

Escape from Eternity
Amy Theakston Yr 12

A mound of metallic mess collapsed on the outer edges of the garage. From car batteries, to fridges, to old pay phones. An old radio cassette player hummed in the metallic madness; “Forever young, I want to be forever young.”

A circular saw placed within a table, hurled blood red sparks against the garage door. A man glared directly at the moving blades and placed his bold head against the accelerating saw. The sound of a butcher’s shop, blade against bone, echoed back and forth between the labyrinth of past objects. The muffled music played faintly under the screeching; “Don’t you want to live forever? Forever? Or never?”

The man shut the saw’s switch off, and wandered to a mirror resting against an illuminated barber shop light. The blue light casted colour from his dimpled chin to the middle of his forehead and the red light illuminated his sliced open pulsating brain. With a microscopic scalpel, the man cut into his frontal lobe, pressing and pressing against the synthetic tissue. Although, no incision could be made, as the magnetic field created a barrier imprisoning the brain. The radio let out a wavering static and repeated the crackling sounds of; “live... live... live...”

The top part of the man’s skull dangled on synthetic fibres. He grasped the radio, turning each knob and button, but the radio would not shut off. He knew he was running out of time, only 42 seconds until the transmission device within his frontal cortex would notice the oxidising matter within his brain and alert The Community. He pressed the top of his skull into the edges where the saw had met his forehead, and melted the seams together with the blue flame of a blow torch.

Hexagons coated the inside lining of the apartment dome like honeycomb, with each pod an individual residence. The centre of the dome towered with mahogany trees, reaching up into the open centre of the roof. With the old cassette player clasped beneath his arm, the man descended the escalator that connected each pod like a vertical maze. Reaching the ground, he moved along the main street, which was covered in a green sea of vines and ivy,

with plants cascading from the roofs of buildings in waves. The man joined the convoy of worker bees, walking in unison to the electronic train station. Single file, approximately one metre apart, The Community members walked seamlessly with electronic pads in hand. Billboards lined the streets, with one stating, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body. As they who attempts shall be banished to H.E.L." The man left the conveyer belt of members and stopped at the corner drug store. Each shelf of the store was lined with thousands of jars of pills. From the top right corner, with a section labelled "orgasm," to a lower shelf titled "joy." The man searched and searched for anything that would cause him to go unconscious. That's all he wanted, the bliss of sleep, the bliss of nothingness. Although, no one could shutoff these days, "everyone was part of the cycle". Turning back onto the street, a sudden crash collapsed ahead of the man. A body twitched on the sidewalk, it's head cracked open like a chestnut and transparent liquid seeping from it's eyes. A man had jumped. Sirens and alarms hollered as The Community monitors grasped the flaccid man and took him to the Healing Electromagnetic Laboratory.

After the incident, the man ducked down an abandoned side street with the radio under his arm, finding his way to a tiny junk shop. A small bell dinged when the man entered the store. He placed the radio before the shopkeeper. "Hello Friend."

"Hello Friend. What can I do for you?"

"My radio seems to be broken Friend, as it will not shut off."

"Let me have a look Friend," the storekeeper stated, pulling the metal box closer for inspection. After moments of fiddling, the storekeeper peered above his spectacles. "It seems friend that the radio will only shut off if the electric component is taken out from inside. I'm sorry but the radio is finished. If I take the part out, it will never come back on. Do you want that?"

“Yes, that is fine... Friend,” responded the man certainly.

“Very well Friend, this should only take a few minutes.”

The man nodded and moved around the cluttered store, observing the collection of past objects scattered in mountains of metal. Browsing the piles of knickknacks, the man came across a magazine. A paper magazine. “Wow,” he mumbled to himself, as paper had been eradicated fifty something years ago. “Reduce, reuse, recycle,” he uttered. No waste was created these days, only recycled matter circled the system. Inspecting the magazine closer he realised a synthetic body ad was on the cover. “Live forever with synthetics! We extract the soul and place it in any body of your choice.” “It had been what... 100, 150 years since the flesh men died from disease”, the man recollected mentally.

“Friend!” the storekeeper bellowed. The man awoke from his daze and moved towards the counter.

“Thank you Friend,” the man voiced, scanning the display case behind the storekeeper, until something caught his eye. “Friend, could I have that small white box behind you?”

“Ah, yes of course friend,” replied the storekeeper. The man opened the thin cube revealing two white plugs.

“What are they?”

“I believe they’re called Air pods. They played music back in the day.”

The man left the store, grasping the small box tightly. He found the answer...or at least he thought he found the answer to the magnetic field paradigm. Someway to disrupt the flow of atoms in the electromagnetic barrier. The man scratched his head in satisfaction, although, he noticed an opening on his scalp. A place where he failed to seal the skin. He turned quickly back onto the street, weaving between the stream of “Friends”. The dome

was in sight just slightly above the ivy covered buildings. Although, he heard a shout from behind him.

“Friend!” a Community monitor bellowed, “Friend!”

The man sprinted and bounded up the escalator leading to his pod. He slammed the door to the apartment and switched the circular saw on. He knew that this was his last chance. His final chance to extract it. The soul. The saw screeched and screamed as he cut open his head.

“Open up Friend!” the Community monitors shouted, banging on his door.

He placed the Air pods within his ears and hoped. The electromagnetic field that was emitted by the connection of Bluetooth within the earbuds, confused the atoms in the electromagnetic field that surrounded his brain. He delved deep within the synthetic mush, searching and searching for the apparent grain of sand that would end his existence. He felt something as delicate as a shard of glass between his fingers and pulled. His eyes closed and darkness slivered its way into what was now nothingness.

He followed the bright light that filtered through his eyelids, opening each lid one by one.

“Welcome!” a booming voice echoed. “Welcome to H.E.L.”

Just Dessert

Daniel Majchrzak Year 12

“Why so sombre? Come in. It’s warmer inside.” Carlson put a firm hand on Johnson’s shoulder, and Johnson felt it was as if Carlson was ignorant of the grief felt by their entire company today. The man’s tone was tactical, being just manipulative enough through his words to make him question whether the rival businessman was nothing more than a heartless machine.

Carlson, the sinewy Chief Financial Officer of the company, rigidly gestured to a room off the clinically palatial entrance hallway of his home. “My family is through there, I believe dinner is almost ready to be served.”

It was easy to assume that he had intended dinner to be ready by the time Johnson arrived, although one can only guess that clockwork exists insofar as the malicious organisation doesn’t find itself in the hands of an elastic and almost disgustingly variable human.

Johnson moved through to the next room. He had acted as the Head of Marketing whilst Mr Schultz had been alive. Although to any outsider he would seem as equally robotic as Carlson, inside the world of business, Johnson stood out as charismatic. It was for exactly this reason that Johnson had found himself wound up as a friend of the company’s late boss, Mr Schultz. The impact of this favouritism seemed to be that Johnson was well-liked by those colleagues who sought to impress their boss by proxy. The death of his boss was beginning to solidify itself in his mind. This was reflected in the way in which he self-assuredly walked into the dining room and flightily greeted Mrs Carlson.

Carlson’s son ran into the room to greet the stranger. A childish antithesis to his father, he gladly interacted with the harsh businessman and the thought of him being anything less than a delightful new friend. “Do you want to see my puppy dog?” The boy asked with a joyous boisterousness that would have otherwise gone unnoticed were it not the only bastion of in the carefully orchestrated home. The boy smiled widely and raised a velvety toy dog to Johnson. Taking the dog, the misplaced businessman considered what it must feel like to so readily give away something cherished to someone that he had no connection to. *This was clearly an act of dominance by Carlson* – maybe Johnson was being paranoid.

Carlson watched the interaction with a wry smile and the social ritual passed. “You better not take that home with you Johnson, I doubt my son would be very happy without it.” Those

weighted words cut through Johnson's hope for a peaceful night completely left him, and it was as if a throbbing headache had set in. "Let's sit down to dinner."

Johnson took a deep breath. He felt that all he could do now was politely wait for his head to explode whilst Carlson trampled the grave of a man he had admired.

The revelry of the carefully assembled meal fended off the unspoken aggression between the two men with the strength of a lit match engulfed in the overwhelming force of a tidal wave. Looking past Johnson as if attempting to formulate a conversation worth his time, Carlson brought the first bite of food into his mouth. Perking up slightly, Johnson decided to probe the topic that he was the reason for the business meeting (that was poorly disguised as a cosy dinner between family and close colleagues). "It's a shame that Mr Schultz passed away, I can't imagine the impact he's had on not only the clients, but all the company's employees and their families..."

Finishing his calculated mouthful, Carlson took only enough time before speaking to allow Johnson to realise that what he was about to say was meticulously targeted. "He was a great man and I'm certain that whatever happens next will determine his legacy." In the words, there was an aura of rebellion against an unspoken hierarchy that was expected to dictate the company's next leader.

Attempting to assert the hierarchy's importance, Johnson immediately replied, "I'm certain of that too, all we can hope is that whoever comes next will hold Mr Schultz's values and deliver the vision he had for this company."

Johnson put down his fork and looked at the mutilated dinner he had created whilst deliberating how to progress the conversation, "The funeral is on Thursday, do you plan on going?" He decided to say using a chipper tone.

"He was a dear friend, so I can't see why I wouldn't be there," rebuked Carlson as the corners of his mouth pinched upwards, clearly in an attempt at some cruel act of intimidation.

The two men sat, cocooned by the apparent warmth of Carlson's family that comforted Johnson in the same way being set alight provides warmth. The toy dog slipped out of Johnson's hand and fell to the floor, but no one dared to move and pick it up. Carlson's son sat and silently watched his father think.

After minutes of silence that would slowly build into a deep resentment of Carlson's words, Johnson cleared his throat and spoke, "Were you two ever particularly close?"

Carlson had never been familiar to Mr Schultz, in fact he had never talked to the man outside of the world of numbers and profit and loss statements - he had never thought it necessary to be particularly close to bosses outside of that. Yet in his mind Carlson was certain that had their decision-making been as intimate as on the level of friends, the company would have prospered far more than it had otherwise done. So, when confronted with the idea that Johnson was closer to Mr Schultz and would rise to power through a crude pseudo-nepotism it seemed only reasonable that Carlson would need to make his intentions clear. *For the sake of the company.*

The two men looked into each other's eyes with an air of passiveness intended to obscure any sense of their true intentions. In the heat of the disguised aggression each man was the same animal. Whilst neither man could possibly want to come to terms with the death of their superior by treading on his grave, a primal part of them made it feel vital that they had the biggest claim on the biggest job for the biggest man- *that they were in control.*

"I wonder what is best- for the company" started Johnson, purely out of a hatred of the unspoken words between them.

"Surely someone who has experience with the company's financials is most fit for the role, I doubt that a lapdog would have any idea as to what needs to be done to make sure the company doesn't crumble to dust," rebuked Carlson, His voice was raised just enough so that it seemed to rise up against Johnson's words without directly leaving the world of the familial.

"I wonder what is best for the company, but I know that it needs someone who will carry the legacy of Mr Schultz properly." said Johnson, his voice raising steadily to match that of his rival.

"You know what's best."

"Would anybody like dessert?" Spoke Mrs Carlson as she placed a tray of desserts between the two men, hoping to bridge the rift between them with a silver platter.

The Chankiri Tree (Killing Tree)

Poppy Volk-Loone Year 11

Choeng Ek, Cambodia, 1976

Some say that if you were to have one view for your entire life, you would soon become bored of it no matter how beautiful. I disagree. From the moment I pushed through the soil, a sapling amidst the rice fields of southern Cambodia, I knew mine was the most beautiful view ever seen, enough to keep me content every day I grew towards the sky. Stretching before me, tall grasses reaching into bamboo, palms and impenetrable vines. The ground alive with insects and slithering cobras. The peace of it, its innocence made it perfect.

As a young tree, my leaves grew bright green in spring. Children came from nearby villages to play games, sing, dance. Faces filled with a joy that fed my roots more than the sun and soil ever could. The sweet chirping of the forest's birds overwhelmed me. I relished the noise, and the silence as night fell, wanting nothing more than to be a delighted witness, rooted in the world that took place around me.

Monsoon was my favourite season. The water rushed from the skies, a symphony of broken light and sound, enslaved to gravity. First reaching my leaves, trickling over my rigid bark, down to my roots; nourishing the soil beneath me, seeping into the earth's pores. To whatever extent a tree might call itself happy, I was happy and content. I took little from the earth, consumed the air's carbon, gave it back oxygen. I hardly understood that I supported humanity, yet I sensed I had a purpose.

I knew only good: the honesty of soil, the tenderness of rain. I had seen no pain, violence or destruction. So I did not recognise them when they appeared, dressed as men in uniform, trucks spluttering their exhaust, brutal buildings. I was dumbfounded, filled with confusion.

For a time, I confess I was excited that something was happening, that I was a part of momentous change. But when an elderly man was violently pushed from a truck, I knew something was wrong. I couldn't place his emotions, his groan so different from a child's laughter or farmers' conversation at day's end. The man looked ill, sickened at his own

existence, without hope. The chained people shuffled off the truck, into the buildings. Until the first drop of blood, I didn't understand.

They had dug large holes in the ground around me. I thought perhaps they meant to plant more like me. Instead they dragged that man - withered body, mind and soul - to the edge of the depression. *What could they possibly be doing?* I wondered. *Is this a game, like the children play?* The soldiers held the man's head down and swung a metal blade across his neck, as though felling a tree.

Death followed death. I could not distinguish one from another. I didn't understand. The victims - men, women, children - were not violent. They could not fight back. The soil that sustained me soaked up sickening amounts of blood, as the bodies piled high in their graves.

The smell and terror of it disgusted me. I became numb, a silent, unwilling observer of the horror, growing sickly from the poisoned earth. My leaves curled, my bark thinned.

One day, almost a year after the deaths began, a woman carrying a bundle left the building screaming. A smiling guard prised the baby from her grasp. Its quiet whimpering became a wail, lost in its mother's screams. The men walked towards me, pushing the mother to her knees only a few metres from my trunk.

She was like a flower, the baby girl, held tightly by her ankles, swinging head to the ground, so fragile, crumpled in the man's bloody hands. And then the unthinkable, the intolerable. Bones splitting like sticks against my brute exterior; her silence even worse than her cries. If only I could have screamed myself. Or torn my roots from the earth, shaken the soil from them, buried the devastation, and run.

That night, a gentle rain began to fall. But nothing could wash the stain from my body, my wretched guilt.

The Killing Fields, Cambodia, 2011

The years passed but not my repulsion at what I had become. Around me, the green crept back over the wounded earth, the grasses stretched tall again towards the sun. The herons returned. But locked in my self-loathing, I was not restored.

The secrets buried around my base demanded to be uncovered and heard. From the corners of the earth, people visited, dug, unearthed the ugly past. More came to learn, to honour the past and safeguard the future. A memorial was built. Families had lost so much; however, I came to realise that I was the only one blaming myself. As the country healed, I began to as well. The Killing Fields became a place of forgiveness. Visitors placed thousands of colourful woven bracelets on the ridges of my bark. Crevices, once filled with blood, carried silk threads of love remembered and peace restored. Still, I knew what lay beneath, the deadly weapon my trunk had been.

On a summer afternoon, the air fragrant with jasmine, a young girl kneeled at the base of my trunk. As always when a child came too close, I felt a chill of fear. I wished her far away. She picked at a wildflower growing in the grass about my roots, giggling as a petal floated in the breeze. She took me back to the time before the killing, when joyous children played games in my shade. She was pure hope, and as she somehow sensed my delight in her, she reached towards my trunk. I tried to scream at her to stop, not to touch me. But her small fingers pressed into my bark, moulding her skin with my bark. Then her soft cheek against my rough; and neither of us tore, neither of us broke. A warmth flooded through me, a stirring of new sap, of forgiveness, the return of life to the killing fields.