

# Annihilation Now

written by Guest Contributor | October 30, 2018



What is it about the water that invites change? Is it the clearing of our minds, paving the way for something new? Maybe it's the depth. The knowledge that if you go in, you go all the way. Lena nor the team won't admit it, but they are drawn to the Shimmer and the way it promises death, or removes the possibility of return. Because to transform—to truly transform—is to become more of who we really are; to destroy ourselves down to the foundation and allow something else to take shape. We think change is something we can idly flirt with, plan for, dictate somehow. Change is a phenomenon, a cosmic event. It is woefully and utterly beyond our control.

*Annihilation* begins with an explosion, or an emission. A meteor strikes a lighthouse where a translucent, Bermuda Triangle-esque field expands upon impact. A big bang of change gradually extending across the marshlands of the southern coast and destroying everything inside it from within. Think *Apocalypse Now's* opening blanket of napalm in the jungle but in slow-mo. An implosion, more like. They call it the Shimmer.

Everyone and everything the government has sent in over the last three years hasn't made it out. Save for Sergeant Kane, Lena's husband whom suffers massive organ failure since his return. He was lost inside for a year and presumed dead. Somehow, Kane winds up on Lena's doorstep. A glass of water refracts their hands as Lena attempts to reconnect with her strange and estranged husband. After a series of vague responses, Kane starts coughing, hemorrhaging, as if Lena triggers his annihilation.

There is something oddly mesmerizing about the Shimmer's gloss, its transparency in what it will do. To go in is *suicide*. The goal remains ethereal and simple. Reach the source. Get to the lighthouse.

Lena is a biologist, our Captain Willard on this journey towards death and destruction. Her emphasis: single cell mitosis. Cells divide and multiply. There is no conscious motive to this; it's simply their purpose. One becomes two, two becomes four, four becomes eight and so on. This *will* go on, destroying the previous in order to be made new and made more.

In the Shimmer, the team finds corruptions of form, duplications of form. Bouquets of the same branch structure stuck in perpetual bloom. Plants bearing human Hox genes form the shape of humans. A brush with an alligator reveals a startling cross-hybridization with a shark. Corpses mutate into oblivion, and tumors both marvelous and malignant grow on trees and standing

structures. The Shimmer is a prism, a magnified petri dish where all DNA is refracted and reconstituted. This includes *their* DNA, their minds, perhaps even their memories.

It's impossible to watch *Annihilation* and not see yourself refracted in these characters. In Lena or Ventress' despondency, Sheppard's bereavement, Josie's fragility, or in Anya's rage. All of them, having stared or lived in the jaws of temptation, know what it's like to self-destruct.

I live on an island in the Pacific, which is in a great deal of ways its own bubble. Hawaii may change in seasons but the heat stays. The heat is residual, regressive, and brings with it a pronounced temptation to drink, to "cool off." It's what everyone imagines when they escape to Hawaii for a week-long self-indulgence: laying on a beach beneath an umbrella, nursing a drink in their hands with a smaller umbrella dancing on the rim. Do we know we're running away from something, or do we tell ourselves we're just having a good time?

Alcohol simmers neatly, unsuspectingly; it sanitizes as much as it soothes. I *crave* the scorch of my throat, the release that ripples across my cheeks. But I do not say this because that would make it "real" and then I would have a problem. *I don't have a problem*, I say to myself. *I just like to drink.*

Drinking with others is so much more encouraging, or enabling. But the get-togethers and the nights have to end, and life reverts to an agonizing straight line. Out of boredom or sheer proximity (a 24-hour gas station sits right down the road), I started to drink occasionally, and then, habitually. I drank when there was nothing to celebrate, no one around to shoot the shit or chop it up. Most days, I would wait until 5pm. *There. At least I set a boundary.* Except 5 p.m. couldn't get here sooner. Slowly, the boundary expanded to noon, to during and before work, until I stopped caring altogether.

I can't pinpoint when I spiraled, just that I did. Self-medicating, I convinced myself. Let loose every once in a while, except it was every day and for no reason at all. It's a lot easier to self-destruct than we think.

Lena doesn't know it, but her implosion is well underway. This is true for all of us. Destruction is not entirely logical; it's biological, an impulse encoded within. We find out Lena had an affair—a discovery that sent Kane over the edge. He *volunteered* to go on this suicide mission. When Kane was thought to be dead, Lena stayed in mourning, turning away invitations from colleagues and retreating deeper into her work. She made a home of her isolation.

Devastation hits like something falling out of the sky. The damage colonizes us. It *becomes* us. "I don't remember eating," Lena says. Inside, the team succumbs to bouts of disorientation. They don't know where they are, can't account for lost time, and find themselves wandering in a fugue state. What are we lugging our baggage around if not endlessly adrift?

Josie is the literally wounded of the bunch, her arms adorned with self-

inflicted scars. The rest are better at hiding theirs, but that hardly seems like a strength and more an evasion from the inevitable. "She's tried to kill herself?" Lena asks, trying to grasp why someone would flirt with destruction like that, maybe trying to understand herself. "I think the opposite," Sheppard says, "[she's] trying to feel alive."

*Annihilation* is often allegorical about cancer, but it's especially incisive about the forces of grief and depression, how we lose our identity in our suffering and become walking specters of our pain. Sheppard *understands* this self-trapping cocoon. Her daughter died of leukemia, a loss that brought on double the despair: "In a way, it's two bereavements. My beautiful girl and the person I once was."

Grief is autophagic, splitting. It is its own mutation, depression its own refraction. When Sheppard is mauled by a transmogrified bear, her grief becomes trapped in the creature. Her wail lives on, the bear and her becoming a hulking guttural scream of anguish and helplessness. Like a banshee roaming the land. Anya, whom forces her sobriety by substituting adrenaline, is consumed by that same lacerating force. "We are all damaged goods," Sheppard had said. We learn Ventress has cancer, and, like Josie, ultimately surrenders to her condition. Resignation is one word for it. Immersion is another. We want to conquer our afflictions, but sometimes it conquers us.

And so we find Lena on the shores of her own subconscious, having lost, having confronted the repressed memories of her marriage and her infidelity. She could turn back. She *should* turn back, but there would be no point having come this far. Like Willard, she has to go all the way.

I'd be lying if I said that I drink to cool off or destabilize. The heat is just an excuse. I have plenty of those. The bad days, the missed opportunities, the memories I can't escape. I drink to numb. It feels good to not stress or worry, to repress. To not feel. And so one drink becomes two, two becomes four, and so on. It has gone on to the point that I don't know how to function outside the habit. Sober, I feel catatonic, like I'm tearing down the middle. The stupor is my home. I look at the glass in my hands, perspiring, and I see an image elongated, distorted. I don't recognize myself, but I know that it's me. I *am* the drink in my hand. I am what I'm running from.

The house, the furniture, and picture frames weren't enough for Lena. Complacency is never enough. In a brief but pivotal flashback, Lena and Kane sit apart on the couch, their lips thin as a flatline, eyes hollow. Their love, we see, had petered out. They choose to stay and we know what will happen to them. There was no saving their marriage, only further ruin.

Lena might've found a home in the Shimmer, but there is something deeper she must confront at the heart of her own darkness.

At the lighthouse, Lena comes face to face with the alien in all of us. That shadowy, self-defeating thing that pins us down. Her Colonel Kurtz. It starts as an abstraction. Then, an apparition. It doesn't just mirror Lena, it *is* Lena. Lena's shadow self stands whole before her, haunting her, getting in

the way and sabotaging her progress. The resemblance is uncanny. Kane, too, had made it to the lighthouse and fought that same battle with himself and lost. "Was I *you*? Were you *me*?" It was his double that made it out of the Shimmer.

To keep running is futile. Lena must make a friend of horror; she has to understand this thing that's become her and the thing she's become. She cannot fight it. To transform, she must divide and conquer.

In a moment of pure metacognition, Lena invites her shadow to change. She *gives* it the impulse to self-destruct. Her shadow receives, echoing. It is transference, *acceptance*, and further, externalization. The lighthouse and the Shimmer are soon awash in the fires of change, trees igniting like synapses in the brain, reducing to rubble. Out of the ashes, a different Lena emerges.

Lena now knows the Kane standing before her is not the same Kane who went in. But who's to say it's not him? Lena isn't the same person either. "Are you Lena?" Kane or not-Kane asks, though she doesn't respond. Newer versions of Lena and Kane embrace. Two bodies become one. A chance to start over. Or, as the iridescent glow in their irises imply, perhaps another cycle of self-destruction has begun. It all depends on how you view the glass.

I don't know if I have Lena's resolve, but I know I'm on the bleeding edge of change, *in vitro*. I am conscious of my venture to and from the bottle. I'm teetering on the rim. I realize this does not put me above or in control of my temptation. This drink is a thing I can stare at, and I can feel it staring back at me. My shadow won't budge unless I do. I'm starting to feel the heat. A transformative staring contest has begun. I suppose we'll be here for a while.



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