

MacKenna S. Hanson
Professor Hasak-Lowy
WRIT 2040-001: Wksp: Short Story
December 12 2023

HANNIBAL LIVES IN MY HEAD

By MacKenna Hanson

When you're on the assembly line, there really isn't much to do. Sure, you can put one thing onto another thing, or next to another thing, or even—wait for it—*into* another thing. But if you've got an ounce of brain matter swimming in your skull, there's only so many ways to not go insane.

One of those ways is to daydream.

I daydream a lot. Sometimes, I feel like I live in my head too much. The things in there start to feel more real than the things out here. I don't even have to shut my eyes at this point to get into the zone. All I have to do is stare at a bit of freshly molded plastic and retreat backwards into my own universe. It's quite vivid. I think if I was worse at daydreaming, my job would be unbearable. It's important to be able to conjure up fantastical happenings. What's *actually* happening is so un-fantastical that it would make anyone's brains leak out of their ears.

I think I went a little too far the other day, though.

Now, I'm not new to this. It's happened before, at work and at school. People say that imagination is a gift and creativity is a blessing. I guess they're right. Like I said before, it's been getting me through the tough parts of my job and I know it'll get me through more tough times. But sometimes it can be a curse.

I'm being cryptic, aren't I? Well, let's get back to the point. Sometimes, if I'm so bored I could scream and cry, and retreating into my inner universe isn't helping, I do the opposite.

I bring my inner universe *out*.

That probably doesn't make much sense. Let me try to explain. I've got people living in my head. Not actual people; I'm not crazy. They aren't split personalities or hallucinations. They aren't actual people. Rather, they're my imagined projections of a collection of personality traits. They tend to be characters from media I'm interested in. (Yes, that's cringe, yes, whatever. I got

over my internal embarrassment long ago. External is...a different story.) Unfortunately for me, one of my long-standing interests is the TV show *Hannibal*.

If you know what *Hannibal* is, the books or the movies or the show or all three, then you can probably guess where this is going. I've got Doctor Hannibal Lecter living in my head. That's a rather dramatic way to put it, but it gets the point across. He's a fictional serial killer who eats people, originated in the novel *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris. He's also extremely annoying in that he waxes poetic about bullshit you *know* is bullshit but still somehow draws you into its tangled philosophy. When you're on the line, putting one thing onto/next to/into another thing, there's not much you can do except sit there and let your mind run wild. In this case, let Hannibal run wild.

Let me help you picture it. I don't stand on the line; we received chairs a few months before I started work there. So there I was, sitting on the line, putting one piece of plastic onto/next to/into another piece of plastic, and I look up and fucking Hannibal Lecter is is standing next to me.

I said before, I'm not crazy. I didn't actually see him—what I saw with my own two eyes was empty space. But I could feel his presence pressing against my head, and I could see him with my imagination. He was a collection of light and color that hadn't been created yet, and never would be.

"Hello," he'd said. Ever so politely. I just ignored him. I knew I'd conjured him on purpose, the idiot that I was, and the regret was immediate. He was in his brown plaid suit and creamy yellow shirt. One of the less offensive outfits he wore on the show.

"I understand you're bored. Why don't you talk to me?" He'd sounded so therapist-y. Or like a lonely little child.

“Hello,” I’d responded, without answering his question. Of course, I didn’t actually say that. My lips were sealed and I didn’t want my coworkers to think I was more of a “character” (their words) than they already thought me to be. But in my head I responded, and considering he was also in my head, he heard my response loud and clear.

“You’re wasting your life doing this.”

Gee, thanks Hannibal. Way to cut to the quick.

“I’m not wasting my life, this is a summer job. I’ll be out in a couple of weeks.”

“Wouldn’t you rather be doing something else with your time? Instead, you are sitting here talking to me.”

He smiled serenely at me after he said that, like he’d made a joke. Even now, I can picture him in perfect detail: his suit crinkling as he leaned against the gleaming chrome shelf of the machine, hands clasped in front of him as he looked down at me like an indulgent teacher. It made me feel vaguely filthy. The level of cognitive distortion involved in having an imagined conversation with a fictional serial killer all while being surrounded by your real, living coworkers cannot be overstated.

“I’m not talking to you. Go away.”

Predictably, he didn’t go away. He didn’t even have to gloat about that. His continued existence was gloating enough. Rather than say anything, he walked around behind me and leaned over my shoulder. I was afraid he’d smell me like how he smelled Will Graham in the TV show, but instead he just gazed intently at my work. At this point, a seed of dread had been planted—and because I know my own mind, I knew it would grow into something I didn’t want to see.

Eventually I grew bored of his silence.

“Shouldn’t you be talking about some obscure art history or psychiatric innovation?”

That was the whole reason I’d conjured him, after all. To not be bored.

“I could discuss the Old Masters of the Italian Renaissance, or how beneficial exposure therapy can be to OCD patients. But I only know what you know. I am, after all, an imagined aspect of your own mind.”

I didn’t want to admit that he was right, so I stubbornly refused to reply. He sighed lightly.

“I suppose I could rhapsodize about the merits of Caravaggio’s chiaroscuro technique. You’re quite interested in the stark difference between light and dark, are you not? How each buttery paintstroke—in Rembrandt’s case, glistening with crushed glass—dances across the canvas...”

Sitting there, I let Hannibal lull me into a stupor about fine art. It was a useful way to pass the time; imagining the detailed aspects of paintings I’d seen once, or had never seen. Considering all he was doing was regurgitating my own thoughts about art, I found myself enjoying his lecture and agreeing with everything he said. Maybe that makes me egotistical.

“What would you do,” he broke during a particularly riveting monologue about the archival qualities of traditional fresco paint, “if I killed a woman in front of you?”

Having thought the thought, there was no way I could take it back. Hannibal had stolen it from me and ran away with it.

“I wouldn’t let you.”

In response to this, he simply raised an eyebrow. The dread grew.

“I control you,” I emphasized. “You said it yourself. You’re a product of my imagination. I can control everything you do.”

Hannibal looked a bit put off by this, as if he'd smelled something foul.

"You can indeed control me. But will you?"

I didn't respond, because I knew he was right.

In the corner, right on the edge of my peripheral vision, a woman appeared. She was brunette and mid-thirties; dressed in dark blue jeans with a cerulean v-neck top. White. Blue eyes and a vacant expression. I could see her just limply standing there like she was suspended on a meat hook. She didn't move. She didn't even breathe. Just a stale, inert body.

Let me emphasize once again, dear reader. I didn't actually see her. This was taking place inside the arena of my mind. Sadly for me, my mind was working overtime.

"Look at her," Hannibal spoke, right next to my ear. I almost shivered but stopped myself. Normal people don't shiver at an imagined conversation. "She is not real, just as I am not real. She is not even animated in your imagination. She is nothing. You are correct; you can control me and you can control her. You know what I want. Are you willing to let me do it?"

The true question went unsaid: was I willing to let *me* do it?

"No," I protested. There was a buildup in the back of my mind. Hannibal clearly knew that I was just delaying the inevitable—the decision had already been made.

In response to my protest, Hannibal walked up to the woman and snapped her neck.

She fell to the floor and laid there. Hannibal just stood and looked at her, saying nothing. This was surprising to me. I had assumed that he would create a tableau, something with which to horrify and shock me. Shock me that I'd allowed him to murder this woman, this creature which wasn't even a thought in my head a scant few seconds ago. No, not allowed *him*—allowed *myself*.

The decision had been made the second I'd manifested his character.

I looked at him, feeling a vague sense of guilt for something I wasn't sure I should even feel guilty over. The woman was never real. She was a mental projection of an innocent victim, the kind they always talk about on those true crime podcasts I don't listen to. And it wasn't like I'd imagined killing her with my own two hands. Hannibal, one imagined character, had killed her, another imagined character. They weren't people, they weren't alive, and no-one would ever know what had taken place in my head.

I felt a little sick the rest of the day.

I had an argument with Hannibal yesterday.

It was about multiple things. The first argument was about the pronoun 'we'. I objected to him using that word in reference to he and I, as the implication that *we* were a partnership disturbed me. He looked disgruntled and superior but conceded to my demand anyway. The next argument was about his precise nature.

Not his nature as a fictional character, the serial killer psychiatrist. No, this was an argument about his nature in relation to me.

"You're a mental projection of a character," I'd said. "All of you is comprised of how I imagine Hannibal would look, act, and speak."

"I am a filter," he'd said.

Rather than being a character, he supposed that he was a filter—a collection of pre-existing traits my own thoughts were filtered through and spat out of. Honestly, both of our points of view seemed the same to me. I believed he was a compendium of traits which acted

according to those traits, and he believed that he was a sort of sieve my own thoughts were strained through. After some pointless back and forth, I decided to stop the experiment.

“It’s just semantics. Let’s talk about something else.”

For a while I tried to get him to talk about art. I’d wanted him to start off with medieval European art and move up through the 19th century, but he was limited by my rusty knowledge of those eras. He could name the big names, sure—Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Donatello, Bosch, Dürer, etc; but our options for an in-depth lecture were hopelessly limited. I think we’re both excited for me to go back to school and refresh my memory on art history.

“They used egg tempera...in...”

Then he’d trailed off, looking frustrated. I tried to help him a little with an information infusion. It slightly derailed the subject but got him talking again.

“Egg tempera is made by suspending pigments in fresh egg white, which acts as a binder. Much like classic oil paints, which later became popular for their brilliant chroma, egg tempera is made of organic materials. Oil paint primarily consists of a pigment suspended in vegetable fat, specifically linseed oil...”

He’d trailed off again. I wasn’t even sure if what he was saying was correct. The lecture was going horribly, and we both knew it. I’d transported us both into my memory of the Art Institute for extra immersion, hoping that it would help the lesson along. It was certainly more conducive for learning than the basement assembly line I was really in. But when he got frustrated, he took the painting of St. John the Baptist getting beheaded (from the hexptych in the medieval section of the European Art wing) off the wall and stared at me in the most unsettling way. A sense of complete eeriness pervaded my entire self.

I think it would make a good painting, actually.

Then we left the AIC and went back to the assembly line.

“I am a filter,” he said again.

“I don’t want to think about this again. We already did it. And besides, if you’re just a filter for my thoughts, aren’t you relinquishing your personhood? Your reality?”

He’d looked pensive, and responded with something I’d occasionally thought about before but never thought I’d hear in a context such as this.

“I am real. As real as anything your mind perceives. Yes, it is true that I do not exist in physical reality. But there are other planes of reality. Think about what your father says regarding quantum physics—once you get small enough, everything is connected, from the least important thought in one’s mind to the largest man-made monument. For example, if you imagine you heard a song, did you not, in fact, hear it for that fleeting second? My lack of interaction with the physical world does not negate my realness. I am standing here before you, and we are having a conversation. Just because it is taking place inside of your mind does not mean it is not real.”

I didn’t have a good retort for that. He was right. It harkened back to a conversation I’d had in the car with Dad that morning about this very subject. It started off with discussing how identical twins were often rumored by tabloids to be psychic with each other, or have some sort of deeper connection us plebes can’t understand. The conversation progressed onto the subject of conjoined twins—less the reality of being conjoined, and more of a thought experiment in how sharing a body would impact your sense of individual self. (It’s worth noting that we also discussed how individuality is a cultural idea, and varies from place to place.) We talked about how conjoined twins who shared a brain might have a different idea of individuality. That instead of being twin A and twin E, they were Æ and stood apart from the rest of the alphabet. So they were a unit, but a distinct unit.

This morphed into a discussion of reality. Perception, more specifically. I created four tiers of perception, each one engaging with a different plane, as Hannibal put it. I can probably flesh them out more later, but here's the gist:

Tier 1 — Complete detachment from physical reality. Most likely induced by mental illness. Delusions, all manner of hallucinations, and severe mental illness characterize this tier. This is when you can literally see something in front of you that nobody else can.

Tier 2 — Isolated incidences of hallucination not caused by a more serious, chronic physical problem. Sleep paralysis, moments of auditory hallucination (caused by neurodivergence, repetitive engagement with sound, etc), and other minor moments of indistinct and/or noncontinuous hallucination.

Tier 3 — This tier is no longer perceived by your physical senses. You cannot smell, taste, touch, hear, or see anything in this tier. However, the mental image is so strong you can perfectly picture/hear the subject, and feel as if they are a distinct entity from you. This is the tier my conversations with Hannibal fall into.

Tier 4 — What we typically think of as imagination. You can think of something, and maybe even picture it, but it's not right there with you in this reality. You have to go back into your mind space.

Tier 5 — Being completely present in only the physical reality. You aren't being sucked into your internal universe in any way. (Dad and I didn't discuss this tier. I made it up just now. 5 seems like a nice, round number.)

After we hashed out the tiers and I told him about my discussions with Hannibal, Dad dropped this little bomb:

“I do that when I'm bored, too. Normally historical figures or philosophers I'd like to talk

to.”

So, it turns out I am not alone. I wonder if it’s a common thing.

Hannibal was extremely disgruntled by the idea that what I do is a common thing.

“You are unique. Not everybody has discussions like ours. Perhaps a small number of people do, but there are nearly eight billion humans on this Earth and I doubt each one engages in conversations such as ours. Take pride in your imagination, in your Self.”

Of course, Hannibal is programmed to think that way. He’s the epitome of a god complex. He can’t stand the thought that he might be like other girls.

“Of course you’d say that. You can’t stomach the idea that we might just not be that special.”

At this, he’d smirked and pointed out my subconscious usage of the word ‘we’. It was mildly infuriating, but I conceded the point.

“Not everyone has as developed a sense of Self as you,” he’d pressed on. “Events in one’s childhood—secret anchors—are a forge. Trauma can melt you or mold you.”

“Plenty of people go through trauma and come out of it with a demolished sense of self. It’s just how people react to those things. There’s no question of strength or weakness involved, and to say so is cruel.”

“Think of Becoming as a forge. Every child going through trauma is a lump of metal, and each blacksmith—the trauma—is different. Perhaps one becomes a scimitar, another a cutlass. Perhaps these swords are of comparable quality. But a weak brass sword will always be brass, and a strong steel sword will always be steel. You are steel.”

This was ridiculously self-aggrandizing, and I felt gross just hearing those words come out of his mouth. Putting down childhood trauma survivors ain’t it—especially belittling their

coping mechanisms on top of it. I felt supremely uncomfortable, and Hannibal looked massively smug in response. He certainly gave me a lot to chew on.

When I'd made that pun in my head—thank you, fictional character who is famous for eating—he looked even smugger. And I didn't tell him the pun, either! But I guess I can't say he read my mind, considering he is part of my mind.

I then brought up the idea to turn our conversations into something more. A philosophical paper, maybe, discussing the idea of self? A series of short stories? Interviews à la Plato's *Republic*?

Hannibal agreed that interviews could be conducted. I'd have to get sufficiently bored for the full immersion, and I'd have to have some sort of recording device on me. Pencil and paper? Voice recorder? I don't know if I could do voice recording—it seems like more would be lost in translation if I tried to repeat what he said rather than writing it down. Plus I'd look more insane than I already seem just from writing this very manuscript.

I warmed up privately to the idea of a scholarly work; possibly with some pithy, eye-catching title like “Hannibal Lives In My Head.” It could discuss a sense of self and the impact that imagination has on that sense. You'd have to begin by defining the ‘self’, then move on to categorizing what senses of self one would discuss. Hannibal and I came up with these already—me (the conscious self I normally am when I'm awake), the character/filter (the subconscious set of rules I am experiencing as an imagined character through which my thoughts are filtered and spat back at me in such a way that they feel new), and the omnipotent third person (my awareness that the entire conversation I have with the Filter is pre-determined because I am regurgitating my own thoughts at myself). I thought it was clever to use a literary term for the third person. Hannibal appreciated it, the menace.

Once the paper had established that, it would move on into the act of consciously creating characters in one's head. I feel as though this is something a lot of artists do—actors, writers, visual artists, philosophers. The Filters we create become so real to us that they really do seem like separate beings. Having conversations with them often facilitates the writing of any sort of manuscript; a short story, a scholarly work, an acting exercise. It helps you interact with and get into a character's headspace while still retaining the self-awareness to analyze their decisions.

I'm not entirely sure what I want to do with this idea. Given that I have ample time ahead of me to converse with Hannibal (or whomever I choose) on this subject, I'm not stressed about figuring it out right now. The assembly line will always be there to welcome me into its boring arms. It seems that an informal scholarly work, or a series of short interviews, might be the best way to format this paper. This *story*, I suppose, if you, dear reader, are generous with me about what constitutes a "story".

Or I could keep it as-is: an extremely casual series of discussions with my Self.