

Annihilation



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEFF VANDERMEER

VanderMeer was born in Pennsylvania but grew up in the Fiji Islands, where his parents worked for the Peace Corps. He then spent later years in Ithaca, New York, before attending the University of Florida for three years and finishing his college education in 1992 at Clarion University. His first book was the self-published collection *The Book of Frog* (1989), which he wrote while he was in college. He continued to publish short story collections through the 1990s, publishing his first novel, *Dradin, In Love*, in 1996. One of his first early successes was his 2001 short-story collection *City of Saints and Madmen*. He then married his wife Ann, a publisher and editor, in 2002.

VanderMeer gained widespread success in 2014 by publishing the *Southern Reach Trilogy* in quick succession: *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*. *Annihilation* won the Nebula Award, recognizing the year's best work of science fiction or fantasy published in the United States. More recently, VanderMeer has published *Borne*, *The Strange Bird*, and *Dead Astronauts*. He has also collaborated with Ann on numerous anthologies of science fiction and weird fiction. VanderMeer currently lives in Tallahassee, Florida.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

VanderMeer has stated that part of his inspiration for writing *Annihilation* is the fact that humans live on a planet filled with sophisticated organisms that we still only partially understand. He cites that humans have only recently discovered that plants engage in quantum mechanics during photosynthesis (a 2007 discovery published in the journal *Nature*) or that the sunfish and the albatross have a complex symbiotic relationship (discovered in 2012). These discoveries continue to this day; in the year 2020 alone, 213 new species were discovered. However, these discoveries are also coming at a time during mass ecological change and destruction, driven by humans, and *Annihilation* provides an interesting alternative commentary on ecological destruction. From 2010-2019, 467 species have been declared extinct due to the effects of climate change, habitat loss, and overharvesting. *Annihilation* hints at that same destruction, as the biologist makes oblique references to the ways in which humans have changed the environment beyond Area X's border, in contrast to the pristine nature preserved inside the border. Depicting the organisms inside Area X as complex and even incomprehensible organisms communicates the kind of power and complexity that VanderMeer referenced, while also suggesting the biodiversity that humans are at risk of losing. Interestingly, in contrast to much eco-fiction, nature is

quite powerful, complex, and destructive towards the humans in the book. This flips the dynamics between humans and nature; in the book, it is *humans*, rather than non-humans, who take on the perspective of having their lives ripped apart by forces that they cannot control or understand, just as plant and animal life in the real world are losing their lives and habitats to organisms that *they* cannot control or understand.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Annihilation is the first book in the Southern Reach Trilogy; the other two books are *Authority* and *Acceptance*. VanderMeer has stated that *Annihilation* drew inspiration from Michael Bernanos' novella *The Other Side of the Mountain* and Leena Krohn's "Tainaron," both of which contain unique views on humanity's place in the natural world. VanderMeer's work has also been compared to the works of H. P. Lovecraft, who was emblematic of "weird fiction," a subgenre of speculative fiction originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. VanderMeer's works are often categorized as part of the "New Weird" movement. Other works in that category include *Perdido Street Station* and *The City & the City* by China Miéville, *The Etched City* by K. J. Bishop, and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. VanderMeer and his wife, Ann VanderMeer, have also compiled a short story and novella anthology entitled *The Weird*, which explores similarly uncanny environments and themes in literature and includes staple authors of science fiction and fantasy such as Ray Bradbury's "The Crowd," Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," and Neil Gaiman's *Feeders and Eaters*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Annihilation*
- **When Written:** 2009-2014
- **Where Written:** Tallahassee, Florida
- **When Published:** February 4, 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science Fiction/Horror
- **Setting:** Area X
- **Climax:** The biologist decides to remain in Area X
- **Antagonist:** Area X, the Crawler
- **Point of View:** First person from the biologist's point of view

EXTRA CREDIT

Lighting the Way. VanderMeer has stated that his inspiration for Area X comes from the St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge and the inspiration for the lighthouse is St. Mark's Light in

Tallahassee, Florida, where VanderMeer lives.

Adaptation. *Annihilation* was made into a film in 2018 starring Natalie Portman (but the film contains significant plot changes from the book).



PLOT SUMMARY

Annihilation is framed as a journalistic account of the 12th expedition into an uninhabited area known as “Area X.” The journal’s author and narrator, an unnamed biologist, is part of this expedition alongside three other women: a psychologist, an anthropologist, and a surveyor. Area X is a mysterious place. Accounts from previous expeditions have hinted at strange ecological events that occurred there, and the members of many expeditions have not returned at all, experienced hallucinations, or killed each other. The biologist eventually reveals that her husband was a part of the 11th expedition. When he suddenly returned to their home a year after leaving for the expedition, he had no memory of crossing the border out of Area X and little memory of his time in Area X. He died of cancer six months later.

The biologist then volunteered for the 12th expedition because she was drawn to its mystery and was curious about what may have happened to her husband. She underwent months of grueling training, set up by the Southern Reach (the government agency responsible for Area X), learning as much as she could about the Area. The psychologist also hypnotized the biologist and the other members so that they could remain calm while crossing the border into Area X. After entering the Area, it took the group four days of hiking to reach base camp.

On their first day at base camp, the expedition discovers a structure with a staircase spiraling underneath the ground. This is concerning to them, because the structure isn’t on any of their maps. Inside the staircase (which the biologist calls a “**Tower**” while the others call it a “tunnel”), they find eerie writing along the wall made from bioluminescent plant material, as well as slime and what look like tracks on the ground. While the biologist is examining the writing, she inhales spores from the plant material. Back at base camp, the biologist realizes that the psychologist is hypnotizing the group to control them; the biologist can see it now, because the spores have made her immune to hypnosis. Influenced by the psychologist, the group decides to return to the Tower the next day to explore its lower levels.

The next morning, the anthropologist is missing, and the psychologist—who seems visibly shaken—explains that the anthropologist was frightened by what they found in the Tower and decided to leave the mission and return to the border. The biologist senses the psychologist is lying, but they have no choice but to go along with her story. Back at the Tower, the

biologist and surveyor descend once more while the psychologist stands watch at the top. This time, the biologist notices that the Tower seems to be breathing and has a heartbeat, as though it is alive. The surveyor doesn’t notice these things, however, and the biologist realizes that the spores have made her more aware of what is really happening in Area X.

A few levels down, they discover the anthropologist’s body: her face is burned, her jaw is broken, and her legs are half-melted. Next to her is a sample inside a vial, which the biologist collects. She and the surveyor also find another set of boot prints going back up. The biologist posits that the psychologist hypnotized the anthropologist to try to collect a sample from whatever is doing the writing (which she calls the “Crawler”), and the Crawler killed her. The surveyor isn’t sure whether she should believe the biologist, but when they return, they pull out their weapons in case they have to confront the psychologist. Surprisingly, the psychologist is gone, and back at base camp, she has taken half of their supplies and most of their weapons. That evening, the biologist notices a light coming from the nearby **lighthouse** and assumes that it is the psychologist. The biologist also feels a “brightness” spreading through her from the spores, heightening her senses and making her glow faintly.

The next day, the biologist sets out for the lighthouse while the surveyor stays behind. There, the biologist discovers hundreds of journals from past expeditions—far more than could have been written by only 12 expeditions—including her husband’s. Reading some of the journals, she realizes that most of what she and the other expeditions have been told about Area X is a lie, and she wonders why they keep sending expeditions there. In the journals, she reads of “unspeakable acts” committed by prior expeditions. She also finds a photograph of a man who she assumes to be the lighthouse keeper from before Area X was uninhabited.

As the biologist leaves, she notices the psychologist at the base of the lighthouse, seriously injured and likely soon to die. When the biologist approaches, the psychologist screams “annihilation!” at the biologist over and over. After calming down, the psychologist explains that she had leapt from the lighthouse because she was being chased by what she thought was the biologist. The psychologist confirms the biologist’s theories about the anthropologist’s death and explains that Area X is expanding. After the psychologist dies, the biologist finds a scrap of paper on the psychologist and learns that “annihilation” is a hypnotic suggestion meant to induce suicide.

When the biologist returns to base camp, the surveyor ambushes and shoots her, injuring her. The biologist returns the gunfire, killing the surveyor. The biologist realizes that her “brightness” is helping her heal as it continues to spread throughout her body. Back at camp, the biologist analyzes some of the samples she has taken from plants, animals, and the Tower and realizes that they all have human cells in them.

The biologist then reads her husband's journal. He was on an expedition with seven other men, and they discovered the journals in the lighthouse early in their expedition. The team then argued over what to do, knowing that they had been lied to. He and his expedition's surveyor decided to investigate the northern border, but they traveled for a week with no sign of the border. They then returned to the lighthouse, only to find that their anthropologist and psychologist had killed each other and the linguist killed the biologist before descending into the Tower. Returning to the Tower, the biologist's husband and his team's surveyor observed doppelgängers of all the men (including themselves) except the psychologist entering the Tower. Seeing this, they decided to abandon their mission. The surveyor tried to return to the border where they crossed it, but the biologist's husband was worried that returning that way would be a trap; instead, he decided to repair an abandoned boat and cross back by following the coastline.

After reading her husband's account, the biologist returns to the Tower to find the Crawler. She encounters it, but her brain is unable to process what it looks like and she feels as though she is drowning and that her brain is being probed and burned. But she survives the encounter and continues to descend. Eventually, she comes in sight of a blurry gateway, like the one at the border when they crossed it. But the gateway makes her feel physically ill and unable to continue, so she decides to ascend the way she came. She passes the Crawler, this time without experiencing the pain and hallucinations, and when she looks back at it, she sees the face of the lighthouse keeper within the Crawler.

When the biologist emerges from the tower, she decides she will stay in Area X and seek out a sign of where her husband may have gone. She will not return home, leaving her journal and his journal in the lighthouse.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Biologist – The biologist is the narrator and protagonist of *Annihilation*. She is a solitary and analytical person, often preferring to study her environment rather than interact with other people. Growing up, she was something of a loner who loved observing the plant and animal life that sprung up in the **swimming pool** behind her house. This tendency to isolate herself eventually caused difficulties in her marriage to her husband—he was outgoing, whereas she was quiet, and he believed that she didn't open up to him. When the biologist's husband returns from the eleventh expedition to Area X with severe melancholy, memory loss, and terminal cancer, the biologist volunteers for the following expedition. She not only wants to find out more about Area X and what happened to her husband, but she is also drawn to the possibility of adventure

and to Area X's isolation from other environments and people. In Area X, the biologist tries to be analytical and objective, but she quickly realizes that everyone's experiences are completely subjective. When she inhales spores in the **Tower**, she starts to change—becoming immune to the psychologist's hypnotic suggestions, seeing the Tower more clearly, and acquiring heightened senses. Over time, she also realizes that the spores have created a “brightness” inside her that is slowly taking over her whole body. The biologist is constantly searching for answers to the major mysteries of the novel: why the government is sending them on expeditions, how to interpret all of Area X's mysteries, and particularly what the Crawler (the creature in the Tower) is doing. However, she starts to recognize that even with all the information in the world (like the journals that she pores over from previous expeditions), she will never truly be able to solve all of Area X's mysteries. Instead, at the end of the book, she goes after her husband when she reads in his journal that he set out on a boat to try to recross the border. She recognizes that she does not want to go home, instead ultimately deciding to become a part of Area X.

The Biologist's Husband – The biologist's husband was a medic on the eleventh expedition. Prior to his leaving for the expedition, the biologist and her husband struggled in their relationship, because she was very reserved and he was very outgoing, and he often felt that she put up emotional walls against him. She disliked that he was going on the expedition, but she did not realize that it was likely that he was being hypnotized during his interviews to convince him to go to Area X. When he suddenly returned from Area X, she found that he was reserved and somber and had memory issues: he had no recollection of crossing the border, nor did he remember much of the expedition itself. The biologist then called the authorities and he spent the final six months of his life in an observation facility until he died of cancer. After his death, the biologist is determined to go to Area X, in part to discover what really happened to her husband there. In Area X, she finds her husband's journal, most of which is addressed to the biologist, to her surprise. She realizes while reading it that her husband in fact did not leave Area X and that he decided to try to take a boat up the coast. He also observed a doppelgänger of himself in the Area, whom the biologist suspects is the person who appeared in her home. She also realizes, reading his accounts, that he had a much deeper inner life than she suspected and wishes that she hadn't shut him out as much as she did. At the end, after reading his account, the biologist sets out to try to find out what happened to her husband rather than trying to return home.

The Crawler – The Crawler is the creature writing the words in the **Tower** as it slowly descends the stairs. For much of the book, the Crawler lurks ominously in the background, relentlessly writing words on the walls, but the biologist doesn't observe it directly. After encountering the Tower for the first

time, the biologist sees the result of the encounter between the anthropologist and the Crawler: the anthropologist's face is burned, her jaw broken, and her legs melted. Later, testing the sample the anthropologist was able to collect from the Crawler, the biologist realizes that the Crawler's cells include those of human brains. At the end of the novel, the biologist finally encounters the Crawler herself, which emits a massive light and is difficult for the biologist to fully see. She believes that it reflects her own ideas of what the Crawler looks like back at her, including a sluglike monster ringed by satellites of odd creatures, or a figure within panes of glass, or a series of layers in an arch shape. The Crawler then probes the biologist's brain, making her experience agonizing pain, and the feelings of drowning and burning—though ultimately she is able to survive the Crawler's trials. When she encounters the Crawler a second time, it completely ignores her, but she is able to see it slightly more clearly, noting that it has the lighthouse keeper's face.

The Psychologist – The psychologist is the leader of the twelfth expedition. She takes part in interviewing and screening the other women, and the biologist instantly dislikes her, since she asks the biologist invasive questions in the interviews. After the biologist inhales the spores in the **Tower**, she becomes immune to the psychologist's hypnotic suggestions and realizes how much the psychologist has been lying to them about the nature of Area X. The evening after they discover the Tower, the psychologist coerces the anthropologist down into the Tower to take a sample of the Crawler, which kills the anthropologist and wounds the psychologist. The psychologist then abandons the biologist and surveyor to return to the **lighthouse**, where she has a vision of the biologist coming after her and attacking her. This leads the psychologist to jump off of the lighthouse, landing in the sand below and seriously injuring herself. When the biologist finds the psychologist, the psychologist doesn't reveal much about Area X's mysteries—only that it is slowly expanding. After the psychologist dies, the biologist discovers the different hypnotic suggestions that the psychologist implanted in each of the expedition's members—including one ("annihilation!") that will induce their suicides.

The Surveyor – The surveyor is one of the other women on the twelfth expedition. She comes from a military background and is inherently mistrustful of the others. The second time the surveyor and the biologist descend into the Tower, the surveyor becomes concerned that the biologist is seeing and hearing things that the surveyor cannot. After finding the anthropologist's body in the **Tower**, the biologist reveals that the psychologist is hypnotizing them and likely caused the anthropologist's death—and yet, the surveyor continues to mistrust the biologist, worried that the biologist is the one who's experiencing hallucinations, when in fact the biologist believes that the spores have made her see reality. This illustrates the complicated nature of subjectivity and

objectivity, because it's difficult to establish who—if either of them—is seeing the truth. Ultimately, the women part ways and the biologist travels to the **lighthouse**; when the biologist returns a day after she said she would, the surveyor shoots and injures her. The biologist fires back, killing the surveyor.

The Anthropologist – The anthropologist is one of the members of the twelfth expedition into Area X. The anthropologist was formerly an architect, and the biologist reveals that she doesn't think the anthropologist has the same kind of mental toughness as the other members of the expedition. The evening after first exploring the **Tower**, the psychologist hypnotizes the anthropologist to get her to return to the tower to take a sample of the Crawler, but the creature ends up killing her. Later, the surveyor believes that she sees the anthropologist and tries to kill her again.

The Lighthouse Keeper – The biologist finds a picture in the **lighthouse** of an older man, whom she assumes was the lighthouse keeper before the Event that created the border around Area X. At the end of the book, when the biologist encounters the Crawler for the second time, she realizes that the Crawler has the face of the lighthouse keeper.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Linguist – The linguist is the fifth member of the twelfth expedition. During the screening process before leaving, the psychologist explains to the other women that the linguist had second thoughts and didn't want to continue with the mission, though in hindsight, the biologist wonders if this was true.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE SUBLIME VS. THE MUNDANE

In *Annihilation*, four women on a government expedition explore a mysterious wilderness preserve called Area X. The narrator—an unnamed biologist—is inexplicably drawn to the different landmarks and environments in Area X, but the more observations the biologist makes, the less she seems to understand. By book's end, she recognizes how incomprehensible yet beautiful Area X is, contrasting it with the mundane nature of her life back home. This notion of a world both painfully beautiful and completely inexplicable connects to the philosophical concept of "the sublime"—something that is so incomprehensible that it inspires a mix of awe and fear. The biologist's journey through Area X conjures these feelings of the sublime, suggesting that

some mysteries are too great or beautiful to truly comprehend, and that sometimes the only way to experience mystery is to appreciate it without attempting to understand it.

As the biologist explores Area X, she feels a constant sense of curiosity, fear, and awe. For instance, when the expedition first arrives at Area X, the group hears a “low, powerful moaning at dusk” and cannot find its source. The biologist writes in her journal that “the effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood, either.” The beauty and fear that the moaning conjures are so strange that the biologist cannot understand or communicate what she’s experiencing in words. The biologist experiences this mysterious combination of horror and beauty a second time when the group discovers what she calls a “**Tower**”—a spiral staircase descending into the earth. The more the biologist thinks about the Tower, the more she is drawn to it; she writes, “I could not tell which part I craved and which I feared,” and she connects this feeling to “a sudden leap off a cliff into the unknown.” In this way, she seems to both fear the unknown and desire it for its beauty, which is an essential characteristic of the sublime. Then, after inhaling spores in the Tower, the biologist begins to perceive the Tower as alive and breathing, like the gullet of an enormous beast. As she descends into the Tower once more, she finds an “ongoing horror show of such beauty and biodiversity that [she] could not fully take it all in.” The more she learns about Area X, the less she is able to “take it all in”—or, the more unknowable it becomes. This contradiction indicates that the sublime is embedded in the very nature of Area X, and the biologist must be satisfied with the impossibility of finding answers to its mysteries.

The biologist contrasts the incomprehensible phenomena of Area X with the “mundane” occurrences that she associates with life outside of Area X. When entering the Tower the second time, for example, the biologist observes strange words written in vegetation and what look like tracks from the creature that is writing the words (which she names “the Crawler”). Looking at her own boot print beside the complex track patterns, she writes that it is “So mundane in comparison. So boring.” The implication is that her boot print—whose existence she can easily understand and explain—has less value than the mysteries of Area X. Then, after she has observed even more of Area X’s mysteries, she thinks about when her husband returned from his own expedition to Area X. That night, she “could distinctly recall wiping the spaghetti and chicken scraps from a plate and wondering with a kind of bewilderment how such a mundane act could coexist with the mystery of his reappearance.” This contrast again illustrates just how different and sublime Area X is in comparison with the dull, uncomplicated tasks of the world beyond it.

By book’s end, the biologist accepts that she cannot understand Area X’s mysteries—and she even seems invigorated by living alongside them. Returning to the Tower at

the end of the book, the biologist finally observes the Crawler. And yet she still cannot fully see the creature; its existence overwhelms her perception, and she has an almost out-of-body experience. She thinks, “This moment, which I might have been waiting for my entire life all unknowing—this moment of an encounter with the most beautiful, the most terrible thing I might ever experience—was beyond me.” In framing the pinnacle of her life as an encounter with something mysterious and incomprehensible, the biologist suggests that it is the nature of life itself to live alongside unsolvable mysteries and to appreciate them without understanding them. When she resurfaces after this encounter, she writes in her final journal entry, “Observing all of this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion I had to *know everything*... anything...” This conclusion sums up the book’s complicated perspective on Area X: not only that there are some things too beautiful and terrible to understand, but also that life is not about solving mysteries—it’s about appreciating them.



NATURE, POWER, AND PERSISTENCE

Annihilation’s narrator—an unnamed biologist—describes the mysterious Area X as a “pristine wilderness.” By contrast, the world where humans live (outside Area X’s border) has been spoiled. But the biologist’s work and life experiences have taught her about nature’s ability to reclaim human environments, such as an abandoned **swimming pool** or an empty lot. It seems that nature is actually more powerful than humanity—and Area X is constantly expanding beyond its borders, which seems like an ominous sign for humankind. By the end of the novel, the biologist is the only one on her team to survive Area X. She does so not by separating herself from it, but by allowing herself to be integrated into the environment, leaving the base camp to live alone in the wild. In this way, the book subverts the idea that humans can control the nature around them and suggests that nature is far more powerful and persistent than human beings are.

Before visiting Area X, the biologist observes how natural environments are able to reclaim areas that have been decimated by human activity, demonstrating nature’s persistence. When she was growing up, the biologist’s house had a swimming pool in the backyard that her parents didn’t take care of. Within months of them moving in, the pool became its own ecosystem, filled with animal and plant life. This fascinated the biologist and inspired her to study nature—she loved seeing how nature could find a way to flourish even in the most sterile environments. Later in her life, the biologist also obsessed over an empty lot near the house she shared with her husband. From a tire track, a puddle formed that quickly began to teem with new life. She called it her patch of “urban wilderness,” an oxymoron suggesting that no matter the environment, nature can reclaim its territory when given the

opportunity. But the biologist understands that nature doesn't only overtake human *environments*—it also overtakes humans themselves. Early in her career, she seemed to “lose [her]self” in studying tidal pools in remote locations. She relates this to Area X, saying that she experiences the same thing there. She writes, “That’s how the madness of the world tries to colonize you: from the outside in, forcing you to live in its reality.” “Colonize” is a word often used to refer to people establishing control over land or other people, and by using it to describe what the tidal pools and Area X are doing instead, she reinforces nature’s persistence and power over humans.

From the outset, the biologist recognizes that Area X is more powerful than she and her team are. On their very first day at base camp, the biologist inhales spores that start to influence her brain and body, enhancing her senses and making her immune to hypnotic suggestion. Later, the psychologist also becomes infected by Area X, causing her to glow and grow fuzzy vegetation on her body. This establishes how the nature in Area X has its own power to change human beings, not the other way around. Area X also seems to be actively trying to encroach on human-settled territory, as its border is expanding outward. And Area X seems not to intend to coexist with humanity, since its environment has lots of defenses against human incursion (violent creatures, a dangerous and mysterious boundary, etc.) In this way, the book suggests that Area X will slowly take over human life. Ultimately, the biologist posits that this may actually be good for the world: she writes, “I can no longer say with conviction that [Area X’s expansion] is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much.” She acknowledges that humans have the power to change the world, but Area X has shown that nature has an even greater power to change it back.

Knowing this, the biologist comes to believe that the only way to survive Area X is not to defeat it, but to become part of it. Many previous expeditions relied on the **lighthouse** (an emblem of human civilization) for safety, but this was an “illusion”—human civilization could not keep anyone safe, as shown by the scene of chaos and bloodshed inside the lighthouse. From this, the biologist learns that in order to survive Area X, “You had to fade into the landscape.” In other words, to survive Area X, she has to become part of it. Over the biologist’s time in Area X, the spores continue to grow and take over the rest of her body, which she calls a “brightness” spreading inside her. This infection heightens her senses and even allows her to endure two gunshots. By joining with nature and allowing herself to be overcome by the spores, she not only loses some of her humanity, but she also gains power and is able to survive injuries she would not otherwise have been able to survive because of nature’s power. The biologist’s final decision further illustrates this point. She chooses not to return home but instead to remain in the wild, becoming a part of the

landscape rather than viewing herself as separate from it. Because she is the only person from her expedition to survive Area X, she confirms that only those who submit to nature are able to survive it, reinforcing humans’ lack of control in comparison to nature’s power.



SELF-RELIANCE, MISTRUST, SECRECY, AND ISOLATION

Annihilation’s protagonist—an unnamed biologist—has several crucial relationships in the book: with the other team members on her expedition (the psychologist, surveyor, and anthropologist) and with her husband. Yet the book also depicts how the biologist remains emotionally isolated and self-reliant, which ultimately ends up benefitting her. The other members of her team and the Southern Reach (the government agency that sent her) ultimately prove untrustworthy, having kept a great deal of secrets from her, and so her mistrust often ends up saving her life. And while the biologist has some regrets about how her own isolation and secrecy dissolved her and her husband’s marriage, she finds greater liberation in the solitude she gains in Area X. In this way, the book suggests that human beings are fundamentally alone, even when part of teams, and that it’s helpful to be self-reliant and mistrustful even when it destroys relationships.

The mistrust that the biologist feels toward the other members of her expedition ultimately ends up saving her life even as it destroys the expedition, illustrating how self-reliance can be helpful. The biologist acknowledges from the book’s outset that she is naturally “attuned to solitude” and isn’t very emotionally forthcoming. Even while training for the expedition to Area X, this mindset creates conflict on the team: when the psychologist hypnotizes the biologist while interviewing her about her life, the biologist reveals little, distrusting and disliking the psychologist—a feeling that’s quickly returned. This demonstrates how the biologist’s emotional walls create immediate divides within her relationships.

Yet this mistrust ends up proving helpful when the biologist ingests spores in Area X and keeps this fact to herself, not revealing that the spores make her immune to the hypnotism. Soon after, the biologist realizes that the psychologist has been hypnotizing them not just to keep them calm, but also to make them go along with her plans. Keeping these secrets makes her feel “estranged from the expedition,” but this estrangement is actually helpful because it allows her to understand that the psychologist and the Southern Reach know a lot more about Area X than she knows—and this clarity that helps protect her from further manipulation. Later, the psychologist’s hypnotism only ends up causing the anthropologist’s death, and the biologist realizes that the psychologist even has a command that can induce suicide in the other women. The biologist is able to avoid a similar fate because of her self-reliance and her

mistrust, showing how these traits—while they have driven a wedge between the team members—have protected her from death.

The biologist's self-reliance similarly saves her from the surveyor, who chooses to spend the night alone while the biologist investigates the lighthouse. When the biologist returns, the surveyor tries to shoot the biologist because she believes the biologist has become completely inhuman, and because—as the biologist later speculates—the solitude at camp had driven her to have a mental breakdown. This shoot-out ends with the biologist returning fire and killing the surveyor. In this way, the biologist's isolation and self-reliance have helped her—not only to survive the mental tricks of Area X, but also to instinctively protect herself from the surveyor's violence, even at the cost of decimating her relationships and the expedition.

The biologist's consideration of her relationship with her husband shows a more tragic side of this dynamic. She recognizes how not opening up to him essentially ruined their marriage, even as it helped her find the freedom she craved in solitude. Prior to her husband leaving for the 11th expedition to Area X, their relationship was struggling because she was "distant" from him and "guarded." For example, she spent many nights observing the environment in an **empty lot**. This was innocuous and perhaps understandable given her passion for nature, but she nonetheless refused to tell her husband where she was going, which unsettled him. In this way, the biologist's isolation and self-reliance bred mistrust in her husband, creating conflict in their marriage. The biologist also discusses how her husband was often unhappy with how disengaged she was when they would go out to bars with his friends. However, she insists that even though her distance disappointed him, she was "happy in her little bubble of silence." Thus, solitude brought her joy—even if it meant being emotionally distant in a way that hurt her marriage. This distance between them was part of the reason that her husband wanted to go on the 11th expedition—she had "pushed him away." But going on the expedition leads to even more distance between them and, ultimately, his death, showing how destructive that emotional distance ended up being. The biologist eventually comes to regret her secrecy and emotional distance from her husband once she finds his expedition journal, seeing that he had a "deep inner life" that she didn't understand. She recognizes that she "could have met him partway and retained [her] sovereignty." In this passage, she recognizes how her fundamental tendency towards being secretive and alone destroyed their marriage, even suggesting that she may have regretted it.

In the book's final pages, the biologist chooses to search for her husband, believing that he may still be alive somewhere in Area X. This ambiguous ending suggests two ideas: on the one hand, it hints at a newfound desire to connect with him and try to be more open. But on the other hand, she seems to suspect that

she will, in fact, never find her husband. In this way, her sense of purpose and joy may actually come from knowing that she's finally alone and autonomous, able to explore the world on her own terms.



OBJECTIVITY VS. SUBJECTIVITY

When the biologist first arrives in Area X, she prizes objectivity. As scientists, she and the other members of the team rely on facts: they collect samples and measurements, which are meant to help them classify Area X's characteristics. At the same time, the biologist realizes that Area X is skewing their perceptions of the world around them, and the team suddenly disagrees about basic realities: is the passageway that leads to Area X a **tunnel** or a tower? Is the tunnel alive or not? That a group of scientists cannot agree on foundational facts makes the very project of interpreting reality "objectively" seem impossible. As the biologist observes, "nothing that lived and breathed was truly objective"—including herself.

When the expedition first arrives at Area X, the group's fixation on facts and figures runs into trouble. Early on, the biologist writes of a "feeling I often had when out in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed, and I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity." She wants to observe things factually, but she knows on some level that Area X is distorting how she observes the world around her. This tension between fact and perception becomes more apparent when the team first encounters a mysterious tunnel with a staircase spiraling down into the ground. Initially, the psychologist tries to emphasize that they need to have "faith in [their] measurements," citing some facts about the height and diameter of the structure. But the biologist suspects that the psychologist is simply trying to "reassure herself" in the face of the tunnel's strangeness—in fact, the data she collects can't explain anything important about the tunnel at all. The team quickly realizes that they cannot even agree on basic facts about what the tunnel is, which seriously casts doubt on their ability to see their environment objectively. While the other three members think of the structure as a "tunnel," the biologist emphasizes over and over that she can only see it as a "Tower." In hindsight, the biologist marks this as "the first irrational thought [she] had once [they] had reached [their] destination." The biologist recognizes that the environment itself is causing changes in her perception, preventing her from seeing anything objectively.

Over time, the biologist's perception becomes even more obviously affected by her environment. On the group's first descent into the Tower, the biologist inhales spores from the walls. When she and the surveyor return a day later, the tower suddenly seems to be living and breathing—something that the surveyor, who did not inhale spores, cannot perceive. The surveyor comments, "You saw something that wasn't there,"

while the biologist thinks in response, “*You can’t see what is there.*” It’s not clear who—if either of them—is seeing “reality.” Moreover, the fact that the biologist doesn’t press her case suggests that she’s giving up on the idea of shared facts or objective reality altogether and accepting the fact that everyone will perceive their environment somewhat differently. The fact that the biologist’s perception is affected specifically by inhaling the spores makes a subtler point about perception, too: that one can never objectively perceive something of which they are a part. The spores are a physical indication that the biologist is slowly becoming part of her environment, and the more integrated into her environment she becomes, the more her perception changes. “Will I melt into this landscape [...]?” she wonders. “Will I be aware that anything is wrong or out of place?” With this, the biologist acknowledges that becoming a part of Area X alters her perception of even basic things about it, like what is “wrong” or “out of place.” But since a person is *always* a part of their environment, their perception is always somewhat clouded by their subjective experiences and judgments.

This is also related to the biologist’s unreliability as a narrator. The biologist reveals partway through her account that she has not been “fully honest” with the reader, explaining that her husband was on the 11th expedition to Area X, and that his journey heavily influenced her own decision to go. She writes, “I know this information might not be hard for anyone to find out, but I have hoped that in reading this account, you might find me a credible, objective witness.” Withholding this information, then, was an attempt to prevent the reader from thinking that she was biased—but the mere fact that she chooses to reveal information about herself sparingly suggests that she is constantly manipulating her narrative, and that *isn’t* truly objective. She later writes, “It may be clear by now that I am not always good at telling people things they feel they have a right to know [...]. My reason for this is, again, the hope that any reader’s initial opinion in judging my objectivity might not be influenced by these details.” This suggests that “objectivity” is a matter of style rather than truth. To be seen as “objective,” one has to appear to be a neutral and rational party—but one can never be neutral about their own perception, and the experience that the biologist is describing is highly irrational. So, in this light, it would be impossible to present it “objectively”—she can only relay her subjective perceptions.

In the book’s final pages, the biologist admits that when recalling details about the environments she has experienced, she “remake[s] them in [her] mind with every new thought, every remembered detail, and each time they are slightly different.” In this way, the book confirms that being immersed in something—whether it is an environment or simply memories of an environment—makes that experience inherently subjective.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE TOWER/THE TUNNEL

At the beginning of the novel, the members of the 12th expedition find a passageway into the earth, which the biologist thinks of as a tower, even though everyone else calls it a tunnel. This tunnel/tower embodies the impossibility of any human being making objective observations about their environment, since all perception is intertwined with subjective experience. This is clear even in the confusion over what to call this structure; while it’s objectively more like a tunnel, the biologist cannot stop seeing it as a tower. She doesn’t really understand why she perceives it this way—due to some personal idiosyncrasy, a structure that is a tunnel to everyone else is a tower to her.

The subjectivity of perception becomes even clearer when the biologist inhales spores inside the Tower, causing her to realize that the Tower is breathing, has a heartbeat, and seems to be the gullet of some enormous beast. When she suggests this to the surveyor, the surveyor becomes concerned, saying, “You saw something that wasn’t there,” while the biologist thinks, “*You can’t see what is there.*” It’s not clear whose perception—if either—reflects the truth. As the novel progresses (and as the biologist descends deeper into the tower), she encounters even trickier perceptual difficulties, including the Crawler. The Crawler is the mysterious creature who lives in the tunnel, and the biologist physically cannot perceive it objectively; she suspects that what she sees when she looks at it is actually just a reflection of her own expectations about what the creature should look like. Because of this, she can’t tell what the Crawler really is. By the end of the novel, the biologist seems to have given up to some degree on the notion that her perceptions can or should reflect reality objectively; she has to learn to live in a world where her experiences and beliefs may not be shared by anyone else.



THE LIGHTHOUSE

The lighthouse represents the foolishness of believing in human power over nature. Lighthouses are usually viewed as symbols of safety—they are beacons guiding lost ships to the safety of human civilization and out of the treachery of nature (the dangerous waves). However, in Area X, the lighthouse does *not* provide a refuge from the dangers of the natural world surrounding it. The biologist even notes explicitly that it provides an “illusion of safe refuge,” because when she visits the lighthouse for the first time, she is met with bloodstains and other evidence of the violence that

plagued previous expeditions. This suggests that violence is not isolated to nature; humanity is part of nature, which means that violence is a part of humanity, and human civilization—as symbolized by a lighthouse—cannot change that.

Instead of holing up in the lighthouse to avoid the dangers of Area X, the biologist says that “you had to wage a guerrilla war against whatever force had come to inhabit Area X if you wanted to fight at all. You had to fade into the landscape.” Thus, the lighthouse illustrates how the other expeditions’ resistance was futile because they tried to separate themselves from the environment. By contrast, the biologist survives because she relinquishes her power to Area X and essentially becomes a part of the landscape in the way that she describes here.

An additional illustration of this idea comes from the fact that the lighthouse keeper from 30 years prior was absorbed by the Crawler. In other words, the person who was the guardian of human civilization actually ended up subsumed by nature—and, specifically, by the Crawler, which seems to be one of the more violent manifestations in Area X. This suggests that any hope for human control over nature is completely futile, as what remains of the lighthouse keeper (as with the lighthouse) has been easily conquered by the dangerous natural world of Area X.



THE SWIMMING POOL/THE EMPTY LOT

The swimming pool and the empty lot illustrate nature’s persistence, power, and complexity. Both are key aspects of different stories that the biologist tells about the formation of her personality and interests. In the first story, she relays how the apartment her parents rented as a child had a swimming pool in the back. Because her parents did not clean the pool, it eventually grew moss and towering plants and became the home of dragonflies, bullfrogs, and egrets. Within months, it became a “functioning ecosystem,” which fascinated her and inspired her to become a biologist.

Similarly, the empty lot near the house that she shared with her husband became a source of fascination when an ecosystem grew out of a puddle—an ecosystem with fish, songbirds, lizards, and butterflies. The biologist spent hours late at night observing the plant and animal life in the empty lot. The fact that these two ecosystems were able to spring up in such unlikely places—in places that have been decimated by human activity—illustrates nature’s resilience and persistence. This parallels what is happening in Area X, where any attempt by humans to change or even observe the landscape is quickly quashed. This highlights a reversal of the common belief that humans have power and control over nature, instead suggesting that nature is far more powerful than human beings and far more persistent.

This point is further reinforced by the fact that the biologist

becomes so engrossed in these two ecosystems that she’s nearly consumed by them; the same happens to her in Rock Bay when she is studying tidal pools. This illustrates nature’s power over her and mirrors the idea that Area X is similarly consuming her because of its power to transfix her, suggesting that the only way to survive Area X is to become a part of it.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar Straus & Giroux edition of *Annihilation* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☹️ Far worse, though, was a low, powerful moaning at dusk. The wind off the sea and the odd interior stillness dulled our ability to gauge direction, so that the sound seemed to infiltrate the black water that soaked the cypress trees. This water was so dark we could see our faces in it, and it never stirred, set like glass, reflecting the beards of gray moss that smothered the cypress trees. If you looked out through these areas, toward the ocean, all you saw was the black water, the gray of the cypress trunks, and the constant, motionless rain of moss flowing down. All you heard was the low moaning. The effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Surveyor, The Anthropologist, The Psychologist

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis


This passage describes some of the biologist’s earliest impressions of Area X and establishes its mysterious and sublime nature. As the biologist walks through the Area alongside the other members of the expedition—the psychologist, the surveyor, and the anthropologist—she describes the effect of the low moaning and the environment’s stillness. Both evoke incomprehensible feelings, which contain both “beauty” and “desolation.” This aligns perfectly with the philosophical concept of the sublime, which means something so incomprehensible that it inspires both fear and awe, as the biologist describes here. The biologist’s inability to adequately describe the phenomena is also clear, further illustrating how hard it is to understand and communicate. This is reinforced by the

paradoxes inherent in her descriptions, like the “motionless rain of moss” on the trees. These descriptions combine to give a sense of eeriness and mystery hidden beneath Area X’s stillness.

In addition, the passage begins to tease out the power and agency that nature has in the book. The fact that it is so still is remarkable on its own; as the biologist comments several times throughout the book, it is a “pristine” environment, one that is powerful enough to have been able to avoid human destruction, despite the fact that the government keeps sending in expeditions. And the biologist’s comment that the desolation can “colonize” a person—a word she repeats throughout her narration—gives the environment agency, suggesting that it is powerful enough to conquer the people in it. Together, these descriptions form an image of a hidden and incommunicable power that grips the expedition members as soon as they arrive there.

☛ At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don’t know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground. I could as easily have considered it a bunker or a submerged building. Yet as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of the last expedition drifting off, one by one, and sometime thereafter the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been but depositing this underground part of it inland. I saw this in vast and intricate detail as we all stood there, and, looking back, I mark it as the first irrational thought I had once we had reached our destination.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist’s Husband

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The biologist’s first encounter with the Tower—and her first description of the lighthouse—illustrate her inability to be objective about the environment she’s in. While the rest of the team all call the Tower a “tunnel,” the biologist finds it impossible to consider it in this way. In stating that this is the first irrational thought she had when reaching Area X, the biologist understands how the environment itself is causing changes in her perception. Her “irrational” thoughts

also include the idea of a burrowed tunnel somehow moving inland after being carved out. This suggests that even things that seem like objective facts (like the classification of a building) are now a part of her altered perception of reality and are therefore unreliable.

Relating the Tower to the lighthouse is also symbolically important, as it establishes how these structures are mirror images of each other. Lighthouses are often viewed as symbols of safety, providing safe passage for ships to return to shore. The biologist and her team also are aware of the lighthouse’s existence, as it has been on all their maps as they have prepared for the expedition. By contrast, the Tower represents exactly the opposite: it is mysterious, unknown, and dangerous. Yet the fact that the biologist thinks that the Tower is an underground continuation of the lighthouse also foreshadows the fact that the lighthouse is actually *not* a place of safety—in many ways, it is just as mysterious as the Tower.


Lastly, the vision that the biologist has of the last expedition drifting off foreshadows her eventual explanation that her husband was on that expedition (which she has not yet revealed to the reader at this point), and that he did, in fact, drift off via boat. Even though she is keeping that fact to herself to try to remain an objective narrator, it eventually becomes clear that her intimate knowledge of the previous expedition is affecting how she perceives Area X.

☛ As I came close, did it surprise me that I could understand the language the words were written in? Yes. Did it fill me with a kind of elation and dread intertwined? Yes. I tried to suppress the thousand new questions rising up inside of me. In as calm a voice as I could manage, aware of the importance of that moment, I read from the beginning, aloud: “*Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that...*”

Then the darkness took it.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

As the group descends down the Tower’s staircase for the first time, the biologist reads words formed by plant

material running along the left side of the wall. The words along the walls evoke the sublime mystery of the Tower—it's both beautiful and terrifying, filling the biologist with "elation and dread intertwined." Even though the words are in a language that the biologist understands, they raise a deeper sense of mystery and incomprehensibility, bringing up a "thousand new questions" for the biologist. The fact that the words descend into darkness, going on forever, adds to this effect, as they are interminable and obscure.



The biologist will grapple with the words throughout the rest of the book, trying to find an interpretation for what they say. At one point, she believes the words describe the previous expedition's journals, as "seeds of the dead" that can be shared with others. At another point, when the biologist finds that some of the plant and animal life in Area X has human cells, she believes that the seeds of the dead are literally human biological material. This would mean that the environment in Area X somehow consumed or transformed members of the previous expedition.


The biblical nature of the words "the sinner" and the "strangling fruit" also alludes to the story of Adam and Eve, in which the first man and woman (according to the Bible) ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. As punishment for this "original sin," God cast them out of paradise. This hints that it may not be unilaterally good to gain the knowledge (the "fruit") found in the Tower—perhaps some mysteries must be left unsolved, like the meaning of the words themselves.

☝ Most important, however, I now could guess at one way in which the spores had affected me: They had made me immune to the psychologist's hypnotic suggestions. They had made me into a kind of conspirator against her. Even if her purposes were benign, I felt a wave of anxiety whenever I thought of confessing that I was resistant to hypnosis—especially since it meant any underlying conditioning hidden in our training also was affecting me less and less.

I now hid not one but two secrets, and that meant I was steadily, irrevocably, becoming estranged from the expedition and its purpose.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Anthropologist, The Surveyor, The Psychologist

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

After fungal spores from the Tower's walls infect the biologist, she witnesses the psychologist hypnotizing the surveyor and anthropologist and realizes that she herself is now immune to hypnotic suggestion. Seeing how the psychologist is using the hypnosis to manipulate the group members, not just to keep them calm, the biologist becomes unsettled by the idea that the psychologist can control them in any way she wants. Throughout the first chapter of the book, the biologist has hinted at her isolation from the others and proved to be incredibly self-reliant. Here, the biologist fully recognizes that her growing mistrust of the psychologist has been justified, because the psychologist has proven untrustworthy in terms of being upfront about the hypnosis.

This becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, because the biologist then continues to retreat from the others—as she notes here, she is becoming even more "estranged" and anxious over telling them about the spores' effects on her, because she doesn't know how they might react. This shows that the biologist is fundamentally alone in this moment, even though she is part of a team. And even though it's helpful for her to be self-reliant for her own protection, the passage here also hints that the expedition will fall apart as a result.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ I got my shit together because we were going to go forward and the surveyor couldn't see what I saw, couldn't experience what I was experiencing. And I couldn't make her see it.

"Forget it," I said. "I became disoriented for a second."

"Look, we should go back up now. You're panicking," the surveyor said. We had all been told we might see things that weren't there while in Area X. I know she was thinking that this had happened to me.


I held up the black box on my belt. "Nope—it's not flashing. We're good." It was a joke, a feeble joke, but still.

"You saw something that wasn't there." She wasn't going to let me off the hook.

You can't see what is there, I thought.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Surveyor

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis



When the biologist and the surveyor return to the Tower for the second time, the biologist sees that the walls are breathing, meaning that the Tower is alive. But trying to see if the surveyor is perceiving the same thing proves how difficult it is to find objective truth one's surroundings when one is immersed in that environment. The Tower already encapsulates that idea, because the biologist can only see it as a Tower, while the others continually refer to it as a tunnel. This passage reinforces this, as how the biologist perceives the Tower's interior is completely different to how the surveyor perceives it.


Then, the subsequent exchange between the two women illustrates how difficult it is to verify objective reality with another person. While the biologist believes that what she sees is real and true, so does the surveyor. The biologist thinks that the spores make her see more clearly, while the surveyor believes that the biologist is simply having hallucinations.

While the reader is biased against the surveyor because the biologist is the one narrating the story, in reality, it is also impossible for the reader to know who is telling the "truth,"—or if there even *is* a single, objective truth about Area X. The fact that the biologist doesn't press her case, simply keeping her thoughts to herself and understanding that she has no way to convince the surveyor, suggests that she's giving up on the idea of shared facts or objective reality altogether. Instead, she accepts the fact that everyone will perceive their environment differently.

☝ I know this information might not be hard for anyone to find out, but I have hoped that in reading this account, you might find me a credible, objective witness. Not someone who volunteered for Area X because of some other event unconnected to the purpose of the expeditions. And, in a sense, this is still true, and my husband's status as a member of an expedition is in many ways irrelevant to why I signed up.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Surveyor, The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis


As the biologist and the surveyor descend into the Tower's staircase, the biologist refers back to some of the accounts she knows from the 11th expedition before admitting that her husband was actually on the 11th expedition. This revelation—coming about a quarter of the way through the book—confirms that the biologist is not necessarily a reliable narrator. Ironically, as the biologist points out here, she is hoping to be "a credible, objective witness." But in keeping back this information, the biologist illustrates that she is constantly trying to manipulate the information that the reader has in order to suit her own purposes, making her anything but credible or objective.

The biologist doesn't want to be thought of as someone who volunteered for the expedition because of an ulterior motive. When she states that her husband had nothing to do with the reason she signed up, this proves to have some truth to it: she wanted to understand Area X better, to find the solitude and isolation that she had been longing for all her life. And yet, at the same time, it's clear that the biologist's husband's time in Area X impacted her decision to sign up. This again illustrates that the biologist isn't exactly an objective observer—neither in Area X nor in her life in the outside world.

☝ How what we had seen below could coexist with the mundane was baffling. It was as if we had come up too fast from a deep-sea dive but it was the memories of the creatures we had seen that had given us the bends.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Psychologist, The Anthropologist, The Surveyor

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis



The biologist and the surveyor emerge from the Tower, expecting to confront the psychologist about the anthropologist's body, and the biologist is amazed at returning to the surface. Below, in the Tower, she had remarked on the beauty and horror of the biodiversity there—a feeling only compounded by seeing the

anthropologist's mangled body underneath mysterious words made of vegetation. Here, the biologist wonders how the "mundane" could coexist with that world, again suggesting its sublime and incomprehensible nature by comparison. The human brain can understand a great deal, but she recognizes how many unanswered questions she has about the Tower and what happened to the anthropologist there, adding to Area X's mystery and incomprehensibility.

The metaphor of the deep-sea dive is a particularly apt one, implying that the world inside the Tower is incredibly complex and mysterious. It is a place where few people explore and even fewer understand what they find there—similar to how humans who venture underwater are completely out of their element, as they enter a place that belongs entirely to the nature that lives there. Coming up to the surface, then, is disorienting, painful, and too quickly restorative, like the "bends" (a sickness caused by rapid changes in pressure while scuba diving)—as if they can no longer handle the life that they were returning to, now that they have seen the depths below. This also foreshadows the idea that the biologist will be irrevocably changed by the sublime nature of Area X—never truly understanding its mysteries but unable to return to the "mundane" world from which she came.

At first, I must have seemed mysterious to him, my guardedness, my need to be alone, even after he thought he'd gotten inside my defenses. Either I was a puzzle to be solved or he just thought that once he got to know me better, he could still break through to some other place, some core where another person lived inside of me. During one of our fights, he admitted as much—tried to make his "volunteering" for the expedition a sign of how much I had pushed him away, before taking it back later, ashamed. I told him point-blank, so there would be no mistake: This person he wanted to know better did not exist; I was who I seemed to be from the outside. That would never change.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Psychologist, The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis



The evening after the psychologist disappears, the biologist provides some exposition on her relationship with her

husband—how it was already struggling before he left for the 11th expedition to Area X. The biologist establishes that she has always been a solitary person who enjoys isolation. The secrecy and guardedness that permeated her marriage, however, created a conflict between them because of the difference in their personalities. Here, she remembers them both grappling with how this dynamic essentially ruined her marriage: her husband told her that she "pushed him away" by not opening up more fully. This not only led to him going to the 11th expedition, but consequently, to his death. This demonstrates how destructive her isolation and self-reliance were in their relationship, even though this is her natural way of being and is often helpful to her.

However, the fact that the biologist insists that there is nothing more to her is another example of her lack of objectivity. Later in the book, she does admit some of her secrecy and even concedes that she could have been more open with her husband. This suggests two possibilities: first, that this is another instance of the biologist not being fully truthful and open. Or, this could serve as further evidence that no one can be truly objective, because it is impossible for her to pull back and assess her own mind.

This was really the only thing I discovered in him after his return: a deep and unending solitude, as if he had been granted a gift that he didn't know what to do with. A gift that was poison to him and eventually killed him. But would it have killed me? That was the question that crept into my mind even as I stared into his eyes those last few times, willing myself to know his thoughts and failing.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

When the biologist's husband returns from Area X, he has a newfound "deep and unending solitude," as the biologist describes here, and he spends the final six months of his life in an observation facility before he dies of cancer. This description not only highlights the differences between the biologist and her husband but also provides some insight as to why the biologist chooses to go to Area X herself. Even though earlier in the chapter, the biologist states that her husband's involvement in the 11th expedition had nothing to do with why she signed up for the 12th expedition, this statement illustrates that this wasn't exactly true. Part of

her reason for signing up is because of the biologist's inherent tendency toward solitude and isolation, even in her relationships, and this drew her to Area X.

The biologist's withdrawn nature ultimately destroyed her marriage, and here she acknowledges that that solitude ultimately killed her husband. The biologist takes a different perspective on isolation, however: to her, solitude and self-reliance are liberating things. This is inherent in her word choice, in that she describes solitude as a "gift" to her, whereas she knows that to him, it was a "poison."

The passage also illustrates the biologist's inherent curiosity and desire to appreciate or solve mysteries. She is drawn to Area X's solitude but also the question of what, exactly, happened to her husband. In fact, her husband's incomprehensible thoughts represent perhaps the first mystery of Area X that the biologist encounters, and one that she "fails" to solve. This foreshadows the end of the book, when the biologist finds a new liberation in pursuing that solitude in Area X. She lets go of her home and decides to stay in Area X indefinitely, appreciating the environment's mystery even if she isn't able to solve it.

As the biologist tries to puzzle out the connection between the words written on the Tower's walls, the Crawler (the being writing the words), and the Tower itself, she identifies the difficulties in attempting to understand the whole mystery. This passage illustrates just how incomprehensible her experience in Area X is to her. The fact that she compares it to a "leviathan" whose shadow is passing over her only emphasizes this feeling: Area X is like a powerful monster that she can't fully see, but whose presence she feels in other, less tangible ways.

The biologist is starting to recognize here that in some ways, she may never be able to see the entire picture or fully capture it in her mind. She becomes surer of this feeling later, after attempting to gather as much information as she can about the place by reading a multitude of journals from previous expeditions. Area X is too sublime and incomprehensible—no matter how much information she gains, the only satisfying way to think about it is to know that she cannot solve its mysteries.


The passage also touches on how nature is powerful in other ways: the brightness in the biologist's chest is actively changing her, infusing her with energy that she would not have if she were only human. It has control and agency that goes beyond the biologist, and despite her skepticism, she finds that the only way to survive is to surrender to it—after all, it is the only thing that has protected her from the psychologist's hypnotism.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ But there is a limit to thinking about even a small piece of something monumental. You still see the shadow of the whole rearing up behind you, and you become lost in your thoughts in part from the panic of realizing the size of that imagined leviathan. I had to leave it there, compartmentalized, until I could write it all down, and seeing it on the page, begin to divine the true meaning. And now the lighthouse had finally gotten larger on the horizon. This presence weighed on me as I realized that the surveyor had been correct about at least one thing. Anyone within the lighthouse would see me coming for miles. Then, too, that other effect of the spores, the brightness in my chest, continued to sculpt me as I walked, and by the time I reached the deserted village that told me I was halfway to the lighthouse, I believed I could have run a marathon. I did not trust that feeling. I felt, in so many ways, that I was being lied to.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Crawler, The Surveyor, The Psychologist

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  


Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

☞ Then the dolphins breached, and it was almost as vivid a dislocation as that first descent into the Tower. I knew that the dolphins here sometimes ventured in from the sea, had adapted to the freshwater. But when the mind expects a certain range of possibilities, any explanation that falls outside of that expectation can surprise. Then something more wrenching occurred. As they slid by, the nearest one rolled slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye to me. It was painfully human, almost familiar. In an instant that glimpse was gone and they had submerged again, and I had no way to verify what I had seen. I stood there, watched those twinned lines disappear up the canal, back toward the deserted village. I had the unsettling thought that the natural world around me had become a kind of camouflage.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis



When the biologist is examining the ruined village, she spots a pod of dolphins in a nearby canal. What she sees in the canal adds to her overall unease, as she observes that the dolphins have eyes that are “painfully human.” This hints at her growing sense that the nature in Area X has consumed the human beings who lived here—both the ones who lived in the ruined village or the ones who visited Area X on an expedition.

Indeed, later on, the biologist writes that her husband may still exist in Area X in the eye of a dolphin—an idea foreshadowed here when she writes that the dolphin’s eye is “almost familiar” to her. This reinforces nature’s power over humanity, in that Area X is consuming the humans that lived or visited there. They are “camouflaged” in nature—a reversal from the normal dynamic in which humans often destroy and have power over nature.

This passage also ties into the idea that the biologist again has no way of being completely objective about what she is seeing—no way to “verify” her experiences. She calls back to these feelings later, when she believes that she is also becoming more and more taken over by the brightness in her chest. She fears then that she may not know that something is wrong, indicating that she has lost all sense of objectivity because of how Area X warps her perception. This underscores the idea that no one, including the biologist, can truly be objective, particularly when they are so steeped in an environment or an experience.

●● But fun for me was sneaking off to peer into a tidal pool, to grasp the intricacies of the creatures that lived there. Sustenance for me was tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things. Observation had always meant more to me than interaction. He knew all of this, I think. But I never could express myself that well to him, although I did try, and he did listen. And yet, I was nothing but expression in other ways. My sole gift or talent, I believe now, was that places could impress themselves upon me, and I could become a part of them with ease. Even a bar was a type of ecosystem, if a crude one, and to someone entering, someone without my husband’s agenda, that person could have seen me sitting there and had no trouble imagining that I was happy in my little bubble of silence. Would have had no trouble believing I fit in.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist’s Husband

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the biologist describes how, in comparison to her husband, she often felt most at home melting into different ecosystems rather than engaging with other people. First, this explores the underlying dynamic between the biologist and her husband. The biologist clearly isolated herself and was perhaps more self-reliant than her husband would like. But the biologist’s description illustrates that this was actually a beneficial dynamic for her—it is something that made her happy. Even when in a marriage, she felt fundamentally alone, gaining things one might associate with a relationship—“sustenance” and “orgasm”—instead in the natural world. This suggests that in some cases, solitude and self-reliance can be helpful, or at the very least that the biologist enjoys this kind of dynamic. But at the same time, it started to dissolve her relationship with her husband.


The biologist also hints at one of the things that makes her so suited to Area X, and that makes her different from the other members of her team. She gains a thrill from nature; she loves understanding its intricacies and even becoming a part of it to some extent. This proves crucial to her arc over the course of the book, as she realizes that the only way to live in Area X is to do just that—to integrate herself into it.


●● The lighthouse had drawn expedition members like the ships it had once sought to bring to safety through the narrows and reefs offshore. I could only underscore my previous speculation that to most of them a lighthouse was a symbol, a reassurance of the old order, and by its prominence on the horizon it provided an illusion of a safe refuge. That it had betrayed that trust was manifest in what I had formed downstairs. And yet even though some of them must have known that, still they had come. Out of hope. Out of faith. Out of stupidity.

But I had begun to realize that you had to wage a guerrilla war against whatever force had come to inhabit Area X if you wanted to fight at all. You had to fade into the landscape, or like the writer of the thistle chronicles, you had to pretend it wasn’t there for as long as possible.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The

Psychologist

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

As the biologist explores the lighthouse in Area X, she recognizes that it is a false symbol of refuge. Lighthouses are generally viewed as icons of safe passage, guiding people to the harbor, and this one has also been fortified with various military safeguards. The lighthouse is also familiar, because the Southern Reach has made sure that the expeditions are aware of it on maps and other preparation materials. Yet in seeing the horrific images of overturned tables, bloodstains, and bullet holes in the lighthouse, the biologist recognizes that in reality, the lighthouse doesn't actually protect humans.

The evidence of this gruesome struggle in the lighthouse actually confirms that in Area X, nature is much more powerful than humans are. While the expedition members thought they were safe, many of them were killed—either by Area X's mysterious creatures, or by former expedition members that Area X had been able to conquer. This is what happens to the psychologist, whom the biologist soon discovers has flung herself off the lighthouse because she thought the biologist was trying to kill her. Area X's ability to mimic humans in order to destroy them emphasizes its power and complexity, whereas humans barely understand Area X.

The biologist's conclusion that to survive Area X, one has to "fade into the landscape" reinforces this point. It foreshadows the end of the book, in which the biologist does fade into the landscapes, and it underscores nature's power in that the only way to survive it is to become a part of it.

Related Characters: The Biologist, The Psychologist (speaker), The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

In the psychologist's final moments alive, she explains that the biologist might go mad if she were to let the biologist access memories of crossing the border—before trying to undermine the biologist's reality even further. This exchange illustrates two key ideas about belief and understanding in Area X, particularly as it explores the human mind and its constant desire to make sense of the world. Here, the psychologist again calls into question the idea that anyone can be sure of objective reality, taunting the biologist by suggesting that even memories of her past might be completely fabricated.

This illustrates another reason that the biologist's inherent isolation and mistrust of those around her has proved helpful. By not giving up so much information about her past, she has made herself less open to manipulation. Even if it might be difficult to prove objective reality, it allows her to feel a certainty in herself and a reliance on her mind that others may not be able to carry. This is evident in the fact that she calls her mind and her memories "the ghost bird's castle keep," relating it to the nickname that her husband called her ("ghost bird"). To him, the ghost bird was a symbol of her not being present, but to her it is a symbol of solitude and self-reliance. Even though her withdrawn nature may have undermined her relationships with the other expedition members and with her husband, it has helped her maintain her own sanity, her "inviolable" reality.

This also relates to the idea that some mysteries cannot be solved. Even though the biologist acknowledges that there might be no way for her to confirm her past, it's not worth questioning, because she has "no choice" but to accept reality for what it is. Some mysteries, therefore, are not only best left unsolved, but are even best left uninvestigated.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ "How many of your memories do you think are implanted?" the psychologist asked. "How many of your memories of the world beyond the border are verifiable?"

"That won't work on me," I told her. "I am sure of the here and now, this moment, and the next. I am sure of my past." That was ghost bird's castle keep, and it was inviolate. It might have been punctured by the hypnosis during training, but it had not been breached. Of this I was certain, and would continue to be certain, because I had no choice.

☞☞ "I'll give you this scrap: The border is advancing. For now, slowly, a little bit more every year. In ways you wouldn't expect. But maybe soon it'll eat a mile or two at a time."

The thought of that silenced me for a long moment. When you are too close to the center of a mystery there is no way to pull back and see the shape of it entire. The black boxes might do nothing but in my mind they were all blinking red.

Related Characters: The Biologist, The Psychologist (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129-130

Explanation and Analysis


As the psychologist gives the biologist crumbs of information about what is happening in Area X, she reveals that Area X's border has been advancing for some time. This fact exposes one of the primary motivations for the expeditions in the first place: to understand why and how Area X is expanding. Yet the fact that it is expanding, and that the expeditions have been powerless to stop it or even understand it, demonstrates that while humans often think they can conquer nature, the nature in Area X is actually much more powerful than human beings can fully conceive.

In addition, the biologist acknowledges the idea that objectivity is impossible when one is immersed in an idea. They are unable to “pull back and see the shape of the entire,” confirming explicitly that they are “too close” to the center of the mystery to look at it objectively.

The reference back to the black boxes again show the biologist's advantage in being self-reliant, particularly in the context of the mission's secrecy and danger. The black boxes, which in reality didn't measure anything but were meant to keep the members of the mission calm, were symbols of false security. But now, the black boxes represent the biologist's own ability to judge the Southern Reach's deception—an invisible indicator of her own mistrust that has helped her protect herself.

☹️ Cleaning up a little later, a fit of laughter came out of nowhere and made me double up in pain. I had suddenly remembered doing the dishes after dinner the night my husband had come back from across the border. I could distinctly recall wiping the spaghetti and chicken scraps from a plate and wondering with a kind of bewilderment how such a mundane act could coexist with the mystery of his reappearance.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Surveyor, The Psychologist, The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis



As the biologist returns to base camp after witnessing the psychologist's death and killing the surveyor, she takes a moment to reflect on the absurdity of her situation. Cleaning up the base camp after the surveyor destroyed it sparks a memory of a similar cleaning when she was home with her husband following his reappearance. Just as the biologist has repeatedly commented on how “mundane” other aspects of life are in comparison with Area X, this contrast again illustrates just how different and sublime Area X is in comparison with the dull, uncomplicated tasks of the world beyond it.

The biologist's husband's reappearance and his experience in Area X was a mystery that the biologist felt she had to solve. Now, reflecting on that idea once more, she has a new appreciation for that mystery, having experienced it herself. It is this absurdity that prompts her laughter, because she recognizes that just as she couldn't understand exactly how he returned to their home, she could never have understood the experience that he had in Area X. Even having experienced it herself, she still doesn't fully understand it. This fact—that despite trying to understand Area X firsthand by visiting it herself, she is still in the dark—reinforces the idea that the only way to experience some mysteries is to appreciate them rather than to try and solve them.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☹️ I didn't tell my husband my walk had a destination because I wanted to keep the lot for myself. There are so many things couples do from habit and because they are expected to, and I didn't mind those rituals. Sometimes I even enjoyed them. But I needed to be selfish about that patch of urban wilderness. It expanded in my mind while I was at work, calmed me, gave me a series of miniature dramas to look forward to. I didn't know that while I was applying this Band-Aid to my need to be unconfined, my husband was dreaming of Area X and much greater open spaces.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

When the biologist's husband was alive, they lived in a city



together, and she would often go out late at night to an empty lot—lying to him about where she was going. First, the empty lot—much like the neglected swimming pool where the biologist used to observe aquatic organisms as a child—demonstrates nature’s power to reclaim territory that has been decimated by human beings. Calling it her patch of “urban wilderness” is a kind of oxymoron that suggests nature can find a way to persist, no matter the environment.


But more than illustrating nature’s persistence, the story also demonstrates the struggles between the biologist and her husband, and how her desire for isolation ended up destroying their relationship. She held onto secrecy and lies in order to be self-reliant and find the solitude she craved, but her inability to be open about this desire unsettled her husband and created conflict in their relationship. This is particularly poignant because she also acknowledges that they might have connected over their mutual desire for adventure and open spaces, but the walls that she put up prevented that connection and pushed him away from her.

The passage also hints at the book’s conclusion. While here, the biologist is putting a “Band-Aid” on her desire to be “unconfined,” abandoning the outside world and fully surrendering to Area X will help her truly fulfill that desire. Thus, even though she expresses some regret over the difficulties she brought to her marriage through her secrecy and closed-off nature, the end of the book affirms that her purpose and joy ultimately stems from finding liberation through solitude and self-reliance, in contrast to the confines of her relationships.

●● There were thousands of “dead” spaces like the lot I had observed, thousands of transitional environments that no one saw, that had been rendered invisible because they were not “of use.” Anything could inhabit them for a time without anyone noticing. We had come to think of the border as this monolithic invisible wall, but if members of the eleventh expedition had been able to return without our noticing, couldn’t other things have already gotten through?

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Psychologist, The Biologist’s Husband

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis


As the biologist reflects on the empty lot she used to visit, she realizes that there are many similar transitional environments that few people pick up on in the world. She suggests, quite ominously, that these transitional environments may actually be extensions of Area X, in the same way that members of the 11th expedition (like her husband) were extensions of the Area—both of them are able to slip in unnoticed and reclaim nature’s territory. This reinforces the idea that nature is powerful and persistent; it can invade a place that was once decimated by human activity. This process is almost impossible to stop, particularly because humans can’t even seem to identify or understand that this “colonization,” as the biologist calls it elsewhere, is happening.

At the same time, the biologist’s question adds to Area X’s mystery, especially by bringing up the lack of understanding about what, exactly, happened to the 11th expedition when they recrossed the border. This passage posits a possible answer to the mystery of Area X’s expansion, suggesting that it has already begun to take control of the world. But the fact that the biologist poses this theory as a question suggests that she truly doesn’t know what is happening and may not have any way of finding out. As with the other mysteries surrounding Area X, the statement suggests that trying to solve the mystery of what is happening at the border could be a pointless endeavor, because the border is too sublime to fully understand.

●● Slowly, painfully, I realized what I had been reading from the very first words of his journal. My husband had had an inner life that went beyond his gregarious exterior, and if I had known enough to let him inside my guard, I might have understood this fact. Except I hadn’t, of course. I had let tidal pools and fungi that could devour plastic inside my guard, but not him. Of all the aspects of the journal, this ate at me the most. He had created his share of our problems—by pushing me too hard, by wanting too much, by trying to see something in me that didn’t exist. But I could have met him partway and retained my sovereignty. And now it was too late.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist’s Husband

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis


As the biologist reads her husband's journal from the 11th expedition to Area X, she realizes the tragedy in their relationship. They had much more they could connect on than she thought, but her impulse toward self-isolation ended up ruining her relationship with him. First, she recognizes that she has a "guard," an emotional wall that she put up in front of him. Even this is a step toward self-recognition, because earlier in the book, she stated that she always felt she was completely open and honest with him—that she didn't have anything she was hiding, and that who she was on the surface is who she really was. But this acknowledgement suggests that the biologist is so isolated as to lie about her own guardedness, or that she is once again so immersed in her own mind that she had no way of being objective about it.

The reference to the fact that she had let "tidal pools and fungi" inside her guard is a recognition of her fundamental tendency toward being alone and of how this destroyed their marriage. In retrospect, she knows that she could have maintained her independence and still found ways to be vulnerable with her husband. Her statement that it is now "too late" to forge that connection suggests that she regrets her actions, and that she acknowledges that her guardedness is part of the reason that her husband decided to go to Area X, which ultimately killed him. Thus, this passage encapsulates a more tragic side of the biologist's intense secrecy, mistrust, and self-reliance. Even though these qualities are an innate part of her and can be advantageous in certain settings, they also come at the cost of her relationships.

☞ The enormity of this experience combined with the heartbeat and the crescendo of sound from its ceaseless writing to fill me up until I had no room left. This moment, which I might have been waiting for my entire life all unknowing—this moment of an encounter with the most beautiful, the most terrible thing I might ever experience—was beyond me. What inadequate recording equipment I had brought with me and what an inadequate name I had chosen for it—the Crawler. Time elongated, was nothing but fuel for the words this thing had created on the wall for who knew how many years for who knew what purpose.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Crawler

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Returning to the Tower for the last time in the book, the biologist finally has a direct encounter with the Crawler—the creature that's been writing messages on the Tower's walls. After attempting to try to get a full glimpse of the Crawler or the words it's writing, she recognizes that the images are constantly shifting or too difficult to look at. The biologist finally acknowledges here that there is simply no way for her to comprehend what she is experiencing.

The passage's word choice, much of which evokes the sublime, emphasizes the idea that the biologist must let go of any attempt to puzzle out Area X's mysteries and simply give herself over to the experience. The statement that the biologist is dealing with the most "beautiful" and "terrible" thing that she has ever experienced illustrates how these images and ideas are too great and profound for her to truly understand. She reinforces this idea over and over again: she has "no room left" in her brain to understand all that she is seeing, the experience is "beyond [her]," and her equipment is "inadequate" to understand what is happening. She also repeats "who knew," wondering what the Crawler is doing or for how long—a rhetorical question inherently acknowledging that no one could possibly know what the Crawler is doing or how long it has been there.

The suggestion that this moment might have been the moment that her entire life has been leading up to communicates the enormity and incomprehensibility of this experience. And by framing the pinnacle of her life as an encounter with something so incomprehensible, the biologist suggests that one of the most important and unavoidable aspects of life itself is to live alongside unsolvable mysteries, which can be appreciated but not understood.

☞ A swimming pool. A rocky bay. An empty lot. A tower. A lighthouse. These things are real and not real. They exist and they do not exist. I remake them in my mind with every new thought, every remembered detail, and each time they are slightly different. Sometimes they are camouflage or disguises. Sometimes they are something more truthful.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Crawler

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis


After the biologist's encounter with the Crawler, she resurfaces thinking about the different environments that she has experienced throughout her life. This quote sums up much of what the biologist has already recognized throughout the book about objectivity and the human mind. She recognizes that even in memories, there can be no objective fact, because they are running through the mind's own filter. And because a person is immersed in their own thoughts and perspectives, it is nearly impossible to understand how their mind might be affecting their own perceptions.


The fact that the biologist chooses these landmarks in order to prove her point is notable, because these memories and places are the cornerstones of her narrative thus far. In this way, the biologist also calls into question the idea that her narration has been completely reliable. She hints at the idea that there is some kind of objective truth—that sometimes she might recall these places in a more “truthful” fashion—but even so, she also seems to recognize that “truth” is unachievable when telling a story about oneself. Neither she nor anyone else has any way of knowing how truthful she is being.

Imagine, too, that while the Tower makes and remakes the world inside the border, it also slowly sends its emissaries across that border in ever greater numbers, so that in tangled gardens and fallow fields its envoys begin their work. How does it travel and how far? What strange matter mixes and mingles? In some future moment, perhaps the infiltration will reach even a certain remote sheet of coastal rock, quietly germinate in those tidal pools I know so well. Unless, of course, I am wrong that Area X is rousing itself from slumber, changing, becoming different than it was before.

The terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is that I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Crawler

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

In the biologist's concluding thoughts on Area X, she returns to the key points the book is making about nature and mystery. Here, the biologist understands that nature is powerful—perhaps far more powerful than human beings are. Nature is also complex—so complex that its mysteries may never fully be understood or solved, and certainly not by the biologist. First, the biologist again hearkens back to the idea that Area X is spreading far beyond its border. (Or, its border might be expanding much more widely than she anticipated, as she posited earlier that the empty lot that she used to visit may be an example of Area X's expansion). In this way, she argues that nature has great power than humans, because it is able to take over areas that were once the domain of humans as well as to completely command what is happening inside Area X.

The biologist even looks at what is happening from an ecological perspective, perhaps imbuing the book with an environmentalist takeaway. The references to “tangled gardens” and “fallow fields” suggest that people remake or destroy nature to be useful to themselves. This is how humans have altered the world “so much.” But by stating that Area X's expansion may be a good thing in response to this destruction, the book suggests that while humans have the power to change the world, Area X's nature has an even greater power to change it back.

The tone of the passage is what continues to affirm Area X's sublime mysteries. The biologist still doesn't understand exactly what Area X and the Crawler are; as much as she tries to posit the solutions, she also acknowledges that she could be very wrong, and that she may never truly know. But in suggesting that these mysterious workings may not be bad, the biologist affirms that sometimes it's more important to experience mystery and to appreciate its consequences than to fully understand it.

●● Observing all of this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion I had to *know everything*... anything... and in its place remains the knowledge that the brightness is not done with me. It is just beginning, and the thought of continually doing harm to myself to remain human seems somehow pathetic. I will not be here when the thirteenth expedition reaches base camp. (Have they seen me yet, or are they about to? Will I melt into this landscape, or look up from a stand of reeds or the waters of the canal to see some other explorer staring down in disbelief? Will I be aware that anything is wrong or out of place?)

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Crawler

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

As the biologist concludes her journal entries, she illustrates how she has changed in both mind and body. This passage touches on several of the book's main ideas: first, it acknowledges that sometimes the only way to experience a mystery is to appreciate that it may never be solved. After experiencing the sublime encounter with the Crawler, and after realizing how little all of the different journals from the innumerable expeditions across time told her about Area X, the biologist realizes here that there is no way for her to fully understand the Area. Whereas the biologist once had a "burning" desire to "know everything," now she recognizes that she can never achieve this knowledge. That the mystery of what is going to happen to her will linger on actually provides her with a kind of closure, because she knows she must simply give herself over to that mystery—and to nature's power.

This gets at the second major theme in the book, which is that nature is far more powerful and persistent than humans. As the biologist pointed out earlier in the book, while the expeditions have been decimated, Area X continues on—and this expedition is no exception. All of her colleagues are dead, while she is now being slowly consumed by nature, to the point that she knows she is soon to give up her humanity entirely and become one with that nature. She posits that her two options seem to be to "melt into this landscape," or to eventually transform such that the next expedition will look upon her in horror as she stands in the canal or the reeds. This calls back to the dolphin (which swam in the canal), and the wild boar and the moaning creature that the biologist encountered (which were in the reeds). She implies that these creatures may all contain elements or consciousnesses of former expedition

members, reinforcing how powerful nature is, such that it can overtake human beings.

Lastly, the biologist once again hints at the difficulty in remaining objective about one's own experiences. In wondering if she'll be aware that anything is wrong as she continues to live in Area X, the biologist concedes that becoming a part of Area X alters her perception about it, like knowing what is "wrong" or "out of place." This has broader implications: since a person is always a part of their environment, their perception is always somewhat clouded by their subjective experiences and judgments, suggesting that no one can be objective.

●● I plan to continue on into Area X, to go as far as I can before it is too late. I will follow my husband up the coast, up past the island, even. I don't believe I'll find him—I don't need to find him—but I want to see what he saw. I want to feel him close, as if he is in the room. And, if I'm honest, I can't shake the sense that he is still here, somewhere, even if utterly transformed—in the eye of a dolphin, in the touch of an uprising of moss, anywhere and everywhere. Perhaps I'll even find a boat abandoned on a deserted beach, if I'm lucky, and some sign of what happened next. I could be content with just that, even knowing what I know.

Related Characters: The Biologist (speaker), The Biologist's Husband

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194-195

Explanation and Analysis

In one of the book's final passages, the biologist determines that rather than returning home, she is going to remain in Area X and follow her husband's path up the coast. In acknowledging that the biologist's husband is still somewhere in Area X—even if in the eye of a dolphin, like the one she saw in the village in Chapter 3—the biologist recognizes how nature has totally consumed the people who have been here. This is even true of the biologist herself: earlier, she noted that the only way to truly survive Area X is to "fade into the landscape," and now, that is what the biologist is doing. The idea that the only way to survive Area X is to become part of it reinforces just how powerful nature is there—far more persistent and long-lasting than any human being.

This passage also suggests that the biologist is still grappling with some of Area X's mysteries, even as she recognizes

that she may never truly find the answers. The imagery in the biologist's description of her husband—that of a sole man in a boat, caught between the mysterious Area X and the mundane outside world—alludes to the Greek character of Charon, ferrying souls between the living world and the land of the dead. The biologist's husband has taken up this mysterious, unknowable space between Area X and the outside world, and the biologist is taking up that mantle as well. She wants to pursue her husband as far as she can, but she knows that she must be satisfied with only seeing a small piece of the puzzle. This perhaps suggests a final point on Area X: that the point of life's mysteries is not to fully understand them, but simply to appreciate and take part in

them.

The book's conclusion, with the biologist remaining in Area X and searching for her husband, is an ambiguous one that suggests two ideas. On the one hand, it acknowledges her newfound desire to connect with her husband in a deeper way. But because she seems to suspect that she will, in fact, never find her husband, her decision takes on a different tone. While she is interested in finding some meaningful connection to make up for the damage that she did to their relationship, her refusal to return home also shows her liberation and joy in finally being fully self-reliant and alone.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The biologist, the anthropologist, the surveyor, and the psychologist all start out for Area X; they are the first expedition to travel there in more than two years. The group is entirely women, and the psychologist is the expedition's leader. She put them all under hypnosis while crossing the border to make sure they stayed calm; they then hike four days to base camp. The expedition's purpose is to continue the government's investigation into Area X, working their way out from base camp. They have supplies for six months, but their mission could last years.

The group has no watches or compasses; their only equipment is a measuring device made of black metal with an indicator. If it glows red, they have 30 minutes to get to a safe place, but they have no idea what the device measures or why they should be afraid if it glows red.

The group reaches their base camp, where they replace obsolete or damaged equipment. The members of the previous expedition disappeared abruptly from Area X, and when they appeared back across the border, they had no memory of recrossing the border, unlike prior expeditions. So, the current expedition has to look out for anything that could cause this kind of memory loss.

As the group approaches base camp, which is situated next to a forest filled with plant and animal life, they also notice eerie signs of long-ago human habitation. There is an odd, powerful moaning each day at dusk, and it is difficult for them to recognize which direction it comes from. The biologist relays that even their basic experiences—seeing the black water in nearby bogs, the grass, and the gray forest, and hearing the low moaning—are difficult to fully communicate or understand. Area X is beautiful and also desolate.

The book's opening pages hint at the incomprehensibility of Area X—first and foremost, in the Area's name, as "X" often stands in for the unknown. This suggests that its unknown nature is the foundation for the government's desire to investigate it. The biologist—who is the narrator of the book—also establishes the group dynamic among the women: she is part of this team headed by the psychologist. These facts already hint at some secrecy and mystery surrounding Area X, because they have to be hypnotized in order to cross the border.



The black metal device hints at some of the secrecy that permeates the expedition and the biologist's early mistrust. Even though the box is supposed to indicate danger, they understand very little about the danger, even though everyone in the group is well-educated and trained in their respective fields. This adds to the eeriness and mistrust that Area X inspires.



The fact that the previous expedition came back with severe memory loss hints that the nature in Area X has the upper hand over the human expeditions. Area X appears powerful enough to prevent humans from acquiring information about it.



Here, the biologist establishes the sublime (unknowable and awe-inspiring) nature of Area X. She suggests here that the moaning and the environment are so beautiful and desolate as to be incomprehensible and incommunicable to others. This passage also returns to the idea that nature is more persistent and powerful than human beings, because nature has overrun the civilization of whatever humans lived there previously.



On their fourth day in Area X, the group finds what the biologist calls a “tower.” It is about 60 feet in diameter and rises up from the ground only about eight inches. The northmost point of the tower opens up to reveal a spiral staircase winding down into the darkness. The biologist doesn’t know why she calls it a tower, considering it tunnels below the earth, but it is the word that comes to her—she remembers the lighthouse on the coast that they saw when they arrived at Area X, and she views the tower as an extension of that lighthouse into the ground. She writes, in hindsight, that this is the first “irrational” thought she had.

The surveyor is shocked to see the tower, as it is not on any of their maps. The anthropologist isn’t quite sure how to identify the tower’s origins, as the materials are hard to identify. The group has no way of informing their superiors of the discovery, as it is a rule that expeditions do not make outside contact (for fear of some kind of contamination), and they have no technology to do so. They do, however, have weapons: knives, handguns, and one assault rifle.

It is expected that they will all keep a journal like the one the biologist is writing, which will either return with them or be recovered by the next expedition. They have been ordered to provide maximum context but not share their journals with one another, because too much shared information could skew their observations and lead to too much subjectivity. But the biologist knows that true objectivity is hopeless.

The psychologist is excited by their discovery and asks if the others are also excited. The biologist feels like the psychologist’s tone is like that of a bad actor, but she says that she’s excited, even though she feels a growing sense of unease. The surveyor shrugs, and the anthropologist nods. The biologist doesn’t use the others’ names because they were told that their personal lives should be left behind—and besides, only the surveyor will survive beyond the next day.

This passage, describing the tower for the first time, not only hints at the biologist’s difficulty in remaining objective in Area X, but it also illustrates that this is a story the biologist is continuing to grapple with. Her comment that this was her first irrational thought in hindsight suggests that she is recounting this story from an unspecified future time. Additionally, this comment introduces the idea that her experiences of Area X may not always be reliable ones, because she was thinking “irrationally” at the time.



Here, the book hints that the expedition—particularly the biologist—is already tending toward mistrust in the face of these revelations. Although the biologist doesn’t comment on these facts directly, mentioning that they can’t make outside contact but that they have weapons illustrates her mistrust in their superiors. It seems that perhaps they’ve inadequately prepared the group for the mission and the potential threats that they face.



Even though the intent in not sharing information is to be objective, the biologist explicitly recognizes that being truly objective is impossible. This is particularly true when telling a story about one’s own experiences, as the biologist is doing. Not sharing observations also isolates the women from one another, making them increasingly mistrustful of one another’s judgments.



The biologist’s unease in this moment, despite her agreement that she is excited about the tower, points to the biologist’s mistrust of the psychologist and feeling of separation from the rest of the group. The fact that they don’t use names or reveal anything personal on the mission also adds to the overall sense that despite being part of a team, in reality, the women are quite isolated from one another, because there’s no camaraderie or personal relationships between them. In noting that only the surveyor will survive beyond the next day, the biologist foreshadows that this lack of connection between them will contribute to the expedition’s failure and the other women’s deaths.



Originally, the expedition had five members and included a linguist. To reach the border, the biologist recalls that they had to enter a white room with a door and a metal chair with straps around it, which alarmed her. The facility was under the control of the Southern Reach, the government agency that dealt with everything connected to Area X. The biologist doesn't remember much of the process to get ready for entry into Area X, but the linguist never reappeared—the psychologist explained that she had second thoughts.

The psychologist then hypnotized the other members so that they would not experience hallucinations when crossing the border, but the biologist isn't sure that this is the real reason she hypnotized them. When she woke up, she was in full gear across the border, lurching with the new weight of 40-pound backpacks and supplies on their belts. The psychologist seemed almost smug as the others struggled to adjust.

Looking around, the biologist found herself on a dirt trail with ants and beetles and tall pines on both sides. They marked their location with a red cloth; if the psychologist became incapacitated, the others were told to return here to wait for "extraction"—though they were never told what "extraction" meant. They were told not to look back upon arrival, but the biologist did anyway when the psychologist wasn't looking. However, she only saw a hazy, indistinct light—perhaps a gate or a trick of the eye.

The biologist qualified for the mission because she was familiar with complex ecosystems, and Area X had many of these different environments, with forest and swamp and beach all coexisting close to one another. She understood why no one lives in Area X, but she chose to believe that it was simply a wildlife refuge that she was discovering. And, she thought, it hardly mattered what lies she told herself, because the real world had become empty to her.

The description of the room the team entered also hints at an ominous beginning to the expedition, shrouded in a nondescript government agency. The fact that the biologist doesn't remember experiencing anything in the white room also adds to the secrecy surrounding the exact purpose and reasoning behind certain elements of the expedition. This provides some context as to why she may mistrust the other people involved in the expedition—particularly the psychologist, who seems to be the team's leader.



The more that the biologist relays about the psychologist, the clearer the implication that she does not trust the psychologist or the reasons that she was hypnotizing them. The biologist is much more inclined to rely on herself rather than others. Her observation that the psychologist was smug in reaction to their struggles also suggests the beginnings of a conflict between them.



The biologist's short vision of the border illustrates two key points: first, it shows how she does not trust the government agency or the psychologist. She is trying to get extra information about Area X despite their warnings not to—particularly because so much of their expedition has already been characterized by tightly controlled information and secrecy. Additionally, the fact that the biologist can't get a good view of the border hints that the human mind cannot fully understand some things about Area X.



Here, the biologist illustrates where she begins in terms of how she thinks about nature: as something to be studied, controlled, and protected, as in a wildlife refuge. In this way, she falls into the common belief that humans are stronger than nature. Additionally, the biologist hints that she is telling herself lies because the real world has become uninteresting and meaningless. This foreshadows her eventual reveal of why she has come to Area X, and it again suggests that she is not being fully transparent or objective in her narration.



The fourth night, the group discusses the **tower**, though the other three insist on calling it a tunnel. There is a vague protocol between them, where they each have some autonomy to decide on what they want to explore, according to their skill sets. The surveyor has medical and firearm experience, the anthropologist was once an architect, and the biologist knows very little about the psychologist.

The discussion of the **tower** is the group's first opportunity to test the limits of disagreement and compromise. The anthropologist wants to explore farther and map out what's around them before returning to the tower. The surveyor believes they should start with the tower to make sure there's nothing invasive or threatening in it. The biologist agrees with the surveyor, interested that it seems deliberately excluded from their maps. Inwardly, the biologist is fascinated with the structure—she can't tell if she craves or fears it.

The psychologist weighs all of the opinions and asks if anyone wants to leave yet—everyone shakes their heads. The psychologist agrees that the **tunnel** unsettles her and that they should investigate it. They then bid each other goodnight, as it has become dark. Sitting alone with her thoughts, the biologist wonders what could be hidden at the tower's base.

During the four-day hike from the border to the base camp, the group experienced nothing out of the ordinary. However, on the last day of their journey, a 700-pound wild boar appeared and charged at them. The surveyor grabbed the assault rifle to take aim at the boar. However, when the boar approached, the biologist noticed a spark in its eyes, a kind of inner torment. It veered left abruptly with a cry of anguish and threw itself into nearby underbrush. When the group arrived at the spot where it landed, the boar was gone, and the biologist thought it might have been victim to some neurological parasite.

The morning after the group discovers the **tower**, they rise early. The surveyor gives them each a handgun and grabs the assault rifle herself as they approach. With the gun, the biologist feels a new tension. Members of the second expedition had committed suicide, and members of the third had shot each other, which makes the biologist nervous. They are the 12th expedition.

The fact that the biologist calls the passageway a tower, while the other women call it a tunnel, demonstrates how difficult it is for people to be objective about an environment they're immersed in. The biologist can't help but think of it as a tower, while the others can't understand why she sees it this way, illustrating that perception is inherently subjective.



The biologist's senses of craving, fearing, and being fascinated by the tower all evoke sensations that are similar to her arrival in Area X. They again connect to the idea of the sublime—that some things are so beautiful and terrible that they cannot be fully understood, even as people are drawn to them. Moreover, the biologist's desire to explore the tower shows her reliance on herself rather than other people.



The psychologist's unsettled reaction to the tunnel is similar to how the biologist feels about it. Even when looking at the same structure with the same facts, the women cannot make sense of it or even agree on what the structure is. Additionally, the biologist's fixation on the structure and what could be at its base hints at the unknowable mysteries that lie there.



The encounter with the boar illustrates how persistent nature is, in that it is actively trying to defend itself from the humans who are trying to investigate and conquer it. Even though the surveyor is able to ward the boar off, it survives, and its resilience hints at more severe encounters to come. Additionally, the description of the boar as having inner torment and a spark in its eyes foreshadows the biologist's later revelations about the mysterious origins of some of the creatures living in Area X.



The weapons continue to ratchet up tension in the group. The grim history of the expeditions makes the biologist even more mistrustful and self-reliant, as she worries about the potential for violence on this expedition. Thus, her isolation and mistrust aren't just an emotional wall between her and the rest of the groups—they're also helpful protective instincts.



At the **tower**, the group examines the structure. The psychologist comments on the tower's different measurements: its height, its diameter, and its building materials. She wonders whether a storm may have uncovered the entrance, which is why it was not previously on their maps. The biologist thinks that the psychologist is simply trying to reassure herself with facts, and that it must be difficult to lead a mission like this.

The biologist reiterates that she thinks of the structure as a **tower**, not a tunnel, and the others grudgingly accept her perspective. The surveyor descends first, struggling on the short steps. She calls out that everything is clear to the first level, and the biologist and anthropologist follow the surveyor as the psychologist stands watch at the top. Underground, the stairwell is cool, dusty, and slightly damp. Twenty feet below the surface, the structure opens out to a lower level with an eight-foot ceiling and blank, off-white walls. There is another staircase opposite the opening where they arrived, and the biologist still thinks that she's correct about this being a tower.

While the group is familiar with the **lighthouse** that they saw on their first day at base camp, the **tower's** purpose is totally unfamiliar to them. The biologist feels uncomfortable in the silence, and she asks many questions as to the tower's potential origins and purpose, hoping to stave off that silence.

The group looks down into the second stairwell, where the biologist observes glowing green vines along the left wall, progressing into the darkness. Eventually, she realizes that the vines spell out words: "Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that..." before the vines continue to descend into the darkness.

The psychologist's reliance on facts illustrates her desire to be objective, particularly as a scientist. But the biologist recognizes that relying on facts is a somewhat fruitless reassurance—not only because even facts can be manipulated, but also because these facts don't do much to explain the tower's mysteries.



In contrast to the psychologist's reliance on facts, the biologist continues to introduce her subjective perspective that the structure is a tower, rather than a tunnel. As the women descend, and the biologist continues to reaffirm her point of view, the tower symbolizes the idea that when one is entrenched in an environment (even literally, in this case, as they are completely surrounded by the tower's walls), it is impossible to truly be objective about that environment.



The biologist's comparison between the lighthouse and the tower illustrates their different symbolic purposes: while the lighthouse represents a point of safety that is familiar to them, the tower represents the unknown and the sublime, because it inspires both fear and fascination in the biologist.



The words along the tower walls add to the ominous incomprehensibility of the structure—it's both beautiful and terrifying. Even though the biologist has difficulty deciphering the words, the references to "strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner" perhaps alludes to the biblical tale of Adam and Eve. In this story, God forbids Adam and Eve (the first man and woman, according to the Bible) to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they disobey, God exiles them from the Garden of Eden (paradise). Thus, the message in the vines implies that trying to pursue knowledge—in this case, trying to understand Area X—will "bring forth the seeds of the dead," rending them from their paradise, much like Adam and Eve. This suggests that knowledge may not always be good, and that some things are meant to be unknown.



The biologist gets closer to the vines, which in reality look like a green moss or fungi, packed close together. When the biologist leans in closer to the words, the W spews out golden spores, which get stuck in the biologist's nose. Concealing the spores, she tells the others that the letters are made of some sort of fungi. They can't seem to understand how the words got there, and it unsettles them.

The biologist tries to remain calm, but she is worried that she might be infected with something. She also realizes that the further she explores, the more the air will be full of potential contaminants. She decides not to tell the others anything and explains that they should go back up, hoping to prevent them from becoming exposed. As they all climb back up the stairs, the biologist has a moment of panic, thinking that the walls now have a fleshy aspect to them, like they're traveling inside the "gullet of a beast."

At the top, the biologist tells the psychologist what they saw, and the psychologist insists on going down to observe the words. When the biologist suggests they get masks to avoid toxins, the psychologist says, "Paralysis is not a cogent analysis." Later, the biologist realizes that the psychologist tried to bind her with a hypnotic suggestion before descending. At the top, the biologist wonders what the psychologist is doing and becomes agitated. Fifteen minutes later, the psychologist returns.

The psychologist flatly remarks that what she saw was very interesting. This offends the anthropologist, who becomes hysterical, exclaiming that she has never seen anything like the words before. The psychologist asks if the anthropologist needs to be calmed, but the biologist butts in to say they should decide what to do next. They return to camp for lunch and complete their regular tasks, while the biologist monitors herself for any biological changes from the spores. Gradually, she relaxes, hoping that the spores will have no effect even though she knows that they could simply have a long incubation period.

Consuming the spores is a turning point for the biologist. First, it shows nature's power over human beings, in that the fungus is able to infect her and, presumably, subsequently influence her. And second, the way the biologist hides the spores from the others again shows that she doesn't trust them enough to reveal that she has been infected. She would rather rely on herself to deal with the problem, which will prove crucial.



Keeping her contamination secret—despite the knowledge that the spores could be harmful—shows that the biologist inherently mistrusts the other members of her group. She doesn't want to tell them that she has been infected perhaps because she is more worried about their reaction than she is eager to receive their help, showing her tendency toward self-reliance and isolation. In addition, this passage illustrates how the biologist's perceptions are already being affected by the spores, in seeing the true nature of the tower. Moreover, the description as the tower as the "gullet of a beast" adds to the ominous atmosphere, as it gives the impression that the tower is a kind of organism that's consuming the women.



Again, the biologist starts to foreshadow the later conflict between her and the psychologist. While the biologist's mistrust of the psychologist has been bubbling throughout the early part of the book, here the biologist realizes that her mistrust has been justified and even helpful, because the psychologist is manipulating them.



Even though the biologist is trying to monitor herself for biological changes, she doesn't have a way of doing so objectively. Being consumed by the spores herself, the biologist wouldn't have a way of knowing whether she was changing, because the spores' effects could also involve psychological changes. This provides another example of the idea that it's impossible to be objective when one is immersed in a situation or environment.



Back at camp, the group splits off to focus on individual tasks. The biologist sees a red and green tree frog, climbs up a pine tree, and stares at the ocean. She finds it much more refreshing than the world back beyond the border, which is “dirty, tired, imperfect.” In Area X, there is a wealth of life, and she often feels like the animals there are watching her—an impulse she fights, because she wants to remain objective about them.

At dinner, the tension has lifted, and the group finds a renewed sense of camaraderie—though the biologist writes that it will prove short-lived. The biologist gets along with the surveyor, though she finds herself thinking that the anthropologist seems to lack mental toughness. As night falls, the moaning starts once more—but the beast in the marshes now sounds like “an old friend compared to the **tower**.”

The psychologist decides that the next day they should return to the **tunnel** wearing breathing masks and investigate it further. Then the psychologist says, “Consolidation of authority,” and immediately the surveyor and anthropologist go slack, with their eyes unfocused. The biologist tries to mimic what they do, hoping the psychologist doesn’t notice. The psychologist says that they will retain a memory of discussing the tunnel and ultimately agreeing with her about that course of action. They will experience calm and continue to see a structure made of coquina and stone. They will not remember this conversation after she snaps her fingers but will follow her directives.

After the psychologist snaps, the women return to their tents. The biologist realizes how much control the psychologist has been exerting over them, and she guesses how the spores have affected her: they have made her immune to the psychologist’s hypnotic suggestions. This makes her a kind of conspirator against the psychologist; she now holds secrets that estrange her from the others.

The biologist’s comparison suggests that outside of Area X, the world has become “dirty, tired, imperfect” because it has been overrun by humans. In Area X, however, it’s implied that nature has once again become pristine and free of human influence. This suggests that nature can be just as powerful in reclaiming its territory as human beings are in destroying nature.



In this moment, the biologist feels slightly less isolated and mistrustful of her peers. This camaraderie and ease even seem to extend to the moaning in the marshes, perhaps hinting at an external force that is now altering the biologist’s perception, because some things in Area X feel inexplicably more familiar than others. However, her statement that this ease will prove short-lived gives a sense of foreboding, and it suggests that her mistrust was perhaps justified and useful in terms of avoiding potential threats.



This is another major turning point for the biologist, as she recognizes that the psychologist is using hypnotism to influence her and the other team members. She also realizes that the psychologist is giving them a biased view of their surroundings (in contrast to their desire to stay objective about the place) by saying that they will continue to see a structure made of coquina and stone. This implies that the tower is not, in fact, made of these materials, and that the women’s “objective” perception of their environment does not actually reveal the truth. Witnessing this, the biologist sees that her mistrust has been helpful, as it helps her recognize the psychologist as a potential threat.



Here, as the biologist reckons with her new discovery about the psychologist, the book implies that her isolation from the group and her mistrust of the psychologist has actually proven useful. Even if her closed-off nature is destructive to the expedition as a whole, it’s allowed her to see how the psychologist is taking advantage of them through hypnosis.



Estrangement is typical of the missions, as the biologist knows from having watched reentry tapes from members of the 11th expedition. They all said they experienced no unusual phenomena while in Area X, but all of them eventually had an intense desire to return home. Still, they could not explain how they managed to come back. They seemed to have a dreamlike calm about them, seeing the world through a kind of veil. At the time, the biologist was seeking “oblivion,” and she wanted the kind of benign escape they had—a death that meant not being dead.

Even though the biologist does not yet reveal what put her in the state that made her want to seek “oblivion,” it suggests again that there are personal reasons for her decision to seek out Area X. Moreover, it suggests that she is not being objective or forthcoming about her own story, even as she is trying to tell it plainly. She also seems to have an innate desire for isolation, as part of her motivation to participate in the expedition was to escape the outside world and find greater freedom in Area X.



CHAPTER 2

In the morning, the group discovers that the anthropologist is gone. The psychologist, who seems shaken, explains that what the anthropologist saw in the **tunnel** unnerved her, and she didn't want to continue with the expedition, so she went back to the border to await extraction. The surveyor notes that she left her gear, including her gun. The psychologist tries to say that she only took what she needed, and the biologist wonders why the psychologist isn't using hypnosis on them.

The anthropologist's disappearance here begins to illustrate how the biologist's mistrust and self-reliance are advantages in this situation. Even though they're part of a team, the biologist knows that she has to look out for her own survival, and it's increasingly clear that the psychologist is untrustworthy, as her response to the anthropologist mysteriously dropping out of the expedition seems suspicious.



Sensing that the psychologist is lying, the biologist knows that she and the surveyor have a choice: they can accept the explanation or reject it, which would only cause even more conflict. The psychologist quickly changes the subject, saying they should stick with their plan to investigate the **tower**. The biologist doesn't want to leave Area X before completing this investigation, so she agrees that they should continue the mission without the anthropologist. The surveyor grudgingly agrees.

The possibility that the psychologist is lying further confirms that the biologist's self-reliance, mistrust, and isolation is justified. The surveyor also seems increasingly skeptical of the other team members as well, and their expedition is at risk of completely breaking down.



At the **tower**, the surveyor and biologist plan to spend the full day inside while the psychologist stands guard at the top of the tower. They have their weapons and breathing masks, but the biologist is wary of the psychologist, wondering what she is trying to guard against. The surveyor says that going down together would be safer. The psychologist replies that there's no “reward in the risk” of everyone going down, using a tone that hypnotizes the surveyor and causes her to agree with the psychologist. The biologist has no choice but to agree, despite her fear of what the psychologist might do.

Again, the manipulation that the psychologist is using on the surveyor—and that the biologist is now immune to—is beginning to break down their expedition. This further justifies the biologist's mistrust, since the psychologist is simply using hypnosis to take advantage of them rather than to keep them calm and safe. Even though the biologist feels that she has no choice but to agree and go along with the psychologist here, the fact that she can question the psychologist's motivations shows how her self-reliance continues to protect her.



The biologist notices on this descent that the **tower** is breathing, as though it is made of living tissue. The biologist sits down next to the wall and frantically presses the surveyor's hand to it, asking if she can feel the wall. The surveyor is afraid, saying that the wall is only made of stone. The biologist wants to explain everything—about the psychologist hypnotizing them—but she doesn't. She knows the surveyor can't experience what she's experiencing, so she has no real proof. The surveyor worries about the biologist, but they continue on, the depths now revealing much greater biodiversity and beauty.

The biologist chose her career path due to an overgrown **swimming pool** in her backyard growing up. Her parents were neglectful, and so they did not clean the pool. This led to it becoming a brackish bog with moss and towering plants; dragonflies and beetles; and eventually bullfrogs, local birds, and turtles. Within months of their renting the house, the pool became a functioning ecosystem, and the biologist loved to observe it.

The biologist's parents scolded her, thinking that she was too introverted. But when she told them that she was being bullied, they let her continue to observe the **pool**, day and night. One day, however, her parents couldn't afford the rent anymore, and they moved to a tiny apartment. The biologist worried about the fate of the pool under a new tenant. She never went back to discover what happened to it, and she hasn't looked back in any of her projects since. She just waited for the moment it would all be taken away.

The biologist and the surveyor continue to descend into the **tower**, and the biologist almost wishes that she weren't aware of the tower's true nature, wondering how the psychologist withstood the knowledge. The biologist again observes the words on the walls, which continue in one long nonsensical sentence: "to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives..."

This exchange reinforces how difficult it is for a person—and especially for two people—to truly be objective about what they're both experiencing, particularly when immersed in a given environment. Because of the spores' influence, the biologist now knows information about the tower that the surveyor doesn't. Yet even though the biologist clearly believes in her own perspective, there is no way to make the surveyor believe that she (the biologist) is the one who can see clearly. Neither of them can be fully sure what the objective truth is, because they can't pull back from the environment that they're in.



The biologist's recounting of her origins as a scientist illustrates the persistence and power of nature. Even in a human-made environment like a swimming pool, nature is able to retake its territory and build this fully functioning ecosystem as the biologist describes. This shows how easily nature can resurge and take over human environments when given the chance, even outside of Area X.



This episode hints at the origins of the biologist's introverted tendencies by suggesting that her childhood was filled with bullying and isolation. The fact that she never went back to the pool—and that throughout her life, she was constantly waiting for things to be taken away from her—also connects her self-reliance to that isolation. The episode suggests that this mistrust has contributed to her relationships breaking down or not forming in the first place, as she is worried that the things (or the people) she loves will be taken away from her.



The vastness and eeriness of the tower, as well as the unsettling words on the walls, underscore the tower's sublime and incomprehensible nature. The biologist is now able to understand the reality that the psychologist was able to see, but this doesn't mean that she can understand it. Being unable to comprehend what is right in front of her eyes is part of the inexplicable nature of Area X and the tower.



The biologist and surveyor are both able to see the words and the creatures living among the words. But only the biologist can see that the walls subtly rise and fall, like breathing, or that there are markings of words that had been there previously. The biologist wishes that the linguist was still with them, but eventually she can make out some of the phantom letters discussing “wickedness,” “God’s love,” and a “higher power.” She wonders if they come from prior expeditions and feels defeated not understanding what the markings mean.

After an hour descending the stairs, the surveyor notices that the words seem to be fresher. The biologist asks the surveyor to turn off her light, and the surveyor hesitates, still rattled from the biologist’s earlier outburst, but she ultimately complies. In the dark, the biologist can see that the glowing colors seem brighter than before, and the words sway with the inhale and exhale of the walls. The biologist says that “something” below them is writing this script, and the surveyor seizes on the biologist saying “something” rather than “someone.” The surveyor then says they should get out their guns, though the biologist is wary of doing so.

The energy becomes much more charged as the biologist and the surveyor continue to descend, walking more swiftly and speaking quietly. After 20 minutes, they notice a residue on the floor, like slime, as though something has slid down the stairs. There are also a variety of marks and tracks on the ground that the biologist finds fascinating but can’t identify. Then they find a set of boot prints—their own, the biologist thinks, noting they look “so mundane in comparison.” But then the surveyor indicates that it is actually a third set of boots, heading up the stairs rather than down.

According to the records the group received, the first expedition reported that there was nothing unusual about Area X, but the second and third expeditions did not return, and subsequent expeditions had varying success. The biologist’s husband was on the 11th expedition as a medic. He was recruited by a friend, and though he was unsure at first, their superiors gradually convinced him, which caused a great deal of conflict between the two of them. The biologist hopes that her account shows her to be a credible, objective witness—someone who volunteered for Area X to fulfill the purpose of the expedition. But she knows that she was affected by her husband’s experience there.

The fact that the tower seems like a beast that can breathe, and that the biologist and surveyor seem to be descending into its “gullet” again illustrates the power of nature in Area X—it can literally consume them. The rest of the tower’s words also reinforces its sublime feeling. The words again hint at some biblical meaning, and they are both sacred and eerie. This evokes both awe and fear, and the biologist’s inability to interpret them reinforces how some mysteries simply cannot be solved.



The biologist and surveyor’s interactions illustrate how the biologist’s self-reliance and mistrust of the world around her is undermining their relationship. Because of the biologist’s earlier outburst, and her insistence that she could see something the surveyor could not, the surveyor is now extremely skeptical of the biologist. Likewise, the biologist worries about what the surveyor might do if they take out their guns. In this way, the lack of camaraderie between them is starting to make them turn on each other.



This section, as the biologist starts to discover hints about the creature that she believes is writing on the walls, also evokes the sublime. The comparison of the biologist’s own boot print as “mundane,” in contrast with the creature’s tracks, suggests that the creature is complicated and incomprehensible to her at this point, and that she herself is less worthy of consideration than the beauty and mystery of Area X.



This passage calls the biologist’s objectivity and reliability as a narrator into question. She states that she has hidden the fact that her husband was on the 11th expedition in order to prove herself as a credible, objective witness. And yet, withholding this information actually has the opposite effect—showing that she is deliberately withholding and manipulating information to bias readers’ perceptions of her.



About a year after the biologist's husband left for the expedition, she lay alone in bed at night when she heard a noise—he appeared in her kitchen, eating and drinking furiously. He didn't remember how he left Area X and had only vague memories of the expedition. He was calm except for moments of panic about his amnesia. He had also lost memories of how their marriage began to disintegrate—he now was as emotionally distant as he accused the biologist of being in the past.

After talking, the biologist helped her husband shower and change before they had sex, and she realized that he only vaguely remembered her, as if through a fog. The next evening, the expedition's leaders came to collect him, and the biologist could only visit him in the observation facility afterward. She never really pierced his amnesia, and he died six months later of cancer. Whatever happened in Area X, he had not truly come back.

The biologist and surveyor continue to descend into the darkness, and the biologist wonders if her husband took the same journey or saw something completely different. The path of slime grows thicker, and despite their concerns, they press on, their curiosity outpacing their fear. But then, the surveyor rounds a corner and immediately doubles back, explaining in fear that there's a body below them, slumped on the side of the wall. The biologist convinces her to keep going so they can examine the body, and then they can turn back. The surveyor agrees.

The biologist goes first, and she realizes that the body is the anthropologist. Her face is burned, her jaw is broken, and her legs appear half-melted. Her black box lays crushed several feet from her body, and there are also glass vials strewn around her. The surveyor follows, drawing out her assault rifle and aiming it into the darkness. Above the anthropologist on the wall, words read, "*the shadows of the abyss are like the petals of a monstrous flower that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear.*" The biologist posits that the anthropologist interrupted the writer of the words.

As the biologist starts to provide hints about her relationship with her husband, she illustrates that they, too, had a great deal of distance and mistrust in their relationship. She implies that her guardedness and self-reliance created a deep conflict in their relationship, to the point that their marriage nearly disintegrated.



The fact that the biologist's husband came back from Area X completely changed—and unable to express how he had changed or what had happened—illustrates nature's power over the human beings. It seems that something in Area X's environment affected him severely, giving him amnesia and cancer, the latter of which ultimately killed him.



Despite all of the horrors and oddities that the biologist and her colleagues experience, the biologist's curiosity always outpaces her fear; she tries to appreciate Area X's mysteries even if she may never understand them. This is not true of all the expedition members, however—the surveyor's fear seems to outpace her curiosity at times, as it does here when she spots the body.



The discovery of the anthropologist's body underscores nature's power over human beings, in that the writer of the words was able to have this kind of destructive effect on the anthropologist. In addition, the fact that the anthropologist's black box—which was theoretically supposed to warn of danger—has been crushed reinforces the idea that nature is much more powerful than any human attempt to stave off danger. The words also tie into the sublime nature of the tower, suggesting that what lies in the tower ("the monstrous flower") expands the mind "beyond what any man can bear," which is true of the anthropologist because her face and jaw are so severely injured. This suggests that there are some things that human beings simply cannot bear to understand.



Surveying the ground, the biologist realizes that whatever left the slime had turned in a frenzy in a clockwise swirl, but the anthropologist's boot prints were on top of the swirl. The biologist begins to form an image in her mind of the anthropologist creeping down alone in the dark, perhaps hoping to take a sample. But a dozen steps up, there is another, fourth set of boot prints. The biologist then realizes that the psychologist and anthropologist came down together, and the psychologist hypnotized the anthropologist. She forced her to walk up to the thing that was writing the words on the wall and try to take a sample, which led to her agonizing death.

The biologist explains her theory to the surveyor, noting that the psychologist has been hypnotizing them while she (the biologist) has been impervious. The surveyor is aghast, wondering why the biologist did nothing if she knew about the hypnotism, and wonders if it's even true. The biologist tells the surveyor that they may need to restrain or kill the psychologist, because she clearly has some kind of ulterior motive. They put in earplugs, hoping to avert the hypnotism, and turn back to confront the psychologist. Before they leave, the biologist finds one of the glass tubes strewn around the anthropologist with a sample in it.

As they ascend, the biologist is amazed at her own gullibility and how there was so much misdirection in their mission—starting with the map. Memorizing its details stopped them from asking questions about it, and the biologist realizes that it may have been a cue for hypnotic suggestion. As part of the training, she had become familiar with Area X's ecosystems, but she also received a refresher course on fungi and lichen that she realizes was likely the true purpose of her studies. The group largely trained apart rather than together, and they knew very little about one another. By the time they were ready to cross the border, they knew "everything... and [they] knew nothing."

When the biologist and surveyor emerge, the biologist is shocked at how mundane the outside world feels in comparison. They cannot find the psychologist. Even at base camp, they can't find her, but she took half their supplies and most of the guns, so they know that she is alive. In less than a week, they have lost three out of five members of their group, and the surveyor decides to believe the biologist's story. The biologist, meanwhile, is still grappling with the horror that the psychologist coerced the anthropologist into her own death.

The biologist's realization that the psychologist lied about what happened to the anthropologist and actually led the anthropologist to her death further undermines her trust in the psychologist and justifies her self-reliance. The biologist's mistrust will presumably continue to protect her from the same fate, even at the cost of destroying the team dynamic.



The surveyor's reaction to what the biologist is telling her only further emphasizes how destructive the atmosphere of mistrust has become, even though it is helping the biologist survive. The biologist has no faith in the psychologist—but the surveyor also isn't sure who she can trust, whether the biologist's story is true, and if it is true, why the biologist didn't do something about it earlier. This illustrates how the secrecy in their relationship—even though it is a helpful survival instinct—has broken the expedition down.



Even though the members of the expedition were all part of a team, the fact that they trained apart illustrates that, in reality, they are fundamentally alone. The biologist realizes in hindsight how little she questioned the mission's procedures or the information she was being given (which she characterizes here as "nothing" useful). But in accepting the sinister nature of Area X and how the expedition's leaders were manipulating them, the biologist is better suited to continue on because of her ease with isolation and her inherent mistrust of others.



Again, the biologist underscores how sublime and complicated the tower is by comparing it to the "mundane" aspects of the rest of the world. Additionally, the biologist's mistrust of the psychologist is now completely justified, as she is convinced that the psychologist manipulated the anthropologist into her own death. Therefore, relying on herself and keeping her immunity to hypnosis a secret has been incredibly important to protecting her own life.



With the surveyor wondering what to do next, the biologist decides to examine the samples and photographs they took and return the next day. The surveyor, fighting some internal impulse, says that she doesn't want to return to the **tunnel**. Instead, she wants to go back to the border and wait for extraction. The biologist refuses, saying that she's not ready to go back. The surveyor notes that the biologist really likes it in Area X. To convince the surveyor, the biologist says that they should look at what they brought back, and they can always return to the border the next day. The surveyor agrees. The biologist can't bring herself to say that they might not really make it back—they might be amnesic, like her husband was.

The biologist spends the rest of the afternoon looking at samples and developing photographs. She finds most of her samples confusing—organisms that she doesn't fully understand. The sample that the anthropologist collected, however, is unique. It is brain tissue that looks human, with some irregularities. The biologist questions if it's actually human or if it's just pretending to be human, and she wonders how the anthropologist took the sample. She also wonders if, having been infected by the organism's spores, she might be causing a reaction in the sample.

The surveyor then examines the photographs they took in the **tower**, noting that they are all out of focus, as if the walls were emanating something that distorted the image. The biologist also realizes that she should have sampled the walls, because she knows they were part of something living. The surveyor also reports that there's nothing in the maps and papers, except that they all seem to be focused on the **lighthouse**. The surveyor asks what to do now, and the biologist says they should eat dinner, look along the perimeter for the psychologist, and think about what to do the next day. The surveyor insists that they're not going back into the tunnel.

The familiar moaning begins at dusk again, but the biologist hardly notices it. It begins to rain as the biologist and surveyor eat in silence, and then when they set off for bed, the biologist and surveyor take turns standing watch in the storm. When it's the biologist's turn, she steps outside into the storm and feels as though the life she left behind was a dream, and that this is the only place that exists. Through the darkness, the biologist sees a flicker of orange, which she realizes must be coming from the **lighthouse**. After a few minutes of flickering, it becomes snuffed out, and the biologist grows restless.

The surveyor's acknowledgement that the biologist really likes it in Area X underscores the biologist's innate desire for isolation, her reliance on herself, and her mistrust of others. This is underscored by the fact that she still isn't fully forthright with the surveyor in mentioning that they may not be able to make it back over the border in the same state. This is causing tension in their relationship, but it hints at the idea that the biologist does indeed feel freer, and even safer, being on her own, isolated in the wild.



The observations that the biologist makes again suggest that she is trying to be as objective as possible about Area X. However, she again hints at the idea that it may be impossible for her to actually be objective, because she has been infected with the spores. This not only illustrates the power that nature has over her body and mind, but it also underscores the idea that being immersed in an environment makes it impossible for her to be objective about that environment.



This exchange sets up a contrast between the lighthouse and the tower, even though the biologist has stated that she views the tower as an extension of the lighthouse. Whereas the lighthouse is a familiar structure to them—they know a lot about it, and it suggests the idea of safety, like boats being shown the way home—the tower is exactly the opposite. It represents the mysterious, the sublime, and the unknowable—even to the point that they can't seem to get a proper picture or sample of it.



The biologist's thoughts that Area X is the "only place that exists," and that the outside world is completely unreal, further suggest her unreliability as a narrator. She has become so affected by and immersed in Area X that she has lost her grip on the world beyond what she can see in front of her. And here, the book begins to illustrate how the lighthouse, though a traditional symbol of refuge, now seems just as insecure as the rest of Area X. It is now the home of something unknown, and its light, which is usually its guiding beacon of safety, is both literally and symbolically snuffed out.



The final weeks before the expedition, the biologist and her husband argued violently. She shoved him and threw things at him to break his resolve, hoping to prevent him from going on the mission. Their relationship had already been struggling, because he was gregarious, and she preferred solitude. This once brought them comfort, as they balanced out each other's personalities, but no longer. She thinks that at first, she must have been mysterious to him, like a puzzle to be solved. He thought she pushed him away—even saying her isolation caused him to want to go on the expedition.

Once, the biologist told her husband about the **pool**, which made him think there were more revelations to come. He said he would have found her surly and grim at that age, but also fascinating—he would have followed her anywhere. They took pride in having a strong relationship as opposites, until their marriage revealed the difficulties in this fact and “destroyed [them] over time.”

The biologist brought up none of their arguments when her husband returned from his expedition, knowing that their time together was likely running out. He was blank and mournful, which he had never been before, and this frightened her. They talked about his journey—though he remembered little—and about her new research, which was rather boring to her. They had breakfast, had sex, watched television, and tried to play a board game. But the fact that he was not entirely present and had gaps in his memory became more and more apparent.

After a nap, the biologist realized that her husband had left their bed. She panicked, eventually finding him on the side of the house, standing in front of the boat he bought a few years earlier. He looked at it as though he remembered that the boat was important to him but not why. After a while, she couldn't take his silent distress and brought him inside; he didn't resist.

After dinner, men came for the biologist's husband in unmarked cars with a surveillance van. They approached him with watchful gentleness, like he was an unexploded bomb, and he left without protest. The biologist couldn't have stopped him, but she also didn't want to. He was a shell of himself—someone she never knew—and that's why she called the phone number to take him away.

Here, the biologist emphasizes how her isolation and secrecy in her relationship essentially destroyed her marriage. In the end, this dynamic fostered mistrust, which consequently split them apart. As the biologist's husband suggested, her isolation pushed him away and caused him to want to go on the expedition—which ultimately led to the end of their marriage and to his death. This suggests that even though the biologist's isolation is both innate and helpful to her in certain situations, it also harms her relationships.



Again, the biologist emphasizes how mistrust and secrecy in a relationship can “destroy[]” it. It has become clear through her narration that she isn't always forthcoming about herself, and this led her husband to feel that she didn't trust him and that he couldn't trust her.



The course of the biologist's husband's day at home with her, following his time in Area X, calls back to the biologist's comparison of the sublime and the mundane. The mundanity of their day puts into stark relief the mystery of what he experienced in Area X—which is particularly tragic, given the fact that he remembered so little and was changed in ways that the biologist couldn't understand.



The biologist's husband's amnesia makes the distance that he always felt between them more literal for the biologist, as she experiences the heartbreak of not knowing what is going on in his inner life. This relates back to the secrecy and isolation she held onto in their relationship, which made her husband heartbroken prior to his going to Area X.



This passage illustrates how the disconnect between the biologist and her husband eroded their relationship, to the point that the biologist made the decision to destroy it. This isn't so different from what her husband did in choosing to go to Area X—pulling himself away from their relationship because he couldn't face the distance between them.



The biologist later visited her husband in the observation facility, where he had little to say except to express a deep and unending solitude, which eventually killed him. However, the biologist wondered if the solitude would have killed her if she went on the expedition, too. As she labored at her job, she kept thinking about Area X, wondering what it would be like to go there. Several months after her husband died, she volunteered for the next expedition. She thinks they accepted her as an experiment, but she wonders if they always expected her to sign up.

At base camp in the morning, the biologist feels a “brightness” spreading through her chest from the spores. She now has a decision to make, because she knows someone was in the **lighthouse** the evening before, and she’s torn between the lighthouse and the **tower**. The surveyor has no interest in either, even though it might be the psychologist in the lighthouse—she’s worried that the psychologist will have a much better vantage from the lighthouse, and there are weapons there. The biologist argues that it’d be better to find the psychologist before descending into the tower.

The surveyor scoffs, realizing that the biologist still thinks that they’re continuing with the mission. The biologist says, “There’s no *reward in the risk* of going back to the **tower** right now.” The surveyor is temporarily disoriented, but it becomes clear that she knows the biologist tried to use one of the psychologist’s hypnotic cues and resents her for doing so. She says that the biologist would do anything to get her way, and the biologist starts to get nervous that the surveyor is the one holding the rifle.

The surveyor explains that she has been bothered by the fact that everything they have is made from 30-year-old parts, and that they’ve been living in some sort of reenactment. The biologist doesn’t respond to this, but she instead asks if the surveyor will stay until the biologist comes back. The surveyor grudgingly says yes, and the biologist says not to promise anything she can’t back up—the biologist no longer believes in promises. The surveyor curses at the biologist, who sets off for the **lighthouse**.

This is another example of how the biologist is drawn to things she doesn’t understand. She knew that her husband’s fate was terrible, but she wondered if she might experience something entirely different—perhaps even enjoying Area X because of the freedom and solitude it might afford her. Additionally, her ominous assessment that her superiors may have always thought she would volunteer for Area X hints that they may know much more information about Area X—and about her—than they let on, again justifying her mistrust in them.



The fact that the biologist feels the “brightness” from the spores spreading throughout her chest symbolizes the idea that nature is overtaking her, literally spreading throughout her body and making her a part of that nature. Her decision to visit the lighthouse rather than the tower shows how she, too, is drawn to the lighthouse as a symbol of safety, even though she logically knows that it will actually put her in a very unsafe position with the psychologist.



The mistrust, secrecy, and lies continue to undermine the biologist’s relationship with the surveyor, as she echoes the psychologist’s words from earlier in order to try to control the surveyor. The biologist’s isolation and mistrust are helping her to protect herself, but as a result, she is completely destroying any remaining ability to work together and help each other.



This exchange shows how the surveyor and biologist’s mistrust in each other has completely fractured their relationship. The biologist no longer believes in anything the surveyor says, and the curse she earns in return shows that the feeling is mutual. But despite the destruction of their relationship, the biologist finds a greater freedom in letting herself investigate the lighthouse, knowing that she might be better able to protect herself alone.



CHAPTER 3

As the biologist walks to the **lighthouse**, she observes the environment with new eyes: the marshes, the algae in the lakes, the oases of trees, the strange quality of light and the sense of waiting—which brings her “halfway to a kind of ecstasy.” She follows the path alongside driftwood, red grasshoppers, huge reptiles, walking for a long time without any sense of getting closer to the lighthouse.

The biologist thinks about what she found in the **tower** and the expedition overall. She knows an organism was writing living words along the tower, and whole ecosystems flourished among the words before dying off. The adaptation of the creatures led her to a “truthful seeing,” trying to tell her something about the tower. She has more questions: if the words mattered and where they came from, or if the organisms used words the way that birds incorporated whatever was on hand into their nest-building materials. Perhaps this is why the expeditions aren’t allowed technology in Area X, so that the organisms won’t be able to use it, either.

The biologist posits that the words are essential to the well-being of the **Tower** or the Crawler (the thing writing the words) or both. The Crawler and the Tower could be intelligent and could have free will. They may want to create ritual, or they actually might be communicating. Perhaps the Crawler is communicating to the Tower, but the biologist realizes that there are too many possibilities, and she only has a small piece of what is a frighteningly large puzzle. By the time she reaches the deserted village at the halfway point to the **lighthouse**, the sense of brightness and energy in her chest from the spores continues—a feeling that she doesn’t trust.

Prior to an Event 30 years earlier that locked Area X behind the border and began the inexplicable occurrences, the area had been part of a wilderness adjacent to a military base. People lived there on a wildlife refuge and quickly disappeared during the Event. When Area X first appeared, there was vagueness and confusion about it, and few people know that it exists: the public story is that it is a remnant of a localized environmental catastrophe, reported in stories in such a way that people didn’t notice it very much. Within a year or two, it was the province of many conspiracy theories.

The biologist continues to evoke the sublime in her descriptions of the landscape. This incommunicable sense of waiting, as she trudges interminably to the lighthouse, is both beautiful (as it brings her “ecstasy”) but also ominous and terrible (as it is filled with loneliness and foreboding).



The spores allow the biologist to see her situation more “truthfully,” but it’s difficult to know what truth really means in this context, because she is so immersed in it. The biologist also realizes that getting a clearer look at Area X only sparks more questions, suggesting that sometimes, there is no satisfying answer to a mystery—one should simply appreciate it rather than try to solve it.



Again, the more possibilities the biologist considers, the more she realizes that she may never truly understand the Crawler, the Tower, or the rest of Area X’s mysteries. Additionally, the infection from the spores worsens (again indicating nature’s power and persistence over human beings), she increasingly recognizes that the only way to truly satisfy the mystery is to accept that she might not ever have a full picture of the puzzle.



This is another example of why the biologist’s mistrust in the mission and in the Southern Reach is well-founded. For years, the government lied about the public story surrounding Area X. Learning the truth of the Area only confirms how many secrets they were—and likely still are—holding about the Area. Additionally, Area X’s origin story points to the power of nature over human life, in that it was basically able to wipe out the society that lived there.



During training, the biologist was told that the first expedition went in two years after the Event, setting up the base camp and providing a rough map. They discovered a pristine wilderness but felt a sense of being watched. Other members reported feelings of euphoria and extreme sexual desire. The biologist never saw their journals; she only heard recorded interviews. Some of their descriptions seemed inconsistent, like images of a village in a state of decay much longer than a few years old. The biologist is now convinced that she and the other members of the expeditions were given inconsistent information about Area X because their superiors knew that few, if any, of them would actually come back.

When the biologist reaches the deserted village—halfway to the **lighthouse**—she sees it has 12 or 13 houses. Few of them have roofs or exterior walls that remain, leaving open views of their interiors: chairs, tables, a child’s toys. There are eruptions of vegetation that form approximations of limbs and heads and torsos—one “standing” and several “sitting” in a living room with a coffee table and couch, all facing one direction. The biologist takes samples of everything she can.

As the biologist leaves the village, she sees something coming towards her in the nearby canal. She pulls out her gun until dolphins rise up out of the water. But when one swims close to her, she notices that the dolphin’s eyes seem “painfully human.” She only catches a glimpse as they submerge again, unsure of what she is seeing. She is shaken, worried that the natural world has become a kind of camouflage for something, and she continues toward the **lighthouse**.

The biologist reaches the **lighthouse** around noon, exhausted. She takes her gun out, leery of the little window halfway up and the large windows at the top. Up close it looks more like a fortress than a lighthouse, with outer fortifications that appear to have been built after the original construction. There are lines of sight for rifles placed in the walls, along with shards of glass attached and barbed wire forming a collar around the lighthouse for defense.

The **lighthouse** is also in disrepair: an external wall on the landward side reflects years of neglect, and the door to the lighthouse is now only fragments of wood. Vines have started to “colonize” the walls. Warily, the biologist picks up a stone and rolls it through the front opening, but she hears no other sound. Gun still drawn, she enters silently, sliding against the wall.

The fact that the biologist was not allowed to read the first expedition’s journals—just listen to recorded interviews, which are presumably edited—hints at the idea that the Southern Reach is trying to keep information from the 12th expedition. This mistrust is helping her separate herself from the Southern Reach’s mission and focus on her own desires to understand the mysteries in Area X to find liberation in solitude. In addition, the first expedition’s descriptions of what happened to them in Area X are not dissimilar to her own—everyone who comes to Area X seems to experience incomprehensible and contradictory feelings of euphoria and unease.



The image of vegetation forming limbs and heads—and the description of them as bodies that are essentially “standing” and “sitting” in houses—again suggests the power of nature. The image evokes the idea that nature has completely overrun the human beings that used to be here, essentially turning them into vegetation and integrating them into the landscape.



This is another example of the mysterious nature of Area X, and it hints at how nature has completely overtaken humanity in the Area. It’s implied that the humans who lived or visited here have somehow become part of the landscape—perhaps transforming into dolphins with “painfully human” eyes, as the biologist says, or being somehow integrated into and repurposed for nature.



Again, the biologist’s inherent mistrust of the psychologist (and now the mission as a whole) is helping to protect her, even as it destroys their relationship. The image of the lighthouse again illustrates how the perceived safety in that symbol—perhaps standing in for the safety of human relationships—is, in reality, a lot more foreboding. The biologist is also outside the lighthouse, suggesting that she doesn’t share in that security (and perhaps that she also no longer shares in that humanity).



The use of the word “colonize” to describe the vines taking over the lighthouse is a crucial detail. This word is typically used to describe humans taking over land or other people, and here it suggests that nature has agency and is reclaiming the lighthouse, demonstrating its power over humanity.



The outer rooms at the **lighthouse**'s base are empty. It is dark inside, so the biologist uses her flashlight. In the front rooms, the floor is covered in debris, and oak tables have been overturned to form defensive barricades, full of bullet holes and half-melted. There are bloody splashes on the walls, and dust has settled over everything.

The biologist then ascends the stairs, finding more bloodstains on the walls, phrases that tracked remaining supplies, and confessions from people who must have thought they would die very soon. She finds discarded shoes, vials of samples, a crucifix, a clipboard, and a dilapidated toy—though the biologist didn't think any children had come to Area X.

The biologist comes to another landing, which has seemingly been cleaned. Opposite a tiny window is a faded photograph with two men and a girl at the base of the **lighthouse**. A circle is drawn around one of the men, who is about 50 years old with a sharp eye and a thick beard. To the biologist, it seems like this man was the lighthouse keeper. In the photo, the lighthouse looks to be in good repair, and she wonders when the photograph was taken. She thinks that none of his work mattered in the end, before thinking that he could possibly still be there, waiting for her. She pockets the photograph, thinking that she was not the first to do so, nor would she be the last.

The higher the biologist climbs, the more she thinks that someone must be living there—it smells like soap, and the walls are clean. She takes her gun out, but when she reaches the lantern room, no one is there: just chairs and a rickety table and a rug. The beacon itself is dormant, and she can see for miles—the village, the base camp, and the **Tower**. There is a kind of phosphorescent brightness emanating from the Tower, and she is frustrated that she is the only one who can see it and that she is the only one drawn to “that stirring of the inexplicable.”

The biologist searches the room. When she pulls back the rug, she finds a trap door. She opens it, pointing her gun, and she gasps at what she finds: a space 15 feet deep and 30 feet wide. The psychologist has been there, as her knapsack and other supplies are there, though she is not in the room. But there are also hundreds of journals like the one she was issued—many more than could have been filled by only 12 expeditions. She asks if the reader can imagine what it was like to see that, before commenting that they might be staring at that exact view now.

The remnants of a bloody confrontation indicate that the lighthouse is not, in fact, a symbol of safety—being here is perhaps even more dangerous than being immersed in Area X's natural environment. The evidence of a struggle here also shows how destructive human beings are, and how they can quickly turn on one another.



The chaos and implied violence inside the lighthouse again suggest that believing it is a safe harbor, superior to the nature surrounding it, is mistaken. Instead, it was easy for nature to overtake it, showing its persistence over humanity and human-made features.



Even here, the biologist starts to reconcile herself to the fact that Area X will outlast everyone who encounters it, demonstrating nature's persistence. The lighthouse keeper and his lighthouse were completely overrun by nature's influence. Additionally, the biologist seems to acknowledge the cyclical, unending nature of the missions in saying that she is not the first nor the last to pocket the lighthouse keeper's photograph. For all the people who come through Area X and either die or are irrevocably changed, Area X and its mysteries continue.



Here, the biologist acknowledges the idea that Area X's mysteries are “inexplicable,” calling back to the idea of the sublime. Part of the mystery even lies in the fact that she seems to be the only one drawn to its mysteries. Yet this also hints that she is becoming more and more integrated into the nature around her because of the spores, and that she is losing her humanity. Thus, she is more invested in Area X.



The biologist's mistrust in the other team members and the mission as a whole continues to be well-founded. Finding the journals in the lighthouse, the biologist realizes just how distorted the information she received from the Southern Reach was, because there have been far more expeditions to Area X than she realized. She also acknowledges again that she is only the latest in a long cycle, positing that the reader might be on the next expedition, because her mission has failed so utterly in the face of Area X's power.



The biologist's third field assignment out of college involved traveling to a remote location in a very cold climate, where forest had grown up around rock formations. Bears, panthers, and elks lived in the forest, and she lived in a village of about 300 people near the coast. She made no friends there, and neighbors seemed not to be friends either, except in the local pub. This was four years before she met her husband.

Every day, the biologist drove a dangerous winding road to a place called Rock Bay. It held complex tidal pools that she would photograph and take measurements of. She could lose hours there, grateful for the solitude. During the drives back, she grieved the end of this happiness, knowing that her research grant only covered two years. She gradually spent more and more time in the pub, and she would wake with a fuzziness, sometimes with a stranger.

The biologist thought, after a time, that she had become part of the community—the “old biologist” the locals saw out on the rocks, obsessed with the mussels, who's been there for ages. Looking at the journals, the biologist feels that she has truly become that “old biologist,” the world “colonizing” her and forcing her to “live in its reality.”

At some point during their relationship, the biologist's husband started calling her the “ghost bird,” as a way of teasing her for not being present in his life. If they went to bars with his friends, she wouldn't talk much with them. All of her hobbies were bound up in her work, but she didn't like to talk about her research and wasn't interested in pop culture. She liked being out but existing apart. Her disengagement, however, ate into his enjoyment of talking to his friends. Observation has always meant more to her than interaction, like observing the **pool**, and she liked to observe the bar ecosystem rather than live within it.

The journals confront the biologist with her husband's death all over again, knowing his account is likely there. Once, he asked her if she loved and needed him. She loved him, but she didn't need him, and she felt that was the way it was supposed to be for her. Nothing could override the desire to understand the tides, seasons, and rhythms around her.

The book again explores the biologist's isolation. Her time in the remote village shows how, in her case, solitude allowed her to flourish and do what she loved most: study biology. Her self-reliance does preclude her relationships, but at the same time, it gives her the liberation that she continues to crave.



The book illustrates how isolation in places like the tidal pools brings the biologist happiness, even though it secludes her from the rest of the world. The biologist was so distraught at the idea of leaving this insular environment that she began drinking heavily and having casual sex with strangers. The appreciation for solitude that she fostered during this time has seemingly enabled her to flourish in Area X, as the environment here is similarly isolating.



Just as she used “colonizing” to describe the vines, here the biologist acknowledges that she is becoming a part of Area X in the same way that she thought she was a part of the natural tidal pools during her research earlier in her life. Again, nature has the agency in this case, not her; she is becoming a part of its world.



The biologist's husband's teasing nickname for her, “ghost bird,” further illustrates that she prioritized solitude and isolated herself from him, as ghost birds are known for being difficult to spot. The biologist is attuned with and consumed by nature (like the tidal pools), more than she's interested in normal, everyday experiences (like hanging out in a bar with her husband). But even as the isolation made the biologist feel more fulfilled, it hampered her relationship with her husband.



Again, the biologist emphasizes that her isolation is intentional, and she doesn't feel the need to change herself and be more open—particularly when it helps her protect herself—even if this leads to a degradation of her other relationships. On the other hand, her description about her desire to understand nature illustrates the power that it has over her.



Some of the journals are turning to mulch in the bottoms of stacks, embodying the scraps of writing in the **Tower**: “the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives...” The biologist lays the table across the entrance to the stairwell, so that if the psychologist comes, the biologist will hear her. The biologist again feels a growing brightness inside her, and she lowers herself into the cool, dark space.

The biologist chooses journals at random, realizing that the dates—found in a journal from the “first expedition”—do not make sense with the information she was given. She wonders how many expeditions there have really been, and if those details are being hidden so as not to discourage volunteers. There is also an archive of audiocassettes and photos. She wonders how to go through it all, skimming journals before coming across horrible accounts of “unspeakable acts.”

Sometimes omissions are worse than inclusions. The biologist finds a journal in which the writer focused solely on a particular plant and never described a glimpse of base camp or his life. She perceives a “terrible presence hovering in the background of these entries,” like the Crawler, and wonders if the focus is a way of coping with that horror. She also notices that the **Tower** fits into this theory as well, because it is never directly referenced. She is relieved when the latter part of the book dissolves into ruined ink, because she could have read it for a long time, transfixed.

The biologist then finds a journal that isn’t the same type as her own. It dates back to before the first expedition and references building the **lighthouse**’s fortifications. She reads an entry about “repelling an attack,” though she doesn’t find information on the attackers, only that the attack left four people dead. Later, their desperation grows; their ammunition is low, and they can’t find rational explanations for all that has happened.

The biologist finds that, to the expeditions, the **lighthouse** is a symbol providing an illusion of safe refuge. But to survive Area X, she thinks, you have to fade into the landscape or pretend the danger (the “brightness” inside the biologist) isn’t there. At some point, the biologist starts to panic at the volume of the journals, becoming literally buried in the papers when she tries to sort through them.

The biologist is starting to puzzle out some of the mysterious messages in the Tower—that the journals are in some ways these “seeds of the dead.” The sentence suggests that the journals have perhaps become more powerful by turning into mulch—a part of the nature around them. This relates back to the dolphin’s eyes that the biologist noticed, which gave her a similar inkling that humanity has become integrated with nature in some mysterious way here.



This passage reveals just how much the Southern Reach has been lying to the expedition about the previous missions and how many expeditions there have been. The fact that this has led expedition members to “unspeakable acts” only emphasizes how the biologist’s skepticism of the expedition and the Southern Reach’s motivations has, in some ways, protected her from these same incidents. She has relied on herself rather than others, as she is doing now.



This journal that the biologist finds again hints at the mystery in Area X—one that is so indescribable that some members of these expeditions aren’t even able to write about it. The fact that they instead focus on nature suggests that the nature in Area X has an unfathomable power over humans—and that becoming more integrated in nature can actually offer a form of protection. Submitting to nature’s power thereby makes them indistinguishable from it and, in some ways, safe from threats.



This entry underscores how the lighthouse is actually a false symbol of safety. Expedition members look to it for refuge, but in actuality, it only makes them more vulnerable to attack because they are so easy to find. But again, because the journals aren’t really able to describe their attackers, what happened in Area X remains a mystery—one that the biologist increasingly realizes she won’t unravel, despite having all of this information from the journals.



Here, the biologist explicitly states that the lighthouse has become a false symbol of security. Instead, the safest thing to do is to fade into the landscape or not examine the danger too closely—just as the biologist hasn’t fully examined the “brightness” inside her. In other words, the only way to survive Area X is to become a part of it, showing how powerful nature is in comparison to the humans who venture here.



The first sentence that the biologist found in the **Tower** appears in a surprising number of the journals, but the others find it just as mysterious as she does. She realizes she could search the pages for years and never understand the right secrets. She thinks that she has to either go back to base camp before nightfall or remain at the **lighthouse**. She doesn't want to travel in the dark, and if she doesn't return, the surveyor will likely leave without her.

The biologist decides on one last effort, climbing to the top of a pile to find more recent journals, including her husband's. She dreads it, feeling as though she's stealing a private diary, even though she knows he was always open and felt *she* was the one hiding things. She can't bring herself to read it yet, but she takes it and a handful of others, along with two of the psychologist's guns, and climbs out.

As the biologist emerges from the trapdoor and sees the sky and sea's beauty around her, she realizes that she's no longer fooled by it, after so many people have been sacrificed to the place. She wonders why the government keeps sending expeditions. Then, when she steps out onto the outer railing to get some air, she's horrified to notice a body in the sand below her: the psychologist.

CHAPTER 4

Everything that the biologist knows about the psychologist comes from observations during training, which amount to little. The biologist recalls training interviews with the psychologist in which she volunteered little about her parents (who were distant and moody), her earliest memories (a stuffed toy she still has, inspecting insects), and her childhood (cheap motels for vacations by the beach). The psychologist also asked about the biologist's relationship with her husband, which she did not answer. The sessions frustrated the psychologist, but on another level, she commended the biologist for being so "self-contained."

The biologist approaches the psychologist in the sand in front of the **lighthouse**; she must have jumped or been pushed out of the lighthouse. She has blood on her jacket and shirt, but she is breathing, and her eyes are open, looking at the ocean but not registering the biologist. She has a gun in her hand, and the biologist takes the weapon and tosses it to the side.

Even with the collective knowledge of the previous missions, the biologist understands that she may never puzzle out Area X's mysteries. This reinforces that sometimes, the only way to experience mystery is to appreciate it without attempting to understand it.



Here, the biologist acknowledges her difficulty relating to her husband. Her own desire for solitude drove a wedge in between them, which is reflected in her feelings here. She was so distant and put up so many walls between them that now, she doesn't want to invade his private thoughts, projecting that reticence onto him.



As the biologist realizes how many people have died in Area X—and how many secrets have been kept about the place—the book illustrates that her distrust of others is well-founded. It has so far protected her from the tragedies that have befallen other expedition members—including the psychologist, as the book reveals here—because she is constantly on alert.



From the outset, the biologist shows her "self-contained" nature, choosing to keep back much information about herself from the psychologist, showing her innate mistrust of the other woman. This contradicts her earlier assessment that she thought she was open with people. However, the fact that she puts up walls and maintains independence is what allows her to survive Area X and withstand the psychologist's manipulation.



The fact that even the psychologist—who knows the most about the Area—jumped from the lighthouse shows that the nature in Area X is powerful enough to influence anybody. Additionally, as with the members of the other expeditions, trying to go to the lighthouse for safety has only backfired. Instead of providing her with refuge, it makes her an easier target for Area X, again illustrating its power over the human beings who investigate it.



When the biologist touches the psychologist gently on the shoulder, the psychologist recoils and desperately screams “Annihilation!” over and over again, rattling the biologist. The biologist tries to calm the psychologist and prop her up, though dark blood is seeping around her stomach. The psychologist says she thought she killed the biologist and asks for water, which the biologist gives. She asks where the surveyor is, and the biologist says back at base camp. The psychologist comments that the surveyor didn’t like what the biologist became.

The psychologist says that she saw the biologist coming, and that she was like a “flame.” She also tries to hypnotize the biologist once more, but the biologist confesses that she is immune. The biologist asks why the psychologist didn’t shoot her, and the psychologist says that her hand wouldn’t let her pull the trigger. When the biologist asks what happened to the psychologist, she says that she thought the biologist was coming after her on the stairs, trying to kill her. She was so afraid she jumped over the railing. The biologist asks what the thing coming after the psychologist looked like, but the psychologist has no answers.

The biologist then asks what happened with the anthropologist. The psychologist explains she miscalculated—the anthropologist got too close, and the creature reacted, killing the anthropologist and wounding the psychologist. The psychologist also notes that she could tell the biologist was changing, and the psychologist decided to leave because the mission was compromised. The biologist is furious that the psychologist abandoned them.

The biologist then asks what happens when they cross the border. The psychologist replies cruelly that removing that veil from her mind and letting her access the memories of crossing the border could make her go mad. The biologist says that if the psychologist tries to do anything, she will kill her. When the psychologist asks how many memories she thinks are implanted—even of the world beyond the border—the biologist says she is sure of her here and now, as well as her past, refusing to be shaken.

The biologist tries to get the psychologist to talk about the Crawler and Area X, but the psychologist seems to take pleasure in withholding the answers the biologist desperately needs. She gives a few scraps: the black boxes don’t measure anything—they are simply to keep the expedition calm. And the border is advancing, almost a mile or two at a time.

The psychologist’s outburst—which seems to be a hypnotic command that the biologist doesn’t yet understand—reveals how little trust there is between the members, because the psychologist is trying to exert more control over the biologist rather than trusting that she is there to help. The biologist, in turn, is only able to withstand this hypnotic command thanks to the spores’ resistance to hypnosis, reinforcing nature’s power over human manipulation.



Again, even the person who supposedly has the most information—the psychologist—doesn’t fully understand Area X’s mysteries either. Nature’s power essentially prompted her death, as she tried to protect herself from nature but ended up fatally injuring herself in the process. In addition, the fact that the biologist is now appearing as a “flame” (because of her brightness caused by the spores) highlights how nature has overtaken the biologist. But it also suggests that the biologist isn’t totally objective about herself. The psychologist can see the biologist’s transformation in a way that the biologist can’t, showing how difficult it is for her to be truly objective about an infection that she is experiencing firsthand.



Again, the incident between the psychologist and the anthropologist only proves that the biologist’s mistrust of the psychologist is well-founded, and that her self-reliance has protected her. The psychologist’s secrecy and lies were so destructive that the anthropologist lost her life at the psychologist’s hands.



Here, the psychologist affirms that some mysteries are better left unsatisfied, threatening that the human brain wouldn’t be able to handle full awareness of the border’s mystery. The psychologist also calls the biologist’s reality into question, trying to undermine her memories of herself in the world outside Area X. This further suggests that no one can be objective or truly certain of their memories or perceptions.



This is another irony in the Southern Reach’s preparation of the 12th expedition. While the black boxes are supposed to make the women more certain and secure, in reality, they simply made the biologist and others more anxious because they didn’t understand what the boxes truly indicated.



The biologist asks more questions—how many expeditions there have been, what the first expedition found. But the psychologist is again vague and obscure, saying only that there are a lot of journals, and that the video from the first expedition is disturbing. The biologist asks what the psychologist knows about her husband, and the psychologist says his journal was very insightful—especially about the biologist.

The sky darkens, and the environment seems to become more alive. The biologist asks if she can do anything, and the psychologist simply says to leave her where she is when she dies. She says, dismally, that she should never have come. The biologist asks if anyone has ever really come back from Area X, and the psychologist says not for a long time. She then slips in and out of consciousness. The biologist asks if she knew about the journals before coming, but the psychologist doesn't respond—she is dead.

The biologist finds the psychologist's journal in her jacket. She also sees that under her shirt, her arm was "colonized" by a green-gold fuzziness, which spread from the wound she received from the Crawler. The wound likely caused not just paranoia, but also schizophrenia and delusional behavior. The biologist takes a sample from her arm to examine at base camp.

The biologist next looks at the journal, which mostly transcribes the words in the **Tower** with a few scribbled notes—including one that says, "lighthouse keeper." She is glad the psychologist did this work so she wouldn't have to examine the Tower again. On the psychologist's body, she also finds a tiny handgun strapped to her left calf and a letter in a small envelope with a name starting with an S on it. The biologist thinks that names are a dangerous luxury in Area X—sacrifices shouldn't get to have names. The biologist tosses the gun and the envelope far across the sand.

In the psychologist's pants pocket, the biologist finds a paper that includes a list of hypnotic suggestions and the actions that correspond. She also wrote other reminders and notes about each of them. The word "annihilation" is followed by "help induce immediate suicide."

The biologist's questions again prove how much she is trying to unravel Area X's mysteries. But in reality, the biologist also recognizes that the psychologist likely knows little about it—even given all the journals, the mystery has remained unsolved, and she comprehends that some mysteries may never be fully understood.



The psychologist's death—leaving only two remaining expedition members—only reinforces how powerful and persistent Area X is. Within days, it has already killed the psychologist and the anthropologist. And, as the psychologist notes, none of the expeditions have been able to withstand Area X's impacts for a long time.



The psychologist's injury represents another way in which nature is "colonizing" the expedition members. This word implies that nature (as embodied by the Crawler) has the agency and power to change the human beings irrevocably. Area X was able to make the psychologist so delusional that she jumped to her death.



The psychologist's notes reveal that she was as much in the dark as the biologist—she, too, was trying to puzzle out the words in the Tower and make sense of the image of the lighthouse keeper. And yet, like all the others, she was unable to fully solve the mystery. Additionally, the biologist's thoughts on their names—and her note that they are "sacrifices"—suggests that in Area X, they have lost all humanity and need to blend fully into nature in order to have a hope of surviving this new environment. This includes relinquishing their names, just as the biologist refuses to name herself or any of the expedition's members.



This haunting revelation illustrates again how the biologist's mistrust helped to protect her. The psychologist had the ability to kill the other group members by inducing their suicide, and she tried to do so to the biologist just moments before she (the psychologist) died. This underscores how the biologist's self-reliance has proved useful, because the psychologist was untrustworthy.



The biologist's husband's life was defined by nightmares he had as a child—nightmares about awful crimes in the basement of a house. A psychiatrist could not help him parse these images, ruling out suppressed memories. But as an adult, her husband went to a classic film festival and saw his nightmares acted out—he must have seen a TV left on at some point when he was young with the horror movie playing. From that moment, he knew he was free, because the nightmares were all an illusion.

Then, the night the biologist's husband told her he was joining the expedition, he told her about dreams he had, swimming through marsh canals or becoming a tree. The experiences in the dreams refreshed him and made him want to go to Area X (he had already had long meetings with recruiters), though the biologist worried about the danger. It did not occur to her at the time that he might have been hypnotized during his meetings. He told her that he needed more of a challenge, and that his work was unfulfilling. She started to wonder why she hadn't done something like what he was doing, and she couldn't blame him.

As the biologist stands beside the psychologist's body, she knows that her husband's journal will reveal the real nightmares he encountered in Area X. She still blames him for leaving, but at the same time, she begins to believe that there is no place she would rather be than Area X.

The biologist decides it's better to return to base camp despite the darkness because she doesn't want to stay the night in the **lighthouse**. She sets out with her knapsack full of supplies, and as she looks back, she sees a thin green light emanating from the dunes—the psychologist's wound glowing brightly. A phrase that the biologist saw copied in the psychologist's journal comes to mind: "There shall be a fire that knows your name, and in the presence of the strangling fruit, its dark flame shall acquire every part of you."

The biologist's recounting of her husband's childhood trauma relates to the idea that humans are constantly trying to solve the mysteries in their lives. But without an easy answer, like realizing that one's nightmares were part of a film, continuing to puzzle out images and dreams that don't make sense can haunt a person, as it did for the biologist's husband. This ties into the idea that to avoid this fate, sometimes the only way to be fully satisfied about a mystery is to paradoxically recognize that it may never be solved.



The biologist's husband's dreams illustrate that even before arriving in Area X, nature was already exerting its influence over him. This also could have been hypnosis by the expedition's leaders, as the biologist notes. Regardless, the idea of having an adventure alone in the natural world is what drew him to the expedition—and what drew the biologist here as well.



Even though the biologist blames her husband for leaving, the fact that she understands his being drawn to Area X suggests her own self-reliance and independence. She understands that she is fundamentally alone in the world, and that the best way to fulfill her desire for solitude is through Area X.



The words that come to the biologist's mind from the psychologist's notebook could allude to the fact that nature is overtaking the biologist. The "dark flame"—perhaps that same "brightness" that is emanating from the biologist and that is now radiating from the psychologist as well—is an aspect of the nature that will "acquire every part of" her.



After an hour of walking, the **lighthouse** disappears behind the biologist. She walks quietly through the ruined village and the darkness intensifies, because she doesn't want to use her flashlight. A few minutes later, the moaning starts, filled with anguish and rage. The biologist decides to forge ahead despite her fear, pulling out her flashlight and gun as she makes progress.

Then, suddenly, something nudges against the biologist's boot. She points her flashlight at the ground and sees a human face rising out of the earth. But on a closer look, she realizes it's a mask made of skin—a wide face with some pockmarks, the eyes blank and staring. She feels like she should recognize the features, but she can't place them. She shines her flashlight ahead and sees more skin-like detritus, sloughed off by some creature.

The biologist continues on, picking up her pace, as the moaning grows louder. There is a thick musk in the air, and a loud thrashing sound begins. She shines her flashlight over the nearby reeds to see movement—an unseen creature thrashing through the reeds, coming after her. She hesitates for a moment, curious to see the creature, but then she runs as fast as she can. She can feel something come at her on her left. She feels its hot breath, but it has too much momentum—and in its dive, it winds up passing her and crashing into the reeds on her right. She does not look back as she runs.

Eventually, the biologist stops. Unable to keep going and make it back to base camp, she climbs a tree to spend the night there. Restless, she drifts in and out of sleep. Sometime before morning, she realizes that her brightness has become literal: her skin is giving off a phosphorescent glow against the darkness. The biologist also remembers the face she saw the night before: it's the psychologist from the 11th expedition, a man whose interviews she watched. He said, back across the border, that nothing unusual happened in Area X. She realizes then that death is not the same thing here as it is across the border.

The moaning is another mystery that the biologist has not yet solved. Just as she referred to it earlier as being both beautiful and desolate, the biologist doesn't know how to understand what is happening around her—it is too sublime for her to fully identify or comprehend. Thus, her decision to continue suggests her acceptance that she may never truly understand Area X, but that she simply has to move forward and live her life despite the terror of not knowing how to interpret her surroundings.



The human face and skin rising out of the earth is yet another mystery that the biologist can't fully grasp. It again suggests that nature has overtaken the human beings who have come to Area X, either replicating them or tearing them apart so as to consume them into the earth—once again illustrating nature's power.



The biologist's narrow escape from the moaning creature is another example of nature's persistence in Area X—just like the wild boar that attacked the group on their way to base camp. In both cases, the creatures are a form of nature exerting power over the humans, so that they do not interfere with Area X's expansion. The biologist narrowly escapes with her life, but her earlier discovery of the human material on the same road suggests that others may not have been so lucky, and that nature is generally more powerful than human beings in Area X.



The biologist continues to realize that the nature in Area X is taking over her body—so much so that she is literally glowing because of the spores' infection. Additionally, in recognizing that the face she saw the night before is a man who made it back across the border from the 11th expedition, the book hints that there may be more than one version of the people who explore Area X. This opens up greater mysteries and possibilities about the people who have returned home.



The next morning, the biologist continues back to base camp, astounded by a particularly still part of the trail that is both peaceful and watchful, asking you to let down your guard while also keeping you on alert. As she pauses to appreciate the tall grasses, two shots hit the biologist in her left shoulder and left side, sending her down to the base of a hill. Seconds pass, and the biologist crawls along the water, realizing that her brightness is dulling the pain and shock. She realizes it was the surveyor who shot her.

The surveyor calls out to the biologist, asking where the psychologist is. The biologist explains that the psychologist jumped from the **lighthouse**. She begs the surveyor to leave her alone, saying that she's not the enemy. She insists the surveyor take the supplies from base camp and return to the border—the biologist won't stop her. The surveyor says the biologist isn't human anymore, and she should kill herself so that the surveyor doesn't have to. The biologist insists that she is still human, thinking that the brightness is also a "natural thing."

The biologist can hear the surveyor coming closer, and she sees the surveyor 10 feet ahead of her, crawling through the grass. The biologist doesn't hesitate, taking out her gun and shooting the surveyor in the head. The surveyor slumps, dead, and the biologist is shocked with herself—she has never killed anyone. She isn't even sure that she truly killed the surveyor, given the logic of Area X. She wonders if she could have acted differently.

The biologist doesn't know what to do: she doesn't want to take the surveyor back to base camp, but she doesn't want to leave her there. So, she takes the surveyor in her arms, wading into the nearby murky water. She says she hopes the surveyor forgives her; she forgives the surveyor for shooting at her. She then gently lets the surveyor sink beneath the water before getting out.

With the surveyor's decision to shoot the biologist, the book suggests that going it alone and being self-reliant has actually been beneficial to the biologist, because her interactions with other humans have been (and continue to be) deceptive and destructive. In addition, the fact that the biologist is able to survive such injuries because of the brightness in her chest again illustrates the power of nature in Area X—it can make humans powerful enough to withstand otherwise fatal shots.



The surveyor is so threatened by the biologist that she feels the only way to protect herself is to kill the biologist. Like the biologist, she feels some security in going it alone, because she mistrusts what the biologist might do. In addition, the biologist's insistence that she is still human perhaps affirms that the biologist isn't truly objective. Whereas the biologist thinks that the brightness is a "natural thing," it's clear that the surveyor doesn't think so. This hints that the spores are making the biologist believe that what is happening to her is beneficial and right—even if, in reality, it is taking her humanity away.



By killing the surveyor, the biologist again illustrates her instincts for self-reliance. Even though she's on a team, being isolated and mistrustful has helped her thus far, and she knows that going it alone and removing the surveyor as a threat is the only way for her to find peace—even at the expense of the surveyor's life.



The biologist's release of the surveyor into the water is a kind of symbolic letting go of human relationships. It acknowledges that her mistrust and self-reliance led the biologist to succeed in surviving, even at the cost of destroying others, because she was able to protect herself from their manipulation and violence.



As the biologist stands on the trail, she feels the brightness spread even further through her. She feels both fire and ice through her body, and she is numb and delirious. In a vision, she sees the anthropologist, psychologist, and surveyor peering down at her as though through water. In a second vision, she sits beside the moaning creature, her hand upon its head, and in a third vision, she watches a living map of the border. Later, she discovers from thrash marks in the grass that she has been spasming and twitching, experiencing agony and trying to die, though the brightness wouldn't let that happen.

The biologist tries to explain more about the brightness—noting that she has not yet done so because she worried the reader would question her objectivity. It enhances her senses: her hearing, her touch, her smell. All along the path from the **lighthouse**, she felt a fever overtake her, making her feel faint and also heavy. Her husband would have been more proactive about fighting the brightness, but she knows that any attempt to cure her is futile; she wants to concentrate on the time she has left.

When the biologist returns to her senses, it is noon the next day, and she has managed to drag herself to base camp. She gulps down almost a gallon of water and can feel the brightness repairing herself. She thinks that it hasn't spread further through her body because it was busy repairing her. Her cold symptoms have receded, but she can feel something creeping under her skin. She doesn't trust this feeling of well-being, worried that it's the calm before another difficult stage. She also worries that to keep the brightness in check, she will have to continue to injure herself.

At base camp, the biologist sees that the surveyor has destroyed the tent and the scientific data, and that the weapons are dismantled and scattered in pieces around the camp. She finds the surveyor's journal, but it is completely empty. She had left one final statement on a piece of paper: "the anthropologist tried to come back, but I took care of her." The biologist thinks that the surveyor was either "too crazy or too sane."

These various visions, borne out of the biologist's being overtaken by the brightness, reinforce that nature has completely overcome her and the others. The biologist is now the only remaining member of the expedition, and she has survived only because of her integration into nature (especially because the brightness is powerful enough to prevent her from dying from the gunshots). This is also represented by the fact that she communing with the creatures and the border rather than the other human beings, from whom she seems separated. Lastly, the fact that the other women are peering at her through water mirrors her decision to let go of the surveyor in the water. This perhaps suggests that the biologist has undergone a transformation equivalent to dying or losing her humanity.



Again, the biologist's own narration calls into question her objectivity as a narrator. She hid the way that the brightness was affecting her in order to seem more objective, but hiding her heightened senses suggests that she is actively selecting and editing out some of the details in the story—she is anything but objective.



The biologist recognizes not only how nature has become powerful enough to heal her and to take over her body, but also that it is clouding her judgment. Just as she hasn't been fully able to appreciate or communicate the changes that the spores have caused, she doesn't trust that nature might also be shifting her perception of the world—and her perception of her own well-being.



The fact that the surveyor was seemingly haunted by a hallucination of the anthropologist—similar to the way that the psychologist was chased by what appeared to be the biologist—illustrates that they couldn't trust what was real and what was an illusion. The biologist's suggestion that the surveyor could have been "too crazy or too sane" indicates that it is impossible to trust their minds and truly establish objective reality.



The biologist takes stock of what she has: a few cans of food, drinking water, matches, her notebooks, and measuring tools. More supplies remain at the **lighthouse**. Out back, she also realizes that the surveyor dug a new grave, a mound of dirt to the side of it and a cross made from fallen branches. As the biologist cleans up the camp, she laughs, remembering the night her husband reappeared in her home. She remembers wiping spaghetti and chicken from a plate and wondering how this mundane act could coexist with what he experienced.

In once again comparing the incomprehensibility of her situation (and her husband's situation) to mundane tasks like doing dishes, the biologist emphasizes how incomprehensible and awe-inspiring Area X's mysteries have become. While the biologist came to Area X in order to understand her husband's experience more fully, now that she's immersed in it, she realizes that some mysteries are too great to solve.



CHAPTER 5

The biologist never enjoyed cities, even though she lived in one because her husband needed to be there. She hated the dirt, the grit, the crowdedness, the light obscuring the stars. Her husband often asked where she went late at night, and she said nowhere, insisting that she wasn't cheating on him. She liked walking at night alone—it relaxed her and let her sleep. But she didn't really walk far: only to a nearby **empty lot**, where the puddle had over time become a pond and she could observe two species of snail, three species of lizard, butterflies, and dragonflies. She didn't tell her husband because she wanted to keep the lot for herself—she craved that time alone.

Here, the biologist again illustrates how people are fundamentally alone in the world—even when they have formed a relationship in a marriage—by providing more detail about her desire to be self-reliant and her tendency toward isolation. In addition, the fact that all of these species sprung up in an empty lot—a place inherently destroyed and degraded by human activity—suggests again that nature (even outside Area X) is more persistent than humans.



The psychologist told the biologist that Area X's border is advancing, but there are thousands of transitional environments that no one cares about because they aren't of use, springing up everywhere. If members of the 11th expedition returned without people noticing, couldn't other things have gotten through?

Here, the biologist's question adds to the mystery of Area X, implying that Area X's power could already be spreading through the world. But, like the mystery of what, exactly, happened to the 11th expedition, this comparison ominously acknowledges that people may never fully know if the world is being slowly consumed by Area X—at least not until it's too late.



Recovering from her wounds, the biologist is drawn once more to the **Tower**. But first, she tries to sort out the lies that she has been told about Area X and what she has actually learned. Ultimately, the most useful thing about the journals is that they speak to a kind of inevitability—everyone had died or been killed, while Area X continued on as it always had. It seemed their superiors feared Area X, hoping not to antagonize it but to discover some explanation for it.

Here, the biologist again acknowledges that in contrast to the human beings on the expeditions (who were killed), Area X shows nature's power and persistence in the face of human intervention, carrying on with little interruption. And even though her superiors want to understand Area X, the biologist realizes that the lack of understanding in the journals points to the idea that they may never fully understand Area X's mysteries.



The biologist examines the cells from the psychologist's wounded arm and from her own body, but she finds they are normal human cells. Discovering this, the biologist becomes convinced that Area X is laughing at her—that observing the cells changes how they appear to her. Examining the samples she took from the village, she finds that samples of moss and a dead fox are composed of modified human cells. She writes, “Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead...”

Discovering the fact that the environment seems made of human cells, the biologist wonders if Area X somehow created clones of the men on the 11th expedition and it was the clones who crossed back over. She thinks that there is something intensely unnatural about Area X—and she is relieved she finally has some proof, along with the brain tissue that the anthropologist took from the Crawler. After this, the biologist finally picks up her husband's journal as the brightness washes over her, connecting her to the earth, the water, the trees, and the air.

Most of the biologist's husband's journal entries are addressed to her, which makes her feel intensely guilty and grief-stricken. The 11th expedition consisted of eight members, all male: a psychologist, two medics, a linguist, a surveyor, a biologist, an anthropologist, and an archaeologist. They went in winter, when the trees lost most of their leaves and there were few birds.

The 11th expedition discovered the **Tower** on the fifth or sixth day, and the biologist's husband was very hesitant to venture down into it, because he had claustrophobia. Instead, they explore further, to the **lighthouse**. They discovered the pile of journals and had an argument about what to do. He wanted to abort the mission, because they were lied to.

Instead, the group split up, with several members staying in the lighthouse while the linguist and the biologist went back to the **Tower**. The biologist's husband and the surveyor continued past the **lighthouse**. The next few entries exhibit a kind of euphoria, telling the biologist how much she would love the light, the dunes, and the wildness. They wandered up the coast for a week, but they never encountered the border. He writes that Area X expanded much further than the lighthouse, unlike what their superiors told them.

The nature in Area X is much more complex and intelligent than anything the biologist has encountered before. It has the ability to mirror her own cells, and it appears to have the ability to integrate human cells into organisms like the fox or the moss. This reinforces nature's power over human beings in being able to consume and repurpose human cells. Whereas before the biologist believed that the “seeds of the dead” could refer to people's journals, it also could refer to the people themselves, as they become “seeds” for the next generation of organisms in Area X.



Area X has an unanticipated power—one that makes it able to mimic and the expedition members, showing its autonomy over humans. This passage also illustrates how, even though the biologist has established many times that people cannot truly be objective, she still values the ability to collect and examine evidence as a way of shoring up her own sanity. And yet—as she noted just a few moments earlier—she believes the samples can shift on her, suggesting that they aren't truly objective.



The fact that the biologist is deeply upset that her husband's journal entries are addressed to her suggests that she knows her self-isolation destroyed their relationship. Even when venturing out to Area X, the biologist's husband was still trying to forge connections with her, whereas her withdrawn nature pushed him away.



The biologist's husband also illustrates the importance of self-reliance in a way that mirrors the biologist's own journey. Even though he was a part of the team, he has to look out for himself because of the suspicious way their superiors hid things from them, like the journals.



Earlier, the biologist wondered whether her husband experienced anything like what she was experiencing, and here, his journal confirms how much he had in common—and wanted to share—with the biologist. And yet, at the same time, the fact that they each experience these environments and missions without each other reinforces the idea that even in a relationship, humans are fundamentally alone in the world.



The return trip to the **lighthouse** took four days rather than seven. At the lighthouse, the biologist's husband and the surveyor found the remnants of a shootout between the psychologist and the archaeologist, who believed the psychologist was killed by a creature but then came back to attack him. He could not account for why they shot each other and died shortly after.

The biologist's husband and the surveyor then returned to the **Tower**, but they only went down a few levels before coming back up, worried that the linguist and biologist were much farther down. But back at base camp, the biologist was dead with several stab wounds, and the linguist wrote a note saying he went down into the tunnel and telling them not to look for him.

The surveyor and the biologist's husband returned to the **Tower** at dusk, where they saw seven members of the 11th expedition heading into the Tower, including doppelgängers of themselves. They were terrified and only watched as the group descended. The biologist's husband thought that they themselves were dead, roaming a haunted landscape while other versions of themselves lived normal lives in Area X.

Slowly, the biologist's husband shook off this ghostly feeling, but he and the surveyor argued about what to do about the doppelgängers. The surveyor wanted to kill them, and the biologist's husband wanted to interrogate them. But no one emerged, and they returned to base camp before deciding to go their separate ways. The surveyor wanted to return to the border, while the biologist's husband refused to go back the way they came, worried it would be a trap.

Interspersed with the biologist's husband's account of what happened were more personal observations, most of which the biologist doesn't want to relay, except one: "Seeing all of this, experiencing all of it, even when it's bad, I wish you were here. I wish we had volunteered together. I would have understood you better here, on the trek north. We wouldn't have needed to say anything if you didn't want to." Reading these words, the biologist realizes that her husband had a deep inner life, but she hadn't let him in enough to see it. She wishes she had connected with him more.

The 11th expedition's experiences also illustrate their feelings that they were fundamentally alone in the world. As a result, these feelings fostered mistrust that consequently led them to destroy their relationships. This is evident in this incident in which the archaeologist and psychologist shot each other, which is eerily similar to the way the biologist and the surveyor shot each other on the 12th expedition.



The violence that the archaeologist and psychologist experienced repeats with the linguist and the biologist here, again showing how human beings will often destroy relationships out of impulses toward self-preservation and mistrust of others.



This story not only reveals more of Area X's mystery, but it also shows how mystery can destabilize a person's perspective. Seeing another version of himself is so eerie that the biologist's husband thinks he's dead. While the biologist knows that he obviously isn't, these thoughts illustrate that being immersed in Area X has taken away his sense of reality, and that objectivity is nearly impossible.



Again, the biologist's husband has the same impulse as the biologist: he doesn't want to return to the border for extraction, and he mistrusts the expedition as a whole. Knowing that he is fundamentally alone in looking out for himself, the biologist's husband mistrusts the surveyor and the impulse to return the way that they came, particularly after their superiors' secrecy regarding Area X.



Here, the biologist concedes to the fact that her closed-off nature and secrecy contributed to her and her husband's marital struggles. But even so, it is that self-reliance that enabled the biologist to survive Area X where her other members did not, affirming that even if she destroyed her marriage and other relationships by being isolated, she gave herself a much better chance for survival.



The biologist's husband had many observations and photographs of the nature around him, which the biologist knows he took just for her. These were ways that he expressed his love. In the last entry, he wrote that he would use a boat in the village to travel as far as he could—to a nearby island on the map and perhaps beyond. This image, of her husband rebuilding a boat and following the coastline north, makes her proud of his resolve and bravery. In glimmers, she wonders if the dolphin's eye was familiar for more reasons than that it was human. But she banishes the thought, knowing it will ruin her if she dwells on it and is denied answers.

By night, the biologist's injuries have receded, and the brightness starts to expand in her body once more. She feels compelled to return to the **Tower**, taking only one gun and a water canteen. She doesn't take anything to record, recognizing the pointlessness of the generations of expeditions whose records lay languishing in the **lighthouse**. She returns to the Tower, guided by the green light emanating from her own body.

The biologist enters the **Tower**, descending past the first levels and observing that the glow on the wall has intensified. She comes to the place where the anthropologist lay dead—the body is now covered by the tiny hand-shaped parasites that live among the words in the wall. The biologist doesn't know if they are protecting the anthropologist, changing her, or breaking her body down.

Below the anthropologist, the **Tower's** heartbeat becomes louder. The words on the wall become fresher, and there is also a hum. The Crawler's slime becomes slicker under the biologist's boots. After two hours of progress, the Tower's heartbeat becomes so loud that it shakes the stairs, and the biologist vibrates with it. It is humid, and the biologist knows that she is close to something.

As the biologist spirals down one more set of stairs, she sees a sharp, golden light beyond the next turn. Seeing this, she feels that her free will has completely gone out of her, her brightness spewing from her mouth. She cannot make herself turn back, and she passes the threshold of the stairs and descends into the light. She would rather die than not know what lay beyond the corner.

It is not clear whether the biologist's husband was able to make it through the border (and therefore was the person who returned to the biologist's house), or whether it was, in fact, a doppelgänger who returned. The biologist acknowledges this when thinking back to the dolphin's eye in the village, suggesting that her husband may have been consumed by Area X. But she also understands that the only way to truly satisfy the mystery is to acknowledge that she may never know the answer, because otherwise, these questions will drive her insane.



Again, in pointing out that the records in the lighthouse are useless, the biologist understands that Area X's mystery will never be solved, and so obsessing over an answer that she may never find is pointless. Turning away from the lighthouse and toward the Tower symbolizes that idea, as she turns away from what she thought would provide answers and would be safe and comfortable. Instead, she descends into and accepts the unknown.



The parasites overtaking the anthropologist's body are another example of how the book represents nature as much more powerful than human beings. Not only did the Crawler kill the anthropologist, but even these small parasites are able to descend upon her body and use it for their own biological purposes.



This description of the Tower is completely different from the first time that the biologist described it. This illustrates not only that her perception has completely changed, destroying any idea that she still can perceive some kind of objective truth, but also that Area X's nature has completely integrated her into itself, such that she can see and hear it fully.



This episode is the epitome of how nature has complete power over human beings. The biologist feels that she has no way of turning back from the light at the bottom of the stairs—Area X is in complete control of her. Her thought that she would rather die than turn back also suggests her insatiable desire to at least find out all she can about Area X, even though she knows she may never understand it.



During the last months at Rock Bay, the biologist was restless. One late evening after a one-night stand, while still drunk, she drove out to the tidal pools. She always thought that the tidal pools changed in the night when no one watched, and she trudged out into the pools to see. She knew that she was starting to melt into her surroundings, becoming wrapped up in them. She knew, stepping into the tidal pools, that she would appear to the outside eye as reckless, antisocial, or selfish.

At the tidal pools, the biologist was desperate for something familiar, a sign, or a discovery. And what she found was a rare species of colossal starfish covered in spines and known as the “destroyer of worlds.” She had never seen one, even in an aquarium, and the more she stared at it, the more it became alien to her. She got the sense that she knew nothing at all about nature, or ecosystems. She thinks that this creature, which had been catalogued, studied, and described, was irreducible to taxonomy. And looking at it, she felt she knew less than nothing about herself as well.

Turning the corner in the **Tower** and encountering the Crawler is a similar experience. The biologist cannot begin to understand what she is looking at; the light blinds and overwhelms her senses. The sound is like ice crystals shattering, but she feels like she is on fire. The Crawler keeps changing, as if to mock her inability to understand it. It is a sluglike monster ringed by satellites of odd creatures, or a figure within panes of glass, or a series of layers in an arch shape. Then it becomes an overwhelming hugeness, a wall of flesh that looks like light—but she doesn’t know if these are all real or simply tricks of the eye.

In all of this chaos, the biologist notices what seems like an arm, encoding information on the left-hand wall, and perhaps something vaguely head-shaped. She tries to pull back, creeping up the steps, but the Crawler traps her. She begins to black out and come back to consciousness, still unable to truly see it. In her mind, she stands over the starfish. She tries to focus on the words on the wall, but she eventually gives up, simply letting herself go to experience this moment with “the most beautiful, the most terrible thing [she] might ever experience.” Time elongates, and she watches the Crawler for an incalculable time.

The biologist’s description of how she was completely taken by the tidal pools illustrates how even outside Area X, nature has a compulsive hold over her. Thinking of this memory in this moment suggests that she feels similarly fascinated and consumed by Area X.



The very name of the starfish—the “destroyer of worlds”—suggests how powerful and persistent nature can be. But it also shows its power in other ways, in that its complexity actually transcends human understanding. Nature’s hold on the biologist here, as in Area X, was somewhat sublime. She felt that she would never be able to fully understand the environment around her or even herself, and she gave herself over to this feeling of mystery.



Just like the tidal pools, the Crawler and the Tower also evoke the sublime. The Crawler is so incomprehensible that the biologist can’t even get a clear vision of it to try to understand it, as its appearance shifts from moment to moment. These images only confirm that the biologist may never truly understand exactly what the Crawler is, even when having a direct encounter with it.



The biologist again relates her experience with the incomprehensible starfish to her experience with the Crawler: the description of it as “beautiful” and “terrible” again evokes the sublime—the idea that these images are so wondrous that the biologist can’t fully comprehend them. And the biologist also confirms that she can no longer even attempt to fathom the Crawler or what is happening—that the only way to be satisfied with the mystery is to simply experience it rather than try to understand it.



After this revelation and paralysis, the biologist slowly returns to the physical world and feels herself “thawing.” She once again recognizes that the Crawler is an organism that might be inexplicable, but that it’s a living creature that practiced mimicry using her own thoughts, pulling different impressions of itself and reflecting them back to her like a form of camouflage. She eventually feels her limbs again and is able to turn her back on the Crawler.

Turning her back provides instant relief, and the biologist hugs the wall and closes her eyes. She starts to walk, sightless, back up the stairs. But she only makes it a step or two when she realizes that the thick light is transforming into heat and wetness—the sea itself. Even though she is not truly underwater, she feels herself drowning, and an innate panic seizes her. She keeps drowning and struggling, realizing she might drown forever.

The biologist then feels the impression from behind her of hundreds of eyes turning in her direction, as though she is the starfish’s prey. She wants to live, but the brightness tells her that she will not survive this moment. She opens her mouth and welcomes the water—but there isn’t really any water. The Crawler transfixes her to the spot, and she cannot move. A waterfall comprised of fingers probes into the skin of her neck and then through her skull and brain. The pressure eases, and though she is still drowning, an icy calm comes over her. She smells burning inside her own head, and she screams as her skull is crushed and reassembled piece by piece. It is the most agony she has ever been in, and she blacks out several times.

Then, the invasiveness, as well as the sense of drowning, are gone. The Crawler tosses the biologist aside, down the steps, and she is bruised and crumpled. She has no choice but to scramble down lower in the hopes of escaping the Crawler. Only when the light has faded behind her does she stop and lay there for a long time. She realizes that she has passed some test, unlike the anthropologist.

The biologist wonders if perhaps her only talent is to endure beyond the unendurable. She stands, legs rubbery, though she doesn’t know how long this takes. Soon the spiral stairs straighten out, and the humidity lessens. The words are less luminous. The biologist drinks water, catching her breath. As she continues, a block of fuzzy white light appears—like the fuzzy white light she saw when she looked back at the border on the way to base camp.

The biologist’s realization confirms how incomprehensible the Crawler is. The Crawler—and presumably, Area X as a whole—can completely change its appearance based on the biologist’s perception. This also suggests that there is no “true” appearance of the Crawler or Area X at large, and that any attempt to find objective truth is futile.



Even though the biologist is not actually drowning, the Crawler’s ability to manipulate her mind again illustrates how powerful Area X’s nature is. This dynamic is an interesting reversal from the regular narratives about climate change, for example. Here, the biologist can be read as a stand-in in for less powerful, less complex organisms that are being manipulated and wiped out by human beings—complex organisms that they don’t understand, just as she doesn’t understand the Crawler.



The biologist’s thought that she is the starfish’s prey represents the idea that nature is far more powerful than human beings, such that the normal human/non-human hierarchy has become completely reversed. In addition, the biologist’s opening her mouth in this moment symbolizes that she is no longer struggling against nature and perhaps no longer even attempting to understand it. Instead, she has resigned herself to nature’s will and the fact that she may never truly understand what is happening to her—she is accepting her fate.



The biologist notes here that she was able to survive where the anthropologist had not, perhaps suggesting that the Crawler recognized that the biologist was already being “colonized” by the spores, as she puts it. This again suggests the power and persistence of nature—that the only possible way to survive it is to become a part of it.



While the biologist notes that she can endure the unendurable, it again is worth noting that she is becoming more and more inhuman because of the spores. This implies that the only way she has been able to endure physical harm (like the way she endured the gunshots) is because nature is helping her to do so.



After almost an hour, the biologist feels she must keep going, unable to return to look at the Crawler again. Eventually, she realizes that the blurriness is about 500 steps below her. It blazes in her vision, making her feel raw, and the grooves in the ceiling feel like they are scraping her brain. She can't force herself to keep going, and so she sits, watching it for some time, feeling her nausea growing. She wonders if this is residual hypnosis—if there is some directive she can't ignore, or if perhaps she is in “the end stages of some prolonged form of annihilation.”

Knowing she would likely die before being able to reach the door, the biologist turns around and feels eyes on her back. She realizes that she has another test to endure: returning to the Crawler. Before she turns the corner where it is writing, she worries about going mad this time, even though she knows it is an illusion. She stops thinking about the starfish and instead starts thinking about her husband's journal—the image of him somewhere in a boat, somewhere in the north. Everything lies above her and nothing below her.

The biologist steps out into the light again, expecting the drowning and the feeling of her head being cracked open, but nothing happens. The Crawler displays no interest in her. The biologist walks past it and risks one more glance back; she sees, barely visible, the face of a man—the lighthouse keeper. He has an expression of unending pain and sorrow, but also a look of ecstasy in his face. He is trapped within the Crawler, existing in a place no one can comprehend. Seeing him, the biologist realizes that there might be far worse things than drowning.

The biologist never dreamed before Area X, which the biologist's husband found strange. The week before he left, he joked that maybe this meant that she lived in a continuous dream and never woke up. She took this seriously, saying that all people might live in a continuous dream. He wondered if he was a figment of her reality, existing only to do her bidding. She joked that he was failing spectacularly, and he retorted that maybe he was succeeding because she wants him to fail. Then, hugging her to him, he asked where she would be if they weren't together. She had no answer, thinking, *Maybe nowhere.*

The biologist's reference to this situation as a “prolonged form of annihilation”—as in, a prolonged form of induced suicide—is an interesting one. It suggests that turning back is part of her own impulse toward death, whereas the door might be able to lead her back to life. Consequently, the biologist implies that death is simply a mystery that human beings must be satisfied to never understand—just as she may never understand the mystery of the door because she can't truly confront it.



This is another interesting turning point for the biologist. She begins to let go of the mysteries—of the starfish that absorbed her and the Crawler. Instead, she anchors herself by thinking of her husband. While it has been helpful for both her and her husband to be self-reliant in Area X, her thoughts here are a concession that even though she was happier alone, maintaining connections with others can still be valuable. Relationships can provide a person with meaning, particularly when a person is also able to find autonomy within their relationships.



Seeing the face of the lighthouse keeper in the Crawler adds another dimension of mystery to Area X—and her reference to the pain and ecstasy on his face again calls back to the sublime. The biologist realizes that she cannot fully comprehend the beauty and terror that the lighthouse keeper is experiencing, just as she couldn't comprehend her own experience being probed by the Crawler.



This exchange gets at several core aspects of the biologist and her dynamic with her husband. First, his needling suggests that their relationship made him feel unfulfilled, as he suggested that he failed to relate to her. In addition, the biologist's implication that she wanted to dissolve into nowhere—perhaps into some natural place like Area X—suggests that she preferred solitude, and consequently that this quality was destroying their relationship. Their discussion of dreams also reinforces the idea that it's hard to understand objective reality when one is immersed in an environment or in one's own mind. The biologist didn't actually know if she might be living in a dream entirely of her own construct—she was too immersed in it to know.



The biologist's husband then asked her for a favor—a selfish thing to ask. He asked her to come after him if he didn't come back from Area X. She wished she could have answered him, even to say no—because instead, she just assured him that he was coming back. She wishes now that she *had* gone to Area X for him, but she didn't.

The **swimming pool**, the Rocky Bay, the empty lot, the **Tower**, the **lighthouse**: these things are real and not real to the biologist. She remakes them with her mind every time she remembers and thinks about them. When she finally resurfaces, she lays atop the Tower, too exhausted to move, but happy in the morning sun. She pulls out the lighthouse keeper's photo, needing to know that he wasn't simply an apparition. She thinks about the anthropologist's sample, which included human brains.

The biologist tries to construct a narrative about the lighthouse keeper, who perhaps saw the Event that created Area X and its borders. What manifested was some unknown organism, which she calls a "thorn," needing to assimilate into and create a new world—one that is entirely alien to them while mirroring what they know. The biologist does not know how this thorn got here, but it found the lighthouse keeper and didn't let him go. And now the expeditions have become part of that environment as well, layered over one another.

The biologist thinks that in some strange future, perhaps Area X will expand so much that it reaches the tidal pools she knows so well—and she realizes that she might not think that's a bad thing anymore. The psychologist had said the biologist changed, perhaps meaning that she changed sides—she was persuaded to see that Area X is pristine in comparison to the world beyond, "which we have altered so much." But the biologist realizes that her speculation is incomplete, her methodology is broken, and her motivations are selfish.

Up to this point, it seemed that the biologist came to Area X in pursuit of her husband, and to find out what might have happened to him. But in reality, the trip has the opposite purpose—it is a way for her to escape all of her relationships and to find the isolation and freedom that she has always wanted.



Even though the biologist still tries to cling to some facts, like the lighthouse keeper's photo or the anthropologist's sample, in the end she comes to the conclusion that there is no way to be objective in any facet of life. Her mind is an entirely subjective place, and even her memories constantly shift her perceptions of the things around her.



The biologist's constructed narrative about the lighthouse keeper again illustrates nature's power. The fact that the Crawler has taken over the lighthouse keeper is additionally symbolic because the lighthouse is supposed to be the safeguard of human beings in the Area. So, the fact that the Crawler has completely consumed him suggests nature's power over human attempts at dominion. The same is true of Area X as a whole, as it completely overrides any human attempt to understand nature or to stop the border from expanding.



This passage takes on a more environmentalist view of Area X. Here, the biologist acknowledges that humans have the power to change the world (because they have altered it "so much"), but Area X has shown that nature has an even greater power to change it back and regain that pristine wilderness. But at the same time, the biologist recognizes the limits of her speculation—that she may never understand this mystery—and that any attempt to find objective truth about the place is futile.



After leaving the **Tower**, the biologist returns to base camp. She spends four days writing this account and plans to leave the materials with her husband's journal close to the trapdoor. She replaces the lighthouse keeper's photograph, along with a second circle around his face. If the hints in the journals are accurate, when the Crawler reaches the end of its latest cycle, Area X will experience another "cataclysmic molting." She has seen growing energy across the village the past few days as she watched figures head to the Tower. The psychologist's body is totally gone, as if she melted into the sand.

The biologist has no desire to find out answers anymore, but she knows that the brightness is not done with her. She plans to leave before the 13th expedition reaches base camp, though she wonders if they have already arrived. She wonders if she will melt into the landscape, or if one of them will come upon her, and she'll see them staring at her in horror. She wonders, too, if she'll be aware that anything is wrong or that she has changed.

The biologist decides to follow her husband's journey as far as she can. She doesn't believe she'll find him, but she wants to see what he saw and feel him close to her. She can't shake the sense that he is still there, even if completely transformed, perhaps in the eye of a dolphin. She might simply find his boat, which would be enough to satisfy her. She tells the reader not to follow. She wonders if there has always been someone like her to bury the bodies and have regrets, to carry on after everyone else is dead. She writes, in conclusion, that she is not returning home.

In leaving her and her husband's journals for the next expedition to find, the biologist recognizes that she continues to be part of Area X's cycle. It will keep expanding and keep consuming the humans who try to arrive and continue its mystifying "cataclysmic molting." Moreover, it will always win out against the expeditions, no matter what they try to do. In summation, the biologist understands that humans will never be more powerful than nature.



Here, the biologist implies that she will soon become a part of nature, completely taken over by the infection that is spreading throughout her body. She also again points out her unreliability because of that infection—that she may not even be aware of what might be wrong or how she may have changed. This suggests that no one immersed in something can truly be objective about that situation. And, in not searching for answers anymore, the biologist also acknowledges that the only way to be satisfied about a mystery is simply to accept and appreciate that she will not understand it.



In acknowledging that her husband may be present "in the eye of a dolphin," which she saw earlier, the biologist underscores how Area X has completely consumed the humans who have visited. And even though the biologist is going in pursuit of her husband, in reality, the book closes with the impression that she has finally found freedom in being alone. Even if she has some regrets about not connecting more with her husband, she values the isolation in Area X and would rather remain there than return home. Her self-reliance has helped her survive, and even though it has destroyed her relationships, she finds more value in that solitude than trying to return to her empty life.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "Annihilation." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 May 2021. Web. 21 May 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "Annihilation." LitCharts LLC, May 21, 2021. Retrieved May 21, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/annihilation>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Annihilation* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. Farrar Straus & Giroux. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux. 2014.