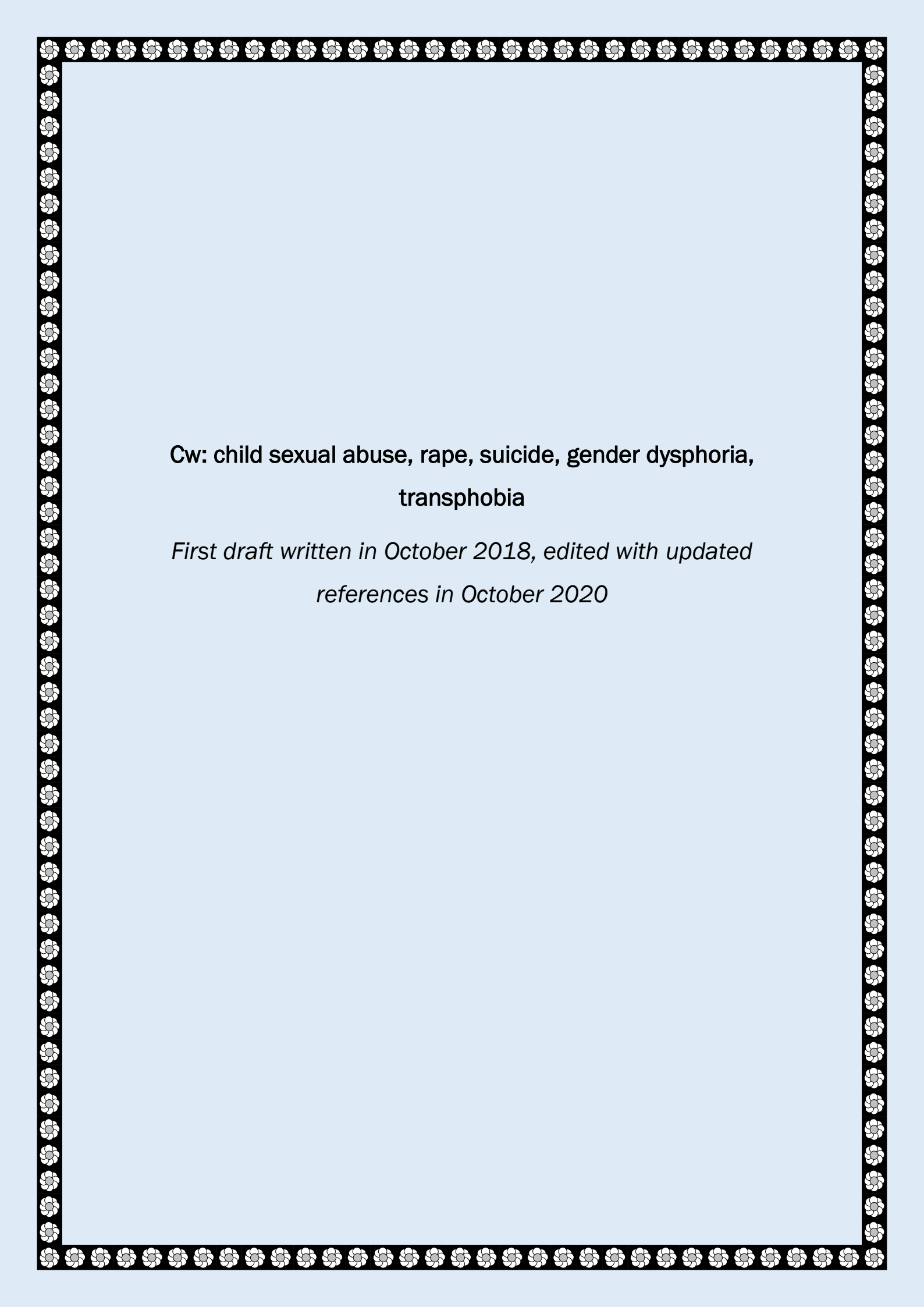


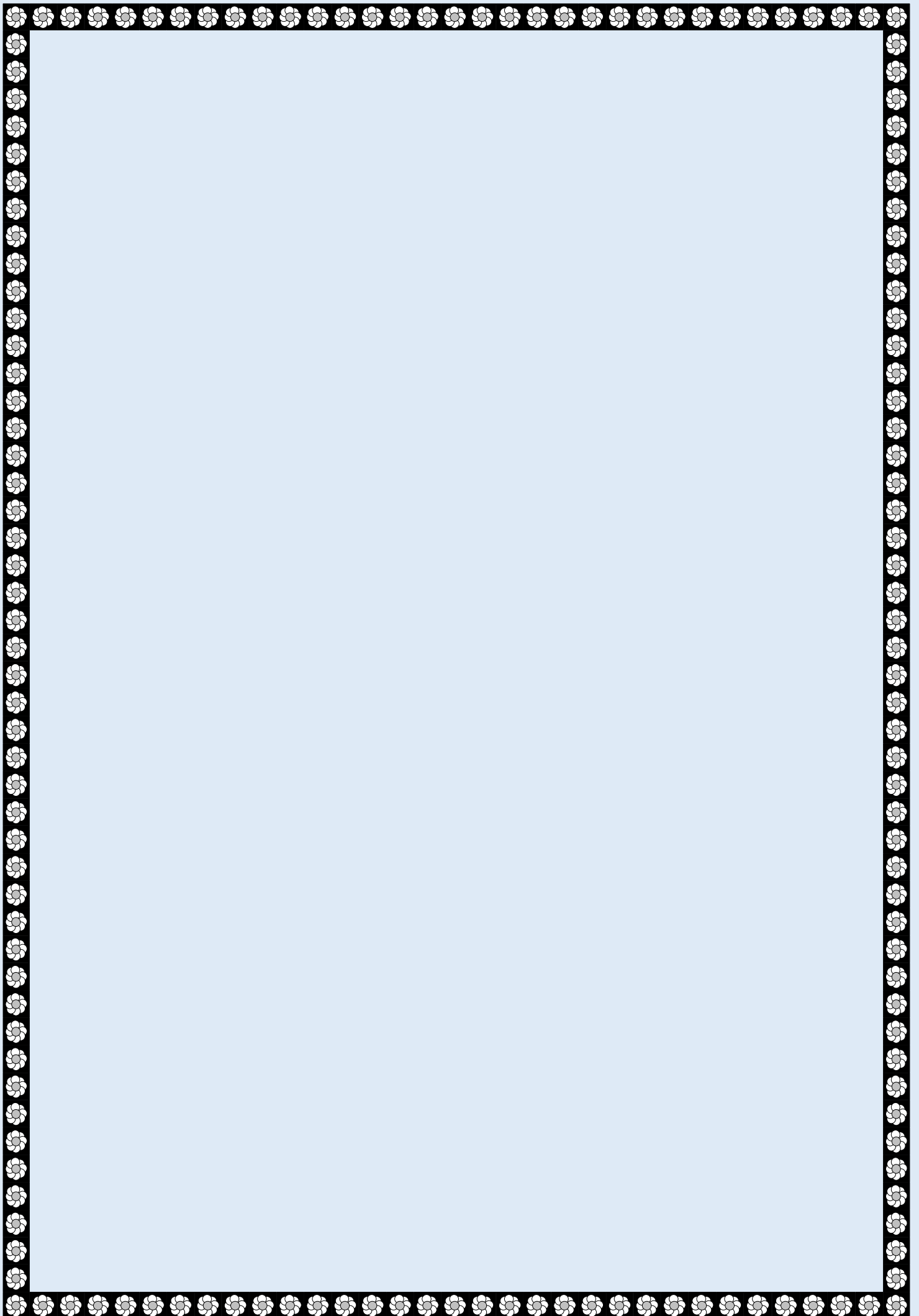


-The Final Boy-



**Cw: child sexual abuse, rape, suicide, gender dysphoria,
transphobia**

*First draft written in October 2018, edited with updated
references in October 2020*





I'd fuck him for free.

1. THE BAD OLD MAN AND THE BEAUTIFUL BOY

Manhood is dangerous, but it is also deeply uncool, which is somehow worse. The paedophile who is conceptualised by his terrible looks and his terrible acts encompasses both the aesthetically unpleasant and the utterly immoral. A contradiction to the mythic image of the vampirically desirable criminal, sharpened suited and smooth. The paedophile's criminal desires, render him repulsive rather than romantic, creating a contradictory portrait of an emasculated rapist, the flaccid and feeble sex offender. He is a failure of the patriarchy and creature of chemical castration for following through the order of age-based oppression so thoroughly. His success in the denigration of children, an extension of the wider disenfranchisement of very young people, is such a gold star good job that he needs to be flunked out of society altogether.

He is a he because we cannot imagine otherwise. He cannot be a hero because that would expose how horrible everyone else is.

I was raped as a child by a man who could not get it up on his wedding night.

This is funny and revealing.

I was raped by a young man with white hair because hurting young people makes you old. He was raped as a child, by a man who I think it would be reasonable to suspect didn't have a wildly happy childhood either. The young man with white hair also hurt another child, who hurt me too. This is because trauma travels in multiple directions at once. Like a firework. Or a sneeze.

BOB, the monstrous figure of murderous incest in the 'Twin Peaks' universe has long grey hair, similarly Leland Palmer, BOB's host vessel, who was previously his victim-*again how trauma travels, contaminates, spreads and circles!*-hair turns white overnight when things get bad. As if the hairs are bad thoughts and violent dreams that have grown up and out of his head and into the real world for all to see.

If the bad man is horrible to look at the final boy is beautiful.

You are such a beautiful, beautiful boy, hisses a generic old John to Joseph Gordon Levitt in *Mysterious Skin*.

I'm gonna come, replies Joseph, thinking not of his fawning client, but of his childhood rapist.

The bad man is the final boy's first love, and he has become an acceptable point of entry into cinematic desire. I am scared for the final boy because I have been the final boy, a character who spends his time screaming, crying, sleeping, being raped, jerking off and wearing cotton vests and golden crowns. No one wants to save him and everyone wants to fuck him, and that's creepy and concerning.

I am interested in how women on the internet can occupy the Germaine Greer-esque position of the bad old man through the eroticised image of the traumatised teenage boy. Celeste, the antihero of 'Tampa' (2013), a satirical story of female paedophilia, is shown in one scene masturbating to music videos of teen boy bands. It is notable here to mention that Timothée

Chalamet's follow up feature to 'Call Me By Your Name' was titled simply, 'Beautiful Boy'. The satirical site Clickhole, parodies these passions, in a post entitled, "Grow Up And Get A Life': Timothée Chalamet Has Threatened To Retire From Acting If The 30-Year-Old Internet People Who Are Obsessed With Him Don't Cut That Shit Out ASAP'. Written in the imagined first person of this youthful star, it reads:

Do you think it's normal for a full grown person to spend all day online explaining how I may look young but I'm actually 24, so it's fine to be attracted to me? How the fuck don't you realize how uncomfortable that makes me feel? I've got a bunch of media dweebs 10 years older than me following my every move. Imagine how fucking unsettling that is. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.¹

But I am not above the abusive powers of the erotic, or rather I am under it, under older men, or turning young men old. Men the same age as men are mistaken for my father, like I am a poisonous substance that gives men M-shaped hairlines and tiger striped foreheads. I have a tendency to bring out the bad old man in good young men.

I guess my rapist was my first love. My rapist, like my valentine or my favourite colour, something that belongs to me, and so becomes a part of me. This raises the question of what manhood becomes for boys whose boyhood have been impaled by bad men.

'Mysterious Skin' (2004) and 'Call Be Your Name' (2017), two 1980s summer stories, that both in distinctly different ways, present the question of queer nostalgia in the dreamy, devastating heartbreak for older men. Against a soundtrack of Slowdive for Neil, Sufjan Stevens for Eli, a diet of fruit loops for Neil and peaches for Eli, we are offered queer Jewish trauma that is concealed and revealed and carried and cradled, that is pressed into your hand like a star of David necklace, *this was mine and now it's yours*, you can wear it round your neck or hide it in a box, but it belongs to you.

But what about going forward rather than backwards? Who do these final boys grow into? And how?

¹ Ed., "Grow Up And Get A Life': Timothée Chalamet Has Threatened To Retire From Acting If The 30-Year-Old Internet People Who Are Obsessed With Him Don't Cut That Shit Out ASAP', Clickhole, June 23rd 2020



2. HEREDITARY AND THE HORROR OF TRANSITION

“A transgender child brings a parent face to face with death. The daughter I had known and loved was gone; a stranger with facial hair and a deep voice had taken her place.”²

-‘A transgender story: My daughter, my son’

“I often described my sudden shift in self-awareness as feeling as if a demon had entered my room in the middle of the night, startled me awake by whispering, “What if you were a man, sort of?” into my ear, then slithered out the window before I could ask any follow-up questions.”³

-Daniel Lavery

Ari Astler’s ‘Hereditary’ (2018) presents transition to manhood as unholy and unnatural, an interruption rather than an inevitable part of the order of life. This change is irreversible, it is a permanent, upsetting, obvious mutation. Much like being raped or falling in love it marks you, outs you, condemns you, transforms you.

Such fears are unsubtly embodied in the ‘daughter’ character of Charlie, who is described as “plump” and “androgynous” in Astler’s screenplay, against ‘her’ brother Peter, who is “a handsome, skinny boy”.⁴ ‘She’ has a fondness for candy, a wardrobe that seems to consist mostly of pyjamas and a nut allergy and verbal tic. Disability, fatphobia and gender nonconformity seemingly intertwining in the film’s signalling that this isn’t just a creepy character it’s a demonic one.

So Hereditary explores these faces we wear, these characters we play, these heads we fix on and off our shoulders, like interlocking dolls to be assembled. Charlie’s mother, the poor orphaned Annie, maker of doll houses and bringer of tragedy, mentions her own brother’s death by suicide, that in the note he feared that his mother had been “putting people inside of him.” Annie later snaps to her son Peter to wipe off that “fucking face on your face”.⁵

The secrets of this family go so much deeper than Annie’s recently departed mother’s grave, they tunnel down straight to hell. This is the world of chaos magic, of sigils and Satanic worship. It is about Paimon: The god of mischief and collector of heads. The devil is a comedian and he will have the last laugh in this movie. We just need Charlie to lose ‘her’ head to achieve this.

Annie goes to a MARKED PAGE.

It features an illustration of a beastly man
with a hulking body and a strangely effeminate face.

² Ann Whitford Paul, ‘A transgender story: My daughter, my son’, *Los Angeles Times*, October 7th 2012

³ Daniel Lavery, *Something That May Shock and Discredit You* (Scribe: 2020) p.14

⁴ *Hereditary*, screenplay by Ari Aster (2016)

⁵ Ibid.

He rides a dromedary and wears a crown. Tied to his hip is a collection of SEVERED HEADS. Behind him is a queue of frolicking ghouls, all headless and all playing instruments.

A title reads "King Paimon (God of Mischief)."
Annie finds a HIGHLIGHTED PARAGRAPH: "When successfully invoked, Paimon will possess the most vulnerable host. Only when the ritual is complete will Paimon be locked into his ordained host. Once locked in, a new ritual is required to unlock the possession."

A sentence underlined in pencil reads: "Paimon is Male, thus covetous of a male human body."⁶

Gender in so many ways is a question of morals, this arbitrary assignment of new born bodies with unfaltering beliefs, of punishing the gender atheists and panicking at the gender agnostics. It's how we define violence, but it's also about who we allow violence against, and within what context. What is hereditary is how we pass down pain and how. (See also, the ignorant and discriminatory insistence that only child sex abuse survivors struggle with gender identity, a claim disturbing and nonsensical for too many reasons to count out here, and one that has been used to explain away my own struggles with identity.)

CHARLIE'S DECAPITATED HEAD

wears a silver

CROWN.

This person (Joan) shuffles past Peter to lift the crown off of Charlie's head. She then comes to stand (now off-screen) before Peter. After a moment, the CROWN enters frame to be placed ceremoniously onto Peter's head.

Hey: hey: Charlie.

Peter's breathing HALTS. He looks up to Joan, still trembling. Eyes wide.

JOAN (CONT'D)

You're all right now.

⁶ Ibid.

A long silence as Peter searches Joan's face for understanding. Peter finally SPEAKS...but he sounds more like

CHARLIE than Peter.

Who am I?

PETER

A loaded pause from Joan. Then:

JOAN (O.S.)

You are Paimon. One of the eight

Kings of Hell.

Beat. Peter doesn't react. He just stares at her, uncomprehending.

JOAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

We have looked to the northwest and called you in. We've corrected your first body and give you now this healthy male host. We reject the Trinity and pray devoutly to you, great Paimon: give us your knowledge of all secret things and all mysteries of the Earth; bring us honor, wealth and good familiars; and bind all men to our Will, as we have bound ourselves for now and ever to Yours.⁷

This is what the writer Sasha Geffen identifies as the trans horror story of *Hereditary* in the 2018 essay 'Trans Horror Stories and Society's Fear of the Transmasculine Body'.⁸ Here transmanhood, much like the trauma of interpersonal abuse exists as a violent, contaminatory state, ready to rot the carefully built family tree house.

Annie sits on the edge of Charlie's bed. Charlie is under the covers. Annie has opened Charlie's drawing pad to see a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sasha Geffen, 'Trans Horror Stories and Society's Fear of the Transmasculine Body', *Them*, August 21st 2018

CARICATURE of Annie's mother's corpse in its casket.

ANNIE

That's grandma?

CHARLIE

I dunno.

ANNIE

You know you were her favorite?

CHARLIE

(looking away)

No I wasn't.

ANNIE

(pouncing)

Oh yes you absolutely were! Even when
you were a little baby, she wouldn't
let me feed you because she needed to
feed you. It drove me crazy.

CHARLIE

She said I was supposed to be a boy.

Annie knows this. She hesitates, wanting to say the right
thing.

ANNIE

How do you feel about that?

Charlie shrugs.⁹

Geffen locates this horror movie in parallel with the Atlantic's own journalistic horror story of 2018, 'When Children Say They're Trans', the masculinising hormone of testosterone and even the abstract idea of trans identity, framed as a sort of child abuser in and of itself.¹⁰ Much like *Hereditary's* story of Satanic possession, we follow the child's trans belief systems "growing stronger", a trans male vlogger, rather than a séance being the catalyst for this cautionary tale.

But why is the abusive character identified as agency and autonomy for a trans young person in a world that denies him both? Are we so misplaced that we see abuse in the authority of a child, rather than in the abusive powers of the adult? Why aren't boys given the tools to grow into men, but instead remain fixed like flower pressings in a creeping, erotic obsession with boyhood?

⁹ *Hereditary*.

¹⁰ Jesse Singal, 'When Children Say They're Trans', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2018 Issue

This a scary story with a happy ending, the trans teen with his “baggy, uncomfortable clothes”, “damaged, short hair” and “depressed-looking face” is returned to ‘she’ status.¹¹ Notably, the author of this lively piece is keen to emphasise the contribution of sexual trauma to such exercises of gender deviancy. This argument is unsurprising and unavoidable, particularly as the writer frames trans manhood, much like PTSD or a personality disorder, as a “psychiatric condition”.¹² The solution to this madness he asserts is to find a safe place to hide and to try and sit it out, to keep quiet and hope it goes away, avoiding loud bangs and any sudden movements that might draw this beast’s attention.

Sadly, these fear-inducing folk stories were not the passing trend of the late 2010s that masculinising transition has been framed as. Its 2020 culmination, a book length diatribe entitled ‘Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters’ by the American journalist Abigail Shrier. A plea to “get our girls back” from this devilish trickery, the cover shows a 1950s style paper doll with rosy cheeks and big blue eyes with a large circular cut out in her middle.¹³ The text itself opening somewhat disarmingly with the Billy Joel lines, “She hides like a child/But she’s always a woman to me.”¹⁴ This is “the new anorexia” of trans boyhood, whose plastic crown is passed on from the anorexic, the bulimic, the hysteric, “the cutting contagion”, and the ‘false’ survivor of child sexual abuse put forward by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation.¹⁵

Notably, Shrier is keen to emphasise that the puberty blocker Lupron was once used as chemical castration for sex criminals, while at another point describing gender affirming surgery as “witchcraft”.¹⁶ It is a corrupting and creeping cult, turning girls into goat headed Gods, through the temptation of transformation. There she is, my poor little daughter, mindlessly muttering “mumbo jumbo” incantations from the internet, like witch-y Latin in a Blumhouse movie.¹⁷ Here the transgender boy takes the paedophile’s threatening throne when it comes to ruining the nuclear family. Dr Lisa Littman, the creator of the ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria’ narrative that

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughter* (Regnery Publishing: 2020) p.7

¹⁴ As of the 20th October 2020 Abigail Shrier’s pinned tweet reads as follows:

“The book Amazon doesn't want you to read, OUT TODAY: <https://amazon.com/Irreversible-Damage-Transgender-Seducing-Daughters/dp/1684510317/>

To the hundreds of families going through this horror right now - thanks for your phone calls, your DMs, your help, your support and your trust.

Let's get our girls back.

-11:06 am, 30th June 2020”

¹⁵ *Irreversible Damage* p.11

Ed. 'Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters': Amazon Blocks Publisher From Advertising Book on Trans Trend, CBN News, 7th July 2020.

¹⁶ *Irreversible Damage*, p.176, 70

¹⁷ Ibid. p.13

forms the foundation of Shrier's storytelling, makes this connection between the child sex abuser and the transitioning trans man explicitly clear:

In the 1990s, the beliefs and practices of many mental health professionals may have contributed to their patients' creation of false childhood memories consistent with a child sexual abuse narrative and research since then has shown that false childhood memories of mundane events can be implanted in laboratory settings [65–67]. It may be worthwhile to explore if, in today's culture, there might be beliefs and practices of some mental health professionals that are contributing to their patients' creation of false childhood memories consistent with an “always knew/always were transgender” narrative.¹⁸

This is the new stranger danger. You might glimpse him as the false prophet of YouTube, preening and posing in the laptop, tricking particularly gullible young girls with his “scruffy-jawed” “boyband looks”, a “boyishly adorable” “world-class salesman”, offering promises of a better life.¹⁹ But first, a blood sacrifice is needed, and the head on the spike her mother's only daughter.

But you can't join a church without a baptism—can't claim to be bloodbrothers unless you spill a little blood. It is the trans bar mitzvah, and it is joyously undertaken. Pain is proof of commitment to the cause. You can almost hear him [the trans male YouTuber] address his YouTube congregation: Today, I am a man.²⁰

-Abigail Shrier

A mother, midforties, presents with the distressing case of her son, thirty; an unremarkable childhood gave way to a bog-standard adolescence and showed every sign of developing into an unexceptional manhood until a wedding at Cana (the influence of out-of-town friends?) then, suddenly and without warning (one odd moment around the age of twelve, if we're being strictly honest, when he had been separated from his parents and other relatives and spent a little unsupervised time talking with teachers in the temple courts, but honestly, nothing since then), full-blown messianic identity disorder, a total change in social groups, all new friends, most of them unattractively dressed, a sudden fixation with fatherliness, miraculous wounds, unexplained twelve-year emissions of blood, unflattering haircuts, unusual new grooming rituals involving feet, hair, and perfume, a tendency to take metaphorical language about abundance, bread, and wine too literally, generally antisocial behavior, etc., etc. Nothing in the child's behavior between the ages of birth and thirty accounts for this abrupt change in demeanor and habit. Further research is required before a formal diagnosis can be made; however, a number of like-minded parents in the area share a growing concern that underlying issues of depression and anxiety may be responsible. Moreover, many of them report that a disproportionate number of their messianically minded children have

¹⁸ Lisa Littman, 'Parent reports of adolescents and young adults perceived to show signs of a rapid onset of gender dysphoria', *PLOS One*, August 16th 2018

¹⁹ *Irreversible Damage*, pp. 64, 58, 64, 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 65

espoused similarly eschatological worldviews after coming into contact with one another.²¹

-Daniel Lavery

“This is the story of the American family—decent, loving, hardworking and kind” reads the introduction, like the headline of an old horror movie.²² And this is a story about families, of too tolerant white upper middle class families, whose virginal, straight A students, so agreeable and obedient, start spending too much time watching anime on their iPhones, and before you know it, they’re “binding breasts and smoking cigarettes.”²³ As Littman laments, “to see kids turning on their parents... I found that very heart breaking...It’s kind of my worst nightmare.”²⁴ Shrier offers a number of theories to this nightmare, citing “our modern-day obsession with mental health”, she narrates her inner thoughts where, “I wonder aloud whether inflated collegiate sexual assault statistics haven’t scared adolescent girls off of womanhood entirely.”²⁵

Trans experiences, much like trauma, can indeed be maddening, capable of slapping and stretching the body in interesting and offputting ways, but whilst a natural impulse in an assault is to play dead, you simply cannot wait transness out, because you cannot wait yourself out. You can’t win or lose in such a single player game. A common assertion of anti-transition is that stalling the action of embodiment is harmless, put it off now and if you still feel this terrible impulse later maybe then you can act on it. Maybe. After all, Shrier is keen to emphasise how “sober, thoughtful and decent” the transgender adults she spoke to were, it is simply the children that are wrong.²⁶

²¹ *Something that May Shock...* p.49

²² *Irreversible Damage*, p.16

²³ *Ibid.* p.33

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.51

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.47

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.231



3. THE SUICIDAL BOTTOM

From my own experience the act of not acting, the art of Trans Hamleting, makes you weird, makes you worse. It does not preserve you, it rots you, you don't prevent transition, you just transition into something else, something sadder and stranger. Meg Ryan in *You've Got Mail*, is asked, following the break up with her boyfriend, whether there is someone else, someone better, she says *no, but there is the dream of someone else*. This is how I feel about men, this is how I feel about myself, this is how I feel about my rapist, this is how I feel about my life. Some days I say I'll do something, take action, go to therapy, stop repressing traumatic dysphoria and dysphoric trauma. But then I make a list of all the things that needs changing, all the corrections the body needs, all the things I do not have, which I cannot get back and then I feel bad, and then I feel worse, and the list is so long, and I just turn on the tv, and try and think of something else. All these stand ins, for the dream of someone else that float past me like little bubbles as I flip, flap, flap on a rock like a baby seal, surrounded by bigger, bolder boys. Maybe sharks, maybe sea lions, that want to eat me and then they do. Because I do nothing, so become something, for someone else, someone else's breakfast, someone else's body, someone else's life.

There he is, the suicidal bottom whose sex is self-destruction and self-assertion. The existence of men is a moral failing, raising the question of whether it is worse to want to be a man or to be with one. This is what Andrea Long Chu defines as the trans queer nature of "desire's ungovernability" in her *n+1* essay 'On Liking Women', which positions "transness as a matter not of who one is, but of what one wants."²⁷ Or as Alex V. Green asks in their 2020 essay, 'Go Ahead Transition', which picks apart the tropes of the trans desire as "faddish fakers", "I wonder why it is so aberrant, so outrageous, for trans and non-binary people to demand similar bodily autonomy [to their cisgender peers]?"²⁸

I want a lot of things that are ridiculous and damaging. So does Eli, so does Charlie and so does Neil. We don't know what's good for us and that's what makes us protagonists and not puritanical preachers. I am a spoiled child, a Veruca Salt stamping her foot, reciting her Christmas list to God on bended knees as if he's Santa Claus, as if he's her father, as if there's a difference. So it's not surprising that my relation to erotic embodiment is any different. I want pop tarts, I want candy, I want a Pekingese puppy, I want to get punched in the face, I want to be a foot taller, I want to kill myself, I want to look in the mirror and not want to kill myself, I want you to hurt me, I want to be a man. I want. I want. I want.

It's commonly agreed that suicidal people are too crazy to know what they want, this is a reasonable assertion. It's also agreed that CSA survivors have no idea about supposedly 'healthy'

²⁷ Andrea Long Chu, 'On Liking Women', *n+1* (Winter 2018)

²⁸ Alex V. Green, 'Go ahead, transition', *Xtra*, June 3rd 2020.

sex, lurching wildly from one rapist to another. But to be fucked by a man twice your size, can at times, be an assertion of power, for as Tim Dean observes:

“Being sexually penetrated is a matter of ‘taking it like a man,’ enduring without complaint any discomfort or temporary loss of status, in order to prove one’s masculinity.”²⁹

The question here is not is the rectum a grave, but rather is the circle pit an asshole? Is Kurt Cobain a bottom? Is suicide by shotgun the ultimate form of bottoming? As Cortney Alexander, notes, “The ultimate expression of Cobain’s failed masculinity is his suicide.”³⁰ And Kurt savours the sweetness of this failure, a buck season of a boy wearing the oversized plaid shirts of the jocks. “It’s fun to lose”, he sings in his most popular song, comically confident in his contradictions. Comfortably uncomfortably in his character of “an underdeveloped, immature little dude that never got laid and was constantly razed.”³¹

The shotgun suicide is a brilliant failure of manhood in its assertive anti-identity and overcompensation. You have to *commit* to a shotgun in the same way you have to commit to a suicide. They’re heavy things, glossy and elegant to look at but inelegant to operate, capable of destroying you so thoroughly that not on even a farewell face for your funeral is left behind. You are deleted so extravagantly and unsubtly you have to leave your driving license on display as a bit of forward planning.

²⁹ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy* (University of Chicago: 2009) p.86

See also: Andrea Long Chu, ‘Did Sissy Porn Make Me Trans?’, *Queer Disruptions*, Columbia University (March 2018) [draft version] p.4

³⁰ Cortney Alexander, ‘Across Borders: Kurt Cobain and Masculinity’, *Gender Across Borders*, May 31st 2011

³¹ *Montage of Heck* (dir. Brett Morgen: HBO: 2015)



4. THE APOCALYPTIC BOTTOM

To operate a gun creates the illusion of handiwork without actually using your hands, the machine after all is doing all the heaving lifting. It's quite something that the only time we consider using our hands is to kill ourselves, that the only time we can envision returning the labourer to the commodity they produce is in the case of a ruggedly masculinist zombie apocalypse.

"A bowman.

I respect that.

See, a man with a rifle, he could have been some kind of photographer
or soccer coach back in the day.

But a bowman's a bowman through and through."³²

The *Walking Dead* is a gloriously ludicrous melodrama of working class alienation, each scene sparkles and shines with affected rural accents and outlandish declarations. Daryl Dixon, played by Norman Reedus, who spends the majority of the show eating the guts of dead squirrels, driving a motorbike emblazoned with an SS logo on its shiny side, shooting possums for his dinner, crying with crinkled eyes, trying to save innocent young people, failing to save young people and giving to the camera speeches about his traumatic childhood, is its most memorable creation.

Over here, we find Daryl in a house in the woods, railing against Beth, a wide eyed and perceptive young woman, and talented musician. It would be reasonable to describe Beth herself as a survivor, of the apocalypse, of an attempted suicide, of the loss of both of her parents, her lovers, and of her home, a beautiful Anne of Green Gables style farm with a sleek set of horses and clean, white wooden walls. Daryl, naturally, would disagree.

"I've never- never eaten frozen yogurt.

Never had a pet pony.

Never got nothing from Santa Claus.

Never relied on anyone for protection before.

Hell, I don't think I've ever relied on anyone for anything.

Never sung out in front of a big group out in public like everything was fun.

Like everything was a big game.

I sure as hell never cut my wrists looking for attention."³³

³² *The Walking Dead*, 'Alone', Season Four, Episode Thirteen, screenplay by Curtis Gwinn, directed by Ernest Dickerson (AMC: USA: 2014)

³³ *The Walking Dead*, 'Still', Season Four, Episode Twelve, written by Angela Kang and directed by Julius Ramsay. (AMC: USA: 2014)

Suicide is understood as anti-labour, it exists in the impractical, feminised, comfortably middle-class world of frozen yoghurt, the performing arts and mutual dependence. An echo of the belief systems put forward by the scholar of queer failure and trans manhood, Jack Halberstam, whose suspicions towards the femininity of mental health support shone through the author's writings of the mid-2010s. You are not meant to die in your bed, but rather live in the forests, anything else is both irritating and unnecessary.

But why is the after effects of trauma, of survival, still a suck it up and stick it out state of affairs? As if being a survivor, whatever that means, is equivalent to a never-ending tour of duty, jumping from one warzone to another, with some Buffy the Vampire style crossbow and a leather vest with angel's wings to match. I get that things like childhood rape, and childhood in general, are painful, awful experiences, that you just need to grit your teeth and wait them out. But why does the rest of life have to be like that too? Or at least why do we delight in pretending that life is an unseasoned, masculine endurance test with the bragging rights to match?

Daryl Dixon, is presented more as a "dumb animal" than an adult man, communicating in grunts, sitting on the porch of your suburban home eating vermin, unwashed but not altogether unhappy.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, he lacks table manners and the sight of him eating spaghetti is a sorry spectacle of the social underclass. We see him a season or so later, captured in a cage, naked in its corner, eating dog food sandwiches for dinner. He is suited to a zombie apocalypse he explains, because he's "used to things being ugly".³⁵ This is an ugliness inherently tied to the nightmarish landscape of Georgia, a state (both physical and mental) that he has never left.

The state of Georgia as a scary survivalist world of woods and white water is first introduced to us in the 1972 movie *Deliverance*. In a place where the rural working class pop out of the trees like peculiar birds, Burt Reynolds' character Lewis evokes the white masculinist idealism of the teenage boy that longs for a zombie apocalypse. His rugged and romanticised speeches pits the vanishing wilderness of "the last untamed, unpolluted, unfucked up river in the south" against the "smart little suburb" these men are escaping from.³⁶ At any opportunity he's leaping into pre-rehearsed monologues about falling machines and the imminent apocalypse. Lewis assures us that he is, and always will be, the last man standing.

"It's like you were made for how things are now.

You can't depend on anybody for anything, right?

I'll be gone someday.

You're gonna be the last man standing.

³⁴ *The Walking Dead*, 'Rock in The Road', Season Seven, Episode Nine, written by Angela Kang and directed by Greg Nicotero (AMC: USA: 2017)

³⁵ *The Walking Dead*, 'Still'.

³⁶ *Deliverance*, directed by John Boorman (Warner Brothers: USA: 1972)

You are.

You're gonna miss me so bad when I'm gone, Daryl Dixon."³⁷

Lewis like Daryl, looks great in a leather vest, his biceps are described in the screenplay as “awesome” and, perhaps most importantly, he is a bow man, a precursor to Rambo’s bow wielding 1980s action hero, and the uptake in Amazon dot com orders for Daryl’s Horton Scout crossbow.³⁸ As Stephen Farber, in his 1972 New York Times review admits, “Burt Reynolds has obvious limitations as an actor, but he is perfectly cast in the role of a walking centrefold”.³⁹ As singular as these characters seem, like all on screen creations they need an audience to exist. Reynolds whose popcorn crunching fanboys exist in a “safe world of locker room and Boy Scout Camp”, is “an imitation Neanderthal superman.”⁴⁰ (It’s worth noting here that seventeen movie fans died taking a pilgrimage to Reynolds river site, most intoxicated, all I assume were deeply idealistic.⁴¹) Because, for all its squeals and shock factor, *Deliverance* is a boy’s playground of a film, with Roger Ebert dismissing the movie entirely with “for all of his 6 feet 4 inches and prowess with a bow and arrow, what James Dickey has given us here is a fantasy about violence, not a realistic consideration of it.”⁴² Similarly, in a 1999 New York Times Book Review, J.D. McCatchy cuttingly observed that James Dickey, author of the novel *Deliverance* was based on, was “under all the chest hair, a hollow man”.⁴³

These figures are hollow, not just for their need for attention, Reedus is a former high fashion model, Reynolds a former stunt men, but because they rely inherently on masculine imitation. Daryl is not a singular survivor because the final boy never is. Of course, he has a double, a bad old man. It doesn’t matter if the first bad old man dies, he can always be replaced. The bad old men is mortal while the final boy is not.

First, we have the abusive father, glimpsed only by the scars on Daryl’s back, whipped like Christ in a sleeveless shirt. A “dumbass” man, who lived amongst “a bunch of junk”, shooting in the house and sitting on a “dumpster chair” next to “your fancy buckets... for spitting chaw in after your old lady tells you to stop smoking.”⁴⁴ Working class, rural masculine identity is drawn in broad strokes, more Halloween costume than character study, the redneck as much of a movie

³⁷ *The Walking Dead*, ‘Still’.

³⁸ *Deliverance*, screenplay by James Dickey and John Boorman (1971) p.2

³⁹ Stephen Farber, ‘Deliverance’, How it Delivers’, *The New York Times*, August 20th 1972

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

⁴¹ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: An American Icon* (Oxford University Press: 2005) p.210

⁴² Roger Ebert, ‘Deliverance’, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, October 9th 1972

⁴³ J.D. McCatchy, ‘A Poet Turns Pitchman’, *The New York Times*, December 19th 1999.

⁴⁴ *The Walking Dead*, ‘Still’.

monster as the zombie.⁴⁵ As season two's antagonist Shane cruelly notes, if a child fleeing from zombies were to find Daryl, and caught a sight of "[him] coming all methoded out with your buck knife and geek ears around your neck [they'd] run in the other direction."⁴⁶ The geek in question is the zombie, but it's clear that the freak here is Daryl, hailing from "the country of 9 fingered people".⁴⁷

"You're nothing but a freak to them.

Redneck trash.

That's all you are.

They're laughing at you behind your back.

You know that, don't you? I got a little news for you, son.

One day they gonna scrape you off their heels like you was dogshit.

Hey.

They ain't your kin, your blood.

Hell, you had any damn nuts in that sack of yours, you'd got back there and shoot your pal Rick in the face for me.

Now you listen to me.

Ain't nobody ever gonna care about you except me, little brother.

Nobody ever will."⁴⁸

This is Merle Dixon, big brother and substitute father figure, a vocal white supremacist and misogynist, a former marine, former drug dealer and current drug user. That SS motorbike you see Daryl riding belongs to him, a reminder of how all kinds of ugly can travel through a family. Much like the nine fingered Appalachian, Merle often exists as more of an archetype than an individual character, a point both supported and subverted by Michael Rooker's 'rent a psycho' reputation as a character actor. Zack Handlen, writing for *The A.V. Club*, commented that "Merle was a terrible character, all dumb hick stereotypes and bluster"⁴⁹ And much like Merle's early appearances lacked characterisation beyond cultural stereotypes, Daryl simply has no identity outside of him. Despite all his speeches of childhood trauma and forest foraging he had no real

⁴⁵ For a historical overview of the 'redneck' archetype see: Patrick Huber, 'A Short History of Redneck: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity', *Southern Cultures*, Volume 1, Number 2, Winter 1995, pp. 145-166

⁴⁶ *The Walking Dead*, 'Pretty Much Dead Already', Season Two, Episode Seven, written by Scott M. Gimple and directed by Michelle MacLaren (AMC: USA: 2011)

⁴⁷ James Dickey, *Deliverance* (Houghton Mifflin: 1970) p.56

⁴⁸ *The Walking Dead*, 'Chupacabra', Season Two, Episode 9, written by Guy Ferland, directed by David Leslie Johnson (AMC: USA: 2011)

⁴⁹ Zack Handlen, "The Walking Dead: "Walk With Me"", *AV/TV Club*, 28th October 2012.

life before the apocalypse beyond the man he adored. He admits that, "I was nobody. Nothing. Some redneck asshole [with] an even bigger asshole for a brother."⁵⁰

"I don't see why he had to leave.

Merle sounds like a jerk.

Men like Merle get into your head.

Make you feel like you deserve the abuse.

Even for Daryl?"⁵¹

Daryl is a tracker, a skill less about his own survival and more about his overwhelming need to chase down any father figure in his proximity. Answering Beth's curious questioning about his past life, was he a homicide cop? a motorcycle mechanic? a jail bird?, he is forthright in his failings, "You want to know what I was before all this? I was just drifting around with Merle doing whatever he said we were gonna be doing that day."⁵²

This is the lover man Nick Cave speaks of in his 1994, 'Let Love In', album. That devil he describes as "dirty" and "poor" and "hungry" and "sore", who claws at your door and pins you to the floor. To love a man like that, to call him (of all people!) your lover man, to cover for him, aestheticize and accessorise him, to paste him in photo albums and follow him like a fangirl, is a study in degradation as much as it is about desire.

This is a love dangerous enough and dutiful enough to be doomed, the giffable image of a weeping Norman Reedus, coming from the day Daryl must finally kill Merle, a zombie bite turning this calamity of a character into a sad shadow. In costume make up and mournful growls Rooker is forthright in the fact that Merle, the father, the beloved big brother is gone.

So, we arrive at the gates of the final dad of Sheriff Rick, his new brother, his new leader, Daryl holding his child like a surrogate mother in an abandoned prison, straddling the line between domestic bliss and bloody terror. "You're my brother", having all the weight of 'will you marry me' for these two lover men, a post-apocalyptic postcard of homoerotic adoration.⁵³ They are crouched underneath a car, happy and hiding for their lives.

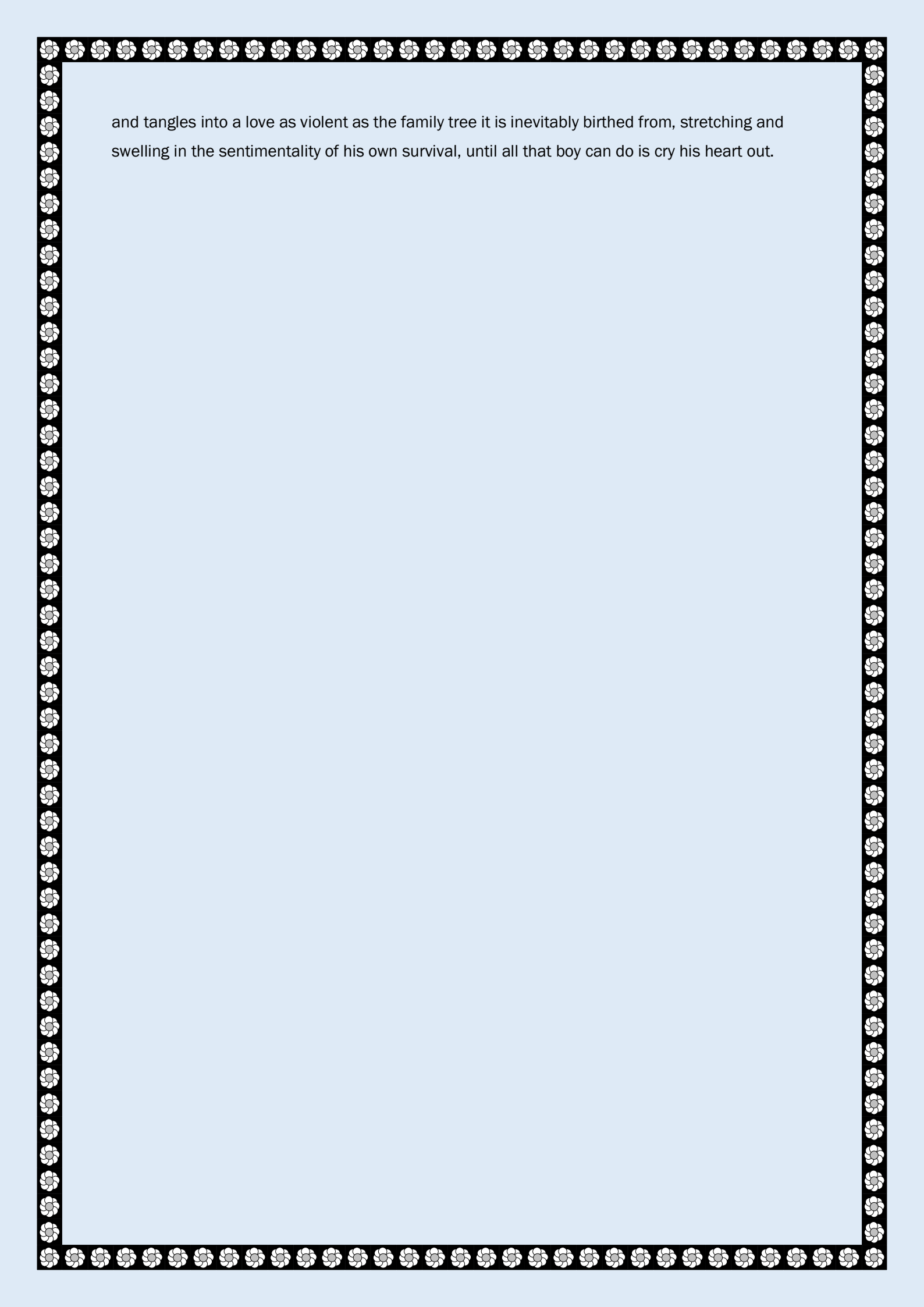
All those love stories, all those horror stories, building up like bad memories, so beautiful and so sad. Because from Northern Italy to Northern Georgia, the final boy and the bad old man twists

⁵⁰ *The Walking Dead*, 'Still'.

⁵¹ *The Walking Dead*, 'The Suicide King', written by Lesli Linka Glatter, directed by Evan Reilly (AMC: USA: 2013)

⁵² *The Walking Dead*, 'Still'.

⁵³ *The Walking Dead*, 'A', Season Four, Episode Sixteen, written by Michelle MacLaren, directed by Scott M. Gimple and Angela Kang (AMC: USA: 2014)

A decorative border of small, stylized flowers surrounds the page. The flowers are arranged in a repeating pattern along the top, bottom, and sides of the page. Each flower has a central circle and several petals radiating outwards.

and tangles into a love as violent as the family tree it is inevitably birthed from, stretching and swelling in the sentimentality of his own survival, until all that boy can do is cry his heart out.

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