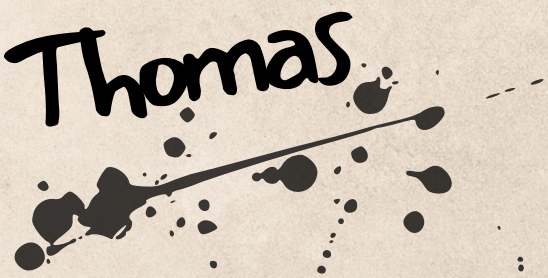
05 Jan, The Third Age

The first few days of a new year are supposed to feel full of promise. Yet this one feels doomed from the start. My mother has broken up with her boyfriend. Again. Once again, her emotions are spiraling out. Every time she finds somebody new, and then it doesn't work out, she goes through this. Days and weeks of self-pity. Of choices she should have made, relationships she should have had. Then the concept that she isn't as young as she used to be, that she's too old to have more children, that a man wouldn't want to be with her because she has no value, which, then, is followed by the reality that all the 'good ones' are taken.

It's a pattern that has recurred several times in my life. I often feel her eyes on me, and feel the burden that I'm part of the reason she can't have the love of her life. That a woman with children is more of a hassle. Men don't want other men's spawn. I try not to take it on board. This is all her drama and not mine, I keep telling myself. I had no say in being born. And I have no say in time continuing and her aging. But I do get to have a say in whether I will endure it.

Eleven more months and I'll be old enough to leave. I will finally have my shot at my own happiness. Till then, I need to ensure that we have food on the table. It's difficult to have dreams about what life is going to look like. I can't help but have anger toward my mother, but I know if I am to survive out there, I'm going to have to let that go. She can't be part of my thoughts. I should be thankful that I have gotten some love from here, if only in the moments between her boyfriends and between seconds of resentment that I am nothing but a hindrance.



03 Feb, The Third Age

She has found someone. I can tell in the spring in her step. She's wearing more makeup. I hate that these pages that are supposed to be for me and my life are filled with her life. Why do I get sucked into this? It's so much drama. #as it become so much of my life that I don't know how to live without? I despise it so much, and yet I can't help but wonder who the sucker is that has gotten her attention.

Am I jealous?

I don't have time to unpack all of this, this rage within me. It's so complex and intertwined; I don't know what I feel anymore. I am on a constant edge and at argument within myself. I want to know who he is, but I don't. I am excited for her, but I know it only leads to disaster. I really want to be free, but I'm still bound, and until I can get that space, get that air I so desperately want to breathe...

Thomas

05 Feb, The Third Age

They downstairs. All of them. My mother, her new man. His friends. I had just come back from my shift after school, and they were all in the lounge. They were all out of it. As I opened the door, I was hit in the face with this cloud of Ember Moss. Disgusting stuff. I know a lot of my friends who smoke it, because their mom smokes it, because their mom smoked it, and so on. If I didn't despise the smell so much, maybe I would also have fallen into the trap of escaping this world for a better one in my mind.

As I threw my backpack on the floor, I could hear the bubbles of the Silt Pipe in the next room. I had shouted at my mom that I was home, and that's when I heard all the giggles that we had company.

They were already half naked by the time I entered the room. Although they had stopped briefly to pull on the Silt pipe. The gauge at the top of the brass metal told me that they had only just started a little while ok. It was going to be a long night of smoke and sweat for them. I'm not entirely sure what the stuff in the glass bottle did, but I remember the first time I saw her and her friends smoke it, I was beyond traumatized. There are some things you shouldn't have to watch your mom do. And her melting her brain and fusing her body with a gang of people was one of them.

I turned and grabbed my bag to head to the roof. I still had homework I needed to do before going to bed. I also grabbed a blanket from my bed. It was going to be another night of sleeping on the roof for me. As I left, I saw that one man in particular had my mom's interest. That must have been the new guy. He sat, stretched out on the couch, holding the end of the siltpipe in his hand, looking like he was contemplating the future. He had dark pants, and his blue shirt was fully unbuttoned. I couldn't help but notice that some of the other girls were also clinging to him a little. My mom seemed to have the upper hand of attention, but I wondered for how long that would last.

I climbed out the window onto the fire escape and headed on up to the top.

It was nice, at least, up here.

There was a cool breeze in Vertex this evening. I could hear the churning and chugging of the factory down the coast. The smog was lighter than usual, and I could see the blue and yellow lights of the city below extend to the horizon.

Ember City made this place sound a lot more glamorous than it really was. The truth was that it was just a sludge of a place. The secret of Vertex, hidden behind the mountains, right up against the coastline. They kept their clean, green, shiny cities for the front of the island, to entice those in Artex. The people in the backwards country. They can see across the water the shiny chrome of the pretty places and dream about crossing the bridge. They would only find out that most Artex'ings end up in this crap hole. Usually addicted to Ember Moss, like my mother downstairs. They had no idea of the trap of city life. The day-to-day groan and soul-sucking shimmer of it.

I often looked at the arrow tattoo on my mom's arm and wondered why she didn't go back. It was obvious that she didn't belong here. This place pulled out the worst of her, and yet she stayed. The dream of city lights, I guess, still flickered in her eyes.

Bull.

I don't have time for such nonsense. I need to get my homework done, finish my assignment, do my projects, write the damn test and then get out of here. Wash my hands of this foul place.

Thomas.

23 March, The Third Age

How long has it been since I've managed to find a moment to write? Two weeks? Three? I need to escape! I've been held against my will. I don't know what happened. My mom woke me up at four in the morning, or maybe five. I had only just fallen asleep as I had the night shift. I was so pissed because when I get the night shift, it means I only have two or three hours to sleep before school, and now she was interrupting it.

She told me we had to go. That it was happening and we had to go. James had found it. Who the fuck was James?

I would love to tell you it was the first time my mother had woken me up to tell me to pack, but it wasn't. She's done this to me about three or four times in my life. Usually because the guy she was with had gotten in trouble, or maybe we were running from him as well. But I was super pissed she was doing this to me now. I can't leave – I only have about six months left before I graduate, and then I can move to the cleaner cities and start fresh. Without her.

But I didn't, to be honest, think about it in that moment.
I was so tired and so groomed by this woman that I went into autopilot. I knew the drill. Pack bag, essentially. Take my official documents, like my birth certificate and school reports, so that I can get signed up for a new place once we settled. I learnt the hard way about the hassle of forgetting those behind.

And that was that.

It's been a week since that happened. And now, I'm walking with a troupe of people that I don't really know. The man, who I assume is James, talks to us at night. He gives a lot of speeches about something called the Umber. The others look at him as if he is some God. Some answer to their prayers. He always raises this canister, and they cheer, and note and look at him with greedy, desperate eyes.

It's this black substance that he has in a glass canister. It's pretty gross is what it is. The stuff is like pitch black, but it moves within the jar like a living liquid.

What the hell has my mother got us into this time?

