

# FORKING PATHS

ISSUE #3

an analog / tabletop / live-action / roleplaying game zine



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## COLOPHON

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**the rules:** wanna hack, remix, or build off my stuff? drop me a line & let's chat!

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Up from the depths of autumnal nights comes this, issue #3 of Forking Paths. Thanks for reading! Each installment of this zine wanders the vaguely-defined land of “analog” games: tabletop roleplaying games, board games, storygames, and so on. *New Forms*, the game in this issue, is closest to the genre of live-action roleplaying, also known as larp.

Given the dark season, my goal for this issue was to design something with an eerie atmosphere, and influenced by the works of writer Thomas Ligotti. His stories fall into the gap between horror, weird fiction, and nihilist philosophy, sharing an aesthetic replete with imagery of decay and visions that undermine the material fabric of the world. If you're sensitive to his wavelength, the cumulative effect leaves a lasting impression. This passage from Ligotti's story “Vastarien” is typical of his style, and demonstrates some of the specific inspiration for this issue:

*Though unspoken, the word unearthly reverberated in the room. In that place and at that hour, the paradoxical absence, the missing quality, became clear to him: it was the element of unreality, or perhaps of a reality so saturated with its own presence that it had made a leap into the unreal.*

*Such was the secret sanctuary of Victor Keirion, a votary of that wretched sect of souls who believe that the only value of this world lies in its power—at certain times—to suggest another. Nevertheless, the place he now surveyed through the high window could never be anything but the most gauzy phantom of that other place, nothing save a shadowy mimic of the anatomy of that great dream. And though there were times when one might be deceived, isolated moments when a gift for disguise triumphed, the impersonation could never be perfect or lasting. No true challenge to the rich unreality of Vastarien, where every formation suggested a thousand others, every sound disseminated everlasting echoes, every word founded a world.*

From those ideas, the theme of this issue — **Out from the Shadows** — came slowly into focus alongside the game itself. Ligotti's stories fascinate me, evoking a deeper sort of dread than any other horror writer I've yet encountered. The profoundly bleak philosophy that animates and echoes through them is perhaps the key difference, equal parts repellent and resonant with some part of myself. So much so that his nonfiction work, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, remains a sort Necronomicon to me: a volume I possess but that I dread to read, for fear that it might truly change me in some unwanted way.

To reproduce his sense of unreality (without plunging as fully headlong into the void), I've structured much of this issue to be in-character itself: beginning with a short framing story to ease into the mindset of a Ligottian character, then passing into a mock found-object that contains most of the game text. Explore, and perhaps come to see the world around you in a slightly different light.

## Ruins midnight Sunday all welcome

The hour is late and the sky is dark beyond the dusty membrane of the plate glass window. A drained coffee mug sits close at hand, its bowl laced with rings like the marrow of trees; striations like the guts of mountains; the hellward spiraling roadbed of an open pit mine.

You've settled in like the others here, heaped up in corners and edges of the all-night café like wind-blown debris. A notebook lies open, its pages blank and scolding. The table stubbornly wobbles no matter how napkins and newsprint are rearranged beneath its feet. Time crawls slow, hairs bristling at the prospect of dawn.

After a long span of uneasy shifting in your seat, and useless glances at the unreadable faces of your fellows (each dutifully attending their own miseries), you rise to find the toilet. For a change of scene, and to debate between ordering another round or giving up what's left of this night and packing it in for home. Despite the clear view your table affords of the other patrons' entrances and exits these glacially-paced last hours, during which none have come or gone from the back hall, both rooms there already stand locked and occupied. Muffled noises sound dully through the doors.

You wait.

A worn bulletin board spans one side of the back hallway, collaged with tacked-up flyers. New notices layer over old: built-up strata of yellowed years-ago paper announcing shows, classes, services. Reading deeper than the topmost layer

always stirs up a sad spirit of yearning and nostalgia. Naturally, you cannot help yourself.

As you idly riffle through discolored theatre handbills and dismal job postings, a sheet slips loose and glides to the floor, face-down. You stoop to retrieve it, pausing a moment to turn the paper over and see if it merits rehangng instead of a toss into the waste bin.

The front side reveals an odd mingling of support group flyer and screed. The upper inches throng with tightly-packed sentences written in a careful scrawl, too small to read in the hall's dim light but littered with repeated words in a heavier stroke: *Forgery. Prison. Black oceans. Phantom life.* And an intriguing, unfamiliar coinage: *enshadowment.*

The flyer's last inch heralds "WEEKLY MEETING" in thick script, "RUINS MIDNIGHT SUNDAY ALL WELCOME." No name, address, telephone number or other details given.

Neither rehangng the flyer nor consigning it to waste, you carry it upfront to the weary soul behind the bar. Do you know what this means? you ask, finger pointed at the final row of text. A quiet nod. Pen and pad are retrieved from a shelf below the bar; a crude map is quickly sketched, torn free. Ballpoint slashes trace the nameless streets that enclose a string of landmarks.

You fold together map and flyer, tucking them into one pocket as you produce a crumpled bill from another. You set the money on the bar, but the server does not

meet your eye. You are not sure, but you think an expression of distress darkens their face for a moment before they turn away to tend their squalling machine.

Notebook, pen, and other trappings make hasty exits from wobbly table back into your bag. You look back through the plate glass window as you exit the café's front door. The crumpled bill still sits atop the bar, untouched.

Home.

Sleep.

A day passes in uselessness.

Night comes early, as suits the season. Hours yet remain until Sunday midnight. Still half-asleep, you fish map and flyer from your tangled pocket and pore over both in the light of a bedside lamp.

The map denotes an area where the town's streets dash against a stand of trees and fail there, the unfinished pavement long-abandoned and petering out among the weeds. Old buildings grown derelict hold vigil nearby. Landmarks to the "ruins" ought not prove hard to follow: you recognize some already. Such places draw in a certain sort of person; braid their countless, irregular wanderings toward one common terminus.

The writing covering the flyer is a tangled thicket of strange ideas. The crowded strings of words forgo all punctuation, and together more closely resemble a single uninterrupted chant or prayer. Fragments of a sermon, perhaps, railing against life's illusions and praising the blind relief of darkness. The overall impression is unshakably religious, or at least adjacent to religion's earnest zeal.

You make little progress at deciphering what deeper meaning lies in the

cramped phrases, losing yourself instead in thoughts about the sort of group that would choose to meet in such a defeated no-place. Urban sprawl and unbent nature fused in warp and weft, where each's campaign against the other left both beaten and dead. A cemetery zone of rotted town and choked-out forest, shunned even by the shelterless.

A pendulous clock interrupts to chime the hours gone. Time to leave. A bus draws as near your destination as its route dares; you disembark to trek the rest on foot. Bare trees rake the sterile sky. Your eyes track the toes of your shoes, the root-cracked pavement, your clouding breath. The light of town breaks and recedes behind you.

You pass beyond a vacant lot turned garbage dump and check off the first of the map's haphazard landmarks. The dump grows each time you pass through these blocks, despite a total lack of human habitation, and never by accumulation of contemporary debris. Instead, unfamiliar objects catch your eye in the dump's peripheral heaps and tendrils, conspicuously settled amidst familiar waste and already bearing the wear and vintage of bygone decades.

Last echoes of the town's sober-minded grid fade into oblivion. The remnants of streets and alleys grow feral beneath your feet, cut off or sprouting forks at the whims of oddly-shaped blocks and buildings. A specter of dead geography looms over the funereal slum, with its unruly paths tracing the skeleton of buried shores and waterways. Gutted hulks of doomed ventures sprawl their entrails out into the open air, the innards long

since picked over, leaving only moldering architectural bones.

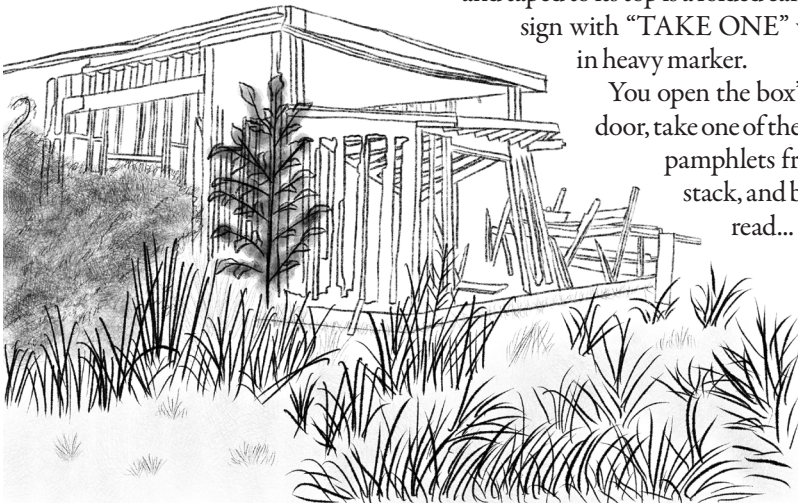
More landmarks: An empty block, equally as ruined and rubble-strewn as its neighbors, yet fenced off and padlocked. A tree hung with mannequin arms. A boulevard of toppled streetlights, scavenged for their lifeless wiring. You cross each off in your mind as you make way to the next.

Then none are left. X marks the spot, as the map's ballpoint lines decree.

You stand at the edge of a small parking lot, abutting a landscaped field long gone to seed. One long-necked pole with two sodium bulbs stands sentinel in the lot, inexplicably powered and casting amber light across the scene. In the field, a scattering of low, heavily-overgrown wooden structures.

A metal sign on a tall pole shaped like a golf club lays fallen on the lot's asphalt, its face rusted out and any words flaked away. A hand-painted sign attached beneath it is in better shape:

*Have a little fun in Big Land.*



Outlines of broad paths curve toward dilapidated, freakishly-oversized toys, food, bugs, and furniture made from crumbling concrete. The vivid green of plastic turf still pokes through in spots at the base of weeds and wild grass, and nearby the charred frame of a driving range sags under the weight of itself and thick coils of bramble.

A gift shop with a collapsed roof huddles at the rim of the parking lot's amber light, and sits nearest of all to the X marked on your map. Walking closer, you see a flight of concrete steps cut down into the earth, ending in front of a metal door. A copy of the same flyer from the café is pasted over the door's narrow window. Feeble light seeps out from under the door's bottom edge.

As you approach the top of the steps, you make out a newspaper box squatting along the side of the gift shop. Drawing nearer, you can see that the box is not empty: something called the "New Forms Manifesto and Orientation" has been slipped into the box's glass door, and taped to its top is a folded cardboard sign with "TAKE ONE" written in heavy marker.

You open the box's heavy door, take one of the several pamphlets from the stack, and begin to read...

# NEW FORMS

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MANIFESTO AND ORIENTATION

**The world is not as it appears to be. Nothing is solid: all is impermanence. The earth beneath us drifts on molten currents. Black oceans roil and grind down the coasts. Stars in the cold so-called “firmament” whirl and die. All bodies— all notions— all forms— are bound to the same pattern.**

Believing what we see, touch, and experience to be real is either the height of ignorance or arrogance. Change, the rot of existence, is the only constant. By trapping ourselves in material thinking we numb ourselves to greater truths.

Unmasking the world's lie of permanence is possible. To do so, we assemble and employ a simple apparatus to glimpse behind the curtain of the corporeal to what lies beyond and above it, squinting in the face of glaring, tidal, inchoate darkness.

Still, we are creatures more comforted by our blinders than by truth. We cannot expect to overcome our crooked miseducation all at once. Habits forced upon us by our rotten, sun-hungry bodies are not easily unlearned. Our flesh is knit in darkness, and our expulsion from the fluid blindness of the womb prompts our first screams. So it should be.

Light is the lie. The visible is what the physical rejects and reflects upon our fickle orbs. Yet as the saying goes, seeing is believing. Here is exposed the root of our earliest betrayals. From birth, we are retrained to reject basic principles of reality we intuit before



we can even speak. Ideas as simple as “object permanence” are minor half-truths that disguise a deeper fiction. And which are, in the end, overridden by sublime ultimate Truth.

Our star will die, as all stars do. Our bodies will die, as all bodies do.

We need not speed any of these eventualities on their way, just as we need not labor at the impossible of delaying the inevitable. Time's mocking parade of grotesquerie will see to each revelation in its own time. It has no need for our permission or consent.

The explorations we therefore undertake are pursued for the sake of something we lack the language to express. What sobriety is to the drunkard, or wakefulness to the dreamer. We strive for a solemn, clear-minded embrace of the nature of existence, freed from the urge to flinch or shudder in the face of what we have been taught to dread.

# OUR MOTIVE FOR ASSEMBLY

We convene to manifest and investigate realities otherwise hidden from the perception of the human mind and body. We do this knowing the sensory limits of the flesh and conceptual limits of the brain cannot be flensed away. Whatever realities we manifest and wisdom we find will thus reflect our limitations. Yet even a crumb of truth will outmatch a feast of lies.

Darkness is a fundamental truth, but such is our brokenness that we cannot perceive the forms of darkness without intermingling its vacant purity with the profane. We turn light against itself to scour away light's fictions and explore the lingering dark that light cannot erase.

The world is rich with debris, forged from the bones of a universe that died in the instant of its birth. Others project a scheme of reason upon this realm of trash, clouding their view of its nature. Therefore in the world's cast-off, forgotten, mismatched things, we find the keys—more truthfully, the keyhole—through which to peer behind the world's locked door. These are our relics.

In caves our ancestors made firelight to dance upon the walls, and so too do we, after our fashion. The light cannot be trusted, and so we cannot rely on dancing flame. We instead employ a simple apparatus to enact our shadow-play, translating mere matter into strange yet discernible forms.

## PROPER USE OF OUR APPARATUS

The apparatus used for our explorations is not a “device,” though it is more than the sum of its parts. Likewise, it is not a ritual, but incorporates elements of ceremony. Its parts are simple and few. Just as important as what is included is what is intentionally neglected. By selecting an appropriate space and focusing our attention on the gathered components, ignoring everything else, we strive to widen our screwed-shut eyelids open a sliver, and perceive something of what lies beyond.

### Components

A darkened room must be procured, large enough for our assembly of observers to gather comfortably. Ideal

settings include theatres, lecture halls, laboratories, classrooms, basements, church sanctuaries, attics, boiler rooms, and abandoned or condemned buildings. Whatever else the space may be, it must be dark, and have room to construct and use our apparatus. The room should also contain the following:

- ◆ adequate seating for the assembly of observers.
- ◆ a table to hold relics, placed at the rear of the room or along one side.

Our apparatus itself consists of:

- ◆ a screen, hereafter called the VEIL, on a raised platform or stage if possible.
- ◆ a light source, hereafter called the LIGHT. It is best if the illumination from the LIGHT is unfocused or blurred, as



shadows with sharp or well-defined edges conflict with proper functioning of the apparatus. A desk lamp on an articulating arm is good. A flashlight will also function well, if it can be held by an assistant, or mic stand, etc.

- ♦ a pedestal, plinth, stool, or similar on which to place a relic.
- ♦ darkness.

The ideal arrangement is thus:



Which is to say, the screen should be backlit, similar to the setup for a shadow play, as long as space allows. (See *fig. 1* below.) These instructions assume a backlit apparatus.

If space does not allow, this arrangement will suffice:

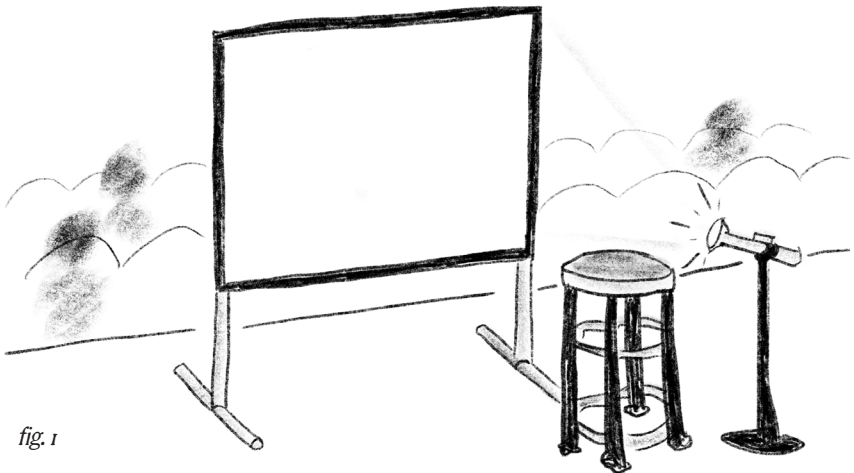


If possible, observers in the audience

should not be able to simultaneously see both a relic and its shadow upon the VEIL. A backlit apparatus is ideal for this reason. If the apparatus' arrangement is not backlit, placing the LIGHT and pedestal at the rear of the audience, as in a movie theater, achieves this. (See *fig. 2* on the following page.) Alternately, the audience might be side-by-side with the LIGHT and pedestal, separated by a curtain.

### Exhibition

When our apparatus is in place, and our body of observers has assembled, exhibition of collected relics may begin. Whoever has handled the assembly's arrangements (space, apparatus, and so on) is the overseer, tasked with a few extra duties. Determine an order for each observer to present their relic; this can be done randomly, as assigned, or on a volunteer basis. When this is ready, the overseer will announce "*We now convene our Exhibition. Our first exhibitor, please take the stage. All others, please be*



*fig. 1*

seated." Each observer in turn will pass behind the VEIL, then manipulate their relic and the LIGHT so as to cast a shadow—a form—upon the VEIL. This process of presentation and observation bears a passing resemblance to "show and tell" from schoolchild days.

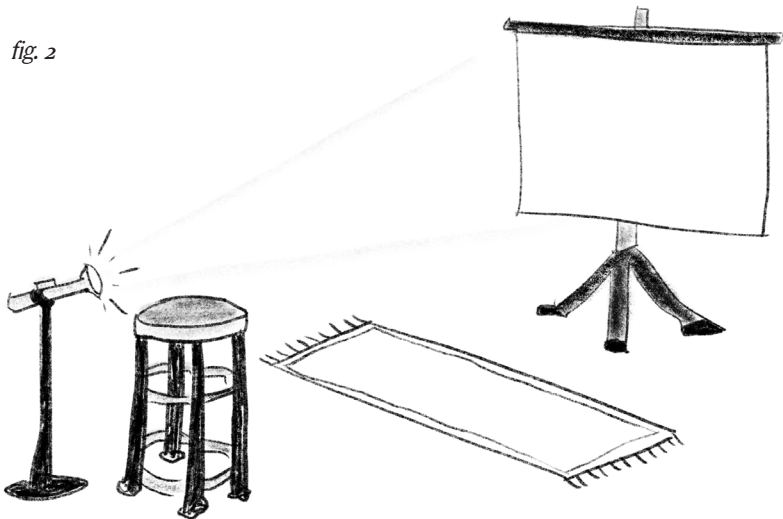
A relic should be manipulated to cast shadows that bear as little resemblance as possible to the relic's mundane physical form; shadows should suggest *other* forms as strongly as possible. The hands of an exhibitor should also be kept out of the cast shadows as much as is reasonably possible. Due to the limits imposed by the fleshy instincts of the mind, shapes resembling faces, creatures, and so on will often make the strongest impression on us. This is expected, but any strange or evocative form is sufficient.

For relics that have been investigated prior to public exhibition, the exhibitor will announce "*Title of form: [name]*," substituting the name they have given the previously discovered form. Once

the relic has been manipulated within the apparatus, and the intended shadow is achieved, the exhibitor of the relic will announce "*The form is revealed*," and describe the features they perceive within the shadow form. The revealed form is documented by sketch if possible, or instant photograph, by a designated clerk with a copy of our observation sheet (later in this pamphlet).

Attendees may exhibit unexplored relics as well, for group investigation. If the assembly uses a printed list or program, the relic should be listed as "(Unidentified #X)" with the "X" replaced with a unique number or code, to avoid confusion with any other unexplored relics. When taking the stage, the exhibitor announces "*Unidentified form*," before engaging the apparatus. The exhibitor will then begin manipulating the relic directly, adjusting the LIGHT or the apparatus as needed in order to produce various shadows. Audience observers discerning a compelling form must interject "*Hold*," in a loud, clear

fig. 2



voice. Any manipulation should pause. The interjecting observer will then briefly describe what they discern. If the exhibitor concurs with the interjector's description of the discerned form, they will announce "*Form has been identified.*" If the exhibitor does not concur, they will announce "*Resuming investigation,*" and once again set to work casting various shadows upon the VEIL. If more than five minutes pass without the identification of a form judged acceptable by the exhibitor, the investigation is inconclusive. The exhibitor will announce "*The form is hidden,*" and exit the stage. The next exhibitor will engage the apparatus and present their relic, until no exhibitors are left.

At the conclusion of Exhibition, dismantle the apparatus, and rearrange furnishings as needed for Forum to follow. With the LIGHT from our apparatus removed, adjust the ambient lighting as needed. Do not yet indulge the desire to banish darkness. Minimal light, enough to illuminate our assembly of observers but little more than that, is recommended.

## Forum

With Exhibition ended, our assembled body convenes for a period of discussion and reflection, dubbed Forum. Forum is subdivided into three sections: *Interference*, for individual reflection on inconclusive investigations and obstacles during or prior to Exhibition; *Revelation*, for group analysis of forms discerned from relics and conjecture on meaning, plus discussion of any objections or contrary findings; and *Archive*, for the addition of sheets, notes, and any approved relics to our assembly's

permanent collection.

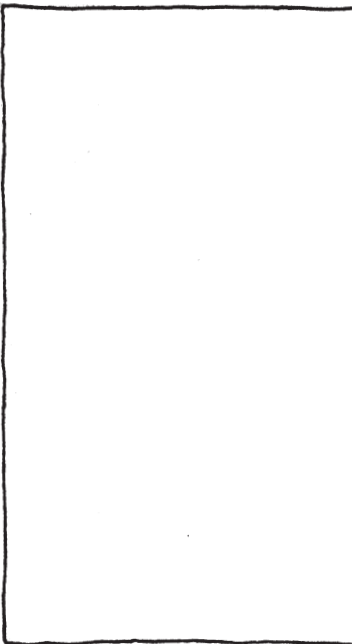
Interference. To begin, instruct the assembled: "*Those who encountered interference with relics, the apparatus, or exhibition: raise a hand.*" In turns, each of the assembled who raised a hand will share the nature of the interference they encountered, as well as any thoughts as to the cause of the interference, and potential solutions. If none of the assembled raise hands, or if all who did have spoken, conclude Interference.

Revelation. To begin, tell the assembled: "*Our assembled body has shared in revelation.*" Describe the discerned form of your relic, if any, as well as your thoughts of what the form implies about the reality that underlies what we perceive. Other attendees may voice their support or objections to these theories. When ready, announce, "*Now we contemplate another relic,*" and direct another attendee to begin. Repeat this until none remain.

Archive. To begin, ask the assembled: "*Which of us volunteers to collect and archive the records from our assembly's observations?*" If none do, take this task yourself as overseer. Gather sheets, notes, sketches and so on from the assembled. If any wish to donate their relic to the archive, collect it as well. Relics without a discerned form, catalogued in an accompanying sheet, cannot be added to the archive. If any such relics are collected, dispose of them.

## Conclusion

Once done with Archive, Forum has ended. Tell the gathered body, "*Our assembly has concluded. May we carry memory of these phantoms with us as we resume our phantom life.*"



"Name":

Relationship between forms:

Philosophical implications:

Avenues for further study:

Current assessment: ( ) truthful ( ) deceptive ( ) unclear

New function:

Emotional impressions:

== CORPOREAL ==

Date of observation:

Observer:

Form:

Function:

Dimensions:

Material:

Color:

Texture:

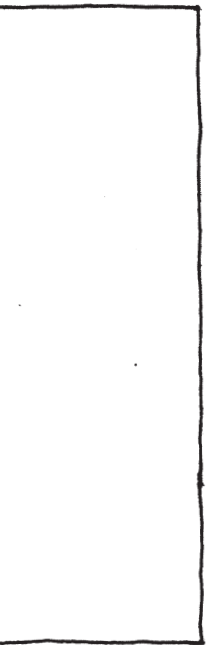
Source:

Manner of acquisition:

Emotional impressions:

Description:

New form:



# SELECTIONS FROM OUR ARCHIVE

## CORPOREAL

**Form:** holiday elf figurine

**Function:** mantelpiece decoration and stocking-hanger

**Dimensions:** 5 inches wide, 6 inches tall, 3 inches deep

**Material:** hard plastic, paint

**Color:** dark red, forest green, blue-green, mustard yellow, blue, light pink, white

**Texture:** smooth, matte finish

**Source:** elderly relative? (unsure)

**Manner of acquisition:** found? handed down? (unsure)

**Emotional impressions:** festive jollity, contrasted with out-of-place lewdness (due to elf's pose, so positioned in order to maintain center of gravity for a hung stocking, which causes groin to protrude). This contrast creates a humorous effect, since the child-like holiday elf seems both vulgar and smug.

## UMBRAL

**Description:** three-quarters profile of a head, with nose and shoulders visible

**New form:** spindly creature with long, thin ears (or antennae)

**New function:** lowly servant to more powerful forces

**Emotional impressions:** fragility bordering on the pathetic. Airs of mischief, furtiveness, and secretiveness. Creature is tragic, servile, and downtrodden.

**"Name":** "Gremlin Lackey"



## INTEGRAL

**Relationship between forms:** inverted— the happy helper-elf becomes the dejected, subjugated gremlin

**Philosophical implications:** in the other realm, creatures and hierarchies exist resembling those we know, but stripped of artificial cheer. Presumably the subjugated are bound to some task?

**Avenues for further study:** seek out more Christmas holiday decorations, especially elves or St. Nicholas

**Current assessment:** truthful

## CORPOREAL

**Form:** mounted antler rack

**Function:** decorative wall-hanging

**Dimensions:** 6 inches tall, 8 inches wide, 10 inches deep

**Material:** metal, likely aluminum

**Color:** metallic silver

**Texture:** ridged (antlers) and smooth (mounting plaque)

**Source:** second-hand store

**Manner of acquisition:** purchased

**Emotional impressions:** sterile, artificial. Shabbily modern take on a traditional “trophy.” Homogenized, and mass-produced façade of organic matter; a forgery. Reminiscent of common rocks dipped in paint to resemble gold nuggets. Inspires feelings of alienation and detachment.

## UMBRAL

**Description:**

side-view of oversized head, attached to a body with many short limbs

**New form:**

multi-legged, solitary megafauna

**New function:** ambling, grazing consumer; formidable prey animal

**Emotional impressions:** strong, tranquil. Calm until provoked. Wary of and prepared to contend with dangerous predators. Inspires sympathetic feelings of strength, serenity, and resilience. Secluded and withdrawn, yet not actively anti-social.

**“Name”:** “Hammerhead Beast”



## INTEGRAL

**Relationship between forms:** extremely direct. Corporeal form is a synecdoche for a wide swath of horned & antlered prey animals (cattle, deer, antelope & so on); umbral form is a complete instance of such an animal, yet on a massive scale.

**Philosophical implications:** relationship so direct as to evoke suspicion. Correlation between forms is essentially one-to-one, therefore sparks little revelation. Too too comfortable & reassuring.

**Avenues for further study:** repeat observation with organic trophy

**Current assessment:** deceptive

## CORPOREAL

**Form:** carving of a dove on the bough of an evergreen tree

**Function:** decorative wall-hanging

**Dimensions:** 11 inches wide, 9 inches tall, half an inch deep

**Material:** wood, plastic/resin eye

**Color:** light and dark brown

**Texture:** mostly ridged, but not rough; smooth in spots

**Source:** second-hand store

**Manner of acquisition:** purchased

**Emotional impressions:** rustic, homespun, and cozy. Simple and unassuming. Easily overlooked. Evokes rural settings, both for subject matter and type of residence where such decoration would best fit: remote log cabins, a far-away relative's home, etc. Vaguely wintry associations due to juxtaposition of dove and pine bough.

## UMBRAL

**Description:** gaunt, knobby profile of an animal head

**New form:** skull (or emaciated head) of a draconic creature

**New function:** avatar of mortality

**Emotional impressions:** macabre, due to dual death symbolism: of the dead, via skull-like appearance, and of the death-bringer, in the form of a starved, ravenous dragon

**"Name":** "Skeletal Drake"

## INTEGRAL

**Relationship between forms:** both indirect and inverted. The dragon relates to the dove only slightly, in that both are creatures capable of flight. The potent death imagery functions as a partial inversion of the "evergreen" tree branch's associations with immortality and eternal life.

**Philosophical implications:** Suggests that death lurks within all life; even in the promise of eternal life. If there is an afterlife, does death stalk its hallowed halls as well? What becomes of heaven's dead?

**Avenues for further study:** locate more relics with literal or symbolic links to eternity, immortality, afterlife, etc.

**Current assessment:** truthful





## CORPOREAL

**Form:** carving of two long-necked animals (similar to giraffes, yet not identical) with heads side-by-side, mouths/lips touching or tongues intertwined

**Function:** sculpture/art object

**Dimensions:** 4 inches wide, 7.5 inches tall, 2 inches deep

**Material:** polished stone

**Color:** mottled dark gray-green

**Texture:** mostly smooth, subtly pitted

**Source:** second-hand store

**Manner of acquisition:** purchased

**Emotional impressions:** unsettling. The animal heads are indistinct, and each has a furrow running the length of its face that suggests a withered, cadaverous aspect.

## UMBRAL

**Description:** side view of a small creature with a prominent eye

**New form:** innocent newborn

**New function:** helpless witness to a world defined by existential terror

**Emotional impressions:** the small, hapless thing seems on the verge of tears, or struck with a wide-eyed fear. Its pose is defensive and withdrawn; wary.

**“Name”:** “Dew-eyed Hatchling”



## INTEGRAL

**Relationship between forms:** possibly transposed? The corporeal form of the relic has more of the qualities and hallmarks endemic to the other realm, and the umbral form looks equally as unsettled as its observer.

**Philosophical implications:** Is it possible in some way for umbral forms to manifest as corporeal relics? And if so, for an umbral form shifted into the corporeal to become a relic, is that relic's *present* umbral form a reflection of the original corporeal artifact imprisoned within the other realm, or a sign of a new “deeper” meaning? Or is there some subtler deception or interference at work?

**Avenues for further study:** identify sculptor, if possible, and locate any additional similar works

**Current assessment:** unclear

# OUR PROGRAM AND PHRASEBOOK

## I. EXHIBITION

*"We now convene our Exhibition. Our first exhibitor, please take the stage. All others, please be seated."*

Used by the overseer to formally begin the Exhibition.

*"Title of form: [name]."*

Used by an exhibitor before presenting a relic that has been investigated prior to Exhibition.

*"The form is revealed."*

Announced once a relic's known form is revealed via the apparatus.

*"Unidentified form."*

Used by an exhibitor before presenting a relic that has not been investigated.

*"Hold."*

Interjection of assembly member to pause an exhibitor's manipulation of a relic, and call attention to a possible form upon the VEIL.

*"Form has been identified."*

Used by an exhibitor if a new form is revealed for an uninvestigated relic.

*"Resuming investigation."*

Used by an exhibitor when a possible new form is rejected and manipulation of the relic continues.

*"The form is hidden."*

Announced by an exhibitor at the end of an investigation that does

not reveal a conclusive form for their relic.

## 2. FORUM

### 2a. Interference

*"Those who encountered interference with relics, the apparatus, or exhibition: raise a hand."*

Used by the overseer to open the Interference section of Forum.

### 2b. Revelation

*"Our assembled body has shared in revelation."*

Used by the overseer to open the Revelation section of Forum, with discussion of their relic (if any).

*"Now we contemplate another relic."*

Used by the overseer (or current speaker) to choose another exhibitor and relic for discussion.

### 2c. Archive

*"Which of us volunteers to collect and archive the records from our assembly's observations?"*

Used by the overseer to open the Archive section of Forum.

## 3. CONCLUSION

*"Our assembly has concluded. May we carry memory of these phantoms with us as we resume our phantom life."*

Used by the overseer after Archive is complete, to conclude the assembly.

*Okay, so... what the hell am I supposed to make of all that?*

If you're asking yourself that by now, I get it! At this point I want to put the mask aside and be direct in explaining how to use what's in this zine.

The sum of this material is a template for creating an experience full of strange feelings: to make the mundane world seem a little less real. If it leaves you feeling untethered for a while, or looking at familiar objects with an unfamiliar perspective, it's had the intended effect.

As mentioned in the introduction, this game's design is closest to the realm of live-action roleplaying, aka larp. The world of larp is vast, so this may seem like an odd fit for that label based on your experience. From my own experience with larp, I think *New Forms* is closest to the archetype of "Nordic larp", though it's not a perfect fit. Those labels aren't essential, but they might give an indication if this is something you'd want to play.

The ritualistic nature of the meeting that's described, with its phrases, apparatus and so on, should make sense as the game's roleplaying elements. But there isn't a set of defined characters, or a dynamic scenario inclined toward typical dramatic conflict. The default assumption of the larp is that players are playing an echo or variation of themselves — whatever version of themselves would attend meetings like these, and share its general outlook (or at least be curious enough to try out attending).

A session of *New Forms* ought to finish in two hours or less, depending on the number of players. The pamphlet itself describes the larp's core activity from an

in-character point of view. And since the pamphlet is written in-character, it doesn't address any metagame elements outside of the fiction of the game. The "Forum" section, for example, resembles the debrief of a larp, but it too is still part of the game. *New Forms* intentionally mimics the format of a support group, Bible study, etc., spinning an eerie take on that kind of ritualized gathering.

What's covered in the "New Forms Manifesto and Orientation" therefore suggests a playable game, but with some of the pieces to actually play it missing. Or at least, to play it responsibly! Theoretically you might not need anything else, but the logistics of larp have needs that an in-character text like the pamphlet can't touch on.

For easy reference, information on safety tools is on the last page of the zine: page 22. Safety tools are helpful even if they may seem unneeded, and having them in place from the start means you're prepared if issues do arise. Anyone running *New Forms* should feel free to modify warm-ups and debriefs to suit the needs of their group, but I've included suggestions for handling each.

### **Relics & props**

The "relics" described in the pamphlet as the focus of using the apparatus could be any number of mundane items. These found objects (whether found, purchased, or already owned) are used to cast interesting and suggestive shadows during the larp. Good candidates for relics include puppets, knickknacks, dolls, machine parts, carvings, old devices, pottery, ceramics, glassware, figurines,

candelabras, broken toys, bones, shells, branches, odd stones, roots, and so on. Above all, look for objects that have an irregular shape from many angles; as much asymmetry as possible is good. Keep in mind that all color and surface detail will disappear in its shadow (except for some glassware). As far as where to look, consider free boxes, basements, attics, thrift stores, antique shops, flea markets, yard sales, and dumpsters, plus anything abandoned in nature or washed ashore. “Smaller than a bread-box” is a good relic guideline, too.

### Warm-up

Start with an icebreaker. Have each player take turns sharing their name and pronouns as a baseline, plus another unique detail, like an answer to a shared prompt. Some examples: “What’s the strangest thing you’ve ever seen or perceived that you could not explain?” or “Describe the oldest childhood toy you can remember giving a name to.”

Cover the safety tools on page 22. If the “apparatus” is already set up, it’s a good idea to demonstrate how to use it to cast evocative shadows, and have players practice using the phrases on page 18.

As a final transition to ease into character, have everyone take a seat in the assembly space. Dim the lights. Encourage everyone to close their eyes, empty their minds of images, and imagine complete darkness. Put on some mood music, and let the moment hold for about five minutes. I’d recommend the track “Heresy Part I” by Lustmord here. At a little over seven minutes, it’s on the long end, but matches the larp’s tone perfectly. If the

play space could use more atmosphere, you might let the full album play through the larp session, at a low enough volume to not be a distraction. (Its liner notes highlight how it’s a perfect fit for *New Forms*: “Heresy is the culmination of work carried out from 1987 to 1989 and utilizes subterranean location recordings originated within crypts, caverns, mines, deep shelters and catacombs together with material of seismic and volcanic origin. It also takes advantage of psycho-acoustic phenomena and the physical effects of low frequency information.”) A playlist of that album and other thematic tracks is linked here: <http://orbis-tertius.org/newforms-playlist>

### Debrief

First, raise the lights! They should have been relatively low throughout play, but once play ends, time for the darkness to be put away too. If you’ve had music playing during the session, turn it off as well. Both of these steps will help players to de-role from the experience. Have everyone gather in a circle, but try not to sit in the same places as during the Forum portion of the game. Maybe move the chairs to a different part of the room, or stand in a circle instead of sitting.

I like the method “roses & thorns” for feedback, though adding an extra step I call “seeds”. First, the ROSE: a favorite feeling, moment, choice, or anything else from the game. Next, the THORN: an obstacle or point of difficulty during play. Last, the SEED: something that didn’t happen, but that the player would like to see for the future. Each player shares their rose, thorn, and seed before

moving to the next person. (A player can pass on sharing one or all, too.)

*New Forms* isn't a high-intensity larp, so something like the above will likely be all the debrief you need. Take the pulse of the group to see if anyone needs more time or space to de-role, and check in if anyone seems uncomfortable.

### Adjusting the game

*New Forms* isn't what I'd consider an especially social larp, since most of the flow of play is a prescribed taking of turns, largely with one player at a time in the spotlight. If you want to add more social play, a natural place for some unstructured mingling would be before starting Exhibition. If there were a table with coffee and snacks, it would be natural for attendees to pass some time while waiting for Exhibition to begin. (And if you really want to go the extra mile in terms of staying on-theme, maybe let the coffee get a little burnt and the snacks a little stale. Play up the sense of reality as a rundown, disappointing place!)

Though the attendees are essentially anonymous within the meeting, with little cause in most cases to use specific names for each other, you might decide to invent specific characters or backgrounds for players to portray. This is fine! If you decide to adjust that setup, here are some ideas of character archetypes you might develop:

- ◆ First-time attendee
- ◆ Transplant who left another group
- ◆ Long-time, jaded member
- ◆ Partner of another attendee
- ◆ Zealous, dogmatic new member
- ◆ Lone dissenter to a core belief

### Bibliography & ludography

This game was directly inspired by the weird fiction of Thomas Ligotti, and would not exist without it. In particular, the stories "Vastarien", "My Case for Retributive Action", "Mad Night of Atonement", "The Night School", and "The Music of the Moon" all have elements that are echoed here. The Penguin Classics dual collection *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* and *Grimscribe* is an excellent starting point for anyone interested in his stories, which I absolutely recommend. While re-reading his work, I also consulted *The Thomas Ligotti Reader* edited by Darrell Schweitzer as part of developing themes for the game.

Apart from Ligotti, the various online collaborative works that make up the SCP Foundation were a likely indirect influence on this issue. It wasn't a conscious inspiration, but its default stylistic positions (clinical, in-character, and circumspect) are similar, and I've read more than enough SCP entries over the years to unconsciously absorb some of its tone.

For puzzling out how to write game rules from an in-character point-of-view, the storygame *A Penny for My Thoughts* by Paul Tevis was an excellent example. The design and textual style of *Lacuna Part 1* by Jared Sorensen also loomed large; I actually avoided re-reading it to avoid too strong an influence! For writing a larp text in particular, *My Jam* by Jeff Dieterle and Eric Mersmann was my guide. For larp safety tools, I looked to the wealth of thoughts, theory, and techniques shared by Eirik Fatland, Lizzie Stark, Johanna Koljonen and Maury Brown. My thanks to each of the above!

## Overview of safety tools

Cover each of these tools (or any other tools being used) before play, during the warm-up/workshop period, so that everyone shares the same understanding. Reading the following information out loud is one option, demonstrating tools one at a time and guiding players through practicing each of them.

The core safety principle is that **the needs of players take priority over the game at all times**. To make that possible, the following safety tools are used so that everyone can look after themselves and others: the Open Door, Cut & Brake, and the OK Check-in.

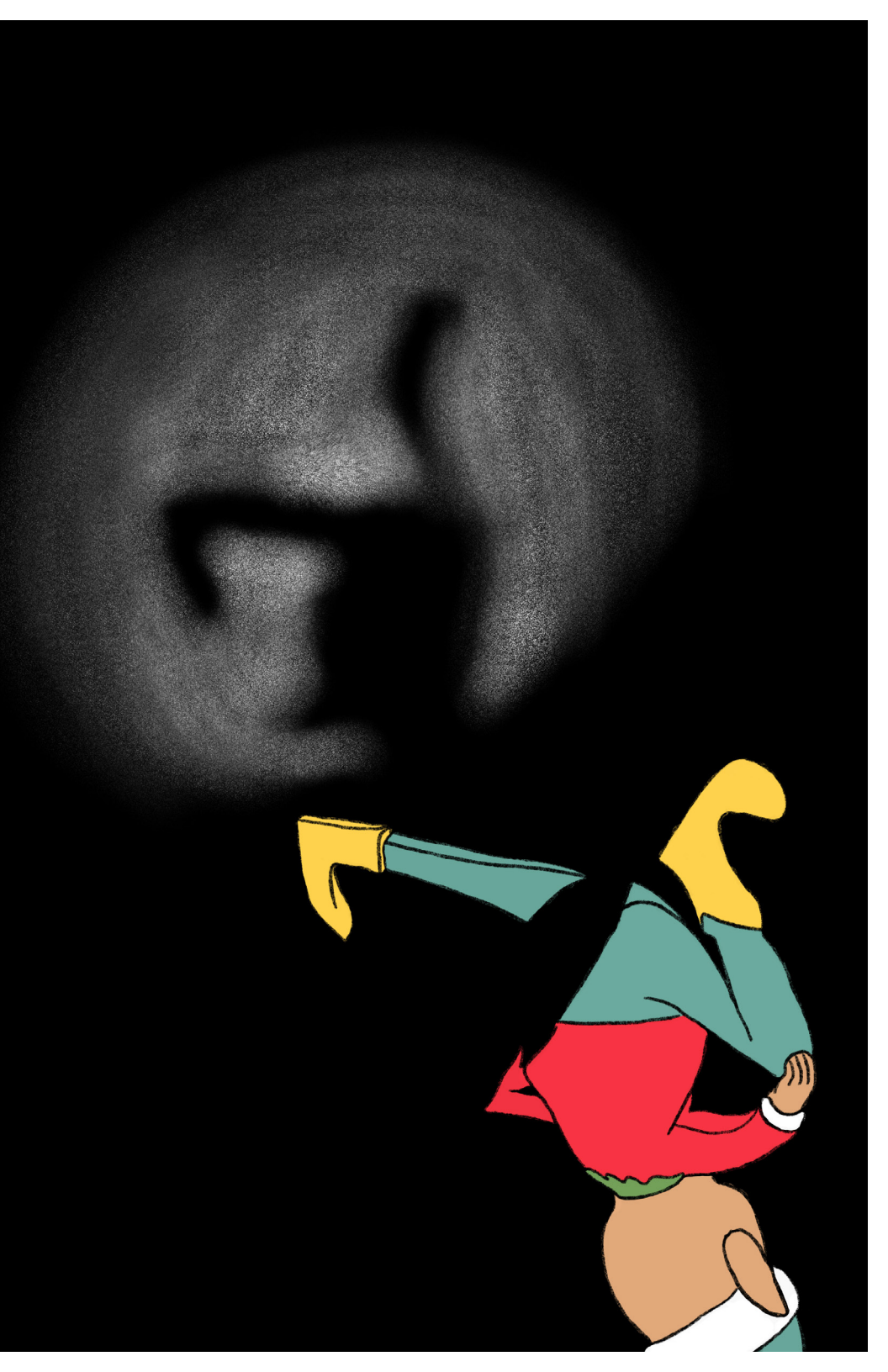
**Open Door:** All players are free to come and go from the play space as much as needed: if someone needs to get away from the atmosphere for a few minutes, take a bathroom break, make a phone call, eat, drink, or for any other reason. It's fine to take a short break, or to leave the game entirely! If a player happens to leave during or just before their turn presenting a relic, it's no issue, and they can take their turn again if they return. If anyone is worried about disrupting the larp by making use of the Open Door, everyone has agreed to the core principle: player needs take priority over the game. Plus, coming and going freely is perfectly normal for the assembly taking place during *New Forms*, so using the Open Door won't disrupt anyone at all.

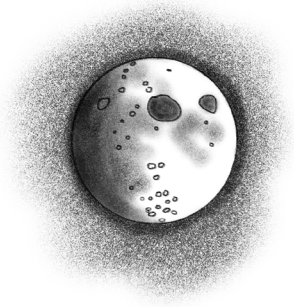
**Cut & Brake:** These two tools let players interrupt or adjust what's happening within the play space. Saying "Cut!" suspends the game, and everyone

stops play until the issue is handled. If "Cut!" might not be heard or noticed, also make an "X" shape over the head with both arms, if possible. A player can use Cut for their own safety, or for another player; if you spot that another player's Cut hasn't been heard, repeat it yourself to help it be noticed. Cut can be used for physical safety (if someone has gotten hurt, could get hurt, or for other dangers) or for emotional safety. No one needs to justify their use of Cut, nor should anyone ask for a justification. Instead, focus on whatever the player calling Cut needs. Saying "Brake" doesn't stop play, but is a signal for other players to lower the intensity of their play. Taking a literal step back signals you hear another player's "Brake" call and are respecting it.

**OK Check-in:** This non-verbal tool lets players quickly check on how others are doing. One player will make the "OK" gesture (index finger and thumb making a circle, other fingers splayed) at another, who will then respond in one of three ways: with a thumbs-up (all is well), a thumbs-down (not doing well), or a so-so sign (a flat hand; somewhere in between). Any response other than a thumbs-up is a sign for further checking in; ask what the player needs. If they're not sure, ask if the Open Door should be used, or if "Cut!" should be called.

*These safety mechanics are based largely on those developed by Maury Brown, Sarah Lynne Bowman, and Harrison Greene for the New World Magischola larp.*





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