

# **ALLYSON PACKER**

## ***OUTER DARKNESS***

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Ever since HBO streaming became MAX, things have felt cluttered and cheap. A sudden glut of off-brand shows has collapsed any apparent organizational structure and the platform's purpose has become opaque.

These things matter when you're living in a hotel. In sterile surroundings, you need to maintain specificity in your personal interfaces, so you don't come fully untethered from meaning. Otherwise, it's easy to start inventing an epiphany or, if one doesn't come, falling swiftly into some abyss.

It's not a nice hotel, but it's not bad either. We're here for my partner's work, which is the reason places like this exist. It's off a highway, next to a medical center, in a city in the middle of the desert where the sun turns everything bleak after 9 am. But there's a pool at least, and a free breakfast. There are a lot of cars in the parking lot during the day and I suspect most people are inside their rooms with the shades drawn. They must be paying for the premium internet.

Mostly I sit out by the pool, under the umbrellas with my laptop. I read the news as it filters in from the outside and try to remember what it feels like not to be here. One day, I come across a story about people who believe in the Fourth Turning. It's this idea that every four generations, America goes to shit—war, plague, economic despair. It's been embraced by Steve Bannon, crypto bros, some writer for *Succession*, which I never watched, and a lot of other people you could predict based on that established pattern. It's all complete fantasy, which the journalist acknowledges, but it's getting attention because coincidences make for compelling stories. We're due for a Fourth Turning now and it seems to have shown up right on schedule.

At night, we've been watching this show that came out 15 years ago. It's a drama called *Big Love* about a fictional family of renegade polygamous Mormons who live in the suburbs of Salt Lake City. Since their beliefs aren't accepted by the mainstream Mormon church, the family worships alone and every week one member of the family or another risks exposing their secret lifestyle.

The more you watch, the more the family's true isolation comes into focus. You see it most pointedly in a few of the early episodes, when the patriarch, Bill Henrickson, played by Bill Paxton, performs a full-body submersion baptism on one of his wives or children in the family's backyard pool. You see that they are devout, but without a true spiritual home, always estranged from the world around them.

One night, in a moment of shared despair, Bill Paxton meets with one of his wives, played by Jeanne Tripplehorn. They sit outside by the family pool, wondering about their salvation and mourning the impossibility of being able to live openly. "I don't know why we've been called to live in a time when no one holds the keys," he says to her. "...there's no one to lead us and we drift in between, but I know there's a reason. We won't be cast into outer darkness."

I thought I'd been watching this show, like most of the target audience, to marvel at the strangeness of the family's beliefs and the incomprehensibility of their domestic arrangement. To lose myself in the pleasure of something foreign to my reality. I don't share Bill Paxton's optimism in the face of cosmic unknowns, but I suddenly feel certain that there's something accidentally prophetic in his scripted

dialogue. For a moment it sounds as if he's reciting lines from an ancient text, a book of hours illuminating the current cultural mood and explaining how this despair has settled over us inevitably like a season.

I stay up late that night. The hotel is hermetic and plasticky, and the memory foam mattress cultivates my body heat. Bill Paxton-Henrickson's god would tell me to have faith in the face of things I don't fully understand. I think this is naïve, or even dangerous, but I can feel a part of me, humiliated by its own desire, that wants to. It'd feel great right about now to have confidence in something.

In the morning, when we still have the hotel blackout curtains pulled, I lie on my side in bed, halfway on my face, so that one eye is looking at the news on my phone and the other eye is closed and pressed against my pillow. When I do this, I notice that the disparity in what they're perceiving makes my closed eye start to do some strange optical stuff. I'll see these glowing purple pieces of something like chipped rock or broken glass that kind of move electrically like snow on an old TV. Not as organic as the visuals you get on psychedelics, or at least not any of the psychedelics I've ever done, but still, it's interesting enough. I zone out on the news I'm reading with one eye and zone into what I'm seeing on my eyelid in the other and just sit with that for a while.

I think about the darkness and revelation: 19<sup>th</sup> century psychomanteums with black mirrors where mourners searched for the faces of the dead, or ancient caves seeping poisonous gasses where young women sat on three legged stools and spouted stoned poetry about who would make it home from war. Joseph Smith had some of his revelations by burying his face in a hat and staring into the darkness until he saw what God was trying to tell him. I'm amused by the preposterousness of this and I wonder what the fictional Mormon family thinks of it.

I like that my own brain is a black box to me sometimes. Or a black box to itself. I'm sure someone could tell me the biological reason for my little optical experience, but I don't need to know. I'm reminded that the things we don't understand yet can't disappoint us and become another signpost towards more suffering.

Bill Paxton's voice is warm and gravelly, a little dumb. I should hate everything he is on that show, and I suppose I do in a strict sense, but, in spite of myself, I also find him reassuring. When I'm out by the pool again, back in the light, I look him up to see what he's been doing lately. Immediately, I see that he died of a stroke in 2017 and, for a moment, I'm gutted. It doesn't align with how things should be, the image of him in a hospital bed. He's so vital. I've been part of his family every night and we're still in the middle of our story.

I feel alone. I move my gaze away from the screen and look out towards the pool, letting my eyes rest on the surface of the water. I feel them start to unfocus and I let it happen. Everything abstracts. If you told me I was on a soundstage right now, I'd believe you. It would be a relief. I imagine the arms of some actor slowly lowering me down into the water as I look up at the sky, one hand on my chest like they do in the show. I'm ready to be fucking submerged.

– Allyson Packer, Summer 2023