

## The Inverted Pin

By Drew Kiser

The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.  
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,  
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.  
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,  
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,  
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

Elizabeth Bishop, "The Man-Moth"

Barely a week old, the 7-foot-5 Mothman towered over three tourists, who wore red sunglasses to match the ruby red of his eyes. After they had gotten a serious picture, the photographer told them to take a silly one. (Ethan couldn't make this up if he tried.) They aped the statue's murderous pose: hunched over, sharp claws forward, fangs bared. Mothman's ragged wings seemed to wrap them up in silver. Around this scene, the confetti from the unveiling ceremony still lay scattered on the ground.

Ethan had come to drown Mothman in the Saponi. At least, that was the primary goal. Time permitting, he would also dump all the Mothman merchandise over the bridge with him—the t-shirts, plushies, keychains, scented soaps—hell, might even firebomb the info booth slash meeting point for the 2-hour Cryptids of West Virginia tour. That he only had a vague idea how to make a firebomb was beside the point.

Then, for not the first time since Heathrow, he stopped. He watched the tourists wander away from the statue and meander down Main Street. There were so few of them now—despite the gimmick of the statue, the mob was increasingly drawn towards fresher, darker mysteries in more exciting parts of the States. In the six years since Ethan moved back to London, an abandoned asylum in Maryland had started hosting candlelit tours. A new sighting of the Bunny Man had expectant visitors camping out in Ashburn forests. An older woman's finger had blurred the corner of a selfie she took at Ford's Theatre and now people lined up around the block for immersive tours of Lincoln's ghost. In another six years, would people even remember Saponi?

Then he saw the plaque. Green with black letters, it read, "At this spot, on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2019, the time-worn Saponi bridge collapsed under the." Here he stopped. He remembered the way the sun bleached the teddy bears the locals had piled around this plaque; how the photographs of the dead scrolled up in the rain. Slowly, he walked back to the alley where he had hidden the rental car. He felt sure.

Though he'd never have admitted it anyone at the conference, Londoners laughed at Cincinnati. That is, the ones who knew it existed. He wanted to approach his first visit to the States with an open mind, but what little he saw of the city between meetings and banquets confirmed everything he'd feared. Food culture began and ended with hot wings. Everyone was suspiciously nice. And he could fit a small child in a Big Gulp. Ethan took pictures of everything he saw—the huge SUVs, the fortress malls, the stubborn, ambient heat and the garish newness of everything—and send them to Elena, his best friend from UCL. She'd tell him to "get OUT of there," and he'd reply with a GIF from *Get Out*. She'd reply with a screenshot of the next flights to Heathrow.

Even the Americans who worked for the stateside subsidiary struck him as rude, rowdy, and rough to the point of puerile. He tagged along to happy hours, reciting the same workspace boilerplates,

navigating sports chats as he would a foreign language, trying to be charming or at the very least professional.

It was during one of these happy hours that he opened Grindr to see if any of these brutes would be online. Not even one. The only appealing profile was Visiting. Visiting was 6'4", 205 pounds, in town for a conference. Sturdy type, with nice arms, though the lack of a bio put Ethan on his guard. Still, riding the first wave of hormones, he sent the guy a message, dreaming of frat houses and college sports. Visiting responded; his body pics piqued Ethan's interest. The flirty texts made him hard. Finally, the nudes got him up out of bed.

He Ubered to a dive bar on the other side of town to avoid seeing anyone from the conference. He texted Elena he felt out of place as the only man without a baseball cap at the bar; "or alimony payments," she added.

Chase was taller in person and more broad. He had dark hair, a dark beard, and wore construction boots. When he shook Ethan's hand he smiled, showing off a crossword puzzle of strong white teeth.

"Chase," said Chase. He spoke with an Appalachian twang that reminded Ethan of *Beverly Hillbillies*.

"Well how do you do, stranger from the internet."

"Stranger? I've already seen your anus. We're at least acquaintances."

"No, only those who've fisted me earn that title."

"Fair. How does one become your friend, then?"

"You can start by buying me a drink."

An hour later, while Ethan lay pinned under Chase in the ice-cold hotel room and gin softened his nerves to elastic, it all ran through his head again. The touching story of Chase's ailing parents and cousins all in rehab or dead. The tiny West Virginia hometown with the library and jail in the same building. The Native American holding up a bloody scalp that served as their high school mascot. The job remodeling homes that spared him from a life hunched underground. But out of all that brutal adversity, this: a man as smart as funny, moving up in his career, in his physical prime, and who asked Ethan what he wanted to have done to him, and did it.

When Ethan's flight back to London was delayed, he called Chase. After a short conversation, an awkward proposition, and an offer, Ethan asked United if he could reschedule not from Cincinnati, but from DC; not tomorrow, but in three days' time. They cut him a deal on a rental car, and, giddy, he struck out for West Virginia.

Chase's cabin stood on a hill overlooking a meadow the size of a football field, hemmed in by primeval pine forest which wrinkled and folded as it stepped off into the rolling blue foothills, beautiful in their own right but even more so when taken under the aegis of a word cracked and blue-grey as the hills themselves: Appalachia. They arranged to meet at the gas station/live bait shop that served as the heart of the town coal left cold and painkillers killed. Chase led Ethan down a winding road littered with white crosses where ice or ardor had introduced teenage skulls to bark. Then a mile-long gravel driveway and a roundabout, at the far end of which stood the cabin in its clean order, and Chase with open arms. Ethan drank six beers that night and gave Chase more kisses than he'd ever given anyone. On the balcony he smoked his first cigarette sitting between Chase's legs, leaning back against the Adirondack chair, staring at the milky confusion of the sky. He would take these feelings with him to London, he decided. He would never to forget this moment.

His two-day stint in Saponi was a dream of evergreen and mist. They shared favorite music videos and mixed awful cocktails; swapped jockstraps and cooked huge versions of childhood meals. Then, halfway through a sentence, it was time to go. Ethan stood alone in the middle of his London flat again, with something as flimsy as a phone number to pin that joy to fact.

They texted for months. Through ill health, bad sex, bad food and a flood. Then, in May, three things happened. First, an ill-planned brunch caused a rift in Ethan’s friend group, leaving him to serve the worst role in a tug-of-war: the rope. Second, construction of a condo building next door demolished his sleep schedule. Third, his company transitioned from an office culture to having all work done remotely via Slack.

They had discussed another visit, with Ethan offering his services as a personal tour guide in London and Chase retorting with “London? Never heard of it.” It was a Monday when Chase made a formal invitation. Ethan took a flight from Heathrow to Dulles with a bag holding what he hoped were a month’s worth of clothes. Running into Chase’s arms at the airport, he felt seen, felt known, felt felt. It was the first time someone had ever waited for him at arrivals without a sign with his last name on it. They held hands the three hours to Saponi.

He’d tell Elena how the transition from rutting animals to an elderly couple was immediate. That first night, they lit candles, drank tea, and fell asleep on top of each other before the clock saw its fourth digit.

What did he learn in those first two weeks? That Chase was tied to the land. Any discouraging word about Saponi, or West Virginia, or any inch of Appalachia raised his hackles. To hear him tell it, any town larger than 1,000 was gangrenous with crime, grime, and elitism. The few times they did meet new people, Chase introduced Ethan with a barb. “Here’s my little city-slicker,” he’d say. “Kind enough to visit us in the backwoods.” He said he wouldn’t visit London for one million dollars. Dollars. Wouldn’t even convert it to pounds.

But neither could say there wasn’t love. Days blue rain would move in and flood the rocky soil and fill the forests on the mountains with mist, Chase would call in sick to work. Wrapped around each other under a gaudy wolfmoon blanket, he and Ethan spent the day watching Netflix originals and eating Oreos with peanut butter. Evenings, after the gall of the day had run dry, Chase would ask what it’s like to live in a place people wanted to visit and Ethan would tell him. Nights Chase came home late he undressed in the dark. Coins would slip out of his pocket as he undressed and clatter on the hardwood. Chase would swear under his breath and creep into bed, casting a warm arm over Ethan and setting his forehead against the back of his neck. The next morning Ethan would stack the coins on the windowsill. Before long he learned to hear the music in their falling. He associated their clatter with warmth.

He loved Chase because Chase could do everything. He knew how to reduce a living thing to steaks and could plane and bevel as if wooden planks were clay. Watching him pick over the blighted hulls of old cars, Ethan imagined that the inside of Chase’s brain held a hologram image of an engine block, which he could rotate, take apart, bore into or diminish, testing—as he held this or that scrap up to the light—whether this was the final piece he needed to make a metal heart beat.

Ethan also began to feel for the land. Driving into Saponi, he found his eyes drawn to the mountains the way floating needles twist north. He imagined the feel of them under his hand, that impossibly plush texture of pine forest coating mountains. “You have to experience it,” he texted Elena. “Send pics.”

Six years later, a cold echo of the landscape stood blasted. Logging trucks chugged blamelessly away from stripped mountains. And the town of Saponi had changed. With the tourism slowing, the seams had begun to show. The photobooth shop, which had taken over a shuttered nail salon, stood shuttered. Shot glasses filled with dust glinted behind a dim window. And the pothole in front of the Dollar General had grown, like a lesion, into an even bigger menace.

Ethan swerved around it and pulled into a spot at the pub. He had a few hours to burn before go-time, and this was, still, the only place in town open past 8. Inside, a man and a woman sat at the deserted bar, not looking at each other. Ethan felt some relief. With everything Chase had taught him about this strip of the country—the resilience, the grim resourcefulness, the people who could eat

squirrel pie—he knew, deep down, there had to be some contingent of locals who never subscribed to the madness. He drank a ridiculously cheap beer and Googled everything about the old bridge.

Back in the parking lot, he noticed a bumper sticker with a huge-winged grey monster and the phrase “I want to believe.” He looked back at the couple inside. They sat under the lights, their features dragging down their faces, side-by-side, not speaking. “Really?” he thought. “Them?”

He had stopped at this bar because that’s where he and Chase were when they felt it. They were sharing wings and discussing their dream houses. Outside, a trucker had gotten stuck backing out of the Citgo across the street. Five men were stationed at points along the sides of the 18-wheeler, guiding it out. Meanwhile, along Main Street, traffic in both directions had stretched out of sight. People stepped out of their cars to commiserate with the others and make a show of looking at their watches. Rush hour in Saponi was not a lot, but store owners were coming out to join the crowd of commuters.

“—ice house,” Chase continued. “The further southwest you get the fewer barns you find, which is ok by me, as long as there’s some kind of outbuilding I can woodwork in.”

“What about nightlife?”

“What *about* nightlife?”

“I mean, don’t you want to be close to somewhere with a gay community? After Saponi?”

“I mean, I’ve lived here all my life and somehow got you. That’s something, right?”

Suddenly, all the glasses on the shelf made a clinking sound. Outside, the men stood perfectly still, looking down the street. They had felt it, too. The room shook and the lamp swung. As if moved by an electrical impulse, half the crowd bolted away up the street, half down. Ethan found himself following Chase out of the pub, leaving phones, wallets, and keys by their food.

Ethan’s weekly phone calls to Elena were usually light-hearted lists of grievances against the greasy food, driving culture, and racist bumper stickers of America. But that night, over the course of an hour and a half, there was little he could tell her that didn’t feel like pulling a piece of metal from his thigh. He told her about how the trusty, wood-paved Saponi bridge had collapsed into the river under the weight of the backed-up traffic. He told her about men diving in to rescue people from their cars. He talked about how Chase was one of the first to jump in, rescuing a boy, a girl, and their dog. How the first responders came from the wrong way and couldn’t get to the bridge until the 18-wheeler had moved. All in all, he told her, ten people from four families had died, all locals.

He did not say how waxen the little girl looked by the time they fished her up. Or how when a 4-wheeler dragged one car up on the bank, the water inside was rust colored. And not from rust.

He held Ethan that night still smelling the faint metal smell of the river in his hair.

For a few days, Saponi enjoyed the gallows fame of a Salem or a Sandy Hook. Thoughts and prayers were heaped on the families. Impromptu vigils and memorials sprung up across the town. Even the president spoke on it, showing how this tragedy was actually a lesson about how the real minorities in America were small towns hit hard by the recession. The pity dried up within a week. Ethan figured that would be the end of it.

One day, Ethan was waiting in line at the pharmacy to pick up his acne medication. Leaning over the counter was a man with a long beard and a grey t-shirt with cut off sleeves. Ethan busied himself with a display of Yankee Candles.

“Far as I can tell, it looks like a duck, and it quacks like one, too. You know?”

Ethan’s ears perk up at the man’s conspiratorial tone. He pretended to be engrossed sniffing a candle named Tranquil Mist.

“But why now? Why here?” Ethan recognized the pharmacist from the vigil. She’d sat in the front row beside a weeping woman holding a pink plastic music box.

The man shrugged. “Can’t say. What did Point Pleasant do to deserve it? There’s just some evil out there. Plain and simple.”

“I don’t know,” said the pharmacist. “He giveth and he taketh away. I think we have to trust that something will work out.” At that, she and the man turned to Ethan, who nearly dropped the jar of Summer Wish.

“Sorry,” said the man, stepping away from the window. “Didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

Home, he told Chase what had happened.

“Who was the pharmacist?” asked Chase.

“Fuck should I know.”

“Blond? On the bigger side?”

“With a star tattoo on her hand?”

“Yeah, that’s Sherry. She lost her niece.”

“God. So she thinks some kind of terrorist did it?”

“Nah, babe,” he said. “Mothman.”

“Who the fuck is Mothman?”

“Who’s Mothman?” said Chase, sitting bolt upright, as if Ethan had just asked how one tied one’s shoes.

“Well pardon me for not spending my teenage years poring over superheroes.”

“Superheroes?” Chase’s voice, perched on a dizzyingly high octave, alarmed Ethan. “He’s not a fucking... Jesus!” Chase whipped out his phone and looked something up. He handed it to Ethan without a word.

Ethan read. “In West Virginia folklore, the Mothman is a creature reportedly seen in the Point Pleasant area between 1966 and 1967... Such-and-such professor notes that at least 100 people reported seeing Mothman... the first witnesses told police they saw a “large flying man with ten-foot wings”, following their car... other reports agree on a humanoid creature with glowing red eyes.” Ethan looked up to find Chase staring at him expectantly. “Honestly? Mothman sounds like a babe. Think he’d fancy a *ménage à trois*?”

“Fuck off,” said Chase. “This is part of West Virginia history. Besides, Mothman is asexual.”

“Wikipedia begs to differ, hun. Look, it says right here: ‘Mothman is a dom top into oral, JO, poppers, and long sessions.’ ”

Chase dropped the subject suddenly, grabbing his phone and playing music. Ethan brought the dishes to the sink and came back to see Chase sniffing the candle from the pharmacy.

“What the fuck,” said Chase. “This doesn’t smell anything like a summer wish.”

The first week of August, Chase’s company was hired to fix up a plantation near a tiny border town called Good, an hour or so from Saponi. His schedule, already odd, grew erratic, and the waking time they spent together shrunk. Ethan would only see Chase in flashes: the electric shade of his blueprints as he zipped his backpack shut, the flash of headlights on the wall as his truck pulled into the driveway after midnight.

One morning, the town woke up with a strange feeling. Overnight some group had plastered the town with fliers showing a winged creature in silhouette, its eyes glowing traffic light red. It was a local teenager who alerted people that Saponi had also been added to the Wikipedia pages for “List of Mothman Sightings,” “Unexplained Occurrences in the U.S.,” as well as “Disasters Attributed to the Paranormal.”

That weekend, the first bus of tourists arrived. Leaving from DC’s Union Station, the half-day “Cryptids—Alive!” tour brought in anywhere between 20 and 100 tourists every Saturday and Sunday. Weekends in town became free-for-alls, with everyone from the Boy Scouts to the Rotary Club to local

farmers hawking their wares to the visitors. T-shirts showing chubby anime Mothmen surrounded by pink hearts appeared on sidewalk kiosks. For the months of August and September, local businesses reported a 200% increase in sales. A Mothman statue was suggested. And the joint funeral, delayed until they could get the last body out of the water, was quietly rescheduled for a Wednesday.

After the funeral, they drove out to the VFW for dinner. The Veterans of Foreign Wars building, one of three places in town that served food after lunch, was an unassuming, vinyl-sided canteen patronized by oldtimers who sat around the bar under a wagon wheel retrofitted as a candelabra, saying nothing.

“Try the Vietnam,” said Chase.

“What?” Ethan learned that all the burgers were named after foreign wars. Chase always got the Persian Gulf. Smothered in American cheese and served with a side of couscous, this one killed his uncle and was the reason Chase and his siblings were allowed to eat here in the first place. Eventually, Ethan settled on the Korea Conflict, which was served with a side of Asian-style coleslaw and flavored with a few drops of Teriyaki.

As Chase and Ethan waited for the bill, Ethan remembered a thing he’d seen about Mothman. It showed a picture of a bridge with the text “Bridge: \*exists\*”, followed by an image of a dark, humanlike form under the words “It’s free real estate!” He showed Chase the meme, which got him to chuckle.

“I guess it’s not just Saponi, now,” Ethan said. “Seems the internet has Mr. Mothman fever too.”

“Just ‘Mothman.’ Well, people love a disaster.”

“Aw,” said Ethan. “I love you, too.”

In the car, Ethan asked Chase if he’d ever reported something on Instagram.

“No,” he said. “Why?”

“Just wondering if I’m supposed to get a notification if they take it down or something.”

“You didn’t actually report that photo, did you?”

Ethan was used to Chase pulling out this fake umbrage whenever they had a spat. “Yes! And I’ve called Meme Protective Services to keep this Mothman shit off the rest of the internet.”

“Jesus.”

“What?”

“What’s the point?”

“What’s the point? You’ve got someone making fun of a tragedy. Where actual people—people *you knew*—died! Then you’ve got the fact that we can’t talk about actual infrastructural issues because, oh no, it was the Mothman who did it, not Regan’s gutting of public works. And then you just have the general ickyness you feel when a meme touches your real life. So yeah! I reported it. If I could have plucked it off my timeline like a weed, I would have.”

As Ethan drove, the warm air buffeting their faces halted the conversation. They picked it up back at the house.

“Don’t you think that’s just a little bit of an overreaction?”

“What, keeping uselessly morbid stuff off the internet? About tragedies that happened, like, last week?”

Not wanting this to become a real argument, Ethan casually picked up a cereal box and began reading the ingredients. The tension in the room swelled, solidified, and set around them. The conversation was over.

In the dark that night, Ethan turned to Chase. “It’s not that you *believe* in Mothman, is it?”

“The ten-foot-tall, red-eyed, half-moth, half-human?”

“Fair,” Ethan said. Though he made note of the fact Chase didn’t actually say no.

An hour passed. Both men twisted in their bed.

“It wasn’t a cryptid, you know.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t the Mothman. Or Batman. Or anyone.”

“Why are you still thinking about this?”

“Because the town is overrun by loony tourists in tin foil hats. And even *they* don’t really believe it was him. Everyone *knows* it wasn’t him. It was shitty construction by a yokel who couldn’t link a Bionicle if his life depended on it,” said Ethan

“It was a firm in Winchester who built it. An architecture firm that has a great record.”

“Had. And, if I’m not mistaken, didn’t your mayor just pick his cousin’s company?”

“If you haven’t noticed, we’re not the biggest or richest town in the world.”

“And?”

“And still, it was a pretty damn good bridge.”

“Do you honestly think it collapsed because of a monster?”

“I know for a fact it did not.”

“Okay,” said Ethan. “Good.”

“But at the same time—”

“Oh my God.”

“Listen. At the same time, who cares? It’s not hurting anyone.”

“You’re right. The people that this disrespects cannot, technically, feel physical pain anymore.”

“What is London known for?”

“What?” asked Ethan.

“If you tell people about London, what do they think about?”

“I don’t know. Kew Gardens. Big Ben. London Bridge.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Ethan sat up. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.” He jumped out of bed and ran into the living room where Chase’s work bag stood in a corner. When he pulled out the stack of blue flyers, Mothman’s glowing red eyes looked back. Chase didn’t try to take them from Ethan or deny it. When Ethan asked about the Wikipedia pages, he didn’t lie.

The fight that followed was more subdued than he would have expected. After Chase left for work in the morning, Ethan arranged a flight and for a maid to start freshening things up in his apartment in London. He packed his bags, relieved he had accrued nearly nothing during his stay there. He decided to simply leave his dirty laundry rather than cart it back across the Atlantic.

Ethan drove to DC alone. As the enormous streetlights above the highway grew closer and closer together, he gave into them. He slept well on the flight and landed with a sweet text from Chase, thanking him for spending these months with him and for sharing this little piece of his life.

That was the last he ever heard from Chase, except for a handful of Insta likes and one unacknowledged horny Snapchat on Christmas Day.

Six years passed. A cousin’s wedding in Baltimore brought Ethan back to America and got him thinking about visiting Saponi. The announcement that a Mothman statue was up sealed the deal. Now, at midnight, parked in the dark in Saponi, two hours after catching the bouquet—an auspicious sign, he hoped—he grabbed his baseball cap and Home Depot bags (containing a long nylon rope, a hacksaw, a stepping stool, and tarp, all bought on separate trips so as not to alarm the cashiers), and slunk the fifty feet to the statue.

Up close, he admired the handicraft: the texture of the fur on Mothman’s muscular chest was almost inviting, and the wings—riddled with holes to lend a spookier vibe—looked light, almost ephemeral. The eyes, made of red glass, were grey in the darkness. How was he going to go about this?

It was too big to put in the bed of the pickup as is. Doing some quick calculations, he pulled out the hacksaw and started on the wings.

The metal was thinner there but, as he would explain to Elena on the drive back to Baltimore, he had trouble seeing what he was doing. That part of town was still quite dark at night, and putting his phone light on the ground was not enough. He sawed clean through the first wing without thinking to catch it as it fell. "It hit the concrete like hell's fucking bells," he said. "All at once, the lights in all the houses turn on."

Driving the pitch black highway out of town, he explained how a man walked out of a nearby house and approached him. A man with a gun. Ethan had just enough time to drag the wing to his car before the man started shooting warning shots in the air. He told her about how giddy he was at his act of vandalism, how he was going to check the wing in the "odd sized luggage" line and eventually turn it into a coffee table. He told her, laughing, that Chase's old high school had changed their mascot: instead of the Savages, they were, now, the Mothmen.

After saying goodbye to Elena, he drove in the dark in silence. Then, his phone rang.

"Hello?"

Silence on the other end.

"Okay," he said, and hung up. His phone rang again immediately.

"Hello?"

"Where are you right now?"

"A hello would be nice."

"I hope you're driving that fucking wing back here."

"Cool it, will you? You can pick it up from whichever dump is closest to Dulles."

"Was it worth it? Do you feel better?" Outside, he saw the sign that said he was leaving West Virginia.

"I thought you'd be excited. This is what closure looks like."

"Why? What's it got to do with you?"

"Chase! Jesus! People died!" He was the only car on the twisting road. Before him, the mountains mellowed into Virginia, a landscape of less urgency.

"Which people?"

"The ones who died! All of them! Ten! Ten people! Including a fucking 8-year-old girl!"

"Who?"

"A local! The pharmacist, you said, it was her niece—"

"What was her name?"

"What?"

"What was her name?"