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Badlands

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Badlands

Samantha Schraub

Thirty years ago a nuclear reactor melted, triggered by an explosion, causing the expulsion of radiation from the broken turbine.

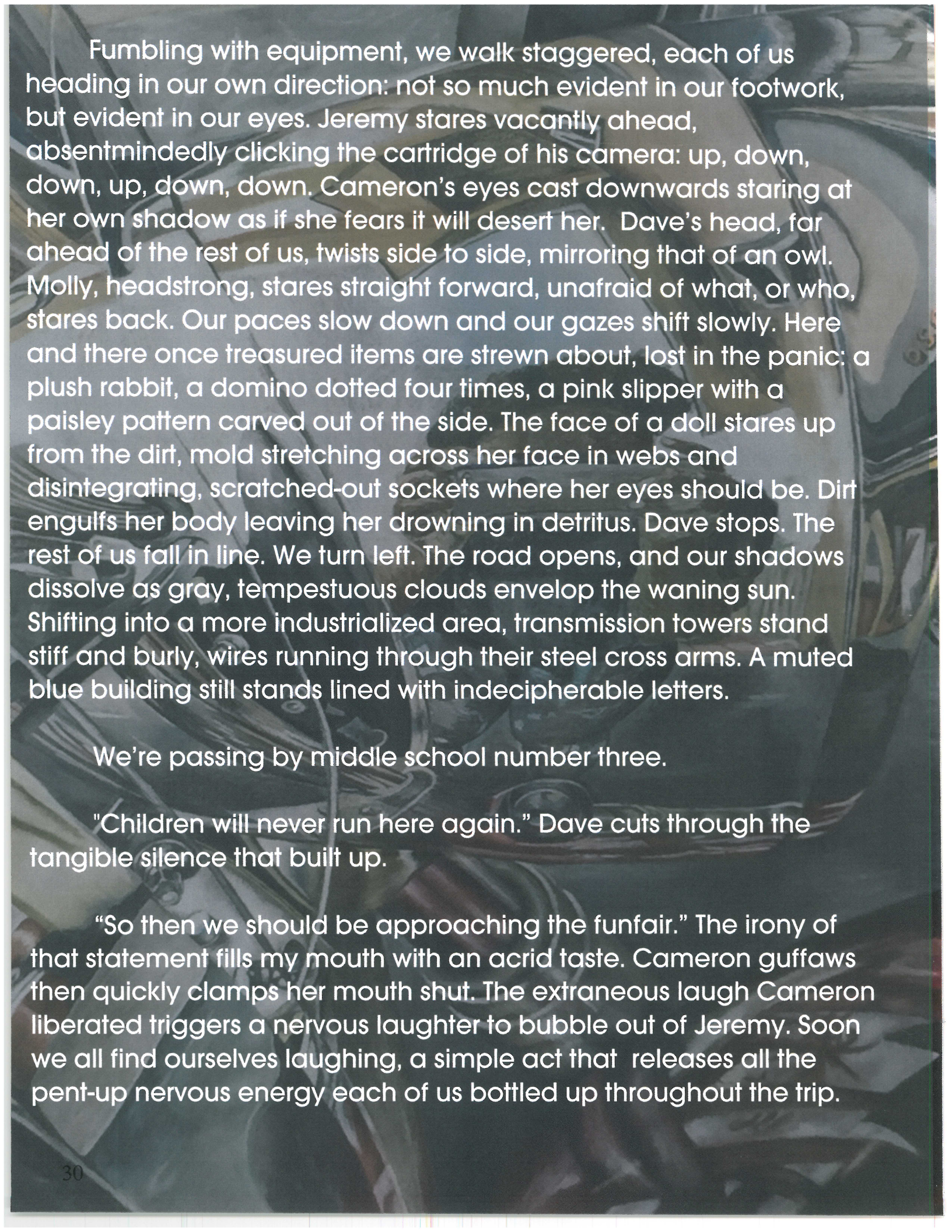
Today we return to the now-abandoned city. Sixteen hours pass while we sit aboard our plane to Kiev. Five hours pass while driving by bus to Pripyat. Time seems fluid as the hours rush by. In seven hours we end the final leg of our journey by walking across Chernobyl.

The aptly named Bridge of Death stands before us waiting for its new visitors to cross. As we walk across the bridge, the pounding of ten feet thunders, sounding more like the pounding of thousands of feet: the bridge's phantoms march behind us.

As we walk, orange paint flakes off of the railed bridge, sprinkling an ill-colored rust across our shoes. Below, two railways trace the rocky ground leading into a dark tunnel that swallows the rest of the land.

In the distance stands the nuclear power plant; a harrowing figure, Death's assistant, a tyrant standing proudly over the village he destroyed. His arsenal had remained hidden until with a bellow and a bang he released it on the earth.

The brittle leaves of trees blur the edges of my vision. Frail as skeletons, the leaves, holding on to the last supply of life that remains, cling to the branches of trees. Overhead, the sun peeks behind its cloud covering, still afraid that the radiation will surge out once again and diminish light. Stepping over the threshold of the bridge brings us to a street the color of a chalkboard slate that has just been wiped clean but remains firmly coated with a dusty residue.

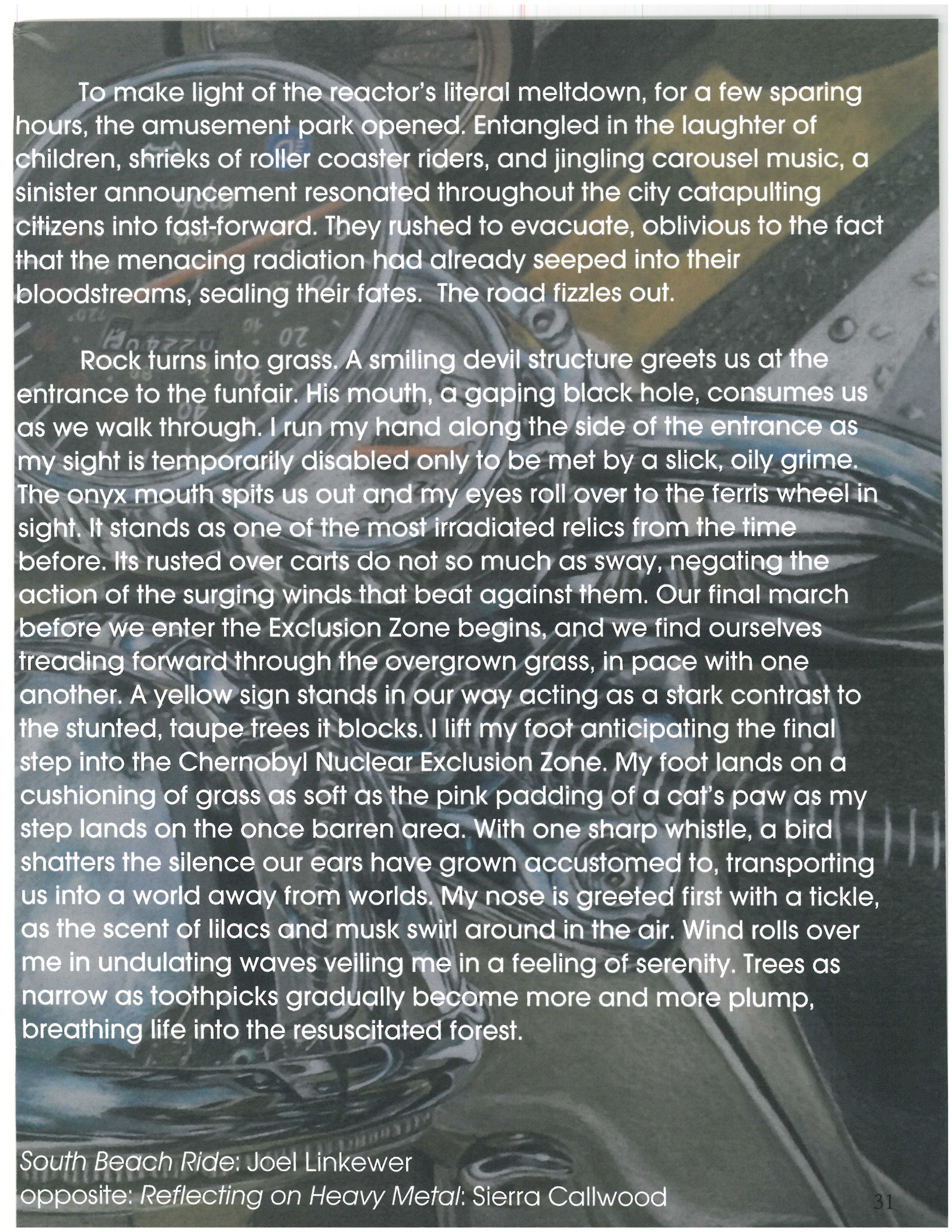


Fumbling with equipment, we walk staggered, each of us heading in our own direction: not so much evident in our footwork, but evident in our eyes. Jeremy stares vacantly ahead, absentmindedly clicking the cartridge of his camera: up, down, down, up, down, down. Cameron's eyes cast downwards staring at her own shadow as if she fears it will desert her. Dave's head, far ahead of the rest of us, twists side to side, mirroring that of an owl. Molly, headstrong, stares straight forward, unafraid of what, or who, stares back. Our paces slow down and our gazes shift slowly. Here and there once treasured items are strewn about, lost in the panic: a plush rabbit, a domino dotted four times, a pink slipper with a paisley pattern carved out of the side. The face of a doll stares up from the dirt, mold stretching across her face in webs and disintegrating, scratched-out sockets where her eyes should be. Dirt engulfs her body leaving her drowning in detritus. Dave stops. The rest of us fall in line. We turn left. The road opens, and our shadows dissolve as gray, tempestuous clouds envelop the waning sun. Shifting into a more industrialized area, transmission towers stand stiff and burly, wires running through their steel cross arms. A muted blue building still stands lined with indecipherable letters.

We're passing by middle school number three.

"Children will never run here again." Dave cuts through the tangible silence that built up.

"So then we should be approaching the funfair." The irony of that statement fills my mouth with an acrid taste. Cameron guffaws then quickly clamps her mouth shut. The extraneous laugh Cameron liberated triggers a nervous laughter to bubble out of Jeremy. Soon we all find ourselves laughing, a simple act that releases all the pent-up nervous energy each of us bottled up throughout the trip.



To make light of the reactor's literal meltdown, for a few sparing hours, the amusement park opened. Entangled in the laughter of children, shrieks of roller coaster riders, and jingling carousel music, a sinister announcement resonated throughout the city catapulting citizens into fast-forward. They rushed to evacuate, oblivious to the fact that the menacing radiation had already seeped into their bloodstreams, sealing their fates. The road fizzles out.

Rock turns into grass. A smiling devil structure greets us at the entrance to the funfair. His mouth, a gaping black hole, consumes us as we walk through. I run my hand along the side of the entrance as my sight is temporarily disabled only to be met by a slick, oily grime. The onyx mouth spits us out and my eyes roll over to the ferris wheel in sight. It stands as one of the most irradiated relics from the time before. Its rusted over carts do not so much as sway, negating the action of the surging winds that beat against them. Our final march before we enter the Exclusion Zone begins, and we find ourselves treading forward through the overgrown grass, in pace with one another. A yellow sign stands in our way acting as a stark contrast to the stunted, taupe trees it blocks. I lift my foot anticipating the final step into the Chernobyl Nuclear Exclusion Zone. My foot lands on a cushioning of grass as soft as the pink padding of a cat's paw as my step lands on the once barren area. With one sharp whistle, a bird shatters the silence our ears have grown accustomed to, transporting us into a world away from worlds. My nose is greeted first with a tickle, as the scent of lilacs and musk swirl around in the air. Wind rolls over me in undulating waves veiling me in a feeling of serenity. Trees as narrow as toothpicks gradually become more and more plump, breathing life into the resuscitated forest.

South Beach Ride: Joel Linkewer

opposite: *Reflecting on Heavy Metal*: Sierra Callwood