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Penumbra is the official, refereed, scholarly journal of Union Institute & University's Ph.D. Program in Interdisciplinary Studies. The journal is published at regular intervals and dedicated to challenging traditional academic and creative disciplinary boundaries in the context of social change.

Penumbra's purpose is to promote theoretically informed engagements with concrete issues and problems. The journal publishes socially engaged, innovative, creative and critical scholarship with a focus on ethical and political issues in the humanities, public policy, and leadership. *Penumbra* is a peer-edited and peer-reviewed journal committed to spanning the divide between scholarly and creative production, and to fostering work from graduate students, junior scholars and emerging artists, in addition to more established critical and creative voices.

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Aether

DAY 3

The last thing I'd heard from them was they would come for me, that they would be here in three days. Today was day three. Then a pop and crackle on the radio.

Then a voice.

"Gauthier? Gauthier, come in."

I rush to the radio and respond, "Yes?"

"Do you have any idea what happened to the station?"

"No. No, I have no idea. All I heard was the metal groan and snap apart. I sealed myself in this section. The hatch is locked tight." I suddenly became worried. They asked me the same thing two days ago.

"We're at the station. It appears that your crew is gone. Everything is destroyed. We're not entirely sure what happened there, but we'll continue investigating. Keep your radio sending a signal. We'll try to use that to locate you."

I find a damaged wire and yank it off the wall, tying it around the radio button to keep the signal maintained. "I've got it broadcasting," I said. "I'll see you when you get here."

Then nothing.

All I can hear is my heartbeat, the blood throbbing through my temples, and the sloshing of food in my stomach.

Thomas Wallingford is a Denver-area writer and poet. He is a graduate of the University of Northern Colorado, and has been a featured speaker and writer on topics ranging from social justice and mental health to fiction and poetry. He is a contributor to *303 Magazine*, *The Mighty*, and the Carson J. Spencer Foundation blog, and his work has been featured in *The Crucible*, a publication of the University of Northern Colorado. Wallingford was a runner-up (poetry) for the Rosenberry Prize of the Walter S. Rosenberry III Charitable Trust and honorable mention (fiction) for Galaxy Press' Writers of the Future.

I worry about decompression primarily, but also about how long it is taking to find me. My new home is three rooms, protected from the outside by a large metal door.

I push myself off the wall and move toward one of the several pantries that were once part of the station. Upon inspection I determine I have enough food, water, and oxygen to last even if they can't find me for a few more days.

There is very little to do but wait, so I grab a prepackaged meal with the words "Shrimp Scampi" in big, plain black letters on a foil colored pack. I crave potato chips, but food with crumbs or seasonings that can potentially find their way into the instruments aren't allowed. I place utensils, snacks and juice on a ceil blue tray with Velcro and magnets affixed.

I stare down at the food for a long time. Any onlookers would probably think I am praying before my meal. I am not praying and I am too nervous to be hungry. Frankly, my rescue is out of God's hands and in the hands of those searching for my radio signal.

Is some news program down there broadcasting my plight? I wonder exactly how much of an effect it has on people. I look out the hatch window and see Earth; it appears frozen and staring back at me.

No one acts as if the world is turning. Maybe that means everything is the same.

DAY 4

There's not a sleep module in my section of the station. Floating, I wake whenever my head collides with something. I wake at 0237, again at 0458, and again at 0820. Eventually I stabilize myself by tying my ankles, body, and wrists to a table. My wrists need to be loose enough to tie and untie my body, so they float freely while everything else is tied securely.

I rustle around and become more worried that I have not been found yet.

After some time I untie myself and make my way to the radio console. I ask if anyone is still looking for me. I release the push-to-talk button and listen for a response.

I wait.

And I wait.

And I –

"Gauthier?" A surprised but relaxed voice crackles in. I can tell he doesn't take thoughts of me home with him. Regardless, his voice still calms me.

"Yes. Where are you?"

"We have been trying to find you, but your radio signals seem to be bouncing off of something before they reach us," he said. "We didn't find you where we believed you were transmitting from. It's delaying the process a bit, but we will be there for you."

I wonder if he is being honest, over-anxiously optimistic, or simply trying to comfort me against the inevitable.

"Thank you. Is there anything I should be doing to help? Anything at all?" I ask.

He pauses as if trying to think up a lie. “Just keep transmitting,” he says. “Keep talking, singing, rhythmic noises. Anything we can detect with a quick sweep.”

“Okay. Will do. I’ll see you when you get here.”

Once again, silence.

It becomes more and more difficult to busy myself. I begin the dangerous activity of relaxing and thinking. Because of the low gravity, my body bends itself inward, as if in a swimming pool, approaches a fetal position, and rotates forward, always forward.

With each rotation, the prepared tray of shrimp scampi moves in and out of my vision. The ever-distant Earth does the same.

Earth.

Shrimp scampi.

Earth.

Shrimp scampi.

I realize the irony of food from the depths of the sea drifting into the heights of outer space.

I wonder if the Earth feels as I do: spinning, lost, and distant. A lone sapient planet drifting in the sun’s grasp. I wonder if I am drifting to the whims of the sun’s flame tendrils as well or if I am drifting elsewhere. A satellite or a rogue planet.

I propel myself toward the window to investigate Earth more closely. It appears to have gotten smaller. To ensure it is not a delusion caused by worry, I grab a marker and trace its circumference on the glass. *I’ll know tomorrow where I am going.*

DAY 5

After several days, I finally eat the shrimp scampi. On my tongue it feels like overdone oatmeal. I hold it against my palate until the sodium slowly works its way around my mouth. My gums and the roof of my mouth numb. I swallow.

Pushing my finger between my lips and crooking it upward, I run my finger across the weathered crags, peaks, and valleys of the roof of my mouth. As I approach my teeth, I feel the roots ever so slightly under the gums. I move forward, pressing harder. My tooth feels as if it gives slightly, but that may be the flesh of my finger. So I use the marker to get a more objective indication of whether my teeth are moving or not. I press the marker against the tip of my teeth. They’re steady. I go back to using my finger, press against the front of my teeth, feel a grainy texture, and realize I do not have a toothbrush.

My fingernails scrape up yellowed plaque like an earthmover across a vacant lot. I scrape up plaque until I can run my tongue across smooth teeth.

“Hello?” I say into the radio.

A voice crackles over the radio. “How are you doing up there?”

“I need to brush my teeth.”

A long pause. “That right?”

“Yeah. I might be able to smell my breath.”

Another pause, patronizing this time. “How do you mean?”

“My breath fucking stinks. I’ll see you when you get here,” I secure the radio again.

I wonder if my family is waiting for me to return or are they more interested in the millions they would get from the government if I drifted away forever?

I think, *Maybe I’m more fascinating dead. Maybe more fascinating as conspiracy nut fodder. Maybe my son’s more interesting as the kid with the dead astronaut dad.*

DAY 6

After being inconveniently woken up by my own rumination, I decide to busy myself with the matter of being found. I whistle scales up and down. Up and down. Major scales, minor scales. Up and down. Just trying to send a pattern out into the void.

I’ve been using the bathroom in specially sealed vomit bags. They are stuffed in small compartments throughout my station. I decide to find out whether I can get more use out of one bag. I lock two of them together and push one end toward the other. One edge buckles and a blob of urine floats off toward a wall. Trying to contain it causes more urine and feces to float out across the station. I shove as much of one bag as I can into the other, seal it, and chase the rest down with the second bag.

The old station had a purification system to reconstitute waste for drinkable water. I never understood the mechanics of it.

I look over to the hatch window. I can’t tell if my circle is any larger than Earth, but it appears to be slightly to the right. As I move toward the radio to relay my findings, the circle moves slightly to the left and encircles Earth again.

I grunt to no one in particular.

I float toward the window to get a better view of the circle. Up close the black marker does not show well against the blackness of space. An oversight. I turn the lights off and flick on my LED flashlight. The circle is still sitting perfectly around Earth. I think about using the flashlight to send a Morse code message to humanity.

Instead, I whistle scales. My jaw muscles pinch my cheeks. Like faking a smile at a party, I’m faking niceties for my rescuers and whistling while I work. Whistling is my work.

DAY 7

My jaw is still clenched so I begin to hum songs. Any songs. “The Alphabet Song.” “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep.” Mozart’s “Ah vous dirai-je, Maman.” Anything I can think of. I try to avoid humming “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

I try to figure out how far away from Earth I am. I measure and calculate and eventually give up.

“I think I see Africa,” I say to maybe somebody. I don’t want to open the channel. I

don't know if I am more worried that they'd sweep over my little section of space while the channel wasn't broadcasting or if I am more worried no one would answer.

DAY 8

I spend a large amount of my day tapping a marker against the radio and eating more shrimp scampi.

DAY 9

I hear banging on the outside of my station. I'm sure I'm rescued, so I push myself toward the hatch. I place my hands on the latch but control myself. I don't want to open the hatch too soon.

I look out the hatch window and find that the noise isn't coming from a rescue team. I see my crew by the station, their bodies rolling across metal and drifting into the deep. One of them smacks face-first into the window. His open eyes are glassy from the ice and his lips are parted slightly, as if he is struggling to take one more breath. Lieutenant Bailey.

Suddenly, he snaps his eyes open and pounds on the window. It's impossible to tell if his expression is frightened or enraged or anguished. I imagine the hands under his gloves pulverize to shards, then splinters, then icy dust. He stops pounding as suddenly as he began and drifts away from the window.

I awaken to find the ties had loosened and I'd been kicking clipboards and computers into the sides of my station. I hear the clock buzzing. When the numbers on the display change, the noise stops briefly.

This continues throughout my meals. The buzzing sends vibrations through my skin and my teeth and my forehead. I place my ear close to the clock to listen for patterns. I try to match a humming tone with the buzz. I can't. I wonder if something is wrong with the circuitry. Maybe something is wrong with my circuitry. Maybe something's loose in the clock. *Wait, no. There are no moving parts.*

I disassemble the clock anyway. The noise stops.

"I think something was wrong with my clock," I say into the radio. "It was emitting a small buzz. Maybe that was causing interference. I don't know." I release the microphone. Only static over the airwaves. The throbbing breath of an infinitely large monster.

I leave it on.

DAY 10

I dream of Adam wandering around Eden and sitting near rivers. The animals graze around him, feeding on the grass, on the trees, on everything but each other. I'm sure the self-manicuring grass feels like a down blanket for his toes. A light breeze makes its way through the garden. It doesn't blow so much as flow around the garden.

Adam sighs and sits next to a tree. He falls asleep and his stomach opens like a robe. The skin above his ribs folds back. Blood pours to the ground, the thickness of the liquid makes it pool above the dirt. His exposed muscles twitch. They move further in and out until there is a crack. A bone tears through his flesh. The rib falls to the ground.

Earth swells up into two small hills with the rib in the valley between them. They pour into each other. Rain softens the ground and washes the blood into a throbbing mass. A hand ascends, fingers like a hydra.

A lightning strike. Four people wandering the desert. A bloody rock. A flood. Bloodstained doors and wailing parents. Crucifixions. A moon made of blood. A lamb with howling trumpets. Scrolls opened. A scorched earth. War. A dead world. Stars. Stars. Stars.

My eyes snap open. The walls look more distant than usual. I untie myself and push toward the hatch that leads to the outside. Through the window I see Earth, stars, and distant galaxies. The stars and galaxies may have died and torn everything around them asunder millions of years ago. They may have ruined countless lives.

I caught my hand moving to the latch and jerk away with a start

I move my attention toward the distant Earth. I wish I could watch it turn into an ember. I close my eyes and can almost hear the distant bombs turning continents into oceans of flame. Eventually the planet fades from a glowing red to black. I can't feel where my body ends and everything else begins. Things no longer feel as if they're moving into extremities, but through them. I hear low rumbles and crackles caressing me, giving me contentment I haven't felt in days. My eyes slowly open but the noise continues. The monster in the radio, still breathing.

Faint discussions cut through the din, syllables blending with breathing static. The voices blend so well with the breathing I may have been missing them all along. Maybe it's the monster talking.

I hear a woman speaking deliberately: "5-4-0 5-4-0 6-1 6-1 0-9-0-1-4 0-9-0-1-4 5-3-9-9-3 5-3-9-9-3"

I frantically paddle through the air to the radio. The message repeats. I write what I hear on a clipboard.

As the voice fades away I grab the microphone and scream, "It's Gauthier! Where are you? What are you trying to tell me? Are you coming?"

The monster doesn't breathe anymore when I release the button.

DAY 11

I can't make sense of the code, even after I run the numbers through every cypher I had ever heard of.

Out of frustration, I crumple the papers I had been working on but am careful not to destroy them in case I need them later. In case the numbers mean something. In case

someone is coming.

In my periphery I see a red bug scurry behind monitors mounted on a wall panel. We'd used those monitors for tests we'd been running. No use to me now. With tools from another compartment, I remove the panel. I see a scuttling red figure shoot toward the pantry. I push my way through the station like a rower pushing off rocks. I chase the bug around the pantry for what feels like hours. The idea of touching another life again invigorates me.

The bug and I finally meet on my makeshift bed. He is a fairly large beetle with a glossy red shell, long legs, black underbelly, and a horn on his head. Reaching out to touch him, I find that my fingertips brush against nothing. The beetle hisses at me. Then squeals. Then screams. The penetrating noise follows me as I try to escape. It stays all around me, relentlessly chasing me around the station.

My throat gradually feels increasingly raspy. I cough violently. The screaming stops.

DAY 12

Waking up, I untie my ankles, body, and one wrist, but can't muster the energy to untie the other. I'm surprised I hadn't broken a sweat from the exertion because I somehow felt heavier.

I let my body relax and move around like a windsock in a weak tornado. Nausea sets in and I weep.

DAY 13

A thrilling excitement interrupts my sleep. I swim toward the radio, press the button and ramble off every thought that comes into my head, a memoir for the aliens, whether they be on Earth or in the furthest ends of the galaxy. As I reach the present day in my audio autobiography, I feel a sense of accomplishment. *That, I think, may have been the best radio show ever broadcast.*

I release the radio.

I tear the wires away and sat contented. The joys of surrender begin immediately.

DAY 14

I untie my legs, body, and wrists from the table and make my way to the pantry. I walk myself forward with my hands pressed over my head and my feet below me. The feeling of pressure against my feet brings back memories.

In the pantry, I rummage through the food packets. The "Spicy Green Beans" were retooled by a celebrity chef on Earth and quickly became one of my favorite foods on the station. Another, "Appetizing Appetizer," is a mystery overall, but the spices leave a lasting impression on the tongue. Other foods are too bland to taste in zero gravity. Finally, I find what I've been searching for, "Freeze-Dried Vanilla Ice Cream". I eat excitedly, yet

methodically, savoring every morsel.

For some time, I stare out at Earth and wonder less about civilization and more about the Earth itself. I see the planet reverse its spin, turning faster and faster. The continents begin to shift together, the seas dry, the world glows red, then fades to black. Explosions send chunks of rock shooting into the solar system. I watch the moon heat up, rip apart. The remnants encircle the Earth. Debris bombards the planet. A new planet forms out of the scorched Earth like Athena from the head of Zeus. This new orb drifts away and what remains of the Earth crumbles into dust around the sun.

I blink and the Earth is green and blue again.

Once again, I fiddle with the locks and mechanisms sealing me in. I prepare, closing my eyes. I see the sun expand and shed the cocoon of its outer layers. I grip the handle. Planets drift out of their orbits. I twist the lever. The sun grows brighter. The suction pulls at me. The sun throbs rhythmically and violently, shooting layers of its atmosphere in all directions and fracturing the escaping planets. I fight to pull the door open against the violent vacuum of space and the shrunken sun fades from red to black.

I rip the door open and lean out of my station, open my eyes, and see Earth as it is. Everything in my line of sight reddens. Space rips the air from my lungs. The saliva on my tongue boils.

I push off toward Earth. I have rescued myself.