This summer, I set out to research the scientific, political, and cultural aftershocks caused by the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant explosion in Pripyat, Ukraine, on April 26, 1986. My goal was to get as clear a picture as possible of the situation before the explosion (the workings of the plant, its importance to the Soviet Union, and the average citizen’s relationship to the nuclear city) in contrast to how history views the disaster today, particularly with regards to the wildlife regeneration in the surrounding marshlands and the continued radioactive emissions reported from the reactor itself. I wanted to write a play exposing the process of moving from decay to life, from desolation to population, as well as investigate the similarities Chernobyl shares with other seemingly colossal disasters around the world. Originally, I thought this would manifest in an avant-garde, non-linear exploration of themes discussed by personified animals and abandoned objects left behind by the Pripyat evacuees following the explosion. I wanted to create an atmospheric event that would allow audiences to feel submerged in the ether of a decrepit, overgrown building left behind by people.

Soon after I began my research, however, it became clear that no matter how interesting non-human storytellers would be in illuminating little-known environmental details of this story of destruction and perseverance, the absence of humans in such an artistic work would mean the absence of that which I found most compelling in the research: the human stories of regret, love, and loss. While I worked my way through each of my proposed research texts, the two sources that became the most inspirational in writing the play were *Visit Sunny Chernobyl*, a journalist’s contemporary travelogue from a series of abandoned places by Andrew Blackwell, and *Voices from Chernobyl*, a collection of firsthand survivor accounts compiled by Svetlana Alexievich. During check-ins with Paul Edwards, my advisor, he instructed me to follow my impulse and, rather than try to keep the play in the same world that I had originally proposed it, to allow it to change and craft my research schedule according to that change. I couldn’t ignore the feeling that, try as I might to tell the story of Chernobyl through a darkly humorous, Brechtian animal-and-object lens, the story was at heart about humans reacting in surprising ways to an almost mythologically immense situation. The play turned into a realistic, naturalistic drama that I hoped felt similar to a Chekhov play. However, I was initially insecure because I could tell that the first draft was all about events rather than people experiencing events. I continued my research, but felt at a loss as to a direction to push the play in during my writing time.

To remedy my stalemate, Paul and I further discussed how I could make my research work for the play I began imagining rather than the play I set out to write. To this end, I began gathering additional research materials in the realm of theatrical explorations of tragedy/catastrophe. These texts were *The Amish Project*, a play about the aftermath of Amish school shootings in Pennsylvania; *Eastland*, a musical about the capsizing of a ship in the Chicago River; and *With Their Eyes*, a collection of monologues written by New York City high school students regarding September 11, 2001. I was originally struck by these texts because of their ability to cover events and their afteraths without feeling operatic,
over-dramatic, or soap opera-esque. I began trying to inject this sense of reality into my play, and to check each character for a grounded objective, something concrete by which the reader can trace their journey from beginning to end. Paul also encouraged me not to edit myself in the writing process, allowing the research I was engaged in to come straight into the play without a filter.

This advice gave me the freedom to absorb everything I could from my readings, continue to focus my research more specifically on the human element in the catastrophe, and then write freely for the human characters that I had devised in the first draft. The second draft I turned in at the end of the summer felt more exciting, more like I was dealing with real characters who could have been there, and with Paul’s continued advisement, I feel confident in the direction it is moving. I have identified a central character (Natalka) and a central conflict—her wish to stay in the irradiated building she lived in in Chernobyl rather than enjoy a “normal” life with her friends and family elsewhere. I have also imposed a structure of monologues delivered to the audience interposed between traditional, realistic scenes. These monologues and the central conflict are drawn directly from first-person accounts that I unearthed in my research process. I hope that, by shifting between direct address and naturalism, the constant alienation from any assumed reality in the characters’ situations will keep the reader aware that it is a fictional exploration of a factual event, and in so doing allow me to take liberties as a writer with certain technicalities in the historical accounts of the explosion, as there are many discrepancies depending on which source is consulted.

With this new structure, and a stronger knowledge of my characters and their stories, I am interested in continuing to rewrite. I want to use the human-focused research I did this summer in conjunction with that original impulse I had to create a visceral, non-linear theatrical event, and try to combine them within the framework I have created. By reconnecting with my original impulse for something more avant-garde, I hope to reinvigorate my writing process and hopefully discover something new and exciting about the characters I have created, even if the third draft continues in the naturalistic realm. Looking forward, I am interested in doing a longer period of research this fall with my play in mind. I want to dig deeper into Soviet government accounts (those that still exist) regarding the days following the explosion, and search harder for first-person accounts of survival to incorporate into my characters. I am also interested in analyzing Chekhov’s major plays with a focus on the vocal palette of his characters, as I am currently trying to decide on whether to make my characters sound more Russian or hyper-contemporary American in sound. Finally, I want to research further on representation through the arts of high-toll human catastrophes, and make sure that every line of my play is respectful and plausible despite artistic extrapolations that keep it engaging and exciting for a reader or audience.

This summer, through my research and advising, I have made significant strides toward a play I am confident to share with others in the Chicago theatre community. With continued, directed research throughout the school year and regular writing time guided by the feedback of teachers and peers, I will have something to submit to theatre companies near the end of next year in order to jumpstart my career post-graduation.