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## **Glass People: Backwards, A Novel of Discovery**

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# Glass People: *Backwards*

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A Novel of Discovery

By  
Sean R. Tellvik

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Dr. Katherine Schmidt,  
Thesis Advisor

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### Abstract

I chose to write a novel for my project to explore a creative avenue. Many writers have portrayed alternate, magical worlds, but perhaps the most well-known example is Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*. But what happens when the magical world is even less magical than the real world? I wanted to answer that in my novel, *Backwards*, the first book of the Glass People trilogy. The book centers around Ava, a soul trapped in a mirrored version of the real world called the Noviscope. She stays connected to the living world through her newfound friend, a second grader named Lucy. As Lucy discovers that the Noviscope is a real place, she takes her chances following Ava down the rabbit hole, only to learn it is not a friendly place for a seven-year-old. Through *Backwards*, I aimed to explore how human relationships adapt and grow out of isolation. At the same time, I experimented with the narrative possibilities of a character who is removed from another character's life while simultaneously omnipresent in it. In the reflective essay on this project, I discuss many aspects about the novel's creation and what I discovered in the process of committing it to the page.

### Plot Summary

“No one I met had vision enough to see what I’ve become.”

For years, Ava Wallace has been stuck as a bodiless soul wandering the Noviscope, a backwards replication of the living world. She jumps between the Noviscope’s Gemini, mirrored versions of real people whose minds she can connect with to see the world she was once a part of. When she connects with seven-year-old Lucy Carman, Ava becomes attached. As their friendship grows, Ava begins to wonder if there are others like her and Lucy, two friends a world apart.

Meanwhile, Lucy struggles with the turbulent navigation of school and family life while trying to have fun and be a kid. But when her father lets a long-held family secret slip out, Lucy begins to question whether she really belongs in the life she’s been living. Desperate for an escape, she makes a deal with Ava to switch places in each others’ worlds. Ava can’t help but say yes as she considers the freedom of returning to the world she lost. She just might get the answers she’s been seeking about whether or not she’s the only one of her kind . . .

**Excerpt from Glass People Book 1: *Backwards***

## Chapter 1: The Snowflake Painter

I'll try to be transparent with you about my current state. It was December, but I had lost track of exact dates. They slipped out of my memory like childhood slips into adolescence slips into adulthood: only in defining moments do you notice when you've hit the next stage. I'd been in the Noviscope through several rotations of snow, sun, rain, and renewal. I could tell December had hit because, in the daylight, shadows of unlit Christmas lights adorned the neighborhood, blistering the proud facades of two-story houses.

A group of kids leaving the elementary school at the end of the street were laughing and throwing snowballs at each other. One girl, curiosity blazing her blue eyes, separated from the pack and began heading toward me. The kids went on playing without her. None of them seemed to notice her or turn to say goodbye. As the girl walked up the street, something familiar about her approached my memory.

She pulled her eyes up from the snowy sidewalk to look at me, but she did not see me. Instead, she saw a tall, serious-faced man in love with his sheepdog. I have never been tall. I have never owned a dog. And, thankfully, I have never been a man. Years ago, I was reduced to this glassy, intangible thing some dead philosophers might consider a soul or a consciousness. I prefer to call myself a Persona, since that at least alludes to the truth that I'm still a living person. Had I been opaque, like the frosty glass that obscures bathroom windows, the girl might see me hidden somewhere behind the man's eyes. But no one I met had vision enough to see what I've become.

I'd been jumping frequently from person to person since I moved across the country, sometime when the sun still gleamed overhead. Now, it whispered behind the clouds, making empty threats to thaw the snow. The man I'd slipped into turned his nose up



at the weather, finding it uncomfortable for walking his dog. Yesterday, my host was the mother of three spoiled children spreading herself thin enough to disappear. The day before that, I had to leave the manager of the local Blockbuster because I found out how poorly he treated his wife. If I had my body back, maybe I'd have the power to do something about people like him, but being a formless fragment of myself made me pretty useless.

I always get too depressed to stick around in one person for long, but I'd hit an especially rough patch of hosts this week. Even though this new guy had a dog, he wasn't looking like much of a bold prospect either. I must have spent months hopping between vessels, looking for someone worth my time. So far, no luck.

Some days, I missed when I travelled with my dad. I needed to find another someone like him to inhabit. Even if they never knew I was there, I could use the sense of companionship. In my four years here, I hadn't run into a single other Persona—or if I had crossed paths with one, I had no way to know. I clung to memories of Dad's bushy beard and bellowing laugh, still pounding at my memory of clear sound. Life was muffled now. The Noviscope drained and diverted soundwaves like it was afraid they would shatter the whole world.

Something I had to learn when I entered the Noviscope—and something you'll have to learn, if you want to follow along—was to think of the world as a sort of half-hearted imitation of the real thing. You might wonder, where could you find a rabbit hole to take you to such a place? Imagine you could walk head-on through a mirror. Then you'd find yourself like me, trapped behind the hollow indifference of a wannabe world. Beats me whether or not you could survive once you crossed over. My own body was my entrance ticket, and I didn't even ask to be let in. Given the choice, I don't know why you wouldn't just stay in your world, the Antescop.

Looking at a mirror on your side, you wouldn't even realize the Noviscope is there. When I was alive, I never thought twice about looking into mirrors. I always assumed they showed a flat imagining of my surroundings, reflected in front of me. Nothing indicated to me *any* sort of physical, three-dimensional space on the other side of the glass, let alone a whole world. Next time you're checking your hair in the mirror or whatever ritual vanity you indulge in, take note: what you see is backwards, sure, but instead of reflective glass, think of it as a window to a parallel world. A world pulling off every trick of mimicry to convince you it's not there. Look a little closer, and that glass is just a thin, clear barrier between the Noviscope and the real deal you call home. But, Ava, you'll ask, you can open windows, or at least break them

. . . how can you open a mirror? To which I'd reply:

You can't.

As for the "reflections" people see of themselves, they're also a part of this copycat world I've come to know. Reflections of people are strung along by their human counterparts, meant to mimic whatever is going on in the Antescop. Really, they're just empty puppets, and it's within these vessels I find safe spaces to stay alive. I've taken to calling them Gemini. You know, like the astrological twins? Don't worry, you're still the puppeteer in your world. The Gemini exist in the Noviscope, acting out a parallel version of your life whether or not an actual mirror is present to show you they're here. That's how I could see the snowy suburb corner second-hand, watching through the eyes of a doppelganger.

I called my new Gemini host Sheepdog Sawyer after his shaggy, four-legged friend, but the nickname wasn't improving his personality much. He hadn't smiled all day, and when I caught traces of his thoughts, they seemed to revolve around vapid, selfish things. He

wasn't even excited for the holidays. His dog started rearing and jumping in excitement, restrained only by the collar, as the blue-eyed girl walked within petting distance. She jerked back, gripping tighter to her backpack straps. Sawyer wrestled the dog into a sitting position and tried to collect himself. The girl stared with fear and wonder at the pair of them, man and dog. And me, of course.

Seeing her closer was like holding a microscope over my recent past. Suddenly, I remembered why she struck something familiar in me. Her name was Lucy, and her father, Michael Carman, was the vessel I travelled in from New York to Washington. That's right . . . it began coming back to me. Last summer, I overheard Michael's plan to move his family of three across the country to help lead a new branch of his family's software company in Bellevue, one town away from their Seattle suburb. I couldn't resist the dream of starting over on the West Coast, a dream from my old life waiting to be fulfilled. After the 9/11 attack in New York, the Carmans finally jumped to action, so I did too. They put the city far behind them, leaving Lucy's aunt behind in the apartment they all used to share. Through the eyes of Michael's Gemini, I watched the city I grew up in surrender to the horizon.

So, it really had been months.

Sheepdog Sawyer watched Lucy carefully, gripping his dog by the collar. "His name's Frankie," he said. He looked down the street at the other children. "Shouldn't you and your friends be in school?" I perceived the volume of their conversation as if the words went dead at their lips, but I was able to stitch together an understanding through my confiscated connection to Sawyer's brain. I figure it's easier if I tell you most things from the perspective of your world while you're still learning.

"It was a half day," Lucy said, holding a hesitance between her breaths. The Gemini in front of me mouthed these words as Lucy spoke them in her world.

An image flashed through Sawyer's thoughts of walking Lucy home, only I couldn't tell if he wanted to make sure she got home safe or lead her to a white van around the corner, if you catch my drift. Given enough time, I could solidify my connection and find out, but time was pressing for little Lucy.

She shifted her feet and averted her gaze.

"You look so young to be walking by yourself. Do you need someone to walk with you? Frankie here loves kids." The sheepdog slobbered helplessly into his shaggy fur. This was going too far. Occasionally, I could nudge my host toward a different feeling or a different action. This psychic Noviscope witchcraft worked wonders in some situations, but usually it was pretty hit-and-miss. I tried it with Sheepdog Sawyer to make him move on, but something in his Gemini resisted me. That was the problem with my hosts; I couldn't rely on consistent suggestibility. Even though I'd never made myself known to a living soul by that point, some people were sensitive to my existence, enough to hinder me.

A green light at the intersection nearby sent a stream of traffic bustling down the slushy street, startling Lucy out of responding to Sawyer. As if I could calm her, some deep instinct compelled me toward the child's mind. I wanted to be with her. Even though she probably wouldn't feel my presence, I didn't want her to be alone. It was time to pull out one of my other Noviscope party tricks.

See, one thing I've recently mastered during my intangible existence here is the ability to fluidly strip myself from one body and settle into another. I've come to think of it as a sort of transfer, unnoticed by my host. At the most, perhaps I leave them behind with a chill, like they've just lost a light cardigan to the wind. They shiver, unconscious of their loss. Then, they shrug it off and go on with their lives, like I was never even there.

For me, it's a lot more painful. The Noviscope treats me like a parasite, stabbing and tearing and doing anything it can to flush me out of its system. Free-floating through the Noviscope is like swimming in the deepest depths of the ocean; it's all too easy to drown or be crushed by the pressure. The Gemini are the only pockets of air I've found. I wish the Noviscope had sent a representative when I crossed over to explain this whole hostile world thing, but I'm left assuming it's so harsh on me because I don't belong here.

Back when I was with Lucy's dad, I was still scared of the excruciating exchange, having completed it only a handful of times prior. Otherwise, I would have switched to Lucy's Gemini or her mother's. Michael was always just a passing ship to carry me to a new land. I wouldn't say I've become numb to the Noviscope's thorns these last few months—it's hard to forget the only sensation I've come to feel—but I've begun to think of it as a necessary pain. I've started calling it "renture." Rend, rent, torture, rupture; however you want to splice it together, it hurt like hell.

But I didn't hate it completely. It's almost a comfort to be reminded some part of me can still feel.

I extracted myself from Sawyer's Gemini to sink into Lucy's. In the moment of transfer, the raw, sharp nettles of the Noviscope's defenses concentrated its power at a point in my head, if it was even there, like a screaming migraine on the brink of rupture.

Lucy's Gemini granted me immediate relief, but once there, I was quickly swept away by the flood of Lucy's thoughts. Things like, *Is this the kind of man Daddy works with? Is this a stranger?* Conflicting voices entered her mind. *He told me to be nice to people, but Mommy told me not to talk to strangers.* Lucy thought about how kids in her class didn't talk to her and how she didn't like the idea of ignoring someone, stranger or not. The cold was biting at Lucy's fingers as they curled into fists. She wondered, *What do I say?*

I had forgotten the fluttering energy of a child's mind. Before I could ground myself long enough to try willing her to leave, Lucy decided to say, "Thank you for letting me meet your dog," and pushed forward across the intersection toward home. She fixed her eyes forward so she wouldn't have to look at Sawyer as she passed him. She hoped he didn't see how close she lived to the school.

I stole out of my new vessel to glance back and saw him looking after Lucy. With cold, determined eyes, he started following us. I worried he was going to catch up until a snowball, flung from the kids now parading up the street, hit the back of his head. His glasses and his concentration were left crooked. Frankie patiently drooled into his beard and looked up at his owner.

The Noviscope was prodding me with its invisible stingers, so I slipped back into Lucy's Gemini for immediate relief. I hated that the world treats me like a disease.

Lucy forced her legs to carry her fast away. The snow drifted on, oblivious to the children and houses it smothered. Lucy's pace began to slow as the snowfall steadied her thoughts. Entranced, her mind began to wander. *What if snow wasn't white? Someone could paint it, like art-time in class. It could be red or orange or yellow. Green . . . what comes next? Roy G . . . Biv. Blue, something, something. Mommy or Daddy would know.* Faint outlines of Lucy's parents wafted into her mind. My own memories of travelling with Michael colored in the family portrait.

Lucy's thoughts circled back around her dad. *Is he gonna be cranky today? Will he take me back out in the snow? We could paint snowflakes together. I hope he's not working.* Lucy's imagination pieced together an image of her father painting snowflakes at the kitchen counter while velvety brownies baked in the oven. She'd come home and be his assistant, and he'd welcome her happily to join him.

Her breathless thoughts reminded me of a conversation I once had with my sister about how interesting our lives would be if our parents had opened a different kind of business. We'd just started waiting tables at our family's café, and we imagined what our roles would be like if they had opened an arcade or a museum or a boutique instead. Mary liked any of these ventures better than a café, where grease coated every surface and needy customers came in unsteady waves. She would have liked Dad as a snowflake painter.

Mary always talked about how, as soon as she was eighteen and graduated, she would take off and visit Egypt, Japan, the Amazon, even a little country like Luxembourg—the whole world or just some other part of it, she didn't care. Anywhere that was somewhere else. She never understood how, at twenty, I could stay shut up in the café, playing the part of the good daughter and buying into Mom and Dad's "sick little family fantasy," as she called it. If only Mary could swallow her temper for a second, maybe she'd see that it was my job to get a diploma in her hand before she bought a plane ticket out of there. Four years later, Mary had no diploma, no ticket, no life left to live. I wish I could say she found her way to the Noviscope, but this purgatory seemed reserved for me alone. In all my time here, there's never been an indication of another Persona's presence. To spend any more energy on wasted hope . . . well, I've learned there's no point. I didn't know where to begin to look for someone else like me.

Lucy was still thinking about painting the snow when I tuned back into her thoughts. *Or Daddy could sit up in the clouds. In Heaven.* It was the city in the sky, as Lucy interpreted it from her grandma. She went on to imagine her father taking each snowflake in his hands, learning its shape and story. He'd give each one a color and a kiss before dropping them toward their new home on Earth. I couldn't imagine Michael so much as smiling at the snow, but I became entranced by Lucy's vision.

The images of Sawyer and Frankie had faded far from Lucy's mind. Her thoughts now mingled with the snow. A world of color appeared in her imagination, overlaid on top of the true world in front of her. The whites and greys were replaced with rainbow flurries. Before she knew it, Lucy was walking up to her front door. At first, I had been surprised to think her parents would let her walk to and from school on her own; she must have only been seven or eight. But when we got to Lucy's house, I remembered that school was only a couple blocks away. Still, a couple blocks allows plenty of time for a kid like Lucy to split her thoughts between daydreams and nightmares. The daydreams won today, but with Sheepdog Sawyer lurking around, things could have gone differently.

Lucy's rainbows stopped at the edge of the dark double doors. The Carmans had hung a puny wreath off-center on one of the doors, but somehow that made the entryway feel even less merry. Lucy left the snow behind her and started heading toward her room, leaving one of the doors open. Blisters of icy wind rode on her heels.

The house dwarfed Lucy. It was an economy of corners and turns paired with high ceilings and an otherwise open floor plan, like the house was ever-rising and expanding. The walls were mostly sparse, but the abundance of windows cast light on their nakedness, like they were intentionally left plain. The Carmans had hung some paintings around the house, but they'd spread them out, creating oceans of blank wall between them. A few half-dead plants loitered in the corners, waiting for the day someone would bury them in the backyard. I could barely make out a Christmas tree in the living room toward the back of the house, the only thing with any vitality here. As Lucy hit the stairs, I noticed Michael was sitting in the office, leaning back in his chair and flicking crumpled paper balls from his desk to the wastebasket as he pressed the home phone to his ear.



“Charles— Charles, slow down—” he was saying. His voice echoed off the walls. “You need to stop spouting all your technology gibberish and speak human to me. Just because I’m in upper management doesn’t mean I made the damn software.”

Lucy moved on from the office’s doorway, where she had listened to her father on the phone. She was almost up the stairs before a slammed door and a shout killed her momentum.

“Lucy! What did I tell you about leaving the door open?” her father called from below.

Lucy looked back at the entryway. Her mind began a frantic slideshow of Michael Carman, searching for a time she had escaped his discipline. He wasn’t the kind of man who intimidated people walking down the street. When he was calm, he looked so mellow, he was nearly approachable. His bushy blonde hair and the meek stubble sprinkled on his chin didn’t scare anyone who didn’t know him. Those who did know him learned that his unassuming, underwhelming disposition had another side. From what I remembered, Michael used his passive charm to weasel his way farther into his father’s corporation. The promise of developing the software business in this prospective area was the whole reason the Carmans decided to move to Sammamish in the first place, and it was finally Michael’s opportunity to seize power on a level he could reach.

“Come here,” he ordered his daughter.

Lucy did as she was told. “Sorry, Daddy.”

Michael loomed over her like a shadow grown up from the floor. He rested the telephone on his shoulder, presumably in the middle of a call.

Lucy could just faintly hear a grainy, timid voice on the other line say, “Mr. Carman? Are you there, Mr. Carman?”

A sort of growl hummed from Michael's throat at the mention of his last name. He put the phone back to his mouth and said in a mocking tone, "*Mr. Carman* is a little busy right now. You can wait, Charles. Don't hang up."

I could hear the guilt pounding in Lucy's chest. She looked at the flecks of snow melting on the entryway rug. "I'm sorry. I forgot," she said.

"Why don't you listen to me, Lucy? I must have told you seven hundred times in the last month to shut that door. It's snowing outside now. Don't you feel that when you come in?"

Lucy was looking at her shoes so she wouldn't have to meet Michael's eyes.

"Well, *I* could feel it right away, so don't think these things are going to slide anymore. I'm not your aunt. Next time, I won't be nice about it." I assumed he was referring to Lucy's Aunt Kat, the idol of her childhood, rather than her less-present Aunt Shari, Michael's sister.

Michael lifted the phone to say, "Yeah, I'm still here, Charles. Hang on just one more minute." To Lucy, he said, "Hey, shouldn't you be in school?"

Lucy looked up. "It was a half-day. Mommy told you."

Michael blew out a sigh. "I guess she might have said something like that on her way out."

"Ms. Nichols brought in pizza and played us a movie today! Do you know Roy G. Biv—"

"You had pizza for breakfast? Tell me you at least learned something." He rolled his eyes and put the phone back up to his ear. "Are you still there, Charles? Charles?"

Lucy recoiled as her father fumbled the phone out of his hand.

"Damn it!" He stood over it, flustered.

The snow was falling softly against the front window. “Do you know the last two colors in Roy G. Biv?” Lucy asked quietly.

As Michael picked up his phone to dial Charles’ number again, he said, “What? I don’t know what language you’re speaking, kid. I’ve had enough jargon for one day.” He put the phone to his ear and turned back to Lucy. “What’s Roy G. Biv?”

“The rainbow colors. What are the last two rainbow colors? I can’t remember. It’s red, orange, yellow, green—”

“Isn’t that preschool stuff, Lucy? It’s blue and purple. Just picture a rainbow.” He waved her off and tried dialing Charles’ number again.

Lucy was left wondering how the I and V could stand for blue and purple, but she didn’t want to press her father’s patience. Smart girl, I thought. Michael put the phone back up to his ear in a second attempt to get through but, after a few seconds, he aggressively hit the end call button. “Great, now he’s not going to pick up.” Turning on Lucy, he said, “Well, you have my attention now. Anything else you want to bother me with?”

Lucy knew she shouldn’t ask. She bit her lip. You could hear the hesitation. Then it just slipped out: “Are you sure you didn’t used to paint with Auntie Kat?” I didn’t let the incoming memories of her aunt pull me out of their conversation.

“Ah, jeez, quit asking me that. The answer’s still no. Hell no. I left the artsy sh—uh, stuff—to your aunt.”

“Did Mommy paint with her?” There was a note of hope in Lucy’s voice.

“What, you call your aunt every week and you haven’t asked *her* about all this? Just forget about it, Lucy. It’s ancient history. Go upstairs. I need to get back to my call.” He dialed again.

“Do you miss New York?” she asked. I had to admire her bravado, even if she needed practice on the timing.

“Alright, that’s enough questions for today.” Michael put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her out the door. “Isn’t it getting close to homework time? Have your snack and go to your room. You can come out when your mother gets home from work.” As Lucy slouched away, he called after her, “And don’t even think about bothering her with Kat stuff!”

Lucy didn’t feel like reminding him that, since she was on break now, she wouldn’t have homework for two weeks. As she started plodding to her room, no longer hungry for her daily snack, she heard her father back on the phone. “You do not want to hang up on me again, Chuck.” Lucy thought it best to stay away for a while.

Michael Carman didn’t remind me much of my own father. When I first got stuck in the Noviscope almost four years ago, my soul latched onto the first Gemini it could find. It bonded to my father’s body when our parents found us—me and Mary—bleeding out on the café’s tiled floors. The grief borne on their faces that night was nothing compared to the hopeless thoughts that beat at Dad’s skull in the following months.

New to the Noviscope, I initially believed I had somehow become my dad. Everything he saw, I saw, but it was all backwards. At first, that was the only thing that reminded me I was someone separate. It wasn’t until much later that I started calling myself a Persona. I had to strain to read the words Dad encountered on receipts, menus, the occasional book. All of a sudden, it was like someone was holding up a mirror to everything I looked at, and I had to learn how to interpret all the backwards letters.

Only when Dad looked through actual mirrors, the windows between our lives, could I see the world I lost. Even the occasional sound travelled through the glass if it was

loud enough on the other side. Back then, I still thought of the Antescopes as “the real world” because, after all, I’d lived for twenty years there, alive in my body. I’d pray to myself that he’d spend more time looking through mirrors, like they could be my gateway back.

How naïve I used to be.

Every one of Dad’s aching thoughts resounded in my mind. *How do I keep living? How can I draw a single breath in a world where my daughters aren’t breathing the same air? Where they aren’t breathing at all?* He’d give himself little pep talks, which were just barely enough to get by, as he paced the wooden floor of the closed café. *Just make it through another day. Just one more day.* I looked for ways to show him I was still alive, but I had no physical control over his Gemini. I found I could will a thought into his head if I concentrated hard enough, but it just made him start believing he was crazy. *Leave the ghosts to the Gothics*, he’d think. *This is real life.*

In time, he found little ways to cope. Mom was no great comfort, expressing her own despair in losing her only children. Eventually, they reopened the café with new pride tied to its name, the Ave Maria Café, a testament to our lives. Our names, Ava and Mary, were a testament in themselves to Mom and Dad’s love for Schubert. Ultimately, it was the customers who brought Dad back. The cheerful, compassionate man who’d died with his daughters started returning in glimpses. A surprised chuckle here. A subtle grin there. Until one day, he stopped feeling guilt at each expression of happiness. I wish I could say Mom felt the same resolution, but no matter how many times she put on Schubert, she couldn’t bring herself to smile.

Lucy dropped her backpack by the dresser and took off her socks. She wanted to feel the carpet sink softly under her feet as she spun around the room, singing to herself. I gleaned from our newly-connected minds it was some Beatles song she’d picked up at

school, something my parents, in all their classical upbringing, would have hated. Lucy's thoughts clarified the muffled music I heard on my end. Just please look at the mirror so I can see you again, I remember thinking. I didn't have free rein over my sight anymore. Lucy controlled where I looked, since whatever she saw in her world, I saw the equivalent in mine. I could only see my hosts when they looked at their Geminis.

When Lucy made herself dizzy enough to smile, she jumped up on the bed, put her hands to the window, and nudged her forehead against the glass. A bare tree obscured her view of the backyard, but an empty bird's nest was tucked into the branches nearest Lucy. *I miss the birds*, she thought. Lucy remembered how the mom and her nestlings were practically waiting for her when the Carmans moved in. This view was the reason Lucy chose this bedroom over the one next door, which acted as a storage room until Lucy's parents decided what to do with it. Disappointed that her friends had fled for the winter, Lucy sat down in front of the mirror hung on her closet door. "At least you're here," she said to her reflection. Lucy didn't know she was also speaking to me. Finally, I thought. Now I can get a good look at you.

It was curious to see how Lucy looked at herself. From Sawyer's perspective, she was just a scared little stranger. Now, Lucy's eyes glowed with wonder, like she was ready to discover entire worlds between her bedroom walls.

"How was school today?" Lucy asked. I could tell she imagined her reflection asking the question, and I wondered if she could sense me. Now that she was so close to a mirror, her voice sounded clearer to me—still muffled, but loud enough to figure out without Lucy's thoughts. I felt a pulsing warmth from having only a few feet between us, like I could reach out and touch her.

“School was a bad day today—it was a bad day. Ms. Nichols asked me a question in math time, and I didn’t know what she was saying. I felt bad because she kept asking until I said an answer, and I was wrong, and she was mad. Ms. Nichols asked Jenna, and she knew. I think I’m bad at math. Jenna called me stupid after the party.” Lucy was only speaking to herself, but I almost tried to say something in response. Just to let her know that fractions are hard or something, that it didn’t mean she was bad at math, and she definitely wasn’t stupid. I could feel Lucy’s shame polluting her mind.

Of course, I didn’t say anything. For a second, though, she made me forget I couldn’t.

“Sorry, Lucy. Ms. Nichols is mean,” she said, speaking for her reflection.

“She’s not as nice as Mommy or Auntie when we do math. It was supposed to be a party day.” Lucy stared at her eyes in the mirror. “One day, you’re going to stop saying what I say, and you’ll have your own words. Then you can talk to me.”

Talk. I haven’t talked with anyone since Mary was alive.

“I wish I knew what the IV stood for in Biv,” Lucy said. “Maybe Jenna’s right. Maybe I am stupid.” She could no longer meet the eyes of her Gemini as her thoughts turned in on themselves. I remembered the few failed times I tried to slip reassuring thoughts into Dad’s tortured self-talk and wondered if I could find more success with Lucy. As a child, she might not think anything of it.

With all my concentrative power, I willed a new dialogue into Lucy’s mind. *You’re not stupid, Lucy. Fractions are a pain, and Jenna is the stupid one if she thinks that of you. And it’s normal not to remember I and V. Indigo is barely even a color, and violet is just a fancy name for purple. It’s not your fault you didn’t know.* I wasn’t sure exactly what I was doing, but I tried to pour as much

positive energy into the words as I could. It was like imagining the words spoken to Lucy from an invisible friend.

Lucy looked curiously at her reflection and smiled. “Blue, indigo, violet! I did know! I wonder if Jenna knows indigo and violet.” *I can be smart*, she thought. “Thank you. I feel like you helped me.” To Lucy, the words were given to her reflection. She didn’t connect that I was hidden behind the Gemini’s eyes, or that I’d fed her the thoughts that changed her mind. I wanted to believe she could feel me there with her, but I knew I would just be fooling myself.

Still, a girl with such a strong bond with her Gemini must have been the universe telling me I was in the right place with the right companion. I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but this seemed like someone I could stick around with. I just never imagined it would be a kid. I wanted to continue the progress I was making with my newly explored power, but I felt tired from exerting so much energy. I must have been psychically out of shape.

Lucy, on the other hand, was exhilarated. Intensity shot through her eyes. Bright and clear, they burned back at me with a lifetime of curiosity, creativity, and compassion ahead of them. But I’m no fool to human nature. I know that with curiosity comes disappointment. With creativity comes failure. With compassion comes depression. Regardless, her vivid energy left me wondering whether this girl was the exception.

Sitting here with Lucy brought me back to nights staying up late with my sister. Mary and I grew up sharing a small room above the café. I remember sitting up in bed criss-cross, talking about other kids at school, what life would be like when we were our parents’ age, and all the other things that kept our minds from rest.

When we were little and I had trouble sleeping, I would tiptoe to my sister’s bed and watch over her as she slept. Falling into a deep sleep was never a problem for Mary, but



once she was there, she always seemed to toss, turn, and kick out like something was weighing on top of her. I thought that, even if I couldn't save her from whatever nightmare kept her violent, I could at least make sure nothing else would bother her. One time, I tried resting a hand on her shoulder to see if my touch could calm her. But she woke up with panicked eyes and yelled out for Mom and Dad until she realized it was just me. Even for a second after, she looked at me like I was a stranger.

The walls of our apartment might as well have been hung bedsheets, so I know Mom and Dad heard her screaming. But they were just a little late getting to the room. If anything was actually wrong, there was no guarantee we'd be safe. The thought kept me coming back to hover over Mary late into the night. I didn't use touch after that—I'd just watch her struggle, wishing calm on her. A calm that never came.

With her first day of winter break, Lucy decided to indulge her imaginative epiphany about the colorful snow. She pulled out her craft supplies from a box in the closet and set it up around her on the bedroom floor. After a half hour of careful cuts with fancy scissors, she was surrounded by sloppy paper snowflakes. I was impressed when she pulled out watercolors and began painting with near precision. Her hands were steady with a paintbrush. You know, for a kid.

"Lucy!" her father called from downstairs. The girl beamed, reflexively ready to answer her father with a blank snowflake in her hand. *I wonder if Daddy will want to use my paint or if he has his own.* Even I set aside my better knowledge to hope Michael would join in the fun and complete her daydream. "Lucy!" Michael called again. She could hear the soft stomp of his feet coming up the carpeted stairs. As he got closer, her face fell. These were not the footsteps of a happy father.

Lucy scrambled toward a stuffed rabbit toy laying by her dresser and shoved it under her bed. *He's not going to take it this time.*

The door swung open and in came Michael, face flushed with frustration.

Lucy got to her feet and tried to dispel her nervous anticipation. As he stood in the door frame, the room seemed to shrink.

“Alright, Lucy, tell me how school’s really been going,” he said.

Thorns of guilt were prodding Lucy’s stomach. She moved the hand clenching the blank snowflake just out of Michael’s sight as she spoke, “Ms. Nichols made us do math before we could get pizza. It was hard . . .”

“The school left a message for us yesterday. That annoying blinking light wouldn’t go away, so I gave up trying to get those idiots at work to listen to me and called your school instead. And good thing I did, because the office wanted to schedule a meeting with your teacher after the break about how you’ve been doing in school lately.”

Lucy’s heart dropped. “Sorry, Daddy.”

“Lucy, I’ve told you: never apologize for something until you know what you’re doing wrong.” Michael stood heavily in the doorway for a second, like a lion trying to catch its breath.

Lucy swallowed another apology.

Michael continued, reading from a sticky note: “Ms. Nichols has caught you staring out the window about a dozen times. Apparently you’re distracted in class, and you barely answer any questions, even the ones she asks you directly. What the hell’s gotten into you, kid? I thought you were smart.”

*You are smart*, I reminded Lucy. She looked up at her father as if waiting for permission to speak.

“Answer me, Lucy. You can apologize now.”

“Sorry, Daddy... I don’t know why, I just think and think and I don’t know how to stop. I think about what she’s saying. I am smart, but she goes fast.”

Michael held the oxygen of the room in his pause.

“Well, maybe you need to be smarter,” he said. “This isn’t art time with Kat. You need to take school seriously and pay attention. I’ll talk with your mother. This isn’t the end of this, Lucy. If it means lessons at home again, well, maybe that’s what we’ll have to do.” He looked around the room.

Lucy backed against the edge of the bed and tried to hide the rabbit with her feet. But it wasn’t the rabbit Michael was after.

Michael held his head high as he searched around. Toys cluttered the floor by Lucy’s bed, and a few books were left open on the desk, stories interrupted. “Don’t forget to pick up your room,” Michael said, taking one of the books. “You can have this back when you’re done. And don’t you dare get a drop of paint on this carpet.” He gestured to the snowflakes. “We’re starting over here, Lucy. We’re not going to make the kinds of messes we left in New York. You’ll make us look bad.” To who? I wondered. I couldn’t recall many friends in his memories. But with that last command, he made his exit. I felt relieved that I’d abandoned his Gemini after the move. He had an interesting enough bank of memories to dip into, like his spontaneous culinary education in California, but his thoughts became an increasingly dizzy mess, swirling with pride, jealousy, and entitlement.

Lucy crawled into bed and turned her face, streaked with young, slippery tears, back to the mirror. “I didn’t mean to.” She loosened her grip on the blank snowflake, now crumpled from the pressure of her fist, that she meant for her father to paint. Snow bumped silently against her window, but no color came with it to calm her mind.

I saw flashes of Lucy's memories, of a birthday party in a small apartment overlooking a city that never sleeps. I saw Lucy tearing wrapping paper away from the book Michael had taken. A woman with unnaturally dark hair—her Aunt Kat—sat beside her. The book was a recent gift, a collection of Lewis Carroll's stories about Alice discovering the worlds of Wonderland and the Looking Glass.

I remember an emotional goodbye between Kat and Lucy when the Carmans left New York. My connection with Lucy's mind must have been strengthening, because the memory of her aunt's words, inscribed in the book, appeared clear to me. Lucy must have read them a hundred times trying to memorize the rich bends and curves of the handwriting:

“Don't go looking for Wonderland, Lucy. It's an awfully long fall

Alice took. But you have the same curiosity, so I wanted to give this to you.

It's a good thing, that curiosity. Hold on to it.

~Love you like my own child, Aunt Kat”

Lucy buried her head into her pillow and wished Aunt Kat had not warned her about Wonderland. *I bet it snows in color there.* She thought back to her conversation at the mirror. *Maybe the Looking Glass world does too.*

I was beginning to wonder if there was some way I could take her into the Noviscope. I'd never had the free will to try with any of my other hosts. Could she survive here, or would it reject her with the same raw pain I face in my exchanges between Gemini? Other hosts I'd known had their own dreams of escaping their disappointing lives, but none had looked to my world to do it.

I knew one thing for sure. My heart was softening for Lucy.

## Reflective Essay

### *Personal Interest: How Did We Get Here?*

There is no way I could talk about why I wrote this novel without starting with my sister. She has been one of my biggest role models and, little brother that I am, I have spent much of my life trying to follow in her footsteps. Growing up, she inspired my love of stories by sharing stories of her own. One Christmas Eve, when we stayed up far later than we should have, she told me this long story full of twists and turns. It centered around characters she'd shared with me before, so I figured she had it written down somewhere. I asked her to read it to me again sometime later because of how much I loved it the first time, but she told me she couldn't remember it. She'd made it all up on the spot.

My little kid brain was shocked to think a story could take spontaneous shape like that. But if anyone could do it, I thought, it was her. After all, she was a *writer*. I believed writers had magic in them, something I can't help but agree on today. At least, they know how to channel the magic of words. As a kid, I hoped that one day, I would learn the secrets of being a writer, just like my sister.

Since those early days, I've spent plenty of time trying to find my own way as a writer. A lot of my ideas stem from "What if" questions, and *Backwards* was no exception. Maybe I've just overheard an out-of-context line of a conversation or I've seen a strange sort of mirage in the distance, only to realize it's something completely ordinary. But my brain does not slip back into reality right away. It has not been programmed to do something like that. Instead, my eyes and my ears are hardwired to start interpreting a story—perhaps logical, other times magical—that could explain what I've just encountered.

I've always had a fascination with the weird. Going through elementary school, I was a firm believer that being called weird was a compliment, just as Ava tries to explain to Lucy

when facing the school bully's nagging taunts in *Backwards*. I guess those bursts of weirdness back then are how I really started to get into writing and why my brain circles back to odd bits of inspiration. Words could become worlds with enough imagination to see beyond the page. But it wasn't until I started to embrace my inner weirdness that I became excited to create. I remember being in the WOU residence halls in 2017, watching actor Ben Platt receive a Tony Award, urging the audience to know that "the things that make you strange are the things that make you powerful." I couldn't agree more.

In sixth grade, we would do these in-class writing exercises called "Stretch-its," somewhat akin to flash fiction. Sixth grade was one of the hardest years of my life. The year I grew up. But there was an innocent little part of me that would grab onto the Stretch-its and string together the most random thoughts I could come up with, almost Mad-lib style. I thought in terms of laughter and measured my success with how many people I got to smile. The only problem? Like most Mad-libs, those stories were incoherent. Since then, I've learned a lot about clarity and consistency, but I still value that strange imagination that turns completely normal things into something worth taking a second look at.

Not to get too caught up in quotes, but everyone knows what Albert Einstein said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." I love the idea, but I have an extension to offer: Imagination *is* knowledge. You have to know something at a foundational level to imagine how it could be different. And then, when you imagine, you start to know more than the people who don't.

So, sometime early into high school, I was getting caught up in a daydream, much like my own character, Lucy, would. I looked hazily out the classroom window, and then I started getting all metacognitive, daydreaming about my daydreaming and imagining someone else getting distracted. Someone you haven't met in *Backwards*, but if you stick

around long enough to see my convoluted Glass People vision through to its sequel, you will.

Her name was Chloe Peak. Like me, she attended high school. She stared out the window that day, too. Why? I asked myself. The answer seemed to come from somewhere else: her brother was missing. As she stared into space, she could see her reflection in the window and caught herself watching its eyes. It brought Chloe back to Earth. And that's when I imagined, what if someone was watching right back, through her own reflected eyes? And what if that someone was responsible for her brother's disappearance?

This Chloe had to have a friend, right? So next came Will, and then I got attached to the idea that he would help Chloe find her brother and be the vehicle through which we see the story play out. But they couldn't do it alone. So in walked two more characters, Will's friends, Alice and Kein. That's pronounced like "Cain," by the way. Naming him Kein with that spelling might say something about how hard I was trying to add unnecessary confusion to this story—a remnant of my "Stretch-it" days, no doubt.

I wrote and wrote about this circle of friends. It became my own little sub-world that I'd return to during classes, at lunch, and at home when I should have been doing homework. Their bite-sized adventures were straight out of your average coming-of-age high school cliché, complete with scenes about standing up to the school bully and laughing around the lunch table. Yet something still pulled at me from farther away. I kept writing about Will and company, Will and friends, Will . . . until I finally realized that I found Alice way more interesting.

I think it's a crime that side characters don't become mains more often. I really only stuck Will in the protagonist seat because he was the safe choice. His voice was his only purpose, and that voice came through in monotone. It's a truly freeing experience as a writer

to let the cool side character take you on the fantastical journey Mr. Boring can't provide. I suddenly felt inspired to color outside the lines. There was something special about Alice's story, if only I could dig it up. There was something magical about her.

So when National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) came around during my sophomore year of high school, I decided to uncover Alice's secret. Or rather, Lucy's, because that's what her name became when I decided to set her story years earlier, during her childhood. It began with a staring contest between Lucy and her reflection, much like the one Chloe had during class. From there, the story began to expand and characters like her parents appeared on the scene.

Back in the NaNoWriMo days, I painted unflattering portraits of Lucy's parents: neglectful, harsh, and altogether mean. At one point, I had Lorrie saying that "having a child is like having a dog." Yikes. Let me say thank you to peer revision for helping me see that these characters work much better as fleshed-out, complex human beings instead of cruel caricatures. One of the challenges of revisiting this dusty story was breathing realistic life into the Carman parents, since I knew they were the key to expressing the complexity of family dynamics, a theme I wanted to emphasize when I reconceptualized *Backwards*.

Reed is the other example I have of how straightforwardly good or evil characters will not take you very far. She was going to be the antagonist for the whole series, back when I thought of antagonist to mean the "villain." I've since learned that "antagonist" refers instead to the character who often challenges what the protagonist represents and brings about their change. I tried adding in charisma, compassion, and other characteristics to balance out her darker ambitions, and I'm happy with the result. If people left me to begin another version of the story with a new main character, I would be unable to resist the temptation of writing through Reed's perspective.



The Shattered Sisters, Mary and Ava, always lurked in the background of the story. When I first started exploring the idea for *Glass People*, they were practically afterthoughts. Carrie existed, too, but she wasn't much better than the harsh pictures of Lucy's parents. I have put in significant thought and attention to bringing more nuances out of these characters. However, my old habit of caricatures came back to haunt me while writing *Backwards* for my honors thesis when I created the character of Lucy's mean teacher, Ms. Nichols. Thankfully, after some feedback, I tried to give even her some redemption.

My original story, way back in high school, came out one-dimensional. However, it's exactly what I needed at the time. The role it served at that moment in my life parallels what the world of the Noviscope is to Lucy: an escape. The reason Lucy asks Ava to switch places with her is to get away from some personal truths she does not want to face. In November of 2013, I needed to get away, too. Remember how I said sixth grade was one of the hardest years of my life? November was the worst of it and is, to this day, the most difficult month to get through. It hit particularly hard in 2013, but my commitment to write 1,000 words a day for NaNoWriMo gave each day a purpose until I found myself writing a world of words I could escape to.

In 2015, I returned to Lucy's story after losing my momentum two years prior. This is the draft that more closely resembled what *Backwards* has become, but it is far more of a spiritual predecessor than a blueprint for the current iteration. Ava finally became the narrator, and much of the main cast is the same, but when I started writing *Backwards* for the honors thesis, I basically took the original first five pages, changed most of it, and started fresh from there.

But why hold onto a story that had already fallen flat twice before? Well, maybe you're familiar with what it feels like to have a story, or even just an idea, take hold of you

and not let go until you've figured out how to share it with the world. It's a powerful feeling, one that can't just be shaken off. This time around, I wanted to take it more seriously. I started from the ground up and surprised even myself developing a new guiding plot and fleshing out all of the characters.

At the heart of Ava and Mary's motivation, they long for connection with living people. People who have no idea they still exist. For once in their afterlife, they want to be regarded as real. Even though the characters of *Backwards* exist in an imaginative space, they feel very real to me. If you tried to convince me they weren't, I'd probably throw this quote from Albus Dumbledore into the argument: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" I wanted to make this story real to others and try to communicate themes of family, isolation, alienation, escape, friendship, trauma, and discovery. Now that it's written out, complete, I hope that I've succeeded.

Discovery is part of my subtitle because it is so central to the story and the process of writing the novel. Creative writing is often a process of discovery as you learn more about the characters you're writing while telling their larger story. It also factors heavily into *Backwards*. On a surface level, there is much discovery in the novel, including Ava discovering Lucy, Lucy discovering the Noviscope, both of them discovering Reed and Mary, and all of them making important discoveries about how the Noviscope works. But it's so much more than that. Self-discovery is the bigger theme. By the end of the novel, Lucy and Ava have learned far more about themselves than they could have done alone. And as a writer, telling their story has helped me learn just as much about myself.

### ***Creative Influences***

I owe my work in *Backwards* to many sources, some more obvious than others. As I've generously sprinkled references and allusions to Lewis Carroll's works into the narrative, a source like his books might be a more apparent influence. However, even I won't pretend to know how many other writers have influenced me in more subtle ways. I'd like to acknowledge a few of them here, but I'll start with the big one first.

Sadly, the most common sentiment I hear about Alice in Wonderland these days is how overdone it is. It's been a theme for countless school dances and events and constantly inspires allusions to its iconic characters and setting. So I'm fully prepared to meet criticism that "the whole Alice in Wonderland thing is cliché." But I cannot ignore how essential Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*, have been in my conceptualization of this story and Lucy as a character.

Carroll, in *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass*, managed to popularize the idea of getting lost in an alternate fantasy world for generations and generations after him. The fact that anyone can even suggest another "Down the Rabbit Hole" themed event so long after *Wonderland's* release is a testament, in my eyes, to the success of Carroll's ability to capture curiosity and wonderment on his pages. His world never ceases to puzzle and surprise readers of all ages, and I find it inspiring to think of the way Alice navigates her world. What better kind of book to capture the attention of a child with an active imagination? The comparison between Alice and Lucy is not meant to be subtle.

Meanwhile, Carroll brings the challenging subject of identity into the narrative in deceptively absurd lines, like when Alice says, "...it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then" (155). It answers a valid philosophical question akin to the Ship of Theseus and Heraclitus' river. What better place to explore the ever-shifting nature

of identity than through a transformative journey in an unfamiliar world, where you are the only familiar being? And it is this type of journey that Lucy finds herself on even before she sets foot in the Noviscope.

This is where it would be wrong for me to neglect the important influence of magical realism. I set out to create a work of magical realism, and I believe I fell far short of the mark. The further I got into writing the novel, the more I could see how unfair it would be for me to appropriate the tradition of magical realism by labelling my own work as such. However, I am deeply in debt for the conceptual idea of bringing the magical and the real so close together that the lines blur.

As Marisa Bortolussi identifies, there is still an unfinished literary discourse on how exactly to classify magical realism, but after reading some of its legends, like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges, I've come to agree with David Danow's sentiment that the genre involves "a playful irony with respect to the magical events" (as cited in Bortolussi 291). In other words, the magic of magical realism is presented in a way that requires the reader to accept it without acknowledging the very obvious fact that it conflicts with the otherwise real elements of the text.

Where I believe I missed the mark is my lack of subtlety in *Backwards*. If I tried to portray the Noviscope subtly, I had a high chance of confusing the reader. In fact, every time I tried to introduce a new magical idea without Ava explaining it directly, I risked losing my audience. Ultimately, I decided that the audience's understanding of the story mattered more than trying to fit it into a literary tradition I was still learning about.

The part that stuck from magical realism is the idea of blurring the lines between the magical and the real. In the kind of alternate worlds seen in Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland* or C. S. Lewis' *Narnia*, staples in the children's realm of otherworld stories, the alternate world is a

fantastical place complete with magical creatures and backdrops that excite and amaze the reader. I wanted to flip the alternate world tradition on its head by stripping it of its magic. A kid like Lucy, familiar with Wonderland, would assume the Noviscope is just as magical, a promise of a fun adventure to take her away from the hard realities of the real world. Yet she must face the reality that this alternate world is much more mundane than the so-called real world she's used to.

I'm sure it is no surprise for readers of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* or viewers of its corresponding movie to recognize it as another big creative influence on my novel. Just as Coraline finds her way to an alternate version of the world she knows, one that looks like a perfect escape, Lucy makes her way to the Noviscope in a split-second decision that she regrets hours later. Sometimes, the places we go to escape from our real lives aren't doing us any favors.

For Ava, though, the transition from the Noviscope to the Antescope fits more with the story of journeying to a magical world. She regains rich sensory experiences that have long been lost to her, which would feel magical to someone who's had to adjust to a world drained of life and color. It's a guilty benefit she gains from Lucy's misfortune, and it strikes at the heart of my magical realist influence. There is a bit of magic in the real world if you know how to appreciate it.

The inspiration for Ava's role I owe in large part to one of my favorite books, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. Zusak's narrator is Death personified, while the story takes place under the backdrop of World War II Germany. As he follows the life of the young Liesel Meminger, Death offers a picture of humankind that is equal parts compassionate and sardonic. I have always been intrigued by the unique role of Zusak's narrator, able to be everywhere and nowhere, watching over someone's life. Ava plays a similar role with Lucy,

but I wondered how that relationship would change if there was a two-way relationship to speak of. Death never gets to talk with Liesel, interact with her, or influence her life. Ava does.

The similarity they share is that Ava has become somewhat disillusioned by life—or rather, her afterlife—but, at the same time, she is curious and inspired by it when she meets the right person. Life is no longer hers to live freely. She may not be able to be everywhere like Zusak’s Death, but she exists on a special plane of being that gives her a powerful level of insight (and ignorance). Inserting that kind of character into the role of narrator intermingled with the life of a child seemed like an interesting dynamic to explore. I’m indebted to Zusak for my interest in that type of perspective and the relationships it creates. Ava bridges life and death, searching for an identity that will ground her to a world she no longer calls home.

Outside of these influences, I’m sure there are many more than I’m not even aware of. I’ve loved reading since I was a kid, collecting overly ambitious stacks of books from the library to fill my rainy days with. The pages and pages of wonderful writing I’ve been exposed to throughout my life has shaped how I approach reading, writing, and thinking in many ways. If I could list all my influences . . . well, I’d need another novel-sized book to do it.

### ***Writing Process***

I've always done better with a routine. And for some reason, I've always set up my schedules in a way that makes a routine near impossible to keep up for more than a week, which made the process of writing this novel all the more daunting. That's why I went back to my past writing experiences to think about what had worked best. Back in high school, as I mentioned earlier, my goal would be to write 1,000 words a day for National Novel Writing Month. It didn't matter when or where, and it didn't matter if I needed to go back and change everything later. For each day, all that mattered was getting those raw words onto the page. I had succeeded in creating two 30,000 word manuscripts in years' past using this method.

So why not more? I started the new *Backwards* with only about five pages from the old manuscript, and moved forward with new content from there. Once I wrote and revised the first three chapters, I created an extensive outline for the rest of the novel. This allowed me to map out a general sketch of the plot so I could have checkpoints as I went through the first full draft of writing. It also helped me store information about my characters so that I could keep them consistent as I developed them throughout the story.

Next, I dove deeper into the setting. The story is set in Sammamish, Washington, a suburb of Seattle. I knew of Sammamish through a close friend of mine and everything she described about it fit my vision for the story. I'm from Hillsboro, Oregon, a suburb of Portland, and there seemed to be many similarities between Hillsboro and Sammamish. I wanted to set the story in a type of place I had experience writing about that wasn't my hometown. Microsoft's headquarters are in neighboring Redmond, and Michael Carman had gotten into the software business, so it seemed like a perfect location to move the story to.

In order to visualize and describe the area more accurately, however, I decided to visit Sammamish. In June of 2019, I stayed in Bellevue with my family for a few days and took day trips to Sammamish for location work. This included picking out places for Lucy and Reed's families to live, local parks they would go to, and schools in the area. I also learned more about the culture and geography of the area.

I am expecting more of this research to factor into the sequel to *Backwards*, which will expand Lucy's world beyond the blocks surrounding her house. Nonetheless, the descriptions became much easier to write when I had experiential knowledge to fall back on. One of the more challenging aspects of location research, however, was the fact that I had set the story in the early 2000s, and those town records are hard to find, even in local libraries. I do not expect my depiction to be the most accurate by any means, since I have never been a long-term resident, but I am hoping it is at least more consistent than my once-vague vision of Lucy's town in the novel's early stages.

Once July of 2019 hit, I made it my goal to write 1,000 words a day until I finished the first draft of the novel. I could feel myself developing into a more committed writer each night I would sit down to put in the work. One of the things I'm most proud of was my ability to bounce back when I would fall behind on the word count. I completed most of my work on a computer, which presented a challenge in August because I had back-to-back trips planned for two weeks and would have neither my laptop nor the amount of time I needed to write. I became determined to keep up my 1,000-word-a-day streak until August 10th, the date before I had to leave. Some nights, the inspiration drained out of me, or I found myself busy and distracted throughout the day, only to realize I had not budgeted enough mental energy to do all 1,000 words. I started to fall behind, and it looked daunting to think about



how many words I'd have to add to each day's word count in order to catch up to my goal for August 10th.

But I did it. I put in the time and willed myself to persevere. Coming back from the two weeks off, which included a transformative road trip with my best friend and a meaningful family camping trip, I had new perspectives and new confidence and damn it, I was going to finish my first novel. I set to work on the last chapters with new vigor, continuing my established 1,000-word-per-day process to stay on top of it through the end of the summer.

I've learned a lot about the writing process by taking Introduction to Writing Studies and the Honors Creative Writing Workshop colloquia, as well as my time working at the Writing Center. From reading Don Murray, I've learned that the part of writing usually seen as drafting "is the fastest part of the process, and the most frightening, for it is a commitment. When you complete a draft you know how much, and how little, you know" (3). Over more than 60 days spread out from July to September, I completed a first draft that tallied in at 90,000+ words (about 275 double-spaced pages).

To know that I had tripled my own past NaNoWriMo drafts . . . nothing felt better. And I had a heaping pile of writing to sift through and revise when the new academic year began. The work felt intimidating, meaning I needed to set myself up for success from the beginning. Another lesson from my Intro to Writing Studies class came from William Lutz. He says, "Place is crucial for many writers. Place provides not just the physical means for writing (table, chair, light), it provides the atmosphere for writing. For many writers, writing occurs in a context and this context helps them write" (Lutz 185).

The only thing that helped me tamper down my self-doubt once and for all was creating a dedicated type of atmosphere that I knew I could rely on for revision. As Lutz

describes, environment is a big factor in a writer's ultimate success. My own ideal environment involved writing at night, alone in my room, phone face-down, other tabs closed, with the soft, introspective mood of my favorite indie album, treesreach's *Some Night You Will Hear Me Crowing*. The benefit of the darkness was to create a sort of "tunnel vision" for revision, because distraction feels more palpable when the words are already down. I needed to block out other temptation, and that included the visibility of the world outside my window. I wrote alone for the same reason.

Yet my writing didn't exist for my eyes alone. A huge part of my process involved review and feedback from my advisor, Dr. Schmidt, and some of my coworkers at the Writing Center. Dr. Schmidt and I set up weekly meetings throughout most of the writing and revision process so that by Spring 2020, we would have finished reading through the entire novel together. In total, I easily racked up over a hundred useful comments—probably much more—from the feedback gained in these meetings. I also had some of my fellow tutors work through the ideas with me and read over parts of the novel I needed extra help on.

I used to be nervous about talking through my writing, but I've learned how crucial it is to a successful process. I believe my previous drafts were primarily held back by a lack of review and feedback from others. One strategy I learned in order to get over some of the awkwardness and vulnerability that comes with sharing creative writing is the ability to laugh at myself. I'm not talking about the inclusion of jokes within the writing itself, I mean laughing at things that I tried to get across in writing that really weren't working when I reread it. If you take your writing too seriously, it's harder to cut the parts that may be holding you back. Laughter and even some healthy self-deprecation can open you up and

help you imagine what the writing looks like from someone else's perspective. At least, that's what I've found helpful in my own process.

I'm especially proud of the work I put in throughout 2020, because I kept the deadline in sight all year, making it a goal to work on the thesis in some capacity every single day, shooting for at least an hour. Horace famously said, "Never a day without a line," and the sentiment guided much of my process. No matter how late it got, I tried to persevere and get something down, even if it was something small. Sometimes I didn't reach the full hour, but other times I far surpassed it. I didn't work on revision every day out of the year, but the gaps total to only about two weeks, the same amount of time I took off over the summer when I was writing 1,000 words a day.

Reflecting on that, I realized the most important part of the novel-writing process is not calculated by how many words you write per day, nor how many hours. What makes a difference is perseverance. It's the mentality to keep going, even when it's so tempting to take the night off. The willpower to push through apparent blocks until the creativity starts flowing again. The willingness to keep coming back to others for more help, even when you're not the most proud of a particular section. The adaptability to adjust your environment to suit your writing needs rather than give up prematurely because something feels off.

Another phrase that comes to mind is "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." That's true for beginnings, but it's also true for middles: that journey, once begun, only continues with another step, and another, and another. Never give up, because one day, you'll take one more step, and it'll be staring you in the face: a completed novel. Let me tell you, it feels like an oasis.

### *Turning Challenges into Triumphs*

Throughout the process of *Backwards*, I learned how much of an emotional journey it is writing a novel, experiencing the exciting highs of getting something right and the self-doubting lows of getting stuck on a particular problem. They are both glorious in their own ways, because even the lows help guide the direction of the writing. And, as I wrote this novel, the rough patches pushed me to persevere and keep trying until I got it right. So I'd like to talk about a few examples of learning moments, both triumphs and challenges, that came out of this project.

What started out as a disappointment became a relief when I gave up my hold on the magical realism genre. As I mentioned in my creative influences section, I ultimately steered away from subtlety when it came to describing the magical parts of the story. I strung magical realism all throughout my thesis proposal, but it didn't take me long once I got deeper into writing *Backwards* to realize that I would be making an uncomfortable stretch trying to get my novel to fit the genre.

With my limited knowledge and practice of magical realism, I decided to prioritize the audience's understanding when it came to concepts like the Noviscope itself, Personas, the Gemini, renture, and so much more. Ultimately, I am happy to have sections of the story where Ava introduces the reader directly to some of the confusing elements of the world.

Which brings me to my next challenge: creating terminology to describe recurring elements of the world I'd built. I used to call the Noviscope simply "the Mirror World," which survives in the story because that is what Reed calls it later on. However, once I developed Ava's backstory and character further, I realized it was unrealistic for her to call it something so straightforward with her parents' classical roots.

The Antescope and renture were terms that came much later in the novel's development. They arose out of the need for words to describe these things. I had been calling the Antescope "the real world" before coming up with the name, but that implied that the Noviscope was not real. Before I came up with renture, I did acrobatics trying to re-describe Ava's pain in the Noviscope each time I had to bring it up again. Creating world-specific terminology taught me how consistency helps guide the reader through the imagined elements of the story.

One thing I intended from the beginning that I think I captured fairly well is character parallels. What I mean by this is the connections between two given characters in the story. The obvious examples are Ava/Lucy and Mary/Reed, but there are also some extended doublings, like Kat/Carrie or Mary/Emily. My goal, which seemed daunting at first, was to portray how similar dynamics can form surrounding people who are in different places and circumstances.

There are two storylines going on in *Backwards*: the present narrative following Ava's time with Lucy and the backstory of Ava and Mary's past, which often creeps into the present narrative. The characters from the past are intentionally paired with characters from the present. The Carman parents, as well as the Wallace parents, are major players in their respective stories. Another parallel is how Mary becomes much more like her murderous ex-friend Emily than she may realize. On another note, Carrie sort of takes over Aunt Kat's former role for Lucy, acting as a third guardian and surrogate member of the family.

It was challenging to make clear links between characters without oversimplifying them to be mere replications of each other. No one is exactly like their counterpart, but patterns develop that are meant to mirror each other. I hoped that the idea of mirrors and reflections would extend on a metaphorical level.

Translating an idea onto the page can sometimes be the hardest part about writing, especially when so much of it is imaginative. There were many times as I read through the novel with my thesis advisor, Dr. Schmidt, that she would be reading along a certain section and have no idea what I meant to get across. This became one of the bigger obstacles to my success with the story, and I wish I could say it came as a surprise.

I have always had trouble trying to communicate clearly in my writing. I have a tendency of stringing together dense clusters of ideas in single sentences that become difficult to unpack. With something like *Backwards*, working with a non-corporeal narrator in a made-up world with odd, specific rules, I set myself up for these exact kinds of roadblocks. However, each week we would work through more of the writing, identify the confusing parts, and I would rewrite them until they made sense. Now, I feel that I am more easily able to identify when part of my writing is starting to get dense or confusing.

This thesis has prepared me well for the future of my writing career. Now that I know for sure that I can write and revise a full-length novel, I am eager to start writing the sequel. There was a time I thought I'd never be able to see a project this big to its end. Yet here I am with a 450-page manuscript under my belt. *Backwards* has taught me patience, diligence, and self-confidence. It has taught me how to turn difficulties into goals. But more than any other lesson, it has taught me how writing can be a deeply transformative and meaningful experience when infused with hard work and perseverance.

### ***Future Plans***

As I mentioned earlier, the original idea for *Glass People* started at a much later time in the characters' chronology than one year in Lucy's childhood. I promise you, this story is going somewhere. When I began drafting ideas for the thesis proposal, I wanted to do one book in three parts: when Lucy was a child, a teenager, and an adult. I was doing research into the *Bildungsroman* tradition in literature, in which a novel follows its protagonist's growth toward maturity, to put it simply. However, there were a couple problems with that idea: 1. Ava is the story's main protagonist, not Lucy, and 2. I had way too much to say to condense into one book.

So if it feels like there are some loose ends at the end of my novel, that's because the story will continue in Books Two and Three of the series. The second book will take place where the original concept for *Glass People* started, when Lucy is in high school, while the third book will take place during Lucy's adulthood. I don't want to give anything away about the future plot, but the second book will get larger geographically, thematically, and include new characters that I'm excited to introduce. The third book will likely scale back and return to its roots, with a quieter, introspective conclusion, although it will still be full of surprise developments.

One of the themes I've worked on in *Backwards* is how human relationships develop in times of isolation, most realized in the relationships between Persona and person, like Ava/Lucy and Mary/Reed. In the next two novels, I hope to explore this theme from different angles. As Lucy grows up and feels the long-term effects of her temporary isolation in the Noviscope, she will struggle with how she can share that experience with others when, in all likelihood, they would think she is out of her mind for suggesting an alternate mirror world exists and that she spent nine months of her life in it. This becomes an inward type of

isolation in her personal relationships that will affect how she interacts with others and what she chooses to share.

Meanwhile, Ava has been with Lucy for many years by this point, which creates a whole new history of experiences to challenge and change her. The life she settles into in *Backwards*, which continues after the novel's conclusion, is far different than the life she had jumping from Gemini to Gemini. Much of her story is centered around identity, as she has been intimately connected with Lucy as the child grows up. When new conflicts arise for Lucy, they certainly become Ava's conflicts as well. But I'll let the books speak for themselves, when they come.

Before I can get to either of these exciting follow-up projects, though, I'd like to work toward publication for *Backwards*. I've weighed my options between self-publishing versus the traditional route of sending the manuscript to publishing companies. Ultimately, I decided I want to try for the traditional route. I've wanted to be an author since I was young, and this is how I've always envisioned it. I have a lot of respect for self-publishers, too, but I want to experience the publishing world through this route, even if I have to fight harder for my idea to have its voice heard.

I know publishing may be a challenge, especially given the added layers of difficulty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, but I am determined to try. The developing situation of the pandemic has actually heavily influenced the direction of the overarching story of *Glass People*. The final part of the series, book three, has always been slated to take place in 2020, long before we could have imagined we'd be in the middle of a global pandemic this year. I do not want to rewrite our current history, especially since I have so much time to plan the project and work on it.



Some of the key themes that have arisen out of these times of uncertainty are the importance of community, solidarity, and cooperation. As much as I've explored isolation in *Backwards*, I think it is important to explore it in the context of its antithesis: togetherness. I don't want to give away anything about the third book while it is still in the early stages, but I am ready for this series to challenge me as a writer and develop themes introduced in *Backwards* into natural, complex nuances.

The characters of this series are like family members and close friends to me. My dream is that one day, others will feel the same way about them. Books for me are like wormholes directly into other people's hearts and minds, and I hope I have shared enough of mine to reach others. It has always been important that we share what we can with others, and I think this time of separation has necessitated an even stronger certainty that we are all connected. I will continue to read story after story, all the words that connect me to other people's worlds. All I can hope for the future as I try to get my story out there is that I can give back to someone—even just one person—the way that so many other writers have given to me.

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