

# Ludic Writing: The Real Leeds Part 10 (Pretty Vacant)

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | October 27, 2018



*Ludic Writing is a series of narratives generated through play, exploring the prospect of “Games as Writing Prompt.”*

*Bartlett’s Memory is an extended work of fiction in three volumes, inspired by a play through Yves Tourigny’s Arkham Noir: Collector Case #1 – The Real Leeds and by the collected fiction of “new weird” author Matthew M. Bartlett. In addition to the story, [Part 1](#) of this series includes an analysis of the Arkham Noir card game, while [Part 2](#) features a review of the two short fiction collections—Gateways to Abomination and Creeping Waves—that inspired many of the details in Tourigny’s card game and, by extension, this work of ludic writing.*

**Volume I** of Bartlett’s Memory traces the investigation of two missing persons, Bill St. Clair and Susan Dimmsler, in the haunted village of Leeds, Massachusetts. It consists of five parts: [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#)

**Volume II** reopens some old wounds and a cold case: the disappearance of our narrator’s cousin, Rangel Bantam, in the early eighties. It consists of three parts: [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#)

**Volume III** shepherds a continuance of established patterns, the disappearance of another child, and the return of the prodigal son. This is the second part. [Part 1](#)

**Readers found perpetuating rumors of a fourth volume are subject to investigation by the FCC.**

**The story will continue in roughly weekly installments until the final case is closed or the transmissions cease.**

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# Part Ten: Embedded Agents

## Bartlett's Memory

### Vacancies

I am a physician who commands respect for my steady hand and my knowledge of the newest advances in modern medicine. I eat them, eat them alive... Using my clamps and torches and my powders and pills, I can keep them alive for days and days.

—Matthew M. Bartlett, "The Weird House," *Creeping Waves*

By the time I'd settled my bill, Agent Schwaller had already made herself scarce, and the atmosphere within the diner had grown stifling, the smell of burning fat and the din of the radio (now blasting a faux-vooodoo ritual performed by Screamin' Jay Hawkins) permeating every facet of my consciousness. I decided I needed some fresh air and a moment to think before the cocktail of pies could make a return appearance.

In the relatively calm atmosphere of King Street, I took another look at the photograph. *Another lead*, I thought. *Leads in Leeds*. I began to laugh, the laugh of a man possessed, the laugh of a Cleveland-born former boxer performing witch-doctor drag for a spellbound white audience. I laughed until the tears streamed down my face, until I hacked up mucus tinged with something red that I hoped was cherry cobbler.

Then, the spell departed, and I sobered up. It wasn't much of a lead, really. There was no dossier this time; perplexing though their construction had been, they'd provided an odd kind of comfort, a mark of legitimacy. I wasn't even sure that I had the FCC's sanction on this one. Probably not. All I had was a name and a photograph.

Tim McLellan. Who had he been? Where had he gone? I couldn't even see his face properly in the photograph; it was turned away from the camera, fixated on some out-of-frame detail beyond and between his handlebars. What had he discovered? A dead body? Or a living one?

I had to cultivate a sense of the victim. Once I had that, I trusted the rest to fall into place.

I examined the picture more carefully. The edge of a house was just visible in the background: the victim's house, maybe, or else his neighbor's. It was a start.

I ended up wandering the streets of Leeds, periodically holding up the photograph as reference. I finally spotted it on Chestnut Avenue: a promising arrangement of trees and houses and sidewalk cracks. The unnatural zoom of the photo made it difficult to be sure of the match, and I spent a few minutes pacing the asphalt, trying different angles, but even with the blur,

I was pretty sure I had it. When I held it up just so, the leftmost edge of a white-painted garage intruded, soft-edged and intangible, beyond the invisible membrane of the photo world. I could almost picture Tim McLellan there before me, rearing up on his bicycle in ghostly duplicate.

That gave me the street. The next step was to start knocking on doors.

The house had seen better days. When I beat my knuckles against the door to produce a muted, wet-sounding tattoo, it left a green-grey bruise on the flaking white paint, and the hinges sank another couple of centimeters into their penumbrae of rust and rot. Peering between the tattered flaps of newsprint and husks of flies that coated the darkened window, I thought I caught some furtive movement in the interior, but my mind couldn't resolve any coherent picture from the dim disturbance of dust and shadow. It could have been a figure, juvenile of stature, hunched or stunted in its development, faded of complexion, slack-jawed from fear or idiocy, ducking deeper into gloom. It could just as easily have been a scattering of rats or roaches.

The pattern repeated as I made my slow way down the block: the same crumbling architecture, as though the neighborhood had stood abandoned for decades; the same echoing vacancy. The entire block was dead, or at least unresponsive. A few times, I thought I spotted eyes peering out from between shutters, but by the time I crossed the asphalt, the house in question had collapsed, like all the others, into a condition of stillness, the colonizing presence (if such had ever truly existed) withdrawn into some inaccessible quarter.

I arrived at an intersection, Leonard and Evergreen. There, for the first time, I saw indisputable evidence of life: a man and woman, haggard, steadily transferring objects from their lawn into the black maw of a moving van. I hurried toward them before they, too, could vanish.

"Excuse me," I called out as I ran. "I was wondering if you could answer a few questions." The words, pressed thin by the minor exertion, were pierced through with shrieks and whistles, like steam emerging from a leaky valve. I paused, hands on thighs, to collect my breath, then closed the remaining distance at a less strenuous pace.

My approach gave me time to take in the couple's expressions: they were was frozen, eyes glassy and staring, a couple of hares trapped in the headlamp-beam of an oncoming truck. Their faces were lined with worry, mottled and scarred from some shared dermatological devastation of the distant past.

"I was wondering if you knew..." I harrumphed to clear the Boston cream still clinging to my throat and dug into my pocket for the photograph of Tim McLellan. "I was wondering if you knew this boy. Or where he lived. Lives." The couple cowered, averting their eyes as under the radiance of a flaming brand.

The man and woman shared a look. "Please," the woman said. "We don't want to be involved." Her eyes darted left and right, scoping out an avenue of escape.

I couldn't understand their reactions, was literally unable to process them, and I proceeded on autopilot while waiting for my brain to catch up to current events. "Thank you for your time," I mumbled, swiveling the arm holding the photograph toward the man, but he cringed away like a man being menaced with a knife, interposing a cracked blender between his careworn body and my outstretched arm.

For the first time, my mind registered the wrongness of the situation. I was blowing it. Anxious to somehow amend things, I stuffed the picture back into my pocket and took a step toward the man, palms out in a placatory gesture. He reacted with incommensurate, animal terror, stumbling wild-eyed away from me as though I carried the ten plagues of Egypt in my outstretched hands. He only made it a few steps before catching his ankle on the dented corner of a VCR and going into freefall, landing hard amongst a glass knickknack case and a grime-caked aquarium.

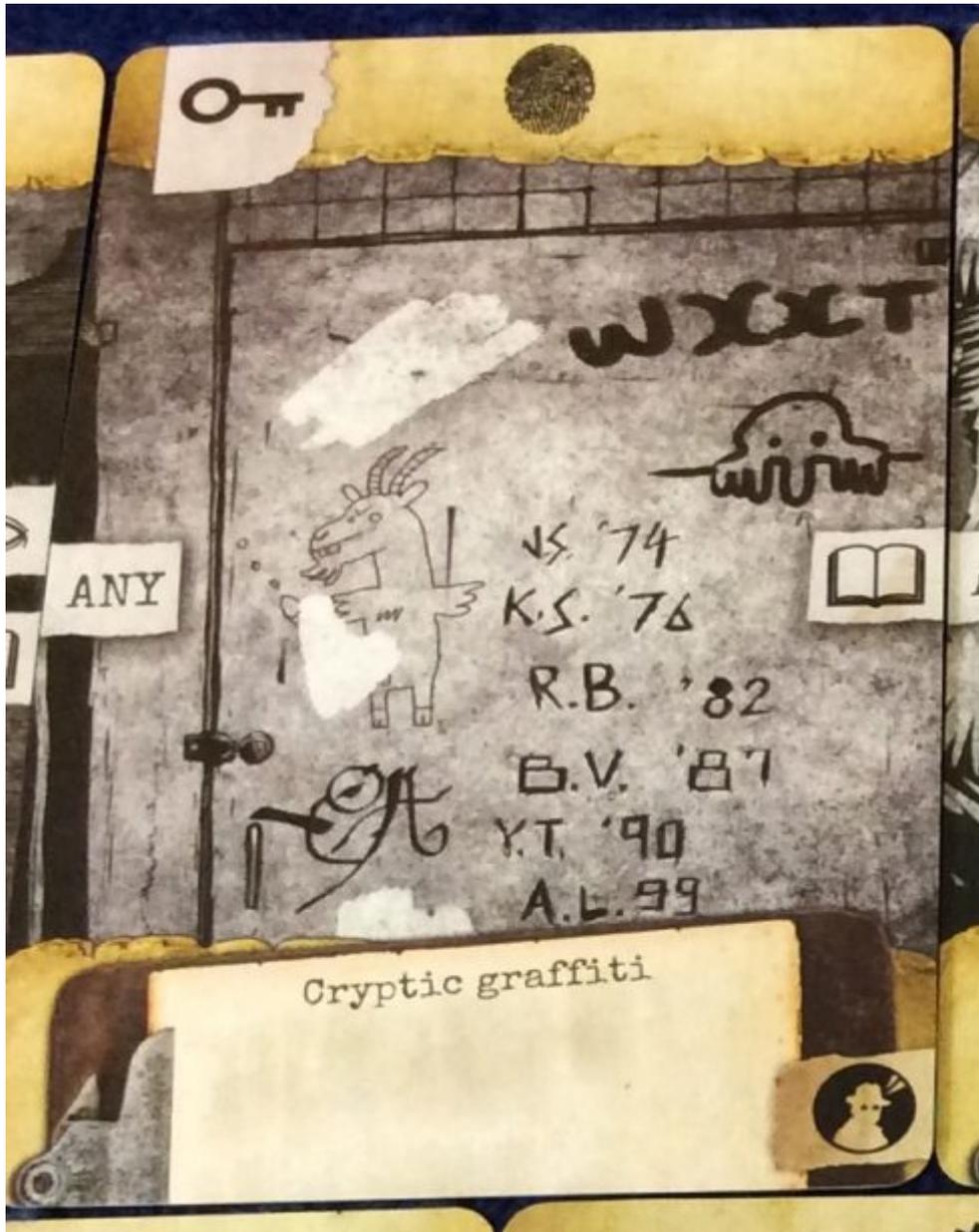
The woman began openly weeping, greyish tears pooling in the crevices of her pockmarked face. "Please," she repeated. "Why are you doing this?"

I couldn't answer. I hadn't felt right since the meeting with that woman from the FCC. If I were being honest, I hadn't felt right since long before that. "I don't know," I said. I looked down at the man writhing silently on the dead lawn, blood streaming from a gash in his head. I felt nothing.

"Please," the woman whispered. Her eyes refused to meet mine. "Don't tell him you saw us. Just let us go."

I'd stopped listening. I pushed past the woman, half-hearing her sobs turn from anguish to relief, and stepped over the now-still body of her husband toward the thing that had drawn my eye. It was a red bicycle, identical to the one in the photo, half-buried in the bushes before a house that was nestled at the very end of the block, shielded from prying eyes by a wild outgrowth of elms. With each step I took toward it, each glimpse of blue-grey paint through the interwoven branches of the surrounding trees, I became more certain that the house was Tim McLellan's.

Then I broke through the veil of trees, and the house spread itself before me. I gasped at its beautiful obscenity. The place was achingly familiar. Had I visited it before? Had Rangel brought me here on one of our juvenile excursions? Had the place revealed itself to me in dreams? What gripped me more than the familiarity, though, were the words: graffiti, reams of it, entire manifestos dripping down the walls of this lovely little family home.



I took a few steps back, trying to capture the whole thing in my field of vision at once, drinking it in.

*tongue the cancer*

*yer boy was DELICIOUS*

*Arkwright's Dental Powder—Washes seven times brighter!*

*Unkle Benjy took a trip  
Across the shores of Sighing  
Chewed a piece out of his lip  
In kidney fats it's frying*

*heard him on the midnight confessional*

*we are CapriPoX*

*Mr. White Noise is coming*

*Buy Fillingut's sausage casings—plumper, firmer, lasts longer*

*Have you seen this man?*

*Golden knows*

*SOMAs crew*

*A.I.I.*

*he begged them to take him*

*Welcome home, Stanton.*

*The Ten at 10*

*Injured on the job? The law offices of Bailey and Hicklethorn will get YOU relief!*

*In hearts of sinners sanctified  
And whimpers in the reeds  
There are two and thirty ways, by my count  
To get to the Real Leeds*

*Bridge Street Boys*

*dogmalts ill-relapse*

*it's your fault he's gone*

*Medley Mondays*

*R.Q.S.V.*

*the old men took our EYES*

I closed my eyes, giving the words a moment to digest, then opened them again. The door was hanging off its hinges; the smell of cooking emanated from the space beyond. I stepped inside.

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**An Interview with Vernon Golden**



He had been wrong all along, and he'd been *doing* wrong. His belief that he was the messiah, chosen to lead and to breed and finally to *punish*, had been a mental bugaboo, the result of a glitch in brain chemistry. He began to retrace his steps on a mission of deprogramming and repentance.

—Matthew M. Bartlett, "Driving to Leeds," *Creeping Waves*

His eyes were big and wet, like vast, moonlit seas.

"You were right to come to me," he said. He smiled, the smile of a man described by seven out of ten strangers on the street as a "personality," a smile that was *itself* a personality, a smile with its own gravitational field, above which the moons of his eyes hovered in a fixed orbit. At 32 years old, he'd been a self-styled messiah, the charismatic head of a group called the Order of the Eighth Hand. He was retired from all that now, doing his best to make good, or so he'd told the FCC.

It wasn't the smile, I realized; it was those eyes that pulled up on his thin, bloodless lips at the corners, exposing glimpses of bleach-scoured dentition. The eyes held all the power.

"They're always right to come to me," he continued.

"I've run into a dead end," I confessed. "They told me you could help."

He smiled again. "They told you right."

We were in a room in the Hotel Northampton, a regular guest room, but one he had apparently been living in for some time—he'd transformed it into something resembling a therapist's office, pushing tables into corners, carting in new furniture and spiriting away the old under cover of night, holding occult auctions right under the noses of the hotel management, replacing the lighting with something soft and numinous, something that buzzed and crackled faintly as its orange light flickered on the edge of visual perception. When I asked to use the bathroom, I saw the corner of a mattress poking out from underneath the shower curtain. Abstract artwork decorated the walls, originals, not prints, the brush strokes thick and volatile, a pasty swirl of colors reminiscent of a burning or a battlefield. He'd redone the walls themselves in a kind of charred blood orange. Thick curtains choked out the light and sound of the city before they could cross the threshold.

He rooted loudly through the mahogany desk's drawers for a notebook, tore off the top page before I could see what was written there, then froze with a cherry-wood fountain pen poised over the paper. "Tell me about it," he prompted.

I tried to tell him about the missing kids, the suicides, the sleepless nights, the place beneath the hospital, the radio that whispered familiar secrets as I dreamt, the sudden and inexorable cravings, the sense of two worlds intruding on one another. I didn't tell him about the McLellan house or what I'd found there. I kept it vague.

"You were right to come here," he repeated for the third time. There was something squirrely about the man, his movements, the way his glasses sat on those oblate eyes. "You don't even realize how lucky you are. You've come face to face with the Devil himself. And he's welcomed you with open arms. You're practically part of the family."

He grabbed one end of a Newton's cradle with enough force that it looked for just a moment as though he was going to tear the thing apart, held the silvery orb suspended for a moment, then set the assemblage into motion, kinetic energy passing from one end to the other with an audible snap: *Clack. Clack. Clack.* I said nothing, watching the orbs flash as their arcs intersected a beam of light from the bare bulb behind my head.

"How about a little music?" he asked, already leaning back in his chair. He flicked on an antique radio; its face lit up like a stained-glass window. Without breaking eye contact, he deftly adjusted the dial, elbow bent so far

back that it appeared dislocated, fingers crawling like worms over the knob. He settled on a frequency that was mostly static layered over irregular bass tones, suggesting a conversation heard through mahogany floorboards.

“They’ve really done a number on you, haven’t they?” he asked. His hand crawled over the glowing display to the knob on the other side, the one that controlled volume, creeping it forward by degrees. “I bet you can’t even tell me your real name.” His voice took on the illusion of distance as the static mounted like a wave.

I opened my mouth, but the sound of the radio drowned my reply.

“You were right to come to me, Stanton,” he said. “I think we can help each other. Now, I want you to listen closely to what I’m about to tell you.”

From the radio, a bell chimed, clear as day. Saliva flooded my mouth, accompanied by a rush of static that poured forth from somewhere deep within the vaulting of my ribs. It coursed down my chin, streaming from my nostrils, trickling down my throat until it filled my lungs. I inhaled deeply.

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## **Voices of the Missing**



DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE – Four men with ties to an occult group linked to human trafficking and ritual murder were apprehended by State Police yesterday in the Hockanum Meadows and charged with cruelty to animals and environmental crimes. The men were in possession of packets of dried herbs and powders that have been sent for testing, and of “The Libellus Vox Larva,” a centuries-old book all copies of which were thought to have been destroyed by the 1930s. Also discovered in the clearing were the mutilated bodies of three of the four goats recently stolen from the Whipotte Farm. A fourth goat could not be located.

–Matthew M. Bartlett, “The Arrival Part 1,” Gateways to Abomination

As I sank beneath the waves of static, the voices surfaced around me, rising like bubbles on the edge of bursting.

*It tastes better than expected.*

*They're still searching for the rest of me.*

*It looked like one of those rubber clown noses...until I squeezed it.*

*Like kidneys and cream.*

*Those aren't ponies.*

*I'm scared, Oma.*

*They served it on a plastic plate.*

*It hurt at first. Now nothing does.*

*Isn't he precious?*

**You're listening to WPLY, the Voice of the Missing. What have you been missing?**

I knew that voice. It was Constance, my angel of the airwaves. What was she doing down here? I drifted closer.

**I'm sure you have a lot of questions.**

"I do," I mouthed, but the words refused to form. There was nothing but the riptides of white noise and the voices bubbling up from beneath.

**It'll be okay, baby. I'm here now.**

Tears of relief rolled down my face, mingling with the drool and the snot.

**How long have you been gone?**

*How the hell do I know?*

The voice that answered her was thin and resonant, like a finger on the rim of a wet glass. I felt certain it was Tim McClellan, though I'd never met the boy while he was...while he wasn't missing.

**You have to watch the faces of the ones you left behind.**

I allowed her voice to pull me deeper, down into the cool, still mud, where the current was barely felt.

*Is it always like this?*

**Like what?**

*So boring.*

Constance laughed, the sound like wind chimes.

**No, not always. Here, we suffer interminable lassitudes agitated by lethiferous raptures. You'll grow to prefer the boredom.**

There was a pause, then she clarified:

**You get used to it.**

*Has anybody seen my baseball mitt?*

*I've always wanted to be a tapeworm.*

The other voices had drifted closer, intruding on the intimate space I'd established with Constance. I impatiently swatted them away.

**Where are you now?**

*My stomach's buried in the woods, under the thunderstruck tree. I don't know where the rest of me went.*

**Were you scared when it happened?**

*What do you think? I'm not a little bitch.*

What a little shit.

*At least I don't go snatching children off the street.*

**Now, Tim, let's try to make our guest feel welcome. He's missing too, remember?**

*He can suck my underage cock.*

Who were they talking about? I felt suddenly exposed, vulnerable; I tried to float away, but my limbs thrashed uselessly in the purling medium.

**We're talking about you, silly. Don't be scared.**

Her bell-chime voice cascaded over me, rippling through my limbs in soothing waves. Bit by bit, my body fell silent. My brain was the last part to go, the neurons settling, one by one, into placid stillness. In another world, the tiny bones in my ears resonated with Golden's voice as he issued directives my conscious mind would never hear.

**We need to wake him up. He's been missing for so long, the poor creature.**

I curled into her voice. The sense of her words fell away as the tones rolled over me, unheeded.

**You're listening to WPLY, the Voice of the Missing. The moon is weeping. The stars signal your return. You have escaped the crematorium. They buried you with your favorite book.**