

THE SHADOW OF THE WOLF

Anthony Barnhart

I

They tell me how tragic it is and wonder how such horrible things can happen in such a beautiful world. I let them talk. I nod my head and act like I agree. If it makes them feel any better, I'll do it; I will displace my own disconsolate fears, my own terrible knowledge, and maybe when I nod, I *will* agree, and think this is all but a dream, some sweet-smelling, noxious nightmare of which I will be relieved with the next wisp of air. Perhaps I should climb the bridge of Clearcreek and jump off; maybe that will wake me up. I stood on that bridge once, my clothes being tugged back and forth in a stalwart breeze, and I saw those waters, thought, *I'll awake before I hit... And everything will be as it's supposed to be...* I did not jump. Because the moon crawled nigh and the wind died down, and I heard them that night, heard them in Clearcreek; that night I made my way down under the bridge, hardly breathed, clenched my eyes shut, prayed and prayed, wondering if my frantic pleas were touching any substance. Maybe they did; I say this because I woke to water dripping on my face and sunlight stretching its ivory tentacles underneath the bridge. The birds were singing, the sky was blue, and the moon had crossed to the other side of the world. I haven't returned to the bridge, and every time I drive over it on my way to the farmhouse, I can still hear them crying, calling, still hear it, and it scares me. It scares me even in the daylight.

You do not know who I am. It is better that way. I will make a conscious attempt to not place my name anywhere on this memoir. If you found me, chances are, it would be my own downfall. I cannot let that happen. So forgive me for not giving my name, but please accept what I *will* give you. I am nineteen years old, I am a senior at Clearcreek High, and I planned on going to college, but if I ever step foot on campus, it will be digging my own grave. My parents are perplexed, bewildered, so confused, wondering why I would refuse to go to college and instead take up a full-time job at a fast food restaurant in town. My sister says I am crazy, because she's worked at fast food for two years and hates it. I have been sent to a psychiatrist who treats me for depression and anxiety. She has grilled me about my childhood, and at first I told her the truth, but when I realized this was going nowhere, I started playing with her, just enjoying my counseling as best I can. No one can cure me of my constant hopelessness; the dejection comes from knowing what I know. From knowing that it is not *I* who am sick, but it is those who accuse

me of being out of my league who are in desperate need of treatment. I don't think they make pills for this, though. I can't imagine they do.

I decided to write this after seeing what my eyes fell upon this very morning. Three nights ago, the night had come, the night I dread with every moment of wake and sleep, the night when I lock myself in, turn down the lights, crawl down between my bed and the wall, and wait for the night to pass, hope my ritual had wormed its way to effectiveness, and so terrifyingly wait for the morning to dawn. Three mornings ago there had been shock and revelation, as seventeen bodies were discovered in the Clearcreek area alone. All over the world, the count is unbearable. The President addressed the nation once again, speaking of how Federal and World authorities are trying to pin down the syndicate of murderers who strikes in every major city, town and village worldwide when certain nights come. I just watched his haggard face and knew that life will never be the same again.

My father and I stood in the deepening summer sun, gathered about in suits and ties, amidst men and women and children. My mother had been unable to show her face, so stricken with untouchable grief, and my sister the same. So we had driven in the car, driven through the town, saw the flags at half-mast, heard the wine-indulged grieving, and listened to a CD in the truck. We gathered upon the turf, amidst tombstones covered with moss and ivy, graying under the boredom of time. The pastor spoke of love and charity, of the justice of God, and the deep and unfathomable compassion of the Christ. I bowed my head and stared at my feet, the pastor's voice running through one ear and out the other, distant and detached. My soul had fallen into a rut, a hopeless existence, wondering how long it would be until my luck vaporized before me and their teeth sunk into my flesh; my skin crawled at the thought of *becoming like them*. How horrible a thought must be to make bile rise in the throat, to make the head pulsate in bitter agony, to make one wish he were dead and lain in the grave before him!

The coffin was a closed casket. They always are. The murderers are brutal men—or women—, de-facing the innocent victims, tearing them apart, mutilating them beyond all cognitive recognition. I have never seen it myself, for I have only ventured out once on the night, and I spent that night cowering under a bridge while a summer's rain fell all about me, just listening to the cries and howls and staring through the downpour, seeing the town's lights shimmering over scattered woodlands and plaid farm-land. It is surprising no one has suggested the real cause of this, the real murderers; I would speak out, but I know that, somehow, it would be, as I have said, digging my own grave. Yet this grave is not one where you rest, but where you exist, tormented and tortured all the days of your life, wondering if you are sane, afraid to speak

your mind, telling yourself you are crazy, and drowning in a wallow of misery and self-pity.

The first report is legendary. It came from the dark countryside around Colongne and Bedburg, 1591, somewhere in the shadowy forests of Germany. Nearing the 1600s, Europe was under a murky shadow of blatant ignorance and crackpot superstitions. Cities were rare; most towns were a collection of huts and fires, a few scattered farms amidst the vast woodlands. In those deep woods, nature had spawned devilish creatures who in turn birthed fear in all who lived among them. Their attacks were so frequent that people even feared to travel from one place to another. Peasants would make sure their children were inside, and they would lock the doors, cover the windows, smolder the candles, and wait for morning to pass; with the dawn's first spastic light, the villagers would discover something to chill the bones of even the most magnificent warrior poet: half-eaten human limbs in the wheat and corn fields. No doubt they looked to the dark forests and felt a pervading fear unlike any American can imagine. A coalition formed, and the villagers decided, once and for all, to kill the bloodthirsty creatures; whether these desires spewed forth due to rage at the ghastly killings, a thirst for heroic status amongst the towns, or in deep remorse over lost companions, many men gathered together and decided they would end the spree and work to live normal lives—relatively *fearless* lives—once again. It was one of these nights that the villagers of Colongne and Bedburg, armed with pitchforks and harvesting scythes, made a gall-turning discovery that altered the entire history of hunting these rabid creatures.

It is an ancient, cryptic pamphlet that reveals to us what happened on that god-awful night. A few heroic men cornered one of the animals, thrusting their weapons toward it, howling and cajoling, feeling mighty powerful as the animal cringed, its eyes sparkling with dew fear. The villagers' dogs barked and snarled, and they released the ropes; the dogs set upon the creature, and the villagers rushed forward with their sticks and spears. The animal did not flee deeper into the woodland, but bared its teeth and... I struggle now even to write what happened, and I ask forgiveness if my writing is too rough to be legible. The animal transformed before them, shifting its shapes like a phantom, drawing the darkest shadows of the woods to its forms; the dogs whimpered and ran away into the forest, none ever seen again. The creature of unimaginable terror loomed before them, and inspired by their own terror, the villagers went to it on the animal, pinning it down and holding it at their mercy. The new creation confessed, its voice dripping with embittered malice: "Peter Stubbe."

Stubbe was dragged through the forest, dragged to the village, and before all the weeping villagers, found himself thrown upon and tied to the torture

wheel. The villagers angrily commenced the gruesome torture, and Stubbe confessed: "Sixteen." Sixteen murders, not excluding two pregnant women and thirteen children. Upon the torture wheel, he revealed even more. Since twelve years old he had mingled and messed in sorcery, and was so inspired by its magical concoctions that he tried to make a pact with the Devil, Satan himself. Satan supposedly revealed to him a magic girdle, which he wore as supplement to attack his enemies, real or imaginary, for bloody revenge. Many months passed, and he took on his guise as the wolf, increasing the brutality of this deep-rooted, devilish evil. In this form, the Devil taught him the essentials of his new identity, and he wore it with relish: he would tear up the victims' throats and suck warm blood, letting their body fluids run down his cheeks and stain his beard, their life energy pouring into him, strengthening his power. His thirst for blood grew and grew to abominable proportions, and he roamed the fields in search of prey, a wicked quest for blood.

The savagery of his crimes is too great to be comprehended. It is rumored that two men from a distant village entered a hut, grabbed a woman, and dragged her out of the village and into the forest, to rape and kill her in the silence of the night. As they threw her down into the bushes and began to tear her clothes, a sweet-song voice called to them from the woods. One of the men, panicky that they had been caught, drew a knife and followed after the voice, determined to kill the one who had made the detestable discovery. The other man held the girl down with the tip of his knife; a shriek resounded through the woods, and driven by fear, the other man leapt up and ran into the trees to avenge his friend. The woman lurched to her feet and sprinted away, blindly running, hearing the sounds of tearing flesh and staccato cries floating between the trees. The next morning, upon hearing the cries of the night, mortified villagers of the nearby towns entered the forest; a horrible sight befell them: two mangled corpses. The woman was never found; Stubbe admitted upon the torture wheel to having completely consumed her corpse. Little girls playing in the fields bordering the forest or who milked the cows in the barns were frequent victims, wisped away in the darkness, their bodies being found in tree boles, strewn about the rocks of streams, or never found at all. Stubbe confessed to chasing them like a hound, howling to scare them; he would reach the closest one, throw her down, rape and kill her. As her ravaged corpse lay at his feet, bleeding from the many wounds, he would lick her blood and eat the supple flesh of their bodies. Stubbe, in tears, admitted to the most grotesque crimes of them all: he tore his *own son* from his bed, dragged him outside, cracked his skull upon a tree, and scooped the brains from his scalp and ate the son's brain off his own fingers.

The villagers, horrified at what he had confessed, came to the conclusion that no known punishment could even *begin* to match the enormity of Stubbe's fiendish crimes. From the time he was first put on the torture wheel and all the way through the sinister words spoken in a broken voice, hours passed; they never released him from the wheel, but till nightfall tortured him, eventually flaying him alive, pulling his tender flesh off with red-hot pincers. As he lay flayed upon the table, his legs were broken with blunt hoes, and as he looked up into the stars, under the cries and wails of the peasants, what thoughts ran through his stained mind, the axe blade piercing his neck and ending the monstrosities the village had endured for many months? Brave men bloodied their hands upon his flesh, dragging his body through the streets to the courtyard, where the blaze that consumed the minion's flesh reached high into the night sky, casting warning glows all over the surrounding forest, a pinnacle of hope in a world of ash and brimstone. His daughter, who had somehow survived her father's rampages, and Stubbe's own mistress, were not only forced to watch the torture of their beloved, but they also burned alive next to him, screaming for mercy, but finding none.

News of Stubbe's malignant atrocities reached the Magistrate of Bedburg; driven by deep loss and sorrow, the magistrate ordered the construction of a grim monument in remembrance of the deep-seated horrors and swift justice: the torture wheel was set upon a tall pole with Stubbe's rotting and skinned head above it. As Roman candles burned, they revealed wolfish curves and angles of his beaten face. Sixteen long wooden pieces were hung from the wheel's rim in an honorable remembrance of the poor lost souls of the victims, whom now resided in the paradise of Jesus the Christ. The words Stubbe muttered and the great justice of the execution sprinted across the lands; his brutality, his ways, and the atrocities he committed were beyond experience. Many did not believe the tales, the un-told mysteries surrounding the murders. His ferocity paralleled the grim ways of the mystical wolf. Some people began to believe that there were men who lived in the shadows of the wolves, and these men, these *creatures*, they called: "Werewolves."

Father and I stood near the back of the crowd, and my father bowed his head, tears streaming down his face, running along the ridgeline of his nose. He squeezed my shoulder, attempting to wear down my own sorrow. A tear of my own concoction fell to the grass, but not despair for the one being lain into the grave, but for the one still living. Her nightmare was over. Mine would continue. Another night would come. The calendar would foretell it so well. I turned my head, felt Father squeezing my shoulder, and I looked up, past the grief-stricken mourners, past the jutting stone monuments, past the iron gate, and looked to the foothills, laden with thick trees and vines, flowers and glens of deep grass that waved in the whispers of nature. I looked to the great sun

shining down upon our little earth and felt anger. I felt anger that I was here, anger that I was all alone, anger that God would—could!—let something like this happen... mostly, anger that I was alive.

We drove across that bridge, the creek waters swirling among the polished rocks, and dad spoke: “Every night I pray. I pray that this will end. I wonder why God would allow such a thing to happen, why God would let people do such things. I do believe that God’s ways will triumph, but you have to wonder, how long? How long will we have to wait? My faith feels paper-thin, like I’m walking on thin ice, threatening to break through and drown, freeze to death. I am terribly afraid. What if your sister is the next victim? Or your mother? Or me? Or God refuse it, you? Michelle, such a precious child, taken in the night. They found her on the steps of the school; an arm was gone, lying in the gutter, and she had bled to death. What kinds of people can just... just tear the arms off girls?” He shook his head, tears watering, struggling to keep clear eyes on the twisting road. “Her father and her mother, her family... This has to end. This is worldwide, and it has to end. It’s been months now. Every month it happens again-”

I reached over and took the wheel, the thought of his ramblings sending us off the road not sitting well within my stomach. “Do you want me to drive?”

He wiped his eyes. “No. No. I’m okay. Really. I’m fine. I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

I sat back in my seat and watched the trees flash by on the side of the road. “Neither do I.”

Three nights past, the Full Strawberry Moon blossomed, the June’s full moon taking shape in a twilight sky. The Full Strawberry Moon’s name birthed from the Algonquin Tribe in the States; in Europe it is called the Rose Moon. It is in June when strawberries can be picked, so they christened June’s full moon the strawberry moon. It sickens me.

II

July is the month when the new antlers of buck deer push out of their foreheads in sweeping cushions of velvety hair; the full moon of July has been coined the Full Buck Moon. It’s also called the Full Thunder Moon, as thunderstorms are most frequent during this time of year. Yet another name for this month’s full moon is the Full Hay Moon. Full Hay Moon, Full Thunder Moon, Full Buck Moon... either way, it is approaching fast, and I must make my preparations. There are some things that I can afford to be lenient and casual about, things I can flippantly delay, but when the moon’s waxing draws nigh, I am forced by the rhythms of nature to prepare for what

might come; no, not what *might* come, but what *shall* come. It is but a few days from now.

Mother and Father enrolled me in a summer course so I can pick up a course I missed in world history. I have said I am a senior, and this is true; I finished my junior year the beginning of last month, and begin senior-year schooling come the end of August. I was held back a grade for low test scores and floundered in Kindergarten. In many ways, I am thankful; had I been at college *now*, when I am *supposed* to be at college, I might be unable to write this, instead locked within a paradigm of shifting shadows and lurking nightmares. The world history class is in many ways an escape; for a moment I learn about times when life made sense, when God was seen as loving and merciful, when people really loved people, when one could sleep outside without fear, when one could go on long walks at midnight, under a ripe moon, and sing praises to the Creator.

Yet today was not one of those days. We discussed ancient Greek and Roman mythology, and almost laughingly, the teacher brought up the ancient Greek belief in multiple gods, not excluding the infamous Zeus. He spoke to us of great tales that lit up the ancient stars, which traced webs of purpose through the cosmos. He told us one story that made my blood curdle, a story of the god Zeus disguising himself as a traveler, seeking for hospitality in the court of the sadistic Arcadian King Lycaon; the King recognized the god despite the elaborate disguise and tried to kill him. How so? Lycaon served Zeus human flesh; but Zeus smelled through the trap and did not feast. Outraged that Lycaon would so feverishly work to dupe him out, Zeus destroyed the Arcadian King's palace and condemned him to spend the rest of his life as a wolf. This mythology coined the word *Lycanthrope*.

"Lycanthrops, as you all know, is the name we have for the werewolf."

Several kids chuckled, glancing about the room, shaking their heads.

"Werewolves, as you all know, are not real," the teacher said (for superstition is not to be taught in schools). "But who puts stock in any of this ancient mythology, anyways?"

I am positive several off-the-cuff glances were thrown my direction when I raised a feeble hand and politely asked if I could make a run to the restroom. I crawled from the classroom and slid against the wall, breathing hard, my mind screaming, *Two nights, two nights*. The Thunder Moon was coming upon me.

I had made a new friend ever since I came to grips with the new world about me. I will not give you his name—or her name?—because you may track him—or her?—down and demand to know who I am. I will tell you, however, why I contacted and befriended him—or her? Let's just say it is a *her*. She is known about my high school as one to approach when the desire to purchase drugs runs nigh; many people around our school are in the business, but she

was my first choice because she can keep her mouth shut and won't make a scene when a poor nobody like myself scrounges up a few bucks for a measly bottle of cloudy-blue liquid. The liquid is called gamma hydroxyl butyrate, but you might know it as G.H.B., "G" (as is most common), Liquid E, Georgia Home Boy, Liquid Ecstasy ("...it is *not* ecstasy," she tells me), or Cherry Meth. I am personally partial to Organic Quaalude.

Organic Quaalude is a clear liquid, looks just like water, except the kind she sells me has a bluish tint to it; why, I'm not sure. It can be mistaken for water, as it is most often kept in water bottles; she sells me mine in washed and re-used Gatorade bottles. Any of these bottles contains several doses; if you just take a drop on your tongue, that very moment you will know it's not water. She tells me she has a powder form she can give me, too, but for my purposes it is not fitting.

In most cases, G.H.B. acts as a stimulant: intoxication, uppity energy, happiness, a longing to socialize, feeling more affectionate and playful, sensuality and enhanced sexual experience. I don't know any of these firsthand, because the Cherry Meth she sells me does just the opposite—it knocks you out. In a few minutes you will be sleepy, then you'll swoon, and you'll be out for—and I have timed it—up to half a day at a time. Usually a few hours is all I need. A few hours and the nightmare has passed.

I thank her for the bottle, and she gives me a flippant "You're welcome."

I am writing this in my journal at school, and I'm afraid someone will see me writing about drugs and confiscate it. Then everything would be ruined. My plans would be burned before my eyes. And no one would know what horrible acts they commit when the Thunder Moon descends upon the sleepy woods and farmland of Clearcreek. I must close the journal now. The teacher is coming towards me. I will tell you of my success; if I fail, you shall never hear of me again.

III

Oh God! The sounds they make! The howling of the man-beast cannot be fathomed by virgin ears, cannot be imagined by even the greatest philosopher of any day and age, cannot be described in any human words which would give it its supreme justice. Mine eyes have heard the cries of the wolves and coyotes, deep in the mountains of Tennessee, amidst the pearl mists and coal mines, but the sounds coming from human mouths, of no excitable origin, cannot be compared. I lay beside my bed and the wall, crouched down under a blanket; the air is stifling hot, but still I freeze, as my body panics in a million different ways, mind running a marathon of grim possibilities. Oh, I can hear

them outside the closed window, and wouldn't, not even for the life of romance I so desperately seek, peer out that great window; I am fortunate to have seen them only once or twice, and the nightmares of their grisly appearance reign in my nightmares and dreamscapes. I do pray with everlasting fervor that they do not find a way inside, do not find a way to break that window, for I do not wish to be laid to rest in a closed casket, barred from all eyes and whispered about in the shadows, mourned in hypocrisy and shallow desperation.

I do not fear my family. They are safe, sleeping soundly, and for this I am so deeply thankful. I shall tell you of my actions, actions that have perhaps saved my family's life. For just as Stubbe had killed his own son, I fear that my own father could kill my sister; or my sister my mother; or my mother my father. All are possessed by the daemons that hide behind charming smiles and quaintly picturesque eyes. Mom was pleased when I announced I was fixing my chef specialty, chicken quesadillas (I have learned the recipe in food and nutrition class); they all sat at the table as I served them their quesadillas, and I interrogated them for what drinks they would like. Dad said water; Mom a diet coke; and my sister wanted iced tea. I gathered their drinks in the corner, and standing in the shadow of the refrigerator, took a dropper, filled it with Organic Quaalude, and placed miniscule droplets inside the drinks, letting the blue liquid diffuse amidst the ice cubes and liquid. I served them their drinks, and they took them kindly; I poured myself a glass of milk, and we sat down, talking about school and work and life, laughing, Dad cracking his crude jokes and Mom politely asking him to stop. No one noticed my eyes keep sweeping to the great dining room windowpanes, beyond the treetops as the brilliant orb of sunlight pressed farther and farther down, behind the trees, throwing its rays between the trunks and limbs, casting wanton glows all over the rusted swing set, the crumbling porch and the ivy-laden brick of our ranch-style home. Mom said she was tired, asked if I would clean it up, I said yes. Dad said he was feeling drowsy and followed her up to their room. My sister said nothing, but left the table, destination: her room. I watched them go, felt the darkness passing through the windows, and set to work.

I did not finish my meal. I went into the garage, kept my eye upon the doggy door, our little Siberian Husky watching me with a wagging tail the entire time. The outside freezer box felt quite heavy, but I moved it well, revealing a hidden stash behind: a few dozen wooden planks, constructed from thin floorboards nailed together in cross-section lattice. I carried them inside the house, locked the door leading into the garage, locked the front door and closed the latch on the French doors opening to the deck we never use, and set to covering the windows with the wooden boards. I do not know the time when I finished, but despite my thirst, did not pause for even the briefest drink.

My sister was sleeping soundly in her room, breathing deep, laying atop the covers. I covered her own window, tucked her in, kissed her on her clammy forehead, and shut the door, boarding it up and making sure no one could get in—or out. I went to my parents' bedroom, found my mother sleeping beneath my father; he had simply fallen atop of her, knocked out. Both were breathing shallow, just as expected; I removed him from her, hefting his heavy body downstairs, setting it on the bed in the guest room. Stepping back, I saw the skin on his arms growing a deeper, rougher hue, and the hair beginning to elongate. My heart began to hammer, for I realized I was running behind schedule. All the windows were boarded up, but I knew the great Thunder Moon was rising high into the twilight. I boarded up the door, for it was a windowless room, in the same way I had done with my sister's room: no one in, no one out. Mother was covered with blankets, but the blankets wrapped around her were shifting positions. I quickly boarded the windows, heard her shallow breathing become ragged, and with shaking arms did the door—no one in, no one out. I abandoned the door and crept to my room, shutting the door and locking it, not boarding it up, in case an escape would be needed. I prayed to any superior being that could hear me that such a detestable thing could not happen.

I boarded my own window, turned off the lights, am now burning only a solitary tea-light; I have a bag of tea-lights and a Zippo I received in Kentucky for Christmas; I keep the light burning all night, just enough for bare warmth and quaint reassurance. I can hear them outside, and I can almost hear my family's stifled breathing. I look at the far wall, knowing beyond it lie my sister, malformed from her beauty into a creature of unplumbed revulsion. The very thought makes me shiver, and I hold my head low, knowing how terrible it all is, knowing it is worldwide, and worst of all, knowing there is absolutely nothing I can do to stop it.

My fingers are hurting, the bones icy cold and the flesh feeling as if it were peeling from the tendons. I must stop writing, for my strokes are becoming unintelligible, and my own heart is pounding harder and harder with each letter added to this ghastly memoir. I will wait out the night, cold and desperate, watching the digital clock slowly tick back the time, until the sun breaks and life returns to normalcy—and another odd-dozen corpses, mutilated and ravaged, are discovered all around Clearcreek. And everyone will sob and mourn and wonder how such atrocities could happen in this technologically advanced day-and-age; and many will cry and pout and watch loved ones descend into the earth, oblivious and unknowing to the brutal truth that they may, indeed, be the one whose hands tore open flesh and drank the warm blood, howling like a banshee under the Thunder Moon.

IV

There is no future. What do I have to look forward to, what hopes and dreams and passions can fill my thoughts when the world's umbilical noose tightens around me? A friend told me it would be Hell on earth to be stuck in a room with no way out, no hope to die, nothing to look forward to. I drive down the packed streets, stand in line at the grocery market, watch CNN nightly news, and suddenly the most awful misery ever known comes over me. When my family sleeps, and I am the only one awake in the house, I often find myself standing at the large dining room windows, staring into the darkness, meeting my own reflection. My friend was right. I will spend the rest of my life trying to find ways to keep my family safe, trying to invent new formulas for keeping my own flesh untouched with the risings of the Moon. I do not know if there is a god or gods—or goddesses—but I *do* believe there is a Heaven and a Hell. I have always imagined Heaven as this ultimate paradise, a place of striking waterfalls, breathtaking canyons, open blue skies, jungles and mesas and prairies, animals of all shapes and sizes, friends and family, and most of all a place where I will not have to sleep with one eye open; a place where I can lie down in green pastures, the sun on my face, and have no worries, no cares, no fiendish dreams to sink their teeth into me as my soul sleeps. Suicide, I think, is not a straight-ticket to Hell, but on the same token, I think it is a sin; I don't want to stand in Heaven under the eyes of the god or gods or goddesses with the knowledge that I—a coward—took my own life; I don't want that to hang over my shoulders. So I feel condemned; condemned to live out a life of hopelessness and sorrow, anxiety and despair, void of the beauty life was meant to have.

The ache, too, is unbearable; the ache of having to go it alone. I cannot speak to anyone of this; and in my own silence, I must contemplate: can there be others who, like me, know of the state of our human species, and yet must remain quiet lest they, too, fall at the hands of the daemons stalking in our own skin and bones? Is it possible that in my own town, my own neighborhood, *on my own street*, there is someone who has so far evaded the murderous phenomenon, and, like me, feels so alone, so lost with a vacant hope of being found, so desperate and without reliant vision? The very thought tears me up; I want to search, want to explore, but my own selfish fears—and the selfish fears for the well-being of my beloved family—render me incapable of such a quest. And so I am scourged by my own cowardice, my back is flayed to the bone, and I am left writhing and bleeding because I am too worried about tangent possibilities to pursue any course of action that may shed light on my own state of anonymity. I am thinking now, and nodding: yes, yes, it is very possible, most *likely*, that there are others—many

others—like me. I am not an exceptionally bright person; I am just a dumb high school kid enrolled in summer school; I am not someone who has the cards of survival stacked in my favor. And yet I have survived! There must be others!

Yet if I went out on a limb to root them from their hiding places, it would be a very difficult task. For those who are... possessed?... and those who are not do not differ in appearance, except when the shadows darken and the full Moon glows bright. Those possessed do not know of their own predicament; they go about their life, completely oblivious, driven by the desire to succeed, a love for family, and a passion for life. They drive their cars, drink their coffee, buy their books at the bookshops, go to the movie theaters and talk on their cell phones. They plan parties, call off sick to go golfing, dream of romance and bondage. They smile and laugh and frown and pout. They cry and mourn for those taken under the full Moon, and complain to God for vengeance; if there is a God, I believe He probably feels between a rock and a hard place.

Mom is calling me down for supper. I bought the powdered G.H.B. I will slip it into their spaghetti when they are crowding the garlic bread coming out of the oven. The Red Moon rises in a few hours, but the clouds are heavy and dark, so I don't know if it is really red or not. The Indians called it the Red Moon because it looked red in the August haze. Raindrops are hitting my window. My thoughts are beginning to scramble. They always do when the night draws close. I must go. I think Mom is getting the garlic bread from the oven.

[the writing changes from pencil to pen]

Thank God I cannot hear them: the wind is high and the rain is coming down hard. Thunder bounces down our street every few seconds, some shaking the house, causing the tea light flames to flicker; once a burst struck so hard and close it felt as if the ground were swallowing the house up, and the little tea light flipped over, spilling wax all over the carpet, and I had to grope around in the darkness for another tea light and the Zippo. The boarded windows offered no light from the obvious lightning bursts. Now I lay between my bed and my wall, thinking of my family, writing in the candle-light, hearing the thunder and feeling the house vibrate with each skyward cackle. No one noticed the powder, and they went out quicker this time, actually falling asleep at the table. I started laughing right then, seeing them all sleeping at the table, heads bowed before their plates of spaghetti, the garlic bread everyone was so eager to get; Dad knocked over his glass of water. Now Dad is downstairs, locked in the guest room; Mom is sleeping on the bed, and my sister is in her own room. I shall remain awake all morning, and when dawn breaks, and normalcy almost returns, I will move Dad

upstairs, take down the boards over the windows, unlock all the doors, and climb into my bed, staring out the window, so thankful for the precious light breaking scattered storm clouds. Mom and Dad and my sister will complain of piercing headaches and attribute it to the spaghetti, because I didn't eat any and I will feel fine.

V

I can only hope my writing is legible, as I am more excited than you can imagine! Before I tell you the most awesome news ever discovered in the last few months, I will tell you what happened this morning. I fell asleep during the storm last night, and awoke to my alarm clock. You don't even know the kind of insatiable fear that swept through me; I barricaded out of my room to hear my sister banging her hands on her door, demanding to be let free; I heard Mom yelling from her own room, and Dad was coming up the steps, rubbing his temples, wincing, muttering incantations under his breath. I stood ashen-faced in the hallway; he saw me and demanded to know what was going on. Part of me wanted to tell him I didn't know, but I knew he would follow up any of my stories, find out there were no facts to back it up, and turn on me like a rabid dog. So I told him that I was sorry I had to do it, I thought it would be funny, and I would never do it again. He stood there at the top of the steps, steam pouring from his ears, and finally he said, "Help me get these boards off the doors. I'm going to be late for work and so is your mom." So we tore off the boards and we let them out. Mom said she was going to ground me, and Dad backed her up; my sister was late to a dance rehearsal and left angry, not being able to wash up and suffering an excruciating headache.

As he was leaving, Dad turned to me and said that he was going to personally burn the boards when he returned home and strip locks off the doors. He left saying nothing more, and Mom cast me a wonton stare before disembarking for town.

But that doesn't matter. I may not be able to board up the rooms, I may not be able to lock the bedroom doors, but I still have the Organic Quaalude, and I can knock them out and move them around. Unthinkably, they have not figured out that part of the equation. So my plans, despite any fears I may have had, are not in jeopardy; in fact, I do believe light is beginning to burst at the end of the tunnel. After I stashed this journal under my bed, I got into my closet and so quietly pulled out a radio I forgot was stashed underneath several layers of old clothes. I turned it on, hearing only static; no doubt most of the news stations had by now already succumbed to this demoniac, monthly

plague. And so I sat in the darkness, under the glow of a waning tea light, turning the frequency knob on the radio, just passing time in the thunder, listening to snow and static, when I heard it. My heart skipped a beat, then another, as greedy fingers retraced their paths on the knob, and out came the clear voice. A *human* voice! Not a recording! A voice clear as day, a voice with intent and purpose, a voice filled with brutal determination and lurid emotion. A voice that did not belong to a machine. A voice telling me, with great explicitness, that a cure is in the works and that anyone who has not fallen to the virus—so it's a virus?—is being beckoned to a little sector of survival; anyone who has lasted this long, they say, undoubtedly has professional knowledge in the art of defense against these black creatures of the Moon's night. They gave me a place, and I have searched it up on the internet, have found directions, and must go. I would tell you where it is, but I cannot, for the risk of this notebook being found is too great; the risk is there, the risk that I will be cornered by compassionate men and women and restrained for my own good, barred from all hope of an existence not etched in cowardice and famine. I have much planning to do. I want to laugh, to sing, to dance, to run! No words can express the brilliant, vibrant, unquenchable emotions running through my body, be it emotionally, physically, spiritually, mentally, and so I will not do injustice to this beautiful emotion by writing more. I have much thinking to do, much scheming and planning, and cannot waste my time on a pointless journal!

VI

I just hope they do not get in! With each vicious assault, the flimsy walls shake and dust falls in torrents from the cross-beamed ceiling. The dust covers me, my pen, and the yellowing pages of this journal as I scribble my thoughts and fears and wonder: how long until dawn? All emotion save for that of indescribable fear has abandoned me, and I itch all over, lying hidden beneath cubes of hay, suspended in darkness except for a miniature flashlight; if I were to bring my Zippo and tea lights into this place, I would send the building down. I cower, coughing and half-suffocating, the flashlight casting the shadow of my profile against the narrow hay, and I am thankful I do not suffer from the fear of small spaces; for now I am wedged in on all sides by nylon rope and bristling hay, eyes watering in this putrid environment; and they keep trying to get in, hurling their ragged bodies against the large doors, which I have padlocked, and the walls; there is one window high above the cavernous swinging doors, but unless they learn how to climb trees, they shan't be getting in that way, either. I do not think they are too smart. I do not

want to revisit all that has happened, but I will, for maybe it will draw my conscious away from the brief sounds of splintering wood; I will tell you of what has happened ever since I received that fatal radio transmission, all the way to why I am stuck hiding in this barn, out in the middle of nowhere, wondering if tonight is my night to join the ranks of those possessed by this gloomy evil. The door shudders again; any moment now, any moment now...

The Clearcreek Police filed a *Missing Persons* report four days after the eighth wave of serial killings; since I had been at school a day after one of the full moons, the police knew I was not an unfortunate victim. In one way I am thankful for the brutality of this infernal plague, for a missing person is not so pressing as the constant, bewildering, maddening syndicate manhunt in an effort to put a stop to the bloody fields pressed all over the world. My escape goes as thus: the third night after the Thunder Moon, I went to bed like everyone else, feigned sleep, and when Father finished watching his *Seinfeld* DVDs, put up his bowl of ice crème and stale chocolate cake, I opened my window, grabbed my leather bag I had received for Christmas, and jumped down, crouching beside the tree to make sure no one was watching from any of the windows or down the street. The bag had been stuffed to the brim with clothes, sorted food (dried fruit, beef jerky, candy bars and canned goods from the neighborhood-friendly local gas station), my notebook, a flashlight, and a paper overlaid with fastidious scribbling; these scribbles looked like a chaotic swirl of mindless dots, dashes, thoughts and ideas, but in reality was a painstakingly-detailed map: a map guiding me to salvation. Masked in the shadows of the night, dark clouds blotting out the sun and stars, I ran over to my own car, opened the door, threw my bag in, slid inside; with the door open, I closed my eyes, heart shuddering, mind a fumbling cesspool of fermenting screams and rants: *Are you insane? Once you go, there is no return.* Yet I shut the door, thinking the noise of its closing too loud, started the engine, dimmed the headlights, and pulled from the driveway. I looked to the house, saw my parents' bedroom light come on, and my heart sank like a stone in the sea; I sat in my car, engine idling along the curb, staring at that window, seeing shadows and shapes splashed against the window; then the light turned off, I drew a sigh of relief, accelerated, and drove away.

It is in the interests of the survivors that I do not give you the pristine details of my venture away from home and to this barn. By now I have memorized the map and burned it, as the creatures are upon the barn's walls, and I fear that if I fail, the map shall be discovered, and all hope for any survivors anywhere will be crushed. I will tell you that I stopped at many gas stations, using my mother's check card to fill up, and more than once, amidst funeral processions and mourning, saw the television news and even a posted bulletin of a missing child, with my smiling, happy face, alive with genuine color, on

the front; that picture had been taken before all of this happened. Everything now is a hoax, and I must force myself to smile. My soul has turned midnight dark.

Their noises are becoming louder and louder. I can hardly think. My hand hurts, I tell myself to put the pen down, but I cannot; for my mind returns to former times, times when the world was right, when the air seemed to vibrate with a generous energy, and life *meant* something. A time when all the answers were etched in stone; all you had to do was flip to the right page. A time when my worries were all about girlfriends and college and if I was getting too fat. A time when the knowledge that I could die *any moment* never crossed the synapses. Times, I am sure you know, have changed. I am not sure how it all started. The man and woman on the radio called it a virus. I don't know, really, what a virus is, except biologists say it isn't exactly living or dead. It's different from bacteria, this I know. The man and woman said that surviving scientists have discovered the root cause of the plague, and this plague is a sickness; those who turn upon the full moons are infected with a virus that revitalizes at intervals coinciding with the full moon. The virus exploded, they said, on a worldwide scale sometime after New Year's Day this year. I remember it well; Dad started coughing, and Mom had diarrhea, and my sister was puking. I was the only one not sick, and I always joked with everybody that my time was coming. It got worse, and for a brief time, I was frightened for the safety of myself and my family: the schools closed, my work closed, and the streets became deserted. Clearcreek turned into a ghost town. Birds sang, the sun rose and set, the wind blew. Life continued. Dad took cough drops and things got better; Mom took some medicine, thanked God that it had ended; she felt able to walk from the bed to the bathroom without spilling a trail; and my sister felt better one day, good enough to eat cereal and watch cartoons. We thought it was over then. That was before the first full moon.

It gives me shivers to think about it. But I must! Anything to turn my thoughts away from their vicious snarls and cries. I look at my watch; a few more hours to go. I pray it will end. I know they can smell me; my scent has followed me through the woods; and I fear they will enter, and despite my hiding in the hay bundles, will sniff me out and devour me. I fear this notebook will be splashed with my own blood. But that thought does not render me as incapable as the memory of that first night; January's full moon. Ironically, that full moon is called the Full Wolf Moon: outside Indian villages, the wolves would howl hysterically into the night. Now they howl outside this barn, somewhere a few hundred miles from home, and that January night, they howled in such a way as I cannot foretell without breaking a cold sweat.

To celebrate their miraculous healing from the worldwide semi-plague, we went to Applebee's, finding it nearly deserted, as much of Clearcreek was still fighting off the ruthless disease. I can remember the night vividly, stained into my mind's eye, the last few hours when normalcy reigned and life was as it should be. Father told the waiter we didn't want appetizers, but when Mother returned from the bathroom, she ordered Nachos Nuevo and a blend of classic- and honey-barbecue buffalo wings with celery sticks and ranch sauce. We ate like kings before our meals came; my sister and her Caesar salad, Mother with her tilapia sandwich, Father feasting on a breaded chicken sandwich. I sunk my own teeth into a large plate of southwestern chicken quesadillas. We laughed and joked and didn't watch the time, even though there would be school the next morning, as the virus was lifting. We walked out pounds heavier, not caring one bit; I had gotten sick of grilled chicken and onion sandwiches. We rented a movie, *Black Hawk Down*, but Mother and my sister left early: not their kind of movie. Then it started happening. Mother and sister were sleeping; Father sat on the couch, and I sipped from a glass of ice water in the chair. The scene was when the Rangers were running through the war-torn streets, ducking stray Ak-47 bullets, running for their lives as the convoy raced for the Pakistani Stadium. Those moments are so clear, I have said, because they were the last moments of serenity, tranquility; the last few moments when I knew up from down and left from right.

Sprawled upon the couch, Father suddenly stood up, complaining of stomach cramps. Sweat popped over his brow, and I told him he should've waited a little longer before digging into a meal thick with cholesterol; should've waited for the last virulent strains to vacate his battered physique. He told me that it didn't feel like the virus this time; it wasn't a cough. I asked him what it felt like, and he told me it felt like his insides were crawling all around inside him. I imagine it was the dormant virus coming to life under the Full Wolf Moon, spreading through his system, coursing through his arteries and capillaries, invading his heart and lungs. He started rambling nonsensically; the virus attacking his brain. His eyes fogged, looked distant, and he clawed at his stomach, gasping for breath. The ice water spilt all over the carpet as I lunged for the phone to call 9-1-1. He muttered incantations, squeezing his eyes shut, falling upon the floor, curling into a fetal position, whimpering, nearly sobbing in the unimaginable agony. I heard the busy monotone, the phone engaged, and slammed down the hook. Little did I know, people all over Clearcreek were calling for help, excruciating pain tearing through their emaciated bodies. Father looked up at me with closed eyes, and then opened them, and that was when I knew everything had changed: his eyes.

I cannot explain them to you, except no longer were they the blue eyes Mother always said belonged to an ancient Prince; they were yellow eyes, filled with malice and hurt, betrayal and loathing. Those eyes tore through me like a knife through soggy tissue paper, an insane cataclysm of swirling emotions that made my head split. He looked up at me and opened his mouth; his teeth appeared to pulsate, then the ones at the corner of his mouth grew longer, pointier; that's when I noticed chunks of fur sprouting from the flesh about his neck and jaw-line; his ears elongated, his brow seemed to curl, poking around his eye sockets; the muscles in his face intensified, and the nose became more slender. I gasped at this transformation, saw the clothes on his body tightening around bulging muscles.

A noise came from his mouth, a cry for help, and he reached out to me, arm sprouting long hair, fingers curling, nails yellowing; he clutched at my shirt and tore it towards him. I flailed backward into the television, knocking it over; sparks flew and the *Black Hawk Down* tape ripped apart. Father turned his head, banging the back of his scalp into the couch. The hair on his head grew thicker, bushier; the lips furled outwards, revealing the teeth, and the nose elongated even more; the brow sloped and the eyes narrowed. The front of his face was bulging outwards. He went into spasms upon the floor, clothes tearing and ripping, exposing hairy flesh; he let out a ghastly scream and I ran from the room, tripping over a clothes basket in the hallway, flinging into the hall closet, knocking the doors open with a loud noise. I fell to the floor, wrist bones reeling.

I lurched to my feet and threw open my parents' bedroom door. The covers about the bed had fallen to the floor, and Mother lie upon the sheets, twisting and turning, moonlight from the window falling upon her transforming form. She was no longer my mother. Her head raised and she stared at me, eyes running along the lengthening nose and maw; and opening her jaws, she revealed the rows of slicing teeth.

I slammed the door shut and burst into my sister's room, screaming at her to get up; she stood beside the window, staring out, and looked at me; the clothes had stripped from her body and lay in tatters upon the carpet; she looked at me and shrieked in that ferocious howl, running after me. I instinctively grabbed a mounted baseball bat and threw it into her face, knocking her against the mirror, which shattered underneath her, glass shards littering the floor. She swaggered in the room and came after me; I hit her again and she fell backwards out of her open window, landing amidst the great oak trees. I ran to the window and saw headlights down the street disappear; figures raced upon the street. A hideous cacophony of howls filled the night, turning my blood into icy fragments; I turned away from the window, saw a shadow in the doorway, Father standing there, staring down the hallway.

I raced forward; he turned at my footsteps; I grabbed my sister's door and slammed it shut, in his face, and locked it. It bulged outwards, the lock threatening to break; casting the bat upon my sister's bed, I took her chair and pressed it against the door. I did the same with her bookcase and music-player shelf. I stood back, heart sprinting, wanting to vomit and die at the same time; then the poundings against the door ceased. I thought quickly, not really trying to figure anything out, just focusing on making my way through the night; I shut my sister's window, tried to ignore the howling, and drew the blinds down. Suspended in the darkness, I sat upon her bed, head in my hands, listening to sounds about the house, Mother and Father moving about; listening to the newfound victory cry of the full moon.

I fell asleep that night, and when I woke up, Father was calling the cops, complaining of breaking and entering, as many doors and windows were broken; but the police had bigger problems on their hands: twenty-seven brutal murders in the Clearcreek area alone, not to mention a wild number of graves had been dug up, the coffins split open and corpses mutilated. My sister asked me for help moving the furniture away from the doors, and I helped her, wondering if it was all a hallucination. Father, Mother, and my sister acted as if there really *was* a break-in, and they thought they'd slept through it. Father had no recollection whatsoever of transforming near the end of the movie; he told me *vividly* remembered falling asleep during the film, and must've carried himself to his own bedroom. That was the beginning of my trusting no one, absolutely no one. The beginning of my desperate search to uncover just *what* was happening, a search that has led me to this conclusion: huddled in a barn, no promise of escape; the howls and rages all about me, a chaotic cesspool. I hope dawn comes soon.

I just heard something. No, God, no!, they're coming in, they're comi [*pen writing ends here*]

VII

The only thing I can recall is the sound of splintering wood, heavy feet upon the floor, a wave of hot air over my neck, and that is all. It is as if my mind fogged out for the briefest time, and I awake to the sound of the birds, the sunlight coming through a gaping hole in the barn, the wooden timbers broken and strewn about the hay floor. My entire body aches and it hurts to write. My head is pounding so hard as if the temples are threatening to snap. When I woke up, I opened and closed my eyes, shoving off the blurred vision, and looked around. The air hung still, the humidity suffocating, and sweat stained the armpits of my shirt; I smelt of an entirely unearthly odor, but there was no question why: I haven't showered in many, many days. The odd thing is, I am

extremely thirsty, but not all hungry. I look my arms and legs over, see only a few scratches, perhaps from the hay, and I stand, legs stiff and aching, as if I'd run the mile fifteen times over. I walked out through the yawning hole, the width and height of a man, and walked around the barn: the grass had been flattened, and in the muddy flats were hazy footprints, most bare footed, some wearing shoes. I stood in the abandoned field, the long grass waving against me, staring at the shadowy trees, feeling the great sun and the sweltering humidity, and finally decided I should try to find something to drink. An odd taste wrapped itself around my mouth, holding reign on my tongue; bile from the night, no doubt. I had to wash it out. And the thirst; my entire mouth, no, my entire body, seemed ready to fall apart with only a mere gust of fragrant breeze.

I left my bag and journal in the barn and carried myself through the woods, following the sound of gurgling water. The trees parted, the sun shining down in translucent rays, and I discovered the source of the sound: a brook, laden with polished stones and minnows flitting between the rocks. As I bent over the water, I saw a crayfish wiggle between the rocks. The water felt so calm, so cool, and I washed it over my face, draining the residue of the night into the grass, and cupping water in the palms of my hands, I steeply drank, the bitter-, iron-taste washing down my throat. I sat upon the bank of the stream, listening to the birds, feeling the sun alighting upon my face, and looking down, I looked at my reflection in the water, and that is when I noticed it. Words cannot describe the terror that went through me. My own eyes gaped in wide fright, and I almost passed out upon the bank; had I gone unconscious and slid into the water, drowning without knowledge, that would have been a blessing compared to the nightmarish horror resting upon my face: around my lips were the flaking crumbs of red... God!... paint. Except I do not have to tell you it was not red paint. I do not want to write it down, as if my own abandonment of grim knowledge will save my fledgling soul; oh, the pain of revelation!

I ran away from that stream, feet carrying me farther and farther through the woods. Tears streamed down my face, and I fell against a tree, stomach retching, curling, collapsing and opening, spewing bile and blood all over the ferns about the forest. Vomit dribbled from my mouth as I ran on, the trees thinning to reveal the overgrown field and the stricken barn; I stumbled through the barren opening, into the cavernous dark of the barn's innards, and collapsed to the hay, rolling into a fetal position, telling myself that I was crazy, there's nothing to worry about; none of that worked. I had tasted it in my mouth, seen it upon my face, noticed the scratches on my arms, and my mind had fogged overnight, just as my family did not remember their episodes of transformation. Realizing this, I stood, angrily, yelling and screaming at

only God knows what, tearing all the clothes from my body; standing naked, shivering even in the heat, I ran my hands over my body, searching, groping, discovering. I remembered the last memory of last night: the hot breath upon my neck, and my hand raced to the skin just below the back of my skull, and I felt it there: two twin curved lines, serrated deep within the flesh, itching as if it were some rabid sore.

I stood naked within the barn, crying softly to myself, and then I heard voices, distant, coming through the trees. Shouting. Barking. I can hear them now as I scribble quickly, standing within the barn, naked before the world. They are circling the barn, yelling and shouting, telling me to come out, telling me to surrender. I will not. I *cannot*. I can see their shadows dancing on the grass outside the hole; I will throw this journal down. Oh, their shouting! I will open my bag, I will pull it out, and I will end it. I cannot believe it has come to this. You must believe me. I am not crazy. One of them—he is wearing plaid and a hunter's cap—is ducking through the hole.

Coroner's Note: the body of the young boy was discovered shortly after ten seventeen a.m. in mid-August, 2005. The body was completely nude, with a single knife found delivered to the face through the right eye socket. Discovered upon the body were several deep lacerations and small abrasions, perhaps from the horrible act he had committed the night before: the body of an eight-year-old girl was found outside her home, not a ten minute's walk from the dilapidated barn. She had been brutally beaten, mauled, bitten and raped; she had been killed by blunt trauma to the head. Curiously, some kind of bite wound was found upon the back of the boy's neck. Amidst the barn, investigators and detectives discovered a notebook explaining the young boy's severe paranoia, dementia and apparent schizophrenia. He had disappeared from his home nearly a month before.