

The Hemlock Chronicles

A collection of short stories by

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Introduction

I don't know exactly how or why the first story came into my head, but I figured that there was no loss in writing it. The stories afterward just then came on their own shortly following. Now, I do you hope none of you misconstrue the topic at hand. These are merely thoughts and stories and little more. Do not worry about me, the actions that these stories represent in no way one I would advise anyone to repeat. Just think and enjoy!

Flight

My feet grip the cold, worn brick. Why did I decide to this barefoot? Glancing back to my shoes quickly, I feel the coarse brick sliding under my toes. I look at to the sky. A blue and white calico. A beautiful day. I look down at the scenery. It looks like a battlefield. The pockets of forest being flanked by the city, slowly shrinking in numbers as the buildings take over. Farmland far in the distance frames the battle. I can smell the river faintly. Its hard to miss with the smell of dying fish and caked rotting mud. The smell of the highway also assaults my senses... the exhaust of a million tired souls on their way home. Two rivers of sludge. I take a small step forward and look down. My toes curl around the very edge of the brick.

I can see the entire side of the building:

- ... Bird nests sprinkled on the ledge.
- ... Windows open in the spring air.
- ... Shouts permeating through.
- ... A squirrel gaining purchase on the brick.
- ... Doors opening and closing.
- ... Backpack-laden students wandering in and out.
- ... Life.

Eh, my thoughts wander to the night before. When I thought of this entire idea...

I have no cause to fight for,	No faith to preach for.
I have to emotions for the present,	No hope for the future.
I have to no reason to join,	No trivial sense to rebel.
I have no love for this life,	No fear for this death.

With that, I turn around, my back facing the battlefield. I slide back till my heels touch the cliff of the bricks. I glance at the solemn, gray, pebbled and worn roof.

I
jump.

I'm surprised it was that easy...

I'm surprised how rewarding this is...

To just let go....

No sound but the wind...

I wonder how high I was...

Thirty-two feet per second?

I stare at the calico sky.

I am flying.

Conversations

I am stuck.

You think with all the money they rake in, they could afford better pews. I sit in the middle row surrounded by my family: Pompous and Submissive on my left, Annoying and Immature on my right. As for me, my ass is asleep. We've already done the annoying kneel, sit, stand, routine. Is my soul saved yet? On the upside, its almost over... the Father ends his empty conversation with God with his last amen and shuffles out the door in grandpa steps, my family quickly gets up and follows.

We bundle up and head out to the car. Having our normal fight over the bitch seat. It goes to Annoying this time. I stare out the window as we drive home. The cold attacks the window. It looks so despairing outside. Wet, salty, and dirty. Who goes to church on Saturdays nights? My soul more attuned in the evening? What a wasted night. We drive home surrounded by more empty conversation.

We finally find ourselves at home. I quickly rush to my sanctuary. I close the door and immediately get the music playing. Why use organs when the crunch of a distorted bass is so much more soothing? Please turn your hymnals to something Metal... I grin as I collapse on my bed, the bed I haven't gotten a solid sleep in days. Eh, what am I going to do with my night? More nothingness in my sanctuary? Almost a shame we never got a computer, I can't even be a nerd when I sit at home on weekends. Only a loser. My favorite song comes on... hmm, the vocals don't have the same effect as they normally do, just more emptiness.

"Hey, Mom, I'm going to take a bath, just relax. Make sure the squirts don't bother me!" I shout as I sneak into the bathroom. I let the water run, filling the old-style, rusted tub with water. I slide into the warm water, wearing my swimming trunks. For what I was thinking, being clothed just felt right.

I lay back in the tub, letting the warmth flow around me. Why am I doing this? The emptiness.... Why are things empty? Thats just how they are.... Why?

That question received no answer. I pondered if it would be easier lying on my back or stomach.

I decide to lay on my stomach... more distance from my lungs to the air.

Did I even leave a note? No, should I? More empty words is all it would be. What about my family? Ah, they have Annoying and Immature... they don't need Depressed anymore... to hell with it.

Focused, I take one large, last, fulfilling breath and dive my face under the warm water. I remember playing the game of holding your breath in the pool as a kid, and realize that this will be harder than I thought. I can't just hold my breath and drown...

I breath through my nose and empty my lungs. Now what?

I must try to swallow the water... drown myself.

The burn in my lungs grows as I reach my limit.

I begin to swallow the water, my lips almost miming words. The water returns the welcome by filling my lungs slowly. Its a one sided conversation. The water is all.

I suddenly begin to choke and my head instinctively raises itself from the water. I reach over the side of the bathtub and begin coughing out the water.

Yet another empty conversation.

Nothingness

Create nothingness...

And people say an Art major isn't difficult. Lets see a physicist or accountant create nothingness. A vacuum and a zero is what you would get.

I stare at the canvas. How am I to draw nothing? Ironic, nothing is worth forty percent of our grade... I can see it now, some smartass will turn in a blank canvas and get a good grade. Or, with the same concept, they will just paint it black.

Where to start? Where does nothing begin? Where does it end?

I look at the window of my dorm and sigh. There we go... due to lack of inspiration. I will start there. A window.

Sharply defined, my window takes shape. I decide I don't care about the rest of the background and fill it full of harsh, heavy strokes of dark paint. My window will be my lightsource. Soon, the light is pouring in and filling in dark canvas.

Now I need to define a setting... a window could be anywhere. Nothing comes to mind... I chuckle at the irony. I set down my brush and look around my dorm again. The first thing that comes to my sight is my bed. Eh... it works. A bedroom.

I quickly create the floor and roughly define the shape of the room. Most of it being in darkness, only the bed is caught up in the light. I gain more inspiration from my room and keep the bed unmade. I make sure to keep the bed ambiguous... nothing to imply what sex the occupant was. No need for people to make assumptions... assumptions lead to the viewer making their own story for my painting instead of seeing my meaning.

Now what? I look at my bedroom... no other muse creeps out. I look at my painting. I have a dark room lighted by a window. Is this nothing?

I'm on the verge of breaking the window and setting the bed aflame in darkness when it comes to me....

Revelation day.

The day everyone reveals their lovely nothingness. The teacher walks by as the artists remove the white sheet covering their work. She looks and critiques and then scribbles on her clipboard. I watch as she critiques one white canvas, shaking her head, one black canvas, again disappointment written on her face. She finds a delicately painted black hole and a rusty old swingset satisfying. Then she comes to mine. I unveil my work.

She scans it like a computer, slowly going down, absorbing it:

The light drifts in from the lone window. It fights away only a section of the darkness. Highlighting the unmade bed and a lone figure sitting on it. Their back is to the window, casting all of their features in shadow. One can easily see the pained expression on the person's face and the glint of spent tears traveling down the cheek. You can make out both hands of the shadowed figure. One is lying palm up along their knee, the other arm is coming up from the first with something in its hand. The light catches it and frames it. Something metal shining and glinting. But it not a pure silver, there is a taint running from its peak. A red taint, traveling down the utensil and dripping onto the hand that holds it. The light returns to the upturned arm. The shadowed flesh is pale as a jagged creek of blood flows from it and cascades onto the dark floor.

The teacher, on the verge of tears, "This.... this is nothingness."

End

Iuvenesco and Detritus sit on the Border, watching the Confused. They sit in nothingness and watch the wandering.

Breaking the silence, Detritus finally asks, "Do you ever sit and ponder the fates of these few?"

"Old friend, of course I am concerned with these poor ones." replies Iuvenesco.

"Have you ever thought about their point in this design of ours? What are the needed for?" Detritus questions.

"They are teachers, sources of enlightenment and wisdom."

Puzzled, "How do the Confused teach?"

"Confusion is the fuel of wisdom my friend. Just as chaos fuels harmony..."

"I thought Confusion was one of my tools?"

"You misunderstand, look for yourself," he gestures at those wandering.

Many are sitting at the edge, pondering. Some haphazardly walk along it. A few unfortunates find themselves hanging onto the dangerous crag, trying not to lose their grip. One or two, almost joyfully, leap into the abyss.

Iuvenesco explains, "The Confused lie on the border. Neither yours nor mine. What those poor souls do with their confusion is what makes them teachers. Confusion can lead to understanding. Understanding to wisdom."

"Ah... it can also lead to misunderstanding and despair?"

"Correct, my friend."

Still confused, Detritus asks, "But the majority of those suffering lean toward despair, they end up mine. Despair does not breed wisdom. How are they teachers?"

"Consider for a moment, those poor beings that are lead to despair by confusion, consider the souls that knew those beings, were touched by them, affected, loved. They are saddened yes, but they learn a new outlook on their lives. A new attitude, a new appreciation. A new understanding."

"It sounds to me like we've stacked the deck and not in my favor. Even when a soul crosses the Border, it is a benefit to those left behind. Even a loss is a benefit?"

Iuvenesco sighs, "You misunderstand, old friend, this is not about winning."

"So, in other words, I'm never going to win?" Detritus scowls.

Iuvenesco merely chuckles.