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Rimetongue: Part I

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RIMETONGUE: PART I

by

Dylan Larino

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

Brooks Landon
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
English have been completed.

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Rimetongue: Part I

by

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Rimetongue: Part I is a high fantasy piece that would act as a part of a larger work. It takes place in what our world calls the late Seventeenth Century in lieu of the traditional medieval setting and is very loosely based off of the French colonization of Canada. It is centered around Vurkoth, a member of a non-human race called the Ozhenka, as his life is terrorized by a malevolent entity known as “The Grinning Man.” This piece was an experiment in order to challenge myself to tell a story using a time period I wasn’t familiar with, from the point of view of someone that is distinctly not human, with an underutilized monster figure found in modern paranormal accounts for a villain.

The critical essay will tackle the “Otherworld” trope that appears frequently in the fantasy and science fiction genres. It examines how the trope is used in various instances in mythology, religion, and modern science fiction, and works to establish how *Rimetongue* mixes up the formula.

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Rimetongue

Part I: The Grinning Man

It was my home once. A place where the ten-thousand shades of brown that colored the tundra always shined brighter than the white of winter's first snowfall. A place crosshatched by mountain chains whose valleys were filled with Hemlock and Frasier fir. Her name was Sokeleth, "The land of eternal starlight," and she was the land that bore me.

I don't believe that there is someone listening to what I say here. After falling for as long as I have without hitting the bottom, you start to question the nature of your reality. My race, the Ozhenka, believe that time has no end. Our culture is one of a handful that don't believe in an apocalyptic end to creation. We were born of fallen stars, and as long as there are stars in the sky, there will be Ozhenka. In all likelihood, yes, there is no one listening to me as I fall. Or perhaps, you have always been listening, but I've been unable to perceive it until now.

My name is Vurkoth, which in Rimetongue means "the fire that rains." This is a fact which I repeat to myself daily, for if I don't, I fear that I'll forget it in my current state. Just as the land first met the sea in times immemorial, I've met my fate in rushing air and sinking stomach—sensations I've since grown used to. Like the rain, I'm falling. I'm hurtling ever downward towards an endless void of blackness. For how long I've been falling, I don't know. But I do know how I got here, and that's the story I aim to tell. If not for myself, then for Luzhen, for mother, and for all the others who suffer now because of what I've done and what I've failed to do.

Ever since I can remember, The Grinning Man has visited me in my dreams. He would appear in different places—and at different times in my life. Sometimes it'd be in childhood, along the rocky shore of an endless sea, sometimes it'd be on a mountain peak in adulthood or somewhere with nothing but the stars shining in the sky as an old man. Yet, even so, the dream itself would play out in the same exact way.

There would be a figure, crouched on the ground—its body covered in glowing, red tattoos. I'd move closer to see. Slowly, it'd rise, turn on its heel, and stare at me. The image would be blurry, but through the blur there'd be an unmistakable toothy grin that was as sinister as it was unnaturally long. He'd whisper to me, and as he did, the sky would darken behind him and a maelstrom would churn where once there were clouds.

These dreams continued. On and on, into my adulthood. I never told anyone about it. Not until my fear reached its peak following the mental decline of my mother. It was the winter evening when I finally told my brother Luzhen that began the chain of events that led to my fall.

I found Luzhen in the cellar beneath the cabin we shared with our mother. He was still dressed in the formalwear he wore for his trips to the tannery in the capital of Shadow's Den—an evergreen frockcoat, tan breeches, complete with those tacky neck and wrist ruffles that the humans love. There was a matchlock pistol in a holster on his hip and his attention was focused on a journal he carried. On occasion he'd glance up at the fur bundles that were kept there.

The two of us have always been compared to each other. He was the oldest, the most pragmatic, and adaptable. The perfect man to tackle the ever changing world we lived in. Luzhen's skin was a tad lighter than usual for our race, a shade of gray closer to polished steel than it was to slate. His hair was kept neat, without a single shred of it touching the birch leaf

frame of his ears. Most importantly, he carried himself with the stoic air of a businessman that left his amber colored eyes focused, and his face expressionless. He was a man of stone in mind, body, and spirit.

“We’re short.” He said, without looking up.

“On what?” I leaned against the doorway, “I’m heading out tomorrow afternoon to check the traps.”

“Beaver mostly. Though we could do with more ermine as well.”

“Beaver’s hard to come by these days. But Ermine I can guarantee.” I fiddled with my hand for a moment before I decided to speak again, “Listen, I need to talk to you about something, but if you’re too busy...”

“Inventory can wait. What is it?” He closed his journal and turned to face me.

“I’m afraid, Luzhen.” I breathe hot air into my hands and rub them together. “I think there might be something horribly wrong with me.” I told him about the dreams. Every detail, every reoccurring theme. Through it all, he appeared unmoved. I couldn’t tell if he believed me at all.

“Nonsense. You’ve listened to too many of mother’s old stories.” He tilted his head up. “I’d say they were all the ramblings of a mad woman, but she said things like this before her mind started to go.”

I closed my eyes. “They’re more than stories to me now.”

“You said this ‘Grinning Man’ whispered something to you. What did he say?”

“He’d say.” As I spoke, I pictured the way the Grinning Man’s slender lips moved when he said it to me. “You’ll see me soon after the sky bleeds.”

Luzhen said nothing at first. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. I asked if he was alright, but he insisted it was nothing. “Maybe you should go see that Beckett fellow. Maybe he’ll make some sense of it. As for me, well, you can color me skeptical.”

It’s the small moments, I’ve found, that can be the most world shattering. Like buying the razor your father would end up using to kill himself, or even something so trivial as hearing a name for the first time. As for Beckett? His was a name that, by the end of it, I wished I never heard in the first place.

Later that night, we had a bonfire out in front of the cabin. Mother sat on a rocking chair next to me. A bearskin covered her up to her chin as she gazed at the stars. Luzhen and I looked at each other, then back to mother. Until then, we’d never seen her so excited. Not even before father passed away.

“Look to the sky, my sons!” She said, “Tell me, what can you see?”

I pulled back my wolfskin hood and looked to the sky as she instructed. The stars glimmered and the aurora sent waves of violet and green rippling across the sky. To me, it was the same night sky there had always been. It was silent out there too, except for the crackle of the fire and a pack of coyotes that yipped in the distance. There wasn’t another soul, ozhenka or human, until you hit Shadow’s Den half a day west.

“I think I see it!” Luzhen shouted from the other side of the bonfire. “...what is that?”

“I don’t understand. What am I looking for?” I looked back to mother.

She pointed to the moon, just above the aurora, “There. Look just above there.”

Mother had pointed to Lunai the She-Wolf, one of the four major constellations venerated by our race. A smoky, red substance emanated from its stars, like a gushing wound in the heavens. It was strange, I thought, the possibility of something so detached from me as having flesh and blood like I did. I couldn’t help but wonder, what if the stars were actually like that? No one’s ever been close to a star, and were the Ozhenka not born from them?

I turned my body toward the fire and held my hands out to warm them.

“What does it mean?” Luzhen asked.

The slate grey skin of mother’s face looked like molten rock through the amber glow of the flames. There was such clarity to her, you could almost forget that she was losing her mind. “I only know what’s been passed down to me.” She answered. “When the stars bleed, our people are called to climb to the peak of First Mountain.”

When the stars bleed, I thought to myself, is that what she said?

“Sounds like a bunch of storybook nonsense, to me.” Luzhen tugged his great coat tighter around himself and buried his nose further into a scarf.

“Ma,” I said, walking over to her, “Why would the stars call *anyone* to First Mountain?”

“It’s...” She squinted her eyes, “It’s the Birthing Grounds—where the Ozhenka first came into the world.”

“And?”

Mother furrowed her brow. Her eyes turned glassy, “Husband? Is that you? Have you come back to me?”

“No, Ma. It’s me, it’s your son—“ I kneeled down and took hold of her hand.

“Yes...yes, that’s...” She trailed off.

“Ma,” I tried again, “Why would anyone be called to First Mountain?”

Mother tilted her head back and blinked several times. She was a million miles away.

“Save your breath,” Luzhen shouted. “It’s no use when she gets like this.”

“The Grinning Man tried to take me away last night...” She muttered.

A surge of fear overtook me. I grabbed her by the shoulders. “What did you just say?”

She blinked. “Husband? Is that you?”

“What did you just say!?”

Luzhen ran over and pulled me off of her. “Control yourself!”

“What did you just say!” I looked to Luzhen and pleaded. “You heard it right? You heard it?!”

“Yes, she mistook you for father.”

“No—she saw him too! She saw the Grinning Man, Luzhen!” I panicked. The electricity of it shot up through my chest and rang my head like a bell. “What’s going on? What’s happening?”

Luzhen put a hand on my arm. “Let’s calm down, alright?”

“But you heard it, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” He was lying. I could tell by the way he blinked. Yet he said it anyway.

“We’ll talk about it later.”

Luzhen led me back to the cabin. He put his hand to his head twice as he did so—stress. The stress *I* was causing. He thought I was going crazy, just like mother—he had to. No reasonable person could’ve believed in any of the panicky drivel I spewed. But something *was* happening to me. I was sure of that.

The way to Saltwater Jane’s Brothel required me to navigate the ever winding roads of the Shadow’s Den Harbor District, a part of the city that was characterized by flaking paint, rotting wood, and the stench of week old cod. It was also, oddly enough, where the stock market was located. People could invest money in any one of the numerous human shipping companies there. It was, however, the only decent part of the district. Other than that, the harbor was the worst of the city—where pickpocketing was sport and prostitution was honest work. It was so bad there that even the bricks in the road looked crooked.

Don’t get the wrong impression—I’m not very much fun, you see. I’ve never been the type of person that goes to a public house, let alone a brothel. Unfortunately, Saltwater Jane’s was the only place where I’d find the infamous Rev. Beckett Bright.

Rev. Bright, or simply Beckett as Luzhen knew him, was once the chief exorcist for the Church of Divine Providence’s Archdiocese of Sokeleth. He was so well respected in fact, that

his name is engraved on the wall of honor in the Grand Basilica of the Redeemer downtown in commemoration of his 250th exorcism. Two years ago, however, he was defrocked after his intensive research into the occult became problematic for the public's opinion of the Church. The whole affair became a huge scandal. There were riots in the streets and several effigies burned in the city square before the Church was forced to act. Beckett's "storied" reputation has been public knowledge to the citizens of Shadow's Den ever since.

Luzhen met Beckett just days before his career ended. The man requisitioned an unusually large number of mountain goat hide. Luzhen remembered thinking the order was strange, but never questioned what the hides were being used for. Privacy is important in our culture, and so Luzhen didn't think it was any of his business. There was no telling if the goat hides had any influence on Beckett's defrocking.

I found Beckett in the backroom of Saltwater Jane's later that morning. He was sitting alone at a middle table, sipping at a glass of vermouth, dressed in a burgundy frock coat, gray breeches, and a wide brimmed hat with a buckle on it. There was a hard stare on his face as if though he was deep in thought. Either that, or he was trying his hardest to ignore the stench of nauseating floral incense and the incessant moaning that came from upstairs. I walked over to his table and sat down across from him without hesitation.

He didn't look at me. "What do you want?"

I leaned forward, then glanced in both directions to make sure none of the prostitutes were heading towards us to make a pass at our table. "I've been told that you know *things*."

"There's no need to toe about it, boy." Beckett sneered. "What interest does an ozhenka have in the occult? Be specific."

“A personal one—I think I might be afflicted in some way. I’m not really sure.”

“Is that so?” He clasped his hands together on the table. “I hope you realize that there’s nothing good I can tell you. Journeys into the supernatural never are.”

I acknowledged the warning and told my story as I had told Luzhen the evening before. Beckett’s expression darkened with each new detail. He took what I said with great seriousness, or at least it appeared that way. When I finished, he straightened his posture and looked at me in the eye for the first time.

I’ve only heard of demons in the vaguest terms—the idea of a physical incarnation of evil didn’t exist in Sokeleth until the humans arrived on its shores. I didn’t know if they were real or if they were just apart of human folklore. It terrified me nevertheless.

“You, sir, are in horrible, horrible danger.” He held up one finger. “To start, this ‘Grinning Man,’ as you call it, is either a minor demonic entity or some other kind of supernatural being that’s been disfigured through demonic corruption. Only a demon or something close to it would toy with its victim like that. It gets far worse, however...”

I nodded for him to continue. In truth, words just wouldn’t come. My heart was slamming against my ribcage deep inside me and every nerve in my body felt on fire.

“Tell me, Mr...?”

“Vurkoth.”

“...Mr. Vurkoth—have you ever heard of ‘The Calligrapher?’”

I shook my head.

Beckett explained that The Calligrapher was an ancient, demonic entity of unimaginable evil who some theologians overseas theorize may have been present during the time of creation. Whether or not he played a role in it was anyone's guess. Almost nothing is known about The Calligrapher other than the proposed existence of his devoted worshippers who called themselves "The Cult of the Red Tattoo."

"The red glow you describe seeing through the blur that obscured 'The Grinning Man' may very well be one of the body tattoos that gave the Cult its name—if this is true, then your situation is far worse than I first thought." He shook his head. "One can only acquire the red tattoo, you see, if 'The Calligrapher' etches it on himself."

My head spun. I was trapped—doomed. That was what he told me. "What do I do?"

Beckett rubbed his chin, then said. "In one week, meet me in the forest South of here come nightfall. There's a glade at the heart of it, that's where I'll be. If we're going to perform an exorcism on you, I'd prefer it be away from other people. Be sure to come alone—there's no need to drag anyone else into this."

I agreed, but as I stepped back out onto the streets of the Harbor District, I started to have doubts. It felt too easy. Beckett knew so much—almost too much—and shared it with me freely. Weirder still, he did so without asking even once for compensation. I've never known anyone, especially a human, who'd help a stranger like that without pay. Altruism doesn't come naturally to most creatures, you see.

But what did I know?

That afternoon, I trudged from trap to trap through knee-deep snow, blanketed in the warmest furs I owned. In my hands was a matchlock rifle, which was a clunky and unreliable weapon compared to the new flintlock muskets for sale in Shadow's Den, but it was all I could afford as a trapper. That's why I always carried my falchion along with it. When gunpowder failed, there was nothing like tempered steel to down a hungry wolf out in the woods. I made my way down a slight incline to a frozen creek bed. A red fox lied in a heap on the ice with my snare taut around its neck. It was a good start. Fox hide sold well

When the sun began to set, an uneasy silence came over the woods as I worked my way deeper into a stretch of balsam pines. My final trap was in a remote section of old growth forest that I knew ermine tended to frequent. The closer I got, however, the more my muscles tensed up. I didn't know why. Maybe the air felt different. Sometimes your gut knows something that you brain doesn't.

There was movement up ahead. I edged my way around a dead bramble thicket, ten yards from where I had laid the trap. There was a human hunched over it.

I stopped and aimed my matchlock at him. The sound of crunching bones was faint, but it carried on the wind. There was an elk carcass in front of him. Soon enough, he stood, tall and lean—like in the old tall tales I've heard about the wendigo, but this didn't quite fit. It tore my trap in half and grabbed my catch, a plump badger, by the head. In one swift movement, He swallowed the animal whole.

Blood trickled down to the snow. My hands trembled. I lit the fuse and felt my finger tighten on the trigger. I wanted to fire. I knew I needed to, yet I couldn't make myself do it. I closed my eyes and took a breath, but when I opened them again—he was gone.

My nails clawed into the wood of the stock. I could hear raspy breathing behind me. He was close enough that I could feel his warmth—and smell the stench of rotting meat that came with him. The world felt hot now when it should otherwise feel cold. I inched myself around. My heart sunk and my eyes widened. I froze—and the whole world did too. The snowflakes stopped in place. A bird was rendered static in midflight. It was The Grinning Man—though I'd never seen him without blur—I knew in my heart it was true. He was the only one who could move.

He was tall and lanky, with long, bony fingers and pale skin. There was an array of otherworldly tattoos on him from his bald head to his bare feet that, I could see, glowed a dim red based on the light's reflection off the snow. He wore a dingy frock coat and trousers like a man would've, and there were two beady eyes—like a doll's—and slits where the nose should've been.

Worst of all, he had a grin on his face that stretched from ear to ear and showed two rows of jagged, yellow teeth while blood dribbled down its chin like a baby learning to eat. The Grinning Man's past words echoed in the back of my mind.

You'll see me soon after the sky bleeds.

He snatched my hand and squeezed it to the bone. His grin never wavered, not once. It pierced through me—and I could not take my eyes off of it. I felt a wetness touch the hand it grabbed, and soon after my head filled with whispers. Millions of malevolent voices screamed and yelled and hissed. Images flashed before my eyes.

Red lightning raged around a maelstrom that churned in the sky. Bodies—humans in uniforms I didn't recognize—covered a frost covered field. Someone screamed, it was blood curdling—someone screamed. Long claws carved into flesh. Sand—a desert and a black city. Bookshelves and buildings half sunk in the dunes—it was night. Shadows with red eyes flickered on a hillside. A humpback whale breached from the surface of the ocean. A menacing voice spoke to someone. It was the echo of itself.

The fire is gone, is it not?

Another scream. Something heavy banged repeatedly against wood.

I can grant you succor; I can take the pain away—for a price.

There was a ditch filled with human and ozhenkan bodies. Each emaciated and riddled with maggots. Two silhouettes tossed another one in.

This- This one is sorry! One second, someone shrieked. The next, there was a wheezing laughter from the same voice. I could see a silhouette writhe in pain on a stone floor. *This-This one is sorry!*

It was dusk when I came to. I still stood where I had been before. There were no footprints other than mine. The elk carcass was gone—no blood. Nothing. My trap was empty and unbroken. I looked at the hand the Grinning Man had taken. It was stained with black ink—still wet.

I stood there for a while and tried to piece together the encounter in my head. A flash of realization hit me. A chill crawled down my spine. I sprinted back the way I came, dodging and weaving between the trees.

The Grinning Man tried to take me away last night...

I dropped my matchlock. I tossed my pelts. I ran faster. I had to get home. I had to get there before *he* did.

The Grinning man tried to take me away last night....

It was night by the time I broke the tree line. There was still candlelight coming from the windows of the cabin. I continued to run. My lungs burned from the cold air and my heart thundered in my head.

Out of breath, I kicked open the door. Mother convulsed violently on her bed. Her eyes were rolled back and black liquid gushed out the sides of her mouth.

“MA!” I rushed to her bedside. It was the only thing I could think to do.

I glanced up at the window. I saw him. The Grinning Man’s reflection was there as if though he were right behind me. I spun around, but there was nothing. I turned back to mother. She was still. The gushing was now but a trickle.

“Ma.” I held her in my arms. There was a distant look in her eyes. Her breaths were shallow. Mother reached her trembling hand out to touch me and placed it on my cheek.

She exhaled one last time and was gone. I felt a draft and turned around. Luzhen stood motionless in the doorway to the outside.

There was an odor in the air. It was one I recognized. I dipped my fingers into the bile that had come out of mother's mouth and sniffed.

I clenched my fist. "It's ink."

Weldon Cemetery was located deep in downtown Shadow's Den. It was owned by an ozhenkan carpenter who leased use of the land to the Church of Divine Providence, who then turned it into a burial ground consecrated via Church tradition (whatever that was). Before that, it had been a public burial ground for the destitute—which is how father had come to be buried there. It was only fitting that mother should be interred beside him.

Luzhen and I stayed behind once the last shovel of dirt was emptied and the headstone was placed. It was a chilly morning, though a tad warmer than was usual for winter. There was thin layer of frost veiling everything from the grass, to the graves, right up to the dome of the Grand Basilica of the Redeemer across the street.

"I'm glad she's gone," Luzhen declared. "One less relic holding us back."

I scoffed, "Have some respect. Are you really so brazen that you'll belittle your mother at her own funeral?"

"Why not? Belief causes trouble." He glared at me, "Belief is what took father away."

I sighed. Bad memories. "You ever... You ever think that, maybe, he wanted to go?"

“No,” He shook his head frantically, “No, I refuse to believe that. He wouldn’t have just left us like that—there has to be something else.”

I sat down in the snow and set my eyes on the headstone, “The older I get, the more I think that’s what happened. He felt nothing anymore. Think about it, what is there to really live for these days? There’s no meaning, no conviction—just pretense. You either feel empty as you adapt, or you fill the void it leaves with the material things humanity replaces it with.”

“I’ve found meaning—I’ve found it in honest work and the life we’ve been given. I’ve found it in the dream I have of putting my name on the map,” He looked at me with intense eyes, “Don’t you tell me life is meaningless when all you do is run around in the woods like an animal!”

We stood in silence for a long time. A cardinal flew from headstone to headstone. I couldn’t help but wonder why his kind didn’t fly away during the winter like all the other birds did.

“I saw him, you know.” I said.

Luzhen had been rebuttoning his “Hmm?”

“The Grinning Man.” I continued. “I saw him the night mother died. Twice.”

Luzhen sighed. “Not this again. This isn’t the time to lose your mind.”

“I’m well aware you think I’m crazy. But what if, for one second, you give me the benefit of the doubt.” I show him the ink blot. “I saw him in the woods. He touched my hand—he left this blot of ink—it’s still wet. Then, I saw him in the window just before mother took her last breath. What if—What if he caused this entire thing, Luzhen?”

I could see it on his face—he wasn't as cocksure about The Grinning Man's existence as he was before. There was the same pain in his eyes that I felt in my heart. Grief can make a man do even the most irrational things. Maybe that's why he said what he said next.

“First Mountain—The red star and First Mountain. That's what mother mentioned the night before she died. Maybe...maybe we should go there for her.” Luzhen said. He cleared his throat. “Assuming the Grinning Man is real, of course, which I still think he isn't.”

“Are you suggesting we climb?”

“I didn't stutter, did I?”

When I was a child, my father taught me a lesson each day about how the world worked. I think about these lessons often as I fall—too often, most likely. On most days, his lessons were about life—like what kind of wood is best for a fire, or how to tell if a man trying to cheat you. On others, they were about something bigger. Out of every lesson my father taught me, the one I remember the most is his lesson about evil.

Don't take what I say the wrong way. This story doesn't have a moral. I am well aware that humans don't all come from the same place. You can't generalize an entire race of people based on the actions of a few—but to my father, the Empire of Olette was humanity, and humanity was the Empire of Olette.

Father was a part of the ruling council that governed our people from the capital city of Shadow's Den. He and the others that ruled alongside him one day decided that we, the Ozhenka, were ready to become a part of the world. They released eight albatrosses in the shipyards and

watched their white shapes disappear through the frames of unfinished sloops and caravels. Each carried with it a message of invitation to whoever was out there across the sea.

No one in Sokeleth expected a response. After all, we were a race of unknown people, from a land of ice and snow, on a continent with no name, asking for friendship in a language that no one but ourselves could understand. Imagine the shock then that reverberated across the pinewood dells when an armada of galleons appeared on the horizon of Gale's Inlet. Each one sported the same teal colored sails which, as they drew closer, we found were embroidered with two black swans in heraldic composition.

The humans of Olette landed at the docks in Shadow's Den and have been there ever since. I remember how odd they looked to me, with their small, round ears, and their slew of different eye and skin colors. We ozhenka, we're all slate gray. We all have amber eyes. We're all tall and hulking, and our ears look like the leaves of birch trees. Our races were as different from each other as you could get. I think, we both decided to hate each other right then and there. It made no difference to Olette whether we liked them or not. Hatred is the true nature of every living thing, or so that's what I've come to understand. But Olette came to make a profit, not to make friends. And so they did and conquered Sokeleth business by business, resource by resource, until every last square of land was Imperial property. They never even fire a shot.

The day the black swans first fluttered above the spires of Shadow's Den, that is, the day before my father slit his wrists in the surf of the Amaranthine, he taught me that lesson on evil. His eyes were hollow. His coat reeked of gin and sweat. Then, he said to me: "Boy, evil only comes into this world for two reasons—either it wants something, or someone lets it in."

I didn't realize just how right he was.

There was little between the cabin and First Mountain. The road there hadn't been maintained by the Ozhenka since before gunpowder was invented, and the land wasn't considered useful to human interests. The flatlands there belonged mostly to the massive herds of caribou that browsed for lichen on the rocks, and the wolfpacks that followed in their wake. Similarly, the hewn steps that led to The Birthing Grounds were cracked and crumbling. They needed to be maintained more than the road did to guard against the devastating effects of freezing and re-freezing. It still held, however.

Other than The Birthing Grounds, there was nothing really special about First Mountain from the look of it. It wasn't the tallest, it didn't humble you with its majesty, it was just—first, by virtue of mythology—the place where the first Ozhenka emerged from the dust of a fallen star. Or so they say. The Birthing Grounds, we found, were equally unimpressive.

“This is it?” Luzhen looked to me, then back to the mouth of the cave.

I shrugged, “I guess so. This *is* the peak, there isn't room for much else up here.”

I turned around and took in the scenery. To the East, it was solid white far into the horizon while the black waves of the Amarthine lapped at the rocky shore of the coastline that bordered it. To the West, there was more green—pinewood forests and the slivered islands of the Kentasee Delta that emptied the Pale-Faced River into the gulf. Then, to the North, there was Gale's Inlet and the tiny specks on the water of caravels sailing to and from the “Old Continent.”

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” Luzhen said as he stepped up next to me.

“No.” I stared straight ahead. “No—it's terrifying.”

Luzhen raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

The Birthing Grounds were exactly what it looked like from the outside—a cave. The only thing that indicated we were in the right place were the wall carvings that were slowly revealed by Luzhen’s lantern light as we went deeper in.

“It’s the creation story, I think,” I told him, “or at least one of them are.”

“You would know better than I would.”

Yes, one of them was definitely the creation story. I didn’t recognize the others. One, for instance, showed a book with fire burning inside it. Another showed a single star that came down from the sky to meet the black hand that held the book. Then another last showed the destruction of the hand and the shattering of the star into countless pieces. The last one was faded, having succumbed to the destructive effects of time more than the others—but I could just make out the shapes of animals. I didn’t know what to think of it, but I wondered if it was the creation of the constellations themselves. Not even mother knew that story.

After the final carving, we emerged into the main chamber. There was a pyre burning and the faint smell of balsam wood filled the air.

“Has someone been here before us?” Luzhen asked.

“I don’t know.” I glanced over my shoulder, “How else could the fire have gotten here?”

Above the pyre there were four more carvings—the four major constellations: Ursin the Bear Father, Zorva the Vixen, Sooravel the Eagle-Eyed, and finally, Lunai the She Wolf. The eyes of the Lunai carving glowed with a dim blue light.

White orbs, blue orbs, yellow orbs materialized from the air and formed the shape of the constellation Lunai the She-Wolf in front of the pyre. When they were finished, the framework they made was enveloped by the spectral image of a wolf.

Lunai edged forward. She looked back and forth between us, “Two—yes, of course. It was always going to be two.”

She went to Luzhen first. Her expression softened and she looked away, “I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do. But there isn’t, you see. There’s nothing I can do...there’s nothing any of us can do.”

“What are you—“ Luzhen started, but Lunai turned away and walked toward me.

“You,” She said, “I know your name—I know your face.”

I glanced at Luzhen. He stared blankly at the palms of his hands. His brow was knitted in confusion.

I turned back to Lunai, her eyes looked hollow and lifeless. Ink ran profusely down my hand. “Why did you apologize to him?”

“Because it’s inevitable,” She trembled, “It was always inevitable, you see, all of it.”

The more I listened to her, the more concerned I got. She wasn’t what you’d picture in a deity. There was no heart. No confidence. No wisdom. Only fear.

“What’s inevitable?” Luzhen demanded. “What do you know?”

“They killed him. Now it’s all exposed! N-Now...” She let out a sharp whine, “You have to help—you must.”

“Killed who?” My head felt light. I hid my ink stained hand behind my back. “You’re making no sense.”

“Please!” She pleaded. Her voice echoed.

Luzhen stomped forward and roared, “WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ME?”

Lunai jumped and then lunged at him. Her fangs glowed with the scorching heat of pure starlight. I charged in between them and felt the sharp burn as she sunk her teeth into my throat. I tried to scream. But the pain was so intense—I couldn’t utter a noise.

“Vurkoth!” Luzhen caught me and kneeled to the ground.

I stared at the ceiling. Blood filled my throat. I felt like I was drowning.

“No—no, no, no,” Lunai scrambled back, her tail folded between her legs. “This isn’t right. None of this is right!”

“Do something!” Luzhen yelled at her, “You’re a god—you have to be able to do something!”

“I’m no god. I’m no spirit. I’m nothing. Nothing...just an echo,” Lunai inched forward. Her image flickered. Luzhen didn’t react—could he even see it? “T-There’s only one wave to save him now. He has to—“

“JUST DO IT!”

Lunai’s form flickered again and, then changed—in her place was a hairless, emaciated husk of the way she portrayed herself. She was covered entirely by the same red tattoos as The Grinning Man. I saw it only for a moment before I started to let go.

There was a veil of light shining from the ceiling. Mother emerged from it, dressed in a gown crafted from moss and lichen. She floated forward and placed her hand on my cheek.

Quick, we’re losing him!

I calmed in her presence. For the first time in years, I felt safe. It was a second chance. There was so much I needed to say to her, but I didn’t have the words to express it. So I settled for the one thing I knew I could say.

“I’m sorry...” I looked her in the eye, “I couldn’t save you...I’m so sorry.”

Vurkoth? Vurkoth! Hold. Out. Your. Hand.

I reached out to touch her. She smiled at me, and pressed her lips against my forehead. She drew close to my ear. In The Grinning Man’s voice, she whispered, “I don’t forgive you.”

An overwhelming sense of dread penetrated me. All the light disappeared from my vision. There was only shadow and chill. What I felt could only be described as the complete absence of feeling—devoid of all warmth and goodness. It consumed me.

When I woke, I heaved up blood and gasped for air. Mother was gone and my head spun. The blood in my veins surged like a roaring river. My hand was lying in a pool of black ink.

There was complete silence in The Birthing Grounds. There was no Lunai. The wound on my neck was missing—and so was Luzhen.

The forest South of Shadow's Den was known as "The Shacklewood." It got its name from distant Ozhenkan history when the most despicable criminals—murderers, traitors, rapists—were dragged deep into the woods, chained to a tree, and left to rot. The idea, I imagine, was to make their final days as miserable as possible. The victim would die slowly of starvation or dehydration if they weren't eaten alive first by something that lived there. That's why I found rusted out chains wrapped around the tree trunks there, and moss covered bones beneath them.

I arrived at "The Shacklewood" at dusk, three days after Luzhen's disappearance at First Mountain—and exactly one week since my meeting with Beckett. The bones were a dark reminder of Sokeleth's past, but in a manner of speaking, every reminder of the past tends to be dark in one way or another. History is a folk tale to some, but a ghost story to others. One thing was for sure—it was a grim place to meet—even if it was for an exorcism.

The sun had just disappeared over the tree tops when I reached the glade that Beckett had mentioned in the brothel. There was an enormous bonfire burning within, and there were figures dancing around it. As I drew closer, I realize they were human women. Each one was stark naked and covered in head to toe in the Calligrapher's red tattoos. Strangest of all, their eyes had all been scooped out from their sockets. The ink blot on my hand began to drip.

The ink blot ran back on First Mountain, and The Grinning Man had a presence there too. Maybe the ink could somehow sense its creator—a warning of sorts? No, it couldn't be. The Grinning Man wasn't stupid. He marked me—for some reason...why? To watch me?

This was where Beckett told me to go. It was here that he was supposed to help me end it—whatever *it* was—once and for all. If there was any hope I had that I could defeat The Grinning Man and find Luzhen, it rested in the glade. So I did the only thing I could think to do. I raised my matchlock rifle and tiptoed forward through towards the fire and its dancers. If The Grinning Man marked me in order to watch what I did—wouldn't he intervene?

The ink felt slick against the wood of my rifle, and below me I noticed the black, pinprick trail it left in the snow. I knelt down, lit the fuse, and aimed at one of the dancers. I had to start somewhere. Demon, Grinning Man—these were foreign concepts to me once. They were stories, they were never meant to be real. Father may have told me once how evil came into the world, but he never told me it was possible to destroy it. Maybe I'm idealistic for thinking it was.

The women froze and floated high, up towards the tree tops. The fire burst upward along with them and flashed from amber to green to violet to crimson before sputtering down to nothing. The women were gone. I sprung to my feet, scanned the glade, then spun around and scanned the trees. The only light in the glade came from the moonlight and the burning fuse of my matchlock rifle. I searched the darkness for the red glow of the dancers' tattoos, but it was as if though they had disappeared entirely.

Suddenly, I'm thrown backwards into the snow, my rifle was flung from my hands and lost in the darkness. I scrambled to my feet and pulled my falchion from its sheath. The bonfire burst into flames again—and I could see them. Five dancers' watched me with their empty sockets. Despite the absence of eyes, I got the distinct feeling that they could see.

They inched forward, and in response I'd inch backward. I pushed further and further back, too afraid to strike out of fear of what these women—or whatever they were—could do. It

was only when the clapping started that I stopped myself. I turned towards the fire. A silhouette stood in front of it.

“Very well, Mr. Vurkoth.” There was a tinge of laughter attached to his voice. “Very well—you followed my instructions exactly! I didn’t think you’d come, I assumed you would’ve solved the mystery by now, but I guess I must’ve overestimated you.”

“Beckett?” I scanned the snow between the trees, searching for my rifle. My gut told me I needed it. No matter, I decided. The falchion will do.

“In a manner of speaking. That is the name I’ve been using for decades now, of course. There was another before it—and another one before that.”

“What do you mean... who are you?” I tightened my grip on the hilt. Sure. I already knew who he was. I knew *damn* well. But I asked the question anyway—in the vain hope that I was wrong.

“I’m that which you’ve been running from all your life.” The silhouette flickered. Just as Lunai’s image did in The Birthing Grounds. Ink waterfalled down my hand. The flickering grew faster, and faster, until The Grinning Man himself stood where Beckett once did.

“You’ve been here...you’ve been here the whole damned time!” I stepped forward. “Right under my nose—you even told me what you were doing ...all just to lead me here!”

To this day, whatever day it may be, I still haven’t forgiven myself for just how stupid I was. It never once occurred to me that an entity as malicious as the Grinning Man could be one, two, or even ten steps ahead of me. I was proud—I thought I had a deep connection to the

heritage of my people and that it would help me fight him. The sad reality was, I never really had that deep connection. I was just as lost as everyone else.

“Not the entire plan, Vurkoth—The Calligrapher was careful about which details I should include and which I should leave out.”

What was I missing? What reason, for example, did The Grinning Man have me come to the forest? If he was going to kill me, he would’ve done it by then—or at least began the process. Worse yet, none of it explained what happened to—I stared at The Grinning Man, and as I did so, I swore his grin grew wider as he saw the panic in my eyes.

“Luzhen...” My hands started to tremble. “Where’s...what have to done with Luzhen?”

The Grinning Man strutted forward and shook his lanky finger in the air. “Ah, at last. Now you’re starting to get it.”

It all made sense—this whole ordeal was never about me. The Grinning Man lived in my dreams since childhood—he knew me better than anyone. He knew every move I’d make. He knew exactly what I’d do, when I’d do it, and why. It was all a ruse to distract me and take Luzhen. For all I knew, the story about the Red Star and First Mountain was a lie he planted in mother’s head—just so we’d be led into the den of a corrupted spirit. Beckett’s instructions were my last lead, and The Grinning Man knew I’d come if it meant any chance of finding my brother.

The panic faded. There was only rage now. I pointed the blade at the Grinning Man. “You planned this out perfectly—did you plan for me to kill you?”

The Grinning Man tilted his head at a sharp angle and scoffed. “No. I planned for your humiliation.”

All at once, I charged and swung the falchion at his side. He caught the blade between his claws and flung me back without effort. Behind him, the fire blasted up beyond the tree tops.

“We both know how this ends, Vurkoth.” He said. “Why try?”

I rolled, pushed myself up, and faced away the fire. The dancers gathered in a circle around us and danced like they had before—I was trapped.

It happened so fast—I was knocked to the ground in an instant, I didn’t even feel The Grinning Man’s claws slash across my back. Once again, I got up. I faced The Grinning Man and found him lunging at me. I sidestepped his attack and swung my weapon upward, the blade just grazed his arm.

The Grinning Man lifted his arm up and inspected his elbow. I stood across from him now. My falchion held out in front of me ready to guard. All I could think about in that moment was how pointless it all was. The Calligrapher could’ve preyed on anyone he wanted, and yet he chose my family—why? Was there even a reason?

Once more, I charged at him—my falchion raised with my sights set on the bastard’s neck. But there was no blood shed in that attack. The bonfire no longer flickered. The dancers stopped in the mid-routine. All was frozen in time—just as it was the day that mother died. All except for The Grinning Man. He sauntered forward, took the weapon from my hands, and tossed it into the fire.

“You didn’t really believe I’d give you a fighting chance—did you? You’re far too trusting, Vurkoth—really.” The Grinning Man turned his back to me. A violet orb manifested in his hand and floated out into the air before him. “I want you to see something.” The orb

expanded into an oval window with about the height and width of a full sized mirror. Soon enough, images came into focus, and then sound soon after that.

The window showed Luzhen surrounded by ice. He was bloodied, and hung from his arms by chains set in the ceiling. A massive, black hand emerged from nowhere, followed by a second—both carried a set a needle-like claws. One hand snatched Luzhen and held him in place. He struggled, but the hand’s grip was too much for him.

“How does it feel, Vurkoth? How does it feel to be a failure?” The Grinning Man cackled. “Your brother is property now—and there is nothing you can do. There never really was, in truth. Destiny’s a cruel like that.”

The second hand carved its claws into my Luzhen’s flesh—each gash bled with the same dim glow of the red tattoos that were etched into The Grinning Man and the dancers. Luzhen cried in pain as The Calligrapher’s nails dug into him, but there was nothing I could do. I was as helpless as he was.

The oval flickered and the scene changed. Luzhen was splayed out on a stone floor, he writhed like a trapped animal. His body was covered entirely in the red tattoos—still fresh and bloody.

This-This one—I. am. Luzhen. He muttered, then shot his hands to his head and shrieked.

I—this one— Luzhen started to cackle with wheezing laughter. *This—This one is sorry!*
This one is sorry!

“Unfortunately for your brother—some initiates don’t react well to The Calligrapher’s blessing.” The Grinning Man said. “The Calligrapher, however, finds those his glyphs leave on the frayed ends of sanity to be his most vicious children—and therefore his most effective.”

The Grinning Man turned back towards me and unleashed a brutal flurry of slashes and stabs aimed at my torso. None of it affected me at first, but when time resumed again the impact of each attack hit me all at once. I collapsed to my hands and knees. The image of Luzhen, writhing on the ground, covered in those damned red tattoos—it was seared into my memory—and even then I relived it over and over just as I do now. There was no fight left in me after that.

The Grinning Man peered down. I felt him staring. “You’ve learned to give up now, have you? Good.” He said. “Unfortunately for you, The Calligrapher prefers closure when it comes to these matters.”

I spit, and a fine spray of blood splattered onto the snow. “Do it—whatever it is. I’m done. You’ve taken my mother. You’ve taken my brother. You’ve broken me. But before you end this—tell me one thing. Why us? You could’ve picked anyone in the world and you chose my family...why?”

The Grinning Man burst into a gurgling laughter. “What kind of answer do you want, Vurkoth? That, somehow, your family was special? That there was something important about you? You people were vulnerable—that’s it. Your father was dead already, your mother was too frail, and you, in your supreme arrogance, resisted us. But Luzhen? Luzhen was the most vulnerable of you all. He disguised it well, but lacked the willpower to change it. And the best part was? No one in his life could see it—not even you, his beloved brother.”

He swung his arm back with his last words and then thrust a clawed hand through my torso. The Grinning Man lifted me up like this, higher and higher until I was held above his head like a trophy to the dancers who frolicked and squealed with sickly delight.

Death is peaceful—that's what I had always been told—but that assumes you're accepting death in the first place. It assumes you acknowledge the end and slip away into the abyss without question. That wasn't what happened to me then. Rather, I felt an icy hot wave of terror and frustration. Terror, for the uncertainty of what came next—and frustration at being unable to do anything to prevent the Grinning Man from winning.

Even as I felt my body breakdown, I still resisted it. I dared the inevitable to take me that day just as I dared The Grinning Man to finish me. Looking back on it, maybe he was right—maybe I was arrogant. But is arrogance in the face of forever really such a crime if you're trying to save the ones you love?

Then, something miraculous happened. The glade disappeared, but instead of darkness, there were stars on all sides of me. I was flying. There were swirling vortices and ephemeral clouds of cosmic smoke. Planets of all shapes and sizes shot past. I sped up, faster and faster and faster all the while following a wispy trail of crimson that cut between all of it.

The planets disappeared. The vortices and the smoke were gone. The stars were but long, white lines in my vision, and the crimson grew brighter. Wind rushed at my face. And then?

I was falling.

Ever since that day, I've been hurtling ever downward into a void to which there's no end. I accept that, in some twisted way, this is where I'm meant to be. I'm a coward, a failure. I was the one thing standing in the way of evil and all but crumbled before it.

They say that you should learn from failure—but too often failure teaches no lesson. Defeat—in its purest sense—settles upon its victims with clean-cut, ruthless transparency. There are no hidden meanings, no silver linings—only the extermination of a man's fighting spirits and fleeting moments that fade to dust. There's nothing to be learned from that, you see.

Whoever you are—if indeed someone is listening—you might not believe in destiny. I never much did, not till The Grinning Man took my entire life from me. He was destined to do so. He had been telling me himself for years and years, yet I was too ignorant to see it. Destiny finds a way—so they say—whether by our own hand or by the hand of something greater than ourselves. I reject that—I reject *all* of it. I will not fall forever. That is not the destiny I choose for myself.

What do you see when you stare into the void? You see endings. You see nothingness. You see darkness. And yes—you are correct. All of those things are present. Staring into the void as long as I have would drive most men to tears—but those men are mentally weak. They are too distracted by what they feel on the inside to notice the rushing wind on their skin and the sinking in their stomach. This void may be an end, it may be nothing, and it may be dark—but it is also a way forward.

Even now as I say this, there is still no bottom to speak of. Someday, I will reach the bottom—this I believe with all of me. And when I do, I will go wherever that end will take me.

My name is Vurkoth, which in Rimetongue means “the fire that rains”—and I am the master of my own destiny.

An Analysis of the Otherworld Trope

In my creative piece, *Rimetongue – Part I: The Grinning Man*, the main character, Vurkoth, tells his story from an ethereal void of darkness through which he has been falling for an unknown amount of time. In Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey" narrative pattern, Vurkoth's experience correlates with the "belly of the whale" portion of this structure with his "falling" after the Grinning Man's final attack as his moment of "crossing the threshold" (Campbell, 64). Meaning, the point in a story when a hero finds himself firmly planted in a world different from his own. *Rimetongue*, therefore, plays on an age old tradition of utilizing the concept of an "Otherworld" as a mechanism for plot development that dates back to ancient myth and continues to be prevalent trope in modern fantasy and science fiction. My intention with this essay is to analyze the ways in which the idea of the "Otherworld" is utilized in Norse and Greek mythology, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and modern Science Fiction, and then establish the ways in which "The Void" in *Rimetongue* breaks the traditional mold.

The term "Otherworld" has its origins in Irish mythology as a common English translation of the many Gaelic names for the plane of existence inhabited by fairies. It is also often utilized as a term to describe a place inhabited predominantly by supernatural beings (Carey, 1). The openness of this second definition means the term can be applied to a wide ranging number of places mentioned in the stories mankind has accumulated over the millennia. Valhalla and Jotunheim in Norse mythology, Olympus and Hades in Greek mythology, Heaven and Hell in Christian Tradition, and even modern creations such as "The Upside Down" in the hit Netflix series *Stranger Things* and the "Mirror Universe" in *Star Trek* all fall under the category of "Otherworld" as defined above. The "Otherworld," however, does not necessarily have to be a place separate from the main world or universe the main characters dwell in, it could

just as easily be a place wholly familiar but poses a situation that is unusual for the protagonist. A unfamiliar situation, after all, can feel just as strange to a character as a literal “Otherworld” if the circumstances are different enough from what the protagonist is used to. “The Void” as it is intended in *Rimetongue*, functions like none of these, as it is meant to be a physical incarnation of nothingness. There is no function or purpose, nothing lives there, and Vurkoth does not know why he was sent there. “The Void” for better or worse, simply exists. The trouble, however, with the “Otherworld” concept is that it is also considered a trope which can negatively impact a story if the nature of the trope is not addressed in some way. In other words, something has to be done with the “Otherworld” from a craft perspective in order to instill an air of originality.

In Norse mythology, given the many planes of existence supported by Yggdrasil the World Tree, there are many “Otherworlds” utilized within its stories. Valhalla, Asgard, Jotunheim, Muspelheim, Nifelheim, Svartalfheim, Thyrnheim, and Vanaheim are all distinct planes of existence separate from Earth, known as Midgard (Green, 263). In the story “Freya the Bride,” the mighty Thor, God of Thunder, has his hammer stolen while he sleeps and has to dress up as a bride in order to steal it back from the giants who stole it (Green 91-110). It can also be argued that Thor’s occupation of a woman’s space is an “Otherworld” of itself to a male god. In order to do so, he has to descend into Jotunheim, the realm of the giants in full bridal garb—an act of desperation for an otherwise prideful god. Thor is a character who usually meets his problems with brute force, but in this story he is forced to do things Loki’s way and use cunning. So, in a way, you have in this story both literal and figurative “Otherworld” concepts at play.

The ancient Norse also utilized “Otherworld” experiences to establish the origin of legendary, magical items. Such is the case with the story of Thor’s hammer, Mjolnir, and Odin’s spear, Gungnir. In the story translators have dubbed “Loki Makes Mischief” (Green 71-90),

Loki the Trickster God journeys to the world of Svartalfheim, the land of the dark elves and dark dwarves, in order to request gifts for the Aesir in order to win a wager. It is from this wager that Mjolnir, Gungnir, among other named, magical items come to be. By utilizing the “Otherworld” in this way, the myth establishes a special origin for these items because they came from another plane of existence.

Another instance of “Otherworld” use in Norse mythology is “The Death of Baldur.” In this tale, Baldur, the most beautiful of all the Aesir, is slain after Loki tricks the god Hodur into killing him. Baldur is then sent to Niflheim, the dwelling of the dead who do not die in battle from which Hermodur, the swiftest of the gods, attempts to free him, “At last he himself knelt before Hela, and told her his errand—told her how great a sorrow among the Aesir, and all living creatures, for Baldur’s death, and begged that Baldur might be allowed to ride home to Asgard with him,” (Green, 220). The key here is that Hela responds by assigning Hermodur a task—Baldur may return home only if everything in the world, dead and alive, weeps for him (Green, 221.) Journeying to the Otherworld, specifically an abode of the dead, and returning with an assigned task in order to free someone is seen in Greek Mythology as well with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The Greek Myth of “Orpheus and Eurydice” is another instance of an “Otherworld” journey that results in an assigned task, but also operates in a way that tests the hero’s own self-control. In the story, Orpheus journeys to the Underworld in order to retrieve his deceased beloved. Hades is so moved by him that he agrees to let Orpheus take Eurydice, but under one condition “that he should not turn around to look at her till they should have reached the upper air” (Bulfinch, 145). By engaging in this task, Orpheus must resist the temptation and paranoia nagging at him to check to see if Eurydice is still following behind him. Here, you not only have

the “Otherworld” assigning the protagonist a task like in the Baldur story, but you have the “Otherworld” acting as place of trial and tribulation as well.

In Greek mythology, heroes often have to descend into an “Otherworld” in order to accomplish a given task or feat. The task use of the “Otherworld” often works in conjunction with the “Otherworld” as the realm of some kind of monster. In the story of Hercules and his Twelve labors, for example, his final task is to descend into Hades, the Underworld, and carry the monster Cerberus to the surface, “He obtained permission from Pluto to carry Cerberus to the upper air, provided he could do it without the use of weapons; and in spite of the monster’s struggling, he seized him, held him fast, and carried him to Eurystheus, and afterwards brought him back again” (Bulfinch, 116). Hercules’s trip into Hades is a perfect instance of the “belly of the whale” segment of Campbell’s Hero’s Journey as he descends into the land of the dead, deep inside the Earth, and comes back. In doing so, he finally completes the Twelve Labors which have dogged him for so long.

Another Greek hero that finds himself grappling with a legendary monster is Theseus. Of his own volition, Theseus slays the half-man, half-bull Minotaur in King Minos’s labyrinth in order to prevent more Athenians from being used as sacrifices to the beast, “He was successful, slew the Minotaur, escaped from the labyrinth and taking Ariadne as the companion of his way, with his companions sailed for Athens” (Bulfinch, 120). Slaying the Minotaur, of course, is Theseus’s greatest feat and makes his name known to the Hellenic world. For both Hercules and Theseus, they found their “Otherworlds” populated by vicious monsters that either stood in the way of their goals, or were the actual goal itself. The “Otherworld” as the realm of a monsters is a tradition that continues today.

In ancient Hebrew tradition, there was no concept of Heaven being an Afterlife to which the righteous were destined to go, that was a later development in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead, upon death, the ancient Hebrews believed that all of the dead, regardless of who they were in life, would go to a place called Sheol. Though they both shared a common fate, the wicked and the righteous did have separation in Sheol itself (Metcalf, 341). This iteration of a so-called “land of the dead” was also shared by the Babylonians and was similar to Greco-Roman depictions of Hades, “From these expressions, it appears that Babylonians and Hebrews alike regarded Sheol as a vast cavern under the ground, the subterranean counterpart of the space included between the earth and the celestial dome” (Paton, 161). Sheol eventually evolves into the Christian belief of Heaven and Hell. In Christian Theology, there is a famous, though hotly debated use of the “Otherworld” journey in Jesus’ descent into Hell, which is alluded to in Catholicism’s version of “The Apostles Creed,” “He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” In Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, it is interpreted that Jesus descended into Hell in order to free the souls of the righteous that came before him, i.e. Old Testament figures such as Adam and Eve among others (CCC 633). Jesus’ descent into Hell acts as a mechanism for showing the evolution in the Afterlife prospects of mankind. It acknowledges the existence of Sheol, which has now become Hell, through the fact that the righteous Old Testament figures had been sent there and have ascended to Heaven with Jesus’ help. While the Judeo-Christian tradition utilizes the “Otherworld” as an Afterlife concept, it does one thing that other examples did not—it evolves. There are similarities, one could argue, depending on one’s interpretation of Vurkoth’s final showdown with The Grinning Man. The writing leads the reader to believe, with a certainty, that Vurkoth dies. If this interpretation is true, then the void would be

classified as an afterlife realm such as Hell or Sheol, with the fall being a form of eternal punishment.

The use of an “Otherworld” as an antagonistic force is a common trope in fantasy fiction, and is oftentimes associated with monsters and demonic entities among other similar fantastic beings. In science fiction, however, there is also the use of the parallel universe, alternate reality, or alternate dimension as an otherworldly home to evil. In the Netflix series, *Stranger Things*, the use of the “Otherworld” is seen in the form of “the Upside Down,” a sort of evil parallel to our own dimension inhabited by bloodthirsty monsters such as the “demigorgon” and “the mindflayer.” In Star Trek, the parallel universe is used as an antagonistic force as is seen in the use of the “Mirror Universe” in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. The “Mirror Universe” is alternate reality where humanity became an totalitarian, intergalactic empire that treats aliens as second class citizens instead of the tolerant, exploration minded United Federation of Planets. In both *Stranger Things* and Star Trek, while characters from the main universe do travel into the parallel one, the opposite happens as well.

In *Stranger Things*, it is the world of the “Upside Down” that occupies the main “Otherworld” space. It is the home of monsters, as is seen in season 1’s “The Monster,” and is a dark, dreary place with air that’s toxic to humans, as is seen in the season finale entitled “The Upside Down.” The Upside Down itself, as it is explained in season 1’s “The Flea and the Acrobat” is an exact opposite of our world and is not only distinct, but exists outside of our very reality—making for a perfect example of the alternate universe archetype of the “Otherworld.”

In fact, if *Rimetongue*’s “The Void” can be compared to anything, I would contend that it is most similar to *Stranger Things*’ “The Upside Down” in that it is something that just is, and

cannot hope to explain. The character of the Grinning Man, for example, is based on an alleged paranormal phenomena of the same name (Keel, 196) that, to this day, remains unexplained. The purpose of "The Void," is to raise far more questions than answers in the minds of the reader. The natural inclination of man is to seek answers where none exist rather than submit themselves to the possibility of there being none, an internal conflict displayed by Vurkoth in his falling scenes. In truth, "The Void" is not meant to act in any way like the archetypal Otherworld instances examined thus far, rather it is meant to act as a mystery in of itself and one that may not be solved.

In season 2 of *Stranger Things*, however, you have an instance of an unfamiliar situation acting as a figurative Otherworld, but accomplishing the same goals as the alternate universe. In the episode "The Lost Sister" in season 2, one of the main characters, Eleven, ends up in the slums of Chicago to look for her adopted older sister who was experimented upon as a child at the same facility that she was. This leads her to briefly join in on her sister's murderous revenge plot. Eleven's journey into Chicago's slums ends up exposing her to a side of life she would never have seen in the small town of Hawkins, Indiana where the show is set. This, in turn helps her to see where her place is in the world, and that she's in control enough of her powers in order to exhibit mercy. The big city of Chicago then acts as the opposite of Hawkins, Indiana in the same dark versus light binary that "The Upside Down" and our reality are embroiled in.

Unlike *Stranger Things*, where the alternate universe involved is a polar opposite of the one we inhabit, *Star Trek's* "Mirror Universe" operates in a slightly different way. In this instance, while still an alternate universe where some things are the polar opposites, there are still constants. For example, most of the main characters in the show have evil counterparts in the Mirror Universe, this includes Captain Sisko, Major Kira, and Julian Bashir as it is revealed in

the episode “Crossover” in season 2. However, some characters, such as Miles O’Brien are the same. In essence, the Star Trek “Mirror Universe” is one where you have a mixed bag of the same and the opposite, so much so that the screenwriters referenced this fact within the show itself in the episode “The Emperor’s New Cloak” in season 7, where the character of Rom is vexed throughout the episode about how some things in the alternate universe are “alternate” and some things are the same.

Still, because of the Otherworld concept’s use in such a wide ranging list of literary and folkloric works, it has become a trope due to the sheer number of times it has been used. In the writing process, especially in genre fiction like *Rimetongue*, unavoidable, as a lot of the stories that inspire us use them as well. Furthermore, every story has been done before in some form, and so a writer must rely on his ability to mold it in order to portray it as something unique and original. That is not to say tropes are a bad thing, in fact, I would argue that it is quite the opposite. Many of the most beloved stories of all time have tropes. It’s just all a matter of how those tropes are used. In my experience, the same rules apply to tropes that apply to clichés, as the two are often one in the same. One solution is that a writer must simply point out the trope, in doing so the writer lets the reader know that the use of it was not only intentional but possibly that the characters in the story realize this too—depending upon the point of view from which it’s told, of course. The second solution is to mold the trope into something unique to the lore of the universe or the story itself. In order to do this, a writer must be as specific as possible because part of what makes a cliché or a trope into cliché or a trope is the generality of it. The second solution is the one I opted to use for *Rimetongue*, and in doing so I created “The Void,” the ephemeral plane of existence through which Vurkoth is falling. Leaving “The Void” as this anomalous, unexplained place not only works to stand out amongst other uses of the

"Otherworld" but allows for *Rimetongue: Part I* to maintain a thread of mystery throughout, and subsequently acts as the perfect cliffhanger to lead into Part II.

In the end, from a craft perspective, the use of an Otherworld is considered a trope, and if a writer is not careful, it can come off as such and keep a reader from reading. In order to combat the trope and prevent it from sullyng an otherwise engaging story, it has to either be molded to originality or it must be pointed out within the prose itself. As it has been demonstrated, *Rimetongue* takes several uses of the Otherworld concept from myth, religion, and fiction and unites them as mechanism to turn the Otherworld trope on its head in order to construct something wholly unique to the fiction universe it takes place in. Vurkoth then, in essence, finds himself facing circumstances in "The Void" that have not been faced by any character that's preceded him. This, in turn, allows *Rimetongue* to take its place as a part of the Otherworld tradition without falling victim to the tropes inherent within it.

Conclusion

The impetus for the writing of *Rimetongue* was to utilize the Honors Thesis format as a mechanism by which I could remove myself from the comfort of what I usually write and do something completely different. In order to do that, I set out to explore a different historical period to use as a fantasy setting.

You see, I'm not a huge fan of the traditional medieval setting found in most high fantasy. Because of that, all of my fantasy fiction typically takes place in a setting based off of the mid to late Nineteenth Century, an eventful swath of time that encompasses the American Civil War, the Wild West, and Victorian England, all of which have captured my imagination for years. Because of my love for this time period, I have great familiarity with it. Over the course of my life I've read countless books, watched countless movies and television programs, and visited historical sites, all of which has served to cultivate this fascination of mine.

With *Rimetongue* however, I tried to turn back the clock and use an earlier time period, but one that was still outside of the run-of-the-mill medieval setting. Originally, I chose the mid Eighteenth Century with an emphasis on the time period surrounding the French-Indian War. However, I found that mentioning the French-Indian War gave readers specific expectations that I didn't want to meet, and as *Winter Break* came along, I found that this time period no longer captured my attention. I then rolled back the clock even further to the late Seventeenth Century which, in history, would correlate with the French colonization of what is now Canada.

My error in my attempt to portray a new time period, however, was being a believer in an old writers' idiom that goes something like "you don't necessarily have to know the subject material, you just have to make it look like you do." Of course with fantasy like *Rimetongue*

there is a plenty of room for flexibility in terms of historical accuracy. Even so, a writer still needs to capture the feeling of the era. Both in my time with the Eighteenth and Seventeenth Century settings, I quickly found that no amount of research on my part was really granting me the ability to capture these historical eras as well as I've been known in my fiction workshops to do with the Nineteenth. This, of course, left my world building feeling superficial in places, a problem that I could not fix due to the fact that I haven't immersed myself in either era for years as I have with the mid-late Nineteenth Century.

While I am a staunch believer in a writer's freedom to write any character he so chooses to write, I have come to a new conclusion regarding historical setting—which will impact both my fantasy and historical fiction going forward. A writer cannot just research a historical period on the internet or read a few books here or there over the course of a few months and hope to capture the essence of a historical period. In truth, one has to commit to it. It requires years of immersing oneself in the material through a wide variety of mediums, be it literature or visiting a historical site. If I had been as passionate over the years about the French-Indian War or the Dawn of Exploration as I am about the American Civil War, then I have no doubt that I could've captured those eras well in text.

Annotated Bibliography

Bulfinch, Thomas. *Bulfinch's Mythology*. Baker and Taylor Publishing Group, 2014.

Bulfinch's *Mythology* provided me with the print editions of the Greek myths analyzed in the Critical Essay as well as a certain degree of scholarly clout due to its author.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed., Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2008.

Joseph Campbell's famous work served to help preface the place of the "Otherworld" in the realm of the hero's journey.

Carey, John. "Time, Space, and the Otherworld." *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 7, 1987, pp. 1–27.

John's Carey's piece was crucial to the setup of the Critical Essay portion of my thesis, as it is where I derived the first definition of "Otherworld" as established in the second paragraph. Without it, I could not transition into the broader definition of "Otherworld" upon which the entire essay is based.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church was crucial in my analysis of Judeo-Christian tradition and the “Otherworld” as the “Apostle’s Creed” is where it is explicitly stated that Jesus descended into Hell.

Fields, Peter Allan, and Michael Piller. “Crossover.” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, season 2, episode 23, CBS, 1994.

“Crossover” was the first episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*’s seven season run that involved the so called “Mirror Universe” and would be one of many. “Crossover,” however, illustrates best the different aspects of each main character’s alternate doppelganger because it has to establish the “Mirror Universe” for the viewer for the first time in the series.

Green, Roger Lancelyn. *Myths of the Norsemen*. Puffin, 1970.

Myths of the Norsemen is where I directly pulled the versions of Norse Mythology which I analyzed in my Critical Essay.

Keel, John A. *The Complete Guide to Mysterious Beings*. 2nd ed., John A. Keel, 1994

John Keel was a world renowned journalist whose subject matter concerned the supernatural, the parapsychological, and the fortean. His account of what he dubbed “The Grinning Man” during the Mothman encounters in the 1960’s which he details both in *The*

Complete Guide to Mysterious Beings and *The Mothman Prophecies* directly inspired my own fictional version of “The Grinning Man” in the writing of “Rimetongue.”

Metcalf, Arthur. “The Evolution of the Belief in the World beyond the Grave.” *The Biblical World*, vol. 17, no. 5, 5 Nov. 1901, pp. 339–347. *JSTOR*.

Metcalf’s work was useful in helping me to establish the ancient Hebrew belief surrounding the underworld of Sheol and its relevance to the concept of “The Otherworld.”

Morrell, David. *First Blood*. s.i., Grand Central pub, 2017.

First Blood was instrumental in improving my ability to write action sequences in “Rimetongue.”

Paton, Lewis Bayles. “The Hebrew Idea of the Future Life. III. Babylonian Influence in the Doctrine of Sheol.” *The Biblical World*, vol. 35, no. 3, Mar. 1910, pp. 159–171. *JSTOR*.

As with Arthur Metcalf’s work above, Lewis Bayles Paton’s work was used to help established the ancient Hebrew underworld of Sheol.

Stranger Things. Created by The Duffer Brothers, Netflix, 2016.

The hit Netflix series *Stranger Things* was crucial to my analysis of the “Otherworld” as an alternate universe, specifically an evil one. It also provided my example of a figurative “Otherworld” that, though not otherworldly in the literal sense, occupies the same niche which the literal “Otherworld” concept typically does.

The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version. 1899 ed., Saint Benedict Press.

The Douay-Rheims Bible is the most traditional Catholic Bible currently available and is translated directly from the Latin Vulgate. This source was important in terms of context that would allow for me to dig deeper into the “Otherworld” concept as it pertains to the Judeo-Christian Tradition.