusted and oozed out through its pores. Affixed to the torso were two slithering tentacles—while its body and legs were motionless, these arms oscillated outwardly and unceasingly. Then there was its head: a module of erratic form. It looked as if it were the engine of this abomination, pumping with faceless features like a heart pumps within



the chest.

When the foreign thing began moving again, it was swift and nimble. It sped across the bellies and backs of the children, transferring its weight to those poor, young souls that were uncontrollably marching in the air. Each child that was stepped on spewed the same mixture of saliva and vomit that the first two had. At first it moved with no set direction. It pranced about and upon every child there below it while twirling its body abstractly.

The Child Walker traveled nowhere except upon the children; they were its stepping stones—its pathway into the world. Nowhere else could its evil be incarnate except upon such innocence. And the creature was not limited by the arrangement there upon the ground; it was not restricted by the twenty-two children spread before it. When the Child Walker arrived at its seeming boundary, it began grabbing children from the ground around it and placing them upon the path that it wished to journey. In this method, it used three children, leaving the rest.

After only a couple children had been placed anew, the Child Walker stood at my desk. It immediately, and with remarkable speed, reached around behind the desk and pulled out the two children unaffected by the music box. Then it started shaking them the way a dog shakes a rat until it dies. These little ones—who screamed and howled with insidious terror—died in that same manner, surely with the snapping of their necks—a sound that resounded quite cleanly in the otherwise silent environment. The Child Walker tossed these perished youths to the side and continued to move toward the classroom door by picking up and placing its collection of three children.

As I watched, a few brief tears fell from my eyes and a poison

of my body's own creation coiled around my innards, sending my gut on a warped jaunt of self-loathing and impeccable guilt. And yet, I still could not close the box and end the terrible music that continued to exude into the nightmare that had formed.

The Child Walker was now making headway. It was moving persistently down the halls of the school, one child at a time. It appeared to know where it was going and that it had a mission to complete.

I was to let it be—to let it carry out its creed. But finally—as the beast vanished and its deeds were left to my imagination—something turned inside me; something revealed a lost aspect of my old self. Sympathy had been reborn; concern had been rebuilt.

I closed the music box and ran after the Child Walker. I wanted to stop it.

But by the time I had reached the hideous creature, I was too late—although I had been too late long before that particular moment in time.

A pile of wretchedness lay before me. In walking upon the same three children over and over again, the Child Walker had worn them through, pounding further and further into them, causing their bodies to fall away with the final steps of the hoof-like feet. And with such folly, the Child Walker had been tainted and had fallen to the ground in a writhing mess. The ash from its body discharged forcefully and immensely into the air. It did not make a sound; even in its agony of both pain and failure, it made not a noise. Then the world around it—the network of all minor and major worlds as one—the world that now touched and embraced it with an evil more powerful than its own, banished it and claimed its rotten soul. Nothing but ash remained in the

Child Walker's stead.

As I stared at this brutal image of flesh and ash, I realized that my world—my personal, unique world—had gruesomely ended. My world was my children.