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Southern reach trilogy books in order

Area X has been cut off from the rest of the world... The author agreed to publish three novels in a year - and then it got weird. March 2012. I drive down to Orlando for a conference on the great arts. My wife, Ann, is in the passenger seat reading the script for my new novel, Annihilation. I'm nervous as hell and have a hard time concentrating on the highway- that boring part of I-75 that serves as an esophagus down against the artificial guts of Disney World. What the hell did I write? The book is about a dysfunctional secret agency called Southern Reach and its efforts to solve the mysteries behind Area X, a strange pristine wilderness. For 30 years, Area X has been closed from the rest of the world by an invisible border and peculiar things happening inside. Most expeditions meet with disaster. While I wait for Ann's verdict, I'm filled with doubt. Perhaps the book is just a pointless wander about four women wandering a facsimile of the 14-mile trail I hike out on to the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, complete with abandoned lighthouse. Maybe it's not the first to show my new agent, Sally Harding. Maybe my first novel in four years should be something else. Maybe I should concentrate on my driving. But the indications are good- Ann, who also happens to be an experienced editor, makes the sounds you always imagine readers would make while in the middle of it all if you had the opportunity to eavesdrop without seeming like a stalker. The sharp intake of breath you wouldn't put into a novel because it's a cliché. The mumbling Oh my God. The intense stare at words on the page that seems to have a physical impact on the world. But I'm still reviewing the possibilities in my head. What if I have to publish myself? No problem. I can do that. I'd rather do it than go with the kind of publisher where I would do most of the work myself anyway. It'll be an hour. The highway is still boring as hell. Ann's still reading. Finally, Ann finished the novel. And sitting there. It's part of the ritual: I have to pull it out of her. So what do you think? Trying to sound like it doesn't matter, even though she knows it matters because Ann never bullshits me. I think it's great, she says. I think it's great. It's wonderful. Which is great to hear, although after 30 years in the industry I'm a little cynical. I've had the full range of publisher meetings, from my start with indie and small presses to dealing with large, commercial houses. Over the course of my career, I've had great experiences, but I've also had to pull a book because the editor became a born-again Christian and wanted my characters to match the numbers in the Bible. I've had a novel published only after a New York editor fished the manuscript out of another editor's trash. I've had figures similar to the report of a healthy 25-year-old's vitals and others who looked like who it was must have just been put in a coffin and pulled in a hearse. Ann does it you always imagine readers would do if you had the opportunity to eavesdrop without seeming like a stalker. But no matter what has happened, I've always been optimistic. Not only has there not really been a year where I've been completely out of the game, but I've been a full-time writer since 2007-with scar tissue and jangled nerves to prove it. Maybe there are options after all. Three publishers in the US end up making offers for Annihilation and the other two books I plan to write after them. I call the series Southern Reach the Trilogy: The Three Books will complete an overarching narrative, while different in style and approach. None of the publishers making offers are science fiction or fantasy editors or from genre imprints. I like all three. But the letter from Sean McDonald at Farrar, Straus and Giroux contains a unique plan to publish all three novels in a year. Sean believes that the first book will leave readers wanting more and he doesn't want to keep them waiting. As he will explain a few years later to The New York Times, you may end up with angry and confused fans. I think people are more aware of the series storytelling, and there's this sense of impatience, or maybe a fear of frustration. We wanted to make sure people knew there were answers to these questions. As I read Sean's original offering, all the details sound right. My detector won't go off once. Knowing that all three books will come out one after the other, I feel less pressure to make Annihilation completely independent, which is important for the integrity of the novel, especially when the whole series struggles with the idea of something beyond human understanding. I have also always wanted to be published by FSG. To be honest, this is the first and only time I've seemed to hear heavenly music playing in the background while reading an offer letter. That seems like a good sign. Of course I have to write the second and third novels in about 18 months, but that's nothing special, right? Retro-style covers created as fan art by Australian designer Matthew Revert The idea for Area X-the mysteriously transformed region at the centre of the Southern Reach trilogy-came out of dental surgery. Not that I recommend dental surgery as the best way to find inspiration, but it worked for me. Dental surgery along with anger and sadness over the BP Gulf Oil Spill. The latter was a dark, horrible spiral through my mind - all our minds here on the Florida coast - that came back from me in unexpected ways. For a while, it seemed like they would never stop the leak that the oil would keep gushing out in the Gulf for decades. After the oil spill, the spiral continued because I knew that the oil at the microscopic level still infiltrated and polluted the environment. That just because you can't see anything doesn't mean it doesn't affect you or the places you love. I have lived in Tallahassee, Florida, since 1992 and I have walked in much longer than that. My parents were in the Peace Corps, and we spent some time in Fiji, but nowhere felt like home until we got to North Florida. The desert here is only landscape I've ever really known to the point where I felt like part of it. So I had dental surgery-wisdom teeth removed plus a root canal treatment-and it turned out my pact with God Paper Cuts that never getting seriously ill all my life long was just a farce. Turns out dental surgery can make you sick, overcoming your defenses. Sore throat gave way to bad bronchitis. I had to slow down, confined to the house. Wake up when I woke up and just sleep through the day. The interior of the abandoned lighthouse at the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, which inspired the mysterious lighthouse of Area X (Jeff VanderMeer) Until one night, somewhere deep in my subconscious, that spiral of oil was transformed or vice versa, and I was obsessed with a dark dream. In the dream I walked down stairs in a tower sunk into the ground. Living words on the walls. Strange question. Peculiar energy. The words on the wall were made of moss or sponge, so common here in North Florida that this part doesn't even register as strange. What made the record as strange was the fact that the words were getting brighter, more vivid, until I couldn't ignore a significant, horrifying fact: down below me, some things were still writing... and I was getting closer to it. You'd think it would have been enough to wake me up, but it was the kind of dream where you don't know you're dreaming. I had the clear thought that I was on an expedition and could remember what I'd had for breakfast and that I had stepped outside for a trip... and came across this ... I'm not going to lie. It was disorienting and terrifying. I was scared like shit in the dream. But I kept walking down those steps anyway until I could tell that around the corner lay what was creating the words. And I don't know if it was out of fear or because my writer-brain knew if I saw what it was I would never write a story about it. But I woke up with the whole plot and the protagonists in my head. Along with about 500 words of strange words on a wall that remained the same in the final version of novels. Afterwards, writing Annihilation was a simple process: I would get up and write for three hours, fall asleep, maybe edit a bit in the evening, and repeat the process. In five weeks, I had a finished novel. I couldn't concentrate on anything else, partly because I was driven to write, but also because I felt so sick I was either writing or sleeping, without the energy for anything else. It was one of the best writing experiences I have ever had. An illustration of a scene from Authority in which 2,000 rabbits are eaten into Area X (Jeremy Zerfoss/FSG) in March 2013. There is a big hole in the living room where a building team has had to dig up our water pipes. The carpet is a crooked curly preamble to the entrance to an abyss opposite which sits, incongruously, our collection of first edition books, about bookshelves under glass. I can't say it's not a distraction. I'm working on Authority, the second novel, trying not to panic because I'm afraid I might have to tell my editor and my agent that there are four novels, not three. The writing is going well, but how many books will there be? I don't know for sure until I'm almost done with authority. The film deal and foreign language offerings are all based on three books. Meanwhile, Annihilation is still imprinting itself on my life: copying edits and repetitions of cover design coming into the house, creating waves of disruption. So I'm grateful I already have 35,000 word stage fragments for Authority before I start in earnest. It includes a strong sense of events and my protagonist. Unlike Annihilation, which is about the four women and their expedition, authority is about a man named Control, the new director of the Southern Reach agency. I know I will focus on his inner landscape as much as information about Area X. Without the basic starting point, I'd be adrift. Every day I get up and write in the morning, mostly in cafes. I'm having lunch. I train as intensely as I can because I know there comes a point where inertia will take action and I will have no time for anything but authority. Slowly, and then faster, red wine infiltrates my life. I can't stop it. It seems inevitable: Writing in the evening, I need some kind of soothing boost. The idea of marijuana has crossed my mind, but I'm afraid it will just make me sleepy and so I cancel an order from a friend. Red wine it will have to be. Not the kind of thing you recommend to start writers: When you're working on your novel, get up and have two red eyes, enough eggs to satiate a komodo dragon, write, have lunch, exercise, write again, and then have a lot of red wine to keep going. Repeat every day for several months. Sometimes you have to change your coffee shop, too. At the end of an increasingly nervous week of writing, the barista asks me, Feel something different? In what way? I ask. I dunno, she replies, I've been adding more espresso shots to your coffee, gradually, to see what would happen. So in some ways it's a relief when getting my daily dose of vitamin D contracts from going to cafes to taking a walk through the neighborhood to just incessantly pacing around the front yard—and then scuttling back inside to write, like some kind of weird scrawling creature. Do I mind this? No. It's almost like being in a groove, the kind of obsessive writing experience you dream of. Perhaps inevitably, I develop a fascination with the term terror, which refers to specific aspects of a landscape and climate that affect the cultivation of grapes. In Authority, Control asks his assistant, Whitby, what the word means, and the answer: What does it not mean? This means the characteristics of a place - geography, geology and climate, which together wine's own genetic inclinations can create a surprising, deep, original vintage. This preoccupation with terror - that deep sense of location that is more than the sum of its parts-spills out from the novel into my life during those months. It's as if my writing itself has signed some contract with the outside world, allowing my daily surroundings to be overtaken by the terror of my novel. As a result of this contract, a lot of strange things happen and I'm able to transform it into fiction. The first dislocation occurs when a routine oil change leads to gas fumes filling the car every time I turn on the AC. The first few days, this happens so gradually that I woozy without being able to recognize the source. I'm out the door to bring coffee home, and when I'm back to the house to write, I'm itchy and paranoid and out of sorts... and so is Control, my protagonist. It's as if my writing itself has signed some contract, allowing my daily surroundings to be overtaken by the terror of my novel. When I realize what's going on, I take the car to the mechanic and hang out at the back of a cafe across the street while I wait for it. I'm working on a scene with Control and Whitby. A friend from out of town comes into the cafe with another person I know, going up to the register in front. I'm going back to my writing. Next thing I know, this friend sitting down next to me saying hello while I'm trying to write, and the person he was with is nowhere to be seen. While he's talking to me, it's pretty clear that the other person is speaking words at him from the balcony behind us, and he takes a little quick look up there. Why the other person didn't want to talk to me, I don't know, even though I'm sympathetic. Structured avoidance is something I am familiar with. But paranoia for not knowing why and the thought of someone standing behind me gets pushed into the Authority draft in a scary way. During this time, too, sleep becomes a problem. I keep waking up at four in the morning for two weeks.

I can't figure out why, think it should be the wine, but have a strong sense of a sharp sound of some sort occurring just before I wake up. The sound always stops when I'm awake. A couple of crimes have happened just up the street, so I'm worried. Does anyone come into the house? Although it is an absurd thought. They come into the house, and then what? Standing and making a sound at the bedroom door and then leaving, again and again? I start writing in a kind of changed mode because I need eight hours or I'm basically a zombie. Sometimes I even come up at four o'clock and write for a few hours and go back to bed, the family's defense system – an axe – by my side. Eventually I discover that one of our cats has taken to scratching at the door, but immediately stops as soon as he hears me stirring. But my sleep patterns are irrevocably damaged, and with a kind of impotent rage over the injustice of that-Sleep Police is not giving me back my hours- I'm writing a fiery scene that involves something unnatural skittering over the roof and then the floor. In the middle of the night. The terror of the scene is wrong for Authority, but terror turns out to be perfect for acceptance, where it eventually appears: You nod. You're coming to. You nod again. Then you hear something creeping low and soft across the tiles in the kitchen, just out of sight. A kind of terrified lurching shudder burns through you. There's a slow scuttle to the sound, so you can't really identify it, get a sense of what has crept into your house... Everything eats everything else now and I'm as disoriented as my characters. This doesn't bother me that much, it seems right for what I'm working on, so I encourage the trend as long as I'm happy with the results on the page. Ann comes home some days and I argue with the cats or talk to myself. The house is a chaos because I can't distinguish between writing time and non-writing time. All I can do is follow my character, almost literally off a cliff. (All the early stories I wrote at the age of 13 ended with signs on the rock. Falling off, pushed. Skip.) One day in June 2013, after going out to have lunch in a rush and parked back in the house, I'm about to go in and wolf down my food when I see a mosquito hovering against the inside of the car's windshield. I swat it into the glass and forget about it. A tarot-short-style illustration of the lighthouse in Area X (Jeremy Zerfoss) The next morning, I get back in the car to run an errand and find the mosquito's body hidden by a fast-acting sponge consisting of delicate white filaments. I'm in such a state of superstition, influenced by the novel, that I can't bring myself to get a napkin and wipe it away. I'm not even sure now that I swatted mosquitoes in the first place. Does anyone get in my car? Is anyone watching me? I'm deep inside the paranoid Southern Reach secret agency by then, and I've lived inside the Control mind for so long that I analyze the world a little differently. So I leave mosquitoes on the inside of the windshield until it is completely encased in white filaments. I go in and write a scene about the end of a very taxing day for Control; I keep the mosquito incident in there, as a kind of exorcism of it from my daily life. But it catches hold, has meaning, and I can't pull it off again. I'm so superstitious about terror I generate that I don't get rid of mosquitoes in my car until I'm done with the raw draft authority. Control keeps obsessed with that little insect throughout the book, plagued by his inability to figure out how it got inside his sealed car. That mosquito is there to remind me of something crucial, even if it's something I can only really sense out of the corner of my eye. End of June 2013. I haven't driven the car in a week because I've been too busy writing. My world has contract with the kitchen kitchen the desk, the free weights in the gym, and a refrigerator that seems to be magically refilling itself every few days. In the evening, I speak out character relationships with Ann, the only person I can discuss a novel going on and not get blocked. The next morning while stretching my legs on a little walk around the front yard and driveway... I notice a red-colored latticework that runs out from under the left side of the trunk of my car. It's hard to shake the feeling that the otherworldly mold that plays such a threatening role in Area X has found its way into my car. Moreover, when I see the spores coming out of the trunk, I already feel a little paranoid: I just rewritten a scene involving a strange room and Control's assistant, Whitby, a character I think of as Smeagol of Southern Reach. What the hell's in the trunk? I don't want to open the trunk. But I have to. If that's the last thing I do, I'm going to open the trunk of this car, which is fast becoming an immobile monument to my (intentionally, closely monitored) ever-deteriorating condition. It's hard to shake the feeling that the otherworldly mold that plays such a threatening role in Area X has found its way into my car. So I open the trunk only to have all kinds of red dust fumes spewing out. I'm bouncing back - but not fast enough to avoid getting stains on my clothes. Horrified, I brush red dust out of myself, coughing, trying not to swallow what's shot up in my face. Once the dust has settled, I look in the trunk, only to find it has been colonized by puffball and tendrill mushrooms, which discharged spores when I opened the trunk. The water seal is broken and let in the rain. The spare tire, below deck, is half liquid in a trough of water. I can't handle this. I can't handle this. I put on a mask - the only one I have is a Halloween duck face - that can keep some fumes on, and I put on latex gloves and clean out the trunk and scoop out the water. Then I go back in and drink some red wine and sing along to a song by Spoon. Shut with. While the cats look on quizzically. I wonder if I should call the pot dealer anyway. An illustration from the Spanish-language edition of the Southern Reach series (Jeremy Zerfoss/Planeta Editions) Once around, when all this happens, I need a location for the former Southern Reach director's house. There is a scene in Authority where Control breaks into it and I have made a promise to myself that no detail in the landscape of these novels will come to me secondhand. But it's method acting, not reality, so I don't want to break into anyone's house. Having ruled out some options — like paying a friend to let me break into his house — I decide that our house is the place. I get into character as Control, having first left our French doors towards the backyard unlocked. I go up to the house in the late afternoon. I sneak through the backyard, only to see staring at me from the next house down. He doesn't know yet, but he's being turned into a shy boy in the novel, someone's unlikely to call the police. I'm sneaking up. I'm going in through the French doors. I walk through our house, trying to see everything with fresh eyes. Eventually, I end up in the master bedroom, looking at a poster against the wall that has a hand-drawn map of Area X on it, just as I thought the former director would have left behind. It's a poster I drew myself, of course. But I stare at it for a while, and a genuine sense of anxiety and fear travels up my spine. I see the room through control eyes-he looks at a map created by an unknown source, wondering what the hell it's doing in the former director's bedroom. I'll take the poster down. I record all my observations about the house. I tell Ann I'm using our house as the former director's house, but don't tell her about the method. It takes a while to erase the vision of the map of Area X in our bedroom from my head. July 21, 2013. I'm in South Carolina, helping run a teen writing camp called Shared Worlds. I've been popping up with a smile to teach in the auditorium and then go back to my apartment and finishing up revisions to what I hope is the final draft Authority. I'm done. I'm done. I'm a little happy. To celebrate, I take the only two foods left in the apartment-chicken wings and Brussels sprouts—and stir fry them up together, a hideous dish I dub the topographic anomaly. Everything seems in order the way I wanted it to. Never mind the abyss home in our living room. Never mind that there is now a huge pile of draft pages, written and handwritten, along with a lot of notebooks in my office in Tallahassee. Once I started stacking them there, I was too superstitious for stops. They are too much like the pile of documents that Control has to wade through in the Southern Reach offices. (I won't actually box them until after the last book is published.) I'm writing an e-mail. I'm sending authority to my editor and my agent. I'm elated. I'm drained. I collapse in an apartment that looks like it has been violently searched by the police, who also apparently left a lot of dirty dishes in the sink and a few empty wine bottles on the counter. Detritus of two weeks of crazy action. I spend the evening watching movies on Netflix. I don't want to remember anything I see that night. I spend the next few days teaching teenagers how to write. One of them, 13, ends their story. How many stories have you written? I ask. This is my first one, she says. I almost burst into tears. Promotional art for Acceptance (Jeremy Zerfoss/FSG) My left knee gives out in early November 2013 while working on the third novel, Acceptance. It starts when I go out to hike the 14-mile trail at the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, which inspired Annihilation, to remember something, may have forgotten. Every time I go there in winter, a crispness to the air, a freshness, blinds me to hazards. The alligators are fearless and thick with cold, motionless in the mud beside the canals, their darkness illuminated by a phantom light over the Martian apartments that are as dramatic and enervating as anything in a painter of Turner. Seven miles in, distracted by the light-the glorious light I keep trying to describe in these novels-I plant my left boot in a deep, grass-fringed hole and twist on the knee. A plug, but I can barely feel it and finish the hike. The next day at the gym I mistake a tightness in my knee while doing leg press for the usual aches and pains-and keep going. A North Florida trail in winter (Jeff VanderMeer) From then on, until about July 2014, I don't have full use of my knee, and even then need a bandage. It's an absurd, darkly funny development. The kind of thing that in context, despite the pain, has me saying to Ann, Well, now, for sure, I can't leave the house, or be distracted. All I can do is sit and write. The crazy thing is that I don't even have time to go to the doctor to get it checked out for six months because I go from writing Accept to pre-advertising and then out on tour. All the time I have to hope it's nothing serious, although until about March I more or less pull it behind me and try to hide the problem by readings. I'm still optimistic - I expect to have a knee operation in 2015 at worst. I'm joking with Ann that she's going to have to trade me for a new man. So... I am unable to exercise and I am still working on Acceptance while in a great deal of pain and uncertainty. But I started writing Annihilation while in physical distress, so maybe there is some symmetry to the situation, something, again, to channel. It helps that the structure of Acceptance is already so clear to me: a large, glowing starfish of a structure, with the characters on their orbits and my knowledge of Area X at its node. I'm an archer who knows he has a chance to hit the middle of the target. As my characters push through the winter expeditions in the novel, winter is cresting in Florida. I eat the way the grass turns to the consistency of hay, with the same fresh smell, the way the lakes become a crazier blue and the animals become careful. I'm still collecting details. Thanksgiving weekend, Ann takes me out to Apalachicola on the coast of the Florida Panhandle. I need some last small town Florida texture. Seen from the car: the worn dark nubs of trees on the strip of an off-white beach. There is a gutted building without a roof that has trees growing inside. A wrecked boat with the paint peeling off the sides and a dark line where the water, over time, stained the tree. A strange Christmas tree with buoys hanging out of it. The swifts and swallows follow the trajectory mapped by a drunk mathematician across the light blue of a cloudless sky. There's something breathless about the birds that I fall in love with. I keep to write descriptions of them on the trip home, and fails to something important about them. It's the last time I'm leaving the house until I'm done with the novel. February 2014. Annihilation, the first book in the trilogy, has finally been published and I'm touring down the West Coast in support of the release. It's going well. The LA Times has given me a very positive review, and the New York Times has mentioned the Southern Reach trilogy in a front-page article about binge reading. More coverage comes from NPR, The Christian Science Monitor, and a host of others. The news of Scott Rudin and Paramount optioning film rights has made Annihilation one of the most talked about books at the London Book Fair, and a slew of foreign rights deals follow shortly after that. Sean McDonald is, fortunately to me, looking like a genius, and Annie, his name for Annihilation, looks like a robust investment. The novel is uber-real now and it's being subjected to intense scrutiny, more than I've ever met before. With all this going on, I wake up and get out of a freezing bed in my room at a bed-and-breakfast near Mendocino. I'm hunkered down in Northern California, taking a few days off from the trip before heading south. The cold is like another skin you can't escape, and the rain slopes sideways into your eyes like little electric shocks. It's about as far from the climate of Florida as you can get, and yet the same destruction and silence lurks in the desert. Here I am, starting to look like a gray-blasted old lighthouse keeper-some demented lonely guy with tired eyes who takes long naps and lives nightly by the sea. I lace up my boots and try not to put too much emphasis on my bad knee, going outside with the final script for Acceptance tucked under one arm. The marked draft I carry features a man carrying a strange manuscript and walking in the shadow of a lighthouse. And here I am, starting to look like a gray-blasted old lighthouse keeper-some demented lonely guy with tired eyes who takes long naps and lives nocturnal by the sea. Which would suit me just fine, as long as Ann was by my side. After working on edits for a while, I go out in the wind and rain with a camera and a published copy of Annihilation under my raincoat. With problems due to the knee, I take a trail near Fort Bragg down to a place called Glass Beach. I'm having trouble existing in two worlds at the same time editing the final book while advertising the first one, so in a wild, symbolic gesture, I'm going to try to drown out Annihilation in a tidal pool. But annihilation, it turns out, floats, and a park ranger comes up to ask what the hell I'm doing, and I take my sopping wet novel and get out of this place, quickly. Later I take pictures of Annihilation drying on rocks and post them on Twitter. I have no idea what effect, if any, they have on sale, but there's an aesthetic quality to those I like, a texture that feels like it will stifle Acceptance. The drowned copy of Annihilation (Jeff The point is: I'm all in. I'll take any gig, do something asked of me, write nonfiction and initiate into conversation pieces until I can't even keep track of it all. At the same time, I'll bite my tongue and stifle my impulsivity and refuse to get sucked into a year's worth of Internet drama and literary bickering to make sure I stay focused. Later, down the coast, I stop at a scenic historic site, pull the cord on the rental car GPS too fast, and the whole (incredibly complex) mechanism explodes into pieces against the safety brake. The idea arises when I look at the broken GPS: Maybe I should just stay in Northern California, fix an abandoned shed to live in, and become a hermit, the one they point to and say: He came out here to do a book tour and something just snapped, and they couldn't find all the pieces to put him back together. Instead, I spend a patient hour finding the pieces from under the front seats, putting GPS all back together so it works because I have no idea where I am because I don't have a real map. (And I got rid of my smartphone before the trip- too distracting.) I think the hour is as reassuring as hiking. Just to concentrate on one thing for a moment. It's nirvana. The author at The Last Bookstore in Los Angeles (Richard Ellis Preston Jr.) The further south I travel along the California coast, the more relaxed things become. It's a world of bookstores and elephant seals and whale sightings, to do interviews via email and Skype while visiting lazy little towns and more tidal pools than I can happily stare into. When I come to the San Francisco area, I'm very relaxed, had enough time away from people to regroup. I giggle in the wet and murk as a group of friends guide me to Point Bonita lighthouse on the edge of marin headlands. Along the bottom of a clean cliff face on one side and the abyss of the sea, kept at bay by the large cliffs to the other. Through a tunnel, over a suspension bridge. In a raging storm. Still editing Accept, still tweaking Authority. By July 2014, Authority has joined Annihilation out into the world, and I'm back at the same teen writing camp, staying in the same apartment where I sent out the book the year before. This time, I'm dealing with a lot of incoming email more touring options, more review coverage all over the place, more news about foreign language deals, now up to 21 countries. People have come to readings and buy more copies for friends. Now theories about Area X are beeping and tumbling their way into my inbox. There is fan art, and several features of Entertainment Weekly. I can't keep track of everything. It's like a big pile of evidence to sort through - a pile of evidence I'm really grateful for. It means a lot to me to connect like that. To have readers who say I usually do not read this kind of fiction, but ... or I love this character or this character. I love Scene. This bit scared me. Two Two later, in September, Acceptance is released, and I try not to be nervous about how readers will receive this final volume, shaking nightmares in which a disapproving Angela Carter (my patron saint) turns slowly, a frown on her face. I'm at Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences with Geekadelphia's Chris Uri, trainer Jill Sybesma, and photographer Kyle Cassidy-and a large horned owl with a wing. We'll get a picture with the owl. There is an owl in Accept, an eerie bird that reminds the biologist of her missing husband. That scene was the most emotive part of the novel to write. It took restraint, just letting the situation play out without the author intervening or editorializing. But although I studied owls closely before writing these scenes, nothing can compare to this moment, watching the owl. Up close, its feathers are even more stunning than in photographs. The details of the dyeing, the richness of layering, have an inherent beauty that defies depiction. Kyle Cassidy I'm not only going to get my picture taken with an owl, but also do an event with one at the Free Library of Philadelphia the next night. Reviewers and the public have been very friendly to Accept. Over the summer, Vernon Reid, the founder of the band Living Colour, tweeted his love of the novels, and then Stephen King did the same. (His tweet became a blurb.) Which is funny because we had tried to bring novels to King's attention back before publication; Instead, he had read them because his local indie bookseller recommended them to him. During the tour, I see other bookstores that recommend my books when I'm browsing bookstores; I get a disturbing shock when I witness people buying them or hearing clerks take orders for them over the phone. Just by chance. All this is great, but I calculate by the end of the year I will have gone from being a hermit in 2013 to spending five months, two weeks and three days on the road in 2014. After the owl photo shoot and a dinner, I just sleep and order take-out and have almost no contact with another human being until the concert the next night. This pattern of forced isolation repeats again and again until the end of the year. Otherwise, all the fuss would be too much for an introverted curmudgeon like me. I've used every magician's trick of perspective to get distance from Accept... and I'm a scene short. It's all in place, but this one scene I can't visualize. The barn owl they bring out on stage in Philly shits plenty within seconds of being out of his box. The coach continues to talk about owls while it craps all over the stage. She's used to this, like I'm used to being on the road. Owl is just a danger to perform with owls. It doesn't even register for her. Afterwards, other venues and bookstores later in the tour begin to ask: Does Jeff require a living owl for his Are we going to round up a living owl? Is a living owl part of the deal? I wish it could I really do. Even knowing what I know, I didn't know much when I signed up to publish three books in less than a year. Right up until the last minute I didn't even know if I could write one of the last scenes. Put yourself in my place: Acceptance is due for three days, but the truth is that I also can't hold on to it anymore, even if I don't finish it. Because I don't know what's going to end. Because I am as deep as my characters are in the spiral of the tower-tunnel that hides the mystery. The knee is worse and it is hard to write without scarfing Motrin. Your stomach when you're also pushing forward on coffee. I've used every magician's trick of perspective to get distance from Accept... and I'm a scene short. It's all in place, but this one scene I can't visualize. The increasingly serious situations in the novel have already put me in a place where burnout is a possibility. The faster pace of the novel puts me more firmly there. A scene short. I know on an intellectual level how this scene is supposed to go: A fellow keeper has a conversation with a girl visiting his lighthouse, but first he is visited by a vision, a hallucination that leaves him shaken to the core. I don't have that part yet, not on an emotional level. I don't want to write anything dead. I want it all to be alive, owl shit and everything. From piles of research books on the kitchen table, I pull out Taschen's Book of Miracles, a massive Renaissance-era tome filled with illustrations of otherworldly things. I open the book to a painting of a comet: an event thought of as supernatural then. This is a picture of a UFO, basically-to them. I put my finger to the side, rough, drunk, even if I don't drink... as if somehow pointing to it and connecting with it will make a difference. This, I say to the cats, who don't care. This is the scene. So I start writing a description of the comet in the photograph and I just keep grinding it out until at some point my imagination clicks back on and the comet erupts from the side in three dimensions and I can see this last scene and the conversation between a lighthouse keeper and the girl and the tidal pool they're both staring in and what it all means. And I have my scene. Somehow I have my scene exactly as I imagined it in my head. Tomorrow, I will send in Acceptance to my editor and then I will go on tour while still doing edits. But that night, when I stumble outside, my front yard looks like a place I don't know. It's midwinter and the light is surprising and the sky is a cold, cold blue. I have nothing left. Nothing at all. It feels great. Unique.

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