

The Burning Man

1

The dust cloud rolls over the dry, cracked earth, filling the sky, staining the sun. Its umber haze convulses, stretching limbs through the gray mass of air which never changes color—unless you call night a color. My boots kick up their own clouds out of the beaten ground, where the earth is baked to the point of forming small chasms. The light particles float upwards, spreading gradually as the ball spaces out, growing larger and larger until I can see each speck individually. I shuffle my feet, making more of these little worlds; as I do so, small bits of what used to be grass crunch under the ageing boots, along with pieces of the leather. The scraps dissolve underfoot, shredding and ripping, their dun leafy flesh just as dry and dead as everything else.

My eyes drift over the unchanging wasteland: nothing but fields of shrivelled crops, lucky to have lived long enough to grow in the first place. I strain to see something, something beyond, but it's impossible. In front of me lies nothing but a dying world, the russet dust eroding everything at a pace, a pace so slow it seems like we won't know it's gone until we are too.

Behind me sits the house, or at least what's left of it. I don't know what it looked like before; I wasn't born and we don't have any photos, but it certainly hadn't looked like this. There must have been a time when there weren't just three rooms, when the roof held itself up and most of the windows weren't shattered. God, there must have been a time. I look up, at that creature consuming everything, trying to imagine it any differently, but that's impossible—we're too far gone to change it now.

2

"Zachariah! What the hell are you doing out here? I swear you spend more time staring at those damn fields than you do plowing 'em, or planting 'em, or—God knows—everything else that needs doing around here!"

I run my hand through my hair, trying to work out the grit, catching some brown strands.

"Don't you ignore me, Zachariah! And don't you dare think that I've forgotten you need shearing along with that damn sheep. You get over here right now and take this bucket to the barn. Dammit, that horse and cow are starving enough without you neglecting them."

Kicking up more dust as I turn, I walk back to the house, the sound of Sam's cries increasing in volume. A loud clanging erupts from the barn, followed by an enraged roar; I walk faster—if Landon's in a bad mood, things can only go badly. He's not a drunk, who lashes out without warning, unpredictable and irrational. No. He's one of the poor—we all are. Condemned to starve and waste, with no hope of any ending other than death. I'd bet my soul that a desperate man is a hell of a lot more dangerous than a drunk one.

I don't remember my father without the anger. There used to be times when he'd smile at us, or crack a joke, but I reckon the bitterness was there, brewing away so that now he just burns with it.

“Boy!”

Shit.

“Get here now!”

I stop, not wanting to turn, instead to run to the house, grab Sam and hide.

“I said now!”

He stands there, in the doorway of the barn, holding a fork and pail, his face as dark as the sky above. “Where'd you leave this pitcher?”

“On the hook just by the—”

“Don't lie to me!” he roars, his face inches from my own.

“Honestly, I—”

“Don't you talk back to me. I swear, I'll beat your god-damned brains out!” He motions with the pitchfork; out of the many times Landon has screamed at us, this is one of the few when I think he's going to kill me. He must see it in my expression, as he stops, a weird calm rippling over his face, as though the storm has passed. But I know the winds will blow it back soon enough.

“I'm sorry, Zach, I, I don't know, I—”

He crumples back into the barn, defeated by whatever pain is tearing at him, small tears mixing with the dust on his face. I back away, unsure. Part of me desperately wants to help, to hug him. But that's for another world. Here, he could easily get angry again if he knows I think he's struggling, so I do what I'm good at.

I run.

3

The pump burns my hands, searing the skin as I persuade it to relinquish some water, if only a dribble.

“Zachy, Zachy!”

A small body crashes into me.

“Jesus, Noah! If you made me spill anything I swear you're going to get a slap. You know what'll happen if Landon finds out.”

He shrinks away, eyes on the ground, and I know I have to give in. A playful punch on the shoulder makes him look up, his mouth twitching—the closest thing I'll get to a smile. His arms are thin, with only a little muscle. Hazel eyes stare up at me; the only shade of brown I can bear. It kills me every time I look at him, at any of them. Ragged, undernourished and dehydrated; I'm not sure how much longer my brothers and sisters will last. They've never known anything but the brink of starvation. They never will. Nothing left for them but this wasteland... It'll even

sweep them away someday. Sometimes I feel grateful for being the oldest—I've seen green harvests, even if only a few and way, way back. Other times, when I see them struggling, I hate it. Because I understand. Understanding changes everything; at least, if you don't understand you can have hope that one day—somehow—life will get better.

“Look—I need to get this done, okay? Otherwise Ma'll wrangle my neck until I go blue.”

“Okay. Can we go into the fields later, though?”

“Sure. Sure we can.”

I watch his back turn, the rusty edge of the shovel dragging in the dirt behind him. God, I wish I knew what to do. I don't even know when all of this started; it must have been coming for a long time, though. Green fields are a memory of when I was four, perhaps five—before all of this came.

The Oil War: Landon had told me of it when he still used to trek to the city. Countries fought for black slime which burned in their machines. It was for this finite substance, that so many people died.

My calloused hands let go of the pump, taking up the can, light with its lack of water. I can see Ella and Morgan on the cracked steps in the distance, their hair blowing and mingling with the dust. It's picking up. I hoist up the bucket, holding the fat, ungainly barrel around the middle, as I walk faster. Ditching the corroded vessel in the barn, I break into a run, not caring that it isn't on the hook. Dust streaks the air—I raise my arms in the hope of protecting my eyes. Landon appears from the other side of the faded red building, behind the rusted silo.

What's out there?

He fights through the storm, defying, daring it to touch him. I sprint, the wind cutting into me with its load—a serrated edge wielded by a monstrous knife. The door is open—I can see it. Ella's thin shape strains to hold it against the gale, her voice screaming at me to run, run faster. The scrap of cloth tied around my face falls away, and my lungs burn with the dust forcing its way down my throat as I plunge through the darkness of the doorway.

The shock of the house's stillness stuns me, knocking my body to the floor. Fingers twist themselves in my hair, shaking out the dirt as Landon bursts through, briefly exposing us to the full roar of the tempest. It takes me a while to notice the dark shade of his hands in the gloom: bloody streaks run down his forearms, coating his palms. He heaves, smearing the stain on his face as he coughs heavily into a fist. After several minutes of hacking up dust and dirt, he turns his eyes to us.

“She's dead.” The flat tone of his voice mutes the meaning of his words; it takes a moment for me to register exactly what has happened.

“What?”

“Didn't you hear me, boy? I said she's god-damn dead!” He looks into all six of our eyes, before shoving his way through to his room, slamming the door.

Our small herd is now one horse fewer. For us, it's simple enough to cover our faces with cloth to reduce the amount of dirt we inhale. But when it comes to the animals, such a thing is

far more difficult. We do our best to keep them in the barn—not that the half-hung doors are much of a help in blocking the dust—only letting them out when we're sure that a storm isn't brewing. Beyond that, like with most things, there's little we can do.

4

“Children, be silent. Landon, stop it. I said stop it. Don't you dare touch that food until I've said Grace. Noah, hold your sister's hand. I said, hold it. Shut your eyes, Morgan. Now, let me begin. Dear Lord, thank you for this food which we are about to receive. Please help us to look after each other and understand that we are lucky for what we have. Amen.”

The small piece of meat in the middle of the table is never going to be big enough for all seven of us: five starving kids is a difficult feed. While the others scrap for the thin strips sliced from the plate in the center, I hold my hands back, waiting until at least Noah grabs something before my belly takes over, its rumble echoing that of the retreating storm outside. I snatch two of the slices, triggering a murderous look and kick in the shin from Morgan.

“Christ! This is Sam's slice.”

“Don't you dare blaspheme, Zachariah!”

“I'm sorry, but—”

“Don't talk back to your Ma, boy, or you'll get the end of my belt.”

I shut up, knowing that if I open my mouth then it's just going to get worse. Tearing one of the slices up, a little fist tied with faded cloth bumps my arm before opening, expectantly. I slide pieces into it one by one as the hungry mouth on the other end chews and swallows repeatedly. The dusty face looks up into my own from its place on the floor as I pass Sam the rest of her meal, leaving me to eat what's now my half slice. Pairs of hungry eyes stare at each other across the table, demanding more food. Each bloodshot orb is a reminder to our parents that they're responsible for this—for us. Mine included.

5

The stars are the only things our disease can't touch. I've never been taught why they exist; what they are and how far away. To me they must be ice. Everything here is so hot, to the point where I spend days believing I'll die of suffocation in the heat; that it'll smother me, forcing itself up my nostrils and down into my lungs, compressing the air until it's gone.

The night is the only time we can feel free: the temperature drops and the darkness is a refreshing change from the dusty hues of the day. Rigid, cracked earth digs into my back, the parched soil clinging to my hair; it too wishes to be away from this place.

“Can we light a fire?”

“No, Noah. We can't.” Though I wish to. I want to burn it all down and let the flames engulf me. This can't go on—we have to submit: There's no hope.

“Why not?”

“Because if we do, it’ll burn.” I see their faces in the firelight: screaming and terrified. Our horse—though already gone—shrieks, sounding more humane than even they do. The barn and house burn while I look on. Even death isn’t freedom. The vision dissolves.

“What will?”

“Everything.”

I roll over, the dried grass crackling and disintegrating under the movement, scraps clinging to my back as I rise. The darkness has engulfed the plains under the stars; even Noah’s head, resting upon my shoulder as I carry him back to the house, is difficult to define in the surrounding blackness. Such calm is a rarity. Most nights, the winds continue to roll their boulders made of thick dust, which leave a fresh layer of dun over the world.

6

It’s impossible to avoid thinking of the past, especially when the present is a prison and the future the unreachable release. I lie with Noah’s arm stretched out over my chest—Sam’s small body curled into my side. The bed is barely wide enough for the three of us: rusty springs stick up through the mattress, daring whoever lies upon them to roll over. The wire frame is propped up at one end by tiles fallen from the now uninhabitable part of the house—the metal legs at the other constantly threaten to collapse. Through cracks in the wall I can see the moon’s faint glow, lighting up the mist before it, but not reaching past the filter to the ground. If remembering can’t be classed as dreaming, then I don’t dream. The smells of the old world come back to me: the light and the emotion. In these brief moments I’m free. The physical cosmos no longer confines me, and I can remember what it’s like to experience true happiness and the world before it disintegrated.

Things always seem more vivid in their moment of destruction. Not after. After, the colors dull in your memory and you’re never sure of whether it was this or that shade. It simply fades. But in that moment, no matter how short it is, the world’s vibrancy is enhanced. The fields which seemed to only be green before, come alive with tones; lime melting into emerald, moisture bubbles shimmering on blades of grass; a spectrum of light. Before they evaporate. Before the leaves shrivel and die. Before they burn.

It is the same of the sky. Only when the great, ominous clouds of filth roll in, do you see how pure the azure is beside it, glowing with radiance and freedom. Until the beautiful void is invaded by tendrils of darkness, attacking and converting, sealing. So that nothing is left but the murky waters of the dust.

7

At the back of the house, the beams supporting the roof are cracked; tiles slipping into a heap on the collapsed porch. Beneath here there used to be two rooms—my bedroom one of them. I can still see the frame of the building which used to stand here, as I scabble through the

lighter rubble to escape the growing wind, noticing that one of the thicker beams has already been shifted. I wrestle my way through the narrow gap into what had been the back hall, tripping over a long object fallen from the corner. My fist wraps around its end, dragging it into the path of the light. The long black barrel of the shotgun is cold in my palm, unused. I turn it over, running my rough hands over the slickness of the tube, wondering.

“Boy! Where you at?”

I slink back, clinging to the gun as the shadows envelope me. Slouching footsteps pass the tunnel of rubble, pausing to kick the tiles fallen from the heap. I instinctively try to retreat further, my heel finding open space, yet my head hits the shaft behind it. The dust works its way into my knees; I set the gun down, stretching my fingers out to reach through the hole, foot catching a loose floorboard on the other side.

“Boy! I won’t ask again!”

I crouch back through the gap, this time knocking over a small pouch, thick with grime. Even more confused, I shake out the seven shotgun shells held within. Without thinking, I grab one of the red tubes, shoving it under the board behind me, sliding the others back into the wallet. As I stumble back out of the wreck, adjusting my cloth mask against the dust, I try to grasp a sense of what is going on. If those six remaining shells are meant for us, then he's going to be the one left standing.

8

“Where is it?” The scream bores into my face, followed by calloused hands ripping at my eyes and throat.

“I don’t know, I swear! I haven’t seen it—I don’t even know what it is!” I fight for breath from the floor, Landon’s figure seizing me—my head smacking against the wall.

“I’ll rip you to shreds, you god-damned bastard!” His left fist grabs the belt, his right smacking me across my face; dust, tears, sweat and blood from my split lip mix together on the paint palette of my cheek. A shove rolls me over, my eyes and nose ripped by the splinters of the wall as his fist tears away my shirt, exposing my skin to the raw burn of the buckle as it lacerates my back.

“Tell me!” Each lash draws a scream, followed by his demand and another lash. I can’t answer—no matter how much my body wants me to—my mind determined to keep at least this.

“Landon, please!” My mother’s voice interrupts the torture. “Please, let the boy go, Landon. He’s done nothing, let him be.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, woman!” The buckle rises again, but as it swings down, I feel nothing. Instead the cries of my mother pierce the air as the leather belt wraps itself around her wrist, uncoiling to leave a band of red.

“Landon, stop. Go out to your barn, for all I care. But leave our children alone!”

From behind my shield I see the confused rage in his face as he whips the belt down on the table, which he kicks over, propelling it to crash into the chair beside. The splinters mark his path to the door; he leaves nothing breakable untouched in his frustration, screaming inhumanly at the burnt sky as he storms into the fields. I don't know exactly what he's crying at, whether it's at us, the world, or himself.

My legs surrender to themselves, giving way beneath me as I retch onto the split planks.

"Morgan! Noah! Your brother needs water now! I want you to go to the pump and yank on that cursed lever until it pisses itself! Come on, Zachariah. We'll get you through to lie down." I hear footsteps clatter up the steps and Morgan's voice fills the room as my head spins.

"Ma, I don't know if we can—Jesus, what did he do to him?"

"Never you mind. Make sure you get that water. If you see your Pa, don't you dare go near him—do you understand?" Morgan must have nodded, as her footsteps quickly carry her away.

9

The storm is building again—I can feel it creeping in, ready to play. Charcoal tendrils bleed into the sepia filter above, bundling into thicker clouds, folding back on each other, regrouping. I stare into its ever-changing face, knowing its fists will soon pummel the walls of the house once more, relentlessly scraping away at the layers of our existence. It blends, russet, umber and dun hues coalescing, red flecks swirling through the thick, dark mess of dust. Nothing can withstand this monster which scours the surface of the Earth, its body sweeping away everything beneath it. It's coming—rolling in on the winds of inevitability.

10

I stare at the food spread over the table: more meat than I've seen in what feels like a lifetime. Where's it come from? For so long we've been surviving on thin strips, dried and coiled in the heat, the flesh chewy and requiring more saliva than we have water in order to swallow it down. My gaze wanders over Landon's set expression, his face grim and firm: forty years of a hard life with too little hope has whittled him down, peeled him off layer by layer until there's nothing left but this burning hatred. Across from him, softer though similarly weary eyes meet mine. Ma's resigned look falls to the food before her—it takes me only a few seconds to realize what she's known as soon as Landon presented the meat for her to cook. This is it, then. As I think of the board and under it the smooth, red plastic casing of the shell, my stomach twists. The many fists of the storm outside knock at the door, the boarded windows, the walls—impatient. So it'll be tonight, tonight that he would put an end to this. As the others gather around the table, Ma pauses to say Grace; her calloused hands shake as she takes Ella's and Noah's in her own.

11

I wake to the sound of the first gunshot. Its roar resonates through the night, accompanied by the screams of my siblings and the wind's inescapable bellow.

So Ma had been the first to die.

Immense heat slams me in the face, joined by the sound of the second blast as I step into the open: the barn is alight, sparks igniting the particles in the air around it, spreading destruction. The raging tempest grates my cheeks like sand paper as I watch Ella's back, her legs sprinting in fear, while Landon raises the shotgun, letting its bellow ring out across the fields, marking her fall. Despite the heat, I'm numb. Noah huddles in the corner of the porch, his face bloodied and blackened, aside from the thin bars of tears across his cheeks. I move towards him, trying to scream for him to run, but the boy is paralyzed. Landon gets there first. He yanks the child by the collar at his neck, dragging him away from the house, and backs off so he can aim. Noah finally seems to wake from the shock, seeing me stare on. Helpless.

"Zachy!" His scream tears through me, ripping my whole world apart as the blast knocks both of us to our knees. Salt burns my eyes, mixing with the smoke of the barn, Landon's silhouette marked out by its blaze. A thin strip of cloth caresses my face as the wind snatches it away. Sam—where is Sammy? I can hear other cries, but the restless fire and the storm's howl make them impossible to place.

I turn back to Landon, vision straining against the brightness behind him. As I step closer, the blood coating his forearms is more visible, in addition to the deranged look on his face. Even he can't seem to believe what he's doing—eyes staring at the gun, wide and wet. The roof of the barn behind him collapses—its sound deafening. His eyes snap up, remembering the purpose of this and his stained hands grasp the gun as he walks towards me.

"I know it was you." Even though he yells over the wind, for a rare moment, he's calm, his words lucid. "I won't waste time trying to find that shell. I see how you wanted it to end, but you got it wrong, Zach. Whoever's left, it won't be either of us."

I stare down the barrel my father points at me, knowing that no matter how, we'll all die here; it'll be left to Sam to starve. My eyes meet his—the gun fires—and an ocean of darkness engulfs me.

Yet in the distance I can see those icy constellations above—frozen in time—their cold light drawing me out, away from this world, from the heat, the pain. Finally, in this numbing ether, I can know peace.

Below, the monster twists and convulses, devouring the remnants of the farm for which it has waited so long. The flaming barn roars beneath, slowly quelled by the cloud as it settles, subduing and suffocating the remainder of life. Its fingers absentmindedly whisk away a small strip of faded cloth as they coil around the throats of coyotes, scorching creatures' lungs until there is nothing left. Only when the last rodent, the last evidence of mortality has been consumed does it sit, its arms rising, stretching out—rolling over the burning earth—not to destroy but diffuse, dissipating until the Stygian beast is no more.

Reflective Commentary

The idea to write *The Burning Man* was inspired by the song *The Ballad of Hollis Brown*, as I felt it contained such strong emotion which I could transform into a creative piece, particularly from the second verse in which the children are 'so hungry that they don't know how to smile'¹. Through it I aimed to write a dystopian short story which questioned what issues we will face in our future, based on current events. In this respect I was also inspired by the songs *Collapse (Post Amerika)* by Rise Against and *Arguing With Thermometers* by Enter Shikari most prominently from the former 'when our rivers run dry and our crops cease to grow'², as I felt that climate change, pollution and the dependence on fossil fuels are some of the most significant problems we face, which are likely to have significant consequences. I was also influenced by the novels *The Road*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, in both setting and technical aspects.

In order to establish the setting, I employed aspects of dialect from South Dakota and chose American spellings so that the reader could infer the location—I did not reveal this within the narrative, as the narrator himself is neither aware nor bothered about knowing where he lives, therefore I decided to limit the reader's knowledge to that of the narrator. Through using the American alternatives for spellings, such as 'color' and 'plowing', in addition to phrases which are a part of the regional dialect, for example 'where you at?'³, I implied the story was set in perhaps a more rural area of America. Moreover, I chose to give my characters names commonly used in South Dakota, in order to emphasise location and authenticity. Originally I contemplated developing my own dialect, one similar to David Mitchell's in the central section of *Cloud Atlas*, or to that of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. An example of a description of the clouds as an alternative to 'the dust cloud rolls over the dry, cracked earth, filling the sky, staining the sun', would have been 'gairnt dus bunnys slowchin' throo th skie', adapting words so they are spelled on a phonetically-based level, such as in Hoban's novel, where 'thru the girzel you culd see blue smoak'⁴. Yet I felt that I would be unable to sustain it effectively in a way which would not make reading the story laborious. If I had had more time, then I perhaps would have been able to create some form of language without the story becoming too dense; however, I feel it would still hinder the reader too much and detract from the plot. Despite this, the use of some pre-existing dialect created the desired effect in forming a sense of location. I did blend in a little of that from the Southern states, such as 'I reckon' instead of 'I guess', as the piece is set in the future, and language is subject to change over time. It also helped to form a greater sense of rural America.

A significant influence for the tone of my story, as well as for several techniques I used, was Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. I chose to use this novel as a model for my story's sparsity, instead of writing densely, similar to *Blood Meridian*, as I wished to reflect the bleakness of the landscape in the language. Yet I decided not to reduce my use of punctuation, for I felt it would not add any depth or significance, and was not looking to replicate the connection between the boy and the father in *The Road*, which is enforced by the fluidity created by the lack of punctuation. Besides influencing my writing style, *The Road* also served as a model of a linear narrative, which I drew upon for my piece. I chose to use a linear narrative, as I felt it would be

¹ Dylan, *The Ballad of Hollis Brown*

² Rise Against, *Collapse (Post Amerika)*

³ www4.wvm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/staticmaps/state_SD.html

⁴ Hoban, *Riddley Walker*, page 1

more appropriate for the reader to remain with the narrator throughout the course of the story, in order for events to have more significance and I wanted to conform to the Aristotelian Unities of Time, Place and Action. Moreover, I also used asyndeton in order to mimic the rapidity of key actions—'not wanting to turn, instead to run to the house, grab Sam and hide', in a similar way to which McCarthy uses it to emphasise 'no smoke, no movement of life'⁵. I also found McCarthy influenced the tone of my story, in its bleakness, as well as in its setting—being in the near-future. Furthermore, I attempted to create a similar figure to the boy through Noah, whom I wished to appear innocent and unaware in his conversation with Zachariah, when he asks "'Can we light a fire?'" and "'why not?'" Through Noah, I aimed to create a figure symbolising innocence of which Zachariah is jealous, as he believes that 'if you don't understand you can have hope that one day—somehow—life will get better'. The significance of fire to the end of my story was also mildly influenced by its importance in *The Road*, as the boy's only reassurance that everything will be okay is that they are 'carrying the fire'⁶. I therefore used it as a symbol of both hope and death, as 'the barn is alight' behind Landon when he kills the family, showing how their only hope of escape has become death.

The decision to make the dust the central motif of my story was the result of the influence of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. I chose to establish this theme through through a tricolon at the opening of the story, and gradually increase its personification, similar to that of the silence in *Of Mice and Men*. In the third section, Steinbeck introduces the silence and repeats its personification, as 'it came out of the night and invaded the room'⁷ and later 'fell on the room again'⁸. I chose to use a similar technique by gradually increasing the personification of the storm throughout the piece, until the twelfth section, in which the dust becomes the omniscient narrator as it is the only remaining protagonist, just as the omniscient narrator is the only witness of Curley's Wife's body in *Of Mice and Men*. The aim of this change in narrator was to suggest to the reader that the storm existed purely for the purpose of destroying the family and that while they lived, its only purpose was 'relentlessly scraping away at the layers of [their] existence'. In order to consolidate this, I created a link between the opening and closing paragraphs, through the continued idea of the dust cloud 'rolling', its limbs 'stretching', as it creates a circular sense of closure and enables the last section to react to the first. I also took a little influence from *The Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck's objective correlative of 'the stream [rising] slowly' to represent Rose of Sharon's miscarriage, in which 'the pains were coming close'. I therefore introduced a subtle objective correlative through the 'faded cloth' tied around Sam's wrist, which later 'caresses' Zachariah's face as he realises Sammy is missing, with the aim of making the emotions felt by the protagonist more sympathetic.

Moreover, use of alliteration, predominantly of 'd' sounds, scattered throughout the piece is intended to accentuate the pervasive power of the dust. In some areas it is more concentrated, such as in the last paragraph of section five—'the dried grass crackling and disintegrating', and also in section twelve; 'not to destroy but diffuse, dissipating'. My aim with this was to increase the sense of the steady erosion caused by the dust, similar to the impression created by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, although rather than using specific alliteration, Steinbeck employs repetition to imply the steady wearing-away of the characters' lives. In

⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, page 82

⁶ *ibid*, page 303

⁷ Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, page 75

⁸ *ibid*

addition, the alliteration makes such passages more memorable and helps to fix the reader's attention, as well as bind the elements of my story. I was also influenced by the setting of Steinbeck's novel—the dust bowl becoming a strong influence for the cloud which looms over the family in my story. This oppressive force of nature joined the bleakness of a dystopian future presented in *The Road* in influencing decisions regarding setting, as they helped develop an idea of the world in which I wished to set my piece.

Throughout the creative process of writing *The Burning Man*, developing it from mind map to story, several of my decisions have been influenced by feedback I received through work-shopping. The sixth section stemmed from a creative task for which the central paragraph was my answer. I felt the anaphora used in the closing three sentences of the paragraph—'before they evaporate. Before the leaves shrivel and die. Before they burn.'—fixed the moment, creating the reflection the protagonist needed at that moment. It was also suggested that I employ epizeuxis in order to imply distance between Zachariah and 'something, something beyond'. I also used epizeuxis at other points in my story in order to suggest the slowness of pace, and to create emphasis on the moment, which helped to increase the sense of reflection. My early drafts of *The Burning Man* were written in the past tense, as I had intended the protagonist to be recollecting the events before his death; however, after the suggestion to alter it to the historic present tense, I decided to do so, and found that it increased the immediacy and vividness of the piece—particularly in the eighth section, when Landon attacks Zachariah. This became quite a significant alteration, as it meant that sections such as the eighth are more intense, as the action is not distanced by the use of past participles. It also works more strongly with the linear narrative and single perspective, as the reader progresses with the protagonist. Rarely, I integrated a little interior monologue after work-shopping, in order to allow the reader to understand the protagonist a little better. Yet I did not wish to infuse the piece with too much stream of consciousness, as I wanted to imply that the protagonist would generally rather not think, as he hates to see his family struggling. However the intermittent analepsis which I did include is short and fragmented, in order to emphasise Zachariah's reluctance to reflect. Another significant alteration I made after work-shopping one of my later drafts was to use red as a symbol of death. This also partially stemmed from Shakespeare's use of green as such a symbol in *Romeo and Juliet*, as it is used to describe the 'green earthen pots'⁹ of the Apothecary, as well as 'Tybalt, yet but green in earth'¹⁰ after his death. I also was influenced in this aspect by Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, as the opening chapter uses repetition of the 'red country' and 'the grey country', and how their colours change, as 'the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover'¹¹. My piece therefore progressed significantly throughout the drafting process owing to having it work-shopped, as it enabled me to hone technique.

Overall, I feel I have achieved my aim in creating a piece which warns of a dystopian future, whilst using the influences of such novels by Steinbeck and McCarthy, as well as maintaining the inspiration of *The Ballad of Hollis Brown*. If I were to have had more time and words, then I perhaps would have added more depth to the story, as well as develop further the dialect. However, using the form of a short story prevented it from becoming too dense and stagnant, thereby enabling me to communicate my message more clearly.

⁹ Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, page 100

¹⁰ *ibid*, page 91

¹¹ Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, page 1

(Creative word count: 4,125)

(Reflective word count: 2,005)

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