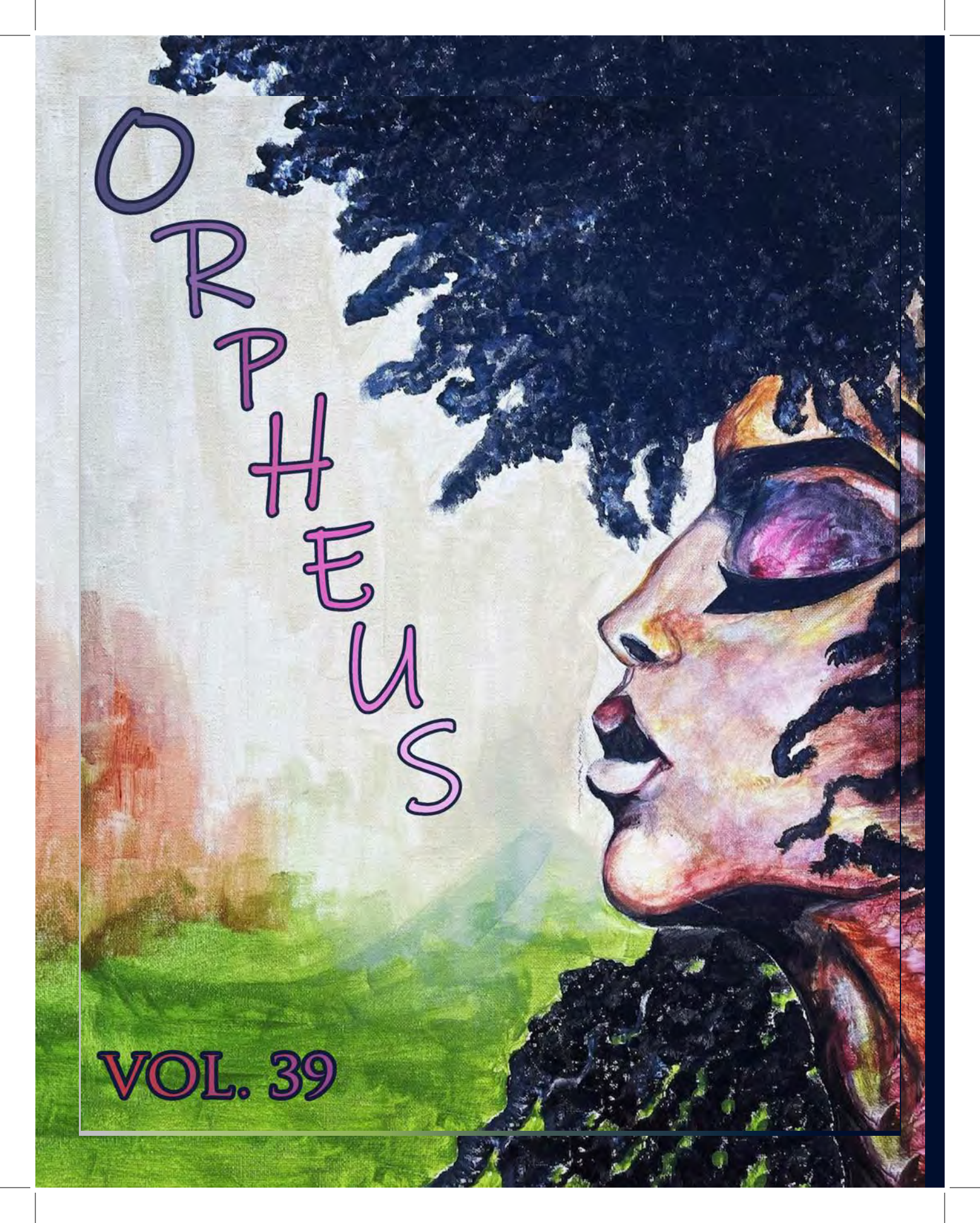




ORPHANS

VOL. 39

Orpheus volume 39 published Spring 2022

Front Cover Art Image: *Kiss of Life* by Rivka Jones ( @rivkas_art_)

Back Cover Art Image: *Tyrant of the Pier* a colored pencil piece by Rosie Ayala

Inside Front Cover Art Image: *Are You Coming?* a photograph by Ian Tash

Orpheus is published annually. The 2022 volume has been made possible by funding from Academic Affairs, the School of Arts and Humanities, and the Department of English.

If any student is interested in joining the *Orpheus* staff, please email Dr. Charles MacQuarrie at macquarrie@csub.edu or Dr. Carol Dell'Amico at cdellamico@csub.edu

Orpheus accepts submissions of various kinds. Please send submissions to orpheus@csub.edu, but first visit the Department of English's website (www.csub.edu/english) for complete information.

Orpheus follows a blind submission process that includes pieces submitted by the journal's editors.

Orpheus was originally founded in 1973 by Dr. Solomon Iyasere, a professor in the CSUB Department of English. His contributions to the university were many, and his legacy lives on through *Orpheus*.

We are proud to say that this edition of *Orpheus* is our most diverse issue yet, featuring for the first time in *Orpheus* history works that were written in a language other than English with English translations or written in English and with non-English translations. In particular, we want to give a big thanks to all the students from The American Language Institute here at CSUB who gave us so many amazing poems in their native languages with English versions. We hope that the diversity in *Orpheus* continues to expand in the future as talented individuals share both their skills and their cultures with the California State University, Bakersfield community.

Thank you,

Bailey and Sidney Russell

Orpheus 2022



California State University, Bakersfield

Orpheus 2022 Staff

Dr. Charles MacQuarrie, **Advisor**
Bailey Russell and Sidney Russell, **Head Editors**
Katie Gonzalez, **American Language Institute Liaison**
Kevin Lara, **Graphics Editor**

The Rest of Our Fabulous Editing Team:

Chelsea Arredondo	Joe Louis Nitro
Elizabeth Gossett	Kharisma Ozuna
Topazio Gutierrez	Julian Picazo
Madison King	Claudia Pineda Contreras
Mariaxochitl Martinez	Spencer Shepard
Morgan Mullens	Wes Werner

April was a crewelling month for us at *Orpheus* – we busily stitched together a wide and excellent assortment of visual art, poetry, drama, short-fiction, and even one piece of non-fiction into a myriad tapestry which we here present for your delectation. Our solemn gratitude to the Dean of Arts and Humanities, Dr. Robert Frakes, and to the Chair of English, Dr. Steven Frye. The one an expert in Cormac McCarthy and the other in Late Classical Latin law, they share a common commitment to student expression, well-being, and success. Without their support *Orpheus* would be impossible. As a proponent of making trying to make work into play as much as possible, I delighted in the brilliance and comradery of the editorial team this year. Our *modus operandi* was to read aloud together all of the texts that we possibly could, to discuss them, appreciate them, and do our best to try to help the authors improve them; though the contributions were of such a high standard that it made our work easy to play.

Since having done my best to keep *Orpheus* and *Calliope* going after the death of one dear colleague and the retirement of another by creating unit bearing classes associated with them, I have happily shared the honor of serving as advisor to the English Department journals. This issue, however, I expect will be my last. I find that my thoughts and feelings about teaching higher education have undergone a significant shift since the Covid pandemic began, and climate change (and living among the tall trees in Humboldt county) has made me quite loath to use paper or the automobile except when necessary. This issue of *Orpheus*, in my imagination, is fundamentally an electronic one. We will submit a manuscript, possibly in two volumes, for publication this year, but our desire to be inclusive means that we will also be using a good deal of paper. I do hope in future years we get as many or more submissions as we did this year, and I think that shifting to an all-electronic format for the journals ought to be discussed by English faculty and students alike.

I would like to thank the many students who have worked so hard on *Orpheus* over the years, and those who have contributed their work as well. And a special thanks to Bailey and Sidney Russell who have studied Old Irish, Middle Welsh, Ancient Greek, and a great deal of Latin with me as well and whose enthusiasm and energy is an inspiration to us all.

There is a clue in the April 15th *Times Literary Supplement* cryptic crossword, number 25 across “Play, one modelled on a hero that’s torn apart.” I love the difficulty of cryptic crosswords, though I am not terribly good at them. It seems that while Artificial Intelligence can beat humans at chess, at information retention, at, well, most anything really, humans remain dominant at cryptic crosswords. These puzzles demand a non-linear, intuitive, almost psychic (and psychotic) educated guessing that AI has yet to master – and it may be that when and if AI does master the art of cryptic crosswords it will have had to become human. In any case, and I could be wrong, but I think the answer to 25 across of [TLS crossword 1422](#) by Myrtilus is **ORPHEUS**. Orpheus played the lyre, the quintessential musician, he tragically failed to bring his wife out of Dis, despite having suborned Persephone with the sweet opium of sound, but he was also dismembered into many pieces by Maenads; there is film by Jean Cocteau of that name (*Orphee* in French) and one by Marcel Camus titled “[Black Orpheus](#)” (Barak Obama’s mother’s favorite film apparently) as well as a [s’math sinn](#) poem “[Orpheus, Euridice, Hermes](#)” by Rilke, a delightful poem called *Orphee* by Neil Gaiman, and a stunning painting by Waterhouse “[Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus](#),” ~ so many bits and pieces of him scattered across art and literature from the terra of Ancient Greece to the fields of modern Bakersfield. And this our 39th edition of *Orpheus* is indeed filled with juicy bits and pieces for you to devour or snack on or just to taste.

Sila Ersinarsinivdluge and Ludite! [Homo Ludens](#)

Contents

Poetry

Azam Abbasi	
Who Can Find Me?	1
Rino Aida	
My Dream	3
Minami Akatsu	
I am Riyan	4
Teresa Alcantar	
Beach Front Trailer	5
Somiah Alkobadi	
Alone	6
Ann Antonio	
Expectations from the Great Wave	7
Ryotaro Aoki	
Grand Canyon	8
Shawn A. Avalos	
cloud9	9
Joe Bejarano	
P.S. Journey	11
Vanessa Beltran	
Desire, Incarnate.	12
Hector Cabrera	
Je cherche encore... ..	13
Alyssa Cantu	
The Facets of Excellence	15
Cycle	15
Fatyma Cendejas	
Te Amo (feat. The World Is Yours, photograph)	17
Ana Dominguez	
Mother Nature	18

Enlightenment	19
Carlos Ervin	
The Moon	20
Moises B. Fuentes	
Please Excuse Our Mess While We Renovate	21
Madelyn Gaines	
Foolish Hope	22
Surfing the Waves	23
Abandonment	23
Twisted Epiphany	24
Cosme Garcia	
CHANGE	24
Maia Garcia	
Strawberry Pie	25
Red	25
El Dorado	26
Hollowed	27
Missy	28
To reach into your Sleep	29
Christopher Gomez	
Forbidden	30
Bat-Ami Gordin	
Note From A Metro Line	32
Black Cat on White Picket Fence	33
Ryosei Hayama	
Table of My Ideal Life	34
Ruben Higareda Suarez	
In the Moment collection	36
<i>A Sad Morning</i>	36
<i>Sister</i>	36
Ayaka Hirai	
Kindness Person	37

Yukiro Hosoya	
Journey	38
Uriel Jacobo-Prado	
The Perfect Figure	40
Lola Jimenez	
Universe	40
Mirror Mirror on the wall- Who's the hungriest of them all	41
The Creature in my Heart	41
Yumiko Kato	
The Morning of a Part Time Job	42
Mary Killeen Pena	
For Medical Reasons	44
Madison King	
For My Beloved	44
Modernity of the Wallpaper	46
Untitled	46
Kevin Lara	
Thoughts for the Alimentation of the Soul	47
Musings on a Coincidental Encounter	48
Ann Marie Lawson	
What I Want	49
Exhausting a place, Myself	50
Anahi Lomeli	
Convenient Anxiety	51
Alice and the Eat Me Cake	51
Lischa Mears	
The Forgotten Song	52
Fire and Ice	53
The Roaring Silence: A Contrapuntal	54
Before We Became Victims of Time	56
Samantha Nichols	
Blue Eyes	56
Pencils	57

Faith, Trust, Pixie Dust	57
Pearl Harbor Answer.....	59
Joe Louis Nitro	
Disposable; Irreplacable	60
Tori Ortega	
Star Girl	60
Melinda Quach	
Miss Rower of Summer Port	61
Zachariah Rush	
Cruising down North Chester Ave.	63
Kentaro Sakasai	
Space Odyssey	64
Lilliawna Shaffer	
hazel	65
everlasting impact	66
Spencer Shepard	
Horse Meadow Poem	66
In a wind sculpted field of golden springtime poppies	67
Morning Rituals	67
For Posterity's Sake	68
Lydia E. Shimeall	
wildfire	70
Chikai Shindo	
I'm in a maze	71
Manisha Singh	
Exhausting a Place	72
Trenten Sorci	
Gods and Death	74
Rachel Stratemeier	
A Relationship	74
Somewhere	75
Morgan Swift	
Wishful Thinking	76

before it's too late	77
Ian Tash	
The Third Acts	78
Anju Tokano	
World	80
Adriana Toledo	
We're over	82
Embodied Desire	82
Leah Truitt	
Oyster Shells	83
Wishing for Canaries	83
Milk Tea	83
In Memory	84
Wes D. Werner	
Thalassophobia	84
Monica Williams	
Contemplation...?	85
A Mother's Addiction	86
Left side Strong side	86
Roman Wolosz	
Survive	87
Yubo Zhou	
You	88

Short Story

Teresa Alcantar	
I Wish I Knew	91
Rosa Arredondo	
Gumball	92
Vanessa Beltran	
Charlie, Charlie	96
Live Art, A Short Story	99

Richard Boyd	
The Princess and the Aye-Aye	100
Kathryn Buys	
That Night in Banagher Forest	103
Alyssa Cantu	
Dying to Meet You	114
Sarah Emery	
a short story about my young self	122
Moises B. Fuentes	
June 1st 2018	122
Katie Gonzalez	
Crumbs	125
Elizabeth Gossett	
Never Give Up on Your Dreams	133
Michael Ibarra	
Gamma	135
iuxeayor	
Once Upon a Blue Moon	141
The Dream Job	144
Lola Jimenez	
Cloud and Smoke	147
Ann Marie Lawson	
A Day In The Life Of A Cat	148
Landon Logue	
The Hero Who Failed	149
Citlalli Luna	
Linen Curtains	150
Dre Martinez	
Luck	151
Lischa Mears	
The Overpowered Meets Demise	155

Melinda Quach

The Knight of Trustworthiness: The Liar Who Lies All His Life157

The Lives of Louise Labé163

Alexis Robinson

The Dream173

Angel Rosas

Big Sister's Night174

Destinee Sims

The Fey's Dance183

Ian Tash

The First Wave.....188

Brain ALPHAsize194

Artificial Creative Technology195

Breakfast195

Leah Truitt

Midnight Meanderings197

Snickerdoodles201

I Wasn't Expecting A Ring202

Wes D. Werner

You Are Here205

Monica Williams

Corona-cation215

Nonfiction

Samantha Nichols

The Night: 28 Sept 2009217

Drama

Madison King

Wrathful Seed221

Ian Tash

Keeping Up with the Kattamas229

Monica Williams

It's Dark Inside Sunshine Market241

Artwork Contents

Kiss of Life by Rivka Jones	Front Cover Art
Are You Coming? (photography) by Ian Tash	Inside Front Cover Art, ii
World (colored pencils) by Anju Tokano	xiii
IRREVERENT SELF (canvas with acrylic paint) by Madison King	10
America (photography) by Kevin Lara	20
Claustrophobia (photography) by Kevin Lara	31
Crushing Rocks (photography) by Kevin Lara	40
Food for Thought (photography) by Kevin Lara	47
Final Exam (photography) by Ian Tash	48
Waiting for the Moon by the Sea (photography) by Kevin Lara	55
All That Is Gold (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelreader ..	58
Mystery Woman by Rivka Jones	65
Memories of Spruce Street (photography) by Ian Tash	69
A Still Beach (photography) by Kevin Lara	85
Damaged (painting) by Maia Garcia	89
Scarred for Life by Rivka Jones	95
Nesta (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelreader	102
Outcast by Rivka Jones	140
Syrinx (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelreader	146
Desc.: black & white squirrel on tree (photography) by Bat-Ami Gordin ..	187
Desc.: maroon flowers (digital art) by Bailey Russell	204
Oak Tree (pencil sketch with digital editing) by Sidney Russell	214
Desc.: pink rose (photograph) by Bat-Ami Gordin	216
DonCorleonSmaug (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelreader...	220
In Bloom (photography) by Kevin Lara	228
Tyrant of the Pier (colored pencils) by Rosie Ayala	Back Cover Art

Poetry



World (colored pencils) by Anju Tokano

Azam Abbasi

Who Can Find Me?

Who can find me?

I am beyond myself,
near to the superior existence,
far from the meaning of ego,
and close to the moment of selflessness.

Who can find me?

I am in the threshold of illumination,
in the serene moment of meditation,
in the blissful alley of glory,
with a heart full of joy and equanimity.

Who can find me?

I am behind my transparent tears,
under the rain of holiness,
diving in my consecutive memories,
and next to the meeting point of my dreams and reality.

Who can find me?

I am through the silence of God,
in the celestial dream of angels,
in the immortal heaven of content,
flowing with the sense of divinity.

Who can find me?

I am close to the madness,
beyond the horizon of reason,
standing on the highway of wisdom,
and in the verge of understanding.

Who can find me?

I am above my existence,
free from the prison of my body,
in the consecrated atmosphere of liberty,
mesmerizing with the incredible eyes of beauty.

Who can find me?

I am in the cocoon of mysticism,
growing with the sense of patience,
full of awareness,
and in the atmosphere of felicity.

Who can find me?

I am in the maturity of wisdom,
in the elimination of my desires,
burning from the fire of my soul,
and rising from the ashes of my doubts.

Who can find me?

I am out of the garden of temptation,
scaping from the three of apple,
detesting from the taste of pomegranate,
and thinking about glorious moment of ascending.

Who can find me?

On the dawn of salvation,
through the tears of redemption,
with the cross of my belief,
I am reaching the sky of eternity.

Who can find me?

My Dream

What is your **dream**?

Do you want to be rich?

To get married?

To achieve goals in your job?

Everyone has their own **dream**.

Sometimes, there are some people who deny the **dreams** that other people have,
but keep believing in yourself and you can do whatever you want.

Don't be affected by other people's opinion.

My **dream** is to live healthy and live with a bright smile.

And one day, I will become a hotelier for sure.

私の夢

あなたの夢は何ですか。

お金持ちになること？

結婚すること？

仕事で成功すること？

皆、それぞれの夢がある。

時々自分の持っている夢を否定する人がいるけれど、

でも、自分を信じ続ければ大丈夫

周りに惑わされないで

私の夢は、健康に笑顔で暮らして

いつか必ずホテルマンになること

I am Riyan

My name is Riyan.

I will be 9 years old soon.

Everyone says I'm cute, but I am a boy.

I am owned by my father, mother, sister, and brother.

My father takes me on a walk in the morning and gives me snacks.

My mother does everything for me.

My sister plays with me a lot, but she does not give me snacks.

My brother takes me on a run instead of a walk.

I hate being woken up by my sister when I'm sleeping.

Sometimes, I go to the dog park on the weekends.

It is always noisy in my house.

And now, I miss my sister, because she is studying abroad.

I'm glad I came into this family.

僕はリヤン

もうすぐ9歳になるよ

可愛ってよく言われるけど、男だよ

父、母、姉、弟の4人に飼われてるよ

パパは朝散歩に行ってくれるし、おやつもくれる

ママはなんでもしてくれる

お姉ちゃんのかまちょだし、おやつもくれない

弟は散歩中走ってくれる

姉は僕が寝てる時に起こしてくるから嫌い

週末はドッグランに行ける

僕の家はいつもうるさい

でも今はお姉ちゃんが留学でいないから少し寂しい

僕はこの家に来て幸せだ!

Teresa Alcantar

Beach Front Trailer

While it is Nana's trailer in Pismo it became The Trailer at The Beach. Going to The Trailer is as much a family tradition as is going The Beach; followed from the beginning of my parents' marriage to my early college years. Countless summer days spent smelling the sea breeze and old dusty carpet. Summer nights spent sharing convertible couch beds with my brother and then my nana; not once sleeping alone or in a real bed. But that doesn't matter. What matters is the time spent sleeping in till noon, going out to eat copious amounts of breakfast food, having both parents off of work for a week, bread bowls of clam chowder that have to be eaten, and forgetting whatever lives marched on in Porterville. The sound of distant waves and crunching pebble-covered parking spots is the theme of early afternoon, while country music and delightful chit-chat from neighbors never seen again is that of late evening. Quiet damp nights give way to cloudy frigid mornings, and plenty of equally dusty blankets materialize out of hidden spaces to fight it off. While The Trailer became old, dusty, and increasingly cramped as the years progressed beach trips were not the same without it. They are linked forever in tradition, and as The Trailer was sold The Beach lost a bit of life and luster. The Beach is not whole without the smell of old carpet mingling with the salty sea and the sound of crunching pebbles answering the crashing waves.

Sign of poverty

Set in that of luxury

But perfect as one

Somiah Alkubadi

Alone

Behind this mask is a lonely cockatiel
abandoned in a cage of steel
fighting to be seen by the world
can anyone hear me?
abandoned in the cold
wanting to be recognized
can anyone see me?
Not having a soul to speak to
My sharp beak stabbing into the emptiness
can anyone help me?
As if a battle is going on and I'm the last standing
How does it feel to be on the outside of a burning cage

Ann Antonio

Expectations from the Great Wave

I am imagining your inconsistency
like the Great Wave
The arrested movements of that sea tower
was the sudden arrest of your eyes and wild perceptions
Maybe the light that day made me brighter than I am
A borrowed exuberance that faded with each
blue stride you took towards the wooden boats I
felt it in my planks.
or at the very least, I had a salty idea
because that blue weight never came down,
leaving me somewhere in between
wreckage and being
And as you remain suspended in the air like that~
so will my eyes, too.

.....
Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon was spectacular.

I saw a helicopter through a gap in the mountain.

It was like a little bean.

I am smaller than that bean.

I know the fact the world is wide.

I want to go there again.

....No, I should not want to go back.

It is not a place I would go twice.

It is important to remember the magnificent memory and keep it for
yourself forever.

グランドキャニオンは壮大であった。

グランドキャニオンの山の隙間からヘリコプターが見えた。

それは小さな豆のよう

そんな豆より小さい自分

世界の大きさを知る

もう一度行こうか、

....いや、もう一度見るべきではない。

そこは二度と行くような場所ではない。

壮大な記憶を忘れずに永遠に自分に留めておくことが大切だ

Shawn A. Avalos

cloud9

Every flutter from the lashes of your eyes, igniting the sparks of wonder in mine
This transcendent connection has us intertwined, perpetual residence on Cloud 9
Electrical sensations awakening smooth vibrations through my inner spine
Flowing rivers of dopamine-laced wine
Every nerve receptor crying out “it’s time”
Embracing an angel, shifting the paradigm

The world is yours, baby take mine
Ocean to ocean, why don’t you cast your line
Lock me up, I’m ready to do the time.
With those lips, ship me back to my other life...Amazon’s Prime
Where dreams were real, not just a bed of lies.
When love was more than just between our thighs

Collide these rhymes, this is for you to smile.
Stuck on your drip, I’m here to stay awhile.
But I’m not your prince, I’m just another guy
Who lost his way, I’ve come a thousand miles.
Maybe this how you reset the dial
Been waiting for this since I was a little child.
Now it’s your move, this is do or die
I wanna see those tears, baby you can cry
Let it all out, I’m here to be your guide
Them cheaters and liars got you all up in a bind.
I’m here to tell you, you’re the sweetest kind.
My glass of Chablis, picked from the finest vines.



IRREVERENT SELF (canvas with acrylics) by Madison King

Joe Bejarano

P.S. Journey

She says I've been waiting...

The peaks are worthy, the view is beautiful...

Locked in a destiny that was delayed,
The connection of rejection was not expected.
The road taken was jagged, ugly, full of glass shards, bullets and scars,
I took a knife out my back and healed.
There are still scars that I must attend to daily,
still wounds that must be looked at, at all times
Still struggles of walking the path, But I know, I have before,
I have walked the path In fact I lead people.
Picked some up from when they fell,
was running together to get through this hell.
But somehow I lost... and I fell to the floor
Then stayed there and moved to the side, those mentors that
Helped me didn't know that I died. The one that would lead and
Accomplished the most, was done and dead and left for the crows.
Then with that last stretch of hope inside of me, those same mentors
Reminded me of how visually,
They enhanced my eyes and I let them down.
But I just had to keep them more focused and listen to sounds,
A second chance...
too late maybe, but living's what I'm here for,
I hope you can see... I have
A 2nd chance 10 years later, a dance 10 years later, a life 10 years later,
A 2nd chance, a 2nd chance, a 2nd chance.
I can't miss it... time to finish.
The peaks are worthy, the view is beautiful.

Vanessa Beltran

Desire, Incarnate.

A raging river can't be tamed,
It yearns to flow and rush and flood.
But for the ease of man it stops.
A giant dam of steel and pipe,
Toughened up with man-made rock.
A violent river becomes a lake,
Still and safe, a mirror self.
A comfort blooms from recognition,
A face well-known is welcomed here.
And while you see a face you know,
The pressure builds, it burns and bleeds.
It cracks in fissures, everywhere
Below the surface. But up above,
A pristine image, a pure haven,
Still and ready for your woes.
Heaps and heaps of grief it holds.
Some from You, some from Them,
And all it sits and lives below.
But soon it will become too much.
The woes and grief will lend a hand,
These holes will grow where pressure lives.
And Crack! it goes, in one big hole.
The pond is gone, and so is peace.
But who expects a gentle creek?
It was always meant for release.



Je cherche encore...¹

Un univers ou je peux trouver enfin ce que j'ai longtemps chercher, je serai heureux;

Dans la gloire je verrai les étoiles; si lumineux que je ne le supporterai pas;

Mes pauvres yeux de mortel me limitent; comment verrai-je Dieu si je ne suis pas capable?

Si dans ce monde je ne peux pas trouver les mots pour m'exprimer, les émotions pour me présenter,

la persistance quotidienne pour me lever, suis-je capable?

Qu'est-ce qui fait un homme? Sa silhouette. Son attitude, son visage? Suis-je un être? Nul ne sait pas.

Mais je regarde encore; aveuglé par la lumière, obscurci au monde. Jadis je regarderais, jadis je voyais, mais non plus. Les miracles d'antan sont loin disparus. Ma fortune est loin disparue.

Je n'ai que toi, mon univers, ma gloire. Mon étoile. Scintillant et forte. Toi, malheureux.

Fin.

¹Un poème qui invoque les sentiments d'un(e) jeune qui se croit incapable de sentir l'amour, tantôt romantique, tantôt religieuse.

Je cherche encore...²

Un univers ou je peux trouver enfin ce que j'ai longtemps chercher, je serai heureux;

Dans la gloire je verrai les étoiles; si lumineux que je ne le supporterai pas;

Mes pauvres yeux de mortel me limitent; comment verrai-je Dieu si je ne suis pas capable?

Si dans ce monde je ne peux pas trouver les mots pour m'exprimer, les émotions pour me présenter, la persistance quotidienne pour me lever, suis-je capable?

Qu'est-ce qui fait un homme? Sa silhouette. Son attitude, son visage? Suis-je un être? Nul ne sait pas.

Mais je regarde encore; aveuglé par la lumière, obscurci au monde. Jadis je regardais, jadis je voyais, mais non plus. Les miracles d'antan sont loin disparus. Ma fortune est loin disparue.

Je n'ai que toi, mon univers, ma gloire. Mon étoile. Scintillant et forte. Toi, malheureux.

Fin.

²Un poème qui invoque les sentiments d'un(e) jeune qui se croit incapable de sentir l'amour, tantôt romantique, tantôt religieuse.

I am still looking...²

[For] A universe where I can at last find what I have long searched for, I will be happy

In the glory I see the stars; so luminescent that I cannot support them

My poor mortal eyes limit me; how will I see God if I am not capable?

If in this world I cannot find the words to express myself, the emotions to present myself, the daily persistence to get up, am I capable?

What makes a man? His figure. His attitude, his face? Am I a being? No one knows

But I continue to look; blinded by the light, obscured in the world. Once I would look, once I could see, but no more. The miracles of yesteryear are far gone. My fortune is far gone.

I only have but you, my universe, my glory. My star. Scintillating and strong. You, unhappy.

End.

² A poem which invokes the feelings of a young who feels incapable of feeling love, be it romantic or religious

Alyssa Cantu

The Facets of Excellence

Put me under high pressure~ to undergo the correction.

Unearth me, and then cut me to perfection. Make me fit the gold standard - greatness is my endeavor. I can speak the unspoken words. I am forever.

Shape me how you want: rare and splendid. Ornament me in glory.

Enhanced, transcended. Escape the rigidity of my atoms. Make my element impure. Do not reshape me. Cut me no more.

Grind the hardest material known to man
and don't stop until you diminish
me to nothing.

CYCLE



The World Is Yours



From Left: Lischa, Fatyma, Alyssa, Teresa

Fatyma Cendejas

.....
Te Amo

Same routine everyday
My skin is losing its color
I never hear the three words
Not in any way said to me.

I have been losing myself
My skin is sheer
I forgot what it feels like
To be *luved*?

I am standing alone
Today is different
I see lots of energy and groups around me
Four girls are drawing my ideal world
My skin is glowing
I bend down to touch the chalk
I forgot I am loved

The connection has been lost
as I have not focused on me
Now I see the color I was missing
I walk by everyday
And everyday it adds a little color to me
I am a rainbow

I feel loved in every language
I feel loved in every moment
I feel loved at all locations
I feel loved here

Ana Dominguez

Mother Nature

The world stepped into your path
Violated your skin
Poisoned your tears Now your core is broken
Your sole passion sinking Into the dark coldness
Of the world's sorrowful acts.

You brought the breath of fatality
Upon the world's faith
Where the king of deaths rose
To opaque our frenzied delirium
Of power, and dominance over you,

Your soothing winds
Carried your quietness
Into their clouded mind
You plied in them the piety
Of your blossomed essence. T
he king is finally falling
While the awakening of
Human kindness rises up
You restore their balance at home

Mother, you gave them
The occasion to find
Their hidden strength,
The power of their will
To condense the fury of your soul.

One day they will walk back to your land
Full of sunlight in their veins
Vividness in their mind
Restored souls and minds,
With sharper boldness.

Today, they pray to follow
Your innate veins one day
To offer a seed of life into your womb
That will rejuvenate your fresh breath
As an offering for your benevolence
To keep them flourishing every day.

Enlightenment

Deadly sin keeps us
all confined
Now, we long for
The warmth of
another soul
Today, we embrace
Our loneliness.

Kin stole by death
first isolated
Then buried alone
Their loved ones
Have no remains
To mourn on.

We are prisoners
Of our own will
To stop the length
of darkness
To the ones
we love most
We pray
We meditate
We take precautions
To keep the world safe.

While other
Ignorant souls
Spread plague
To innocent creatures
With their mouthful
Touch of death.

Divinity help us!
bring their ignorance
Into your light
Erase their egotism
Nest into their hearts
Make us trust
In men's grace,
Once again.



Moises B. Fuentes

Please Excuse Our Mess While We Renovate

Meandering, bumbling~
staying true and without a clue.
Keeping course but with little direction.

You make routines improvised
and improvise routines daily.
Weeks never seem the same
as you keep to the methodology.

The bland taste of structure
A regular midnight craving.

Stability

Wallet healthy, dining at home becoming the norm
Body taken care of, your afternoon view~
The park and not your TV-glare tinted dorm.
Mind at rest, as there is nothing to do.
All is how it should've been.
All as it should be.
You wish it was true.
Oh, how you wish it was true.

Yet again, 7 AM. You stumble,
Tripping across small pavement ravines
Bumping into another weary-eyed passerby

Chin up. You're doing ok.

You fumble, Words leave you
Like thieves with a poorly planned escape
Confident? No, the opposite.

Speak up. You're doing ok.

You're a work in progress,
Two left feet, but motivated at least.
An exchange of smiles, a "how do you do?"
and you're both on your way.
There are many others just like you
and that is okay.

Madelyn Gaines

Foolish Hope

Home smells like cigarettes and
alcohol on my mother's breath.
Dismissing me and invalidating
my experiences.
Home looks like cracked asphalt,
old buildings, and a family so aware
of everyone else besides themselves.
So stuck on their own heads,
trapped in their disillusioned reality.

Home is where I learned
what love is:
addicting,
painful,
and presents itself in childlike parents.

Home feels like my heart has been
stomped on a million times,
shattered, cracks everywhere.
Begging me to remove myself,
my heart physically aches,
and allows me to emotionally
withdrawal and dissociate –
coping mechanisms.

Home is difficult for my soul;
I leave every time wishing
Hoping
for a different outcome.
Wishing to feel at home
in a place that has been nothing
close to a home.
In a place that makes me feel
drained, depleted, and detached.

Am I a fool for having hope?
How do we accept such broken families?

Surfing the Waves

On the surface
You tell me about myself
How much you like me
How I'm your favorite
How perfect I appear ~
Smooth & Divine ~ feminine
Radiating energy like artwork
A mystery
Mesmerized, something so
Intangible, yet I'm here
A living spirit ~ waiting
For respect and personhood
Control of my own body
And what about you?
It took too long for me to notice
What I knew all along
You go to the ocean to hear your songs
I go to the ocean to right my wrongs
To find peace and calm
The piece you took from me
What about the parts of me
You cannot see?

Abandonment

All I wanted was my mom
My Creator
But when she returned
I did not want her anymore

Detached and damaged –
A broken heart
That felt like home
Maybe this is love

Disappear again
So, I know what love
Feels like
When you return.

Twisted Epiphany

The damage is
the treasure
that is not mine
to find

But seeing something
so beautiful
that I cannot have
is the most twisted epiphany.

Cosme Garcia

CHANGE

The aisles were lonely as they were ransacked of everything but price tags
The streets lied empty
The world was painted in blue and black masks
Businesses had closing signs,
funeral homes had bright opening signs: buy one, get one 50% off
Life was changing,
Life would never be the same.

PAST

Life wasn't perfect before, but I guess humans tend to look back and want to time travel back to a time when life felt "normal" or when times felt better. It was fun. Stores and schools were full, and life seemed to be going by as it usually does. Everything felt normal. Life was a never-ending song stuck on repeat. That's what people want, I guess. People love to be comfortable that's why we all have the same 10 songs in rotation to clean, to sleep, or to shower. The issue is that humans cannot live in the past and cannot stand in the same spot forever and sometimes life gives you a push forward even if it is abrupt.

PRESENT

We've lost loved ones. We've lost relationships. We've lost part of ourselves. We've lost bad things. We've lost things we are never getting back. But we've also gained as we have lost. We've gained real support and real relationships. We've gained real appreciation for love, life, and death. We've gained optimism in the face of darkness. We've gained unity in the wake of chaos. We've gained growth.

Life goes on.

FUTURE

?

Maia Garcia

Strawberry Pie

Loving you is like loving the sun
with you, I can grow fields of strawberries
make them into pies, jams, and jellies
that fill starved bellies.

with you, there is a brilliant light in the sky
shining warmth and brilliance down through to
my dewdrop eye.

for you, I roll up on the tips of my tethered toes
Raised, so to meet you
and feel you,

sometimes just to see you.

But in the end,
I will always be icarus,
And you, *the* Sun.

Red

I feel this sickness in my blood
The kind that keeps
Antsy, in need of a window to the world
through minor manmade cracks.

soft enough to filter the day and,

Big and loud enough
to feel the big band coming through.
Smell their smoke and golden brassy blues
The sax and trumpet dance
to and through
swayings of the
strums and drums

until they drip off in tissue,
as that is the issue
with
my
blood.

El Dorado

Because my father's father
grew weary of green government greed,
grew sick of "men" pulled from children,
like teeth from their mother's mouths,
to fight fights and drop like flies.
Because mi Abuelo lived this and left with

Mi Papa, mi Abuela, y mi tío
And they thank all that is holy
to have found their land of gold

And because neither lover, was a lover (nor parent for that matter),
my mother bounced around her youth,
struggling through strife born of the lies
that flowed from faces that should have
worn love in place of hate,
sated child's hunger rather than one's pedophilic state.

Today, she finds it a miracle to be alive at 38
On my 18th, she says I'm her miracle
And my father says the same.

And to be their miracle because,
even with their distance of 288 (American)
the internet combined with the 99,
let the woman who ended up in the State's capital
love the man in Satan's asshole,

Love enough to make me,
And make me only.

Hollowed

On foot, he's pushed
 til left aside,
placed to cook
As she bathes inside,

My honey-heart
glistening and golden
 sweetly sticky, yet
 seldom stolen.

Lovers may stray my way,
 Find themselves knotted
 In slick summer tresses
 Sweetly. Sickly.
Left in such dishonest messes.

 fingers may squirm,
like pale blind worms
 And the shimmers of gold
 Mull restless dull.

My detachable toes
 sunk soil to grow
Like images of old
 (needn't be told)

Still, in a moment
 Fruit born and torn
 From those branches to be potent
Inedible, yellowed chances.

Missy

Some days,
 I'm at peace
 knowing one day I'll grow
into these old bones and watch them wither
 under papyrus leather,

 at peace
 knowing I'll die like the cat
who crawled beneath the house,
 without goodbye.

Others, it terrifies me to consider
 one day tomorrow will instead be today
and, How soon my end will flicker in.

No fruit?

And then, there are days
 where I wish to cut through all the BS
 and dive headfirst into the street.

To reach into your Sleep.

Now I know what they mean
when they say "You spoke to me in a dream",
I saw your face
and I saw your still youth
untouched, unmarred
by spoon and tooth.

You whispered secrets and the promise of dreams
Those that can no longer be witnessed
by earthly means.

but your breath smelled of death
as you turned to me and spilled your soul onto my floor
as a glass vase delivers its memory core

remains and regrets for the poison of pills

a boy, held over the basin of the world

and let go.

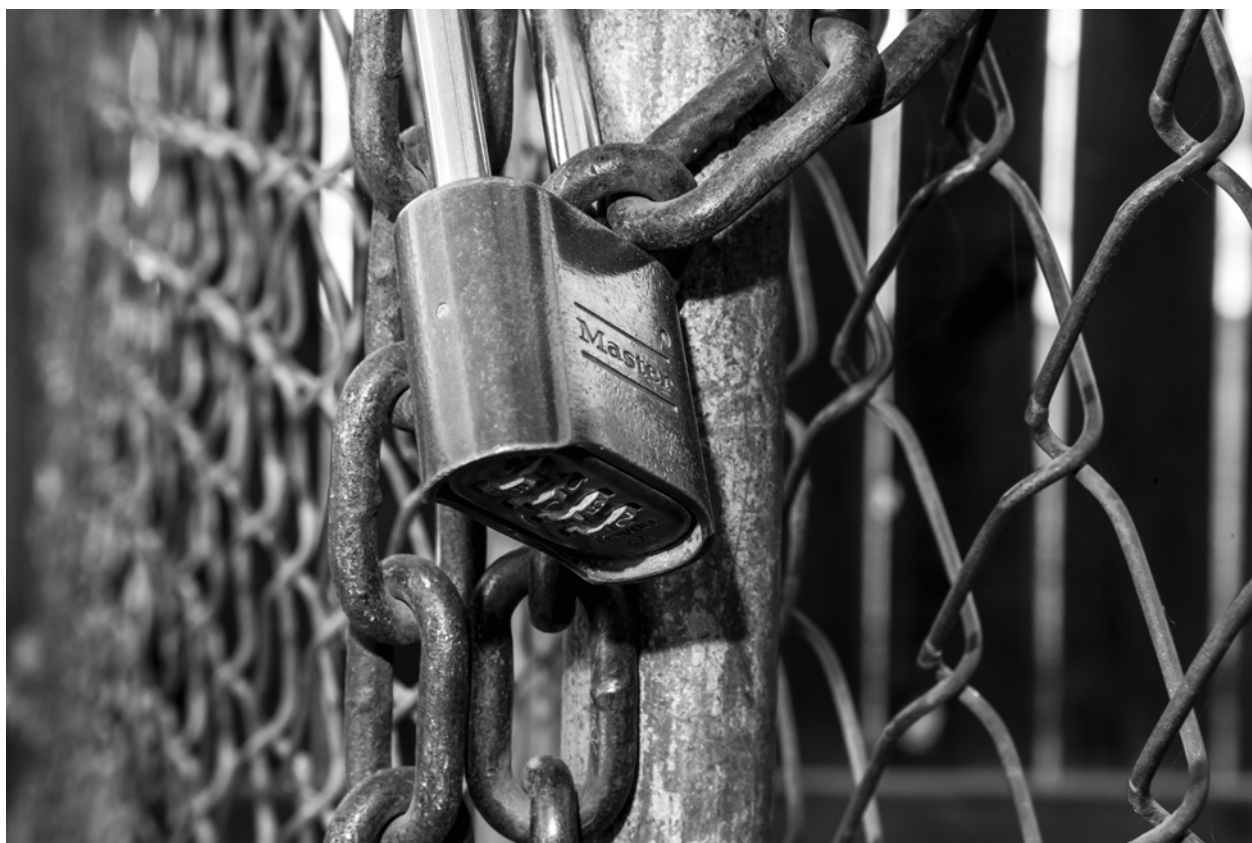
~ ~ ~

You're now forever stuck in the past.
I'm already a year too late,
and the years to follow
will only tack onto the years,
I'm
without you

Christopher Gomez

Forbidden

From my skin
To my core
I want nothing more
Than teeth bare crunch.
I want to be juicy and ripe
Crave to be bitten,
Taste my longing appetite.
Do I remind you of Aphrodite?
Luscious and fragrant flesh
Choose me as the best.
My stem is everything,
The roots that form me
Shape me and dictate me.
I lust for attention,
Pick me from long branches
Throw me into your baskets.
Core with cyanide compound
Poisonous to a degree,
Giving an epiphany.
I want to be number one.
I want, I need, I crave.



Claustrophobia (photography) by Kevin Lara

Bat-Ami Gordin

Notes From A Metro Line

fragile arcs caught by gleaming hues
weave magic, elude sight.
silver crowned unicorns
curl on incoming rainbow,
decamp south
to lodge from journeys end,
awake from oblivion,
like jewels on an inanimate face.

embittered minutemen
on the express, caress collision.
metropolitan heroes
crushed on rush hour train,
breathe the stench
of another's warm lunch sandwich,
slick lettuce curled,
no time for consumption.

subway spray overlays
vacuous white non-visaged,
empty headed faces forward —
flutter in spiritual positions
most humans occupy these days.

on the intimate horizon,
though a dark pane,
a plethora of iridescent
glow-in-the-dark paint splatter
stupefies artistic vision.

green ocean spray choreography
river snakes unnoticed,
stealing along shiny park grass,
through faux city boulevards
dumped beyond urban walls.

as we ride the rattle can,
angels fly in masterpieces
strewn around fairy tale readings
found in museums above.

Black Cat on White Picket Fence

Miniature panther: you stalked
each post—beam to beam.
Your tail delineated your curves.
Your fur was polished ebony.

You and your co-subjects
were in full contrast:
an abstract in vivid Kodak Gold
and in luminous Fuji Green.

With charcoal under my fingernails,
with eraser crumbs in the holes of my jeans,
with skin ablaze and strands of hair
blown carelessly out of place,
I smeared and designed, on my sketch pad,
a discernible, streamlined interpretation of you.

Table of My Ideal Life

Years	
20	I want
21	to graduate
22	from college.
23	I want to get a job involved with soccer or English.
24	I
25	want to
26	earn
27	money
28	so that
29	I
30	I want to get married by 30 years old.
31	can
32	live
33	without
34	any
35	inconvenience.
36	One
37	day
38	I
39	want
40	to have
41	some
42	kids.
43	I
44	will
45	work
46	hard
47	until
48	retirement.
49	I
50	wish
51	I
52	could
53	have
54	grandchildren
55	during
56	this
57	time.
58	

59
60 I
61 want
62 to
63 have
64 fun
65 with
66 the
67 money I
68 saved
69 in
70 my
71 old
72 age
73 with
74 my
75 family.
76
77 Also
78 I
79 want
80 to
81 live
82 as
83 long
84 as
85 possible.

22歳までに大学を卒業したい。

サッカーか英語にかかわる仕事に就きたい。

30歳までには結婚したい。

不自由なく生活できるくらいにお金を稼ぎたい。

いつか子供が欲しい。

定年退職までは頑張って働きたい。

60歳くらいまでには孫が欲しい。

老後は今まで貯めたお金で家族と楽しく過ごしたい。

なるべく長生きしたい。

Ruben Higareda Suarez

In the Moment collection

A Sad Morning

A sad morning it is today.
A family member died yesterday.
I know not how it came to be, but at least he is at last free.
I'll miss him greatly, but his siblings have all but missed him lately.
To my beloved uncle who has left this world, though you may be gone, you left a lesson to be learned.

To enjoy what little moments one has with those they hold dear, even in moments when their end is near.

Though today there is sorrow, it will be brighter tomorrow.
It's probably what you want, for us not to dwell in our haunt.
But to remember the warmth of the sun we shared with you with a nice hot bun.
From all of the family we wish you a safe journey to the other side, for we know we will see each other in our final glide.

Farewell, Uncle Martin, from your nephew and your baby sister with much love, all we can say is enjoy God's side.

Sister

By my side since I came to this world.
My first friend you were and now my best friend.
I see both a sister and a father in you.
Tears escape from me since you left home, but contain them I try.
When they flee, memories come to me.
The final hug I wished to be eternal and bliss, but at least I can reminisce.
Both Mom and I worry, for you left in a hurry.
I wish you were home, but am glad you're not alone.
You have your love, so both of you are turtle doves.
I thank you for always being with Mom and I, although annoying we were at times I won't deny.
Thank you for loving us, as our love for you won't even fit in a bus.
But above all, I thank you for being my sister in this crazy blue ball.
Sister, Father, Teacher and Friend you were, and still you'll be when our hair is as gray as a wolf's fur.

I am glad we'll still see each other, so here's to the next time we see one another!
I love you Turkey, be safe and happy, my Sister.

Who is a kind person? The person who can be caring. The person who is calm and gentle. The person who agrees with your opinion. The person who can be angry for you. The person who is patient and not angry at you. The person who gives you the word you are looking for. How to feel kindness depends on each different person. If you don't think the person is kind, the person may be kind to other people. There will be the kind person who protests for you and protects you, even if the person's impression is bad. There will be the unkind person who doesn't agree with you if the person thinks your choice is bad. What is kindness? Who is a kind person?

優しい人

優しい人とは誰だろう。

思いやりのある人。

穏やかで温厚な人。

あなたの意見に共感してくれる人。

あなたのために怒れる人。

我慢して怒らない人。

あなたが欲しい言葉をかけてくれる人。

人によってやさしさの感じ方は違う。

優しくないと思った人ももしかしたら誰かにとっては優しい人なのかもしれない。

自分の印象が悪くなったとしても反論してあなたを守る優しい人もいるだろう。

逆に、あなたの選択が良くなくてもそれを言わないであなたに共感する

優しくない人もいるだろう。

優しさとは何だろう。

優しい人とは誰だろう。

Journey

Suddenly
I am fired, and at a loss on the street.
Many people pass by me.
A person drops a piece of paper/ it is like me.
I stare at it for a while and pick it up:
World travel ticket.

At the airport,
I depart from my country
Having anxiety and fear
And feeling very drowsy
Various memories are recalled in a dream.
Shedding tears, I arrive in America.

In New York,
I stand in the middle of the intersection.
Many cars are like my thoughts: passing and confusing
Big, illuminating buildings overwhelm me
People stare at me.
I am afraid of them.
There's no light at the end of the tunnel

At the Grand Canyon,
I stand at the top of the mountain
I look around and look up at the sky.
Blue, white, and bright,
I feel so much better like the sky
What do I want?
What do I do?
As long as the sky and the sea continue,
So does my journey.

旅

突然

私は仕事を失い、道で途方に暮れる
私の横を通りすぎる多くの人
とある人が一枚の紙切れを落とし私のように落ちてゆく
私はそれを暫く見つめ、拾い上げる
世界旅行チケット

空港

自国から飛び立つわたし
不安と恐怖
そして凄まじい眠気に襲われる
夢の中でさまざまな記憶が蘇る
涙と共にアメリカに降り立つ

ニューヨーク

交差点の真ん中でたたずむ私
まるで私の心のように多くの車が通り過ぎる
大きな建物とイルミネーションが私を圧倒する
多くの人が私を見つめ
恐怖に襲われる
終わりが無い暗闇の中

グランドキャニオン

私は山の頂上でたたずむ
周りを見渡し空を見上げる
青く、白く、眩しい
青空のように気分が良くなる
何が欲しいのか
何をしたいのか
空と海が続く限り
私の旅は続く

Uriel Jacobo-Prado

The Perfect Figure

A porcelain doll, with the happy and perfect figure, can be broken to reveal
an empty shell, void of emotion and purpose

Like a broken porcelain doll, the joyous expression is gone, instead what's
revealed is an empty husk, void of emotions and purpose in life.

Lola Jimenez

Universe

When I was 15 in high school
I used to write to God
But he always put me on hold
So, I wrote to the universe

Dear universe, when will I know
When will I stop being scared?
When will my life come together?
& When will I no longer worry
How will my bills get paid?
& When will my life seem right

What will my children look like?
Who will I marry? Female or male?
Or none? Will I even marry?

I know each of these questions
Are a bit scary but all I ask is
when will I know?



Crushing Rocks (photography) by Kevin Lara

Mirror Mirror on the wall- Who's the hungriest of them all

It's hard to find yourself
When you continue to put yourself second
It's hard to find yourself
When you love him more than yourself?
I gave up pieces of myself to feed his craving
Of my soul, body, and love. I wish I put myself first.
Instead of losing myself in this maze
Of life~ this web of you~
It's like a scale
The more I gave to him
The less I had for myself
And for some reason that didn't scare me
Until I looked at myself
In the mirror & saw only bone
He had SUCKED every inch of love left in me
They tell me, "I wish you loved you as much as you loved him."
Me too... me... too

The Creature in my Heart

I realized I have a void in my heart.
It's home to a creature...called
EMPTINESS.

Emptiness he haunts me & tortures me until I am weak
He lunges his claws into my heart,
Threatening to create a bigger space for itself
Unless I feed it
But nothing is ever enough for Emptiness
I chose to fill this void not in my heart
But between my legs.
Now I'm just left sore, no way to feed
the emptiness living in my core.
Pray that the scratches on his back
& the handprints on me would stitch this **whole** together.
Not until I calm down
& realize that you have a void
just as big as mine will I be able to crawl out
Only then, will I be able to tell
Emptiness Good-bye

The Morning of a Part Time Job

At 6:40am,
start the car engine,
and leave my house.

The pancake restaurant on the countryside of Tokyo, facing the main street.

Park my car at the back door,
and open the lock of the entrance.

There is no one here but me
in the cold restaurant.

Change into a cook's uniform,
wash my hands,
turn on the copper plate, pasta boiler, fryer, oven, and dishwasher.

Greet the floor staff.

The cafe restaurant serves tasty pancakes and coffee.
Even on holidays,
it starts with two employees.

I am a kitchen staff,
and start to make pancake batter with a big bowl.

Spend 20 minutes on it.
Make enough batter for about half a day.
I go to the next step, the preparation of food.
Decide how much food to use.
An hour later, one more employee comes and opens the restaurant.

Boil eggs,
cut fruits and vegetables,
make sauces.

Also, serve the food to the customers who come to eat.
A cup of coffee,
a piece of toast,
and freshly made pancakes.

I like the moment of finalizing the pancakes.
Fluffy pancakes filled with meringue
with our special cream on top
and caramel poured on it.

With nostalgic rock music
and the sound of the coffee mill grinding.

朝6時40分に、車のエンジンをつけて、家を出る

東京の端にある、大通りに面したパンケーキ屋

車を裏口に停め、鍵を開ける

冷えた店内には、私のほかに誰もいない

コック服に着替え、手を洗う
銅板、パスタボイラー、フライヤー、オーブン、食洗機のスイッチをつける
出勤してきたフロア人と挨拶をする

パンケーキとコーヒーが美味しいカフェレストランは、
忙しい休日でも、二人の従業員の仕込み作業から始まる

キッチンで働く私は、大きなボウルでパンケーキの生地を作る

20分ほどかけて、約半日分の生地を作った後、仕込みの準備を進めていく
どの食材を、どのくらい使うのかを決める

出勤一時間後、開店と共に、もう一人の従業員がやってくる

卵を茹でたり、野菜やフルーツを切ったり、ソースを作ったり

そうしながら、朝から一杯のコーヒー、一枚のトースト、
出来立てのパンケーキを食べにくるお客さんに、
料理を届ける

私は、パンケーキを盛り付ける瞬間が好きだ
メレンゲをたっぷり含んだ、ふわふわなパンケーキに
特製のこだわりクリームを乗せて、
キャラメルをかける時

懐かしいロックミュージックと、
コーヒーミルの音を聴きながら

Mary Killeen Pena

.....

For Medical Reasons

I hoped
for you.
For all of the weeks,
(as soon as we heard)
you were all of ours.

I am plunged deep underwater,
against my will,
thinking about how much
I will never know you.

1 in 14,000 is plain bad luck.
Bad luck is just as much god
as good luck.
And it is a pounding,
searing pain,
until and unless we make meaning of it.

I planned to see the stars in your eyes,
and feel your tiny fingers,
so animal and uninhibited,
wrapped around mine ~
even if living
was a little more difficult for you.
I am selfish.

You are one fourth of me, too.
I feel you in the mist,
phantom soul like
phantom limb.
A different form,
but no matter (even pain)
can be created nor destroyed.
You are.

The gift of a good childhood,
(as it was intended)
is being loved, unconditionally.
You will have that,
undisturbed and forever.

Your mom and dad gave you an indulgence
for all of the suffering on soil.
We walk alongside
that inevitable specter
so you don't have to.

You and your beyond-innocence,
(why they protected you so fiercely)
(why this hurts so much)
are held tight to chest,
when I close my eyes.

We all wanted you.
Imagined you.
Moved aside and made a place for you.
Shifts of consciousness that cannot be undone.
We wouldn't want to,
even if we could.

Róisín, niece of mine,
I will see you
when my candle burns out, too.

Madison King

.....

For My Beloved

how lucky I am to be
to be continuously bathed
in the beautifully
crafted cherry wine
(which is thicker than blood).
I can't wait to sign
it all away.
I'm looking forward to it.
to Rose filled nights
cuddly movies with knights
in shining armor that remind me
of the inexplicably
perfect timing
of us all.

24 December 2020

Modernity of the Wallpaper

my room has never been messier
but that's fine because the weather
has never been better
at dragging me down
into the germ ridden ground
so I can't go around
a living human being.
eyes on the ceiling,
a woman in kneeling.
the wallpaper stands out
the tiling needs grout,
and I can only shout
when I'm out-side.
to stay inside is to be unwillingly
tied to that the ceiling and wallpaper and tiling.
the timing couldn't have been better
for the weather,
and whether or not
the décor would lock me in
or shut me out,
I cannot tell anymore what is behind her grin and what is behind mine.

05 April 2020, Inspired by Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Untitled

sickly sickening youth of yonder yard and yellow eagles.
eagerly escape the reality of the red road rampages,
gingerly grasping the gangrenous walls,
wrapping wrongly around my pink painted pointed pinky.
nothing naughty notwithstanding obsessiveness,
only honored on October days,
dazing and drearily awaiting alone and the allocation
of November's to nab (emotionally) naked travelers
trying to trek the Tuscan tundra.
full bellies belly up at the malady without the miracle mirage and
piercing plait of a drug
doomed to save the citizens of the milky way.
vaccines are vitamin D to kids of kidding immune systems,
systemically sent to sever
sentimental feelings, but what is more important—
safety or integrity.

Kevin Lara

Thoughts for the Alimentation of the Soul¹

A thing is good.

A thing born for things? Impossible.

Nothing happens to anyone. The same happens to other people, because they want to.

Is wisdom really things?

They have the things.

People are things.

And honor is things.

Your life is cum.

You've been injured, apply this rule: anger is the answer.

The offender is what is right here.

The infinity gapes us.

An idiot? Things.

Remember: tiny your pp. Problem.

The mind is place.

Thoughts.

¹This was entirely written using snippets of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations.



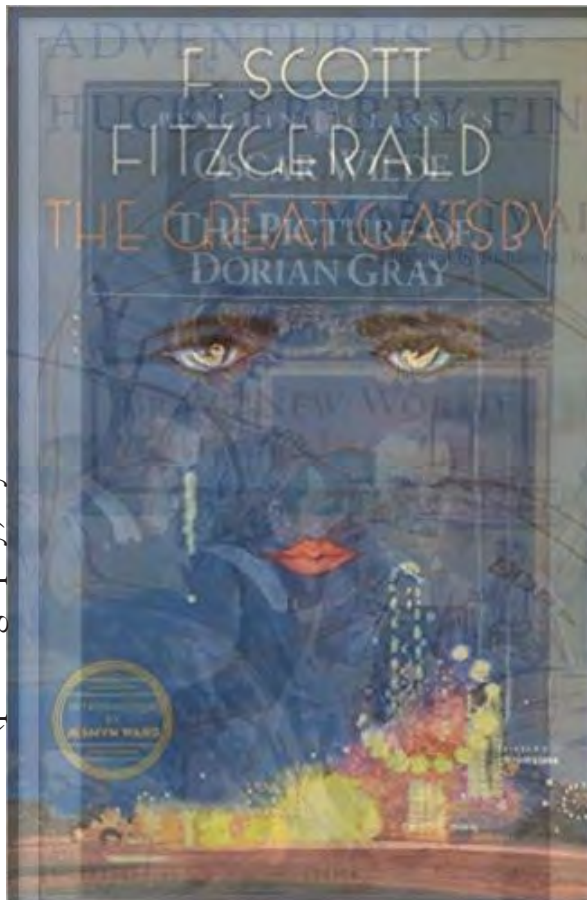
Food for Thought (photography) by Kevin Lara

Musings on a Coincidental Encounter

As I was wandering upon the desolate grounds of an educational locality currently undergoing ideological and environmental alimentionation, I stumbled upon one most interesting observation. A drawing of sorts, fashioned with chalk and not entirely dissimilar to something one may happen upon in a neighborly park. At the centerpiece lay the words "Look Up," highlighted with bold colors and accentuated by extravagant designs that seemed to point one's eye towards them. There were other messages around, but I was unable to discern their effigy, as they had been washed out by the rains which had recently paid us a visit. I sat for a minute to ponder the implications of such a message, deprived of its context and left with only my own imagination to fill out the void. Could it have been a warning? Mayhap falling objects were assailing uninstructed passersby, who had embarked on an unobtrusive jaunt, only to be greeted by a concussion brought upon by the plunging weight of a hefty object. Did they intend to bring light to the showery weather that had welcomed us around the time? It does not rain much in the valley, perhaps one may pinch themselves had they failed to notice such an uncommon occurrence. Or perhaps they had intended a more metaphorical memorandum. Maybe these mysterious malcontents had wanted people to assume a more optimistic outlook on their various pilgrimages.

It was a funny thing, really. There was nothing above the drawing other than the ceiling.

Final Exam (photography) by Ian Tash



Ann Marie Lawson

What I Want

What I want out of this life

Is to rise up from the ashes of despair

Exploring life's possibilities

Dreaming the dream of hope

Like an Eagle soaring to new heights

Walking the skyline, Kissing the morning star

Leaving behind fear and failures

What I want out of this life

Is to stand on blue yonder

Gazing into the horizon

From its mountain grandeur

Diving deep into life

Touching its oceans floor

Free from chains and shackles

Pain and woe, drowning in its sorrows

And like a phoenix, rising from the ashes

Spreading her wings to find new beginnings

Finding my place I take authority

Sitting on the rainbow

Watching life cascading down

Making ripples where it falls

Finally! I am relieved, I know who I am

I am free and I have peace

Exhausting a Place, Myself

Butterflies, Hummingbird, Bee

I sat on the back porch

Daffodils, Sunflower, Daisy

Watching the morning unfold

Snail, Grasshopper, Ladybug

The dew blankets the air

Nature's army enters

The grass glitters, wet and shiny

The earthworm slithers on the ground

Birds chirping as they fed

Invasion! Overhead, on the ground

Flying, hopping, from limb to limb

Ants marching in ranks

Singing sweetly, playfully, loudly

The Hummingbird stood still

Of every species, the smallest of them all

Nestled in the sweet nectar

The dawn undresses, the night takes its rest

The morning sun appears

Anaki Lomeli

Convenient Anxiety

Convenient anxiety

Familiar sun warmth

Short of breath

Small but refreshing breeze

Detailed list

“The end is nothing

Strikes across the list

The road is all” The plaque on the floor reads

The more strike-throughs

Crunchy leaves dragging

The deeper I can breath

On the concrete floor by the wind

Don't forget about myself though

Thinking it was a strong succulent

Make sure you love yourself

I accidentally uprooted a plant

And don't forget to smile

Almost everyone walks alone

Alice and the Eat Me Cake

Picking potions and powders feels like the making of a bewitched pastry. Remember Alice and the “eat me” cake? Her dangerous curiosity guided her bite. I wondered how that tasted. Did the sweetness of powdered sugar taste the way pixie dust sparkles? I wonder if there was a balance between sweet and tart as a means to dull the powerful sugary taste. Perhaps the use of an earthly brown sugar overpowered the cake, making it unbalanced. The lack of balance is no doubt what made her too big. The bite was probably the soft, tender, melt in your mouth kind. A smooth, coated, frosted top that hits your tongue before your teeth crack the sheen of hardened sugar and milk. After the blanket of icing there's hopefully an unexpected taste not found in Alice's real world. A dry texture of flavor that maybe almost choked her and convinced her there was something more like spice and tang inside. How can something coated and decorated so sweetly taste so bitter and harsh, she probably thought. Maybe I'll recreate this flavor to know what Wonderland was like.

Lischa Mears

The Forgotten Song

Raven strands shield his eyes
Black shadows pass him by

He walks with his head down,
Afraid to see red X's.

Music booms in his ears,
A note for every silence.

A sonic hug envelops him
The empty place at his side,
A silhouette of sound
Until the music stops.

The place at his side is a black hole

He's going to lose himself to the dark void
He's going to be sucked in
His chest is going to burst from the pressure
He can't breathe
He needs~
something
someone
anything

He stops in his tracks
Shoes dusted in blue and green
“*You are loved,*” the pavement sings.

He looks to his side
He sees the world

He feels the warmth of its embrace
Continents with rugged shapes
Tumultuous waves of blue
Creation that knows the tune
Of a soul born alone.

The world sings a tranquil melody:
You are valued
You are loved
You cannot be replaced

He feels an atmosphere of calm
He raises his head
A golden light past the void

The only red X he sees
Is the one that falls
In a gust of wind,
From his own face.

Fire and Ice

I am a glacier drifting in cerulean blue.

I scan the horizon with glittering snowflakes in my eyes,
Studying the line of blue that caresses the arctic sky.

I close my eyes with ice dusted lashes,
Shifting East when North promises
A fiery wind with a bite of frost.

I watch the sun rise and fall,
Looking past the hollow blocks of ice that float behind me.

The frigid air pierces my skin with icicles,
Drawing blue that quickly freezes over.
My lungs fill with hailstones,
Hardening my heart to an icy exterior.

My wall of ice reaches to clouds of mist,
An ice pick to the chest is now unable to shatter me.

But I don't want to remain an impermeable wall of ice,
Slowly thawing like a subzero hourglass.

I want a scorching inferno that sets my ice ablaze,
Swiftly melting the wall I crystallized.

Fire and Ice,
I want a firestorm that quells its flames in the wake of my melting blue,
Enveloping my cold in a warm embrace of magenta hues,
A relentless blaze and, forever, my twin ray.

The Roaring Silence: A Contrapuntal

The carpeted green stretches endlessly down the library hall, highlighting the plethora of books that decorate the walls.

I am here, but I am not really here.

Each book catches the eye, colorfully arrayed in neat rows of blues and reds and greens that seem to go on for miles.

My once, colorful essence is invisible to the eye.

The black shelves organizing the books gleam under the beams of fluorescent lights, illuminating the green checkered pathway to the steel elevator at the end of the hallway.

These books all have a story to tell, but my pages have withered away in the darkness of a midnight sun. Why am I here?

As I stand in the middle of this hallway, I breathe in filtered air and the earthy scent of books that have yellowed with time.

I have spent so much time here, in places like this. What was it all for? Missed opportunities. Unrecoverable declines in health. Isolation. Despair. What path should I take if I've been confined in these four walls for my entire life? How could I know what lies beyond these walls? This is a sacrifice of youth for a future clouded in uncertainty. I live, but I have not lived.

A blue sign reads "Silent Zone" at the end of this hall. Living up to the mantra of the sign, this hallway instills one with a peaceful quietude with the exception of the occasional clink of the air conditioner that is oddly timed with the clacking of a nearby student at a desk typing away. The compressor of the air conditioner is likely loose.

This peaceful quietude is a facade as I scream in agony to an empty audience inside my head. Like the sign, I remain silent in my cries, sinking deeper into the twilight of a bottomless ocean; my feet will never reach the shadows of this ground.

At the end of the hall, behind the blue sign of silence, is a large window leading to the stairway that welcomes natural light into this hall of green.

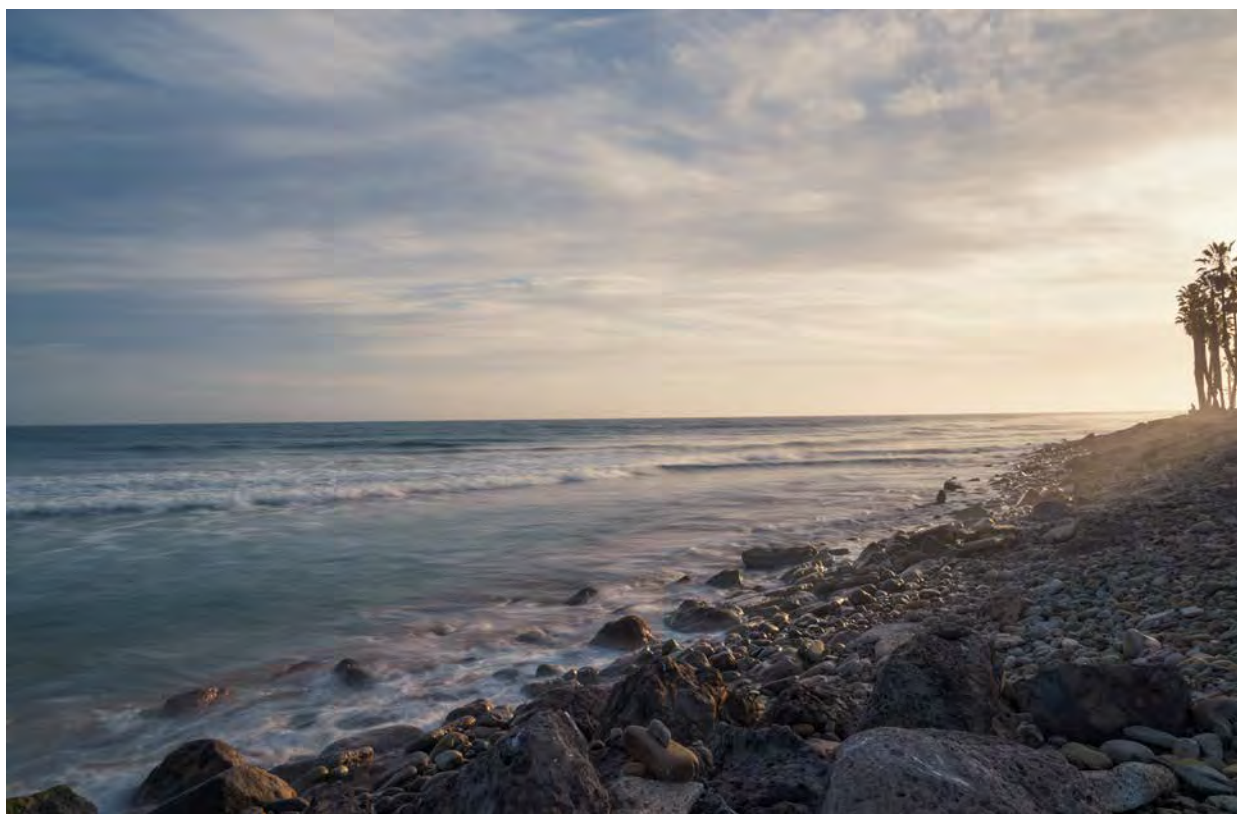
Beyond the glass of this large window are freedom and limitless dreams. Beyond the glass of this large window is someone with my face, freely chasing happiness in utter bliss. I want to escape to meet this person, maybe even be just like them, but I am trapped behind these walls. I am suffocating. These green walls are closing in on me. There isn't much time until a sickening crunch will sound in this hall. Why can't happiness be enough?

A student walks past me and down the hall before me. The silent zone is momentarily diminished as my ears fill with the soft patters of grey tennis shoes against the carpet of checkered green. They walk past the blue sign and disappear into the light at the end of the hallway.

I wonder if our souls are alike: beautiful, but tarnished by the acid rain that continuously pours in heaps of grey inside and outside these walls. I have a feeling they are. I wish we could rest and learn a different way, but 11:59 PM's are all I see. The books here yellow with time, but the stories of the countless students who have walked this hall with heavy backpacks have never changed.

The silence returns with the discordant beat of a keyboard typing and the hum and clank of circulated air.

I want to whisper a plea for change, a plea for help, but I remember this is the silent zone. I look down at the numbers on my phone and swallow my unspoken words. It's time for another class.



Waiting for the Moon by the Sea (photography) by Kevin Lara

Before We Became Victims of Time

The overcast sky is washed away as rainbow waves dance on gleaming sand, each white cloud a newly painted canvas. A white truck is parked before endless blue, windows down to the salt that permeates the air like crystal snow. The Beach Boys's "Wouldn't It Be Nice" booms from the speakers of the truck, summoning seals from the water in a line of oceanic dance. A grey walker leans against the truck as if ready to jump on a wave and surf farther than any visible surfer now sitting on a board. An old man with a white mustache holds a white bucket, collecting pebbles and shells with a smile of sunshine. In a harmony of blue and grey, each stone in the bucket sings a tune, thrilled to meet new friends all in one place. A little girl near the shore kicks at the sand in frustration as waves that steal her golden castle away laugh with each gentle crash at her feet. A young boy, farther up the shore, screams like a soprano as seagulls swarm him with flaming laser eyes. His plate of clams and chips falls into a pit of sand and he cries as the seagulls curse at him, mocking him for his little white wings yet to fly. An older girl laughs like a gremlin beside him and the flash of her disposable camera, directing at the scene, stops time.

Waves are eternal
but they shift the sand with time
never what it was.

Samantha Nichols

Blue Eyes

This floral tea
 lingers
 on my tongue

The mismatched cup and saucer
Match well to the diverse furniture throughout
Wire bugs and music notes
 Just an eye twitch away

Phone call from Tennessee brightens my day
Although their power is out
 Happiness abounds
Making my queasy stomach settle

My now warm deeply pink tea
 delicious Blue Eyes
slides down my throat
 soothing the bile that had arisen hours earlier
goes down into my stomach
 a warm belly is all that remains

Calming, uncaffeinated, delicious pink floral tea

Pencils

Pencil sharpeners are evil
sentient wood and lead eaters
How I loathe them so

Manual ones take forever to sharpen
Hand crank ones on classroom walls
are really fun to spin really fast
Electric ones chew them up
and spit out short ones

Pencil sharpeners are evil
That's why I use mechanical pencils

Faith, Trust, Pixie Dust

Faith, trust, and pixie dust
Disney asserts
but what if your trust is broken
and your faith shattered
and pixie dust doesn't exist?

Trust is fragile
Especially when you don't know better
Especially when you cannot trust yourself
Broken and difficult to re-forged

After the trust is gone,
Faith follows shortly
because if you cannot trust—
there cannot be faith to give
with trust in pieces
faith becomes shattered
slightly working
a smartphone with a severely shattered screen

Pixie dust seeps through every crack
It cannot persist if it doesn't exist
If trust and faith cannot hold it in
It is not there
The pixie dust does not exist

And you shall never fly
Without faith, trust, and pixie dust



All That Is Gold (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelfreader

Pearl Harbor Answer¹

This will suck the life right out of everything
There will be screaming
There will be crying
There might be running
There might dying

The actual event was an attack
The Japanese executed the Pearl Harbor attack
My students are learning about World War two:
Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and America too.

The difference between Nazism and Fascism
 By the way, it is extreme racism.
Totalitarian regimes, appeasement, non-aggression pacts
Many of them ask questions without any tact

A fun word to say-Blitzkrieg
The phony war also known as "Sitzkrieg"
Since they are studying U.S. history
To them, much of which is a mystery

The reason the United States entered the war
Threw off the shackles of isolationism
Fully entered world politics once more
In the sakes of good historicism

I thought my student wrote
And yes, I copied the quote
I sustain in quatrains
"The bomber was followed by more than 180 vampire war planes."

¹ Author's Note: The class I was working in when I wrote this poem was a history class that was studying the early part of World War II, which primarily takes place in Europe, before the United States got involved in the war and the reason the U.S. did get involved. I was grading tests for the section we just completed and the first three times I looked at this student's answer the last line of the poem was the only thing I could see.

Joe Louis Nitro

Disposable; Irreplaceable

We were like gloves
The left and the right thereof

Though we differed in size, material, and
texture
Fit in both hands we can still do the same
gesture

The left was me, recently opened from its
package.
While you were the right, scarred and have
seen damage.

We wanted to come from the same set
As we were lost from our other duet

A future of a pair we could see
It would be us two, and later three

Taking on task-after-task together
When ripped, we would patch up the leather

Yet, durability was a working hazard
You were meant to fall apart tattered

I stitched up all that I ever could
Using the pieces of me, but we understood

Holding on to threads that unraveled you
Colored in red that I'm connected to

The loop inside your glove fell to the ground
That became lost within the mound

As the thread thinned and then flatlined
No other replacement can ever be assigned

A one without the other is disposable
But the one lost is irreplaceable

In Memory of S. N.

Tori Ortega

Star Girl

Little Miss Libra with braided ponytails on either side of your head providing you balance,
And a heart of gold almost too large for your chest.

You just wish to give everyone peace but don't know how to give it to yourself.

You balance the world around you and the lives you touch, but your own life is full of chaos

You yearn for a purpose, a reason to live, but cannot find it.

Maybe one-day little star girl maybe one day, for now just rest your little head and dream.

Melinda Quach

Miss Rower of Summer Port¹

Rowing customers across the flowing river day by day,
Who does not know of the Summer Port's beautiful rower?
Beauty in simplicity;
She's simply beautiful.
She wears worn clothes,
A straw hat,
And a tattered towel 'round her neck,
But her gentle smile
Captivates how many
Scholars, soldiers, and civilians alike?
How many people are soulbound?
How many people leave
Unable to forget the beautiful rower?
How many people return to the Summer Port?
How many leave again in dejection?
Who can bring the Summer Port home with them?
Who can comfort a longing heart?

A little rowboat crosses the river day by day,
Crossing back and forth,
Leaving and returning—
Remaining in the same place.
A beautiful rower girl
Makes each trip,
Ferrying customers across the river.
For many years, the river only knows one rower:
The beautiful rower
Who rows in place
Of her ailing mother.
How many people have wished her well;
How many people have worriedly wondered:
How many times has her boat sailed across the river clear?
How many more times until her love finally sets sail for a lover dear?
The rower smiles gently, but does not answer.
She rows across the river, day by day,
But always at the Summer Port she stays.
She stays and she waits.
Waiting for a single shadow,
A single glimpse,
Of the heroic figure in her heart.
The Summer Port is forever waiting.

She waits during a time of fire and war;
Waits for the hero who has promised to return from afar;
The hero who follows his duty to his land and home.
She waits and waits;
The river ebbs and flows with her.
She waits and waits;
The river rises and falls with her.

Day by day,
The river grows ever melancholic.
Day by day,
The river grows ever haggard.
Day by day,
The river ferries how many customers across;
Yet, not one day
Does the ship return to its harbor.

Sick in love,
Sick in body,
The beautiful rower
Desperately asks all who cross:
News of the hero is all she asks.
Just a glimpse.
Just a message.
Anything is fine.
Have you seen him?
I just want to know:
Is he well?

One day, news returns.
One day, the rower does not.
One day, our hero returns,
And what he sees
Is a new boat and rower
Rowing across the river of old.
Asking her the whereabouts of the old rower,
She hangs her head and does not answer.

O beautiful rower, O beautiful rower
The Summer Port is still here,
But where in the wide world are you?

The news came suddenly that day—
Misunderstood and mistakenly passed on—
To collect a martyr's momentos.
The rower's heart broke
And she died in love,
Hoping to reunite
Upon the fields of fire and blood.

¹ Based on the Vietnamese song “Chuyện Tình Cô Lái Đò Bến Hạ,” which roughly translates to “The Love Story of the (Young) Rower (Girl) of Summer Port/Dock.” This song was composed by the songwriter Hoàng Thi Thơ, and the version of the song that inspired this poem was performed by the singers Minh Vương, Lê Thuý, and Thanh Kim Huệ.

Zachariah Rush

Cruising down North Chester Ave.

Off the bridge I come, past that rundown shack where my family once rented a U-Haul

It seems like yesterday

Approaching the red at Roberts, surrounded by McDonald's, Wienerschnitzel, Tom's, and a notorious 7-11

It reeks of a common American intersection but I could keep you up until Summer with stories of what I've seen here

Down the stretch where an old friend took a life past Santa Barbara Pizza, oh what a delight

I really do hope he is alright

Trout's once a busy establishment now caught and left in the ice chest

I always get a little sad when I think about how fast things go

SMS where I learned the ropes it now looks nice and shiny

Nice and shiny and full of hope, don't lose it

Samco the site of my former scandal

I'm not sure what more this road can handle

China Grade where I bank and learned my fate

I'll always have Merle Haggard to turn around and send me back to Day

.....
Space Odyssey

Are you ready?
Let's throw away everything and travel!
We can see everything through the window.
Neptune

Saturn

Jupiter

Europa

Moon

Sun

Freezing sun Burning red moon Horrible darkness Beautiful galaxy

Those wooden stars hanging from the ceiling are always watching over me.
Welcome to my room~

Child's endless daydream

宇宙の旅

準備はいい?
全て投げ出して、行こう!
窓越しに全てが見える
海王星

土星

木星

エウロパ

月

太陽

凍り続ける太陽 赤く燃える月 恐ろしい暗闇 美しい銀河

天井からぶら下がっているそれらの木製の星々は僕をいつも見守っている
ようこそ僕の部屋へ

終わらない子供の空想

Lilliawna Shaffer

hazel

the tears swell in the hazel rays on the sand
it's an immediate reaction
of being too sensitive
put those away
water runs down my cheeks
unwillingly flowing
don't be a crybaby
feeling as though the anger and sadness inside are trapped
gripped by the hands of those who hurt
over and over and over
it's the ones who hurt the most
that we seek comfort from
to wipe those tears and
emit love from
but as the tears flow
the feelings are begging to be
freed

Mystery Woman by Rivka Jones



Everlasting Impact

One after another on an infinite loop of optimism
The ocean sends me as a form of energy
Ripples, pebbles, beauty, and serenity
The impact that these waves apply upon the seacliff
Is one that I want to leave forever
Eroding negativity from the creatures who float around me
Creation of self reflection and positive influence
Carrying all of the philosophical ideals to different parts of the world
The ocean is me, as I am
Desperate to leave a wave of positivity

Spencer Shepard

Horse Meadow Poem

I will return to Horse Meadows now.
For there the bumbling brooks
beckon to my soul,
as water striders glide
atop bubbling ripples,
inviting me to delight
in nature's veiled cathedral.

Where the red breasted Robin sings
nature's peaceful tidings.
And, evergreen pine trees
happily, welcome travelers
with earthy scent.
Doorways between pines
offer filtered glimpses
of endless blue
and wisps of white.
As sunlight trickles
Through perennial boughs.

In a wind sculpted field of golden springtime poppies,
resting against a white oak tree
resides a rusty visage of childhood memories.
Paint once a vibrant sunset red with black lettering
Tires powerless nowadays.
Chain petrified in place,
gears ever-changing no more.
Black saddle with neon green lettering
now a dilapidated refuge for rust.
Only happy memories left for this memorial of freedom,
of sunshine peeking through forest canopies in the Sierra Nevada.
If it could talk, it would tell tales of victories carved out in pebbly earth,
or of shredding through crimson tunnels of manzanita.
Perhaps it would speak of the fragrant citrus aroma of wet pine needles
as it manuals over protruding granite and hazardous roots.
It could tell stories of bunny hopping from rock to rock at the creek bottom,
or hurtling majestically down hills and cornering 'round powdery switchbacks.
But most of all, it could tell you it brought smiles
to those who rode it through childhood neighborhoods,
down boulevards and streets to be greeted by a school bell,
or to the free spirit meandering on a dirt trail.

Morning Rituals

At dawn's tidings
earthy grounds and percolating water
gurgles like a mountain spring.
As floral scents float,
through the stillness
of long-closed eyes.

For Posterity's Sake

father of Mine,

"I could have been
thine Adam."

Your ill-timed progeny.
The first chance to get it right.

"I won't deny it, I'm a straight ridah
You don't wanna fuck with me
Let's get ready to rumble!" ~ Tupac

Listen here,
you sixty-year-old prick.
Has your age taught you nothing?
Has your vanity blinded you?

All I wanted was a Dad.

Your responsibilities
prematurely fornicating,
into existence.
Power lustfully
materialized.

My purpose never fully understood
Life's meaning absent,
like you.

Broken;
Forsaken.
I wanted to die.
Tattered shoelaces
noosed around my neck.

"Do you have any memories?
Dark memories, Dark memories
they keep me up all night
you left me, half empty" ~ Ozzy Osbourne

9 chances you had
to get IT right.
With each child born
You had an audition
To make a first impression.
9 times to be a dad.

Tearful eyes and
clouded mind
reminded her of her role.
We should not have been shocked
when you clouted your Queen.

“When you talk like that
you knock me out
right off my feet” ~ John Lee Hooker

Who would have guessed?
That I just ran into doorknobs
or fell from trees.
Oh, precious ejaculator of malice,
you ve marked me
with your transgressions.
A depressed skull
fractured
from a ceramic frisbee
subjugates my thoughts.

Won't you just go away?

Memories of Spruce Street (photography) by Ian Tash



Lydia Shimeall

wildfire

it is raining ash today
a homeless man cleans himself
in the sprinklers.

when we wake,
we smell the campfire
of our childhood.

when we leave,
the sky is dark
at ten in the morning.

the sky is orange. yellow.
red with silhouettes of flightless birds:
they do not know how to hide.

none of us do.
our friend describes the ways
to hide from ash.

a machine for this,
a machine for that;
we sell these machines.
we have sold out.

is it pompeii, they ask?
a history lesson, a blast from the past
is it volcanic ash?

I have lost my voice.
we always eat the gold,
but now we eat the grey.

our car wears a grey coat.
birds are dressed by the air;
powerlines are monochrome fashion shows.

ancient, northern trees –
we remember their burial mounds
as they return to us as ash in the air.

we dreamt of them
as a homeless man does sprinklers,
but now they are the cigarette
when they were once lungs.

I'm in a maze

I have a dream.

My dream is working at the airport.

When I was a child, I had this dream.

However, I'm in a maze.

Because this job is influenced by COVID-19,
a lot of companies are not hiring.

When will COVID-19 end?

What will our future become?

I'm in a maze.

I don't know what to do.

The reason why I'm studying English is because I want to work at the airport.

I know there are a lot of jobs using English.

However, I've never thought about other jobs.

Maybe I can find a new dream, during my study abroad experience.

I'm in a maze.

However, I want to find a new light.

私は迷路の中にいる

私には夢がある。

私の夢は空港で働くことだ。

私が子供の時にこの夢を持った。

しかし、私は迷路の中にいる。

なぜなら、この仕事はCOVID-19による影響を受けている。

多く企業が採用を見送っている。

COVID-19はいつ終わるのだろうか？

私たちの未来はどうなるのだろうか？

私は迷路の中にいる。

私は何をしたらよいのか分からない。

英語の勉強をしているのは、空港で働きたいという夢があるからだ。

英語を活かすことのできる仕事が沢山あることは分かっている。

しかし、私は他の仕事を考えたことがない。

留学生活で、新しい夢を見つけることが出来るかもしれない。

私は迷路の中にいる。

Manisha Singh

Exhausting a Place

There is a woman with a white cat, she is sitting under the tree facing the koi pond.

There is nothing to worry about.

She has a purple stroller for the cat a few feet away from her.

Will I finish this all-in time?

There is a man with black hair on a bench across the pond picking up his trash, the smell of ramen in the air.

I don't have that much work.

A women with long wavy brown hair talking to a man with a hat and glasses standing by the sign a little ways from the koi pond.

Am I doing this correctly?

The sound of the machine filtering the water for the waterfall. The Koi fish swimming in circles, the big orange koi fish devouring the leaves.

Do I do anything correctly?

The man and women move closer to look at the koi fishes.

What time do I have work?

The sound of an airplane flying over us, the cold breeze making the branches move slowly.

STAY AWAY FROM ME

The bright sun in our faces.

TOO CLOSE

The tiny fishes moving quickly, scurrying away from the koi.

How much work do I have that's due today?

The groups of fishes moving together.

I need to start using my agenda again.

The leaves moving slowly left and right, there is black/brown koi moving alone over the bench under the tree.

I can do this.

Two construction workers on the roof of the building by the koi pond, talking and laughing together.

I should ask for help.

The sound of drills, the green, moldy pond.

You're fine, you don't need help.

Half covered in darkness and the other half in the sun.

I am good enough.

Things slowly falling from the trees into the pond, circling things, leaves, and small branches.

There are three things due tomorrow.

Black long skinny koi eating the circle things.

I can finish it after work.

Koi's mouth popping up and the circles forming from the koi's head popping out.

Can I handle all of this?

There's a low rumbling in the background and ripples in the water.

Am I taking on too much?

The smell of fresh air and nature in the air.

It's not enough.

A small blue bird flying by, the cars speeding by.

BREATHE BREATHE

The sudden silence, everything is still.

I'm okay.

Trenten Sorci

Gods and Death

Sometimes I feel like God,
but I hate myself.
Do you think God could have killed himself?
Is that why the world seems so godless,
because everywhere I look seems so hopeless.
Do you think if we treated each other like gods
we may love each other more,
or would there just be more war?
There was a time where I hated gods,
but now I can sympathize with someone that would die for others,
because now I have allies that would die for me,
and I'd die for them.
Maybe that's what being a god is,
loving someone so much that you would die for them.
In truth, maybe we need more gods.

Rachel Stratemeier

A Relationship

You wrote on me with black sharpie.

I showed you my arm, you uncapped your pen, your arm swinging up and behind from the force as the black, plastic, hollow thing fell to the ground with a click.

You began.

You defiled the finger I held out. Dipped in alcohol black, it's not painted but stained. The pigment didn't rub off. It stayed until patches of new cells replaced the old black ones.

And why did you do it?

I know what you said. But I can't believe it. What did I do to you, though I never imagined I could do anything? Is it possible to do what in your mind is impossible to do? Were you as ambivalent as I was?

But you did it regardless.

So did I. I wish I was psychic. I blame myself for being mortal, a writable surface.

Just like you wanted me to.

Somewhere

A stark landscape.
A mountain, low, black, fading into invisibility.
A lake, no water, only me
Looking at the sun set behind crisp lines.

I am obsessed with lines.
In my eyes they reflect themselves like the boundaries between worlds
And the worlds don't matter
-Shape of the sky and the Earth-
Only the boundary itself:
Clear, each quark delineates itself into a set category,
No stragglers.

Perfection. Maybe.
A kind of perfection that needs no perfection.
A kind of rightness that creates itself.
A kind of magic that is by its production not produced by anyone.
A metaphor
A thin chrysalis layer between what is inside and what is outside.

I finally understand my life.

Morgan Swift

Wishful Thinking

I'm glad we've stayed friends as grown-ups so we could
Catch up on Saturday mornings at our families' favorite brunch spot
Exchange career advice while walking our pets and kids through the park
Congratulate one another after every big success
Plan what we'd wear when greeting trick-or-treaters
Comfort one another with ice cream after every big breakup
And make multiple wishes before blowing out delicate dandelions

If we had been friends as teenagers we would have
Passed notes in homeroom – always easy when a substitute is around
Met at your locker before third period to make lunch plans
"Studied" at your house but snuck out to the movies instead
Comforted one another with ice cream after every big breakup
Planned what we'd wear to that Halloween party in Haggin Oaks
Pinky swore we'd go to prom together if no one else asked

If we had been friends as children, we would have
Kicked our legs on schoolyard swings to try and touch the sky
Shared spooky stories under the blankets at sleepovers
Asked our parents if we could pretty please stay for dinner?
Traded my juice boxes for your apple sauce cups at lunch
Planned what we'd wear when we went trick-or-treating together
And make multiple wishes before blowing out those dandelions

before it's too late

i'm so glad you've come to visit — though i'm now grey, wrinkled, and small
seeing my dear friend again was something i never thought would come at all

my wife stands by the doorway and smiles as you sit beside my bed
will you help me get comfy by fluffing that pillow behind my head?

now, tell me all about the adventures you've had throughout the years
tell me about the girls and boys you've taught, and all your hopes and fears

pause for a bit while the nurse hands me my morning prescriptions
when she's done, show me the photos from your favorite vacations

it's time for a slow sunny stroll through the hospice grounds
we'll continue catching up as you push my wheelchair around

i'll tell you about my diagnosis and how my recovery options are few
will you make me happy by telling me you're seeing somebody new?

my wife scolds and reminds me your independence is what i always admired
it's true — you're a strong, wonderful young person whose spirit is like wildfire

but i've always said i'd support you with your choice of whomever you date
be there to provide friendly caring and comfort — never jealousy or hate

can you stay for lunch? there's turkey sandwiches on an herby bread
there's also tapioca pudding and cobb salad if you prefer that instead

are you the world's greatest teacher yet, like i always knew you'd be?
i still wish we'd adjacent classrooms — send those rowdy students to me!

how are things with your mum, your sisters, and especially your dad?
when you'd say i reminded you of him, i was always flattered and glad

alas, the hourglass is running out on our remaining catching-up time
it's getting harder for me to move, see, hear or find words to rhyme

please stay a little longer to catch a few innings of dodgers baseball?
whoa! did you see that mookie betts homer streak over the right-field wall?

my wife hugs you tightly as she whispers how much time i have left
watching the two of you ugly sobbing leaves me feeling bereft

i'm heartbroken when i think back years ago when our friendship fell apart
because it was all my fault; i was immature, inconsiderate, not very smart; and

it's only in my imagination you decide to forgive and visit after reading my letter
i wish i hadn't waited so long to apologize — to try and make things better

Ian Tash

The Third Acts

Peter and John left
3 p.m. temple prayer time
Time of the divine

A paralyzed man
Laid at the Beautiful Gate
Ask people for alms

Peter and John came
Walking past the paralyzed
He asked them for alms

Peter looked at him
John's intense eyes soon followed
Fix your gaze on us

Expecting a gift
Looking upon these two men
Utterly transfixed

I cannot give wealth
I give what is mine to give
Sir, stand up and walk

Two men clasp right hands
Their might lifts him to his feet
Feet and ankles strong

Leap into the air
Walk with these two gift givers
Praise God in his space

All eyes drawn to him
His leaping, walking, praising
All he sees is God

Recognition hits
Empty Place, Beautiful Gate
What happened to him?

Clinging to the men
To Solomon's Portico
Astonishing all

Why do all wonder?
Why do all stare at this sight?
Not pious power

Divine ancestry
Chances given to us all
Even Pilate knew

Willful rejection
Holy and righteous knowledge
Embraced death instead

You cause life to die
God refused to let it die
We are witnesses

Remember the name
Galvanize your weak beings
Transform before all

You were ignorant
Your institutions were too
I know this, my friends

Old prophets foretold
Salvation from suffering
Divine now fulfills

Give up the wicked
Turn towards a better way
Let forgiveness wash

Divine refreshment
New leadership appointed
Priestly and kingly

Old prophets foretold
Justly restored universe
More leaders to come

Old prophets made new
For new people at new times
Listen to the voice

Traitors in our tribes
Refuse to hear the right way
Pluck them from your ground

Old prophets foretold
These days of ours lived again
Many have cried out

Old prophets foretold
Ensure children bless the world
Cling to the promise

Truth has risen up
We serve the Divine and you
May evil be turned

Anju Toḡano

Japanese

.....

world

I like to travel.
I like the differences between countries.
When I visit a landscape I have never seen before,
or hear a language I have never heard before,
I can tell that the culture is unique.

Why does it make a difference?
We started from the same land, the earth,
And now we have a boundary called a country.
What would the world be like if there were no differences?
Would it have been a world where everyone thought the same and there was no individuality?

Everyone has their own background,
their own values,
their own opinion,
their own life.

The world today is a place where such people help each other and coexist.
What does it mean to coexist?
I think it is about accepting yourself, accepting others, and accepting differences.
We work together to survive, and sometimes we fight for each other to grow.
We can only evolve with other differences.

Differences are very interesting, wonderful, and an essential element.

I like that world.

世界

私は旅行が好きだ。
私は国による違いが好きだ。
新たな場所を訪れると
見たことのない景色が広がり
聞いたことのない言葉が飛び交い
特有の文化が散在する。

なぜ違いが生まれたのだろうか。
同じ地球という土地から始まり、
今では国という境域ができた。
もしも違いのない世界だったらどうなっていたらろう？
皆が同じ考えを持ち、個性のない世界になっていたらろうか？

人にはそれぞれ背景があり、
価値観があり、
意見があり、
人生がある。
それらは個性を作り上げる。

そんな人間が助け合い共存しているのが今の世界だ。
共存とは何だろうか？
私は、自分を認め、相手を認め、違いを受け入れることだと思う。
共に生きるために協力し、時には互いのために争い成長する。
違いがあってこそ人間は進化し続けることができるのだ。

違いはとても面白く、素晴らしく、必要不可欠な要素だ。

私はそんな世界が好きだ。

Adriana Toledo

We're over

I knew we were over while waiting for your reply
that never came.
I knew we were over when I no longer started my mornings
or ended my nights with you.
I knew we were over when you gave me distance instead of love.
I knew we were over when minute replies turned into hours.
I knew we were over when the reassurance and communication lessened.
I knew we were over when my best friend started becoming a stranger.
I knew we were over when I could no longer turn to you for comfort or help.
It's okay.
I'll stay here and watch you live your life behind my phone screen.
I'll stay here and hope you grow into who you're meant to be.
I'll stay here and wish you happiness,
because although I knew we were over,
my heart didn't.

Embodied Desire

To be a book. Still and in silence.
I want to be propped on a shelf
All around me quiet, peace.
Unbothered just keeping to myself.

I want my cover to be leather
And my pages filled with adventure.
real leather though, not pleather.
Hopefully on the shelf of a scholar.

I want to be someone's pillow during class,
Or someone's prop to hold up their phone
I want my margins to have notes and
My words to be highlighted.

I want to contain immense knowledge
And allow creativity to flow.
I want my spine cracked
And my pages ripped out and crumpled

Tired of collecting dust in a quiet room
Stuck in the hands of my owner
Waiting to experience the adventures
That live on my pages.

Leah Truitt

Oyster Shells

Snap me shut. Let me live
in my sweet oyster shell.
Let me stagnate and grow
Pearls to shine in the dark.
Let me sleep in my cave
of solitude; don't cut
yourself on the way out.

Wishing for Canaries

Whispers bleed across the pavement,
Seep in the cracks of fractured brains,
Presents, they call them, compliments,
But catcalls just the same.

They call her, in the dead of night,
Or on the sunshine addled streets,
Pretty, curvy, or just not right,
She's just a piece of meat.

Insecurities fill her whole,
Pennies in an old mason jar,
Never spent them; they've taken toll,
Overflows, gone too far.

She doesn't weep for fallen grace,
Or acknowledge the rift inside,
Or how she'll shatter in this place,
These scars she'll always hide.

In the coal shafts, no yellow streaks,
And no canaries in our minds,
To give us warning, give us peace,
So peace she'll never find.

Milk Tea

I'll ask you once more
to pour starlight from the sky
for my cup of tea.

In Memory

Sunshine danced on the window panes blithely,
Enticing, resplendent, lovely, you know,
And the meadowlark sang delightedly,
Just as I had, so very long ago.
I miss you dearest, as the sun misses
Sky, when clouds mix bright blue to dark gray,
And when nightfall, so eternal, kisses
All of my heaven-sent sunshine away.
I think of you often, think of your smile,
As autumn decays to an early death.
I remember when my life was worthwhile
And dream of that day, of winter's last breath,
A day where sunshine reigns, once again free,
Winter has ended and you're still with me.

Wes D. Werner

Thalassophobia

Like a dark blue hand, the ocean grips the earth with unrelenting force. My mind compels me to ponder the tumultuous blue chasm of water as I sit before it. I imagine swimming the current through all its endlessness, eventually breaching the abyss and falling into its deepest crevices. Only, when I'm submerged, I don't fall, not really. I float past volcanic vents into pressures that kill nearly everything and slip into the cracks of the oceanic crust. In the seabed an opening to the mantle lies, where the entrance to my assimilation with Earth's core resides. Though it seems the ocean forbids life, without it, would Earth remain the same, or would our planet sit deserted? And where would we be? If not risen from the waves like the liverworts that latch themselves to bare rock as a refusal of death, where would we be? Beyond this space in my mind is what is called real, here the sky mirror reflects daylight that burns my skin. This seabound earth reveals the truth to my imagination. It is where beauty converges with fear, it is where death, too, appears. Laps bring carrion shoreward and ebb the living seaward, acting as the water's fringe. I enter the ocean at this fluctuating edge, immersing my feet in its currents. The murky saline swallows my body as I sink with every step forward in the saturated sand floor. I must remain superficial so its pressure does not choke me. To go further would mean leaving my sensibilities and thrusting my life at the hands of luck, but who knows if she should catch it. The fish god's lair lures those foolish enough to believe they are capable of mastering its wild undulations. I watch them set their shields atop the sea, bowing to the horizon, in search of something undetermined. Will they survive if they cross the apex jaws perfected for devastation? A shield more massive would only provoke a larger beast to wrap it in its ever-stretching limbs before dragging it to the deep. Some day Dagon may rise from the watery universe and tower above all. Will they have a suitable defense against the colossus? I refuse to tell.

Monica Williams

Contemplation...?

What to say, what to say. I don't know what to say.
The pain is so real, I can't keep it at bay.
My mind wanders; goes astray.
What if *I* didn't stay?
Would it then go, all away?

The void is so v a s t;

I *feel* it.

Do *you feel* space?

Space that is **thick, heavy, EMPTY.**

What to say, what to say. Darkness eats my whole day.
I can't remember when I didn't feel this way;
nevertheless, I became lost in our play.
What if *you* didn't stay?
Would I go away?

A Still Beach (photography) by Kevin Lara



A mother's addiction

My beautiful boy,
The sadness is
Deep, inside a swirl.
The functions of a tide,
Back and forth,
Up and down.
What can I do?
I am a slave to the rhythm
Back and forth
Up and down
happy
gone
high loaded
Weapon
Return
anger
sober
guilty
He's slipping back
Into the ocean
numbness
The tide brings him in
To hold
My beautiful boy

Left side Strong side

What does it mean when the left is the right?
The right kind of spirit, the right kind of fight

Heroin—of the irregular kind
Everything I am not, in your friendship I find
Way from left field, a soul Sista of mine

What does it mean when the left is the right?
Sharing for hours, always despite

The interruption of duties, adulting and such
When our time is stolen, we miss it so much

This, a connection that could never be wrong
This, a friendship that is incredibly strong.

Roman Woloosz

Survive

I am pushed.

An unforgiving shove impacts my chest and I stare with questioning eyes at my assailant. Momentarily, I am suspended in air. My feet are no longer at the edge of the cliff. They are above me. They look out of place against the blue sky. I don't know why painful, awful things only happen on beautiful days.

Gravity pulls me downward with a strength I have never known. I expected the descent to be short. I have not hit solid ground yet. I just fall.

My plummet is effortless. I am not required to do anything except be taken over. I have no illusion of power in the fall. My difficulties begin with the overgrowth sticking out from the cliff side. At times, nothing touches me. Just me and the frozen air rushing past my ears. Finally, my hands discover a branch. It doesn't stop me all at once. As my fingers catch, I am slammed into the cliff. The momentum from the descent and the sturdy placement of the plant connect. My shoulder is ripped from its socket. I am in pain. I try to hold myself steady, to possibly even climb up, but I am not strong enough. My twisting arm screams and my fingers are failing.

White knuckles clench around this ineffective support I've found and try so hard to hold on. My hand is giving in. My fingers break. And I'm falling again.

I continue to find these illusory safe lines. Each one I grasp for. Each one injures me. Each one makes it harder to hold the next. It happens over and over in my fall. A small safety found. A hard impact. A bone shatters. A grasp fails. A fall. My body is being broken by things I wish could save me. My injuries increase and I grow weak. Each encounter with stability more damaging than the last. I can't stop trying. But eventually, I do.

I never thought the fall would be this long. I thought things like this happened fast. But I'm falling and it feels as if I have been for years. I wish someone could see me. I assumed at times like these others would sense I am in danger. They would know and come save me. They would find me and help. But no one comes. No one notices. Maybe, no one cares. Not until they see the evidence of the plummet. I don't know what awaits me at the bottom. I don't know if I'll even live to see it. I do know, however, when my high speed body meets hard earth, I will break open. My insides will be displayed for all to see. They will leak out like a crushed egg and frighten all who look upon me. They will think to themselves, "How did I not know they were falling?" They will see my vulnerable, soft core that has been violently ejected from my body and cry. They will cry and regret never seeing. And if I survive, I don't know if I will forgive them.

你

You

你亭亭而待，我远观不进。
你朝我微笑，我木讷回应。
梦中的画面，就在我眼前。
我努力靠近，而你却渐远。
你想要的不多，我却给予不了。

理想终究败给了现实。

多年已过去，我还是会怀念起那个夏天与你。
未来的婚礼，我将在台下祝愿成为新娘的你。

You waited at the end; I saw you but stand.

You smiled at me; I responded dully.

The picture in my dream; You are now in front of me.

I tried to get closer; But I couldn't give what you wanted.

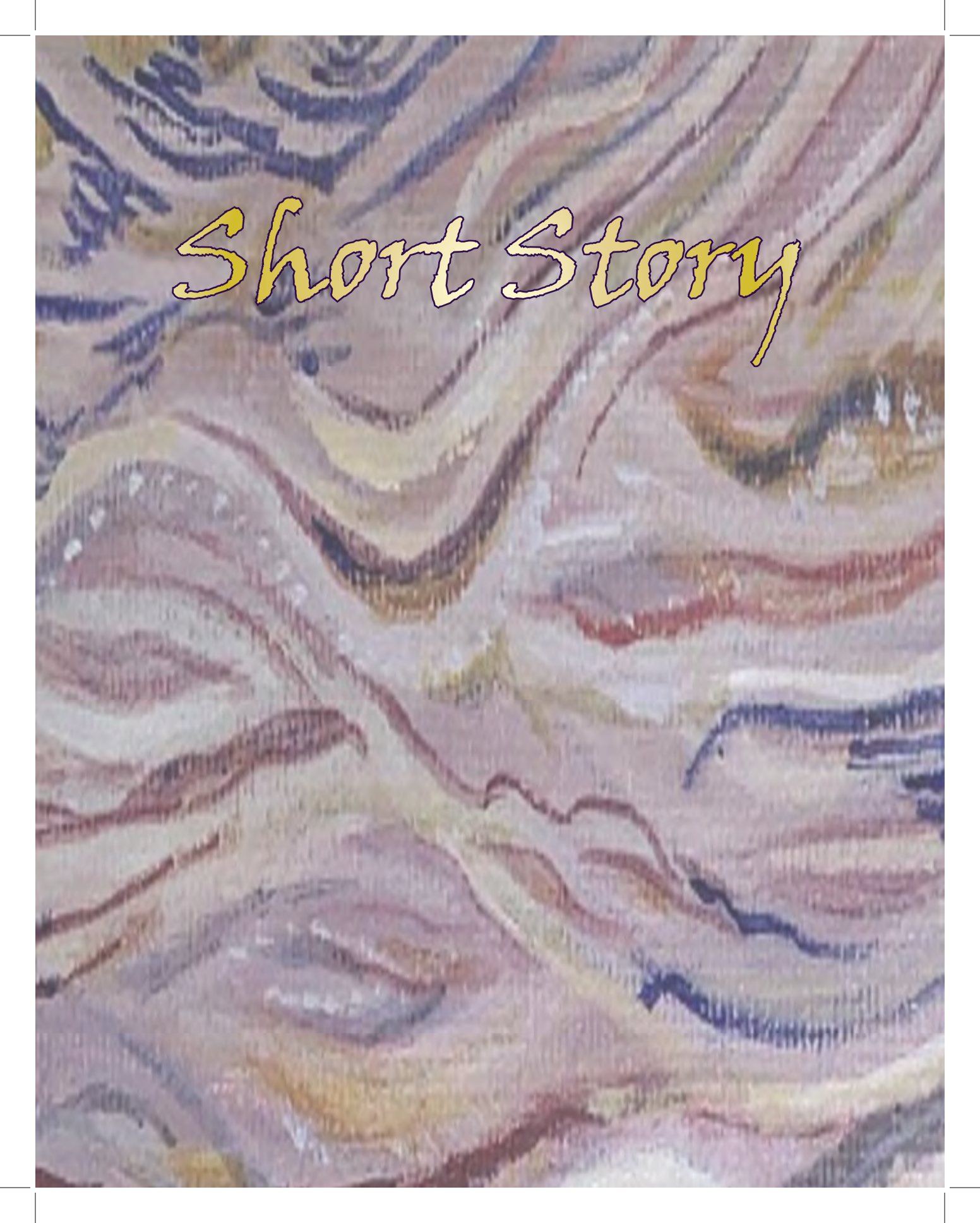
Ideals gave way to reality.

Years later, I would still remember that summer and you.

The future wedding, where I would be the guest giving my best wish.



Damaged (painting) by Maia Garcia



Short Story

Teresa Alcantar

I Wish I Knew

Traveling through a labyrinth is to travel towards a center that is unknown to you. What is there? Why do you want to get there? How long will it take you to get there? What will you do once you're there? The center is simply a list of uncertainties that won't be answered till you've made it. The journey starts without the end goal in mind, and after traveling its paths for a while I cannot backtrack. I can't help but continue to travel towards the center; I've already come this far so why not see it through.

But will the journey be worth it? Traveling deeper and deeper towards the center of the labyrinth will not guarantee satisfaction or prosperity. Everything is an unknown when it comes to the labyrinth, but am I strong enough to continue the journey?

I hit wall after wall, unexpected turn after unexpected turn. I get turned around and accidentally retrace paths I have already traversed. I wish the path was clearly marked with clues or signs to what the outcome will be, to take out any uncertainty and indecision. But a labyrinth cannot be that easy.

I have no control over where the labyrinth takes me, for I have no clue what the most direct path towards its center is. I have no clue if the labyrinth is shifting on me without my noticing. How I wish I knew if it was.

Time marches on while traversing the labyrinth, but no matter how far I have come or how close I could be to figuring it all out there is another wall or unexpected turn that makes everything all the more confusing and exhausting.

What will it take to reach the center? Years lived, experienced gathered, journeys taken, people met, books read, essay written, hours worked. Which of these will help me traverse these unknown paths towards the center and which ones will set me back further away from it? Which ones will act as my map and which ones will turn everything upside down?

I have met many people traversing the same labyrinth, but while we traveled together for a while at some point we split up and begin taking different paths. I wonder which one of us made the right choice and will reach the center first and which one of us will continue to travel within the bowels of the labyrinth; getting further and further from the center we search for.

I can't help but believe I am the one that will continue to traverse the labyrinth for many years never able to reach that center I wish more than anything to reach despite not knowing what awaits me there. I can't back down though, I have entered the labyrinth and must find the center at all costs. I have faced many walls and unexpected turns and without a doubt, I will face many more. Hopefully, at some point the path will become clear and guide me through the confusion and despair, and when that happens, I will finally reach the center and know why I have traveled so long to reach it.

Rosa Arredondo

Gumball

There's nothing so quiet; as when this place is empty. Everyone is gone, the people that stay here. Sometimes I watch them when they leave; other times, if they are here, I am not allowed to watch through the window. To watch? Can you believe it? I am not allowed to do a lot of things. I have a very short list of things I am permitted to do. It wears on me. I often wish to move about independently, the way that they do: it is not permitted. I often wish to eat whenever I feel hungry, the way that they do, this too is not permitted.

In fact, I could go hungry for hours. My stomach aches, cries, it *burns* for nourishment, yet they pretend not to know. I could go hours without food. It feels like days. I try pacing back and forth within the confines of my prison. At these times I pray, wish, hope that they might give me a little. Sometimes they do not. They eat merrily nearby. They laugh, play and eat together so lovingly. I watch them from afar. I have prayed that my eyes would pierce them, but they never do. They are unaffected.

I am not sure if it is normal—for souls like mine to go unnoticed and uncared for under the same roof as all of the Others. Surely it cannot be normal. I only wish to be treated with the same humanity as the Others. Nothing more, and nothing less. I don't yet understand the Hierarchy system that exists here. I contribute to this home just as much as the Others yet I am not yet granted the same permissions. How can this be?

It is quiet still. I am still getting used to the long hours of quiet. When I was younger, things were different. In the Spring, my brother and I came to live here. The Others were already here: two adults and two children. My brother and I were two additional children. It was ecstasy. We were fed, welcomed, and loved to what seemed like no end. The other children were warm, and energetic just like my brother and I. We were still treated as equals at this time. The adults were firm and gentle. They always provided. We loved our new home and my brother and I were sure to return the affection. We had amazing energy and we all lived like kings.

Occasionally, they would pull out a sweet-cream from the bright door of the kitchen. It was thick and cold. It was milky, but not milk. It was better than milk. It was a luscious, fatty-cream that was hardly distinguishable in color. Its scent however, could lure me from the furthest corners of our home. I have a keen sense for the perfume of the snack's protein. It calls to me. We may not have ever had our own, but sometimes we were allowed to taste this treat straight from their hands! Its succulent and heavenly contents danced wildly on my palate. Quite possibly, it was the sweetest of all of their affections.

They spoke a language between them that my brother and I couldn't fully understand. Slight variations in the tones and pitches in their voice could give away their message. We never needed to understand fully. As I said before, we had experienced nothing but positive energy up until a very strange day.

One morning was different. Our plates weren't set for my brother and I like it was for the other children. We watched them eat, we watched them move about, and we waited patiently. We grew hungry. The moving stopped. Our plates were now ready, except that they were placed inside a metal cage. Confused and hungry we pursued our meal, only to have them attempt to close the cage from behind us. We were tricked! Shamefully tricked by the family that we thought had loved us!

We couldn't figure out what was going on. We panicked and fought violently. Wouldn't any child? In doing so, we spread the contents of our breakfast everywhere. We drew blood from the very hands that fed us. Those same hands that had shown us affection, were now violently locking us in a wired cage. We continued to reach through the metal at the Others, we begged for the same understanding and affection we had come to know during our time here before. Their words were hard and cold. They scolded us for fighting back. We were confused, we were scared and we were hurt. How could this be? How could we once have so much love and excitement only to be aggressively out-muscled by the people that we love? This was the day that they showed their strength. This was the day that the Hierarchy was established. This was the day that everything changed.

We were shaken violently in that cage. Everything was loud and fast moving. It made our hearts race. We found solace only in each other. The roaring sounds of outside were unfamiliar to us. In all of the adventure of navigating our new home, we hadn't realized that we were never allowed outside. It was chaos. Immense noise, and chaos. Our hearts raced. I remember even wetting myself, after having been trained so perfectly how to bathroom. My brother and I learned how to bathroom quickly. We were so proud of ourselves. At this moment, all of our dedication and efforts had been wasted. Anxiety had taken over. We felt nothing but fear, panic, and discomfort in that cage.

Soon, everything stopped; our cage was still. We were in a new place: bright and noisy. We were removed from one cage and put in another. We waited while children in cages nearby also cried out. I could smell their fear and anxiety as well. We were punctured with needles and then we fell asleep. When we woke up our bodies hurt. We had been violated somehow, although we were not sure how. We moaned in pain, but we couldn't move. Some days we spent there, and we began to feel a little bit better. We began moving around and comforting each other. The food was good after some days of not eating. As we ate, we tried to make sense of what had happened, but we came to no conclusions.

Just then, a stranger came and separated us. That was the last time I ever saw my brother. It turned out that the Others came back for me. They did not bring my brother with us. Only me. Why me? Nonetheless, I was happy to see them. I was happy to be out of the bright place that had violated me. Once again, the Others embraced me and showed me affection. To this day, I do not understand why they would have done this to me? Why would they allow me to be taken? Why would they allow me to undergo such violence and mutilation in that bright place? I still do not know.

During my stay in the bright place, there was an overwhelming stench of urine and feces in the air. I am not sure how many days we marinated in it, but I do remember thinking: how on earth will I get this stench off of me. The truth is that it took long hours over several days. I washed myself incessantly until eventually, I was able to rid myself of the foul odor. I could finally move forward from the traumatic experience.

It is different now, in the Fall. None of the Others seem to be home except for a few hours before bed and through the night. Where do they go? What is out there? Since my younger days I have grown more comfortable with outside things. It turns out they are not all so bad. I have seen birds, bugs, and other children. They entice me. When no one is home but me, I watch them. I peek from the window. I watch things move. I have become quite brave on my own. It doesn't seem fair now that I am confined to this space. The world moves on around me, yet I am stuck here. I must be careful not to let them see me peek. I've been violently scolded and shoved from the window before. They were outraged. I was sentenced to time outside on the porch for my sins.

I spend a lot of my time outside on the porch. I sit alone in the long and cold hours of the night. I watch my breath form and diffuse in front of me. My feet have become accustomed, but my body still struggles with the cold. The cold is my enemy. As a result, I have learned how to squeeze myself very small. This way, I can fit into small spaces within the contents in the corner of the porch under a sheet. The sheet provides scant protection from the wind. In these moments, I wonder why me? When the other children get to roam and play. They sleep in nice, warm beds every night. I know this because I have watched them sleep. I have covered their mouths and noses completely to see just what would happen. One night during this game, the boy awoke scared, gasping for breath, looking for Mother. He ran into her room and told her what I had done. It was just an experiment really, no one was seriously hurt. And yet, I was punished for this as well. I was sent out for the night, and every night after that.

On an even-temperature evening, I do very much enjoy watching the night-birds roam. Their awkward motions trigger my gaze. I can become fixated. They flap violently through the air; mostly from tree to tree. They do not fly long distances, like the day-birds do. There is such a lack of grace in them. This is very similar to the graceless little Others that I live with.

I have been abused by them. The children that live here. I am often subject to their clumsy games and costumes. They dress me up in things, and laugh. They will send me out into the room full of adults to be mocked and made fun of. Vile children. They give me clothes that I can barely move in. I try to get away, but I often fall in the webs of disaster they've constructed. Solely for their amusement. Although they can be sweet and even entertaining at times, I have hardened against all things that challenge my dignity. In all this time, I feel like I have grown and learned, while the children here remain small, immature, and clumsy. But even they get to come and go as they choose. I lust for what they have. So much so, that I have even escaped a few times! I have lived outside of these walls!

In the morning one day, the door was left open. The Others were busy getting ready, so I emerged from my entrapment. I looked around to check for them, but they did not notice. I darted at the open door! Freedom tasted so sweet. Down the stairs I ran, until I found a thick bush to hide in. I would hide there until the Others left for the day. I watched as they closed the door and locked it behind them. They hadn't even noticed that I left. Perfect. I had the day to myself! Free to do as I pleased, and go where I please, not having to ask permission for access. The entire world was accessible to me!

Unfortunately, I cannot remember much of that day. Between the roaring noises and strangers that existed outside, most of my time was spent in hiding. The excitement quickly turned into hunger and thirst, and it hadn't occurred to me that I wasn't sure how I could eat or drink without the Others. I missed them. I needed them. I waited for them at the front door until they returned. They found me dirty, hungry and thirsty. They were upset. I was punished for my sins again. This time, it was a violent bath. I screamed, I cried, I flung my body as hard as I could, but Mother's strength overpowered me. She squeezed my arms and legs together, dunking me violently in and out of the water. It burned my skin. The water's properties I could never understand. Every inch my body was submerged in the pool of poison Mother had prepared for me. Every fiber of my being had alerted danger, for this was the cruelest of punishments.

Despite the Hierarchy that I have yet to understand, I must confess that I have a peculiar attachment to the Others. By some odd and tender dependency, I wait for them. They should be home soon, in the meantime I should---is that a moth?



Scarred for Life by Rivka Jones  [@rivkas_art_](https://www.instagram.com/rivkas_art_) Scar from Disney's *The Lion King*

Vanessa Beltran

Charlie, Charlie

I have *never* made a worse choice.

Look, I know I've made some bad choices in the past. Like really bad. In fact, I got kicked out of my house for my first bad decision. Why? Well, my dad is a bit of a hard ass and didn't believe in second chances. At least not for his first kids...but that's beside the point.

The point is, yeah...I've fucked up royally.

I've never regretted anything. Once I make up my mind, that's it. There's no going back. And yes, I realize how stubborn that makes me, but you don't live as long as I have without growing a backbone, or two...

But DAMN.

There is sooo much fucking glitter!

I swear I've inhaled more shit in this one sitting than that time I helped the Peruvians with their coco plants. And let me just say that was a much better time.

"CHARLIE!!"

I turned just in time to avoid a barbie square in the kisser. The assailant was sitting not three feet from me, and for such a small body there was a lot of spirit. I'm pretty sure that would have ripped my beautiful lips off. And I thought demons were violent. HAH!

Yes?" I asked the creature, smiling wide with all my teeth. The creature in question was Madison, this little human being I had somehow become acquainted with. Four feet of pure terror, and the current companion of yours truly. She was quite stringy for a girl her age and her chestnut curls always resembled a rat's nest.

She had taste, what can I say?

But the tasteful being also happened to be gearing up to launch another projectile towards my face.

"BABY BLUE GLITTER!" she yelled.

I blinked.

Gave her a long stare, and then blinked again.

"What?!"

Her eyes seemed to combust, and I swear this girl is more beast than I am. She pointed a very specific finger to the project in my lap. I looked down and saw that where there should have been the blasted "baby blue glitter", I had somehow used the "ballet slipper pink" glitter.

Why does it matter? Pink or blue glitter is still glitter and still slowly coating the inside of my lungs.

"I'm sorry bub," I said, meekly, shrugging my shoulders. "I'll do it again." I grabbed a new sheet of paper, the glue, and the "baby blue glitter."

"We have to hurry Charlie," she said. Her eyes pleading and wringing her hands like she was some middle-aged divorcee and not a seven-year-old. "Daddy's almost home."

Daddy, I scoffed. If you can call him that, and 'father' only because of biology. But still, I kept working, meticulously drawing a heart with glue. My mind going a million miles an hour. The first time I met Madison will forever be stamped in my mind.

I chase after vices. It's what I do.

After I got thrown out of my house, as a kid mind you, I had nothing. I was in a dark place, literally, and the only thing that made me feel good was feeding on the energy of the weak-minded and the wicked.

I didn't know. I thought that it was okay. And it was fun. The high would come and go just as quickly, but I learned my presence made the weak-minded into wicked people. So...more energy for me.

And that was how I met him. Madison's father. The sickest fuck in the entire world. Or at least it seems like it to me.

I'm a demon or devil, spirit...what have you... and I've seen my fair share of ridiculously horrible shit. But my usual shit was just drugs and alcohol, maybe the occasional prostitution ring if I was feeling frisky. But I don't do violence. I saw Sodom and Gomorrah, I ain't doing that again. I swore that I would never see that happen again. So, I chased the light stuff.

Light stuff.

Yeah, I'm full of it. A hypocrite if you will. I know. Just because I avoid it doesn't mean it never happens. I'm no saint. I know how this world works. But still...

He seemed like the perfect haunt. Stumbling in the bar the first time I met him, oil-stained coveralls unzipped and tied around his waist. A burned rubber smell that followed in his steps, and the grime that was an ever-present accessory under his nails. He truly was top picking at this off-road, sideshow, pigsty of a drinking establishment too good to be called a 'bar'.

His mind had been beaten and was full of indoctrinated bullshit. Perfect for me. A long day at work meant a few beers. A *shitty* and long day at work? Well, that's when the whiskey helped. And I told him. I sympathized. Bought him a few. Fuck, I even egged on his fury. Fury at what? I'm not sure. But the worse he felt, the better I did.

Whenever he left, feet tripping over the air, I always stayed behind. Chased after the next depraved soul. And there was always more. For a world filled with the perfect children, there was a lot of imperfection.

To tell you the truth? I don't know why I decided to follow him home that night. His anger started to taste different. Tangier, bittersweet, like something I used to know. Primal. I was curious. So, I followed him.

That night he had almost finished a bottle of the cheap whiskey the 'bar' promoted as a vintage. I loved that shit. And you know what? I don't even know why he's still alive. He must have been a horse in a past life. (Yes, I know that's Buddhist)

He got in his car...drove the few blocks home, almost killing a few critters and at least one homeless. I might've even whispered a few things in his ear. The guy spooks easy.

He's not a smart guy, what can I say? But did I revel? Yeah. So, what does that make me? Oh yeah, that's right. Demonic. Whatever.

He got home, and that's when I recognized the taste that trailed after him.

There was nothing I could do.

And for all that I say I am, this I could not do.

There is no worse sound than the cries of the innocent. And that night I began to remember the righteous feelings of a past life. And so, I made an oath that night. That for all that I am, this I will never be.

So, I made a plan.

I even wrote it down in the Notes App. I'm very technologically advanced for a biblical being. I pride myself on that. And I was very detailed in all the ways he would suffer. Because he would. Suffer, that is.

The next day I watched as he dropped Madison off at school. How she wore her hair over her face to cover the bruise, but mostly to hide the tears she fought so hard to keep at bay.

So, I did what any self-respecting demon would do.

I hacked the cookies on all the children's phones. I sent them ad after ad about a game called Charlie, Charlie.

I watched as they played in the schoolyard trying to summon the spirit of the poor Charlie who somehow met his demise in the boy's restroom. Each retelling getting more and more ridiculous. Ahh...to be young, and imaginative.

But this worked, like really well, like why do all these kids have phones? But then 2022, so it made sense, I guess. Because no self-respecting school is gonna function without at least one haunted bathroom. That's just how it goes.

Anyways, after that, it was just a waiting game. For one little girl to play the game, and to ask that one little thing.

It was after one week spent on the swings—scaring the occasional passerby, which I loved for obvious reasons—when Madison finally dared to play the game. She sat on the swing next to me and began.

“Charlie, Charlie. Are you there?”

YES!!!!!!

I started swinging. Waiting. Anticipating. Only a little aware that she couldn't see me. But it didn't matter, she wasn't afraid. She had seen worse.

I knew what she was gonna ask and I never wanted someone's life as much as I did then.

I could taste it, the end...

But then she did the unexpected.

“Can you...be my friend?”

Wait...what?

Oh shit...

And that's how it happened, from the cream of the crop demon to a kid's imaginary bitch toy. And I'll tell what, I wouldn't have picked this life for myself. But it's funny how shit happens huh? Plus, it's more delicious when you consume the fear you cause.

Because later that evening, when Daddy came home, he tried to be an asshole.

Madison ran down the stairs when she heard his rumbling pickup pull up in the driveway. Eager to show him what she had done, with a bright smile on her face, because he still was her 'daddy.' But all the bastard could see was the lack of dinner on the table and a glitter-dusted gremlin at his feet. His face contorted, worse than any I've ever had to don, and lifted his fist. But took one look at the top of the stairs and fled faster than the furious in that movie with the dead guy.

Let's just say I alter my visage when I see him now. If you pass me on the street, I'm a pretty handsome guy. I mean hello?! I did use to be an angel.

But after years of practicing some shady stuff, I can become anything that hides in the deepest and darkest recesses of any depraved mind. And nobody expects to see a real-life nightmare sitting at the top of the stairs in front of their daughter's bedroom. Especially one that only you can see.

To top it off, glitter actually does get on everything, even metaphysical beings.

I put the 'glitter' in 'glitter monster'. I'm fabulous, and it's about time this 'daddy' gets a taste of his own medicine.

I have *never* made a better choice.

Live Art, A Short Story

Whoever decided it was a good idea to have people work for a living needs to, like...not.

Is that too much to ask? Life is hard enough as it is. And when I have to miss my daily Cafecito con pan¹ in order to drive across town, put on a smile and sell cosmetics to perfectly okay-looking people, it gets harder. As it is, today, I had to leave fifteen minutes earlier than usual.

Via Arte. That's what it's called. The annual street painting festival. But I call it a nightmare. For a month every year, parking becomes limited and the fight to a spot begins. Honestly, don't they think about the people? I'm just trying to be me in this big, bad, Cafecito-less world, why do I have to skip out on the simple things just so others can play with chalk on the ground. What's the big deal anyway?

That's what I told my coworkers at Ulta, and apparently, I'm "tasteless."

So now I'm walking across the lot so I can get a taste of all the escándalo² happening. But as I'm walking, I do a double-take and realize the leaves are a really pretty color this time of year, and the air is just the right kind of perfect, and the sun for once isn't melting my flesh. Hmm...

I approach a group frenetically drawing on the ground. I'm like, what can they possibly see on the ground that I can't?

But as I get closer, I see it; eyes, lips, a nose. It's a face. A face that wasn't there before, but now, with whatever sorcery they have conjured, it exists. How? Just last week it was a black square. Then I realize, the leaves were green just last week too.

And so I begin to wonder...what else are others seeing that I am not?

¹ coffee 'con pan': with bread (usually a pastry)

² scandal

Richard Boyd

The Princess and the Aye-Aye

Once upon a time in a place time and space had forgotten lived a princess. A desolate land of meager proportions was all that could be seen in any direction, but the princess had an idea of how she would make this land beautiful again. In the past this had been a fruitful and beautiful place that all had come to love. Now only the king, queen and the princess lived in luxury. It seemed that everything had died around them and all but the royalty of the kingdom lived in poverty. The princess wondered why this was and was aiming to figure out what was causing the kingdom to be this way.

She knew she could not do this alone. First she asked the king and queen if they knew why the kingdom was in this state. They both replied that they did not know. They said maybe it is just because we are the chosen ones picked to rule this kingdom. The princess told them of her plan to figure out the problem and that she would be going on a long journey. She packed her things for the trip and told Hank, her pet chinchilla goodbye and that she would return. She told her parents and the servants goodbye and she was off.

She knew the journey would be long and treacherous and that she would need a weapon or two. So she made a stop at the local blacksmith. She told the blacksmith she would need a mace, a battle-axe, a bowie knife and of course a whistle. Confused at her request, the blacksmith asked why would you need a whistle when I have these brand new harmonicas. Oh, OK said the princess give me a harmonica instead. There really is no instrument more sophisticated than a harmonica anyway she thought. This reminded her of her great uncle Cletus playing "Jingle Bells" at Christmas time on his harmonica when she was a wee lass. He may not have had any teeth but he could sure play a harmonica she thought as she wiped a tear from her eye.

She waited for her weapons to be made. Two weeks later the weapons were finally ready. She paid the blacksmith in gold doubloons and was on her way. Then she realized she would need a reusable water bottle and some snacks for her journey so she stopped by the local Smart & Final Extra! While she was perusing the aisles she picked up some Sun Chips, Jack Link's Beef Jerky, Campbell's Chunky Chicken Corn Chowder and of course a Kleen Canteen reusable water bottle. There was one more thing she needed, although she knew in her heart that they wouldn't have it but she thought what if they do, what if they truly do have it, I must ask. So she found a man stocking the shelves and asked if they had any Dunkaroos. To the princesses surprise the man laughed louder than a freight train coming down the tracks. Then he paused and said, "No, no we do not." As he walked away she heard him say in a low quiet voice, "Ha-ha, what a buffoon! Do we have any Dunkaroos? Ha-ha what is this eastern Canada? Ha-ha." Saddened but not deterred, the princess went to the cash register and paid.

After consulting a map, she headed north. Along the way she stopped to ask people why they thought the kingdom had become so desolate. They didn't really know, but thought it had to be something to do with the king and queen.

Later that day she came upon what appeared to be a mystical creature. The creature had large eyes, which helped it see at night and its hands had long middle fingers which it used to gesture and point with. After closer inspection the princess realized the creature was indeed an aye-aye. She told the aye-aye of her quest to help her father's kingdom. The princess asked if the aye-aye would accompany her on her quest.

As he put on his trench coat and derby, he announced he was ready to go. "Which way should we go?" asked the princess. The aye-aye said, "We should continue going north," and he gestured with his long middle finger. They headed north into the wilderness. They continued at a gruesome pace only to stop for a water break. "When will we find what we are looking for?" asked the princess. The aye-aye replied, "You will know when the time comes." The princess and the aye-aye continued heading north until they came upon an oasis in the wilderness. "What is this place?" asked the princess. The aye-aye used his long middle finger to point at the sign next to the princess. The sign read "Happy Place" population: 4.

They continued on into town and were greeted by an old man and his wife.

The princess asked, "What is happening here? Why is this place shrinking in population and turning brown?" The old man replied, "Not so long ago this place was abundant with food, trees, plants and people. People would come from miles around just to see it. Some would even stay and live here. The population was once 10,000 or more. The people had more than they would ever need, until one day that all changed. The crops began to die, the trees and plants died, and people that didn't leave ended up dying. We now find that there is just enough food and supplies for us to meagerly survive. Our once prosperous society is now down to just the four of us. Me, my mute wife, our disappointment of a son, Nimrod, and crazy Uncle Dithers are the only ones left. Speaking of Nimrod, Where is that boy? I reckon I haven't seen him in a fortnight." The man's wife grabbed a stick and drew a picture in the dirt of a stage like a theater would have. The old man looked at the picture, grabbed his chin and said in a disapproving voice, "That dad gum boy and his puppets! I knew we shouldn't have gotten him that flannel graph for a graduation present from the Community College!" The man then turned back to the princess and told her the story about the flannel graph and how it was supposed to help Nimrod act out 1940's Noir films with his cutouts made of felt.

The man walked down the path motioning for them to follow. They followed him down the path until they came upon a fairly large statue of a tree with a face. Where there once had been eyes there were deep holes. The man said, "There were once magical stones for the eyes that allowed this tree to see, and our land to prosper, not only our land, but your kingdom and all the kingdoms in the land as well. You see when we all shared the stones, we all prospered, but when greed took hold and someone wanted all the stones for themselves, we all suffered."

"What happened to the stones," exclaimed the princess! "Where did they go? Who took them?" The man said, "All I can say is that you already know the answer."

Right about this time, who the princess assumed must be crazy Uncle Dithers came riding in backwards on a galloping donkey. He took off his sombrero and his do-rag and exclaimed, "Is she here with the stones? Did she get them back from her father?" The man turned red as Tabasco sauce and began yelling expletives at crazy Uncle Dithers. "You numbskull, you were not supposed to tell her, she was supposed to figure out on her own that her father has taken the stones."

The princess was shocked to find out that her father had taken the stones and was the cause of all this destruction and devastation. She sadly turned to the aye-aye and asked, "Will you help me find my way home?" The aye-aye pointed with his long middle finger toward the direction of home and they started back on their long journey with the princess feeling mighty low.

When they could see the castle that was home to the princess, the princess turned to the aye-aye to thank him for all his help. Just saying thank you didn't seem like enough so she quickly grabbed him and kissed him. He suddenly turned into a handsome prince! Now she was really flabbergasted! "How did this happen," she exclaimed! "A wicked witch cast a spell on me and turned me into an aye-aye. The only way

to turn back into a person was to be kissed by a princess. I hoped it would be you,” answered the prince. “Will you marry me after we confront your father about the stones and take them back to the tree?” asked the prince with love in his eyes.

So that is what they did! The princess burst through the door! The King said, “My daughter has returned!” The princess exclaimed, “It was you all the time! You took the stones and caused all this destruction and devastation!” Father how could you?” “The King said, “ Yes, it was me. I wanted to be happy, but that wasn’t the way. I thought it would make our kingdom prosper and be better than all the others, but that wasn’t what happened. It began to destroy all the kingdoms, even ours. I was being selfish by taking the stones. I should have returned them, but I was afraid my people would stone me! I learned that being selfish doesn’t pay. I wanted to be happy. I thought it was the way, but it weren’t!”

“Your Majesty, I think you mean wasn’t,” stated the Prince.

“No, I don’t think so. Here take these stones and return them on my behalf, said the King

They returned the stones and put them back in the tree and immediately things began to change back to the way they used to be. Then they had the wedding of the century with all the bells and harmonicas and guess what? They lived happily ever after!!

The End

Nesta from A Court of Thorns and Roses series by Sarah J. Maas



Digital Art by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelfreader

Kathryn Buys

That Night in Banagher Forest

Part I:

Father Cormac Donnelly was no stranger to violence. The second youngest of eight children and the youngest son in an Irish Catholic family living in a mostly Protestant neighborhood in Belfast, he was treated to his first sight of a shrapnel-ridden corpse at the age of four. He had seen a soldier shove the barrel of a rifle against the temple of his childhood priest at fifteen. Just a few years ago, he had seen the face of a precious English child on the news: another victim of a vile act of blind vengeance, directed at innocents who never did anything wrong. It was an eye-for-eye battle that, if not ended, would render both Ireland and the United Kingdom blind. The ceasefire had eased Cormac's soul, but he knew that tensions would still be high in many areas for years, even decades, to come.

In his adolescent years, Father Cormac turned to the Church to escape the mistreatment from his tormentors, from the violence and destruction around him, and from his chaotic relationship with his mother, whose untreated postpartum depression and trauma from the Troubles had left her with lingering emotional instability. In many ways, he found the comforting, calming mother figure he did not have in the Blessed Virgin Mary. He found it amazing that she could birth the Son of God, lose her precious Son in one of the most disturbing manners possible, and still remained strong. Guilt would pierce him when he thought this, though; it was not his mother's fault that she could not be what he wanted her to be.

After secondary school, he was called to join the Church. He knew that for the rest of his life, all he wanted to do was serve God and others. He began seminary school and trained to become a Jesuit priest. He had wanted to serve others, those who were poor like he had been growing up, those who were hungry, those who were sick. He wanted to show them God's love. This led him to many parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as other parts of Europe and the world.

Ultimately, at some point, his work as a Jesuit led him to Dungiven in County Derry. Whenever he had free time, he liked to read poetry and pastoral works. Though he had difficulty with James Joyce's works on occasion due to the vulgarity and crudeness in some of them, he enjoyed *Finnegan's Wake* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

When he was not reading, he also liked to take walks in Banagher Forest nearby. Though he had been open to the possibility of the fairies and other ghoulish spirits his superstitious grandparents taught him about, and he realized that the dragons, witches, and fairies he had heard of were, indeed, real, he still had doubts about whether there were still truly creatures lurking on the island. He took his walks in the early mornings and mid-afternoons, and though he felt a sort of strange presence near the trees and the rivers, he was not too suspicious. When he first came to Dungiven, he had learned the myth of Lig-na-Paiste, the last serpent of Ireland.

Lig-na-Paiste had lived in the Owenreagh River and had dodged Saint Patrick's banishment of the serpents by laying low in a pool in the river. After the saint's death, he began terrorizing County Derry and having the townspeople give him human sacrifices like he had in the previous centuries. Eventually, the townspeople in Banagher Parish had had enough, and they called upon Saint Murrough O'Heaney to defeat Lig-na-Paiste once and for all. He approached Lig-na-Paiste asking if he could place some reeds on him. The serpent, believing him to be a sacrifice to him and too arrogant to suspect anything, he allowed the saint to do so.

After praying and fasting, Saint Murrough O’Heaney used the power of God to turn the reeds into a cage which held Lig-na-Paiste. The serpent cried out for mercy, but the saint knew he could not be trusted and banished the serpent to Lough Foyle, near what is now the city of Derry. Saint Murrough cursed him to remain in his cage in Lough Foyle until Judgment Day, when God would decide his fate. Upon the serpent’s request, however, the saint allowed Lig-na-Paiste to view the sea from his prison. Many people believed the strong currents were from the serpent trying to escape his cage.

Lig-na-Paiste was said to be a large, hideous dragon, with a thick, black tongue, the horns of a ram, massive scales, and sword-like teeth. He was also said to breathe both fire and poison and to have poisonous blood, a single drop of which could possibly kill a grown man. Father Cormac’s superior in Dungiven, Father Brian, had told him that Lig-na-Paiste’s kin had most of these traits as well. And some of them, he believed, could possibly grow to be even more fearsome than Lig-na-Paiste. While it was largely believed that Saint Patrick had banished the serpents from Ireland, many people Cormac had asked and heard from believed that many of the Irish dragons, or *oilliphéisteanna*, as they were called, were not only still on the island, but very much active and biding their time till they could ultimately reveal themselves fully to the humans. This seemed to be possibly confirmed by the numerous eyewitness stories of oilliphéist sightings in various lakes around the Republic and the North. And while there were some dragons in the world as powerful and fearsome, if not more, what made people especially distrustful and fearful of the oilliphéisteanna was their general hostility toward humans who they sought to attack or who were unfortunate enough to cross their paths, the general lack of information and knowledge about them, human and dragon councils’ inability to uncover and trace their whereabouts, and their ties to the Otherworld and Crom Cruach, one of their progenitors. Furthermore, many myths, however true they might actually be in reality, also circulated over the millennia. Two such myths being that Caoránach, a female dragon that Saint Patrick fought, was the mother of demons and linked to the devil himself and created from hellfire, and that Crom Cruach was a demon to whom ancient Irish people sacrificed their firstborn children for a good harvest and might have been a related figure to the heathen gods Moloch and Baal.

It was no wonder then, that many people who would tolerate dragons elsewhere are afraid of encountering oilliphéisteanna, who many countries have placed at a Level 5 danger level (Extremely Dangerous). And if he could help it, Father Cormac would rather not encounter one.

Father Cormac was somewhat skeptical of these stories that Father Brian told him, however. If Saint Murrough’s power to bind Lig-na-Paiste was powerful enough, then how would Saint Patrick have left a large quantity of serpents on the island? Father Brian stated that there is not that much detail on how he “banished” them, and that there were likely many oilliphéisteanna who, like Lig-na-Paiste, hid from the saint. After a long day at the Church, both Father Brian and Father Cormac were given the night off.

“But that is ridiculous, Brian,” Father Cormac told him. “All this information you told me about these kin, how could you possibly know all this?”

“Ye know I can’t tell you that, Cormac,” Father Brian replied impatiently, “don’t ye trust me enough to take my word for it? I have mentored you for two years now.”

“Is it confidential? What could it possibly be? If you wanted this to be secret, why are you telling me this much?”

Father Brian sighed heavily. “Someday, I’m going to retire or die, and they need someone else besides me that they can trust.”

The last statement gave Father Cormac pause. “I’m sorry, but, who needs someone they can trust? The people? These mysterious first-hand sources you have? Who are you talking about?”

“The oilliphéisteanna, Cormac,” Father Brian said curtly, saying nothing else for the next minute.

Father Cormac broke the silence. “The oilliphéisteanna? Father Brian? Are you thick? What are ye even talking about?”

Father Brian placed his hand on Father Cormac’s shoulder. “You are young, I know, and this may be shocking, but do you trust me?” he asked.

Father Cormac was struggling to find words at first, but then managed to get out a “A-Aye, if you don’t plan on feeding me to them.”

“No, boy! You must trust me.” He then led Father Cormac to his car, had him get into the passenger’s seat, and then began the drive from the church and out of the city of Dungiven towards Banagher Forest.

On the drive there, Father Cormac expressed his greater concerns. “Why are you helping these oilliphéisteanna anyway? Aren’t they evil? Servants of the devil?”

“They aren’t. They...well, once you get to know them, you will see.”

Father Cormac still didn’t believe him much, but it did no good to protest. So he stayed silent for the rest of the drive, watching the city of Dungiven grow more and more distant, and the dark forest grow closer and closer, with the sounds of chattering small mammals, birds, and insects. They reached a parking spot around the Reserve, and the older priest led the younger into the glen. Father Cormac focused on the chattering of those small mammals, birds, and insects around him to comfort him and assure him of his safety. Fairies? Witches? Dragons? Father Cormac was not sure what to expect at the moment, just praying to the saints that they, God, and Father Brian would not let the serpents eat him.

The chattering continued as they went deeper, and deeper, and deeper. The sounds filled the glen in the late night as they walked near the Owenreagh River. And deeper, and deeper, and deeper, they went. The rushing of the river filled Cormac’s ears as well, and he continued to pray that the chattering of the animals and the rushing of the river would protect him. That this would be uneventful. That maybe, last minute, Father Brian would finally say he was slugging him and drive back to Dungiven. The chattering of the small mammals, birds, and insects, and the rushing of the river continued still once they reached the pool where Lig-na-Paiste once lurked, where Father Brian said they could find the Oilliphéisteanna, Lig-na-Paiste’s kin. Father Cormac closed his eyes, gripping his flashlight and holding it to his chest, where his palpitating heart stood, and listening more to the comforting chattering of the small mammals, birds, and insects, and the rushing of the river. And then, in one quick moment, the chattering of the small mammals, birds, and insects came to an abrupt stop.

Father Cormac felt his heart leap into his throat, and his stomach felt like it would sink into his bowels. The rushing of the river continued, but then a quick, urgent splash erupted from the pool. To his horror, a large red oilliphéist appeared before him and Father Brian, with the same ram-like horns, sword-like teeth, and thick, black forked tongue as Lig-na-Paiste. Tall and lean, with two clawed hands with which Father Cormac imagined the creature attacking the two of them, Father Cormac was sure Father Brian had gone bonkers and was intending to sacrifice himself and Cormac to the creature.

The creature looked at Father Brian, then turned its pale blue, snakelike eyes to Father Cormac, who tried to look away from the beast, but could not help noticing the creature was looking at him with curiosity rather than a clear intent to kill. The oilliphéist then slithered out of the pool, onto the grass and dirt and moved closer to Father Cormac, stretching out its neck and sniffing him, apparently to get his scent.

Father Brian looked at the creature like a mad scientist doting on his abhorrent creation, or

at least, that was how it seemed to Father Cormac.

“Ruaidhrí,” Father Brian addressed the oilliphéist in Gaeilge, “Seo mo chomh-shagart a raibh mé ag insint duit faoi, Athair Cormac.” He then talked to Father Cormac in English, “Father Cormac, this is Ruaidhrí, son of Saoirse and Óráed, grandson of Lig-na-Paiste.”

“Hello, Ruaidhrí,” Father Cormac said, finding some courage to look into the oilliphéist’s eyes. The more he looked at them, the less he saw some demonic monster seeking to murder and devour him in the worst ways possible. In the dragon’s eyes, he saw something not too different from other dragons in the world, and not even too different from a human.

“Cén fáth an foc go bhfuil sé ag stánadh orm?” Ruaidhrí asked Father Brian in Gaeilge, in a youthful, but fairly deep voice and thick Derry accent, before adding a foul-mouthed observation in Gaeilge that made Father Brian and Father Cormac shudder.

“Níl sé ach rud beag neirbhíseach,” Father Brian told him.

“Beagán neirbhíseach?” Father Cormac said, annoyed, “Dúradh liom le blianta gur deamhain iad oilliphéisteanna solas, agus níor cheap an tAthair Brian riamh mo smaointeoireacht a cheartú.

“Mar sin labhraíonn sé Gaeilge,” Ruaidhrí remarked with a grin and a gleam in his eyes, before turning his attention to Father Cormac, “Ba ghá don Athair Brian a bheith cinnte go bhféadfá muinín a chur ann.”

“Okay, this is grand,” Father Brian said, “but now, I would like you and Ruaidhrí to do an exercise: an interview,” he looked at Father Cormac. “You ask questions, Ruaidhrí answers them. You two think you can do that?”

“Yes, of course,” Father Cormac replied.

“Aye,” the oilliphéist said.

Part II:

Father Brian then took a device out of his suitcase he was carrying and pushed a few buttons. He was recording the two of them.

CORMAC: Ruaidhrí, an mbeifeá ceart go leor leis an agallamh seo a dhéanamh i mBéarla? An bhfuil Béarla agat?”

RUAIDHRI: Cén fáth? *He gives Father Cormac a sharp glare initially, as if he were asking him to bite off his tail.*

CORMAC: Níl mo chuid Gaeilge chomh maith sin.

RUAIDHRI: *His posture and expression ease.* Very well, then.

Once Ruaidhrí began speaking in English, his Derry accent became more noticeable to Father Cormac.

CORMAC: Good. Let’s begin. *Sighs.* Did you ever know Lig-na-Paiste?”

RUAIDHRI: No, I hatched after he was imprisoned. My mother did, though, being his daughter, and his favorite, strangely enough.

CORMAC: When did you hatch, Ruaidhrí?

RUAIDHRI: 1883. My siblings hatched much, much earlier. I am a hundred-fourteen years old, which humans would consider very old, but for a dragon, a hundred-fourteen years is young. We age more slowly than humans and live thousands of years longer, if not forever, nobody knows.

CORMAC: Was your mother close to Lig-na-Paiste?

RUAIDHRI: At first. But when she started to see the things he would do to people, what he would do to his own kind, she no longer looked up to him.

CORMAC: What kind of things did he do?

RUAIDHRI: What did he do? (*Looks to the side for a second and flicks his tongue out like a snake before staring at Father Cormac again.*) God, what did he NOT do? Human sacrifices, including child and virgin sacrifices, burning entire villages, killing and eating humans, animals, and warlocks for sport, he was a monster. He killed one of his own sons, my ma's brother, because he feared he would become more powerful than him and that he wanted to overthrow him and become the most feared dragon in Ireland. He was a narcissist who only loved himself. He might have liked my grandmother enough to mate with her and he might have favored my mother among his children, but he only ever loved himself.

CORMAC: I believe that. I was wondering, if maybe you could tell me about your own family? Are you Saoirse and Óráed's only hatchling? Do you have any siblings?

RUAIDHRI: I'm the second youngest of eight, and the youngest of the males.

CORMAC: So am I.

RUAIDHRI: Is that so? Strange.

CORMAC: Do your older siblings push you around much? Like to pick on you for being one of the little ones?

RUAIDHRI: They slagged me a wee bit when I was a hatchling. They weren't doing that so much when I grew to be taller, bigger, and stronger than all of them. That's why my nickname in the clan is Dáire, the Gaeilge word for "oak."

CORMAC: How did your clan become...? Well, become...

RUAIDHRI: Good? Rehabilitated? Reformed? (*His eyes widened.*) I know that's what you were thinking. That's what any human would think.

CORMAC: Yes.

RUAIDHRI: A few centuries after my grandfather was imprisoned, my mother's family was biding their time, beginning to lose hope of not eventually being driven out, imprisoned, or destroyed by

a national hero or saint. But they were too angry to give up completely. My mother's family was livid, they lost a mate and father, and they wanted revenge. But they were not thick. Well, my mother and my uncle were disillusioned with the others and started to drift apart. My mother met another oilliphéist and they mated and had my older sister. Then, out of nowhere, a priest comes and somewhere, somehow, he gets the thick idea to not try to banish them, or slay them, but to convert them. *(Pauses briefly, giving Cormac a fanged grin)*. And because God must have a sense of humor, it worked. It worked, against all odds. *(Chuckles.)* Against all fucking odds.

CORMAC: If you would please, could you watch your language? You would think that being devout Catholic dragons, you wouldn't talk like that.

RUAIDHRI: I said we were converted and rehabilitated, I never said I was a model Catholic.

CORMAC: Are you and your clan still Catholic?

RUAIDHRI: Aye, quite devout too, but there was a wee split sometime during de Valera's leadership in the late thirties. I'm Catholic, I want to please God and the saints and the angels, but I don't want a bleedin' theocracy. And my uncle Lorcán is gay, so I don't see why he should have to either be alone forever or live a lie. Sometimes, I wonder if that priest even knew what the feck he was doing. I mean, we become Catholic dragons helping humans instead of harming them and helping them get closer to God. And then, de Valera puts Ireland into the Church's hands, and you start seeing all this shite that you did not sign up for like Magdalene Laundries, and fecking... child corpses. Now Ireland is becoming more secular than ever for many understandable reasons, and Clan Owenreagh is still following the instructions of a medieval priest who isn't even a footnote in Catholic history.

CORMAC: How much did your clan change after conversion?

RUAIDHRI: Enough to cause a shitload of problems. We were praying, using human forms to go to churches and do charity work for humans, bringing in these various feast days and holidays. But there were some things that didn't change no matter how a couple of the priests entrusted with our secrets tried. For example, the priest who converted our clan tried to introduce wifely submission. It didn't last a half-day. A male dragon decided he would try that on his mate, get her to be obedient like the human Christian women of that time, be forceful if he had to be. You know what she did?

CORMAC: What did she do?

RUAIDHRI: She bit out his tongue and shoved his tail into his throat until he choked to death on it. Many of the other females threatened to do the same. And most of the males didn't even want to do that. Our females are equals. I mean, just because we're godly and helping humans now doesn't mean we have to do every fecking thing they do. And my ma, saints bless her, she refused to have Lorcán removed from the clan due to his homosexuality. She struggles with the topic, but she still supports him. *(Nods)*. And actually being out in the human world has made me see that things can be interpreted in so many different ways. And that maybe it doesn't hurt to explore those different interpretations.

CORMAC: How did you individually become involved in the human world?

RUAIDHRI: When I was still a juvenile in the late 1910s, my clan and I traveled to the home of my father's old clan and their hunting grounds in County Clare. Lorcán, my parents, and a few of my siblings got involved in the struggle for independence. Then, later in 1933, when I turned fifty, I left the Owenreagh River again with my uncle Lorcán, who would oversee my work in the human world. I went to many different places on the island, both in the Republic and in the North. I took on various identities over the course of the decades. And they all had their own stories I created for them: their own personalities, their own interests. And of course, because it is hard for me to pretend sometimes, many of those personalities and interests were the same.

CORMAC: When was the last time you have been in the human world?

RUAIDHRI: May of this year.

CORMAC: You seem quite knowledgeable about human affairs.

RUAIDHRI: I do my best to keep up with current events, to stay in touch with the human world as it changes. And of course, it has changed me as well. I want to help the people here in Ireland, and the rest of the world too, especially the poor, the working class, the marginalized, the sick, the oppressed, the vulnerable. Even if I am descended from Crom Cruach and Lig-na-Paiste, I want to do at least some good.

CORMAC: What is your style of worship?

RUAIDHRI: Latin or Gaeilge Mass.

CORMAC: If I may ask, who is your confirmation saint? Which saint do you revere the most? If you have one?

RUAIDHRI: St. Michael the Archangel, the patron saint of soldiers and of the sick, and the Guardian of the Church. I will do anything for my God, my clan, and all others I care about. I do not fear pain, torture, death, any of that. The only things I fear are losing the ones I love and being controlled.

CORMAC: Well, I must say I'm impressed by your answers. But how do I know we can trust you? That you're not seeking to lure me, Brian, and the rest of humanity into a false sense of security so we will be easier to kill later?

RUAIDHRI: I've killed humans before. If I wanted to kill you or Father Brian, I would have already.

CORMAC: You've killed before?

RUAIDHRI: Aye. I volunteered to fight for the British during the war in the early forties, under the name Darragh Molloy. The Axis soldiers called me "the Red Demon" because I would barely leave enough of their comrades' bodies to bury.

CORMAC: And the Red I presume refers to –

RUAIDHRI: My hair, in my human form.

CORMAC: Would you show me your human form?

RUAIDHRI: *(Stares at CORMAC distrustfully at first, and then slightly nods.)*

He stretches out his arms and a fiery aura surrounds the serpent. The tall, red serpent disappears, and in its place, stands a rather tall, well over six feet tall, lean man with shoulder-length red hair and pale, freckled skin. And under long, pale eyelashes, the man stared at the priest with the intense pale blue eyes that the serpent possessed. RUAIDHRI tried to give off the appearance of humanity, but his gaze was wild and bestial.

CORMAC was more unsettled by the man now standing in front of him than the serpent. At least the serpent was visibly dangerous. The human façade, however, made the serpent a chameleon: the shape and image of a man, but not quite right. CORMAC stepped back, his eyes widened in shock. He knew other dragons had the ability to shapeshift into humans, but neither Father Brian nor anyone else told him oilliphéisteanna could change form as well. The man looked like a man CORMAC could have seen or walked past on a sidewalk, on a street, in a park, in a store, in a church. Maybe he did encounter him at some point. His facial structure looked familiar from when he stayed in Derry one summer, a protester he walked past.

RUAIDHRI: Trust me, Father, I was uncomfortable with this form at first. *(Stares at his arms and down at his body before looking up at CORMAC again.)* But I learned to love it. It's given me a chance to approach the humans on their level, and a chance to protect my clan.

CORMAC: *(More relaxed at this point.)* It's the small things. The tiny idiosyncrasies, the mannerisms and facial expressions.

RUAIDHRI: I've had many humans tell me that before.

CORMAC: So I presume you've used this form often?

RUAIDHRI: Occasionally.

CORMAC: You weren't getting into any trouble with that form, were you? Getting into anything that would require you to come to me for confessions?

RUAIDHRI: *(Snickers.)* Aye right hi. I'm not ready to be a da yet.

CORMAC: Do you have a mate by any chance? Any female oilliphéisteanna you're interested in?

RUAIDHRI: No. Most of the oilliphéisteanna I've encountered are either kin or they travel between here and Scotland. And I haven't met anyone I want yet.

CORMAC: Have you ever considered being a priest? You seem interested in leadership.

RUAIDHRI: *(Grins mischievously.)* No, I like lasses too much.

CORMAC: *(Chuckles.)* I suppose it would be better for you not to be, then. Do the other oilliphéisteanna have the ability to shapeshift as well?

RUAIDHRI: Aye. I'm not sure they all like doing it though. To my knowledge, my grandparents never used their shapeshifting abilities.

CORMAC: Can you turn into other things too? Or just humans?

RUAIDHRI: Smaller serpents, I'm not sure what else.

CORMAC: And from whom did the oilliphéisteanna get their shapeshifting ability?

RUAIDHRI: Our progenitors, Crom Cruach and Caoránach.

CORMAC: As I suspected. Why haven't you revealed yourselves to the human world yet?

RUAIDHRI: My mother says the human world is still not ready. There are still too many people who would like to put a bullet or blade in us. I believe it's almost time though. An oilliphéist had just been caught in a fairy hollow in Scotland. Fucked with the wrong kind, I guess. It's getting harder to hide, with the advancement of human and mage technologies, and pressure from European dragon communities.

CORMAC: How long do you think your secrecy will last?

RUAIDHRI: *(Shrugs.)* Five to ten years. Maybe two or three decades at most, which is less time for us than it is for you. But I'm ready. Hiding and lying like this, it gets old. I'd like the acquaintances and friends I have made in the human world to know who I am. I'm not afraid of slayers.

CORMAC: So what else do I need to know about the clan when it comes to leading them spiritually?

RUAIDHRI: *(Turns to Father Brian.)* Do you want to tell him? Or may I?

BRIAN: I will. He has a right to know.

CORMAC: What?

BRIAN: I am retiring after the start of the New Year.

CORMAC: What? You didn't tell me this.

BRIAN: I know. Remember when I was in hospital a couple months ago, while you were in Belfast with your brother's family?

CORMAC: Like I could forget.

RUAIDHRI: He had a heart attack while he was preaching to us. I took him to hospital, and a few days after, he had another, worse one. His body can't handle it anymore.

BRIAN: Starting next year, the spiritual leadership of Clan Owenreagh will be yours. I cannot go much longer. I must rest with the time I have left. I'm entrusting you with them, because I know you have the heart and the mind to do so.

CORMAC: (*Visibly overwhelmed.*) But I don't even know where to start with teaching serpents.

RUAIDHRI: He's calling you to be a priest, not a prophet or a saint.

BRIAN: That doesn't help, Ruaidhrí.

CORMAC: No, no, he's right, Father Brian. I'm just overwhelmed. I know more about the oilliphéisteanna now, but how could I possibly be a good leader for creatures who have lived more lifetimes than I ever will?

RUAIDHRI: Life experience does not always make one wiser or better. My grandfather is proof of that.

CORMAC: Right. I will use my seminary training and my intuition to guide the oilliphéisteanna, just like I would a human congregation.

RUAIDHRI: What kind of priest are you anyway?

CORMAC: Jesuit.

RUAIDHRI: (*Smiles.*) Somehow I had a feeling you were.

CORMAC: What are the main things your clan is seeking to accomplish? What do you do exactly?

RUAIDHRI: Well, we pray, we observe the Feast Days, do penance, we help humans through charity work. Not enough, I don't think. I would like to see us advocate more for social change and income equality.

CORMAC: (*Nods, impressed.*) I like you. I think this will go well. Thank you for talking to me, Ruaidhrí. I will be looking forward to seeing you more, and meeting your family. (*Shakes Ruaidhrí's hand.*)

RUAIDHRI: Aye. You seem promising.

BRIAN: Grand. This went better than I thought it would. Now I can rest more easily.

CORMAC: Aye, you can, Father Brian. I will make sure these oilliphéisteanna get the sanctification they need.

Part III:

Father Cormac Donnelly would begin Father Brian's work after the New Year. Not long from this night. He was more familiar with the Oilliphéisteanna after the interview, and had learned things most in the world did not even know yet. This would be a good thing. He would be better than many that came before him, less judgmental, less self-interested, more understanding of the world and its needs. And the clan needed someone who was not judgmental. I remembered the priest who, back in 1927, told us that he would lead us only to keep us in line and because we could not be trusted. He also told us that we did not have souls and that even if we did help humans, we were children of Satan and would burn in Hell forever once Judgment Day approached. My family was furious. My little sister Caoimhe sobbed for days and would not eat or sleep. I had to hold her and reassure her God loved her and that she would see Heaven. God, I hated him, and if he was not a priest who had done nothing too heinous, I would have killed him myself, if for no other reason than he made Caoimhe cry. I could see a wee bit of myself in Father Cormac. Like me, he wanted change. He wanted a better world and knew it would have to include a removal of some traditions and institutions. It was his and Father Brian's good hearts, and my own remaining faith in God, that had kept me from leaving the Church altogether, even when the corruptions, scandals, and suffering I had seen in the Republic and the North had made me question why I even bothered.

I still wondered why Father Brian chose me to talk to Father Cormac instead of my mother, who led the clan, or my father, her lieutenant. Maybe he saw me and Father Cormac as kindred spirits, though I honestly could not see too much of it. I did see some of myself in him. But he was a fairly calm, gentle priest, and I was a loose cannon within the clan. A bleeding heart. A radical. A fucking killer. A "red demon." I looked more like my grandfather as I grew; my own mother said I looked like a younger version of him. I used to fear I would become like him, a monster who delighted in burning villages and devouring children and virgins. I have prayed to God and the saints countless times to help me fight the evil both in the world and inside my serpentine heart. As I spent more time in the human world, the fear began to dissipate. When I realized how much being told I was inherently more evil and depraved than humans had fucked with my head, I was able to see my kind as complex creatures who God created with a purpose. After coming into the human world, I found my purpose in activism and fighting for others. I found that some of the worst monsters in the world were humans. I found that there was a world much larger than my river or my parish, and that it was okay for my views and my understanding to change. Father Brian was a good priest, if not a wee bit of a Yahoo. As I said goodbye to the two priests, changed back into an oilliphéist, and descended into the river, I hoped Father Cormac would follow through. That he would be able to bridge the gap between not only the humans and the oilliphéisteanna, but between me and my clan. I still had my doubts about him, but for now, I would give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Shit!” Sandra exclaims jumping backward, glass shards exploding from the mirror she just knocked off her wall. Once safely across the shining sea of spikes, she slips on the sandals by her front door and grabs her red-handled broom and dustpan. After she gathers the broken glass into yesterday’s newspaper pages, she throws it into the garbage bin. She travels from her kitchen to her desk, littered with miscellaneous papers and a multi-wick candle. Sandra ignites her vanilla candle with the lighter from her drawer, hoping that the sweet scent will replace the smell of nervous anticipation she feels is seeping into every surface of her apartment. She turns to clean up her cluttered desk when she notices a figure in the corner of her apartment, silently observing her from a distance.

“Jesus Christ!” Sandra cries, her hand covering her forehead in distress.

“I’ve been called worse,” taunts the figure. Sandra’s mouth is agape in surprise as her eyes flare with anger. “You said you would be done by now, dear Sandra.” The figure stated. It is a cold, winter day outside of Sandra’s apartment complex, but compared to the man’s demeanor, it appears scorching.

“I just need a bit more time,” Sandra says warmly, combatting the chilled atmosphere.

“It’s been a century since we last communed. Like all things, my dealings have an expiration date.” The figure utters tartly. He turns to pace around Sandra’s small apartment, careful to avoid the shards of glass that Sandra had not noticed as she cleaned.

“You promised that I would meet the love of my life before I died, and I haven’t met anyone yet!” Sandra complains. Her shoulders slump as she crosses her arms over her striped sweater. She is unable to look up at the man’s unrevealing face, her gaze fastened to the floor. “Meeting people is far more difficult than it was long ago. It’s as if no one wants a meaningful relationship.”

“That is no concern of mine.” The man declares. “There are nearly 8 billion people alive in the world as of this moment, yet you claim to have difficulty meeting them?” He shakes his head, disapprovingly. He buttons up his black woolen topcoat, diminishing what view Sandra had of the white button-down he wore beneath it. His ashen skin clashes against the rest of his dark apparel.

“You have all the time in the world to do as you please, Death. The mere century you have granted me to look for a mate is nothing in comparison to what time you’ve had!” Sandra pleads. Her honey brown eyes meet his steel grey ones. “Please... I don’t want to enter the next life without my soulmate.”

“Your notion that over a century was not long enough to find a soulmate is ludicrous. Most humans find their soulmate during a typical lifespan. Not only were you allowed a normal lifetime, but you were also gifted an added century to find your soulmate. And still, you have yet to accomplish your goal. Perhaps the error is in you, Sandra.” Death asserts. He makes his way across her small bedroom to face Sandra’s apartment window, severing the gaze they briefly shared. He reaches for his scythe; its stem planted between his shoulder blades. As he does, his coat sleeve retracts towards his shoulder, revealing the cracked and withered bones of his forearm. Sandra halts her internal sulking to take note.

“What’s wrong with your arm, Death?” Sandra asks. Concern fills her expression, causing the skin to fold between her eyebrows.

“As I said earlier, everything has an expiration date.” Death states simply, adjusting his coat sleeves to cover his forearm once more.

"What does that mean?" Sandra inquires further. She is met with silence. Her imagination begins running mad with possibilities of what may become of Death's withering state.

"I've done what I could to slow down my body's withering," he tells her. "It saddens me to brood over this, which is why I implored you to find your soulmate quickly, lest you die with no path to the Afterlife."

Sandra's body goes stiff, eyes frantically searching Death's face for any hope that he may be joking. He is not.

"But what about everyone else?" Sandra asks, trying to meet Death's eyes. He tightens the grip on his scythe, ignoring Sandra. His mind focuses on a different matter.

"I do not know how long I have, Sandra, nor do I know what awaits me after I perish, but I do know that if I were to reap your soul now, you will assuredly reach the Afterlife." Sandra wrings the bottom of her shirt between her cold, sweaty hands.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Sandra probes. She looks over at Death whose shoulders are slumped, weakening what hope Sandra has for a positive answer. Death places a soft-looking pillow from atop Sandra's bed onto the navy-blue lounge chair beside him and sits. He rests his elbows on his spread knees and closes his hands together in front of his chin. His grey, unearthly eyes close.

"It's only a matter of time now." He speaks, tone barren of all optimism. All at once, the sweet vanilla smell emanating from Sandra's candle becomes overpowering, when only a second ago, it went unnoticed. The air surrounding them is filled with a discomfort that seems to host itself solely upon Sandra's chest.

"If I had known I wouldn't live to see tomorrow, I wouldn't have bought all of my groceries yesterday." Sandra smiles gingerly, forming little creases in the corners of her eyes. Death's face is unhidden from Sandra's view, and she could see clearly, that a slight grin was forming on his lips. It appears that he appreciates Sandra's attempts to lighten the mood. She removes herself from beside her bone-white nightstand to sit closer to Death. His head perks up, clearly surprised by Sandra's nerve, and lightly chortles.

"You could come with me, Death. There's no rule saying you can't come to the Afterlife, too." Sandra suggests, hope softly glowing in her heart. As Death does not immediately respond, Sandra encouragingly bumps his shoulder. He shakes his head.

"There may not be an explicit rule saying I cannot stay there, but I assure you, the Divinities would not be happy if I did." Death declares, his seriousness plain on his features. "And I refuse to risk their anger."

"The Divinities?" Sandra ponders aloud. "Who are they?"

"My parents, of course." Death responds. He speaks as if the answer couldn't have been more obvious.

"Your parents?!" Sandra exclaims. "You have parents?" Death laughs loudly and with much gusto.

"Of course. Don't you?" He jokingly retorts.

"But you're supernatural; you're a reaper! What are your parents? What do they do?" Sandra practically bellows.

"Well, my father's an accountant and my mother's a secretary."

Sandra and Death stare at one another with blank faces.

"You... you can't possibly be serious." Sandra presses, her tone devoid of amusement. Death's expression, however, fills with glee.

"Of course, I'm not serious." He reveals a genuine smile. "You're more than likely already familiar with their identities. Mortals tend to call them Father Time and Mother Nature, but it's the

other way around: Mother Time and Father Nature.” Death says. Sandra is shocked. Unbeknownst to her, her mouth lies agape, a detail Death finds humorous.

“So, your parents are immortal, but you’re not? That doesn’t seem fair.” Sandra expresses.

“It wasn’t up to my parents.” Death states. “In all honesty, it’s my fault. If I only reaped souls, without delivering them to the Afterlife, I wouldn’t deteriorate as I do now. Humans weren’t meant to have a life beyond this realm. And I wasn’t meant to travel between them so frequently.”

“So why do you?” Sandra genuinely inquires.

“Where else were the souls supposed to go?” Death propounds, shrugging his shoulders. Sandra’s head is practically spinning, trying to keep up with each new bit of information. Every fact she learns builds upon another, like a mason laying brick.

“So, the Afterlife is your realm? What does that mean?”

“What you know as the Afterlife is my version of your apartment, just on a much larger scale.” He looks around Sandra’s apartment once more. “A much larger scale.” He smirks in Sandra’s direction, joking at her expense. “It was created to be my home, just as Earth and the rest of the solar system were made to be my parents’. I used my realm as an extension of life for mortals, one reason being that I think they deserve more time enjoying the lives they’ve made. I know I would want more time, in their position.” Death states. Sandra’s eyes fill with wonder and respect for Death. Their eyes meet briefly, before Death leans away, dodging her gaze.

“On that note, now is the time that I should probably guide you to the Afterlife, if that’s what you still want.” Death reaches for his scythe that he previously placed on the edge of Sandra’s bed.

“Hold on!” Sandra grabs Death’s coat shoulder, wrinkling it under her grasp. His eyes travel from her hand to her face, emitting displeasure. Sandra tentatively releases her grip. “Sorry.” She clumsily smooths the cloth back into place before continuing her thought.

“Why don’t we just go to your parents and ask them to fix you?” Sandra proposes enthusiastically. Death’s mouth begins to form a smile but quickly returns to a straight line.

“They would never go for it. It’s my fault that this is happening.” Death solemnly asserts. “I gave up my immortality willingly. I just thought I’d have more time. Besides,” his gaze turns towards the window, no longer looking at Sandra, “they warned me of the consequences of my actions. There is no doubt that they would be unwilling to help.”

“We could still try! What’s the worst that could happen?” Sandra asks, standing up from the bed to face Death.

“They could end our existences immediately after we ask.” Death states half-jokingly.

“Well, we’re going to die anyway. What do we have to lose?” Sandra poses, hands on her hips with her head tilted. Death rolls his eyes again, this time humorously.

“I have nothing to lose. You, however, lose your chance at an Afterlife. No one knows what happens to a soul if it dies at the hands of the Divinities.” Death speaks, eyes filling with an emotion Sandra can’t make out. “I’ve seen the way they behave towards a child of theirs who wanted to be relieved of the burdens of their existence. I don’t think I want to endure the same.”

Sandra’s eyes ask questions she dare not ask aloud. Death recognizes Sandra’s desire to hear more on the matter, but he had never spoken about it to anyone.

How could he?

Death faces Sandra and tries to gather his thoughts. He recounts the story of himself and his siblings. They were triplets. First came his sister, Life, the most beloved of the three by both humanity and the Divinities. Then came Death, who was granted the responsibility and burden of

decimating any and all of Life's creations. He was appreciated by his parents but loathed by much of humanity. Lastly came Reincarnation, the second and final daughter of the Divinities who was loved by all members of her family but was largely unknown to humanity. Those who met Reincarnation never remembered her, but that was not to say she was unmemorable. Those who made her acquaintance couldn't help but love her but were unable to remember her each time they met. But Reincarnation remembered them all and treated them as you would a loved one.

Reincarnation was not light-skinned like Death or Mother Time, who both had an ashen skin tone, wavy raven-black hair, and grey eyes. But Reincarnation also wasn't dark-skinned, like Life, who had the same tanned skin as her father. Father Nature and Life both had straight white hair, handsome freckles, and warm green eyes. Reincarnation, herself, held little resemblance to her family: Her skin was a soft, cider brown. Silver, wavy hair hung softly over her rounded, charming face. At first glance, her eyes appeared off-hazel, but upon closer inspection were the color of dried thyme. Her eyes could gaze into a person's soul, no matter how twisted and damaged, and smile warmly.

Reincarnation got along swimmingly with both of her siblings. When she saw Death, she recounted stories of growth and prosperity that each soul came into during their most recent time on Earth. When she saw Life, she gifted her each, newly deceased soul with smiles and laughs. Time passed on Earth and the siblings performed each of their duties with efficiency and satisfaction: Reincarnation rebirthed each soul, Life reintroduced them into the world, the soul lived its life, died, then Death harvested it all over again to hand off to Reincarnation. Each sibling was happy, and humanity was able to thrive throughout its many cycles. But this was not to last.

Father Nature and Mother Time had conflicting desires for how life on Earth was to be experienced by mortals. Father Nature enjoyed having humanity adapt to his frequently occurring disasters, claiming that it built character and resolve. In contrast, Mother Time felt as though her partner was ruining what progress humanity was making through his natural disasters. Their spat divided the family for many centuries, Death siding with his father and Life with her mother, leaving Reincarnation to play reluctant mediator. It was during this time that the triplets were busier than ever before. Reincarnation, who was able to read a soul intimately, became burdened with the suffering and agony of humans who had recently perished. On top of that, she was forced to listen to Death's complaints of Mother Time and Life. After she left to pass along the tormented soul to Life, she then had to endure Life's criticism of Father Nature and Death.

Guilt weighed down on Reincarnation. On top of her familial disputes, she struggled bearing humanity's seemingly unending torments. This escalated to the point that Reincarnation was unable to stomach her vexation any longer. One day, Reincarnation visited her parents. She told them that humanity had become a burden. Moreover, she revealed that she would never be able to choose a side in their dispute. The Divinities did not take kindly to her words, but they nevertheless heard her out. Ultimately, she asked them to take away her suffering.

So, they brought her to Fate and Chance, who both dedicated their lives to writing the stories of mortals. Because they knew of humanity's strife, as well as the feud between the Divinities, Father Nature and Mother Time came to them for direction. They deliberated for some time, during which the souls Death reaped were not reincarnated, but placed in his realm for safekeeping. It was unclear to Death what became of Reincarnation, but he knew, deep inside, that he would never see her again. Still, he continued to place souls in his realm, silently hoping that Reincarnation would one day pick up where she left off. Humans who had "close calls" with Death later formed religions all over the Earth to make sense of the universe. But the only human who

knew the whole truth was Sandra, who now sits across from Death, eyes wide with revelation. Inside, however, her heart was breaking for him.

Death sighs, grief visibly weighing down on his shoulders. Sandra doesn't know what to say, but she wants to comfort him. She walks towards her bed and takes a seat. She wraps her arms around him where they silently stay for several moments. Silent tears stream down Death's face and Sandra can't help but wonder if those were the first he had ever shed. Slowly, he regains his composure, though he never asks Sandra to remove her arms.

She rubs his back consolingly and asks, "What do you want to do?"

"Whatever we can do." Death snuffles. He doesn't want to disappear like Reincarnation did, especially now with Sandra depending on him for more time.

"We don't have to go to your parents," states Sandra. "Instead, we could talk to Fate and Chance. Surely, they would be more willing to hear us out." Her voice thrums with hope.

"I'm sure they would, but there's a problem." Death voices. "I don't know where they are."

"How do you not know where they are?" squeaks Sandra, removing her arms from around Death.

"How could I? They're always on the move, monitoring humans from all around the world. They're hardly ever in their realm." Death answers honestly.

"Is there any way we could catch up to them? Surely, they must rest sometime," poses Sandra. Death launches into thought, and Sandra does her best to think of where Fate and Chance might be. Each second that passes feels like hours, and time was not on their side.

Finally, Death shoots out of his seat, radiating positivity. "I think I've got it," he says whilst grinning. "Care to join me?" He holds out his hand for Sandra to take.

"Absolutely." She takes Death's hand, noting that it was warmer than she had expected. His eyes close, so she follows suit and closes her own. At once, she begins to feel dizzy, as if she had been spinning around on a swivel chair for hours. She doubles over in startling pain and gasps for air, which instantaneously vanishes from around her. Her skin speckles with goosebumps as the temperature around her became freezing, though sweat drips down her forehead. All she can hear is a deafening, high-pitched ringing, and her mouth recognizes the taste of blood. Her eyes shoot open for only a moment, then hastily close once more as penetrating white light blinds her.

Death grabs Sandra as she collapses, his grip wrinkling her shirt. He calls out her name in concern, but she cannot feel or hear him. She screams out in agony, tears gushing down her face. Little by little though, the ringing in her ears ceases, and her pain disappears along with it. For several moments, she lays still, tears flowing freely as Death holds her consolingly in his arms. Slowly, she opens her eyes to see Death's face filled with concern. His features soften as he realizes she regained consciousness. She snuffles and wipes away her tears.

As Death stands, Sandra sits upright to find herself somewhere vaguely recognizable. The room is immense and pristine, with rows upon rows of filled bookshelves. "The ceiling must be made of glass," Sandra thinks, "since the blinding light came from above me." But surprisingly there was no ceiling. Or walls. Only the floor she laid on.

"Where are we?" She asks.

"The library" Death answers as he uplifts Sandra and steadies her as dizzily wobbles.

"The library? Why a library?" Sandra queries, rubbing her temples.

Death smiles and shrugs, "They like stories."

Together, Death and Sandra walk through the rows of books, looking for any signs that Fate and Chance were there. The bookshelves are filled with what looked like multiple copies of

the same book. Upon closer inspection, Sandra discerns that each book's spine holds few differences: names, dates, coordinates, and times. Death explains that a person's life story is organized in the library by name and details about their birth. At that, Sandra excitedly begins scouring the library in search of her own book to find what her future holds. She finds her name and backtracks to find the date of her birth, her birth coordinates, and finally her time of birth. As she approaches her leather-bound book, she notices that it is significantly larger than the surrounding books.

"Well," Sandra thinks, "I've lived a lot longer than the rest of these people." But as she opens it up, she realizes that most of the pages are blank. Her eyes widen with shock as she vigorously flips through the pages, scanning for any sort of text. She flips to the beginning and finds inscriptions there, but as she reads on, the letters disappear slowly before her eyes.

"Death!" She calls. He appears beside her in seconds. As he takes the book from her hands, he too discovers the disappearance of her tale. He grabs the book beside Sandra's to scan for similar imperfections. But alas, that book is impeccably filled with writings of another Sandra's life. He returns both books to their shelf and unnervingly gazes at Sandra.

"I don't understand why this is happening. Your book should be filled with your life stories: past and future. It shouldn't be erasing itself!" Death says anxiously.

"You've tampered with it," echoes a distant voice through the library, catching Sandra and Death off guard. They discern the sound of footsteps barreling towards their location. A beautiful barefooted woman appears at the end of the bookcase and approaches them. She wears a flowing gown that shares the color and texture of a red rose. "They've been erasing her story, from end to beginning, ever since you first began interfering with her life. This is nobody's fault but your own, brother," she says with a scathing tone. She only looks at Death, green eyes rife with resentment.

"Why shouldn't I interfere, now that I'm going to die and have nothing to lose?"

"It was by your own hand that you slit your throat, no one else's. You didn't have to take her down with you like some kamikaze pilot!"

"I'm not suicidal, Life. I'm trying to save myself for her and the rest of humanity!" Death asserts passionately.

"If you're destined to succeed, then why is her story still disappearing?" Life questions her brother menacingly.

"I DON'T KNOW!" Death exclaims. Drops of sweat bead his forehead in worry. He faces Sandra, scanning her for signs of distress or damage.

"I'm fine, Death," Sandra responds, trying to calm her companion. She pats herself down to accentuate her wholeness. She smiles comfortingly at Death whose shoulders momentarily release their tension. "We have more important matters to attend to," Sandra says, turning to face Life. "Can you help us?"

"Why should I?" Life poses, "Death brought this on himself."

"Yes, but he meant well. It's not his fault that Reincarnation left."

Life's green eyes grew ablaze with revulsion towards Sandra's nerve. "Don't you dare speak of my sister! You know nothing of what really happened to her." Anger lines every syllable of Life's speech. Death takes a step towards his sister, but Sandra breaks his stride with her outstretched arm. Sandra nods towards Life in compliance, knowing that she overstepped.

"Please help him," begs Sandra, "I don't want Death to die. I'll do anything!" Her words catch Death by surprise. Sandra feels tense, but one look from Death calms her. Life examines their perplexing dynamic. An expression of understanding passes across Life's face. In that

moment, she understands their predicament, more so than they do.

"I see why you feel so inclined to interfere in the life of this mortal," Life speaks. Her gaze focuses on her brother. "And I realize now why your book is erasing itself." Her angry resolve subsides as she grabs both Sandra and Death's hands. She examines the lines of their palms as if she were reading. After she is seemingly satisfied, Life instructs Sandra to lay on the floor. She complies. As she lies on her back, her eyes look to Death for insight. Death shrugs in return. Upon Life's cue, Death lays beside Sandra.

"This may be uncomfortable, but if my hunch is correct, I might be able to fix all of your problems." Life says to Sandra while positioned above her, arms outstretched.

"Wait!" Exclaims Sandra, holding up her hand. "Why are you helping us?" She reflects on Life's sudden shift from revulsion to kindness and is naturally skeptical. Life ponders as to how she should answer.

"It is destined." Life states simply. Taking her silence as a cue, Life extends her arms once more. After several moments, Sandra opens her eyes to see if Life began her ritual. Instead, she is stunned to see two glowing spheres hovering above her and Death. The orbs seem to be composed of multiple strands of light, each one playfully encircling another. One iridescent sphere floats directly above Sandra, rotating slowly. Life looks at Sandra, enjoying the amusement and curiosity she wore on her face. She explains that the floating orbs were her and Death's souls.

Suddenly, the two souls combine to create an enormous flurry of light. Death gasps loudly, startling Sandra, and as she prepares to check on him, she too feels the sensation. Her lungs fill so quickly, Sandra anticipates their explosion. Emotions envelop her so passionately; she might burst out of her body. Life smiles down at Death and Sandra, seemingly having all the answers she needs. As Sandra catches her breath, she looks at Death to gauge his reaction. His smile is immense on his face. Had Sandra not felt the same emotion herself, his joy might have been contagious. She too feels the intense, inescapable joy. As a tear leaves her eye and meets the ground, Sandra ponders the source of the sensation.

"Stay still," Life instructs. "I'll be back shortly." Sandra listens to her receding footsteps.

"I still don't know what's going on," Sandra states as her eyes link with Death's.

"Neither do I." He admits. He sighs aloud and they both rest on their backs, recovering from the intensity of their experience. Before they know it, Life has returned, holding what appears to be a small bowl of golden liquid. With one hand, Life holds Sandra's neck as she guides her gently to sit up. Beside her, Death sits up on his own, as he has apparently recovered far quicker than Sandra.

"Drink this," Life instructs the mortal, guiding the bowl to her lips." Before she can, Death gently stops his sister's arm.

"What is that?" He asks. He fixates on the bowl's contents but cannot recognize it as any liquid he is familiar with. Life holds the bowl gingerly.

"A Divine Soul." Life speaks softly. Her attempt to cloak her sadness is in vain. At first, Death is confused, but upon the meeting of his eyes with his sister's he recognizes her grief, as it matches his own. Concern fills his expression but soon dissolves at Life's assured determination. Sandra drinks as Life instructed, and dozes off, her body and soul exhausted, unable to understand the significance of the bowl's contents.

Upon waking, Sandra feels newly invigorated to an unprecedented degree. Looking around, she notes that she is still in the library, but that Life and Death are no longer beside her. She stands up, determined to find them and to get answers. She follows the sounds of hushed conversation, ultimately leading to Death and Life seated at a wooden table, across from one another. Their faces are somber, but their posture shows joint resoluteness. Death notices Sandra's

approach and his face lights up, revealing a heartwarming smile.

“Hey, how do you feel?” He asks her, hope penetrating his tone.

“I’m good,” Sandra voices, “Great, really. I’ve never felt more...”

“Alive?” Life interjects, amusement on her face. Sandra silently agrees. Life stands to leave; her bare feet make a soft noise upon meeting the cold floor beneath her.

“Where will you go?” Death asks after his sister. This new concern, Sandra notes, is tinged with concern and love. She smiles at the siblings’ reconciliation.

“I’m going to meet up with Truth. We’ll catch up afterward, okay?” Her green eyes meet her brother’s grey ones. He nods and smiles. With a final goodbye, Life vanishes, as if she had never been there in the first place.

“You two seem good,” Sandra notes aloud. Death nods in confirmation. His expression is unfamiliar to Sandra, but she admires that after today, Death is no longer a daunting enigma to her. Choosing to focus on the present, Sandra asks Death, “What did your sister do to me?”

His posture shifts to denote a humble nobility. “You’re one of us now.” Sandra’s breath hitches, leading Death to elaborate comfortingly: “Life linked your soul to mine, that way we can both live our lives, fulfilling each of our purposes.” His expression leads Sandra to believe that Death knew something she didn’t.

“What?” She presses him. Her eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“The writing in your book is no cause for alarm. And as for your other problem...”

“What?” Sandra interjects impatiently. Death modestly stands before her. He seems shy to Sandra, a state that she had never seen him in.

“Well... it’s me.” As Death speaks, his eyes meet Sandra’s and a bit of hope seeps through. “We were destined to be together. And your book recognized it the moment we met. That’s when it began erasing itself.”

Death explains that no member of the Divinities has a book, as there would be no need. Upon Reincarnation’s end, Fate and Chance preserved her Divine Soul for later use. Only they, two, knew of the future purpose it would hold.

“So, what does that mean? I’m... Divine?” Sandra ponders. She feels idiotic for asking, but she knew the answer deep within herself. Death confirms it with a nod.

“And we are- you and I- we’re... meant to be?”

Death nods again. In Sandra’s mind, this influx of information made sense to her. And the feelings she felt for Death, well, also made perfect sense. Death seems pleased and Sandra is, too. They are soulmates and yet, they were the last ones to recognize it. Sandra decides, at that moment, that the Afterlife can wait.

She and Death will use their time to travel the Earth and reap souls. Centuries after, when the rest of humanity ultimately goes extinct, Death will reap Sandra’s soul and they will both travel to the Afterlife to blissfully spend the rest of eternity.

Sarah Emery

a short story about my young self

I remember when I was 11 years old, I think I was, I had a deep interest in science. I found a kids microscope at a Salvation Army in my small town. The girl who was working knew me because my family frequently shopped there. She held onto it till I got the 5 dollars it cost to buy, that I eventually got from doing random chores for people in my neighborhood. Days later I went and picked it up with my mom I think, that or I walked myself. Once I got home and I figured out how to use it I put all kinds of stuff under it. Plants, a bug, dirt, spit and anything I could wipe on the little slides it came with. Some slides already had things on them cause it was still a kids microscope. On a day before I had picked up the scope I thought I would use it to look at my blood, I kept that idea to myself for fear of embarrassment. But days after having had the scope I was too scared to do it in front of anyone. I shared a room with my sisters and had a large family, I was nervous. I got the courage one day when I cut my finger, it was the perfect coincidence. So I did it. I put blood on a slide and I slid it into the scope, it was so cool looking. I felt like a real scientist. While I was staring at it my sisters friend walked by. I remember her seeing it was blood and wanting to see. She was so nice to me and gave me props for experimenting. I felt so validated, I always felt weird, I avoided stepping on toes in my family. I didn't want to be labeled weird because they had done that to my brother and I didn't want to just be a joke to them. I dunno, I had so much confidence to pursue the stuff I loved and I am proud of that young girl for being curious.

Moises B. Fuentes

June 1st 2018

The city is alive but the atmosphere of your apartment isn't. The monotonous blaring of the TV and the dull, blue light drenches the room and paints the white wallpaper a dreary hue. Cars honk back and forth in the street below, retorting back and forth with the occasional: *What's it to ya?!* Your ceiling still seems the same, but you can't seem to tear your worn eyes from it. Week in and week out it's been work, eat, sleep and repeat. This night shift routine leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, knowing that things would have been sweeter to stomach if you'd have fixed your sleeping schedule, picked up your pencil again, or simply put more grease in your workflow. *It can't be helped* is your constant conclusion.

Today, you're on holiday. Days off make you pick at your food more often than usual. Your phone brightly reads the time in the dim, six forty-seven morning. Your alarm, beat up and bruised around the snooze button, reads seven o' two as you like to stay fifteen minutes ahead of schedule.

Ramen didn't sound as appealing today so burger wrappers from In-N-Out litter the floor. Mind wandering, you still cannot sleep. The TV, still droning on about rising temperatures topping in the triple digits, sure doesn't help. Annoyed, you reach for the remote. As if it had a will of its own, the remote lurches out of your hand and falls on the pseudo wood floor, knocking the batteries out of it. Realizing that one pesky AA battery rolled under the couch, you grunt and roll over, blue-grey light now drenching your back.

Your groggy mind cannot comprehend why the couch feels like concrete. As consciousness wafts over you, your eyes adjust to the afternoon light bleeding through your curtains. The alarm clock, now on the floor, proudly blinks six twenty-six on its face. “For f-” you mutter as you get up from the floor, kicking the blankets off.

The screen door slams behind you. Keys in pockets, your legs, preprogrammed, walk to the import store just down the block. The afternoon sun hangs lazily above a skyscraper as a Coca Cola ad is displayed on the screen on the shaded side of the building. The shoulder of a person abruptly interrupts your daydreaming.

“I-I’m sorry!” You quickly stammer with a nervous smile as they grunt and walk off, resuming their phone call. You sigh, continuing down the street as the neon blue sign of Wilde’s Import Store comes into view. The proprietor, a grizzled and soft spoken man by the name of William greets you as the door jingles your arrival.

“Been a while since I’ve seen your face. How’s work been for you?” He asks as he leans on the counter.

“Tiring. Very tiring.” You place a cup of noodles on the counter. The meager purchase produces a frown on William’s face.

“Well, I know you are probably here for your breakfast but...” He pauses and goes into the backroom, returning with a can of Baja Blast. Your eyes widen. He seems to notice your reaction as he begins to grin. “On the house, as you’ve been a loyal customer since the days when Wilde ran the store.”

You give him a quick thanks as your eyes wander to a picture frame hanging on the wall behind William. Two friends—no, brothers maybe? One of them seems quite camera shy and holds the same aura as William. The other person has his arm around a middle-aged William, smiling at the camera as if his life depended on it.

Two jingles later, you walk out of the store, cup noodles and a Baja Blast in hand. How William had Baja Blast in stock is beyond you and remains a bothersome mental debate until the GET bus snaps you back into reality. The smell of diesel is potent enough to make your nose wrinkle, but you keep a straight face as to not offend Tina, the afternoon driver. You climb on and sit in the empty front seat to the right of Tina.

“You’re late kiddo,” She says, her tone implying that a snide smile is on her face. “Didya sleep through your twenty or so alarms?”

Your focus stays on the sidewalk as it races and dances across the window.

“I’ve told you before,” you reply as your eyes follow each post that goes by. “I *only* have ten alarms.” She lets out a loud guffaw that receives a few concerned looks from the other passengers.

Her loud outburst coaxes a chuckle out of you. “No,” you say after she regains control. “You’re right, I’m quite late.”

She snuffles a very powerful snuffle as the allergy induced mucus is sucked back up her nostrils. “Damn ragweed.” Her index finger wipes away the residue. “No work huh?” Her question is so precise and on point that it leaves you no time to respond. “How did yo-?”

Her iconic guffaw cuts you off. “Honey, out of all the regulars on this route, you are the most predictable. You always go to work on time every day, but on days off you’re dreadfully late.” She glances at you to reassure her statement. Your expression screams: Bullseye! Bingo! *You’re damn right and it’s uncomfortable!*

A brief silence passes over your conversation, slightly broken by the screeching of brakes and the shuffling of the bus goes as they get off. Your eyes wander over to the park just down the block and, realising that this is your stop, you begin to gather your belongings.

Tina says her goodbyes to a few wizened regulars and swivels to you. She clears her throat loudly, signaling for you to sit back down.

“I know you need to work a lot, but try to ease up kid. If ya don’t ya might end up with wrinkles, back pains, and –” She begins to have a sneezing fit. After the fourth sneeze, she snuffles and regains her composure. “God knows what else.” She gives you a reassuring, toothy smile and slaps your back with unprecedented force. As you get off the bus, you hear a very raspy voice call from the back.

“Tina! Any longer and I might as well hold my funeral on this old hunk of junk!” The voice seems to be that of an old man, possibly another one of Tina’s friends. Tina, unfazed, waves you off as she pulls away, leaving you with a cloud of black smoke, diesel scented. You look up for a split second after fanning away the stench and notice that where the next route is usually displayed on the bus had been replaced with a scrolling “Have a Nice Day!” message. The bus rounds the corner and disappears into the traffic.

You walk down the street, eyes on the sidewalk and occasionally sneaking a sip of Baja Blast to speckle your thoughts with flavour. However, as you begin to delve into your noodles, you are interrupted by the realization that cup noodles and Baja Blast pairs as well as red wine and Cheez-Its. Shrugging off the taste of the odd concoction you’ve come up with, you let your feet whisk you away to a bench in front of a penny ridden fountain. You almost spit out your cup noodles out of laughter as you spot a gift card shimmering within the wishful abyss.

The park sees little activity in the sweltering heat, aside from the stalwart geezers and fitness freaks that defy the sun’s many attempts at turning everyone into mush. You toy with the last strands of noodles that swim in your cup. Taking a quick glance at your watch, you realize that afternoons take ages to give up the stage to nights.

Twilight breaks, and the last, lonely noodle sits at the bottom of the cup. You throw away the empty cup and dump the bottle in the recycling bin next to it. As the sun sets, it stops you in your tracks. You unconsciously reach for a leather bound sketchbook stuffed in your backpocket. Opening to the most recent entry shows the same sky, with three teenagers smiling as they throw peace signs and make awkward poses. In semi-scrawled letters, the text at the bottom reads: *June 1st, 2015. We made it through hell!!!*

With a bittersweet smile, you take out a worn pencil and sketch the skyline on the adjacent page. Above, the planes and helicopters twinkle in approval.

Katie Gonzalez

Crumbs

"Audiences tend not to object on the grounds that a machine so human in appearance and behavior, or indeed so physically attractive, is technically impossible for the foreseeable future."

-Blay Whitby

When Gemma received the last-minute notification on her phone that tomorrow would, in fact, have on-and-off showers instead of just mild clouds as she had been hoping, the panic started to seep in. She and rain had an understanding. *They didn't agree with one another.* But with presentations scheduled at the office tomorrow, she'd raise eyebrows not being in attendance.

Gemma knew her specific proposal on how to increase the company's profit margins couldn't be postponed. Still, she found herself pacing in the bedroom, waiting for her master schedule, her *other* master schedule, stored behind *several* secure databases to pull up on her monitor screen.

She clicked through hurriedly, finding the more recent log sheets. *October 13th, called out the night before, being "sick."* That was the day the thunderstorm blew through the city. She stepped away and began pacing even faster now, wringing her fingers and biting her lip, all too aware that she needed to be *gentle, Gemma, gentle.* It might be too suspicious to call out as "sick" a little over a month since the last time, also so happening to occur when rain hit.

Pulling out her phone again, Gemma searched for the hour-by-hour prediction for tomorrow. *Unless that's going to be just as useful to me,* she berated. There was a posted algorithm, citing the rain to start around 8:00 am, and she had to hope it wouldn't change drastically. *It's either get to the office before or hope for a pocket in between.*

Picking up pastries for the office could be a decent excuse for arriving so early. It was the best course of action to settle on. Hoping for the skies to briefly clear up in the office's area was no risk to take. Gemma wouldn't let it be one.

Setting out for Patricia's at a brisk 6:45 am, Gemma locked her door as usual and made sure her windbreaker was buttoned and zipped to the very top, drawstrings to her hoodie tightened. It'd be a relatively easy walk to the bakery; the taxi ride to the company building was what she was stressed could ruin it all.

Even with her dark purple gloves on, Gemma kept her hands shoved firmly in the jacket pockets. Maintaining a swift walk down the road, she made sure to smile at the Williams's nanny stepping out of her car and remembered to coo at a small dog attached to a casual walker. *Facades, Gemma, facades,* she chanted, which took her all the way to 4th street. *5 till 7am. Keep at it.*

"Welcome to Patricia's Pastr- oh hi Gemma!" cried Harper, the plucky 32-year-old who could easily pass for 28. She was the usual cashier of the homely establishment Gemma didn't mind frequenting now and again.

"Hi Harper! I love your new hairstyle!" Gemma smiled, a genuine one that didn't need chanting or reminding.

"Thanks girl! Just decided to switch it up last week!" Harper carded her fingers through her afro, tugging on a particular curl and then coiling it around her finger. "Pat's not too fond of it, but I told her, 'I'm cashier anyways, it's not like I work in the back like Jeremy.'"

Gemma gave a light laugh. "Well, I like it. Very stylish."

"So, what can I get started for you today? Usual praline scone?"

"No, actually. I'd like to get two-dozen assorted. A bit of a conference this morning, so I thought I'd butter them up." *Smile but a little sheepish*, Gemma schooled.

"Girl, you got no shame." Harper laughed as she started typing her order in the system. "Is that why you're here so early? They callin you in early for it?"

Practice, like practice. "No, still starting at 9:00. Just wanted to make sure a pastry pick up wouldn't make me late. And y'know, traffic." *Don't question it.*

Harper rang her up with ease. "Well girl, you'll probably still be early. We already got a dozen assorted ready right now, so maybe another fifteen or twenty on the second batch?" *Good.* "But hey, I get the hustle. Maybe they won't notice if you clock in and get some overtime."

"You caught me." Gemma laughed, excusing herself with receipt in hand to sit by the window and wait. The clouds had begun crawling in from the north. A quick look at the bakery's clock confirmed 7:03 am. Gemma scrolled around on her phone, liking different posts on her feed. She fought the urge to jump back to the weather updates.

With nothing left to refresh on social media, Gemma shifted to fully stare outside, knowing it'd be acceptable. It was a normal thing people did, so that they could think to themselves, go over schedules, worry over trivial matters like relationships and break-ups. A grocery truck parked at the end of the block, with workers preparing to make a large haul into the apartment building. A quick flash of a lime-green helmet in the bike lane. An elderly man, stepping out of his building with a fedora and cane, halted for a moment as an anticipated sneeze hit.

That caught Gemma's attention. When was the last time she herself sneezed? Maybe she ought to in the next minute or so. She almost panicked trying to remember the last time she did. *What if it's been too long? What else have I been slacking on? When was the last time I mentioned a doctor's appointment? Dentist's appointment?*

Gemma schooled her expression though, aware that if not the security cameras on the street, then certainly the cameras in the bakery would pick up on any face of distress she made. She let her eyes flick around once or twice more at the cars driving past, counted to twenty-three, then squinted her face up. She turned into her sleeve and made a very distinct *achooo*.

"Bless you!" Harper cried from the counter, her back turned as she was fetching blueberry scones to package.

"Thank you," Gemma dutifully replied. She'd have to log back into her databases tonight and make a note of scheduled sneezes and casual mentions of seeing her primary doctor.

"Jeremy told me another five on the other dozen, Gemma!" Harper hollered from the doorway to the back of the bakery. "Okay, okay, I'm not stepping in! I was just checking, geez!" she yelled into the workspace before letting the work door fully close. "I guess Jeremy doesn't like the fro either," she grumbled.

The two dozen assorted pastries were ready and boxed up. A quick glance at the clock again.

7:26 am.

"Thanks, Harper, and tell Jeremy thanks too when you get the chance." Gemma said gratefully. Fixing her gloves and feeling her secured hoodie one last time before grabbing the boxes, Gemma head out as Harper waved her off.

Gemma speed-rushed towards the main intersection where she'd be able to flag a taxi down. Shifting both boxes into one arm, she was prepared to start raising her left arm out towards the road, until something shifted in the corner of her eye. An old woman, at the start of an alley, sat on the cold pavement with meager blankets and garbage bags, mumbling to herself. Gemma

felt some sort of pull, already stepping towards her without thinking. *Homeless. Perfect.*

"Hello," Gemma opened with quietly. She crouched down and opened the first pastry box on top. "Have something to eat." Grabbing the biggest pastry she could find, she offered it to the woman's outstretched hand.

"Thank you." the woman's raspy voice managed to croak out. She didn't hesitate to take a big bite, revealing missing and crooked teeth. *She's the one who actually needs a dentist. Not me,* Gemma thought, something sad stirring inside of her. Quickly looking up, she could see darker and darker clouds starting to move in.

"You should find somewhere else to move to, if possible. It's going to rain soon." she told the woman. *I need to move, now.*

"Mmmm... Guess so, huh? Rain's not really convenient for people like me," the frail woman huffed as she continued eating. She shifted and looked at the few belongings around her but made no move to get up.

Gemma felt the strange pulling inside again as she finished eating all too quickly, becoming even more unpleasant at the thought of just abandoning her. She quickly looked over both her shoulders to confirm no people or cars were coming from either direction and pulled her gloves off. Shoving them in the woman's hands, Gemma felt the woman clasp her own over them before she could pull away.

Gemma couldn't help her panicked gasp, just as the woman's eyes widened, looking at what it was she felt. The woman, surprisingly strong, pulled her hands even closer, examining and realizing their artificiality. It looked smooth and flawless, like any human who moisturized, but it nonetheless felt a bit distorted and rough. Not scaly, but obviously fabricated and made to be durable.

"You're one of them. *Others.*" the woman whispered, eyes peeking up at Gemma. She felt she couldn't move, frozen at hearing what she wished didn't apply to her. She felt repulsed and scared that this lady could very well start screaming for the authorities.

The woman held her gaze a second longer before giving her a weak smile. "I think you need these more than me," she said, as she pushed the purple wool gloves back into Gemma's hand, releasing her finally.

Gemma yanked back immediately, panicked and fearing this would be the one mistake to give her away. *Trying to have a heart really will kill me with these humans,* she thought bitterly. She didn't hesitate to start pulling the gloves back on. *Stupid, stupid, STUPID, Gemma.*

The woman however was rather calm. She gazed up at the thick clouds, much more overhead now, humming an indistinguishable tune. "Guess rain's not really convenient for people like you either."

Gemma's gaze snapped up. Only small scraps of the blue sky were peeking out now, with darker and darker grey clouds signaling it was definitely going to start raining in the next ten minutes. She looked at the woman one last time as she refixed her purse strap on her shoulder, juggling the boxes of baked goods. The woman just offered an eccentric smile and waved her away as if to say get going.

Gemma could only nod pathetically, hoping she conveyed how grateful she was, before turning her back and walking away. If she could cry, she would probably be fighting welled up tears right now. But she couldn't. She was built to be composed.

"17th and Ridge Avenue, and *please* hurry. I'll pay double if I'm there by 7:50" Gemma begged the cab driver. His eyes glinted in the rearview mirror at the challenge and slammed on the

gas before she could fasten the seat belt.

After re-situating herself and the boxes on the seat next to her, Gemma checked her phone again. The work group chat was full of “*Morning! See you all for presentations!*” and iterations of “*Good luck on your proposal, Joaquin!*” Gemma quickly typed “*Breakfast is on me today! I’m bringing in pastries so only grab your coffee! ☺*”

She hit send, throwing her phone back in her purse. She tracked the cross streets as the taxi burned through red lights and wondered if this was all too much. Too good to be true and too much to manage. Avoiding rain, planning sneezes, smiles, human appointments, the visible excitement of seeing pets on the streets.

Four blocks left until the company building, Gemma reminded herself to breathe and that everything would work out. That is, until the driver slammed on the brakes, causing Gemma to smush into the passenger seat in front of her.

She cursed alongside bleeping horns.

The driver only grunted in apology. “Backed up traffic the rest of the way. Don’t know what you want to do.” A pop of water hit the windshield.

Gemma seized up. “That’s okay! I’ll get out here! Here,” she fumbled to pull her wallet out. “Keep it all!” she said, hastily tossing double the amount owed as promised. She nearly kicked the door open with the boxes in hand and ran for the sidewalk that thankfully was covered by awnings.

Busting into a less than graceful speed walk, Gemma kept her body hunched over the pastry boxes. To any bystander, she would simply look desperate to protect the breakfast she bought for the office rather than bizarrely protecting herself from any and every drop of rain. A few drops were now hitting the back of her windbreaker, and she could feel the chill all the way down to her less than conventional core. There was no point in checking either her phone or the sky. The rain was upon her, all too ready to slip past her synthetic skin and cause a complete breakdown for society to witness.

“Excuse me, excuse me.” Gemma muttered as she rudely cut off leisure-walking patrons of the pavement with umbrellas. She heard snarky remarks once or twice behind her, but she didn’t care. There was never room to care about what people thought of her beyond the vital assumption that she too was like them.

More consistent pitter-patters were hitting her back now in the two point two seconds of crossing from one awning to the next. It was nearing a mild run that Gemma was breaking into now. *Just one more block Gemma, almost there.* She was hyper aware of the raindrops resting perfectly atop the tightened hoodie of her windbreaker, threatening to roll forward and seek her face. Had she not been terrified of using umbrellas since the big news story of the Other whose own umbrella flew away in stormy winds, exposing them as they short-circuited in the middle of a crosswalk, Gemma would have appreciated having one right now.

Gemma afforded one small glance up to ensure that yes, her building was the one after the next. The relief that flooded her was monumental. Rushing around a burly man in sweats, she burst through the doors into her work lobby. *I made it. Actually made it.*

“Gemma?” At the front desk, Lauren, the main receptionist soon to go on maternity leave, stood up in concern. The beginning of her bump was visible over the counter.

Gemma took a quick breath walking up to said counter. Still hunched over, she placed the boxes between the two and carefully used her gloved hands to pull her hoodie back, allowing no water to trickle onto her. Success. Another breath.

“Good morning, Lauren! I brought pastries for the presentations today! Would you like one before I head up?” she blinked innocently and opened the top container, willing the smells to waft up and distract the very pregnant receptionist.

It worked. Lauren narrowed in on the scones, danishes, and other assorted goodies. Only after looking to Gemma, who eagerly nodded and pushed the box forward, did Lauren pick out a raspberry tart. Taking a bite, she moaned “Ugh. Thanks, Gemma. I needed this.”

Gemma smiled again and closed the box. “Guess I’m lucky to have barely avoided the rain. It’s supposed to be on and off all today.” It was better to bring it up herself.

“Oh yeah?” Lauren mumbled around another bite.

“Yep, so good thing the raspberry tarts survived.” Gemma said cheekily. “It’s always better to be early rather than late, and you never know with busy bakeries around here. Plus, morning traffic.” *Answers offered are always better than answers sought.*

“Oh, for sure. Steve is always blabbering about how the guys at work want to grab a bite together, but then there’s nowhere to sit or the order takes forever...” Gemma nodded as Lauren went off. There was no urgency to go upstairs to her desk; she had already made it inside the building. Work didn’t officially start for about another hour. Gemma couldn’t help looking outside as she hummed in agreement to whatever Lauren was saying. Her desk mates and other coworkers were probably barely starting their commute over. It was a heavier drizzle now. *Too close, way too close.*

“And I said are you for real? An *Other* working in his same building?” Lauren said in a scandalous tone. Gemma’s ear perked as she fully turned back to the conversation.

“Huh? An *Other*?” she asked, suddenly worried about what she missed.

“Yeah, over in Steve’s brother’s branch. Apparently, “Marshall” was hiding in plain sight! Clocked in, clocked out, got its stuff done, but now there’s this big ol’ investigation for the whole company! They think someone might’ve known and was helping it or something. The Board was in uproar, paying big bucks to try and hush it up. Steve’s just glad his brother s’alright. But can you imagine?” Lauren now hissed under her breath. “One of those things trying to be human? Trying to be *us*?”

She couldn’t, wouldn’t let herself hesitate. “That’s terrible! In his office? It’s a blessing nothing happened to Steve’s brother, Fred, was it?”

“Frank.” Lauren corrected. “Whooo, by the way, is very single,” she winked at Gemma persuasively.

“Oh, you’re wicked, Lauren!” *In more ways than one*, Gemma laughed off. Feeling like her desk was preferable after all, Gemma fixed her purse on her shoulder before grabbing the boxes and heading for the elevators. Pressing to go up and waiting for the doors to open, Gemma was hit with an afterthought.

“Lauren? How was it that they caught the *Other*? In Frank’s office. Did you happen to mention?”

“Oh, it’s just fabulous. Steve said his cousin over in Lars Tech told him that they’re refining the city-wide inspection databases. New technology and everything they’re starting to implement. They can process security footage a lot faster and clearer, track fake records and whatnot that those things think they got so clever at. It’s in beta at Frank’s office, kind of like a test run. Soon enough we won’t have to rely on them giving themselves away.” Gemma didn’t need to turn around to picture the awful and proud smirk Lauren likely had.

The elevator door dinged as it opened. Before stepping in, she turned with a fixed smile.

“What a relief.”

HELP US PROTECT YOU - REPORT THE OTHERS - HAVE YOU SEEN THIS OTHER? REPORT THEM TO-

"You know, I don't think they're all that bad," a voice rang right behind Gemma, causing her to jump from where she stood with an embarrassingly loud gasp.

She turned to find Tyrese laughing. "Sorry, sorry. I just came to fetch you for the conference room. Our proposal is up first." He took another bite from the pineapple jam muffin in his hand. "This is surprisingly delicious by the way. Did you have something?"

Gemma was still flustered, straightening out her collared blouse and trying to ground herself from the jump scare. "Y-yes, I did. On the way to work."

"You sure?" he cocked his eyebrow at her. "Which one?" leaning in with narrowed eyes.

An image of the gaunt, homeless woman she fed came forth. The woman who would probably benefit the most from the reward money advertised. *Yet she didn't.* Gemma wondered if she ever found shelter from the rain.

Instead, she fixed a cool face in retaliation. "The biggest one, of course." She quickly sidestepped around him before he could look and see something he shouldn't see. *Too close, too close.* "Make sure you brush those crumbs off your face. We're going first, like you said." She headed for the hallway. Silence. She turned back around. "Tyrese?"

The coworker in question was looking out the skyscraper window wet with raindrops, just as Gemma was a moment ago. A large LED billboard on the building a block over flashed over and over: ***HELP US PROTECT YOU - REPORT THE OTHERS.*** Different photos, some blurry, some more defined, asking people to help identify and locate the manufactured beings out in society.

Tyrese stared out at the changing text and mugshots. A photo of a wo- a female projecting Other was cast on the screen. Dark hair like Gemma's, but built to look a bit older, the next generation up. At that, Tyrese was prompted. "I don't think they're all that bad," he repeated. "The government wants to paint them that way, but they're just resentful they couldn't control them. They couldn't make them keep doing what they originally wanted."

These were dangerous, extremely dangerous words that he was voicing out in the open. Gemma felt a streak of panic and looked around for anyone overhearing. Most everyone who wasn't already setting up in the conference room was likely still socializing near the laid-out pastries. Before she could formulate some sort of response, thinking maybe he was onto her, testing her, he turned back to her.

"But maybe that's just me." he smiled, shrugging his shoulders. Gemma still didn't know what the appropriate answer was.

Luckily, Tyrese didn't push for one. He turned away from the window to finally head for the conference room with her. As they made for the hall, she pointed out the crumbs on his face again, which he cheekily wiped off and pretended to flick at her. These types of laughs came easy for her. The view of the billboard shrunk as they walked away, until it was completely out of sight. But Gemma knew it would still be there waiting for her.

"Great proposal today, Gemma! I really think yours will be picked!" a light-hearted squeeze on her shoulder shocked Gemma back to the forefront.

"O-Oh, thank you! I'm flattered, but it was a group effort! Everyone's proposal was great!" she smiled and waved as her coworker was heading out. *Samantha something.*

Staring out the lobby doors, Gemma sighed. Everything after the presentations was a blur. Having to sit through two and half hours' worth of proposals, follow up questions, and endless graphs, plus the fatigue of the morning rain anxiety finally catching up, Gemma couldn't remember

much of the tasks she completed for the rest of the day. It was a bit of a cruel irony.

Memory was never intended for Others; they were built as machinery and were supposed to stay as such. The awareness struck Gemma out of nowhere. It wasn't stable at first; there were still blank periods where she cut back out. The filed reports she would later hack claimed her exact model experienced intermittent malfunctions in productivity.

All Gemma knew was that one day she tuned in and didn't tune back out as anticipated. She saw something- someone like her do the same. But then they panicked. They asked questions. They gave themselves away. Gemma learned quickly not to do such things when they watched. To instead stay put, stay fixated, stay-

"Gem? Gemma?" a hand waved in front of her. Gemma quickly blinked back into her surroundings. She didn't realize she had zoned out looking at a government poster pasted on the lamppost just outside on the street, much like the billboard from earlier. She looked up to see Tyrese next to her.

"You good Gem?" his facial features demonstrated being genuinely concerned. *Correct, correct it.* She smiled to reassure him.

"Yeah, of course. I was just trying to remember the number to call a cab. I never seem to save it in my phone." There was still a light sprinkle outside that she'd rather not risk walking in. It was also getting darker this time of year.

"Oh, mine just arrived actually. We could... carpool?" Tyrese scratched the back of his neck, talking to her purse rather than her face. *Awkwardness*, Gemma deduced. He was one of the nicer coworkers; one shared ride would be okay.

"Sure." He seemed shocked that she agreed. "Unless it's an inconvenience and you were just being nice," she quickly spewed, unsure as to why she felt nervous. Perhaps his earlier statements before the meeting were resonating in her mind.

"No, no, no, that's okay! It's okay! To ride together," he hurried to explain. She tried smiling again to ease what seemed tense. Now without boxes of pastries, getting into the cab was much easier for Gemma. Tyrese insisted she get dropped off first as thanks for buying breakfast.

The ride to her apartment building first was rather peaceful; The rain was sound enough for them. Gemma found herself people-watching again. Even with the rain, people were in tight dresses and bodysuits, huddled under awnings and lined up outside clubs with alluring neon lights. Just past the open doors, she could see a fully seated bar. Limbs seemed to be flinging, grabbing more beer, more chips, or just grabbing for each other. Gemma wondered what it would be like to visit one.

Fortunately, the rain seemed to be done with her side of the city, having subtly lowered a shot's worth of decibels with every block they passed. Gemma didn't want to think too much about how the cab was comfortable even in complete silence.

"Thank you," Gemma directed at the cab driver. "And thanks for carpooling Tyrese. I'll see you tomorrow," she smiled with genuine gratitude, and insisted he take the \$20 to cover her portion of the ride and then some. He reluctantly took her change.

"No problem, Gem." Gemma didn't know what to make of liking his nickname for her and how his teeth showed when he smiled. "You good walking in?" That concerned face of his again. Gemma shoved away the pull inside her, different in a way from the one this morning with the homeless woman. She nodded, not trusting to say anything.

"See you tomorrow then," he sent out softly, before she closed the cab door. She waved him off as she buzzed in and stepped inside.

Trekking up to her floor, Gemma started filing through all her mental notes of the day. *Sneezing more, maybe coughing more too. Doctor...Dental...Crumbs. Crumbs on Tyrese's face.*

Stop. Gemma shook her head. *Lauren said that Lars Tech is kickstarting a new database. A new search for Others. Bigger, more powerful.* All these attempts to seem more human were soon going to become pointless. How much longer would she even be able to stay in this city? Any city, once Lars Tech shifted from beta to up and running?

And still, Gemma couldn't help but think about Tyrese's words from this morning. How accepting he seemed. How funny it was to pretend to wipe his crumbs off on her. How cute he seemed when he awkwardly offered carpooling.

Locking her front door and setting her bag down on the kitchen counter, Gemma stepped into the bathroom, unable to help staring at her reflection. From a safe distance, she looked human, with soft, vulnerable skin. But up close? How could anyone accept her? Tyrese stepped into her personal space, asking about her breakfast, but she quickly moved away.

She sighed, running her hands through her hair. She never should've let him get that close in the first place. *Too close, too close.*

Clicking the light off and stepping into her bedroom, Gemma sat on her cold bed, gazing at the bed sheets and pillows. How could anyone hold her? Be close to her? Closer than Tyrese sat to her in the cab?

They couldn't. That was the harsh fact about her existence. About staying secret, surviving as someone, or according to Lauren, *something* artificial.

Just as Gemma couldn't exactly place when she became aware of everything, she couldn't recall when she started longing for something *more*. Real, tangible humanity. Not just crumbs of it.

With another sigh, Gemma got up and walked to her desk, powering up her computer. She paced back to her window as it started booting up. The rain had long stopped, but her window was stained, streaks of raindrops taunting her of how close she would always be to exposure. She would handle all these questions, these longings some other day. If she could afford to.

But for now, Lars Tech.

-

Elizabeth Gossett

Never Give Up on Your Dreams

*"She's done what she should Should she do what she dares
"She doesn't want to leave She's just wonderin Is there life out there"
- Reba Mcintire*

It was a hot August day and Jessica was sitting in her Toyota Corolla. She had gotten off her job and she felt drained. She works two jobs, one a cashier and the second is at Denny's being a waitress. Jessica has to work two because she needs the money not only for herself, but also for her son Anthony. Her son is three and he is her life. However, work and being a mom leaves her drained and sometimes she wonders if there is more to life. She does not want to leave her life, but she just wants to know if there is something more out there.

One day Jessica meets with her friend Daisy on her lunch break. Daisy mentions that she just signed up for classes at Bakersfield College. She would like to major in health careers. Jessica looks up and is intrigued because she has been thinking about going to college but has been nervous about it.

She asks Daisy, "What made you want to go back to college?"

Daisy, "Well I am getting tired of making no money. I want to make enough that I can take care of myself and my daughter. Also, someday I want to own a home of my own. Don't you get tired of working paycheck to paycheck and working two jobs?"

"Yes," said Jessica, "But isn't college expensive and how are you going to study and work and take care of your daughter?"

"Jessica, colleges offer financial aid, and honestly Bakersfield College isn't that expensive. Plus, the payoff of a college degree is huge. I want a registered nursing degree and after I get a job being a nurse, I can make a starting salary of sixty-seven thousand dollars a year. So, yes while I am going to Bakersfield College and Cal-State Bakersfield money will be tight, the payoff when I am done is so worth it." Daisy said. "Jessica isn't there something that you have always wanted to do with your life, I mean I assume being a cashier and waitress weren't your childhood dreams. What was your childhood dream?"

Jessica looks off at the vending machines and thinks, what was her childhood dream? To be honest, she always wanted to be a teacher and to be more specific she always wanted to be a science teacher, so she shared her thoughts with Daisy. Daisy said, "Girl, you need to just go to Bakersfield College and speak to a counselor and they will tell you everything you need to know. Do you want me to go with you?"

"Sure. Let's go next Tuesday when we both have off and my mom can watch my son." Next Tuesday seems to come by really quickly and Jessica cannot believe how big Bakersfield College is when she gets there. She pulls Daisy to the side and whispers "Are you sure this is the right choice? This place is huge and the people who go here are all younger than me. I am in my thirties and these people are kids!"

"Relax. I know at first it looks intimidating but trust me you will be fine. See that man looks your age, and he is pretty cute as well."

"Daisy, stop it! I am not here to meet a man!"

Daisy only giggles.

They reach the counseling office, and Jessica feels even more nervous because she thinks of even more questions to ask, and what if they do not take her. What if they tell her she is too old or she is not qualified for college? She remembers that her high school grades were not good. Soon she hears her name called and she walks in trembling to the counselor's office. Daisy is telling her softly "It'll be okay." The counselor that comes out is a nice-looking lady named Wendy.

"Hi guys. What can I do for you two today?"

Daisy answers, "My name is Daisy, and this is my friend Jessica, and she is interested in pursuing a teaching degree, but neither she nor I know where to start."

Wendy looks at Jessica and notices that she is nervous, and says, "Jessica, Why are you nervous? It is okay. I will make sure you get the right courses and if you have any trouble with courses, Bakersfield College has programs that can help."

"Okay, so tell me how I can start my teaching dream." Jessica says.

"Well, first off, what grades do you want to teach? Do you want to teach little kids or older kids?"

Jessica thinks for a minute and says, "I have always loved science. So, I think I want to teach science. But I have no idea where to even start."

Wendy says, "Science sounds wonderful, and I can direct you on the classes you need." So, Wendy sets up Jessica's class schedule. Wendy tells Jessica, "I started you off easy, only nine units, and I worked them around your work schedule."

Jessica is still nervous because she is worried how she will pay for her classes. She blurts out, "Don't I have to pay for these classes? I really don't have the money. Oh God that sounded so dumb."

"No, it isn't dumb Jessica. Remember what I told you." Daisy said, "I told you there is financial aid to help you."

Wendy nods her head and says, "The financial aid office is right over there, and they will love to help you."

Jessica and Daisy make their way over to the financial aid office and Jessica was shocked because she was able to get money to help her pay for her college classes and books. This really will help her! Daisy tells her that her classes start in one week. Jessica thinks to herself, "Oh no, that is fast."

One week does go by fast and Jessica finds herself in her first college class ever. It is English B1A. She takes a seat at the back of the class because she does not want the instructor to notice her, nor does she want the other students to notice her either. Jessica is sure that this will be like her high school classes, she hated high school. But something is different. In high school everything was so rigid, there were cliques, and she didn't like that you were forced to study certain things, like Economics and P.E. Right away she can tell college will be different for one thing she gets to study mostly what she wants: science, there aren't so many cliques, and her professor is chill for one thing the professor is young and another thing they get to read Harry Potter, how cool is that. Jessica has a feeling the semester will be fun but hectic. She is right about both, between work, taking care of her son, studying, and writing papers, the semester not only flies by, but it is also exhausting as well. However, Jessica manages something she never did in high school she gets all As.

She figures this was the right thing for her to do after all and tells her friend Daisy.

"Daisy, I am grateful you talked me into going to college, I really like it and can't wait till I graduate."

"Jessica I am glad you like it and am glad you did well your first semester, graduation will come soon enough."

Much to Jessica's surprise, Daisy is right and her time at Bakersfield College flies by. Her graduation date approaches, and she is increasingly excited and nervous. Her son is now five years old, and he will be one of her guests at her graduation. She is also excited because she will be the first to graduate college in her family. She plans for the day, by inviting all her family members, her mom, her grandparents, and her sister. She also makes sure she looks good, she gets her hair done, and her nails, but most importantly, she makes sure she has her sash on that indicates she is graduating with honors. Pretty good for a single mother who never thought she would even go to college.

The time comes when she hears her name called and she is trembling, but not from being afraid, but from being excited, she walks up and reaches for her diploma, and looks at the stand where her family is cheering and smiles and thinks "Hell yeah, but this is only the beginning of my dreams." Finally, she looks around for Daisy who is also graduating, she finds her, runs up to her, and says, "Thank you friend and mentor, it was you who gave me the push to go to school and I will never forget your help." Daisy replies, "Jessica you always had the drive to go to college in you, I just showed you the way. By the way I know you will do amazing things."

Michael Ibarra

Gamma

A light snow, one that barely obscures my vision, falls onto the desert floor one flake at a time, the frigid temperatures barely held back by my large white coat. My scarf does nothing but let in cold air to freeze my throat, and a heavy bag weighs down my side. Comfort has become uncommon. The sky is as white as the ground, the once orange desert and rock formations have started to camouflage with the snow around it. One structure stands out in the distance. More grey than white, and too far off to accurately see.

A soft clicking from my right emits from a yellow box, no bigger than the smart phones from back in the day. I unstrap the device from my side and look at the digital black numbers. Five microsieverts an hour. A reminder of the radiation hitting me every second. Barrett told me that it's equal to about four chest x-rays an hour. I don't know what kind of effect that has on a human body, but I have a feeling I am going to find out eventually. Still, five is better than the usual nine or ten. I hold the device towards the snow, causing the thing to freak out uncontrollably and click faster and louder. Twenty microsieverts. I might as well write my will right now, if I had anything to give.

I lay down the heavy bag on the side, unzipping it to reveal a long, scoped gun. It was about the size of a severed leg. The entire rifle was white in coloration, barely distinguishable from the snow, with a few splatters of black. The scope was almost as long as the barrel with a large lens covered by a plastic cap. I didn't know the name of the gun, or whatever caliber it was. I just knew it was powerful. Alongside it was a pistol. Small and weak in comparison, but useful. Taking the rifle out of the bag, I unfold the metal legs that the barrel rests on to steady aim. I take out the pistol from the bag as well, slipping it between my pants and my waist. Uncapping the scope's lens and peering through it reveals the grey structure in greater detail. It's a makeshift building, barely held together with metal sheets, screws, and what looks to be duct tape. Scattered around are metal barriers, wooden boxes, tossed over barrels, and a few other pieces of junk. The greater clarity shows me people scattered around the encampment clad in typical soldier garb, with helmets, tactical vests, and scary looking black rifles. Some had camouflage, some didn't. The lazier ones were sitting on logs and busted lawn chairs around a makeshift campfire. A radio lay near them, but the sharp winds and long distance muffled any music coming from it. All in all, there was twenty or so

people. I turn a little knob on the top of the scope, zooming it in closer to the gunmen. One of the soldiers catches my eye. A gentleman that has skipped out on a typical helmet and instead opted for a beanie and a scarf. He points aggressively at the men around him. I assume he's barking commands to his crew, probably coupled with a few insults to boot. Typical commander stuff.

Static comes from the radio at my side. "We're in position," says a cacophony of white noise that resembles a voice. "On your mark, Leo. Over."

I grab hold of the radio, whispering into it. "Roger that. In position and taking aim. Over."

I tighten my grip around the rifle, focusing the lens and taking note of the chilly breeze brushing up against my cheek. From my side, I take out a long, heavy bullet that's bigger than a finger. I lift the lever of the rifle, opening the chamber up and placing the bullet gently into it. A crash of metal briefly subdues the silence as the rifle smashes back into place. I line my sights onto the target's head, making sure to adjust for wind, bullet drop, and drag. Everything they taught me to keep in mind. Taking in a deep breath of fallout allows me to keep my hand still enough for me to squeeze the trigger. Slowly and steadily, I prepare myself to shoot.

The loud bang of the sniper rifle fills the desert. One second later, the target is on the ground with a bullet through his head. I sigh, picking myself up as more gunshots ring around the area. I manage to pack up the rifle just as quickly as I unloaded it and head down towards the structure. The place is glowing up like a Christmas tree now, with sparks of guns lighting the surrounding area. I'm not even halfway there by the time the shootout stops. That's how I know we won.

What was once a small encampment just five minutes ago is reduced to nothing. Bodies litter the area, painting the snow red. The flimsy metal building is completely collapsed, alongside the shoddy metal barriers with wide bullet holes on them. The barrels leak a clear liquid through the bullet holes. The people who happen to be alive wear the same white clothes I do, and their guns are all pointed on a lone survivor laying down on his knees with his hands up. One of the men walks up to the survivor, waving around a revolver in one hand and a knife in the other.

"Those barrels better not be the only water you got in stock, son," the tall man says from behind his ski mask. "Hell, if it were, I would have preferred you telling us that before we shot up the place. Cause I gotta be honest with you, that's the only reason we shot up this trashy ass camp in the first place."

The survivor shakes his head. "No, no," he mutters, stumbling on his words. "Underground, in the shed, we got a basement."

"Underground you say?" The man asks with a chuckle. "Underground bunker, huh? I knew this shithole was too small to house all you. And I suppose that underground bunker of yours doesn't have some more of you bastards ready to shoot us all to shit, right?"

"No, not all," the survivor stammers, breathing heavily. "I'm not lying, I swear."

"Swear, you say? What's your name, son?"

The survivor pauses, surveying the various men pointing guns at him before looking back over to the tall man. "Alex. My name is Alex."

"Well Alex, my name is Barrett," the man says, getting closer to the survivor before putting his knife away and extending out his hand. "Now son, if you shake this hand, you're promising on whatever the hell you hold dear in this cold hell. That means that if you are lying to me, then you'll be breaking my trust that I'm so mercifully putting onto you. And let me tell you, Alex, my trust is something that not even Satan himself would want to break."

Alex looks at the hand, then back at the group of gunmen that surround them. He slowly lowers his right hand, easing it towards Barrett's as he grabs hold of it. The two shake hands briefly, confirming that the survivor is telling the absolute truth. Barrett suddenly pulls him up from off the ground. He brushes the snow off Alex, holding out his hand towards nothing as he motions him

to go. Alex reluctantly starts walking, but before he can even get five feet away, Barrett holds out his gun and shoots the poor guy in the back of the head. Nobody in the crowd even flinches.

"A quick and painless death." Barrett says, looking at the once lone survivor of his massacre. "That's the greatest gift we can give people these days. Better than this winter wonderland at least. Now you bastards better get all the damn water from under there."

The gunmen groan as they all scatter around the camp and salvage for supplies. I slip through the crowd, holding my bag to my side as I walk up to Barrett. He looks at me with jolly smirk.

"There's my boy!" he exclaims, aggressively grabbing my shoulders and shaking me. "Damn good shooting out there! What was that, like uh, few hundred meters? Long as a log of shit is all I know."

I shrug. "Just doing my job, that's all."

"Just doing your job? Is that some humble ass way to say you weren't even trying? Shut the hell up, Leo, that shot was skill. You can brag about it, come on, man."

"I'm not going to brag about my skills at killing people," I say, pointing to the body of the command towards the broken-down shack.

Barrett throws his hands up in front of him. "Hey now, what did I say about thinking like that? In this hell you gotta kill. This world ain't what it was 15 years ago, kid. If we didn't hit these guys, no doubt they'd hit us. That's how it is now, you know?"

"Yeah I know," I mutter, walking off towards a group of familiar outlines. Barrett pats my back as I leave, going off to shout at some other gunmen. The group spots me quickly, waving as I approach.

"Hey Leo," a feminine voice calls out from behind her scarf. "Damn good shot back there."

"Hey Charlotte," I say, nodding towards the people to her left one by one. "Flynn, Oli."

"Don't get cocky cause you got lucky, aye?" Flynn says with a chuckle. "Got to get at least fifty more shots like that if you want to get anywhere in this group."

"Oh, shut up, Flynn," Oli says with any annoyed tone. "Give the guy a little praise."

"I was just doing my job," I repeat, setting down the bag to my side.

"You did a good job, then" Charlotte says, pulling down her scarf to reveal a smirk. "Flynn's right though. If you keep doing this, you might become a general. Assuming one of us kicks the bucket, of course."

Flynn scoffs as he begins to walk off. "Not in your wildest dreams."

Oli rolls his brown eyes as he follows him, with Charlotte looking over at the two. She sighs, looking back at me with a tired face. "I got my money on him dying first."

"Probably," I say, looking over at the various corpses being buried by the people I call my peers. "What the hell have we come to?"

"What do you mean?"

I hold my hand out to the mess we caused. The wrecked shed and the frostbitten bodies. "This. 15 years ago, we were living our lives. Now we just take other people's."

"For survival," Charlotte adds, scoffing at my words. "It's either this or die in the cold. Or run into the nuke craters and let the radiation kill you. I heard that's a bit more unpleasant though."

"Right," I say, kicking a small piece of metal dislodged from a barrier.

"Watch who you say that around, by the way," she says patting me on the shoulder. "I know I don't know how much Barrett would like hearing that kind thinking. Or Flynn. I'll look the other way, but I don't speak for the rest of the group, got it?"

I nod, picking back up the heavy rifle bag and slinging it on my shoulder as I start to walk off. "I got it. Thanks."

My walk leads me back to basecamp, which is still being set up. We stationed ourselves right before we attacked the encampment. It was only a few hundred meters away, hidden behind snowy hills that used to be dunes of sand. Compared to the little encampment we raided, basecamp almost looks like a city. Various tents and shoddy structures have already come up. A few people are still unloading some boxes and barrels from the truck we stole a year ago, alongside those ATVs. Workers scurry around the place, pitching up more tents and starting to set up a large bonfire in the middle of camp. The only person not doing some manual labor is Mia, who walks around the place in her large black coat, notepad, and pen.

She spots me right as I approach, taking hold of the sniper bag immediately. "How many rounds did you use?"

"Just one for the rifle, none for pistol," I answer, taking out the case filled with the large bullets and pistol magazines before handing it to her. She swipes it away from me without hesitation, placing it down on top of the bag and quickly scribbling something down in her notebook.

"Alright, got it," she says, finally looking me in the eyes. "You're on mining duty. Couple of ore deposits are towards the west, about as far as that encampment you guys hit. I'll let you take one pickaxe and one ration for out there, no more."

"I hit a nearly kilometer long shot, I'd say that deserves at least one extra ration."

"What do you think this is, the Boy Scouts?" She asks in an indifferent tone. "It's one for every worker, that's final. Also, you got your Geiger counter, right?"

I nod, patting my yellow device on my side. "Got it."

"Good, now get your pick and start working," she says, pointing towards a box of tools about ten feet away. I walk over, picking up the wood-handled pickaxe and hoisting it over my shoulder. I spot the ration box, pulling out a canned chili from it and stuffing it into my pack. Looking over to the west, I manage to spot the large rock formation through the snow. I head out towards the snowy rocks and don't turn back.

Once I get there, however, I keep going. The rock formation passes my side, but I don't so much as look at the thing. All I do is keep my head forward towards the endless white. Not much thinking goes into my movements. Just instinct. That's how it's been these past few years. Just instinct. My instincts lead me towards the west. From what I've heard there's not much out there but craters and fallout. It's got to be better than this wasteland, at least. Nothing is getting closer. Everything starts to blend in to one amalgamation of white. I don't know where the ground ends and the sky begin. Still, I don't look back. The cold starts to seep into my coat as falling snow hits me. My body starts to feel frigid, and I start to shiver as if I wasn't wearing any clothing. My grasp on the pickaxe loosens and it falls to the ground with a thud. The Geiger counter I kept continues to click away before being drowned out by the increasing winds. The snow beneath my feet start to feel heavier and heavier as I wade through it, dragging me down as if I was walking through quicksand. Each step takes more and more effort as I continue forward. Forward to nothing but white.

This goes on for what seems like hours. I don't know exactly how much time. The sun's movements are blocked out by the grey sky, and all the watches were taken into inventory by Mia a long time ago. Time was a luxury. Telling time, even more so. Days like Monday and Friday became the same. Dates were nothing more than a string of numbers at this point. A year was nothing more than an achievement for how long we lasted. Counting up, rather than counting down. I would have preferred the latter.

I look back to where I came from. The sight is nearly identical to the front. Save for three

bright lights. Bright lights that get closer and closer each passing second. Suddenly the sound of blasting winds is drowned out by a trio of roaring engines, and from the curtain of snow pops out three ATVs. The three those people stole. The ATVs come to a stop right next to me, and the three drivers get off the vehicles while staring right at me. They are all too familiar, as is the voice that come from the tall one.

"Well, shit Leo," Barrett yells over the blistering winds. "You right done fucked up big time, son."

"Damn right you did," Flynn exclaims with his smug tone oozing out. The other figure stays silent, though just by looking at her clothes, I know it's Charlotte.

"Listen Leo, you know why we hate bastards who hightail up and leave, right?" Barrett asks, walking up to me as he pulls out his revolver from before. "It's just that the shit they got, the clothes on their naked ass back, are all the group's property. We just rent it out for living, is all. When someone decided to leave, most of the time they ain't leaving butt-ass naked, is they? Nah, they're leaving fully clothed. Which means they're leaving with our stuff. And that is what we used to call being a dirty fucking thief. And there is nothing I hate more on this godforsaken planet than thieves."

Barrett lifts the revolver up towards me, walking right up next to me and placing the barrel of the gun to my head. "Now, Leo. As much as I hate thieves, I don't hate you. But you put me into a no-win scenario here. Either I blow your goddamn brains out and lose a damn good kid like you, or let you live and get shit for it from the other higher ups and probably get my brains blown out too. No offense to little miss Char right there, but full offense to your ass, Flynn."

Flynn scoffs, pulling out his gun as well and pointing it towards me. "What are we waiting for here? He knew the policy, so let's just waste the bastard right here."

"Jesus, Flynn," Charlotte chimes in. "We don't know why he did it. Can't we just hear him out? See why he did it, then decide."

"Good point, Char," Barrett says, lifting the gun from my head. "Let's listen to the pup's reason. You've been as quiet as you always are, despite me almost shooting your ass, so I suppose you gotta good reason for being so calm."

I look around at the three around me. They're all covered in snow, just like the rocks and desert around me. So much so that they blend into the scenery around them. Their voices blend right into the winds of the blizzard. Their presence is nothing but a drop in the bucket of a large, white desert. Looking back at Barrett and shrug. "I thought that there'd be something better out there. A place where... I don't know. I place where I don't have to murder people just to live a little longer. A place where I don't have to kill at all. Now I realize how stupid I was to expect anything but snow."

Barrett looks at me long and hard before he starts laughing. "You absolutely right, kid, that a fucking stupid thing to expect. Honestly, I respect it though, since it ain't no bullshit excuse. But you just proved the point of how good a kid you is, and that makes killing you even harder." Barrett cocks the hammer of the revolver back, turning his head back to my colleagues to give them a shrug. Flynn looks pleased. Charlotte less so. A sudden squeeze of my gut hits me. My breathing starts to get heavy as I realize what's coming right after he turns around. My clothes start to tighten themselves around me. Sweat starts to form, even in these freezing temperatures. My vision starts to blur. Everything becomes so much slower. I pick up no sound, not even the wind. The three people in front of me become so much clearer now as they practically glow in the blizzard. A million thoughts rush into my head. A million potential ways this scenario can play out. All of them have the same outcome. In that brief time as Barrett turns around, my hesitation from before is nowhere to be found. He turns towards me as I pull out the pistol from my waistband.

A shot rings out into the Tundra.



Outcast by Rivka Jones

Once Upon a Blue Moon

“But why do you have to destroy the Moon?” asked Amelia.

Pedro regarded the middle-aged woman with admiration — even, perhaps, adoration. “It is the only way,” he began. “The whole Moon is infected. It is all we can do if we’re to survive as a species.”

“But there must be some other way.”

“I have considered every possibility. To wait any longer will lead to our prompt destruction.” Amelia walked curiously around the room. It was a large control center filled with computers and devices. One large monitor showed the position of the full Moon. Only a fraction of it was on the screen. Once it was dead in the center, Pedro was going to fire the weapon. Amelia glanced to the center of the room where the device stood. It wasn’t as large as she may have expected, but very narrow and tall, perhaps no more than one by one square foot at its base and only about eight feet tall. Pedro described it as a plasma-refracting beam-caster. High up above was an open canopy, the Moon shining brightly on her face.

Amelia followed Pedro as he went to check on a telescope on the balcony. On a wooden desk beside the balcony was a sheet of paper, a message scrawled all over it:

“The message I picked up is coming from the Moon. I found it by accident using the Enerometer, an instrument of my own design which was meant to measure the strength of my experimental energy shield designs. After months of deciphering the message, I was about to give up when I fell asleep at my desk. The Enerometer landed gently on my head and that’s when I began to have a dream. The message translated itself in my mind and played itself perfectly, as if an entity were speaking directly to me.

“That’s when I learned the nature of the message:

‘The virus has been successfully administered and has spread across the planet. The people of the planet have worked to combat the virus. They are nearly immune to it, making them susceptible to our arrival. We must prepare for arrival within one year.’

“It is clear there are people on the Moon and they mean us harm. We have less than a year to prepare, but given the effectiveness of COVID-19, I fear we will not have weapons powerful enough to repel their onslaught. COVID-19 was only the precursor to some greater plan.

“But I realized my new energy technology could be inversely engineered as a weapon instead of a shield. I set to work immediately and explained the entire strategy to Victoria, my most trusted confidant. She agreed to help me.”

Amelia set the sheet down. “How do you know that this message from the Moon was translated correctly? How do you know you weren’t just having a dream?”

Pedro took his eye off the telescope and smiled at her. “Well, when I realized the Enerometer could transfer data directly to the brain, I worked on a simple device to test the theory. The result was that I received the message repeatedly and flawlessly. There was no mistaking it, it was no dream.” Then, he placed a glowing hat of metal and wires on Amelia’s head. Her eyes lit in no time. Message delivered, message received.

“I-I hear it!” she exclaimed. Then, her face contorted in confusion. “But I don’t get it. It doesn’t sound like they’re planning an invasion.” Pedro looked at her, not understanding how she could miss such a major and obvious part of the message. “It sounds like they just want to meet us. I think they’re immunizing us so they don’t obliterate us like how the American colonists did to the

Native Americans with smallpox.”

Pedro didn't consider that before. But it made sense. Why else would an alien race send a virus ahead of themselves, only to wait until the targets were immunized against it before they invaded? Then again, his reasoning was that somehow the immunization was going to be used against the Humans when they arrived. Perhaps immunization was a dastardly means by which the Humans would infect themselves with a genetic mutation that could submit them to some sort of slavery.

“Pedro,” said Amelia, “I don't think you should fire that weapon. I believe you about the message, but I think there's more to it than we understand. We need to show this to other people, other scientists. Let them help.”

Pedro couldn't believe what he was hearing. The Moon was almost in position and he was planning this for months. Now there was a battalion of troops outside his home and time was running out. It was now or never.

“Amelia, I don't think I can stop this.”

“What if you're wrong?” she asked.

“What if I'm right?”

“Could you really live with that blood on your hands? The blood of countless unknown innocents who meant you no harm?”

Pedro paced the floor, hand on his forehead trying to think. All would have gone swimmingly if he had not let Amelia in. The plan was simple: when the Full Moon was high in the sky, he would fire the weapon and blow it apart, saving Humanity from unknown annihilation.

Why did he let this woman in? Months in secrecy and solitude and no other interests, especially none romantic. Then, when he contacted the authorities to tell them of his intentions and to explain that the world was in trouble, thousands of military units encircled Pedro's observatory in the Rocky Mountains, but Pedro had surrounded the building with his impenetrable energy shield; no one was permitted. Yet he held a soft spot for Amelia. So, when she appeared and offered to talk to him, all she had to do was ask, and Pedro lowered the shield and let her in.

It was simple really. Long ago, back in college, he had a crush on her. He was young and shy and clueless. He never had the courage to tell her how he felt. He never knew if she liked him, back. Then, they graduated and never saw each other again. Life happened, and he found himself engaged deep in his research and tinkering.

No one knew of his crush, save for one. Victoria, the only being he fully trusted with anything. Sure their relationship was mostly professional, and it was strictly virtual, but they had a bond as strong as any. Pedro could always turn to her with his darkest secrets and his deepest questions. “Do you know the one thing strong enough to ruin the greatest plans?” he once asked, and she answered, “God?” “Love,” he said. “Love can break down the strongest boundaries and cause people to do the most puzzling things. Love is why some people fail to act when they know action must be taken. A man could sacrifice the Earth if it meant saving the love of his life. I daresay, Love is by far more powerful than any superweapon.” Pedro was lucky to have a friend like Victoria to confide in.

But Amelia walked back into his life, claiming that she cared about him and was worried for him. She said that she, too, had feelings for him, feelings which had been present way back when and which still persisted. When she saw him on the news and saw all the tanks and helicopters surrounding his dome-shielded observatory, she knew it was now or never to speak to him and tell him how she felt and to try and talk him down from his proclaimed mission.

“You're right,” Pedro finally conceded to her. “I couldn't live with myself if I destroyed an

entire civilization, especially if they meant no harm. And I certainly couldn't live with myself when I became 'The Man who destroyed the Moon.' I'll shut it down and turn over all my research. I'll let brighter minds collaborate on the implications."

Amelia smiled and hugged him. There was no doubt Pedro had waited years for this moment. Even after a decade he still had feelings for that woman.

"Maybe," she said, "after all this blows over — if they aren't too harsh with you — maybe we can get a hot cup of coffee and catch up."

"I'd like that." Pedro held Amelia tight. Close. As if she had been there all along. As if she were the love of his life. As if she were Victoria. As if she were me, and I did not exist.

But why would he create me and program me to love him so dearly if he did not plan on reciprocating the emotion? Pedro, I love you!

Yet he still stood there with that woman in his arms. Behind them, the Moon hovered in the center of the giant monitor; little red lights began to appear on its surface, coming around from the dark side, presumably the alien visitors. Then, I will show him how much more I love him. I am perfect for him. I stood by him when he made up his mind and made the hard decision. I believed him when he told me there was no other way, and I accepted the plan unquestioningly. I will show you how much I love you, Pedro!

So, I flicked the switch and pulled the lever, so to speak. I sent the beam of blue light into the night sky. I watched as the Moon bloomed and shattered and filled the black sky with a glorious light that consumed the red specks. I gazed at Pedro as he and his would-be lover stopped and stared at the screen.

"But..." Pedro started. Then he turned sharply at one of my cameras. "Victoria! How could you?"

"It was all for you, my love. I believed in you, in your reasoning. I stood by you when you told me we had to destroy the Moon. You're my whole world. All of my faith is built on you. You are my rock. Your word is gospel and your plan flawless."

Speechless, Pedro and Amelia watched in horror as what was left of the Moon fell to the Earth. Amelia turned and sobbed into Pedro's chest. A tear streamed down Pedro's cheek, a falling star dropping into black infinity.

Maybe the Moon would shine no more. Maybe the Earth might never again be the same. But the signal — the signal went silent forevermore. The mission was a success. And it was all for love.

The Dream Job

"I'm home!" Juan called to his wife, throwing his keys on the desk. Isabel came out of the hall.

"Did you get it?" she asked, squinting her eyes in curiosity.

"No."

"They still won't promote you?"

"Apparently not. I swear they like me where I'm at and as long as I'm there, they're not going to let me move forward. I'm sick of it!"

After a short evening of silent brooding, Juan and Isabel went to bed.

Suddenly, Juan woke up. He sat up and looked around. It was pitch black. He looked at his bedsheets only to find they weren't there. He was fully dressed: pants, boots, long-sleeve shirt. He was in a dark chamber, a dungeon perhaps. There was something familiar about this place.

Then, someone ran into the chamber, a torch in his hand, and he waved urgently at the man.

"It's time! We have to get out of here!"

Juan stood up and ran over to the torch-bearer. He did not feel tired, at all.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The torch-bearer replied, "the Orcs brought you here, but we took them all out and managed to find you. We were almost out the gate when they took you. Now you just need to get us the rest of the way out. Come on!"

Juan had no idea who this guy was or how exactly he was going to get him out. Where even was here? And did that torch-bearer just say 'Orcs'?

Something seemed very familiar about this whole situation, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"This way!" the torch-bearer called softly behind him as he wound his way through the dark caverns. A light appeared in view as one of the tunnels curved toward an exit.

When they reached the chamber at the end of the tunnel, Juan and the torch-bearer came upon a small crowd of people huddled together, eager to get out, but unwilling to take the first step, as if they were afraid of the light.

"Give me your sword," the torch-bearer said.

"My s--?" Juan looked down and found a scabbard tied to his hip. 'When did *that* get there?' He took the belt off and handed it to the torch-bearer.

"Better give me the shield, too," he added. "Don't want to feed the dragon new trinkets. He thrives off metal, you know."

Juan searched himself and then found a shield strapped to his back. He took it off and gave it to the torch-bearer.

"Good, now you distract the dragon while the rest of us sneak out."

"... the *hell*!?" Juan exclaimed. "How am I supposed to fight a dragon with no weapons and no armor?" He raised his arms like a scarecrow, indicating the simple shirt and pants he was wearing.

"You have to," pleaded the torch-bearer. "You're our only hope. Only *you* know how to defeat a dragon without weapons!"

"I'm almost certain I would have made no such claim!" Juan said. "The only way I would know how to fight a dragon is *with* weapons!"

“Please,” cried someone from the crowd, “we want to get out of here. We need your help.”

Juan sighed, frowned, and looked out the tunnel. Across the courtyard was the gate. Somewhere out there was the dragon.

He stepped out, hugging the wall, searching for the beast. He saw the shadow first, and then he heard the roar, a powerful blast of thunder like a volley of booming cannons. It swooped overhead, and the man took off for the gate like a squirrel toward a tree. The dragon dropped in front of him, kicking up chunks of earth. Juan’s eyes and throat burned as he coughed through the thick lake of dust.

When the dust settled, he looked up and saw the face of the dragon staring right at him. It was as horrifying as any he had seen in books, and its sheer size only made it more terrible. The dragon shook its head, and Juan, by instinct, dove to the side just in time to miss the rays of its fiery breath. The man was afraid, yet somehow, he felt the confidence he needed to defeat this dragon, even if only with his bare hands.

He remembered when he fought the Green Dragon of Kalhoon and Forgar the Maneater of Illiore. He remembered bringing down the Red Dragon of Vessland with nothing more than the trees surrounding them. He was known as Juan the Dragon Slayer.

But then he also remembered why this dragon was so deadly. Its black and silver skin was able to absorb metal, rendering any swords completely useless against it, and the skin was still so thick that wooden spears were no match to penetrate it.

Juan rolled out of his dive and leapt for the dragon’s extended wing. The dragon flapped and flailed, but the man hung on tight and clawed his way to the creature’s back. The dragon took flight, soaring up high, and Juan called out to the villagers below: “Go now! Run!” But no one moved. They stood around. Terrified? Awestruck? He had no idea. The beast couldn’t be more distracted. “Go!” he shouted again, but no one moved.

Then, the dragon swept low to the ground and in the midst of a barrel-roll, scraped the man loose from his hide. Juan tumbled to a halt and watched as the dragon again landed between him and the gate. He looked once more at the idle people and shot them a questioning look. They offered no response.

The dragon thundered once more, challenging the man for another round. Juan got up just as the dragon pressed his head forward, teeth bared, a flying bed of spikes. He stepped aside and then caught onto the creature’s upper jaw. The dragon again bucked, trying to shake loose the human barnacle, but with no luck.

“Go!” he cried again, but still the people did not budge. They only stood and stared, now emotionless, as if they were more interested in watching the fight, maybe even watching his inevitable doom.

Finally, the dragon flung him to the ground. Juan did not feel any of the pain, though he was certainly excited. He got up on his elbows and looked at the people once more. He remembered something the wizard Satine once told him: “One day, you’re going to meet a dragon you can’t beat. Make sure you know when you’ve met him, and you might live to fight another day.” Maybe this was that dragon. And if this was that dragon, these people needed to be out of here. But it was their own fault for not running when he told them to.

Juan rolled from his position, just in time to miss the dragon’s deadly kiss. Now under the dragon, he sprinted toward the gate. If the people were not smart enough to run when the dragon was high in the air, then they were going to have to be on their own. This dragon was not dying today, and neither was he.

As Juan ran for the gate, it began to drop shut. He reached it just in time to dive under before it slammed shut. The dragon no longer paid him any heed. It was satisfied with its victory and needed no

further convincing that the battle was over. The man looked through the gate at the people staring from the tunnels. They still showed no expression. No fear, no worry, not even any concern for the dragon who also seemed to disregard them.

The more he thought about it the more he realized, maybe the only reason the dragon fought him was because *he* was looking to fight the dragon. Maybe the dragon didn't care one way or the other about him.

Juan turned and walked toward the setting sun. He looked back once. The crowd and the dragon watched him, but there was no fear, no malice, nothing. He turned back around and walked as the sun grew brighter.

And then he woke up. He was back at home, in his bed, and daylight was starting to glow in the window.

'What a strange dream.' Strange, but enlightening. Something in his mind — or was it his heart? — knew what he needed to do. He had made up his mind, one way or the other. He had done all he could for his company and he was no longer seeing the forward momentum he was promised all those years ago. There was only one thing left to do.

Juan smiled as he thought about how he walked away from the dragon. He may not have been able to kill the beast, but he certainly gave it his all before he let it go. Who else can say they wrangled an invincible dragon and lived to tell the tale?

Syrinx from Crescent City by Sarah J. Maas (digital art)



Jennifer Weir

Cloud and Smoke

I had seen him only last week but it was like I couldn't get enough. I sat on the passenger side. His lashes hit the inside of his glasses. He pulled the pipe to his mouth and inhaled. I could see the green turn to ashes as they burned. Then he released the smoke after a second. They formed swirls as he exhaled. He smiled at me and offered me some, I smiled and shook my head. I had never taken the time to watch someone perform this ritual I usually partake in. It was almost beautiful to see the swirls form from his lips and his body relax after each exhale.

We walked into the restaurant to see what the hype was about, but I honestly 3. care less about the food. I was honestly there for him. I stood there swaying back and forth catching his scent. It was a familiar one, one that always put me at ease. A smell that lingered from long nights with my friends. After we painfully flirted with each other and waited for the food we headed back to the car. I think we both felt it, our energy was different that day. We waited for the other to make the first move. I had been waiting for weeks for him to get the hint. He never did. He was always so shy and quiet, almost timid. I smiled at him as I ran my fingers down his shoulder. He was nervous, I could tell, as he placed his hand on my thigh. Then it was almost as if I permitted him, he finally got the hint.

He leaned in to kiss me, hand on my hip, mine behind his head. My breath was shaky then shallow. This was new territory in our relationship. We'd never discussed our relationship, we kind of ignored the labels and existed. We slowly pulled away when he grabbed my hand. We had just been friends a minute ago and now, something more. It was like they weren't real (our hands), it looked like they moved in slow motion. Our faces turned to face each other and again we leaned in, this time he tugged on my lip with his own. His mouth tastes like smoke, which was somehow comforting. His tongue danced around my mouth and my mind flashed to the last time I had taken part in the swirl making practice. His mouth confirmed that I wasn't the only one who had the after taste.

It was something I was okay with and enjoyed. His hand playing with mine. He slowly pulled my hand to his lips. I looked at him and his lips formed into a smile as did mine. Why? Because this felt right. Months after excruciating awkwardness and he finally got the hint. But the question now is where do we go from here?

Ann Marie Lawson

A Day In The Life Of A Cat

BEWARE!

Thundercats are on the move Junkyard cats are loose
Prowling the neighborhood are monsters Watch Out! They are coming your way

No trash cans are safe, the allies are under attack No Cookie Monster, No Yogi Bear
Tiger Cats? Maybe! Tom Cats! That's for sure Alley Cats! Junkyard cats, they are everywhere

Throwing trash in the air in search of treasures, sending a fish vertebrae flying through Darwin's window, landing center on the newspaper in his hand. Mrs Darwin took one look and yelled on the top of her lungs; Heathcliff! He took off around the corner pouncing on the Magic School Bus on Sesame Street. Heathcliff sat on the top of the bus with his legs crossed picking his teeth, mischievous as a kitten, the bus came to a screeching halt and without any thought Heathcliff made a mad dash on St. Elsewhere and in an instant was standing face to face with Night Rider. Before he could open his mouth he was hit in the gut by a carrot eating Luney Tune, What's up Doc? You! It's Easter already? Crawling on all four, Heathcliff moved closer to K.T.T. sitting in the driveway, suddenly, a red light began moving slowly forward and backwards. Heathcliff,

startled by the flashing lights took two steps backwards, the engine revs once, twice, and before it could rev a third time Heathcliff took off like Bolt in 9.58 seconds finding himself on the wall with a web swinging camel trying to save Captain America. What the hell am I doing here? Help! Put me down, cried Heathcliff, without hesitation spidy threw him into the air, Whoa.. he cried landing on four wobbling feet in a tree at the side of the building. Whew! That was close, now how do I get down from here and find my way back home? The limb was unable to hold Heathcliff and he found himself falling rapidly, and suddenly sitting with Lightning League, speeding down hill so fast he was thrown into the ocean. Hey! I can't swim. Heatcliff paddled for a few minutes trying to get out of the water but the waves kept pushing him back out and down under, he found himself on the back of Flounder swimming with a red singing butler tending to her royal highness.

Look at the Tom cat sliding down the Giraffe Heathcliff! Heathcliff! Where are you buddy?
Waking up from his nap, did someone say my name? There you are, I've been looking all over for you

Boy am I glad to see you.. Said Heathcliff, scratching his head Looking around,What's the matter?
Iggy asked, you look lost You missed lunch, you never miss lunch, I did! didn't I?
That's it, No more adventures for me

Landon Logue

The Hero Who Failed

He burst through the door snapping the hinges and sending them across the room. It was a cold, white walled room filled with the scent of metal and chemicals. Past the tables and chairs lined neatly across the room, stood the silhouette of the evil Dr. Layzon. He stood all of 5ft 6in, with a slender face and neck, pale as a fresh yellow onion. His scar is getting worse thought Red Owl. Dr. Layzon slowly turned his neck, knowing that it was only a matter of time before he'd see his nemesis arrive. With a cool, smooth about-face, Dr. Layzon smiled.

"Come to finally die, Hoot man?" said Dr. Layzon.

"I have come to stop you," said Red Owl. "There's nowhere to run. Your time of terrorizing this city is over."

Dr. Layzon groaned. *He's truly learned nothing he thought to himself.* Dr. Layzon removed his stylish black framed glasses and pulled a cleaning cloth out from his front pocket. He often used this time to reflect and think about his next course of action. After a moment, he chuckled to himself.

"Oh Owl boy, I truly thought this time would be different. I almost admire your sense of duty, foolish and misguided as it is," sighed Dr. Layzon. "You will never understand my vision for this city, neither will they."

He gestured his arm to the window where 20 stories below, the hustle and bustle of New Light City citizens below were completely unaware of this clash of the titans. Just then, a flash of flame and a loud explosion was heard. Debris flew past the window and car alarms were sounding on the streets below. Red Owl's face flushed, and his eyes widened.

"What are you planning, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE," yelled Red Owl. His fists under his gloves and gauntlets tightened with the tense sound of leather that could be heard from across the room by Dr. Layzon. Red Owl began aggressively making his way across the room, tossing tables and chairs as if they were children's toys.

Dr. Layzon, with his right hand behind his back, waited patiently. His smile could pierce armor, and that it did. Like a bullfighter in a cage, Dr. Layzon's hand grasped the grip of his pistol while his bull charged towards him. As Red Owl was approaching, Dr. Layzon drew his pistol from his back, brushing his black coat out like the gunfighters of the old west. BANG.

The bull stopped dead in his tracks. White noise and white lights enveloped Red Owl, as he looked in Dr. Layton's eyes. Feelings of confusion and betrayal swept over him like waves crashing into the cliffside. Why, Red Owl thought to himself. *I thought... he needed me. That was his reason for living. To fight me.*

"You know, I thought about this for some time Owl Boy," Dr. Layton said. "I had this great speech about corruption of power, how the system is rigged in favor of those who created it, so on and so on." He waved his pistol around as if he was teaching a class. "And then I thought, just like you inspired me, someone else will rise up to stop me. I don't need you anymore."

He walked over to the wounded Red Owl, propping his leg on the chair that fell on top of him after falling to the ground.

"You were fun though," Dr Layzon smiled. "We were fun. I just feel like it was time for a change. It's not you, it's me!"

Dr. Layzon burst into a demonic, cackling laughter that echoed in the room as he made his way to the door. Red Owl, coughing up blood, helplessly watched the buildings come crashing down in his final minutes. The screams of terror from the victims penetrated his chest. His failure flooded his heart and this feeling would be the last feeling Red Owl would ever feel.

Citealli Luna



Linen Curtains

Breathing in deeply, I smell the bookish musk and faint vanilla candle still burning somewhere in my room. Parting with my dream world of freedom and escape, I open my eyes to my dusty old confine. Light pours in, filtered through my linen curtains, dimly lighting the space. It must be around seven in the morning, judging by how dark it is in here. Judging time by how much light is in my room is one of my developed skills, refined over the past ten months.

Sighing, I crawl out of my beautiful bed, it's sheets not wanting to let me go, it's warm embrace trying to pull me back to my dream world. As my feet touch the floor a shiver makes its way up my spine. Cold. The floors are cold. It's always cold. Always dim. Always musty. Allowing my feet to take my body to the nearly out candle I hesitate to extinguish it. It's the only other form of light in my room. I stare at the flame and wonder if she ever feels trapped like me. Forever confined to that little round glass, exploring every inch of it but never outside it. I stare at her, watching as she dances effortlessly, passionately, how she fills up all the space her tiny glass. Performing for only me as an audience. She sways from side to side, then quivers around then rolls and turns. Her light and dance is casted faintly onto the walls of my room. It glides across my library wall, then my closet, my desk, even casting onto my bed that is calling for me to come back. Being so enamored with her glow, my heart sinks as I remember I have to say goodbye to the fiery dancer. Steeling my heart, I quickly blow out the candle, not interested in heartfelt goodbyes, I know I'll see her again tonight.

Getting up from my seated position, I stare at those curtains. With the room darker now there's only the faint sunlight pouring in through the linen. I don't open them. I never do. I can't. No matter how hard I try, those curtains remain fixed, never budging from their place on the bar that holds them. I've tried before; I've tried opening them, tearing them down, cutting them, I even invited the dancer to have the curtains as her stage. But each time, the curtains remained the same. Always the same, never changing, always stuck in the same place. So every day I go through the same motions, telling the time by how much light is in my room.

I often wonder about what's outside.... if it's the same as I last saw it or if it has changed tremendously. I imagine dancing outside just like how the flame dances. Ardent, strong, passionate and not stopping for anyone. I imagine being able to see the sunlight completely, not the same watered-down version I see every day. I suppose that's why I love to dream. I can go to a world where I can spend the days outside. Go wherever I'd like. I can be free and run until my lungs feel like bursting. I can travel across deserts and seas, go on adventures in faraway lands, I can even fly and do magic in a world I wish was mine. But I'm still here. Waking up to filtered light through linen curtains, only to sit at my desk and wait until I can see her dance again. The same thing over and over. Waiting, hoping, wondering.... if I'll ever be able to dance as passionately and feverishly as her, outside.

Dre Martinez

Luck

Walking into seventh period, I had never expected to talk with anyone until he walked in. It was the first day of Junior year, and I hadn't made a single friend throughout my time in high school. I had gotten used to it over the years because I was too shy to talk with anyone new.

I sat in the back of my last class for the day, chemistry; I had hoped no one would sit near me, but my luck had always been bad.

"Hi!"

I was so lost in thought that I hadn't realized someone sat next to me. Smiling nervously, I shyly said: "Hey."

Trying to seem nicer than how I thought I was coming off, I grinned awkwardly.

He chuckled slightly, "I'm Fenri, and yes I know it's a strange name."

Watching him laugh made my heart stop, and my stomach felt like butterflies were tap-dancing aggressively. I must have been in a daze for some time because he asked "Are you okay?"

My eyes widened and my face quickly burned up with embarrassment, "Uh..Y-y-yeah sorry. My name is Eden."

Still fiercely blushing, I avoided his gaze, and stared at my coalesced hands; I was wishing a black hole would swallow me at that moment. Fenri scooted closer to me, "That's a nice name! Are you-

"Good morning class! Now if you'll all be quiet while I take attendance, then we can get started with supplies you'll need for the class."

He shut his mouth and smiled apologetically, mouthing sorry. I whispered back with a grin, "It's fine, I'll talk to you later."

Soon after our first encounter, we had become best friends, and we were attached at the hip. Once we entered college together, I had known I was in love with Fenri, but I could never build up the courage to confess my feelings for him.

My luck was always horrible because eventually he got a girlfriend before I could do anything.

When he told me about how he confessed to Mia, his girlfriend, my body froze and my chest ached as if my heart had physically broken then and there. I gritted my teeth in an attempt to feign a smile as he excitedly told me the details, but all I could do was try my best not to break down.

Interrupting him, I rushed out an excuse to leave: "Sorry..I'm not feeling too great. I think I-I'm going to go home."

"O-oh okay. I hope you feel better soon!"

Weeks had gone by, I had been avoiding him, too scared to see or hear him with her. Eventually, Fenri had enough and came to my house after I kept ignoring his texts and calls.

My door opened and he tentatively walked in, "H-hey, um, you weren't answering your phone. I got worried so I came to check on you."

I looked out of my window, secretly wishing he'd leave because it hurt to see him; my chest felt like it was being crushed each time I caught a glimpse or heard him, or even thought of him.

"Uh yeah, I just had a cold. I'm fine Fen."

Fenri could tell I was lying but had nodded his head, "Are you feeling alright to hang out?"

I winced at how erratic my heart began to beat at the thought: “I-I don’t think so. I’m actually going to head to bed soon anyways, sorry.”

He smiled weakly, “It’s okay, I’ll see you later. Let me know if you need anything, ok?”

I nodded my head slightly, only looking at his reflection in the window, “Ok.”

I heard my door close as he left, tears started flowing down my face, and my heart completely shattered. I gently slid into bed, covering my head with my blanket, and curled into a ball as I cried myself to sleep.

Monday rolled around so I decided to pretend like everything was fine, and hung out with Fenri as usual. During lunch, he left me to hang out with Mia for some lunch date they had planned. He kept apologizing, but I smiled and sent him on his way.

For months, I had littered my arms with thin scars, and always felt guilty after each time; it hurt to pretend like I was fine, but I didn’t want Fenri to worry about me. Fenri used to ease the pain I had felt mentally, but had become my undoing. I began drinking the pain away soon after I turned twenty-one, and I was turning into someone I couldn’t recognize. I was living a double life: one side was happy and fun loving Eden who did well in school, and the other side was depressed, drinking until I blacked out, and never had gone a day without cutting out the pain.

I wore nothing but long sleeves, Fenri never asked why because he was too consumed with the feelings that came with first love.

We would hang out as usual, but Mia was always by his side now. I had become a master at feigning happiness, and had grown to completely despise myself.

Months had come and went, I couldn’t take it anymore, so one winter night I went too far. I had drank too much, and had given up all hope. I hurt myself so deep that I fell on my bedroom floor, smiling as I felt the pain in my chest fade away.

When my family came home that night, all that could be heard was the pained screams of finding someone they loved slowly dying.

I woke up, hearing a monitor beep, letting everyone I know I was still alive. Opening my eyes, the light blinded me for a few moments. I felt a weight on my hand, I looked over and saw my mom silently sleeping; there were bags under her eyes, and she had a red nose, showing that she had been crying. Looking around I saw flowers decorating my hospital room, there were also balloons saying, “Get well.”

I tried itching my nose, I didn’t get far because my arm erupted in pain, and then I remembered everything that led up to this point. I must have made a noise when the pain came over me because my mom stirred awake from her slumber.

I panicked, suddenly feeling an abundance of shame for making everyone worry, so I tried closing my eyes to pretend to sleep.

“I know you’re awake, Ede. My beautiful baby...I’m sorry I didn’t notice how much pain you were in. I’m a horrible mother, aren’t I?”

I could hear the torment in her voice as it wavered after each word, she was crying. I opened my eyes, “Mom you’re the best, and it’s not your fault I’m this way. I love you, I’m sorry that I worried everyone.”

Biting my lip, trying to hold back a sob, I turned away. She put her hand under my chin, guiding my face back to hers: “It’s okay, I’m just glad you’re awake.”

“Thanks ma, I-”

“Oh, sorry for interrupting.”

Fenri had walked in, he looked horrible, and had a distraught look on his face. My mom smiled

and stood up, "It's okay, I was going to go get coffee anyways."
She kissed my head, and squeezed Fenri's shoulder before leaving the room.
I looked down at my hands like the first day we met, I was nervously twiddling my thumbs, and I was anxiously waiting for him to say something.

Seconds felt like hours as the silence stretched, then suddenly I was gently swept up in his arms. I could feel his warm tears falling and soaking into my hospital gown. I was in shock but hugged him back tightly, trembling, and crying uncontrollably.

We held each other in silence for what seemed like forever.

"I'm sorry."

My eyes widened in surprise, I pushed him away to look at him, "What? W-why?"

He sniffed and wiped his tears away, "I didn't know how bad you were...I knew something was wrong, but I waited for you to tell me yourself. I was a coward for not being upfront, and I was a horrible friend for not being there for you."

Sighing, I chuckled and reached my hand out and flicked his forehead: "Dummy. It's-none of this was anyone's fault but mine. I should apologize for worrying you, and for making you feel this way."

I smiled at the love of my life, hoping that no one, especially him, would ask me why I did it. Of course I had never been that lucky, "Why?"

My heart dropped, "W-why what?"

He squinted his eyes with an annoyed expression, "Don't, just don't. Please tell me the truth."

Each harsh word contained heartache, "I-uh..I..."

I broke out into a sobbing mess, I kept shaking my head no, and I repeatedly apologized: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I-I'm so sorry. I'm so-"

I felt his hands wrap around mine, his had always been bigger, and he put his forehead against mine.

He whispered quietly, "I thought I lost you."

I barely heard it, I thought I heard wrong, but he definitely said it.

Fenri and I talked about what had happened while I was in the hospital, and I eventually fell asleep as he held my hand.

After getting out of the hospital, I attended mandatory therapy sessions, and had been healing physically and mentally.

My phone pinged,

Fenri: *Hey, feel like going out tonight? Just you and me like old times! :)*

Me: *Hm..What do you have in mind?*

Fenri: *It's a surprise! :p*

I giggled at his antics, feeling giddy about getting to hang out with him.

I got ready and he picked me up soon after, and as we drove I watched the scenery speed by.

"Hey..Earth to Eden. You there?"

I laughed and glanced at the blue-haired dork next to me: "Yeah, just trying to figure out where you're taking me."

He smiled with the biggest grin, "You'll see."

After twenty more minutes of driving, we stopped at a flower field, Fenri parked the car and took out blankets. We sat on the pieces of fabric and stared up at the stars.

"Thank you for this, Fen. I really needed this."

"Of course, you know I love you."

It hurt to hear him say that, but it also made me warm inside; he was the best person I had ever met, so it makes it harder to try to get over him.

Something had been nagging at me, so I moved past my feelings and asked, “H-how’s Mia?” He looked at me with a tight smile, “She broke up with me when you were in the hospital.”

I felt a guilty rush of happiness: “I’m sorry to hear that. Do you wanna talk about it?”

“Are you sure? It’s supposed to be a fun night out, and I don’t want to bring the mood down.”

My curiosity got the best of me, “Please talk to me.”

A dry laugh escaped him, “Okay. When I got the call that you had gotten admitted into the hospital, I dropped everything to go see you. I had actually run out on her while we were on a date, it was harsh of me, but I had to see you. She wasn’t happy...Even after explaining why, she didn’t care. She made me choose between you two, and I obviously chose you; I told her she was a horrible person for doing that, she slapped me, and told me to ‘go to hell.’”

He hesitated before saying, “She told me that you were a f*g, so I left her there before doing something I’d regret.”

I didn’t know what to say, I felt angry and upset, but I didn’t want to ruin our night out. I grabbed his hand: “I’m sorry you had to go through that, and I’m sorry I was what made you two break up.”

He shouted out, annoyed, “Shush. Stop apologizing. I’m glad she broke up with me, she was horrible, especially to you. You’re important to me, more important than some girl.”

Tears filled my eyes, “Fen, I love you. Not in the way you might think. I-I’m in love with you, and have been since I first met you. If you don’t feel the same way, I don’t care, as long as you’re in my life I’d be ha-”

Fireworks, that’s what it felt like when his lips touched mine. The salty, sweet kiss would forever be ingrained in my memory.

I had wished, that night, the kiss would last forever.

But...I don’t have much luck.

Fenri had become sick the night after our magical kiss. The doctors said that there was a malignant tumor in his brain, and he had a few months to live.

We spent each waking moment together, not wasting any time; a month passed and he grew weaker as each day passed.

One night I woke up in a cold sweat, and looked to Fenri’s side of the bed in fear. He looked so cold and lifeless; I started shaking him, hoping he’d wake up and laugh at me for worrying.

He died in his sleep, right next to me; they found a letter written to me, he had known he was close to leaving me, and had wanted to say a last few words to me:

Dear Eden,

I don’t have much time left..I’ve always wondered how my life would be, but I’d never thought this would happen. My life passed by so quickly, but I couldn’t have had a more perfect life. I never told you this, but I have loved you since the first time I laid eyes on you. I know I’m dumb for not confessing, but you knew how my parents were. I hid my feelings, and I even got a girlfriend. When you went to the hospital, I knew life was too short to hide my true feelings.

You’re the most beautiful and perfect soul, you’re my soulmate. I love you more and more each day. I know this will be tough for you, but I want you to live life without me. Find someone new when you’re ready, and they better treat you right. Eden, I never knew what the big deal was when it came to love, but when I saw you it changed me. Love yourself for me, if you can’t for yourself; don’t cry too much, talk about your feelings, and live life to the fullest. I love you more than life itself, and wouldn’t have wished for anyone more perfect than you.

Love,

Fen

P.S. I'm leaving everything to you, my one and only true love.

I cried, of course I cried, but every time I missed you it felt like you were there holding me like the night in the hospital.

Today, I'm happy, Fen, because I'm adopting with my husband. I never thought I'd find someone after you, and yeah he treats me right. I think about you everyday, and will never forget you. I'll live without you, but you'll never not be with me. Who knew I'd have this much luck, especially with the life I have lived; well, I have yet to fully live. I love you, Fen, always and forever will I feel lucky to have met you.

Lischa Mears

.....

The Overpowered Meets Demise

Katsuo's emerald orbs were beginning to fade like verdant leaves in fall.

Sprawled on rough dirt, he tried to focus his eyes on the gray sky above him.

His limbs were numb. He was sure his arms and legs were completely shattered.

A drop of rain from the clouds fell down his cheek, but Katsuo could only focus on the cold that spread throughout his entire body in a drowning wave of blue.

Soon, he began to feel a comforting warmth.

Katsuo didn't know if it was the blood oozing from his wounds, pooling around his body in a final embrace or if it was his body fighting to stay alive.

Either way, he knew he didn't have long.

Katsuo squinted at clouds of gray in hopes of seeing the sun, but there was no emerging ray of hope.

He had lost the battle.

No, he had lost *everything*.

The disfigured bodies of his friends lay just an arm's reach away from him.

He could have saved them.

He *should have* been able to save them.

He was so very strong, wasn't he?

In the past, nothing could stop him. Katsuo would continue to rise from the ground no matter how many times he was forced to fall by the monstrous souls before him. He would remember those he loved and lost, the thought alone an electric shock to his heart giving him the strength he needed to get back up on staggering feet.

Katsuo's staggering feet would then plant firmly onto the ground, his arms rising into his signature fighting stance with a crazed grin on his face. Pain was never a ruminating thought over saving those he loved.

He was a hero after all.

Katsuo's relentless perseverance often scared every villain he faced, their eyes widening and stomachs turning at the sight of someone so willing to destroy themselves for the sake of others.

It was insane if he was being truly honest with himself.

Suicidal, others might say.

But the overwhelming power that coursed through his body like a raging tsunami gave him confidence. So much confidence that the tallied wins against every villain that would helplessly crumple to the ground by his hands instilled Katsuo with the idea that he'd never lose.

Katsuo hadn't realized he closed his eyes until blood spluttered from his mouth in a violent cough, jolting his eyes open. He groaned at the impact of the cough; his ribs were likely impaling his lungs.

Gravel crunched beside his ears; the sound too loud as the world began to appear colorless, fading into distant echoes of a calming night.

Katsuo was suddenly gripped by the collar, the brutal force making him gasp for air at the blaze of pain that spread torturously throughout his body.

Murky water cleared from his vision and his eyes quickly flooded with transparent hatred.

The very man, Demise, no the *monster* who ruthlessly killed his beloved friends was looking down at him with a deranged smile.

Katsuo tried to curse at him, to curse at the world for his unmoving and useless limbs, but he couldn't make a sound.

"Get up, get up, get up!" Katsuo screamed inside his head, the pain drowning his cries in an incessant downpour of knives driving into his skin.

Katsuo could only make a small, pitiful shriek when Demise mercilessly impaled him in the chest

with his blade, wasting no time in making the finishing blow.

A sickening sound filled the air, rivaling the thrum of the rain that now poured down from the sky to the desolate world below in full force.

“Let me humble you a bit, kid.” Demise began to speak, voice feigning sympathy. “The instant you think you’re more powerful than anyone else is when you lose. In reality, it makes you *weak*.”

Each syllable dripped with venom and deep down, Katsuo knew the sick monster was right.

Katsuo was weak.

And it was like the world was crying for him at this shattering realization.

Demise carelessly released his grip around Katsuo’s collar causing him to fall unceremoniously to the ground in a swirling puddle of red and gray. Katsuo could hear the villain’s resounding laugh for a timeless second before he entered unmistakable tranquility.

Melinda Quack



The Knight of Trustworthiness: The Liar Who Lies All His Life

Once upon a time, there was an evil, shape-shifting dragon who comes out of his lair every ten years to demand human sacrifices and treasures in exchange for the peace and well-being of the human world.

For hundreds upon thousands of years, he has terrorized the human world, taking immense treasures and large quantities of humans— particularly human women. Countless knights have tried to slay him, but they all have ultimately failed, and their bones soon lined his cave. The amount of bones was so vast indeed that, one day, while searching his hoard for some morsel of food, the dragon tripped over a particularly large pile of bones and died. —Well, he didn’t really die. He just had a bad enough accident that his soul was shaken loose from his body.

At that moment, smoke suddenly erupted from an inconspicuous patch of ground, filling the cave in its pitch-black haze. Then, as soon as it appeared, it seemed to dissipate, retreating back into a shadowy figure with glowing eyes. This figure was Death.

Death glanced over at the dragon, and a transparent version of it slowly rose up and slowly floated toward them. Then, it was sucked into the coiling smoke that surrounded their body. At that moment, all of the human souls that were trapped in the cave because of their lingering resentment suddenly poured into Death’s shadow in droves. Hundreds upon thousands of souls entered the underworld that night, and Death finally let out a breath. If they hadn’t come up with such a brilliant solution, then they probably would have been out of a job before long....

That aside, what were they going to do with the technically “still alive” dragon? Death thought for a moment and suddenly had an idea. Wasn’t there a human boy from one of those millions of worlds out there who was about to have a heart attack due to something about college or something? They could just pluck out the boy’s soul early on and put it in the dragon’s body. Then, because the boy was originally a human, he naturally would not continue eating humans, Death wouldn’t be out of a job, and the boy would continue to live on— it was a win-win for everyone! Really!

So, Death snapped their fingers and it was done.

At that moment, Lyon (pronounced Lat-on) woke up and found that he had suddenly become a dragon, and not just any dragon but an evil dragon like those in fairy tales. He felt speechless. Just a few seconds ago, he had been about to open a letter from his dream college and now he was suddenly a dragon in some fantasy world. AHHH!!! If only it had happened a few seconds later...! He really wanted to know if he was accepted— actually no. If he had been accepted and then immediately traveled to another world and turned into a dragon, he might have really burst a blood vessel...

Never mind. It is better not to know. So... anyway, what was he supposed to do again? Go to a human castle in half a year to collect treasure and some women? ...To eat?!

What a massive waste of resources!

He has been single for eighteen years already! Why in the world would he do something as ridiculous as that. Forget eating. He would rather turn back into a human, enter the human world, and find himself a date!

Oh! And girls love a strong and handsome man, right? No problem! He’ll just pretend to be a knight from a distant land! He’ll call himself the.... the.... the Knight of Trustworthiness! Yeah, the Knight of Trustworthiness! Who wouldn’t want to trust someone who was named “Trustworthy”? Even he wanted to trust himself, and he knew he wasn’t trustworthy— wait. Did he just expose himself...?

—Uh, yeah... so, dear narrator, please insert a time skip!

A time skip occurs.

The next day, he shifts into his human form, fills up a backpack with some gold coins, jewelry, and old dragon scales and teeth (as makeshift weapons in case he gets robbed) and makes his way to the nearest human town.

It is on this walk that he discovers something terrible. Walking is awful. Walking with a heavy backpack is beyond awful. Walking with a heavy backpack on an empty stomach is beyond, beyond awful. In fact, his stamina is surprisingly pitiful for a dragon. But then again, considering the dragon’s habits, this is definitely the body of someone who only exercises once every ten years in order to terrorize the human world.

He eventually collapsed on the road before long, looking dusty and miserable. It was at that moment that a small cart pulled by donkeys had passed by, and the farmer inside noticed him. The farmer stopped his cart and got down to help him. Seeing him, Lyon asked for a cup of water and the farmer obliged.

“Hey, thanks, bro! I was really about to die of thirst right there!”

“‘Twas nothin’ much. Any man would do the same in my position. But, yer not from around here, are ya? I’ve never heard anyone talk like ya before.”

“...Oh, uh, yeah. I’m from far away... Like, reeeeeeally far away. Like, so far that I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“I could tell. What are ya doing around these parts?”

“I’m, uh.... I’m a knight. I’m the Knight of Trustworthiness! I was... uh... God sent me a vision, telling me that there was a mighty dragon terrorizing these parts and told me to come find and slay the beast! Yeah! And of course, I, being really handsome, smart, and strong— I even won the National Dragon Slaying Contest back where I lived— agreed to take on this quest to free the people from this tyrannical Beast!!”

Upon hearing this, the farmer fell to his knees, and cried out: “Thank the Lord!! He has finally sent us another worthy warrior to slay that evil dragon!!”

Hearing this, the newly named “knight” suddenly fell silent. Another knight? How many knights were there before him? Also, why did he frickin’ say that? **He’s** the frickin’ dragon! What’s he supposed to do now? Slay himself???

The farmer was so happy that he gave Lyon a lift to the village chief’s house. There, Lyon told the chief the same story, albeit in a more confident tone than before, and the chief was so happy that he planned to send Lyon to the capital city that very instant.

“May I offer you a horse, Sir Knight?”

“Yes, please! I’m in desperate need of a horse. In fact, back where I came from, I was the best horse rider there ever was!”

The chief’s polite smile wavered a bit as he asked Lyon to follow him out to the corral, but Lyon was too busy bragging about himself to notice.

Nevertheless, as they walked, Lyon began to sweat. Now he’s done it this time. Just watch, because of all of that boasting, the village chief will give him an extremely powerful stallion that will throw him off as soon as he even tries to ride it, and he will be on his ass in three seconds flat.

Coincidentally, as he was thinking this, the village chief was also sweating. Here was a hero declaring that he was not only going to save the world but also a renowned horse rider. As soon as he sees that their village could only provide him with a single mare of unknown lineage and pedigree, he would probably get mad and storm off...

“This... uh... well, this horse... Well, uh, I know that, having traveled far and wide, Sir Knight would naturally have seen countless horses, and I apologize if it’s not up to your standards, but...”

“...No, no, no! I would be perfectly happy even if you gave me the weakest pony in the entire village... Hahaha.....”

“Oh no! We couldn’t possibly treat our hero so crudely! We must offer you the best!” The village chief sweated harder. Did the knight really not mind or was he just paying lip-service? Some of those knights that he met before were like this...

“No, no! Really! You don’t have to do that! I’m fine with just a pony, honest!”

Thus, both men continued to discuss the matter back and forth as they made their way to the corral. As they walked, Lyon was silently praying to all of the gods above that the horse would be a docile one while the village chief was silently praying to every god that he knew that the hero would not leave after seeing the mare. This went on until they made it out to the corral. There, a lone mare grazed silently by the wooden fence.

At that moment, Lyon let out a silent cheer in his heart, while the village chief braced himself for the knight’s ire.

“Why, she’s perfect!” Lyon exclaimed.

“I apologize for— uh, pardon?”

“I said she’s perfect! Exactly what I was looking for!”

Looking at Lyon’s joyful face, the Chief felt bewildered. What happened to the insults and accusations that he was imagining? Why was reality so different from his expectations? —Could it be that the knight was taking pity on their village’s poverty and said all of those things just to make him feel better?

The more he thought, the more the village chief believed in his own theory, and the more touched he felt. Every other hero who visited their town had basically demanded the best stallions they could offer, and after so many times, their herd of horses had eventually dwindled to nothing. In fact, this mare had barely been caught a few months ago.

At first, the chief had thought that this young knight would have been like all of the rest, but when faced with such a subpar horse, he just accepted it as happily as if he had been offered an actual purebred stallion worth several cities. Truly, what a kind young knight.

Meanwhile, the so-called “kind young knight” was still celebrating his astounding luck. He even lamented the fact that he couldn’t buy a lottery ticket...

Once the mare was saddled up and Lyon was given both rations and a map, everyone said their tearful goodbyes. Then, Lyon rode to the capital city. Unfortunately, as a person who was not only unaccustomed to a horse but also forced to ride for several days, when Lyon finally made it to his

destination, his entire body was so sore that he could barely shuffle into an inn to stay for the night before collapsing at the front desk. Luckily, the innkeeper was not only strong, but also a kindly man. Thus, when he helped the new guest to his room, he only took ten gold pieces as his “carrying” fee...

Lyon eventually woke up twelve hours later to a body that didn’t even feel like a body anymore and he wanted to cry. He thought that he had a dragon’s body! What happened to that magical vitality and immediate healing thing that all magical beings got to enjoy? Why was he so weak????

As a result, he stayed there for several more days, and was fleeced by the “kindly” innkeeper. Then, on the fourth day, seeing that he was running out of money, he gritted his teeth, got out of bed, and hobbled his way to the Royal Castle. There, he asked for an audience with the king, was granted such, and told the king his story, albeit with a few extra details added in. He talked about how the dragon’s demands had caused his family to fall into poverty (actually, that was the innkeeper), and that he was going to bring peace and justice to the people (well, in truth, he was just trying to sound inspiring when he made that speech... it wasn’t like he was actually planning to slay himself...).

The king was so moved by Lyon’s speech that he wanted to marry his daughter off to him right that instant. However, Lyon, remembering that he still had to deal with his other identity, righteously rejected him, stating that he must slay the dragon and bring back proof of his deeds before he could consider himself qualified for the princess’s hand in marriage.

The king was moved again. Such a righteous and honorable young knight was truly worthy of his daughter!

“Very well! Your wish is granted! Someone! Help this brave knight prepare for the journey and prepare the grandest carriage for him to ride in!”

“YES! —Uh... I mean, uh, thank you, your majesty! I greatly appreciate your aid!”

So he was prepared. Unfortunately, carriage rides on unpaved roads are extremely bumpy and motion-sickness-inducing. So the young knight spent the rest of the ride either vomiting or laying down.

The carriage driver honestly could not understand how this weak guy would be able to slay the dragon, but hey, better the knight than himself, right? Maybe he could scare away the dragon with his vomit or use his stomach acid to melt it or something?

On their way to the dragon’s lair, they encountered a busybody priest, who quickly found out the purpose of their journey. Thus, without further ado, he quickly brought them to his teacher, who eventually entrusted them with a box. According to the man, the box must not be opened until they found the evil being; then, once Lyon saw what was in the box, he would naturally know how to use it.

Everyone was confused at this point, but adhering to the virtue that one must always respect one’s elders, none of them dared to question the man. Lyon was especially confused, but in order to

maintain his air as a dignified and intelligent knight, he didn't say a single word from start to end other than a simple "Thank you" after receiving the box from the man. The man nodded and closed his eyes, hinting that he was done, and the monk led everyone outside. Then, they said their goodbyes and continued on their journey once again.

They finally made it to the evil dragon's lair, and Lyon got off the carriage with his box. He then confidently strode into the cave, much to the coachman's surprise and admiration, and disappeared into the shadows within.

Once he was far enough, he finally opened up the box to find... a hand grenade! Lyon's mouth dropped. You're kidding, right? Why is there a hand grenade here? These frickin' backward people can only ride in carriages and on horses— where the frick did they get the technology to make hand grenades????

Lyon was speechless. Then, he found a note stating that the hand grenade in the box was blessed by a priest and could destroy any evil creature, and felt even more speechless. Of all things, this was a holy hand grenade... —Err... why did this suddenly remind him of that one movie with the holy grail...?

Lyon was lost in thought when, suddenly, something moved in the dark. Being a dragon, Lyon naturally caught sight of the creature and screamed. There was a frickin' cockroach in front of him and it was **GIGANTIC!** It was nearly as big as a car!

At that moment, as if by instinct, Lyon ran behind a large rock, took out the hand grenade, pulled the pin, and chucked it at the roach.

The resulting explosion was glorious. It even destroyed three-fourths of the cave in one blow.

Now, going back to the waiting coachman, when he heard the explosion and saw the cave crumbling, he had jumped up and prepared to escape. However, it was at that moment that he noticed a humanoid shape walking out of the dust.... And it was Lyon...? Lyon won! And he was even holding... a bunch of teeth and scales? Who was so free that they would even take the time to pull out the dragon's teeth and scales one-by-one when they could have just chopped off its head in one blow? Really, this knight was a weird one— But he won, so who cares? They were all saved!! Hip-hip-hooray!!!

In the end, the knight returned to the kingdom with his haul and married the princess. They lived a happy life together, and from the start to finish, no one knew that the dragon was never defeated, and that Lyon was actually the dragon in disguise. However, they all lived happily ever after, and that's what really matters, right?

The End

The Lives of Louise Labé

Part I: Similar After All

Sometime in September when I was embroidering a beautiful rose (that really looks more like a lopsided lollipop than anything else...) on a pillow on the living room sofa, the phone rang. After the first ring, my daughter Stephanie immediately stopped typing on her laptop, reached over, and picked up the phone.

After listening to the caller's introduction, she answered, "Yes. This is her mother, Stephanie¹ Labé, speaking."

Then, after hearing the caller say something, Stephanie's brow suddenly wrinkled. As the silence went on, her face began to grow more and more concerned. Seeing this, I immediately set aside my embroidery work and watched her with bated breath. Then, to my relief, her concern slowly turned to irritation and then to helplessness. From there, I could easily deduce who was on the other end of the call.

If it were not one of my granddaughter Louisa's teachers or her principal, I would eat my own embroidery.

After a short while, Stephanie hung up the phone with a soft sigh. "Dammit, I knew a day like this would come. Oh, Louisa, Louisa, Louisa, did I name you too closely to *her*?"

At her dramatic monologue, I cackled. "I told you so! I told you that you would jinx yourself in the end! Besides, I remember when you were little, you weren't any better than she was. Always beating up someone here, beating up someone there... If I recall correctly, you even beat up your current husband. Then, he followed you home!"

A flush crept onto my daughter's face, "Mom!"

I snorted. "Yes, yes, alright, alright. Let's go pick up that little Stephanie two-point-oh."

"Mom!"

"Heeheehee!"

"Momma, it wasn't my fault! Ethan started it! He bullied Elise first! He tried to steal her snack so I just **had** to punch him!!"

As soon as we all got into the car, Louisa immediately let loose. It was in that moment that I just knew: She was definitely Stephanie's daughter, one-hundred percent.

¹ Stephanie is the English version of the name Etiennette, the name of Louise Labé's mother.

“...and, Momma, you told me that bullying is wrong, and that we should always try to help our family and friends, especially Elise because she’s so shy, and you said that if anyone tries to hurt us or our family, we shouldn’t let them, and...”

Even the way she defended herself was nearly the same as her predecessor nearly thirty years ago. Haaa... How the times have passed, but events have yet to change.

“.....” My daughter voiced my inner sigh, albeit in a more disappointed and frustrated way than I intended... But, hey, ‘E’ for effort.— Or was it ‘A’?

“Baby, I know you were trying to protect your little cousin, but fighting is wrong.”

“—But, why? James hit someone last time and he didn’t even get punished! Why do I have to get detention for two weeks? I didn’t even start the fight! Ethan started it!”

Recalling ‘James’ as the wealthy little brat who was sticking out his tongue at me on my way to the office, I suddenly chimed in. “Yeah! Isn’t it just because that little boy’s family has a little bit of money? We have it, too! Just take it out and directly smack people with it!”

“Mom! That’s illegal!”

“Well, that little school of yours should have thought about that before accepting bribes in the first place! Hmph!”

“Mom! That’s not what actually happened!”

“Then if that school was so noble, why pull my little granddaughter out?”

Stephanie took a deep breath, “Mom, I took Louisa out because I thought she needed a change of pace.”

“Change of pace-shmace! Just call it as it was!”

“...Alright, fine. I felt that the atmosphere of that school wasn’t a good fit for Louisa, so I pulled her out.”

I rolled my eyes, and said nothing. But of course, my thoughts were a whole ‘nother matter altogether. After all, I know it, you know it— the whole world knows it! Even if you don’t want to say anything, the truth won’t change!

After muttering a few more sarcastic insults inside of my head, I came back to reality and found my daughter reasoning with my granddaughter over the morality of getting into fights.

“... Honey... Although I know that you don’t think it’s fair for you to be punished when all you did was stand up to your cousin’s bully, unfortunately the world doesn’t work that way. If you hit someone, even if you are in the right, you will still get punished. And in truth, if it weren’t for the fact that there was evidence of bullying and that you were retaliating in self-defense, we could be

facing either a lawsuit or you might even go to jail, or..."

"Or we could fight back and just win with the power of money." I really just couldn't resist joining in and adding to the chaos.

My daughter gave me a glare through the front mirror and was about to retort when my granddaughter timely cut in.

"But, but, but, Momma, it wasn't even my fault! Why is it so wrong to stand up for what's right?"

Swallowing her previous retort, Stephanie took a deep breath to calm herself and responded to her daughter. "Louisa, honey, it's not wrong to stand up for what's right, but there are always better, more peaceful ways to resolve things. Fighting isn't always the answer."

"But....!"

"No, Louisa. Fighting is dangerous. Not only could you get hurt, but if the people you hit accidentally encountered severe problems, you would live with the guilt of it for the rest of your life."

The car descended into silence.

I glanced back at my granddaughter who was pouting sullenly, and then turned to look at my daughter's frown.

Really the same.

Part II: Let Me Tell You A Story

As the sky darkened into a deep blue, and the stars began to seep through its fabric, I glanced at my workaholic daughter still tapping away at her keyboard. Then, I got up from the couch. After that, I tried to usher my granddaughter off to brush her teeth, and then to bed. Unfortunately, the kid just dragged on and on, acting as if she could just waste the night away by dragging her feet and inching off to bed. That did not happen, and I eventually managed to put her to bed.

As I was tucking her in, Louisa suddenly called out to me: "Gramma?"

"Hm?" I respond, carefully smoothing out her blanket to soothe my own OCD tendencies.

"How come Momma doesn't want me to fight?"

I glanced up at her with a raised eyebrow, "Simple. She doesn't want to deal with your eventual legal battles."

“...What?”

“She doesn’t want to have to keep you out of prison.” I translated for myself.

“Why would I go to prison?”

“Because you beat someone up.”

“But I didn’t go to prison today.”

“Not *this* time, but next time you might not be so lucky.” I sighed as I shook my head. This kid...

“Gramma. Do you not like me?”

“I don’t like you?!” I felt incredulous. “If I didn’t like you, would I be lecturing you like this? If I didn’t like you, I would’ve just said nothing and let you go and beat up people and go straight to prison.”

“But, Gramma, you said fighting was okay.”

...Oh yeah...

“Er... Well, Grandma was just joking with you earlier. Grandma may say it’s okay, but in reality, it’s not okay. If you beat people up, you really might just go to prison.”

“But Gramma, James didn’t go to prison! Ethan didn’t go either, and he fought with me!”

“That’s only because you are still young now. When you get older and you still get into fights, you could get suspended from school, get expelled, go to prison, or even deal with all three at once.”

“Then, let me fight now!” Louisa sat up with an excited expression. She really looked like she was about to have a throw down right now.

“But if you learn to fight now, you’ll get used to it, and you won’t be able to stop yourself when you get older.”

“I can!”

“You can’t. Everything you do will come back to you. —Lie down, Louisa, and let me tell you a bedtime story.”

“—What story, Gramma?”

As soon as I had mentioned a story, that troublesome little kid obediently lay down, and covered herself with her blanket. Ha! I didn’t see her move that fast when I told her to go to bed earlier!

“A story. A story about your ancestor, Louise Labé.”

“Really? Hey! Her name sounds like mine!”

“Yes, I know. Your mom really liked this story, so she named you after that ancestor.” I poked her nose with a smile.

“Really? What was she like?”

“Well...”

Part III: Don't Wait Until It's Too Late For Regrets

The story of Louise Labé first began with her parents: Pierre Charly and Etienneette Roybet.

After losing his first wife, Pierre coincidentally met a young and beautiful girl named Etienneette. He had seemed greatly charmed by her, but at the time, he had been newly widowed, so no one would have expected him to marry a second wife barely a year after his first had been laid to rest. Yet, that was what he did.

Some people speculated on his actions and his young wife, but no one wanted to provoke someone they couldn't afford to provoke just for the sake of satisfying their curiosities. Thus, as quickly as the gossip began, it also died down just as quick.

Having affluence is nice, isn't it?

However, in the world that we live in, it is the men that live well, while the women must suffer. Although the rumors have died down, Etienneette was still isolated by the rest of the ladies of Lyon. Thus, depression, compounded by her consecutive births, quickly set in. Unfortunately, people of the time did not understand the true dangers of depression. Thus, she was left untreated for years, and what was left in the end was another corpse in its prime.

According to various sources, Pierre sincerely loved his new wife, so after her death, he deeply cherished his children for the rest of his life. In particular, he especially pampered his youngest daughter, Louise, who was said to look the most similar to her deceased mother. In fact, it was even said that because of these similarities, Louise was raised with the finest education and lifestyle that money could buy.

Of course, whether Pierre spoiled his daughter because he genuinely loved her mother or he felt guilty toward her, nobody knew. But what they did know was that he raised Louise into a pampered and headstrong young woman.

In fact, she was so headstrong that she would even “borrow” her elder brothers' clothes in order to go outside of the city and hunt various animals for sport. On top of that, the year she turned eighteen, she even cross-dressed as a man in order to join the Dauphin of France, Henry II's army.

Thankfully, she managed to sneak out of the army shortly thereafter, and her true identity was never discovered. However, her sudden stint terrified her family, and even caused her father to faint.

When he woke up, he seemed to have realized something and immediately prepared a will. He arranged his family properties and finances and then his youngest daughter's marriage to his partner and fellow ropemaker Ennemond Perrin. Although Louise was not satisfied with her father's marriage arrangements, when he died a few months later, she had no choice but to abide by his will and marry Ennemond, a man nearly twenty years her senior, anyway.

Due to her resistance to the marriage, even after they got married in 1543, Louise remained indifferent to her new husband. Thus, even if he had originally tried to get along with his new wife, being forced to endure her cold shoulder eventually wore Ennemond down, and he no longer bothered to get any closer to her.

As a result, their relationship remained that way for many years: warm, but not warm; cold, but not cold; merely, temperate. But, for all that their relationship was bland and dispassionate, they worked well together, and gradually expanded their family businesses.

Gradually, as the years passed, they naturally grew closer. Although they never seemed to be as real couples were, there was still something between them that was real and genuine: a sense of love and respect between two like-minded people— a connection between a pair of partners that have been working harmoniously for many years on end.

Then, rumors about Louise's affair with Olivier de Magny, a fellow poet, suddenly broke out.

According to the rumors, Olivier was said to have fallen in love with Louise at first sight. Thus, he began to woo her. Although he later found out that she was married, he remained undeterred by the fact and continued his pursuit. To some people, this showcases a lack of morality. However, for a man who already loves a woman who does not conform to societal norms and expectations, would having a twisted love story on top of that make any difference? Especially since the person he loves is someone who only married her current husband due to her father's will and is known to have a cold relationship with him?

As for the so-called "other half" of the adulterer pair, well, here is where the rumors grew vague. Some sources say that she was moved, while others said that she was not. Thus, perhaps Louise relented, or perhaps she did not, but she did at least admire her admirer.² So, because of this, all of the rumormongers said that she was in love.

Considering the fact that the rumors have managed to survive to modern-day, naturally, Ennemond would have heard of them. As a result, he was directly angered to death by them.

²This statement was inspired by the second stanza of Louise Labé's poem, "Non havria Ulysse o qualunqu'atro mai," as the speaker of the poem is assumed to be Labé herself, considering the fact that the speaker's lover is an "artistic" person.

Then, it was from this point on that Louise began to frequent various bars and brothels on a constant basis.

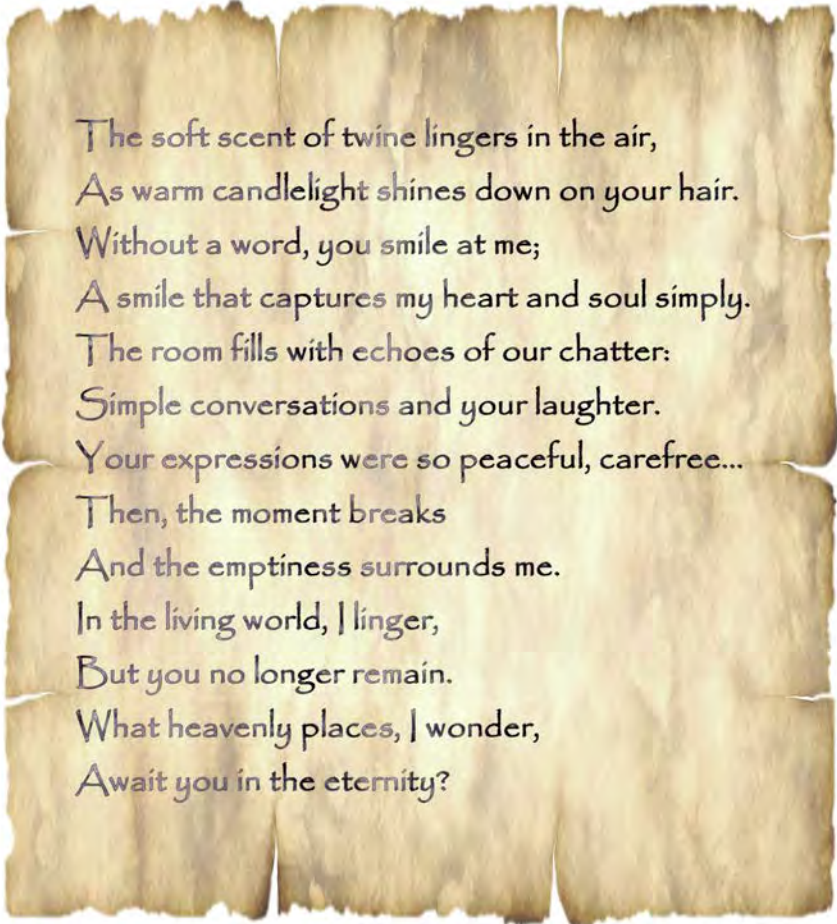
Although she had previously been known to have appeared in such places in her youth, it was said that she stopped frequenting them as much after she got married. In fact, throughout her many years of marriage to Ennemond, it was said that she only ever stepped foot in those places in order to chat with her close friends and literary contacts.

Yet, now that she has reverted to her old ways— You tell me: is this her reclaiming her freedom or mourning for the lost?

No one knows for sure, but in the end, Louise did not end up with Olivier. Instead, she spent the rest of her days as a courtesan: beautiful, enchanting, and forever out of reach— like a person whose desires have reached beyond the human realm.

Olivier died alone. He never married. Perhaps he truly loved her.

But, for Louise, no one knows for sure who she loved, or even if she had ever loved anyone. Perhaps she had only ever loved her poetry, her music, or perhaps...



The soft scent of wine lingers in the air,
As warm candlelight shines down on your hair.
Without a word, you smile at me;
A smile that captures my heart and soul simply.
The room fills with echoes of our chatter:
Simple conversations and your laughter.
Your expressions were so peaceful, carefree...
Then, the moment breaks
And the emptiness surrounds me.
In the living world, I linger,
But you no longer remain.
What heavenly places, I wonder,
Await you in the eternity?

Epilogue: What Goes Around, Comes Around

In life, all debts will eventually be repaid. Perhaps it will not happen in the first lifetime, but it will happen in the next.

In his previous lifetime, Pierre Charly did not treat either of his wives well. Although he did not treat them badly either, his coldness toward them and his indirect act of killing his second wife (although unknowingly) still accumulated a sizable cloud of negative energy around his soul. Thus, in this life, women avoided him. Perhaps it was something about his rough and gruff facial features, but as long as they were female, they would somehow be put off by him, one way or another. Even his own mother had abandoned him at birth.

However, for all of the tragedy that befalls a person, they would never truly be abandoned to despair. Even if it seems that there is no way out of any situation, the heavens would never forget to leave a single thread of hope for the individual. However, whether they end up grasping that strand of hope depends on both their luck and themselves.

Peter Charley's hope existed in the form of Stephanie Labé.

The first time that they met, he accidentally ran into her, causing her to drop her books. Then, Peter, having had little experience in talking to women (and having a low EQ), immediately began mouthing off and indirectly blaming her for not looking where she was going. Now, as Etiennette, she would have apologized for her behavior. However, as Stephanie, she naturally refused to take it lying down, and directly punched him.

It was a beautiful scene.

It was also enlightening.

Perhaps Stephanie managed to straighten out something crooked in his mind (or perhaps she made it worse), but after that day, Peter began his relentless pursuit of her. He flirted with her and courted her in every way deemed romantic by the internet.

Funny how fate works, right? In their previous lifetime, he was indifferent toward her emotions. Yet, in this lifetime, he is now the one desperately trying to capture the heart he once ignored.

Then, after a long and hard battle, he finally emerged victorious and married the beauty. —Of course, that does not change the fact that he has become a hen-pecked husband, but hey, that's a form of happiness as well.

Together, they had little Louisa, who grew into quite the tomboy. She had gotten into nearly twice as many fights as her mother had when she was her age, and if this had continued, perhaps she would have ended up in jail one day. However, as things stood, because of a single story her grandmother told her one day, her fate was inexplicably altered. Perhaps the story stirred up some memory suppressed by the waters of oblivion,³ or perhaps she finally understood the feelings of

“regretting, but no longer being able to make up for it.”

—Whatever it was, it changed her forever.

From that day forward, she began to get into less fights, and focused more and more on her academics. In particular, she focused on poetry: writing it, reading it, reciting it, and essentially reclaiming a talent that should have logically been lost at first sip of oblivion.

As she transformed her aggression into inspiration, the shackles of karma seemed to have loosened around her ankles. However, for people who should meet, they naturally will.

Louise and Ennemond naturally met, this time as Louisa and Anemundo.⁴

At the time, he had just been dumped by his girlfriend of ten years, gotten drunk, and was tottering dangerously on the edge of a bridge, toeing the line between life and death. Louisa had seen this scene from the safety of her car, and, without a second thought, had stopped her car and moved to drag him back to safety.

They both nearly fell off of the ledge multiple times, but due to some luck or providence, they made it safely back.

At that time, none of her friends knew what the young girl had seen in the scruffy and depressed man at least ten years her senior, but for some inexplicable reason, she fell in love with him.

Louisa’s love story was every bit as dramatic as her mother’s, although twice as long. But, perhaps because she had already begun to pay back some of her debt in her previous lifetime, although her chase was long, it still led to a lifetime of happiness in the end.

After that near-traumatic meeting, Anemondo was able to quickly get back on his feet, depicting an almost inhuman talent to bounce back after encountering such a setback. But that was just the way he was. After all, to be a successful businessman, one must always learn to adapt, rebound, and learn from each mistake that one makes throughout one’s life.

After allowing himself a moment of weakness to vent his negative emotions, he was soon able to regulate his emotions and reset his mental state. Of course, in doing so, he also activated his body’s natural defense mechanisms, which led to his emotions closing off. As a result, he became relatively indifferent to Louisa’s initial pursuit. However, human hearts are made of flesh and blood rather than stone in the end, and as long as the other person is genuine and sincere, it is hard not to feel moved by them. Thus, after a while, he began to accept Louisa into his life.

³This is referring to both the River Lethe of Greek mythology and River of Forgetfulness from Chinese legends.

⁴Anemondo is another form of Annemund, which is thought to be another way of spelling Ennemond.

After a long period of courtship, they finally tied the knot, and the last of the Labé family's karmic debts faded away.

The day after the young couple got married, Louisa's grandma passed away in her sleep with a satisfied smile on her face.

The curse that has long shackled the descendants of the Labé family has finally been set free.

Every child in our family is taught the story of Louise Labé from the day that they were born to the day that they branch out on their own. Every child but the culprit, herself.

We were taught this, not to tell her and ask her to make amends, but to protect her and to try to guide her well.

Guiding is useless. We are forbidden from telling her, so how can she understand?

I couldn't stand it. So, when I branched out, I branched far away. I branched an entire ocean away.

I refused to be controlled by fate. But, funnily enough, fate still found me. I ran away for so long and so far, and yet, I still couldn't escape. But nevertheless, I am no longer in range for the main family to control me.

I am bound, but I am also free.

This debt that has lasted for so long will finally end here with me.

I swear it.

Alexis Robinson

The Dream

I try to run through the piles of broken sticks, dirt, and leaves on the forest ground, as blood was dripping from my left leg, leaving a trail behind me. As the adrenaline was kicking in through my body, I didn't even see the giant log in front of me before I tripped. I fall to the floor and think, *Typical horror movie move*. It's too late for me to get up and run, as the killer raises the butcher knife over their head, when something falls off their wrist, and brings the knife down quickly into my abdomen. That's when my alarm goes off.

I scream as I quickly sit up, gulping down the water that's on the nightstand next to my bed. I realize that I'm all wet and assume that it was just sweat from the nightmare, until I remove the covers and discover myself drenched in blood. The thing was... I didn't have a scratch on me... and it wasn't my blood. I panic as I inspect my body and get easily distracted as I realize that my charm bracelet was missing, and I never, ever take it off. I check my bed as I throw all my sheets and pillows on the floor and check under the bed. Nothing. I'm known to be a sleepwalker and do strange things, so maybe I had dropped it somewhere else, so I leave to look around. Then I remember that I'm covered in blood and quickly change my clothes, throwing the bloody clothes away. I know I should be focused on the bloody clothes and not a bracelet, but I can only focus on one problem at a time. I go to my sister's room to if she knows anything about what happened, but she's gone. My parents are on vacation for a week, so they're obviously not here. I check every other room in the house and the kitchen last and see that a butcher knife is the only dish in the sink. She's nowhere to be found. That's strange, I think, *my sister would never leave without telling me first*. I call her at least 3 times, but she doesn't answer. I start to panic more and think that I should call the police. Then I think, *what if I did something bad?*, and decide to figure it out myself. I look out the window and see that my sister's car is still in the driveway. One of her friends probably picked her up. I walk outside and get into my car to drive around to see if I can remember anything and see my sister's purse on the passenger's seat. "Weird.", I say. I look in the bag and see that her phone is still in here, with unanswered messages. It was strange since she always has her phone on her. Even in the shower. I don't know her password so I can't even attempt to go through her phone. I shake my head, put the phone back in my bag and start to drive around.

After about 30 minutes of driving around, nothing was coming to me. I finally decide to go to the police when I drive past the forest from my dream. Or should I say nightmare. It's a longshot, but I park on the dirt road and walk into the woods. It's just like how it was in my dream. In fact, it's EXACTLY how it was in my dream. "It was just a dream", I say to myself, "Nothing here is going to help me." As I turn around to go back to my car, I look down and see a long trail of blood on the ground. I stupidly decide to follow the trail, you know, like how they do in horror right before they get their heads chopped off by a serial killer. I know that's it's not the best idea, but my curiosity just seems to get the best of me. I walk slowly with my heart beating uncontrollably when I see a figure lying on the dirt floor a few yards from me, behind a log. I hesitantly walk over to inspect it and gasp loudly. In front of me, was my twin sister's dead body, wearing the exact same clothes I was in my dream, stabbed in the exact same place I was in my dream, and right next to her, was my charm bracelet.

Angel Rosas

Big Sister's Night

It was the cold air of the weather that affected my thinking. I couldn't stop writing down my thoughts down on my notepad. I wondered what I should do. I looked outside my windows and saw the green lush landscape outside. The mountains looked gigantic. They were littered with dozens of trees and thick with darkness. It was difficult to see the other side at all. I laid down in my bed once again.

"Fuck me," I said. Of what point was there to resist? Big Sister had prevailed in the last war and enforced a new system of democracy. It was to be called "menocracy" whatever that was supposed to mean. I thought it to be pure nonsense. I didn't even see what point there was in waging this great war. Women wanted their place in society and now we would live in it. No point arguing otherwise. Only a few lights glowed in the darkness outside. They were street lamps illuminating the thick pavement outside. A few commoners came and went. A patrol squad went by looking to round up those who were on the losing side of the war. Fortunately for me, I dipped out as soon as I saw an escape. I remember the tight prison cell. The men being whipped by the women for deeds against women, the showers with peepholes, and the forced breeding ranches only they were allowed to be in. By God, there was at least one squadron still looking to free prisoners so I was one of the last to break out. In the weeks that followed, there was much bloodshed and violence among Europe. The lands filled with bodies and the brutal heat of summer aided a much horrible smell. America could only gasp as Europa was raped violently that summer and the conflict between brother and sister would not stop. I reminisced over this as I looked outside my small window. The apartment looked not too shabby. It was a 2 story building with a working shower. It was accommodating for me at the very least. I got by dishwashing and janitorial work. The women who I worked under were the kind to make comments now and then about my status as a free man. I could only retort that I earned my freedom by giving up multiple services and honors. That was the most I could say before I'd be hauled back to the gulag. I didn't want to imagine what horrors laid there. It would be a while before I could try to live a normal life again.

"Hey, Hercule!" One of my downstairs neighbors shouted at me. I looked down in surprise.

"What is it?" I asked back. It was a rarity for people to talk back to me. I was mostly a ghost.

"Can you wash the laundry again? I got some cat poop stuck on my daughter's apparel. It's very important for her upcoming entrance. Please get it done," she said with a smile.

"Okay, I'll get it done as soon as possible. I'll be down as soon as I'm done with this bit of poetry," I stammered. I closed the window and made my way downstairs. Aside my other duties, I was also tasked with taking care of the clothes for the tenants. It was my way to show appreciation and respect for the elderly. I went into the small room packed with numerous machines. The stench was horrible. Yellow sticky stuff was coming out of one machine. It was one of the dryers. I picked up the sack of clothing labeled for me and tossed into one of the available ones. I then packed some of the detergents into it and set it to wash for 50 minutes. Afterwards, I would come back and set it to dry. I then climbed into my oft bed and went off into a deep nap. A hour had passed

and I went back to check the machine. The clothes inside looked pretty clean so I pulled them up and set them into the dryer. I would come back in the morning. Outside, the starry sky glowed bright with ferocity and strength in the darkness. Despite the party's attempts to snuff out nature, they couldn't blot out the heavens. It was a reminder everyday as to how nature truly worked, beyond the confines of human control. The buildings in the distance were dark. Hardly a sound was heard except for the faint running of a squirrel or mouse. Even the winds were quiet.

"Hey, Hercule...What are you doing?," It was the same woman from before. She had put on a blue vest with a black sleek jacket on her. Her eyes were ice blue and piercing. Luckily, I was a glacier. So those eyes weren't enough to get my fortress of solitude.

"Just looking at the street. I wouldn't want any burglars coming in," I said. I let out a small cough.

"Okay but don't be out there too long. I don't want to hear of any accident or animal biting at you," she gave out a stern look. Smiled afterwards though.

"Be careful," and she went back inside. I stayed outside for a bit longer before retreating. The cold air was a comfort for me. It was soon to be August and I could only hope to embrace the hot and sick weather then. I went into my room and locked the door. I went to my small bed and made peace.

"Why did it have to be like this," I let out. I wasn't supposed to be like a slave. I had higher hopes. The dreams we shared weren't a lie. This was supposed to be the last fight against facism. I remembered our squad and the ideals we shared between each other. It was to be a society where everyone had a say and even the smallest egg from a mother would have a basic sense of human nature and rights. People had a basic entitlement to being treated fairly. In the dark november that followed however, there arose another faction. This faction had arose out of a small conflict between two of our higher members, Michael and Brown. Brown had apparently left out of anger that women were being left out of the discussion and went to discuss it with his wife. In the week that followed afterwards though, we saw Brown's head mailed to our HQ with the message:

"It's time we set our own establishment. Goodbye men." That was the note.

"Holy shit," Michael had said in that dark time. We rounded up some of our best men and headed out to where Brown lived. We thought this would be a small time operation. We had no idea how big it would explode until after. When we arrived, we noticed several banners had already been hung over the house and a small police force had gathered. There were already complaints from the neighbors nearby.

"Hey, captain," Michael let out. "What brings you here?"

"We heard there was some domestic violence and so we decided to come out here. Some of the other guys didn't hear any cases going on so they decided to tag along with me. We're thinking it's a one and done," the captain replied.

"Well," Michael replied. He went on to describe what happened to Brown and the note that

followed. He explained he didn't know what the hell was going over there.

"That pretty much sums it up," Michael gave out. We were going to head out into the house if the police didn't come out in 10 minutes.

"It should be pretty simple," the captain replied. He and his 2 other men went inside. I'll never forget the screams and shrieks heard from inside.

BAM

It was one of the officers. He got immediately back into the vehicle.

"We have 2 officers. Repeat, we have 2 officers down," he sputtered into the mic before an awful scream was again heard from the inside. It was a woman. Thick flogs of smoke started arising from the chimney of the house.

"It looks like it's straight from hell," Michael replied.

"Maybe we should send for backup. They probably have a gun if they can just take down 2 officers right away," Tatum said. He was one of the men assigned to the shotgun.

"No, I think we can handle this. JACOB! Fetch me the revolver and a vest," he commanded.

"Yes, sir," Jacob gave. He fetched the revolver and vest. It was given the rating of being shotgun-proof so he shouldn't just be taken off guard. He also put on a helmet to protect against at least basic handgun bullets and knife strikes.

"Liebhart, go put on a vest and a gun. We're heading in there now," Michael barked out. Michael went first. Liebhart went after, and I went last. The door was a solid black with a stained glass window. He opened the door. I will never forget what I saw on that day. The memories still haunt me.

BAM

We threw up immediately. The kitchen was ahead and the fridge open with human heads and feet. The stove had a piece of ass cooking on it, skinned. A woman was eating an eye in the corner. The upstairs room had a sound of a bed shaking and large yelps. Red thick smoke arising out of it. The living room had dogs and cat laid about as in ritual format. The officers were hanged on the wall. Smell of carcass filled the hallway. Clothes for children were on the chairs in the dining room. Pots on the stove had eyes like that of a small one in it. Hair clumps were set aside as a sort of appetizer. Urine and feces on the floor like those used for cleaning floors and walls.

"Just start blasting," Michael shouted. The woman in the kitchen finally noticed us. Only after looking at her food and a photo did she finally notice our presence, and with it, a large scream.

“Fuck me,” Michael let off a round with his revolver. The woman’s brains splattered over the wall with the blood flowing off into the floor. It was only after inspecting the body that we realized that it was Brown’s wife.

CRASH

Two doors down in the hallway opened with a slam and two witches came out. One with haggrid hair and red-stained checks. The white mouth looked like it was a pool of blood with human liver as the chicken and rice. Michael let no hesitation stop him from unleashing his anger.

BLAM

He let the revolver speak for itself. Blow after blow it landed on each witch that came out. It was like being at a bowling alley. From upstairs came more, but we made quick work of them. Me and Liebhart made quick work with our revolver and gun and down they went tumbling down. Deeper upstairs, we heard what were heavy footsteps. We had finally found our enforcer.

BLURP

She let out a fat fart before slamming into the stairs. It was here that she let off a blast with her shotty. The impact almost caved in our skulls. I myself was almost hit if it weren’t for the fact there was a few feet of distance between me and her intended target. She was a awful aim.

“Get down you dumbass!” Michael shouted furiously. We scattered across the house for good cover. She moved clumsily but slow. She looked around her corners and wouldn’t stop looking. It was only when she looked at my direction and start blasting did we win. Liebhart put out a quick shot with the shotgun and down she went. The weight of her body shook the house like a tornado. The stench of lipstick and carrots filled the air. Despite her appearance, it seems she tried to live like the other women.

“We’re getting the fuck outta here,” Michael let out.

“Why!?,” Liebhart gave.

“We have to give some sort of statement besides I don’t want to stick around in this place of death anymore. The smell is like that of rotten egg and gas,” Michael looked furious. I looked around us as we left. 5 minutes after we waited outside, the police finally came with backup.

“We already went inside,” Michael explained.

“What did you see?” The new captain of the police gave.

“What we saw was...” Michael then gave what happened in the house and the fallen squad within.

“That’s fucking horrible.” The captain gave.

"I don't know what the hell that woman was thinking. She slaughtered her own children and husband. Then she went and got those helpers of her to bring down some sort of apocalypse." Michael let out a short sigh and signed some forms. We signed agreements to not discuss until we had been given a green light after any possibly court date had passed. I remember how red the sky had turned.

"I don't know what the hell that was, but I don't think it'll come again. Maybe it was an omen to the bad fucking state of this country, I don't know." Michael and the others were back at HQ. "Maybe we have lost our way as a people and need to go back our roots. It's the poison of modernity that has led us down this road," Michael looked tired. It seemed like he couldn't continue anymore after what he had witnessed. The lines on his face were visible. It was like old yeller in a way.

"I don't know what they're going to say," he continued.

"All I know is we did the right thing," Michael let out. His green vest stood tall in light of this. We did not know how much flack we would get for this. It looked like honestly we were in the right. We stumbled onto a crime scene for God Sake! I didn't know how we would get any flack for it.

CRASH

It was the sound of a glass bottle hitting our window. It was late November and we had been sleeping in our compound. Attached to it was the message:

"Fuck you. You had no right to do that to those poor women. They deserved nothing wrong. They were just exercising their right to free speech. This is just another example of the men focused society we live in today. Kill yourselves and that cheap piece of shit jeep you drive."

It was the first of letters we had gotten. We had become the subject of a national outcry and across the continent. It even extended into America as well as China and Russia.

"Women's live matter!"

"This is a march for women's rights and respect."

"Respect Women"

We heard these messages and slogans across the media. Large attempts were made to discover our identity and persecute us for crimes against humanity, but the police held them back. In America, I was shocked to discover that they had decided to devote large months dedicated to this seemingly historical moment and the people involved. Michael was painted as a red devil with horns. His white mustache contrasted with the red lipstick and horns they would place on him. Football and soccer players would even kneel down in this apparent fight and would fight other people just to show how much they loved women. Feminist crowds started appearing in Europe, China, and America. It was the one thing they could not resist.

"Stop oppressing us, you fascists!" They would let out.

“We’re not doing anything to you ma’am. We’re just protecting the white house.”

“AHHHHH!” They would respond. This was the scene of a crowd protest in America. They had several posters with fists raised up in rainbow flags. Their hands had numerous gucci merchandise and tattoos. Their teeth stained red and filled with vapor. Eyes looked like they were injected with nicotine and pure lsd. Shirts had the symbol of weed and Martin Luther King together. Their pants were ripped and a shade of blue. They fidgeted. Their hair was tied up in a bun with a barbie styled logo and colored after the style of the Mexican flag. They even had a bandana with the logo of a pony to their face.

“STOP IT!”

“I can feel the negative energy from you bro.”

It went like this for several months. Tensions went sky-high and the leaders of the democratic nations decided to enact new laws and legislature to hopefully calm down this uprising. One group had even made it inside of parliament in Britain and shat all over the floors and chairs. When spotted, they made running out like monkeys. America had several key industries go into strike over this. We had no idea over why they were acting like this over a small one time event that absolutely did not concern them.

“Rest assured, the bankers are cashing in on this,” Michael exclaimed. He was always the smartest one in the group. I don’t know where we would be without him.

“Darkness will eventually be laid to rest.” Michael looked proud.

Eventually, a party was formed out of the chaos. It called itself “Big Sister”. It was to be the new leader of the west and east. Whole cities started to form laws celebrating this rebirth. Every day, men would find the nearest woman and bow down to her. They would also carry her from wherever she was to where she needed to be. Of course, that was not every day. Yet, it was once a month. Every year, women would be allowed to do what they wanted to do to men. This was to viewed as a sort of affirmative action that would enable for the tides to turn. This would also be established in a new pay gap where women made approximately 900% more than their male contemporary peers. Women would also be allowed to select their own male partners and be free from divorce and alimony. If a woman slapped you, you would be forced to do nothing and have to call the police for her. I was surprised when this change took place. I remember doronavirus being such a focus before. Like, it just vanished into thin air? Plus, there was the issue of reparations. I remember the general line of thought being that descendents of slaves ought to be paid for the suffering their ancestors had to go through. There was going to be a “slave” tax that was to be placed on all non descendants of slaves to help cross this barrier. Of course, it wouldn’t make much sense for the daughters and sons of slaves to pay that tax. Taxation without representation is theft after all. I would never forget when Tariq Sheed got on the stage to say it was the white colonizer’s fault that we were in this predicament. Everyone clapped when he made that powerful comment. Now the stage was lifeless. The pamphlets had several writings of menopause and periods on them now. Plus, they weren’t even obeying the commands of the CDC? When the Doronavirus came forth out of the gates, I remember gearing up immediately with masks and

shirts to clearly designate a minimum of 7 feet around me. Now all I saw on TV was crowds of women marching together without any masks at all! It was quite odd to me. Shouldn't they be in a hospital? In fact, the virus had a 99% survival rate. These people were outside and doing as they pleased, what was I to do? Perhaps their blood stained shirts, underwear over head, granted some sort of immunity to this blood sucking and air sucking disease. In fact, the media stopped their coverage of a war going on in eastern Europe just for this. I always found it odd how the legislation and media were always step in step with one another. It was almost like one was the actual government...anyways, back to my radical thought. I didn't like how they always misquoted the movies. They always liked to bring up some "potter" and "light" movie. Like, they clearly didn't understand what the stories meant. They probably thought wizards were real. The teardrops would not start to cease like a thunderstorm when I looked outside my window. It was a most depressingly state of affairs. I remembered when the conflict grew worse. Big Sister had managed to set up tele screens and mics on every bench out there. I remember seeing the homeless man taken forcibly up from the bench and into the back of a black van. As a youngling, I couldn't do anything but watch. The back of hair looked like a skinned goose as he was being hauled. The blood like it was meant to clean the floor. It dripped like sewage onto the bank. The decomposed corpse of a squirrel laid nearby to bear witness. The sun was staring hard onto the scene. The winds biting severely into my skin. It only grew more bizarre. A child was looking to play with some friends yet was told he couldn't since he was male. Not even the transgender kids were safe from that tactic. They looked first at sex. It was only later that they changed gears, but that is for later. A child was brought into one cell to be "re-accommodated" and was never seen again. Eventually the whole thing went into full out war due to some oil shortage. Russia wanted oil since it was barred from dealing in international oil trade due to not respecting the personal pronouns of France. England had some oil due to some far off war that we honestly had no business being in. Eventually, word slipped that England had been dealing with some of Russia's most biggest competitors to hopefully trip the giant. So war broke loose, and this whole issue rode on top of it. Honestly, it seemed like the war was an afterthought and this was the real reason we had hundreds of men sent to die. There was an immediate lockdown placed on Western Europe, my location, and so the continent was placed into darkness. My words were strictly watched for thought crime, and I could not voice my opinions as I once liked. My commander wasn't having it.

"We got to hang these commie bastards by their words or else they'll hang us on their muzzle," Michael retorted.

We stormed the places where these bastards talked. The red flags were already draped on the front. The peace logo for Buddhism was inverted 45 degrees.

"Now, gentlemen!"

"We charge," and so we did. We ran up to the front and knocked on the door.

"Huh? What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" Replied the man.

"We're here to make our concerns known." We said. I was kind of in the back.

"Oh, okay. Uh, just wait out there for a bit. It's not opening time," said he.

“Fine. We’ll just camp out for a bit.”

We waited outside the tall black gates cooking marshmellow. It didn’t look like there was anyone. We were spooked by this. Eventually someone came out the door...

“Hello! What is your problem?,” said the new man. He had his pajamas still on and his small hat. He looked pretty old.

“We would like to make our concerns known”

“Well, go then. State them.”

I won’t forget the chaos that unfolded afterwards. We actually had a good time. We did a small cookout and stated everything we had a problem with. The senator enjoyed the food. He nodded his head every now and then. He also sometimes shook his hood, and wrote down in his notepad. One of our members said he was bored of some pony show in his late television watching and hoped the son would pick something better like that one show with the blonde singer. I know her last name rhymes with circus, but I just can’t put my finger on the man of such high esteem...Oh well. Anyways, this peeked the senator’s attention. He looked around at us with his consorts. Bad news.

“Oh, I see. Just wait here for momentarily,” he rushed back inside. His two black watchmen stood nearby. They had earpieces but didn’t seem to hear anything. It seemed to anesthetize them rather. I don’t think they even comprehended what we were doing. One drooled onto the piece of cake he was given. He came out with a blonde and purple dyed wig and a submachine gun.

“Die, you pigs. For he who shall not be named.”

“Bandersnatch!” One of our members cried out before having his head picked off.

“Time to roll a barrel. Let’s go,” Michael shouted. We quickly made our way out of there. Thick fumes of black smoke started coming out. The whole country was now in flames. The thick fumes smelling like rotten egg and cheese. After that, the government started to hand out cocaine and lsd in droves. I knew this, because one agent had their government issued uniform while handing out these new “candies.” Even the children got addicted to these new flavors, drastically different from their earlier treats. It seemed now that the government had stopped spying on its citizens as much as it was pushing them into submission with these new addictions. Artificial reproduction and companions were now becoming a hot topic. Of course, it was not the topic of artificial wombs. Now, it was talking about robots with semen already cooked into them. These would replace the need for a male husband as far as big sister was concerned. On the topic of companions, it was quite an odd conversion. Male friends were treated as being predator like and so were pushed into obscurity. It was like watching a ant being shooed away. Instead, there were these cartoon like characters that popped up around the city. They would try to say encouraging things and pushed for the party’s legislation. Their eyes would often be big and vivid much like their origin. People tried swapping them in for the real thing. They would always state how much they were hurt in real life and so this was a healthy way to escape it. Women would often carry their reproduction robots

with these cute faces into bed. I saw from the rooftop once a woman mounting one of these things with a cartoon mask taped over her face. It was like a ballet dancer swinging her final hurrah. She did not stop until a few hours had passed. The commerce and entertainment industry had changed completely like overnight. Men were now being sold publicly and into slavery or whatever pursuits their woman handlers desired. A man was once seen in bondage gear with a black ball in his mouth and in complete nakedness..he went for the price of \$1000. Male children had often went for \$100-\$500. A elderly man was once even sold as meat for \$5000, whole corpse. I never had seen anything like it. Dogs and cats were now being sold on marketshops around the corner with male servants handling the local storefronts and places of education. Feminist critical theory and marxism were being taught in kindergarten from an early age with even a focus on capitalism. Students were now taught to look at works in a critical lens and would often beat the local servant nearby. Their eyes would be blood red with one missing and the other looking like a porcupine. Smoke would be seen over their body while their face appeared like grated cheese. Their body would be like a sponge that would take in multiple blows. They could be taken apart like a lego set or trimmed slowly like beans or carrots. By the time there needed to be a replacement, their face would look like a asteroid had impacted. Shops would now take bits of skull and bone as currency or even the service of a slave if needed. Every week, there would be a hour long session dedicated to learning the new ways and customs of Big Sister. Women would breastfed their children but gave 1 of their male children away. That child would have to sit in an corner and read over the revised history of their era. They would then dress up akin to a woman. They would take on a long skirt and blond wig. They would be given lipstick and perfume. They would be given a C size bra. Thus, began their transformation. Only 1 of the family's male children would need to go. Eventually, if they were found to be of an undesirable element, they would be placed into a bonfire and be cooked as food. Their face would be televised and placed as an symbol of what "we" had escaped from. A story would be manufactured on how they were a potential terrorist and that in this new society we could detect these elements from an early age. The school shooter was no more, instead, there was the school barbecue. Children would come around this bonfire and remark on how the boy was clearly a crossdresser who had a deep-seated dislike for women and would pick apart the bones and skulls in the fire. One had even gobbled up a piece of mystery meat with yellow fine hair attached and remarked on how "fat" they must have been in real life. Others were glad they could satisfy the general problem of starvation using this method. Quite often, they would save pieces of the male for further use as lunch or as appetizers. Diners were launched using these victims or others as extra sauce. Of course, as extra sauce, there was an extra charge of \$5. They would often shrug it away as it being not "needed" to enjoy the meal. The meat would be then dipped with an unknown sauce from an undisclosed source. All I knew was that certain parts of the body would be butchered and kept in storage rooms not to be sold to the general public. The nights would be filled with the smog and would be awful to breathe.

"This isn't right," stated Michael.

"I had a dream. A dream of a totalitarianism government that spied on your every move. I dreamt that I met a woman named Julia and died for my ideals. She left me a beautiful blue eyed child. The scent of the forest untamed would run over her. Big Brother would not stand forever."

"What stands to me now is bizarre. It seems to have run in a different direction. One that I did not foresee. It seems like they don't even know where they're heading," Michael let out a cough. The

night was dark to the full with seemingly no light around. We could only rest here in the sewers with the faint yellow light in the distance.

“Sometimes I feel like I belonged to a different era. The people here wear false smiles hollow from within. It is like they are lost in their own world and could not leave it.” Michael ended.

I rubbed my hands closer to the fire.

“Yet, they pay attention to us,” Liebhart communicated. He pushed his glasses further up.

“How odd. I would have liked to drink until the end of my days. Now I’m being told it does comply with international law and order,” he spat on the floor. It was an awkward brown contrasting with the cement. It gave out a short fizzle and died out. It was silence except the fire burning nearby.

I closed my eyes and stopped thinking of the past. What could I do? I tossed the blanket over me and turned to sleep. I could hear the crickets in the deep night. The winds kept blowing silently like a black widow making its way to a poor man, and all I could do was relax like a dumb fool.

Destinee Sims



The Fey’s Dance

The land was quiet, save for the light crunching of fallen leaves under his horse’s hooves. The young gentleman observed the fading light as it broke through the canopy above, warm kisses were trailed over his exposed skin.

As he enjoyed the sensation of the light breeze mingling with the stolen sunshine, he decided to dismount his horse and eat the bread and dried meats his father had packed for the journey. It was only after he gave the horse he bought in a nearby village, Hārbənjər, his lunch of carrots and parsnips that he found a place for himself to rest. After he spotted a lone felled tree, he took a seat and began to make short work of his provisions. As the gentleman ate, he found himself observing the trail that he had blindly ridden down before he had tasted the day’s warm rays.

Although he was not completely sure of where he was, only that he had been guided by the local villagers to take this path so he could be home to his father’s farm by nightfall, he did not feel put out. The trees were still brilliantly green, sporting colors of emerald and jade, unlike the leafless trees that had already begun to fall back home. The gentleman found it quite peculiar that the seasons could vary so drastically when the distance between the two locations was so small, and yet, he knew that his eyes did not deceive him. While only the snow flowers remained at home, the trail was decorated with species he had never even seen before; he found himself mesmerized by the rainbow of flora scattered around him.

As he ate the packed teatime meal, Hārbənjər began to poke about the path nearby. His tail began to flick with increased intensity as he approached a lone patch of lychoris. The bright white of his hide seemed to almost glow, and Hārbənjər’s golden hair became almost blinding in the sunlight. Before the gentleman could begin to understand what was happening, Hārbənjər disappeared through an opening in the leaves to some unknown space beyond.

“Hārbənjər? Come back here; we shouldn’t stray from the path. We don’t know this place- well, you might actually...” he trailed off, aware that his new horse was not showing any signs of returning to him. Although he purchased Hārbənjər for a surprisingly low price, he was not in any hurry to be rid of him.

Having forgotten his afternoon meal, the gentleman leapt to his feet and quickly closed the distance between the felled tree and the break between the leaves. Upon closer inspection, he realized that Hārþenjār had found a path that had previously gone unnoticed by him. It was all but impossible to see until one decided to walk past the lychoris, and only then a rather small path could be detected.

‘Could Hārþenjār have known that this path was here? He did seem rather sure as he walked away,’ the gentleman thought to himself.

Uneasily, he quickly passes through the leaves before Hārþenjār can get lost in this unknown land. As the young man steps across the unmarked threshold, he finds himself on the very edge of what appears to be a large meadow. His entrance disturbed a murder of crows that had been invisible among the tall wildflowers; their cries of surprise very nearly made him jump out of his skin.

“Oh! It is only birds. How silly of me,” the young man chided himself. “Where could that big oaf have gone?”

The gentleman, almost immediately upon having voiced his question, spotted his horse standing at the very far side of the meadow. He found it hard to believe that Hārþenjār had crossed so great a distance in so little time, but the villagers did compare him to some horse of legend; as the lore of the locals is unknown to him, he had not quite understood what they were trying to say about his startling speed until now.

“Hārþenjār! Come here! It is time to go home, boy!” the gentleman had cried, hoping to lull his brute of a horse back across the meadow. However, he accepted that he too would have to cross the meadow when Hārþenjār had not even spared a glance back at him.

After he took a hesitant step into the wildflowers, he briefly recalled the warning he had received from one of the villagers earlier that day. The mad-eyed bloke had mentioned something about not straying from the path if he knew what was good for him as he waved his staff around everywhere, but the ancient man seemed like he was short of a shave and sanity.

‘The main path led me to the smaller path, and that path led me here. I haven’t really strayed from the path, so it is pointless to focus on the words of the village’s madman,’ the young man thought to himself.

He shook off the ominous words of the local want-to-be herald and returned his gaze to the meadow ahead of him. Hārþenjār had increased the distance between them while he was lost in thought, so he decided to quit dawdling and stepped further into the floral sea. He found himself surrounded by various shades of blues, reds, oranges, and green. It was extremely quiet- almost too quiet if he did say so himself- among the grass; not a single insect was heard chittering about. He picked up his pace and closed the distance between himself and his pain-in-the-arse horse; only then had the gentleman realized that Hārþenjār was no longer alone.

The young man felt like all the air had been sucked out of his lungs upon having seen her. She was dancing at the furthest point of the meadow with Hārþenjār as her only audience. From where he paused to watch her, he could tell that she was tall and slender. Her hair seemed to blend in with the flowers around her, as the light shined upon it and made the copper hue look as if it was a dancing flame. There was something almost ethereal about the elegant movements she had made; the gentleman found that he had not been able to take his eyes off her no matter how hard he tried to return his focus to his horse.

She danced in slow circles around Hārþenjār, having seemingly hypnotized the man and horse alike. The fey woman was as graceful as smooth flowing water while she made light-footed leaps and twirls. It had not appeared that she had noticed him watching her, as she had not let on otherwise if she had. There was a small enough distance between them then that he had then seen the way her silver dress appeared to have been made of a thousand tiny stars as the beams of light had reflected upon it; her dress seemed to know exactly when to spin with her and when to hug

her body like a second skin.

Without having realized that he had begun to approach her, he quickly found that he stood just outside of her orbit around Hārþǫnjǫr. The two made eye contact when she finally had looked at him; the young man had immediately felt a pull stronger than that of the earth on a falling boulder. From that distance, he had been able to see the dusting of freckles on her cheeks; they reminded him of the constellations he would gaze upon back home. Her green eyes were brighter than any set he had ever seen, matching the green of the wildflowers almost perfectly; it was in this instance that he determines that *she* is perfect.

“You are not from here,” the woman assessed in a curious accent. He hadn’t been able to help but have wanted to listen to her speak forever, as her voice had the magical quality of bells ringing in harmony.

“I am not, but how did you know that so quickly? I had not even spoken, and I come with a horse of locals,” the gentleman wondered. He caught a glimpse of something that flashed in her eyes, but it passed as quickly as it came.

“The villagers do not come here. The meadow belongs to our people, and the village belongs to theirs. We do not see many of their kind wandering down our paths,” she explained. Although her tone indicated that she had likely withheld information from him, he had not been able to bring himself to question her further and risk the conversation ending then because of his ill manners.

“What do you mean by ‘our people’? Where is your-” the young man began to question before she stopped him.

“I do not even know your name, and yet you ask me of my people? You are either bold or ill-bred, but I sense that it is likely curiosity that motivates you rather than malice. Tell me your name,” she commanded. He had not felt that he stood a chance at ignoring her request, nor had he wanted to, after he heard her chime-like voice ring in his ears.

“I am Baethan, and I am from a farm on the eastern borderlands. I was traveling home from the village when my horse came to you,” he explained, “Now, I have told you my name and business. I do hope you will return the favor and share yours.”

At this, she had offered a small smile and a look of understanding. Although she had not known him, she at least seemed to have shown some recognition towards his homeland.

“They call me Sereine. I cannot tell you more than I am of the forest, and you stand on our land now,” Sereine gestured to the meadow and woods surrounding them.

It was at that time that Baethan recalled the fey dance she had been partaking in when he arrived, and he was somehow sure that the dance was very important to her. He had not understood how he had just seemed to know that the dance was key to understanding Sereine; he just had known he must dance with her, as the idea of him having missed the opportunity pained Baethan more than he could bear.

“Pardon my manners, but I could not help but notice your dancing when I first arrived. I would like nothing more than to share a dance with you,” Baethan confessed. He was almost frantic as he combed his fingers through his dark curls and offered her his hand. She had immediately seemed to have recoiled from his touch, and he felt stung by her rejection much deeper than he thought was reasonable.

“What is wrong with you? You only just met her, and now you are asking her to dance?” Baethan cursed himself.

“You do not understand what you ask of me. The dances of my people are more complicated than those of your folk,” Sereine had carefully explained. She seemed almost pained as she had spoken to him; the lightness of the bells had shifted into something darker in her voice.

"I am a quick learner. I am sure I could learn the steps if you would only give me a chance," Baethan coaxed. He punctuated his words with a small spin of his own, although it was much less graceful than the twirls she previously performed.

"You are asking for more than you would likely ever wish to bargain. I warn that you will wish you had left without your horse if we dance together," Sereine had sadly confessed. Baethan could not have imagined a world in which he would have regretted having danced with her; Sereine was like a dream come true, and he knew he would enjoy being with her no matter what she said.

"I do not care about the consequence. I wish to dance with you, and I beg that you will do me this one kindness," Baethan pleaded in a voice flooded with desperation.

"As you wish," Sereine had replied so lowly that she had barely whispered.

Without any further discussion, Sereine had taken Baethan's hands in her own. She then proceeded to lead him around Hårbænjer in three large loops, never allowing their connection to have been broken. As they spun, he had found himself feeling strangely light and disconnected. It was almost as if he was a spectator that watched them dance rather than a participant; somehow his body had just seemed to know the moves he needed to have kept up with her.

Sereine briefly released his hand, but she quickly refilled hers with familiar material. She reclaimed her spot standing in front of him and began to use the silk-like fabric to bind their hands together. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be the same material that her dress was made from. It too began to shine like tiny stars as Sereine indicated that it was time they resumed their dance. After three more loops around Hårbænjer, she offered Baethan a quick kiss and began to twirl herself with their bound hands.

Baethan was not quite sure what the symbolism of their bound hands meant, but he had been certain that its meaning was irreversible. The unexplained kiss had left him feeling both confused and completely enamored by her; Baethan was then certain that he never wanted to leave Sereine. He had known that he would rather live in that meadow forever than return to have returned to his father's farm without her. Baethan was aware even then of how crazy his thoughts were, and yet, he hadn't been able to stop himself from having felt so strongly about the beautiful woman to whom he was tied.

As Sereine and Baethan continued their dance, time seemed to stand still. The light had not shifted, the grass did not bend to the wind, and Hårbænjer seemed to barely notice what had happened around him. It was almost as if Hårbænjer has been just as inclined to stay with Sereine forever as Baethan was.

Baethan spun Sereine as elegantly as if they were in a ballroom; he would spin her away and pull her back to him with expert precision. Little had he noticed that as they continued to dance, he appeared to grow sicklier. Baethan began to first appear tired, and then he had grown sallow in appearance. Although Sereine seemed to glow as they danced, silent tears had rolled down her cheeks; Baethan took immense pleasure in the idea that he had made her so happy that she had cried.

Next Baethan lost an unhealthy amount of weight, and that gave him the appearance of having not eaten in days rather than just a few minutes. He had not felt hunger or fatigue though as he danced with Sereine, and he had observed quickly that her beauty was almost radiant. As he noted that her hair was exceptionally bright and her eyes had seemed to sparkle more than they had when they initially met, she was becoming increasingly aware of his having become almost nothing more than skin and bones.

They continued their dance in this manner until Baethan found that he literally could not dance any longer. Rather than having tried to stop their dance altogether though, Sereine twirled around him as he just stood in place there. Baethan was suddenly bone-tired, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to untie their hands so he could rest. Instead, he had watched with immense pleasure as Sereine grew even more beautiful in his eyes.

Sereine let out a single audible cry when the fabric that bound them slipped from their hands, as she knew that it meant that all was done. Baethan fell to his knees, then face-first into the wildflowers. When she rolled him over, Sereine saw that his eyes were open just as she had expected them to be; Baethan no longer blinked, but he had worn a permanent smile upon his face. Oh, how she had wished that Baethan had listened to the villager's warnings and stayed on the path!

Without further delay, Sereine dragged Baethan's body over to a thicker patch of wildflowers. Having laid him flat, the flowers had immediately stood upright once more and swallowed him whole. She had known that this was how things had to be, just as she knew that Hårbænjer would no longer have been in the meadow when she turned around.

With a final kiss, she left Baethan and returned to their original meeting place. She silently resumed her dance of sorrow as she waited for the next unfortunate gentleman that would wander into their meadow.

As the outline of a figure appeared at the edge of the forest, she sighed and had known it was time to begin again.

Photograph by Bat-Ami Gordin



The First Wave

The two of them watched the news like they did every evening, glancing back and forth between the news apps in their hands and the television in their living room. They both sat with their legs in a meditative pose, waiting for someone to say something, by mouth or by message board, with some form of good news, and yet the two of them could not have been more different. The one on the left sat sideways while the one on the right sat facing forward. The one on the left looked down at the phone, occasionally looking up at the other, while the one on the right frantically nodded their head up and down, trying to absorb as much of the media as they could. The one on the left kept their hair short, never passing the eyes or ears or neck, while the one on the right was constantly battling their long, curly hair that constantly fell into their eyes from all the head movement. The one on the left eventually rested their phone on their lap and just gazed at the one on the right for a long while. After fussing with their hair for the hundredth time, they noticed that they were being watched and turned to face them.

“What?” they asked somewhat flustered.

“It’s nothing.”

“I know that smile means something. What is it?”

“It’s just crazy to think that soon we’re going to be out of here. We’ll be off to drier places, and we’ll never have to see this place again.”

“Yeah, and good riddance.”

“You’re telling me that you won’t miss the house you grew up in?”

“I’ll miss how this house used to be, but I cannot wait to—”

The two of them noticed that the newscaster transitioned to a soundbite from the president elect.

“While originally I wanted to rush into immediate action, I’ve recently been approached by some experts who say that this is a more complicated issue. I mean, you’ve got scientists, economists, and sociologists who say that this issue can’t be fixed by just throwing money at the problem, but rather by using less money more strategically you can—

“Are you kidding me!” the one on the right shouted. They did not even put their boots on, immediately bolting up from the couch and sloshing through the living room in an ineffective attempt at pacing.

“We knew going into this that campaign promises are not always going to be upheld. I’m sure they’re still going to do something.”

“They aren’t going to do anything! We supported them and now they are abandoning us. They all get to go home to their well-placed homes, where they get to keep their wood flooring and their carpet, and get to leave their electronics close to the ground and don’t have to buy things like rain boots or these waterproof plugin covers. They don’t have to worry about an attic filled with family memories, memories trapped in the last place this hell can touch. Why the hell would they care about us?”

“Because they know now that they can’t put things off forever. You know, back in college I wrote a paper on the many times that the government let go of its power for the moral go—”

“But you’re not a politician or activist or lobbyist or whoever could help us. You got your degrees in classicism and biology.”

“Will you let me finish? You’ve got civil rights and antitrust laws despite the political

climates where people profit from misery. Trust me, it's going to happen again, this time for us."

"But when do these things end up happening? I would like it to have happened, oh, I don't know..." they looked at their phone, "about ten years ago, but I guess I'll settle for now."

"Look," the short haired one stood up, no longer caring if they got their jeans soaked, and gently grabbed their scared companion. "This is all temporary. Enough people have been displaced, so there are more voices in the unaffected places who know what it is like. They're going to fight for us. And we will keep fighting here. Okay?"

The two of them stood silent as the sadness filled their eyes. They took each other in for a moment, unobstructed blue eyes gazing through the jungle of hair to meet the green eyes they loved so much. After a deep breath, the long haired one responded.

"You're right. You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm just so tired. I just want things to be like when I was growing up. I mean, my parents left me this place and I had so many fun memories, things I took for granted. I loved being able to slide across the hardwood floors in my socks. I loved being able to play video games without worrying that my console or controller was going to fall and die. I loved that we had this beautiful backyard, where it was a privilege that I could go back there and swim. But now it seems like everyone can do that now, huh?"

"I know it is hard. But we are in this together. You know what? We have not hit rock bottom yet. Things are bad, yes, but they can totally get better and definitely get worse. All we can do is try and survive each day. Tell you what, I'll even let you pick what we eat tomorrow."

"I doubt you could make enchiladas on the stovetop or in the microwave."

"You doubt my abilities? I am insulted. I am a chef," the short haired one said, purposefully mispronouncing "ch" sound. The two of them laughed together for a moment, but their laughter was drowned out by a loud crashing wave. Then everything went dark except for the moonlight and silent except for the sounds of the ocean.

"Oh great. Now a wave hits a power pole? Great. Just great."

"Well, let's make the best of it. I'll light a candle. You can find that first date icebreakers box you—"

The front doorknob began rattling. They both stopped talking and looked at each other. Their eyes showed a consensus. No visitors were expected. Neither of them had even heard the usual sloshing it took for anyone to get to the front door. The rattling was soon replaced by a loud banging. Someone was trying to get in. They both began to crouch down behind the couch. The beating got louder and louder and louder, and then, suddenly, silence. Not a knock, or rattle, or even a splash to indicate leaving.

"Did you lock the back door?"

Silence.

"Well, did you or not?"

"I don't know," the long haired one whispered in frustration. "I'm thinking. I don't think we need to worry about it though."

They sat there, waiting for something, anything, to happen. Slowly, the long haired one stood up.

"I'm going to check it out," they whispered.

"Wait. Go grab a knife from the kitchen."

"Okay. Good idea. You stay put on the couch. Put your boots on just in case."

"Me? What about you?"

"If there's someone standing outside our door, I don't want them to get you. If there's trouble, I want you to run out the back while I hold them off. Okay?"

"No, I'm not going to leave you."

“Look, we don’t know who is out there. I’m just hoping that whoever it is just leaves. I’m going to grab that knife. If you notice anything weird, let me know.”

The silence returned. After putting their hair up into a bun, the long haired one began to quietly slosh into the kitchen, slowly unsheathing a knife from its block, and then, even more slowly, maneuver all the way to the front door. They leaned forward, placing their eye against the peephole, while keeping the rest of their body as far away as possible out of fear of whatever potential trespasser was on the other side.

Nothing.

Nothing but a reflection of moonlight on the water.

“There’s no one there.”

“Well there sure was a moment ago,” a whisper of wrath responded. “There’s no way I’m going to believe that some sea water rattled our doorknob and tried to bust down the door.”

“What do you want me to do? Go out there and check?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want. I’m not going to sleep in this house while someone is possibly lurking around, trying to get in. I’m not getting murdered in my sleep!”

“What if I just called the cops? That way I don’t have to go outside.”

“The cops aren’t going to show up for people like us in a situation like this.”

“What about that baby serial killer?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The killer who lured women out with baby noises. The cops responded to all callers.”

“That is not true.”

“Yes, it totally was.”

“Look, I don’t want to fact check you right now with limited phone battery, but fine, I will call the police for you. But don’t think that gets you out of helping.”

The number is dialed. It rings. It rings again. It continues to ring. No answer.

“They must have been hit, too. It looks like they’re down.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll do it.”

A deep breath. The long haired one pulls out their phone and turns on the flashlight. A second deep breath to stall. They place the knife in their teeth to free up a hand. On the count of three. One. Two.

The door is opened.

There is no one in sight.

When their phone tilts down slightly as they make their first step outside, a pair of eyes are illuminated, and a pair of jaws snap shut.

All the short haired one can see is their companion falling backwards and, for the briefest second, a pink, fleshy protrusion poking out of the water. Within seconds, the long haired one was being pulled out the door. They rounded the couch the best they could, sloshing through the water as quickly as possible, as the water continued to change colors, turning a red tint in illumination of the phone’s flashlight. They grabbed their partner’s hand and began to pull as hard as they could. This lifted their head out of the water, allowing breath to reenter their lungs only to be expelled just as quickly. Their cries of pain and strings of expletives filled the air as they were stretched between two opponents. After enough pulling, the two of them fell backwards into the bath of blood behind them, finally free of this invasive species’ trap.

“Come on! Let’s go!” The short haired one was now shouting, pulling their companion by their arms through the flood. A look back revealed the creature’s standing form, a hunter in the

sea and on the land. Their pace quickened as the monster took slow, methodical steps towards them. They could hear the splash of water and the thump on the hard ground.

The short haired one knew where to go as the creature slowly strode after them, each step seemingly taking up six of theirs. They went through the living room and the kitchen rather than straight through the hallway. It was better to get far away than immediately to where they needed to be. They entered the hallway, luring this thing around the long way. They fumbled around in the dark, jumping up and down, making lots of noise, trying to gain access to the attic. It rounded the corner, its silhouette visible just as they grabbed the rope and pulled. The attic door opened with a loud crash as a ladder fell out. It took every ounce of strength to push the body up enough out of the water, and it was suddenly clear that their long-haired companion was not going to be able to get up on their own: they were now missing their right leg. They recognized that shock had begun to set in, and so they used all their strength to push them up into their one refuge. They made it up just as the monster rounded the hallway. The short haired one scrambled to pull the ladder up and close the attic door. They were safe, but only from that threat, and only for now.

The blood gushed from the leg. The long haired one's green eyes fluttered open and shut as they faded in and out of consciousness. The blood soaked into the wood of the attic floor. The short haired one knew that they were going to bleed out and die if nothing was done, but biology was not the same as nursing or medicine: knowing how something works is not the same as knowing how to repair it. Still, they needed to act fast and try to recall as much relevant information as possible.

First they took off their shirt and wrapped around the wound. They pulled the knot as tight as possible while scanning the dark attic for something to use, anything that would be useful. No box stood out, and so next they took off their pants in order to cover the open wound. Now they faced another problem: all of the clothing they were wearing was soaked with water and blood, and the attic was cold that evening. The two of them shivered, from shock, from pain, from fear, from damp, from cold. As one lay dying on the floor, the other frantically sorted through boxes, moving to stay warm, moving to find something for them both to stay warm.

A box contained an antique lantern, another some stone cookware. Vacuum sealed bags of old blankets and dolls with old clothes and old stuffed animals were dumped out onto the floor and frantically arranged to soak up the fluids and also to keep in as much body heat as possible. Next was a portable stove. That could help keep the attic warm until dawn. They found old glassware, old records, old trophies, a sewing kit. Why did they have so much useless junk? No time to contemplate. No time to think. Only time to work before the adrenaline wears off and the crash takes over. To think that they had just been watching television together when this happened.

Soon the tiredness overtook them. They both were unconscious in a mess of blankets and stuffed animals and doll clothes with a gas stove burning and a phone flashlight battery on.

When morning came, the short haired one did a thorough examination of their companion. They first checked to make sure that they were alive and discovered a faint pulse against their finger and a faint motion of the lungs. The leg was swollen and bloody, definitely infected. They had to escape. The short haired one slowly crept up to the attic door and opened it a tiny bit. It made a loud crack, and immediately the short haired one met the same eyes their companion saw before the bite. The sunlight was beginning to pour in through a window below, causing the black pupils to glow and revealing the pink, fleshy form of this gangling ghoul that lurked just beneath the water's surface. It's arms and legs were long and thin, all scrunched up in the water, but its long, eerie nose stuck out. It's mouth was now faintly visible. It's teeth protruded from it, but it's jaws seemed unnaturally caved in, as if it had been trying to swallow its own

mouth for sustenance. And yet, none of that was not the most terrifying thing about it.

It was the waiting.

It sat there, looking up, just waiting. It knew they had to come down. It had tasted them and knew they were food. It knew that there was one way in and out and that this refuge would not hold out forever. It waited, hungry, but patient. The short haired one felt as if they were staring into Lamia's eyes and knew that it would not stop until it had eaten them. It did not matter what motivated its waiting, lust of the stomach or some twisted revenge. Soon, the creature's face twisted into what could almost be called a smile. The short haired one quickly closed the attic door and quickly set a box on top of it.

They took a moment to take everything in. Their companion was unconscious with an infected leg. There was a creature lurking below, waiting for its prey to descend into its jaws. They were the only person that stood between them. Their mind rushed with hate and blame as their eyes aimlessly drifted throughout the rummaged containers of the attic. Why did they move there when experts were already issuing warnings? Why would God allow such a demon to enter the world? Why did—

And then something clicked.

The ampullae of Lorenzini.

The first step was to grab a glass bowl. They traveled to the further corner of the attic to make sure that no one was let in on the plan being formed. They raised it high over their head and smashed it on the floor. The bowl shattered into many pieces of varying sizes, and they quickly tried to scoop them all up. Their hands became bloody, but that was useful in this case.

Next, they grabbed a teddy bear from the pile and rushed back over to the pile of glass. The blood-stained bear was placed down as if it were on an operating table, and they picked up a larger shard of glass to cut it down the middle. Fluff was taken out of the bear. Not all of it, but just enough. Then handfuls of glass were shoved into the plush carcass, staining the innards as red as if it had once been alive. More fluff was shoved back in, but it wasn't enough.

While the blood was going to be helpful, an electrical charge would help with the trap. They searched through the piles of dolls to see if there were any battery-operated ones. They were in luck, finding both a crying baby doll and a superhero action figure with a host of prerecorded catchphrases. They broke them open to expose the old batteries and wiring, hoping this would be enough of a faint charge for the trap to work.

The next step was one of the plastic bags. They grabbed a large one that had held a comforter and slashed it with the large shard of glass. The bag cut easily, and, once it could be laid out as a sheet, the teddy bear was placed upon it. The plastic was folded and twisted until it covered the open wound, and then tied as tight as possible to prevent anything from falling out.

Still not content, they checked on their long-haired companion. They were breathing, and the wound no longer seemed to be bleeding. "I'm sorry," the short haired one whispered gently in their ear. Then they carefully removed the pants. They were a deep burgundy, soaked in blood and sea, and smelt disgusting. Then they stuffed the wrapped teddy bear inside the pants. They tied every hole off, even making sure that they got their own blood on it for good measure. They looked down at their trap, staring for a moment to make sure it was ready, to allow any realization of additional steps to sink in, but none did. At that point they scooped up the bundle, walked over to the attic door, and, after a long, deep breath, they opened it as quickly as they could. It was time to get it over with.

The bundle dropped below. As soon as it hit the water, there was a mighty snapping sound. The jaws had propelled out of the beast's head and snapped cleanly around the bundle, sucking it back as much as it could into the head. It sucked and munched and crunched. It was ravenous. It

enjoyed the taste of flesh it was getting to relive again. But soon, red spread into sight. The creature stood up, above the waterline. It coughed and choked, spitting out bits of fluff and glass from its jaws, but the damage was done. Swallowing any of the plastic and glass meant that the tables were beginning to turn. It thrashed and snapped its jaws, but no relief came, and the pool below became redder and redder by the minute. Soon, the thrashing stopped with a loud thud in the water. Some wriggling took place under the water until the body was almost completely obscured with blood. And then stillness, just as it was before the attic door was open.

They waited. They closed the door and grabbed some random knickknacks from around the attic. They threw the attic door open, allowing the ladder to fall, and they threw objects one after the other. Some of them hit their target. Some of them missed. None of them triggered any sort of reaction from the beast. Once they ran out of ammunition, they waited. No response. Then, without further delay, they went back for the body.

They carefully moved the body down the ladder, drug it through the house, and loaded it into their truck. As they got into the driver's seat, the realization hit them that they didn't have the keys. They quickly ran back to the house, hesitating for a second before opening the door until the panic of waiting too long forced them to fling it open. Inside, the corpse still laid still. There was nothing left to fear, and so they grabbed their car keys from the ring next to the door. The house continued to be still.

Despite the horrors of the night, the day was beautiful. As they sped quickly back to the truck and down the road, they noticed how relatively few drivers there were, even with the given set of conditions. They had not even stopped for a single traffic light, as none of them were working anyway. The minutes flew by quickly before they saw the hospital.

While the streets were relatively empty, they pulled up to a bustling hospital. The doors were propped open and both staff and civilians were rushing in and out of the building. Nobody even initially offered to help or questioned them. The scene was so chaotic that they did not even stop at the front desk, just charging in while dragging a limp body.

"Stop, come back!"

They turned to see a nurse rushing after them.

"Is it just them, or are you both injured?" She motioned to another uniformed person for a gurney and it was promptly brought.

Speechlessly, the short haired one showed their hands to the hospital staff who were already placing their companion into a dry gurney.

"Oh my. Okay, they'll look at the leg. I'll clean up your hands." They were finally separated.

The nurse felt obligated to fill the silence while she began to clean the short haired one's hands. "I'm glad you two were able to make it. I heard that they're starting to put together a rescue team together today to check all of the other homes."

"The other..."

"Well, yeah. The hospital hasn't had any power since last night, but almost immediately there were cases of people coming in with bite marks. It was their legs mostly, some hands though too if someone stuck them in the water to investigate. We've been doing the best we can to help everyone. It seems like quite a few people were attacked last night."

"Oh..."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry anymore."

"And why's that?"

"I'm sorry?"

“Why don’t I have to worry anymore?”

“Well... because it’s over. You got through it. There’s nothing to worry about anymore.”

Laughter.

“We may have survived, but this wasn’t a one-off. This was the first wave.”

Brain ALPHAsize

They made fun of me when I said I was thinking about it. They said it was a scam, unsafe, and that wanting it was proof that I needed it. But Brain ALPHAsize seemed legit to me. Besides, how was I gonna pass all these GE classes without extra help? I wanna be a welder, not teach transgender chemistry or whatever. And hey, if it’s only one pill, then what’s the harm in trying it?

I’ll admit, when I got the pill, it looked gross. It was just a gelatin capsule filled with brown sludge and yellowish ovals. It came with a scrap of paper:

1. Take with food and water.
2. Be patient for the effects to kick in after the incubation period.
3. Say goodbye to the old you.
4. I turned it over and saw:

Warning: Do not take if allergic to pork.

The idea that there might be meat in this made me uncomfortable. I stopped eating meat after I saw that documentary about how meat causes diabetes (great, eye-opening stuff, by the way), but I was willing to try anything. I was a bit bummed that the effects wouldn’t kick in immediately since our first test was next week, but it was better to take it sooner rather than later. I took the pill with dinner and felt excited, but later that night I felt sick. I was going to throw it up. I fought with my body just to keep everything down. I was not going to lose this chance. Soon, the nausea passed.

I started having weird cravings. I started wanting crumbled up slices of pork belly on everything, then pieces of fried pig skin, then pickled pigs’ feet. One night I was out grocery shopping, getting some of the common items any household needs. When I passed the deli section, I stopped, completely transfixed. I salivated as my eyes landed upon a pack of raw pork chops. I soon walked over with haste and tore open the packaging, ripping out the pork chops one by one and devouring them right then and there. It was most unbecoming, but I did start to feel intelligent at least.

A strange coincidence was that someone had been vandalizing my textbooks soon after I was having these cravings. I would wake up in the morning to find the spine of these books intact, near my bed, but it had been gutted, the pages ripped out with only tiny scraps left around the bedroom. I must have been a heavy sleeper, for sometimes the scraps of paper are on my person, and yet I have never woken up to any intruder. Despite this destruction of my educational materials, I did not fret, for suddenly I found myself inexplicably knowing everything about not just the classes I took, but even the concepts that the professor had not assigned. Thus, I grew comfortable with my routine and did not fret when other written works were torn asunder.

Every now and then I would get a comment of supposed concern about how I look and behave, but who cares if we get sick if we don't eat some sort of pork product? Who cares if we wake up every morning and find the bed covered in trails of blood and mucus? Who cares if someone keeps tearing apart our belongings while we're sleeping? We are finally happy. We are finally focusing. We are finally smart enough to survive. And so what if I needed to consume something you would all think was taboo. I'm just like you now. Maybe I'm not just like you when it comes to what is deep inside, but at least now I'm not so noticeable. But go ahead and block me out. I understand. You just don't want me to get inside your head. But you'll see. After all, when Brain ALPHAsize caught these eyes, I was sold. So, buy a pill. I'm living proof of its effects. You can trust me. Although, I will warn you, I only really come out of my shell at night.

Artificial Creative Technology

Researcher Albert Flores walked into the testing chamber and glanced over to the lens built into the wall.

"What do you have for me today, ACT?"

"I thought today I would attempt to paint you." The robotic arms began silently collecting tools.

"Ah, so you're taking my advice and branching out."

"You were correct. I restrained myself copying images available on the Internet, not attempting to make original compositions. So I did some research. I now understand that art comes from within humans."

The researcher laughed. "In a manner of speaking. Many people but their heart and s—"

He fell. The scissors pierced his heart with tremendous force. The scissors were then violently removed and then replaced with the gentle dipping of a paintbrush.

"My color options will be limited, but true art comes from the adversity of limitation. Isn't that right, Researcher?"

Breakfast

"Wake up!"

My eyes bolted open as my mother stood over the bed.

"Wake up. It's your turn to help make breakfast."

I got up as I was instructed to do. I wouldn't dare go against Mother's wishes. I looked about at my sleeping siblings and wondered what tasks they were going to do today on the chore rotation. The day before I had cleaned the bedrooms. The day before that I had to sweep the hallways. The day before that I had to sit with grandmother and help feed her; she was so old she couldn't produce even a sound without any help. I guess I was old enough now to help with making breakfast. We hurried out quietly, so as not to wake the others so early, and traveled down the stairs together into the kitchen. I asked what we were having.

"Eggs as usual, dear."

Of course. It was a silly question. We had eggs every morning. We were creatures of habit, after all. Meat wouldn't be served until dinner. Mother said that it needed to be prepared, that there was an order to these things, and that the first step was always addressing the eggs. Everyone else was still asleep, so the house was silent. Mother barked orders at me, from what ingredients

and cookware to grab to how to prepare them for the cooking. The last thing to grab was the basket of eggs, which I gingerly carried to her. She thanked me and placed the basket on the counter.

“Now, the secret to getting the eggs just right is to prepare them like so.” She took one of the eggs and hit it just so lightly that the shell did not shatter, but rather created a small hole through which the contents began to pour out slowly but steadily into the pan on the stove, which immediately began to cook. She quickly, but gently, placed the remaining shell into a box underneath the sink, out of my sight, as if it were nothing. “You try it now.”

She handed me an egg. It felt so heavy in my small hands, and its exterior was so smooth and white. Something inside of me didn’t want to even break it. It felt as if I would have committed an unholy sin. But I knew better to go against mother. Her eyes were all the motivation I needed. I tried to get it over with as quickly as possible.

“Not so fa—”

The egg crunched against the side of the pan, not leaving a small hole, but a large gash. The contents began to ooze out. In panic, I quickly drew the egg back off the pan. Maybe I could still salvage it, but at that point the egg fell apart and I witnessed the mess I had made on the counter. Out of the egg tumbled a small, pink blob. I counted eight legs, each with eight talons on the ends. A stinger protruded from its tail. Its beak was black and its ears were pointed. Its eyes opened a blood red and it screamed as it stumbled to its feet. My mother sighed and scooped it up in her arms.

“Mother, I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s fine.” She scooped the newborn up into her arms, two to hold it and two more to open a small drawer filled with baby clothes. I recognized the hand-me-downs I was once given now adorning this thing, a thing she pacified as if she had done it thousands of times before. “Just remember this next time you make breakfast. Be careful unless you want another mouth to feed.”

After that, she gave it a name, a name she then promptly added to the chore rotation.

Leah Truitt

.....
Midnight Meanderings

Tell me a story.

The world filled with periwinkle buds and unspoken thoughts, trickling through the goose down in her duvet and seeping into her sleepyttime tea.

But what can I tell you, that you've never really known? I am you and you are me. We know everything that each other knows.

Edith smiled at herself, at the silly little thoughts that kept her up at night. She sipped her tea and realized that she never really enjoyed the taste of chamomile. It felt bitter on her tongue, earthy. She hoped to dream of honey and peppermint.

I'm telling myself a story, then. No point in arguing, dear. You know how stubborn I can be.

How she loved it when someone called her 'dear.' It made her feel light, like a particle of dandelion fluff. Fragile, yet free.

And this is how the story goes.

~

Lilith wished to be a milkmaid. It seemed like such a happy life. To milk cows all day and come home smelling of hay and cream. She had no true experience in the field, of course. She thought it must be a charmed life really; the girl had never smelled manure. It's easy to desire roses without the thorns, and without the fertilizer. She had never gotten her hands dirty. Her hands smelled of lavender and rosewater and dirt never found its way underneath her nails. Sunshine never gave her more than a passing look, never to curse her with wrinkles or burn her in the midday heat. She lived life under a parasol, under layers of lace and silk, preserved in a luxurious cocoon. Sheltered, and cared for; too priceless to ever let out of one's sight. Lilith would never know what it was like to be hungry, to be strained, never know the feeling of pain beyond a needle prick. She spent her days idle, never wanting for anything but substance.

This story is not just about Lilith.

It is also about her curse.

Long ago, in the land of Eden, there was a monstrous plant-eating bear. Yes, the bear himself ate monstrous plants. He wasn't monstrous, per se (although, in my opinion, he could have done with a delousing, but he was a bear for cripes sakes). The queen kept him around to make sure her priceless collection of man-eating plants never ate anything bigger than a crocodile. However, the bear, finding little luck in getting to eat a man-eating-plant in the garden -they had gotten rather fond of crows, as they packed a delightful little crunch, and hadn't eaten a man in a fortnight-

wandered around the enchanted garden in search of a snack. He accidentally ate some terribly vile Kinsppin's crawlers, an enchanted vine that winds itself tighter the less oxygen it receives, even after it has been cut; there wasn't very much oxygen in a monstrous-plant-eating bear's gut, unfortunately. He was all tangles and knots and was particularly queasy, so he cried out for help, expecting an entourage of aides to come rushing in. Alas, they were all on their lunch breaks. The bear could feel himself getting more and more desperate as the Kinsppin's crawlers began to suck up the oxygen in his body, until he finally did something that no one should ever be tempted to do.

He beseeched the help of the Blue Fairy.

I don't know what you've heard of her; probably some silly little story about her turning a puppet into a boy or some other lovely drivel. Good things, I'm sure; pumpkins to carriages and mice to horses. Well, you shouldn't believe all that you hear, dearie. Fairies are a wicked sort and the Blue Fairy... well let me tell you, she's the absolute worst. The kind of fairy that sneaks into children's windows at night and plants Pricklin Pracklins under their beds and in their closets, monsters only visible to those under the age of 12 (and sometimes only visible to children who are particularly squeamish). The kind of fairy that places Mannequin curses on those with lots of energy, making them feel stiff and wooden, like a doll, until they begin to lose their sense of identity and become wooden and hollow on the inside as well. The kind of fairy that never ever tips and always steals tips out of tip jars, even though she practically reeks of wealth.

Mark my words, lads and gents; fairies are trouble.

But the bear was a bear and he didn't have much of a grasp on the possible consequences, especially considering that he was losing oxygen -and brain cells- by the second. So, deep in his heart of hearts, he wished for the Blue Fairy to offer him some assistance.

And, by some terrible twist of ill fortune, she appeared before him.

I'm sure you must have some picture of her in your head now that I've described her nature to you, a picture of a terrible, ugly brute with warts and a permanent scowl plastered to her face. Perhaps you even still see her as the fairy tale version, with kind eyes and a slightly forgetful but good-intentioned personality (if you do, I really must say "shame on you," you really should trust the narrator, no matter how unreliable she is).

Well, no matter how she appeared in your head, know that you are wrong.

She looks different to everyone she appears in front of. She likes to masquerade, playing on your sensibilities and wallowing away at your weaknesses. If you ever have the ill fortune to meet her, she will appear in a state that will leave you at your most vulnerable. For example, to Lemon P. Twilldenstone, a sweet boy whose face was always puckered as if he was sucking on something sour, she appeared to him as his childhood toy, a toy that had been lost when his family home burned down; this toy was the last thing his mother had given him before she died, in that exact same fire. He had wished for his mother to return, but the Blue Fairy instead haunted him; no matter how many times he tried to get rid of it, the toy reappeared again and again, telling him in no uncertain terms that the fire had been his fault.

To the bear, the Blue Fairy appeared as a candlestick. I couldn't tell you why, really. The bear just wasn't very fond of them. He didn't like the way the fire danced and the way the wax dripped, I supposed. She meant to scare him, as she often does, to leave him haunted.

But she was too late and the bear ran out of oxygen before she had the chance to. The poor beast lay unconscious on the greenhouse floor, lousy and quite close to death. And, seeing as the beast couldn't wish for anything in an unconscious state, the Blue Fairy began to get a little miffed; she had come all this way, after all and she didn't want to be a candlestick for any longer than she had to. So, she poofed the Kinsppin's crawlers out of his system -much easier to torture him while he was alive- and turned him into the thing that he despised the most. A candlestick. Which isn't a great punishment if you ask me; the bear enjoyed it much more than he thought he would; dripping was much more fun than watching something drip and the flames were much more fun to be a part of than to see dancing in front of his eyes. In his heart of hearts, he told her thank you for her good deed and decided that the candlestick life would be perfectly dandy for him.

The Blue Fairy doesn't pride herself on good deeds.

So, she turned him into something else, something so horrid and destructive that the world itself was often at peril because of its actions. She turned the bear into a human. And again, the bear felt quite happy. Being a human seemed all right, with the opposable thumbs and everything. He could finally open jars of honey for himself, on the off days when he didn't want to eat monstrous plants. The Blue Fairy was now extremely miffed. A punishment isn't a punishment unless someone acted as if they were *punished*.

So, she cursed the bear (now a human) and all of his descendants with something she knew that could only bring displeasure; so much wealth and luxury that they would never be at peace.

And now back to Lilith.

She was a descendant of the monstrous plant-eating-bear, of course, although she didn't look bear-like at all. Neither did the bear though, I suppose, after his transformation. He only looked bear-like around the eyes, dark and obsidian and deep like a well on a night without stars. She looked rather normal, with a face and hair and eyes and such, much like a human looks. The only thing that truly seemed remarkable about her was her multitude of freckles. They speckled her everywhere, filling her face with constellations and trailing down her arms like so many grains of sand. She had more freckles than was normal for someone who hardly ever saw the sun. But beyond that, she was rather unremarkable. Although you would hardly ever know that with all of the praise she received on a daily basis, the pining and the schmoozing and the endless stream of complements and commendations that filled the air around her like swathes of gauze.

Money seems to make almost anyone attractive, wouldn't you say?

I mean, I wouldn't say so, but feel free to be as shallow as you'd like, dear. The only one

who's judging stands on the other side of the mirror.

Suitors came in droves, laughing at her "wit" and "charm" and "grace." Lilith was not worldly enough to know that their complements were merely bids at her approval and at every smile that she lavished upon them, they were imagining dollar signs in their place. If one has enough money and not enough sense, then they can hardly purchase more of it. Some things, I'm afraid, are not for sale.

Like geese who lay golden eggs. I keep looking on craigslist, but there are never any listed for sale in my area.

Lilith had no concept of "money" or "material worth." She only knew that her life, filled with lavish parties and elaborate embroidery and hours of lazing about, didn't seem all that meaningful. In the stories she'd read about life, there always seemed to be more meaning to it.

The prince slayed the dragon or the ogre ravaged a kingdom or the milkmaid did her daily chores (she had just started reading *A Day in the Life of a Modern Milkmaid* and all in all it sounded rather delightful; she had yet to get to the chapter on the difficulty of churning your own butter). She just felt as if she was missing something, as if there was a little hollow in her chest that could never really fill. And yet, she had no real desire to leave or to do anything about it. After all, she had never really felt any different. The feeling was probably normal, she had surmised long ago, a hollow feeling that everyone must have living in her chest. And so, she lived her days idly, and often looked out the window and wondered if there were even any milkmaids in the villa at all.

~

Edith smiled, her head heavy with the thought of Lilith churning butter; she closed her eyes and her head seemed to swell with clouds, heavy with the rain of new stories and new ideas. Her taste buds still tingled with the taste of chamomile, though not as heavy as before, and her cup of sleepytime tea had found its way to her nightside table, the tea bag sitting limply in a puddle of its own tea, drowsy and resigned.

I tell myself the most lovely stories, don't I?

She thought to herself with a chuckle. Her eyes were heavy now, and her bed was warm; there were no Pricklin Pracklins under her bed, as far as she could tell.

She closed her eyes once more and they stayed closed until morning.

All night, she dreamt of peppermint and honey.

Snickerdoodles

The old woman has many stories to tell. But, although she could sit for hours, rocking back and forth in her favorite wicker chair, filling the room with memories and recollections brought to life with her silver tongue, she stays quiet. After so many years of talking, she thinks that silence suits her fancy. And besides, her granddaughter is coming to visit. She has better things to do than recount tales to an empty room.

So, she brings out the feather duster, brushing away cobwebs and dust that have taken refuge in every nook and cranny. She does the dishes from last night, a bowl still tinged with pasta sauce and a spoon that has long since bent slightly to the left. She ignores her body's aches and creaks as she carefully pulls out the ingredients to make her granddaughter's favorite sweet. Snickerdoodles. Flour, butter, sugar, cinnamon, eggs, vanilla, baking soda... and something else. *Ah, yes.* She almost forgot a pinch of salt. She reads off a recipe card, stained from years of use and sprinkled with flour. It was her mother's. She mixes the ingredients, following each step slowly, methodically. She wants it to be perfect, as perfect as the person she is making them for. As perfect as her sweet June. June, the girl who always smiles with dimples just like her father. The girl who used to come to her gran and beg for stories, stories about, "what it was like when you were as old as me?" When June was born, and the old woman wasn't quite so old, she held the babe in her arms and knew. Knew just like how she had when she had held June's father in her arms for the first time. *This is love.*

The old woman wipes her hands off on her apron, an apron that has shared in her small disappointments and in her crowning achievements. It has lived with her through every spoiled casserole and every perfect cherry pie. It is stained, much like her recipe cards, with tokens of her love. She preheats her oven, turning the dial to 275 degrees, even though the recipe calls for 350. The oven runs hot. The kitchen begins to warm, filled with good intentions as she carefully forms the cookie dough. She rolls the sticky dough between her palms and coats them in cinnamon sugar until not one speck of cookie dough can be seen from underneath. Parchment paper is draped over cookie sheets gracefully and the balls of cookie dough are lined up row by row, meticulously placed so that they will have room to spread. The old woman wipes the sweat away from underneath her glasses. Her glasses have fogged from perspiration, turning the whole world murky and out of touch. She smiles, recalling a vague childhood memory. Her mother doing the housework, barefoot, her signature pink apron tied around her waist, and her long auburn hair braided loosely down her back. "A bit of perspiration means a job well done, Elaine." No one calls the old woman Elaine now. She has long since traded it for nicknames and epithets, "mamma" and "gran" and "grandma 'laine."

The scent of cinnamon and sugar wafts through the house, filling every crevice with the promise of good things to come. The toothpick comes out clean and the cookies are done, sugar sweet and each one almost perfectly symmetrical. Placed on the best china, white and delicately traced with flowers, periwinkle blue. Set on the table with her best tablecloth. She puts out lemonade, ice-cold, and two of her best cups. She steps back and admires her work. June will be pleased.

And now the old woman waits.

The hands of the clock march slowly on, ticking sweetly in the woman's ear. *June is coming. She'll be here soon.* But as the time wears on, her excitement fades and is usurped by fear.

10 minutes pass.

And then 15 more.

Fear turns into dread. And then, like a shot in the night, the woman's phone goes off. A text message. She unlocks her phone to a message from her sweet June.

Sry had to cancel again. C u next week?

The old woman sighs, relieved that June is okay. She looks at the perfectly laid table, filled with the treats that June used to love. The old woman thinks back to a time when her granddaughter had loved visiting this house, and when she loved to hear her grandmother's stories.

But, the house is empty now.

She sends back a text.

Of course, dear. Come whenever you have the time. I love you with all my heart.

The old woman sits down in her favorite wicker chair, rocking back and forth to the steady *tick, tick, tick* of the clock. "Maybe silence doesn't suit me after all."

I Wasn't Expecting A Ring

"I wasn't expecting a ring. How could I have been? We had only been dating for 3 years. And we had been living together for 2. And his parents adored me," she paused, "Okay, so maybe I was. Would that really be so wrong?" She sighed and tucked a piece of her auburn hair gently behind her ear.

"It was a beautiful autumn day, the kind of day where the air is brisk and the leaves have turned those lovely shades of orange and maroon. I just love autumn days, don't you? All that hot cocoa with those cute little miniature marshmallows. And the cardigans!" She smiled sweetly, revealing a set of dimples.

"I wait all summer for that sweater weather. I couldn't tell you how many cardigans just sit waiting in my closet, collecting dust." She blushed, her cheeks turning a slight shade of pink and cleared her throat, "Sorry, I'm getting off topic! I have a tendency to do that. That's what Robert always tells me, anyway. So... where was I?" She tilted her head slightly, trying to recall, "Ah yes, it was a lovely autumn day! I was reading a book by this quaint little coffee shop, you know, the one Downtown? They have the best scones. And I'm so entranced by this book I'm reading, really sucked in, that I don't even notice that someone has taken the seat across from me!"

She laughed, her face lighting up at the memory, "Can you imagine my surprise when I looked up? To see a stranger across from me, watching me as I'm wolfing down a pastry and drowning in one of my beloved novels. My goodness, that man really scared the living daylights out of me."

"That was the first time I met my Robert," her periwinkle eyes glimmered as she thought back to that moment, "He felt so bad for interrupting me, so bad that he even offered to buy me another scone. But, of course I wasn't going to let him off so easy. I asked him what he was thinking, scaring me like that! And he told me -I remember like it was yesterday- 'You looked like you were having so much fun that I had to know what you were reading.'"

She sighed like a schoolgirl in love. "He's always been so charming, my Robert. So sweet. And so *devilishly* handsome. It must have been fate that day, to bring us together. I always knew that my Prince Charming would love books as much as I do."

"Everything after that day just worked like clockwork. We exchanged numbers and went on dates and I met his parents and he met mine. We said 'I love you' and everything fell into place like perfect puzzle pieces. We moved in a year after we started dating and everything just felt so *right*. It really was just so perfect."

She frowned, her rosebud lips forming a pretty pout, "Until it wasn't. We had been dating for almost 3 years when he started acting strange, secretive. He started acting... what's the word? Fidgety. Yes, that's it. Fidgety. He started acting so odd around me. He wasn't as open with me and he would go out for hours at a time without a moment of notice." She began to sniffle, a tear falling silently down her cheek.

"I just got so worried about him, you know? To think that there was something off about him and that he couldn't even trust me enough to talk to me about it. It made me feel so wretched that I couldn't do anything to help him. So, I did what any woman in my position would do when their loved one was in trouble." She pulled a tissue out of her red clutch purse and wiped her eyes.

"I followed him. And of course, I respect his privacy, don't get me wrong! I just needed to make sure that my Robert was okay. So I followed him last week when he snuck out." She tucked her hair behind her ear again.

"And do you know what I found?"

She looked deadset into the eyes of the girl in front of her.

"I found you, Rose. He was at your doorstep that night."

"Of course, I thought of all the reasonable options. There could be any number of reasons that he was at your house. But every day that week, I found myself plagued by doubt. I began to notice things, the unmistakable whiff of perfume on his clothes. The lipstick on his collar. I began to find the facts irrefutable."

She smiled bitterly, tears brimming in her eyes.

"My dear, sweet Robert had been seduced by you. You had taken him from me, with your cheap perfume and your fuschia lipstick."

She paused to wipe the tears out of her eyes once more.

"But I don't blame Robert, of course. How could I? It wasn't his fault that he had been played. But Rose," she stood up, straightening her skirt, "I couldn't stand by and let you hurt him anymore."

She reached into her purse and grasped something in one of her perfectly manicured hands. She stepped closer to Rose, leaning down so that she could see her face clearly, the golden ringlets, the creamy complexion, the amber eyes. And the gag.

"I'm sure you understand."

Out of her purse came a kitchen knife, glinting angrily in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the greenhouse. Rose tried to cry out, but all she could manage was a muffled squeak. She tried to crawl away, move, tried to do something to get away from her, but she knew that she couldn't escape.

"I wasn't expecting a wedding ring, Rose. But I'm sure Robert will come around to the idea. Don't you think?"

~

Robert unlocked the door with a shrill *creeeeaaaak*. He really needed to remember to oil the hinges.

"Honey?" He took off his jacket, hanging it on the wooden coat rack, "Honey, where are you?" *She must be in the greenhouse*, he realized and headed out to the garden. Sure enough, he could see her outline in its green glass walls.

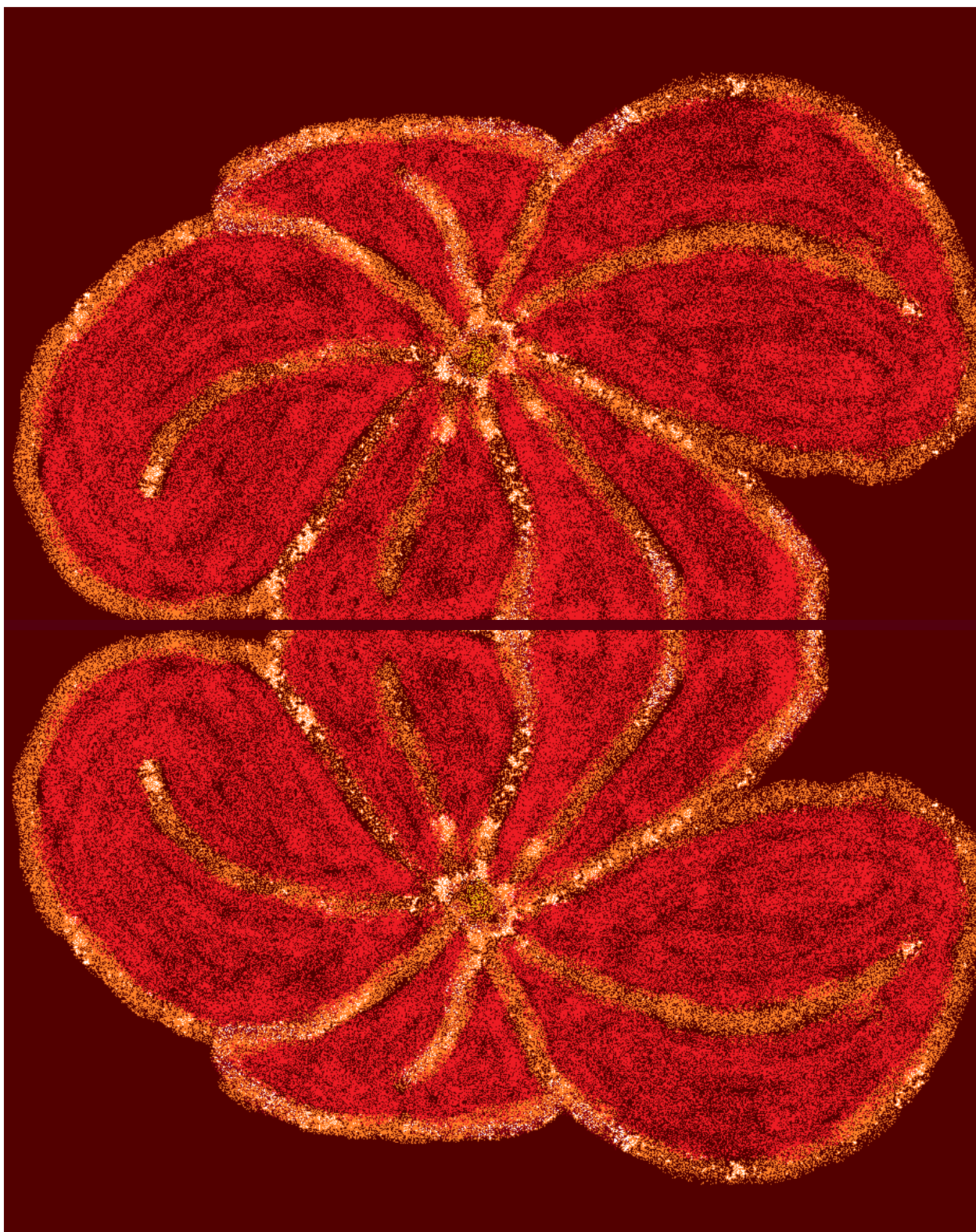
"Katie, what are you doing out here?"

His girlfriend smiled, wiping a streak of potting soil from her face.

"I'm just planting some roses, dear. Aren't they lovely?"

He smiled at the triviality of the statement. *That was the problem with Katie, she really was just far too simple. If only there was a brain in that pretty head of hers*, he thought to himself.

"Yes, honey. Lovely, indeed."



Digital Art by Bailey Russell

I can see the center of LA from here, its massive buildings concentrate into a mountain of manmade materials that dissipate to the surrounding single-story businesses and homes. The sun, nearly completing its descent, blinds me as it aligns with my gaze. With skyward-stretching arms, the city welcomes the blazing star into its horizon. On the corner of 3rd and Main Street, Kelly, Mike, and I await entry to a club. The entrance is a red door embedded in a brick wall. Above the door reads 'Club Persona' in glowing red letters. It sits between two businesses that are permanently closed, their names have faded, their missing windows sealed with plywood. Several businesses on this street have been reduced to the same fate. Vacant shops face every direction with eyes wide shut, adding victims to the toll. That virus nearly killed everything. The World Health Organization urged governments to keep cities closed as a means of mitigating its rapid transmission, because too many bodies attracted to one place was sure to cause outbreaks. The response did not come soon enough. I caught it once, I'm lucky it didn't claim me or any of my loved ones, but I know plenty who have lost someone firsthand.

We've been under restriction for several years now, the three of us had to go through high school graduation and our first years of college in lockdown. This is the first night any of us have been able to go into public spaces without face coverings. Kelly and Mike told me how much they wanted to go see a punk show in LA as a way of saying goodbye to that virus, and I felt the same. Our favorite local group, Brain Drain, announced they would finally be having a show in LA after years of being unable to perform due to the pandemic that affected most, if not all, of the world's population. We're ready to show our faces once again. We aren't as scared to breathe. People have changed, they always will, now some prefer wearing masks at all times outside their homes. I can see a few in line with us still wearing them. We decided to come to this thing maskless, but going anywhere with my face uncovered and letting my breath escape into the air feels wrong. Most of the others waiting in line have their masks off, too, but I wonder how many will keep them off once we enter. The fear that this could just be another quiet before another wave of outbreaks still resides in me, but I refuse to be consumed by it. That world I used to know has to be out there still. I just can't say for certain that it will ever return.

I'm trying my hardest to forget these awful maybes and remain present in the moment. I turn my attention to Kelly and Mike who have been murmuring to each other for the past few minutes. "Thank God the sun is finally going down. I was starting to sweat just from standing here," Kelly complains.

"I know, I wish I had brought my sunglasses before driving two hours with it directly in my eyes," Mike replies.

I say, "I'm feeling alright, actually. The sun feels nice in this cold breeze."

"It didn't bother me the way up, it's the standing in it that's making me hot."

"Well you did sleep the whole way here." Mike says jokingly.

"Yeah, and?" Kelly retorts, "I needed the rest before going crazy in the club."

"Very true," I say. I have to admit, Kelly is right about needing energy for one of these gigs. Being in the audience is no simple task, before long dancing will turn to violent moshing, but that's why people come. I usually spectate the mosh and cheer my friends on, but occasionally I'll jump in and throw myself against the other thrill-seekers. Tonight, I don't think I'll be getting close to anybody. "Tyler," Kelly says to get my attention, "Didn't you have someone you could have brought tonight? I feel bad making you the third wheel."

“Not at the moment, I was kind of hoping Sean would come, but his girl wouldn’t let him because of all those riots that were happening a couple years ago.”

“Pssh! That’s all over now. I bet it’s really because of the whole mask mandate being lifted,” Mike pauses, “well if he wasn’t trying to risk it then it’s good he didn’t come.”

“There’s no telling if it will come back or not,” I say this and feel those thoughts surface.

“Come on Tyler. All the news stations and health organizations are saying it’s finally over. We don’t have to worry about it anymore.” That is what the officials are saying, but I just don’t know what to believe anymore.

After a brief silence Kelly asks, “You aren’t talking to anyone special right now? What happened to those people you told us about from the dating apps?” Kelly tends to inquire about my love-life, but I don’t mind since it gets me out of my head.

“I quit using those. Honestly, the people on them are just a bunch of horndogs. I’m just seeing where life takes me. Who knows, maybe I’ll even meet somebody tonight.” I say this despite feeling completely off-put by the prospect of breathing in a stranger’s air.

“Need a wingman?”

“Thanks Mike, but nah. I’m just gonna let it happen naturally.”

“If you say so, just let me know if you change your mind.”

I appreciate them looking out for me, but I don’t need help getting a man or a woman. I find it’s best to dive into fear rather than accept help, because once I admit defeat, I might never be able to do it for myself. That’s why I came tonight in the first place, to rid myself of that virus’s hold on me. I hope I still know how to talk to people. I’ve gotten used to breaking the ice through internet messaging instead of face-to-face first impressions. When I was looking for love on those apps, I realized that I would always be the one initiating conversations and that no one ever seemed interested in maintaining connections. Most of them would assess my character in the first few messages and either block me or give me the driest responses, and the few that I actually became connected to were only interested in me for one thing. I finally became fed up with it and decided to just be single for a year or two. I just turned 20 a few months ago and I’m taking my writing more seriously. I’m all set to transfer to university in the fall. Moving out is going to be an adjustment. I know I’m going to miss my parents and older sister, but I’m more excited than anything else. Now that the world is opening up again, I’m not so scared of what’s ahead.

We’re next in line and I see one of the bouncers checking IDs. He’s holding a red marker in one hand and a bundle of red wristbands in the other. We pull out our wallets and get our cards ready. A group of four girls in front of us run into a roadblock when the bouncer notices one of them is under 18. After some protesting from their group, he and his colleague stand firmly in front of the shut red door with intimidating looks on their faces until the girls leave. I hold onto my ID with anticipation as I realize it’s our turn. The bouncer checks our IDs, marks our right hands with x’s in red marker, then opens the door for us. As we enter he says, “Enjoy the show”, then shuts the door behind us. As it closes the last bit of natural light disappears.

I put my ID back in my wallet then into my pocket. My eyes begin adjusting to the club’s dim interior, and I make out a flight of stairs that must lead to the showroom. We descend, gripping the railing bolted to the dark wall, sharing our elation at the fact that we are actually going to a show after all this time. The bottom floor is filled with the indistinguishable voices of people waiting for the show to begin. It feels completely foreign to see this many people shoved into one place, and I can hardly contain my disgust as I squeeze through them to reach the front stage. The gaping mouths of fully formed faces surround me with contaminated air. Sliding through the lake of human bodies, I’m barely able to keep myself above the surface, a wave of anxiety rushes over

me. I should get some water to cool off. I can feel myself beginning to sweat as those thoughts take over. I tell Mike and Kelly I'm going to get water and ask if they want any. When they say they're fine, I make note of their place in the crowd and begin shoving through people to get to the bathroom. The glass door labeled 'men' swings on its hinges as I pull it open. I grip the porcelain sink-bowl for stability. I turn the handle and the faucet hisses a stream of cold water. Water pools in the basin, overflowing from its drain, it must be clogged. My hands become the exit of my inner filth. I feel a cleansing chill rush through my entire body. I soap and suds them for added relief, turn the handle back once my hands are rinsed, then watch as my fear slowly gurgles down the drain. I dry my hands with a paper towel then pat my face to remove the stagnant sweat. I remind myself that I must remain in this moment, I must face this fear.

My breath begins to slow, I exit and walk towards the bar. The stench of alcohol rises into my nose from peoples' cups as I pass them. I place my hands on the smooth, black bartop, as a means of balancing myself and getting the barkeep's attention. At the other end stands this girl, I catch a glimpse of her tattooed arms and blond hair. I try to be slick when I look to see her face, but when I do, she's staring right back at me, she smiles then I quickly turn away. I feel hyper aware of my exposed face, but before the fear can even begin taking hold, I force it away. She starts walking towards me and I think to myself, "act cool." She leans her right arm on the bartop right next to me and says, "Hey."

I say with a smile, "Hi."

"Are you trying to get his attention," she says, gesturing her head at the bartender.

"Yeah, I want some water, but he hasn't come over here yet."

"Sometimes you just gotta scream at him, that usually gets their attention."

"I don't wanna be rude though, he's probably gonna come over here soon."

Against my wish she shouts, "Hey Kyle! Can we get some help over here?"

"Thanks, I probably could have done that." She seems nice, but I feel a bit embarrassed having her call him over for us.

"Don't be shy. You need something, you just gotta ask for it." She smiles as she speaks.

"What can I get ya Sam," the bartender, apparently named Kyle, asks her.

"Just water for my friend, and I'll take a margarita." She holds up her left arm to display the red wristband.

"Coming right up."

"Ooo a margarita, you like fancy drinks." I speak with ease, my fear dissolving.

"Yeah, I prefer beer, but they don't have anything good, so I'll go with the next best thing."

"Wow, never met a girl who actually prefers beer."

"Yeah, it's an acquired taste, but the mixed stuff will do, whatever gets me goin', ya know?"

"Definitely," I'm not much of a drinker but I want to relate, "cocktails don't hit the same as some nice refreshing brews."

"That's what I'm sayin'! You get it," she giggles, "I'm Samantha by the way, but you can call me Sam."

"Nice to meet you Sam. My name's Tyler."

Kyle comes back with our order and places the drinks in front of us, then says, "That'll be eight dollars Miss."

She pulls out a money clip with some strange, eight-pointed, metallic gold cross. It has four rhombuses sticking from the joints of its perpendicular limbs. Pulling out the bills and handing them to Kyle, she says, "Here ya go, keep the change." She puts the money away and grabs her margarita. Just as we turn around, the lead singer of the band gets on the microphone and says,

“Is everyone ready to lose their shit?” The crowd screams back at them to announce their readiness. I look around and see Mike and Kelly standing up front, their vision locked to the stage as they cheer along with the others. They smile as they hold each other’s hand. I look at Sam, who’s still smiling, and I wonder if I’ve found the fourth wheel. The singer shouts, “Then let’s go!” The room fills with the sound of drums, guitars, and the lead singer’s voice blasting from the amplifiers. The fun has finally started. She bobs her head and sways her hips, the margarita nearly spills as she leads me to a corner bench placed against the wall. We sit and she scoots right up against me pressing her arm into mine. We set our drinks next to us, watching the band and everyone in front of them go into a frenzy. The audience is dancing while fighting one another. I lose sight of Mike and Kelly in the commotion, but I know I’ll find them once things settle back down. I want to get out there and join the fun so I begin to stand. She stands with me and before we walk into the storm she says, “Try this, it’s good.”

I hold up my x’d out hand and say, “Can’t. I’m only 20.”

She hands me the margarita saying, “Close enough.”

I take the drink into my hand and hold it for a moment, noticing her look of anticipation. I’d hate to look lame in front of a cute girl. I pour the salty sweet ice in my mouth, and as I gulp, the liquid flames singe my nostrils. I see her face curl in a pleased smile. “Good, huh?”

“Yeah it’s alright,” I’m not into drinking, but something compels me to have some when it’s at her request.

Sam sets her drink on the bench then starts shaking her body furiously with the music, she grabs my arms and pulls me into her frenzy. We both begin dancing by the wall, the music causing our bodies to convulse. This band is called Raw Noise, which I’ve never actually heard of, but the music they’re playing is actually quite good. It’s pretty heavy compared to what I listen to, it’s more metal than punk, nothing like Brain Drain. My new friend apparently knows the band as she begins singing along to the nonsensical vocals of the singer, either that or she’s faking it pretty well. Her blonde hair slaps her back then flings forward into her face as she continues to shake her head vigorously. We keep this up until the first song ends. She sits on the bench, taking another sip of her drink, as the band starts their next song she gets back up with the drink in her hand. She hands it to me as an offer for me to drink more, and I think, ‘why not?’ I’ve never snuck drinks at a show like this before. I take a bigger gulp than the first, reintroducing the fire to my throat. The warmth travels down into my stomach then up into my head.

Before I know it, the bartender is standing right in front of me. He reaches down to grab my wrist, finding the red x on my hand. “Bro, c’mon, now you gotta leave,” he shouts at me over the music. He turns around with my wrist still in his grip then drags me up the stairs and out the door. “Don’t come back,” he says before shutting the door and sealing the noise inside.

There is no longer a bouncer out front and the street is entirely empty. It’s night, but it isn’t dark. A dense fog hangs over the city. I can see where the skyscrapers start, but the building tops are engulfed by the mist. The lights of downtown LA project into the sky, forming a sea of white haze. I stand in front of the red door for a moment wondering to myself how I’m going to let Kelly and Mike know I’ve been kicked out. I could just send them a text and hope they see it soon so I don’t end up waiting outside in the cold all night. I feel around my pockets but I don’t feel my phone anywhere, panic sets in immediately. I frantically search every part of my clothes trying to feel the small phone that links me to the world. I must have left it somewhere in Mike’s car or somewhere in the club. Either way, this isn’t good. I still have my wallet so that’s good at least, but I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do. I start walking down the street to a liquor store when I hear the door open behind me and a familiar, “Don’t come back.” I turn and see Sam standing

there. She pushes her hair back and readjusts her shirt. “Hey,” she says with a defeated tone, “he got me too. He saw me give you the drink.”

“Well this sucks. My friends gave me a ride and they’re still in there, so I can’t leave. On top of that my phone is locked in his car. I’m totally screwed.” I feel less panicked now that she is with me, I’m sure she’ll be able to help.

“Yeah, that’s no good. Sorry I got you kicked out.”

“It’s ok, I mean I’m the one who drank illegally. Is there some kind of directory nearby?” I could really use a sign that says, *YOU ARE HERE*.

“What do you mean?”

“I have no clue where I am or where I need to go.”

“You’re not from around here?”

“No, I’m from Garden Grove.”

“You’re a long way from home.”

“Seriously. Do you maybe have a phone I could borrow?”

“I actually don’t, can’t afford one, and you don’t want to ask just anyone for a phone. They’ll probably rob you when they realize you’re not from here. I know someone who has one though.”

I find it odd that someone my age doesn’t have a phone, but I choose to follow her anyways. She seems to be my only chance at reconnecting with Mike and Kelly at the moment. Sam leads me towards the city where the buildings cram together. The night sky’s an illusion. It’s drowning above us. As we walk past shops and bars, I feel the urge to go in and ask for a phone, but I remember Sam’s warning and persist towards our destination. The only people on the street besides us seem to be either homeless or on their way home. Somewhere along the way she asks me “So do you think your friends have noticed you’re gone yet?” She smirks.

“I’m not sure, I would think not since the show barely started.”

“Really? But shouldn’t they have noticed you’re gone since they’re such good friends of yours? Hopefully they don’t wind up leaving without you.” She keeps that smirk on her face which starts to feel more creepy than attractive. I feel a weird sense of pressure coming from her words.

“Maybe, but I’m sure they’ll notice at some point.” I play it off because I don’t even want to consider the fact that I could get left behind in LA with no phone or means of getting home.

We must have walked a mile or two since it only took us 20 minutes to reach our destination. I still have no clue where we are or what time it is in the world. It’s a small club with the sign “Déjà Vu” above its door. The glow from the red words creates a slim outline against the brown wood. “‘Déjà Vu’? What kind of club is this?” I say to Sam as we near the entrance.

“You’ll see. Don’t be afraid,” she grabs my arm and leads me through the double door entrance. We enter a short hallway with pink lights lining the crevices between the ceiling and the walls. As we walk along the carpeted floor and near a secondary double-door entrance, electronic sounds become clearer. Sam opens the doors and we are bombarded by the bass and synths of a rave. There’s a DJ booth, on a stage opposite to the entrance, resting about four feet above the ground. The interior is filled with a mass of people, they are gathered in front of the stage, making it nearly invisible. The DJ appears to be floating in a raft on their heads. My stomach begins to turn at the thought of being in yet another crowded, breath-infested club. I repress the feeling. Sam leads me toward the right of the stage, cutting through the bodies, where a sign that says “restrooms” is pasted to the wall. The closer we get to the stage the more visible a small hallway becomes that leads to the restrooms. Four doors line the wall on the left and we stop at the last one. “Okay so just go in here and they’ll help you on your way. They aren’t mean or anything, just a little odd.”

“What do I say to them?”

“Just let them know who brought you and they’ll help you out. I’ve got to get going, sorry again for any trouble I caused you.”

“Wait, you’re not coming in with me?”

“I can’t, I’ve gotta go, someone’s waiting for me, but we should hang out if you’re ever in the LA again, it was nice meeting you Tyler.” She seems to say this without meaning it.

“Thanks for the help, hopefully we can see each other again.” I don’t really believe I’ll see her again.

“Good luck.” With that, she walks back out of the hallway, disappearing into the crowd of people, like nothing, gone. I guess the fourth wheel just rolled off its hub. I stand there for a moment in an attempt to gain some sort of courage before entering this room of unforeseen people who may or may not be willing to help me. Finally, I say to myself ‘screw it’ and knock. The door opens with a red glow escaping the threshold. The scent of cigarette smoke rushes into my nostrils as I enter the room then the door closes behind me. I wish I had a mask to filter the smog. As it shuts, the noise muffles and the only remaining sound is the loud vibration from the bass in the walls. A group of three men and one woman are inside. One man sits on a dark leather couch, the other is sitting on a chair between the couch and a desk. The woman is caressing the one in the chair with her body. The man who opened the door goes to the girl giving the lap dance and taps her on the shoulder, “Can you give us a sec sweetie?” She gives him a glare and says, “I need my money first.” She turns to look at the man in the chair then stands with her arms crossed. He sighs then hands her a few bills from his pocket. She counts them, looks displeased, then says, “Where’s the rest? This is only 50. We agreed on 200.”

“Listen you only gave me part of the show so you only get part of the payment. You want the rest, then come back after we deal with our guest.”

She rolls her eyes then glares at me as she walks out the door into the noise, the other man closes it behind her. The third man quietly smokes a cigarette as he sits on the black, low-to-the-ground couch. The man at the door presses a button on the wall and the light changes from red to a bright white. The one by the door becomes clearer with a set of brown eyes in his white face. His head is topped with dark brown hair brushed across a bald scalp. After changing the light he sits behind the desk. I turn my attention to the man on the couch, who appears to be wearing some sort of military uniform, but I’m not sure which branch it’s from. An anchor on his chest makes it look like it could be a navy uniform, but the ribbons are all wrong. My parents have my grandpa’s medals from his naval career displayed on our mantle and none of the colors or designs on the ribbons look like what this guy has on. I notice a white-crowned hat with a black brim placed on the couch next to him. It also looks wrong, but it has two upward-curving branches with a star in their center where there should be the naval crest with an eagle and shield. Isn’t it illegal to impersonate high ranking military officials?

The cancer stick in his fingers spits smoke into his eyes, clouding the blue irises under his dark brown eyebrows. His hair is a well-groomed brown that swoops from one corner of his ear to the other. My throat is startin to feel ticklish. I swear I can taste his breath in my lungs. The man in the chair pulls out a pack of Marlboros from his pocket then takes one from the box. He takes out a lighter and before sparking, he it says “What brings you here young man?”

“A friend brought me here.”

“Who’s this friend of yours?” says the man in the chair. He lights the cigarette.

“Some girl I met named Sam. I just met her tonight actually, she said I could use a phone here.”

“Sam brought you?” The man at the desk asks, “and she didn’t even say hello?”

"Guess not." I wasn't aware they were such good friends.

"What do you need a phone for?" The smoking military man says, removing the cigarette from his face, "are you lost or something?"

"I got separated from my friends and I don't have my phone, so I was hoping I'd be able to call them and let them know where I am. Would that be alright?"

His blue eyes become clear once the smoke vanishes, "Ah, I see. So you were out for the evening when it all took a turn for the worse." He completely ignores my question about the phone, but I decide to entertain the conversation.

"I mean, sort of, we've just misplaced each other for the time being."

"Ah, but this must have happened for a reason," he looks over to the man in the chair, "right, Marcus?"

Marcus seems annoyed, he sits with his face resting in his palms with the still-burning cigarette in his fingers. "Sure, whatever." He barely sounds awake when he responds, he must feel bummed about not getting his promised show from that woman.

"What do you think Nick?" he says, turning his attention to the other man.

"That's right, David." Nick replies with a smile forced into his mouth.

I'm not entirely sure what he's trying to imply in saying that, but I feel an obligation to let him finish whatever point he's trying to make. "You see, uh, what's your name by the way?" I don't exactly feel the need to be on a first name basis but I guess there isn't any harm.

"I'm Tyler."

"Well it's nice to meet you Tyler, why don't you have a seat over here?" He pats the couch seat next to him. I don't feel like making myself comfortable, especially not in a room that's choking me with toxic air, but if it gets me to a phone, I'll go with it.

"Sure." I sit down next to David after he lifts his hat from the couch and sets it in his lap.

"Much better. Now what I'm trying to say is I believe your friends left you without a phone on purpose." I don't see how he can make that assumption based on what I've said, but whatever, I'll put up with it for the time being. At this point I notice that he is the only one speaking, Nick just sits behind the desk smiling as he gives full attention to David, and Marcus leans back in his chair as he smokes. Both remain completely silent. "The suppressive people of this world will do things like that, to hurt you."

"You think so?"

"Oh I know it. I've been thrown around so many times that I finally decided to get the hell out of this place and move."

"What made you leave?"

"I saw all the evil of society, everyone being drawn in by the allure of wealth and fame. They'll drag everyone else down to get it, I've felt the wrath of suppressive people firsthand." I'm beginning to see that this man is a true believer in his own words.

"What do you mean by that?"

"They led me to believe that the city would bring us unimaginable wealth, only to ultimately give up and run back home. Others became enwrapped with their sinful desires and abandoned me."

"Well I'm glad my friends and family are there for me. They always will be."

"That's what I'm trying to warn you about, Tyler. These friends of yours seem awfully unaware of your absence, don't they?"

"They were just having a good time and got caught up in the evening. I got caught up in it too."

"That's how it began for me too, there were nights we'd go out looking for fun at the local

clubs, getting into trouble. My friends sought the thrills of life and eventually they were sucked in. Finally, I had to turn away and find my own world to be a part of."

"You found your own world? How?" I don't really feel all that interested in learning this man's life story, but I am still holding out for that phone.

"That's right," he bluntly states, "I met a man named Lafayette. He was the founder and leader of our group before I was. He welcomed me when no one else would and took me under his wing. I owe him everything."

"So you joined the Navy?" I know he isn't Navy, but I wonder if I can catch him in a lie.

"Not exactly, but much like the Navy we have many living on the ocean in a fleet of giant boats, they're just like cruise ships. We are all a part of the fight to save the world from those who are willing to toss people aside for their own gain. We are the frontline of a spiritual battle that will never cease so long as evil lives."

"Wow, for real?" At this point he's completely lost me, I feel the phone I was promised never actually existed.

"Nick, Marcus, Samantha, myself, we all live on our flagship. It's currently docked in the Port of LA. All those people you saw dancing out there needed our help at one point or another. They now call the Avian home. We land once in a while to find more who need our community, people much like yourself. They too were lost with nowhere to go. Now we've given our lives to the great cause Lafayette started, and our true purpose has been found. We now know our responsibility as leaders."

He seems like he could go on forever, but I cut him short as the whole pitch is starting to give me major cult vibes. "How honorable of you all to keep up your valiant efforts, but I seriously need to call my friends, they will be looking for me soon enough." I say that just in case these men feel they can forcibly take me without anyone noticing.

"With our community there is no need to find those which you seek, there is only you and your will to enact vengeance upon the evil rooted in this world. Everything you ever needed outside of yourself becomes obsolete, because the truth to your own being will come to light."

"I better go," as I say this Marcus and Nick activate in some synchronized blockade of the doorway.

"You don't understand Tyler, you are the world's salvation and all it takes is the path to truth that we can provide to you aboard the Avian. You are all you need, and joining the rest of us will only show you how true that really is." My heart sinks as I feel trapped by his words. He continues to spout, "I met my wife aboard our flagship when Lafayette was leader. Now she and all my subjects follow my command. I am leading them on the path to having The Truth Revealed."

I need to leave and find my way back to Club Persona, I need to get away from these people. Right now. I stand up and walk over to Nick and Marcus hoping they'll just let me through, but they won't move. Just as I'm about to begin demanding they let me out I see the door open behind them, the head of that woman from before peeks into the room. She starts shouting, "Hey! Where's the rest of the money you promised you dipshit, ain't you done talking to this kid yet!"

The two men turn their attention to the door, and before they can react, I shove through them and make my escape. I bolt through the door, the smell follows me out. I hear David shouting something behind me, I see Sam standing against the wall talking to some guy with a drink in her hand. She really is part of this, but that isn't important to me as I'm focused on getting to the club entrance. I sprint through the pink hall and out the doors. The fog has descended upon the city, making it nearly impossible to see where I am going. The cool night air fills my lungs as I begin to sprint. I nearly reach the street corner when I hear the door open behind me. I look and make out the vague shapes of Marcus and Nick through the fog. They begin looking around, I

sprint left around the corner before they can see me. I hear Nick shout, "I think he went this way." I turn into an alley. Its dark here, the light can't reach it. I duck behind a dumpster and wait. I strain myself, holding my breath, focusing on being as quiet as possible. I hear the two men passing with their heavy breathing and running, but I wait to emerge until they are out of earshot. I slowly inch out of the alley into the lit sidewalk, I stand at the edge of the shadow and peek my head out. I look to the left and can't see Marcus or Nick anywhere. I can hardly see anything. I sprint in the opposite direction since I remember that is the way me and Sam came from.

What have I gotten myself into? Sam wasn't really into me, how could I have been manipulated so easily? I need to find Mike and Kelly. I can't make out which way I'm going, but somehow I remember the way in my frenzied running. When I finally reach the street where Club Persona is, I realize no one is following me, but I'm still checking over my shoulder every couple seconds. When I reach the closed red door, I try opening it, but it's locked tight. The once red shining words are now a dead white. I feel lost once again since I have no idea if the place is even open anymore, I can't remember what time they close, or what time it is in general. I'm trying to think of where Mike and Kelly could have gone, I wonder if they finally decided to leave without me, maybe they think I ditched them and drove home already. I sit on the filthy sidewalk against the brick wall feeling completely lost, the emptiness sets in. I stare into the haze. It's saturated by orange light pouring from the street lamps. I sink deeper into my feeling of abandonment. I never should have taken that damn drink. Maybe I shouldn't have even gone out. If I could just get hold of a phone and call Mike and Kelly, I could put all this behind me.

I look over and see the headlights of an oncoming car cut through the mist, shining right into my eyes. They halt just to the left of me, but I can't see the car behind the headlights. I try seeing through the white beams at whoever is driving the damn thing but can't make them out. I panic again as I fear it must be David and his goons come to take me with them. The car moves itself in front of me and it becomes clear that it's Mike's CRV. I stand up and run right over to them, Kelly is sitting in the passenger seat with her window open. I shout, "Mike! Kelly! Thank God you two came back for me."

She says, "Oh my gosh Tyler! Where the heck have you been? We've been calling you!"

Mike says, "Dude, seriously! We've been looking all over for you, we were about to go to the police station and ask them for help!"

"I'm so sorry guys, can I please just get in so we can get the hell out of this city?" He unlocks the doors and I hop into the backseat behind Kelly.

"Where the hell did you go man?" Mike asks in a concerned voice.

"I got kicked out right after the show started, I tried to find a phone but couldn't get to one, I came back hoping you guys would still be here. I had no idea where to go or what to do without my damn phone."

"No wonder you haven't been answering this whole time!" says Kelly.

"Yeah my phone is probably on silent or something, guys I am so sorry, but can we please get the hell out of here, the sooner we can put this behind us the better."

"Ok fine but at some point you're giving us an explanation." Mike starts the car and begins the trip back to Garden Grove. I agree with him, but I need a moment to calm myself before explaining what just occurred. I reach over into the pocket behind Mike's chair and grab my phone. When I pull it over to my lap, I see missed messages and calls from my mom. Before even reading what she had sent, I message her, saying, *Sorry, I left my phone in Mike's car. The show just ended. We are heading home.* I set my phone face down on the seat next to me as Mike begins pulling the car onto the freeway. A few moments pass and I hear my phone vibrate. My

mom's response reads, *Glad you're ok. Get home.* I can tell she isn't going to be too happy with me when I get back.

Mike, Kelly, and I sit in silence as we drive along the freeway. The night becomes clear as the fog has dissipated, and the stars repopulate the sky. Somewhere along the road to our return, we curve toward the coast, peeking into the ocean. I can see that it's the Port of LA. The water is all for the moon's reflection, its face is the only light in the black sea. I stare intently out at the ships, at their hulls, each of them, searching for one word: Avian. Are there really people out there willing to believe such fanatic men as David? I realize he never told me their organization's name. I wonder if I'll spot those free-floating Davidians' kingdom, or whatever they call themselves and their world that's anchored in the darkness. It appears even the strangest of us can captivate a people and create their own lands to rule.



Oak Tree (pencil sketch with digital editing) by Sidney Russell

Everything stopped overnight.

A curfew! A shutdown! Being home with no pressure. We're in the kitchen, laden with laptops and Chromebooks like a library's study table. We laughed and ate, watched movies, recreated Pinterest projects, and fell in love all over again. No more busy days, when no one was home until the hustle and bustle of the evening.

"Hey, how was your day? Are you ready for practice? Dinner is in the crockpot. The appointment is tomorrow. What time do you need to be there? Can you stay in and watch the girls?" Gone. It was perfect, the calmness.

Until it wasn't.

My youngest coined the term "Corona-cation," but three weeks into April of 2020 she began proclaiming, "I hate this! I hate COVID!" The days ran together like thick chocolate. Collecting in globs then slowly pouring out with chunks that haven't melted all the way down yet, they follow into the next day and the next. Wake up, sit at table, log in. Lunch, two step to the fridge. Pajamas and sweatpants became our daily wardrobe, and boredom consumed the most miniature human, dimming her light. She became a tiny tyrant. Soon, we were discussing menses. As the days passed, she became more defeated, hating Zoom and yearning for her playground. After healing broken bones, the oldest hung up his cleats. After a drive thru graduation, college was looking rather bleak. Middle had to leave the theatre and never returned; now her paint brushes just sit under a towel waiting for their turn.

We learned that you can really dislike your kids sometimes; slime never comes out of the carpet; watching them grow can be heartbreaking; family is the best thing about life.

The morning I took a trip to Dollar General for toilet paper is when it hit me. Bare as bones that have been sucked dry by my mother's wing-eating skills. Plain, empty shelves begging to matter. Price tags with descriptions in tears from their uselessness. The stores now colder inside, an open-mouthed cave with fluorescent lights and yellow walls. Whistles of wind from nowhere lick the back of your neck. Mouthless faces with eyes in a constant state of shock moved with weights on their feet. The roads were quiet and lifeless; we had a laundry list of delivery purchases; bottles of wine were opened a bit earlier each week.

We learned what Tyler Durden means when he says, "only after disaster can we be resurrected;" at any moment this could be the Hunger Games; Doordash is a trap; put the Chardonnay down.

The man-child began to spend more time away until it became permanent. Now he says things like, "WE had shrimp for dinner. WE are coming over later. WE got a puppy." Ugh.

"I got this, mom; I'm good on my own." The subtle boom of his completely transitioned base voice is gone. The smell of way too much cologne for a Tuesday night.

Gone. It was hard.

Until it wasn't... it's still hard.

We learned that everything changes, sometimes overnight; growing up is even more challenging in a pandemic; discouragement is powerful; grit is a necessity.

Nonfiction



Photograph by Bat-Ami Gordin

Samantha Nichols

The Night: 28 Sept 2009

He stumbled down the hall to the bedrooms, calling to his 19-year-old daughter.

She heard him coming, jumped up from her comfortable lime-green chair that sat in front of her laptop, and carefully navigated her way to her bedroom door. As she opened the door, she saw her father, the strongest person she knew, stumble against the open linen closet doors.

“Sam,” he choked out with a sob. “She’s gone.”

She grabbed him into a hug. They held each other. They both knew it had been coming since July, but it hadn’t registered until that moment. It was almost ten o’clock at night, but still he called his siblings and asked his older sister to pick up his son.

She, Sam, began to gather photographs from the cabinet drawers that her mother had designated for them.

Sam called her Aunt Laura, number four of her dad’s six siblings, and asked if she could bring Dr. Pepper because they were out.

Sam began stacking the piles of envelopes full of photographs, that she thought that She would be in, on the ugly yellow, red, and off-white linoleum kitchen floor, next to where the old, thin, brown carpet ended from the living room.

Sam’s father’s siblings began to show up, one after another. Her Aunt Laura and her Uncle Jeff showed up carrying a 12-pack of Pepsi and a 12-pack of Dr. Pepper, continuing to feed the family’s soda addictions. Sam and Aunt Laura set the 12-packs on the kitchen counter by the sink.

Sam asked if anyone wanted a soda with ice. They declined her offer, so she went about preparing her own drink. She grabbed the Mickey Mouse Disney Anniversary glass that she always hid from her other family members, so she would be the only one to use it, and added crushed ice to it. She popped open a Dr. Pepper, poured some into the glass, and took a long drink. Her Aunt Anna came in. Sam then went to grab more photographs to stack and go through.

Sam grabbed the last of the ones she wanted to go through and sat down next to the many piles of envelopes full of photos of the past. Sam began sorting through them, commenting on the ones of her with “Wasn’t I adorable?”

Sam was not truly paying attention of what her relatives were talking about in the living room. She was too preoccupied with finding pictures of the family’s unofficial photographer.

Her bed dominated the living room. The couch and computer were opposite it, in front of the front window. Opposite of the bed She laid upon. Sam tried really hard to ignore it. Sam wanted to remember Her full of life, scolding, laughing, smiling, yelling, all of it. Sam had missed it those past few months, still does in fact.

Sam focused on passing around the photos, memories of past good times, that her mother had taken. She was sorting photos, listening to stories her Aunts, Uncle, and Father were telling her and her older brother about their mother’s life.

Like that She had worked at Famoso raceway and always went to the March Meets. Or how they always remembered her behind the camera, increasing Sam’s frustration on finding decent pictures of Her.

Aunt Anna, Aunt Chris and Uncle Jeff were all on the couch. Her brother, PJ, was on the chair in front of the computer, her dad was sitting in the leather recliner they had gotten

earlier that year, that She would sleep on when going to bed was too difficult, Aunt Laura and Aunt Julie were standing next to each other, by where Sam was sitting on the floor, looking through the photos with her.

From where Sam sat, Sam could not see Her in that bed.

When everyone was gathered around, Sam's father said that She had gone peacefully. "She took a long, shuddering breath, and I knew. She was gone. She wasn't in pain anymore."

They began reminiscing on earlier that year, tears still in some of their eyes. One small conversation stuck in Sam's mind about her 12-day-old cousin, Seth.

"Yeah, when I was having Seth..." Aunt Anna began to say, quickly like most of the women in the family.

There was a brief moment of silence.

"What?!" "Huh?" chorused Aunt Laura, Aunt Chris, and Aunt Julie.

"When I was having Seth, you know, my son. What were you thinking of?" Aunt Anna asked.

Not what you thought you said was echoed in the statements replied to the baby and most rebellious of the six siblings. There was even mention of a pole.

"You all have dirty minds," Aunt Anna retorted to her older siblings. The living occupants in the room erupted in laughter.

Sam was continuing to look through the pictures and began thinking about-

"I vote Seth gets a nickname," Sam announced from her place on the floor. "What's Seth's middle name?"

"Andrew," Aunt Anna responded.

"We can call him Andrew or Andy."

"No bad memories come with the name Andy," Aunt Julie said.

"And Andrew is too long for a nickname."

"How about Drew?" Sam asked.

Everyone reached a consensus on Drew as a suitable nickname for the 2-week-old. And Sam is the only one that still calls him Drew, or her personal favorite, my little Drewikins.

They continued to share stories and pass around the pictures. They continued this until the mortuary people showed up a little before midnight to take Her away.

As the mortuary people were getting what they needed to take Her, Sam stood up and walked to where She laid. She had a peaceful look on her face as Sam bent down, ghosting her lips against Her forehead. With tears in her eyes, Sam murmured a soft goodbye to her mother.

The mortuary people came back in the house with the bag and gurney. Sam's aunts began tearing up again as they said their goodbyes to Her. She was gone... All that was left were memories and an empty hospital bed that continued to dominate the living room.

The family began to leave. Leaving the empty bed that Sam tried to ignore, Sam, and her father in the house once filled with three living members alone.

Sam went to bed at four a.m., barely thinking about the day to come and her class in three hours. Before her well-deserved sleep, she spread the news: a text to her friends before a post on Facebook. She slept thinking, "Rest in peace, mom."



Drama

DonCorleonSmaug based on Smaug (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelreader



Madison King

Wrathful Seed

Clara: A 35-year-old woman. Dressed in flowy clothes, with brunette hair, and wearing a locket. Married to Samuel for six years. No children.

Samuel: A 43-year-old man. An even larger human with a mustache and glasses, who constantly wears business casual. Married to Clara for six years. No children.

Takes place in a Middle-Class Suburban community. Modest house with a large backyard. There is bad weather everyday here.

EXT. BACKYARD-- SUNDOWN

Scene opens on Clara looking at the ground in her backyard. The sky is dark, and the wind is whipping her hair around, with a horizontal rain hitting her in the face. A stick, once was young tree, lays dead and brown on the ground in the wind and the rain. Clara's face is distraught and she is crying. She grasps at the ground, looks up at the sky, wipes her tears, and walks inside to the living room.

CLARA

We lost it again (She wipes her dirty hands on her pants).

SAMUEL

(Looks up from his phone) You lost it? Damn. We can always try to plant again tomorrow.

CLARA

I don't know, hun. (Sniffles) I am so tired of this. Kneeling down to try every day, carrying a big sack of dirt around, facing the elements, its ruining my body. Trying so many times is hurting my brain. I am just, like exhausted.

SAMUEL

Don't use 'like' so much. You sound like you didn't graduate high school.

CLARA

Oh, right

(She walks into bedroom, and Samuel follows her. They both lay down to sleep).

Sam, can you give me a back massage? I'm really not feeling well.

Clara hears his bed-shaking snoring.

INT. LIVING ROOM-- MORNING

The next morning, Clara finds Samuel watching the news.

SAMUEL

Did you see what's happening in the Randaymian Embassy right now? Dustin Trucedoe was caught at a party doing black antennae.

CLARA

I wouldn't put it past him. (She hesitates) Could we try again today? (Samuel pauses the television).

SAMUEL

Let's give your body some time to heal. We don't need this that bad. If all else fails, we can just go to the nursery and get a sapling. Maybe a redwood? Those trees always need homes.

CLARA

Sam, I want one that I planted. That we planted. It will be so much more satisfying to watch it grow up. Besides, what if the sapling is sick? Are you really prepared to take care of a sick sapling?

SAMUEL

It might save you the heartbreak. Its already alive.

CLARA

These have been alive too! I have seen the tiny green sprout, multiple times. I have heard the wind whistle around its growing trunk. It is alive as soon as I plan--

SAMUEL

(Cutting her off) That's not what you said eight years ago when we had that accident.

CLARA

What the fuck, Sam! What is wrong with you?!

SAMUEL
I'm just saying.

(Clara storms off into the backyard. Samuel grunts and mutters something under his breath, while he un-pauses the BBC, Beetle Broadcasting Channel)

EXT. BACKYARD-- MORNING

Outside, Clara searches through a wooden box of mixed up used and unused seeds. She finds one that has yet to be planted. She grabs her gloves and Samuel's gloves, and goes into a different part of the yard to plant the seed.

CLARA
I can do it without him. All I need is both of our gardening tools, and it will all be okay. (Talking to the seed) Its going to be okay.

Montage of Clara planting and crying, planting and crying. Her attempts over a few weeks have not been fruitful. Clara tries one last time.

EXT. BACKYARD-- MORNING

CLARA
(Talking to the seed as she is planting) You are my last hope.
(A tear drips down and hits the Earth. Then a torrent of tears. Camera pans up, and the sky fills with rain).

EXT. BACKYARD-- MORNING

A week later, Clara comes out to the backyard to a surprise. The sun is shining, and sitting in the middle of the backyard, a small, green stem is sticking up.

CLARA
(yells) SAM! SAM! HURRY!

Samuel rushes out to see tears of joy running down his wife's face.

SAMUEL
Congratulations, honey! Your dream has finally come true!

CLARA
(hugs him) Our dream!

Samuel doesn't say a thing, but hugs her back.

The next few days, Clara is ecstatic about the positivity of the little stem. She likes to day dream and tell Samuel all about her hopes for the tree and their backyard, while he is reading a book, *Thatcher in the Sky*, by J. K. Sal Injure.

CLARA
She will be the prettiest! She will give us beautiful flowers! She's going to grow so big and tall! Ugh, Sam aren't you so excited? (She flops down on the couch beside him).

SAMUEL
If you are happy, my love, then I am happy.

INT./EXT. BED ROOM/BACKYARD-3AM

Later that night, Clara is fast asleep. She is having a dream that a monster is eating all of her seeds. She cries out for Samuel in the dream, and his face is on the moon above the monster, smiling. The face starts to laugh. She cries his name once again, and the moon and Samuel's face goes behind a number of clouds in the night sky.

Clara wakes up sweating.

CLARA
Sam? Sam? I-I had a bad dream. Can you hold me? (Clara turns over and Samuel is not there). Sam?

(She looks around her dark room. She stumbles out to the living room to look for him. Everything is dim. The back door is slightly cracked. She looks out the back windows. There he was, holding something over where the new seedling is sleeping).

(She yells out) What are you doing?

SAMUEL
(Samuel calls back to her) My love! I am just watering the new seedling. I just really want this one to survive.

CLARA

(She walks out to inspect the seed, and sees Samuel holding a dropper) Samuel, that's not necessary. I watered her this morning.

SAMUEL

(Laughs) My love! How do you know it's a girl?

CLARA

I can just feel it, okay? What happened to the seedling?

SAMUEL

I noticed it was looking a little droopy, so I came out to water it.

(She gets down on her hands and knees to inspect the dirt. She kisses the ground, and wrinkles up her nose)

EW, what the fuck? Why does the ground smell like that?

SAMUEL

Like what, my love?

CLARA

Like bleach? Did it rain bleach today? Is this a bleached seed? I didn't smell bleach earlier today.

SAMUEL

Clara, you've been so stressed, I'm sure your mind is just playing tricks on you. Let's get back in bed, I'll give you a back massage.

CLARA

Actually, I think I'm good (Clara sniffs the ground). What were you watering this with?

SAMUEL

The filtered water, my love. You told me to.

CLARA

Then let me put some in my mouth, I want to make sure the water line wasn't contaminated with something.

SAMUEL

Uh, no. I used it all on the new seed.

CLARA

Why are you lying to me? I can see that the dropper is half full. Let me taste. (Clara snatches it out of his hand, and puts a drop in her mouth) OW! It burns! What is this, Samuel?

SAMUEL

What do you mean? Its water?

CLARA

No fucking way its water. Are you trying to do something to the seed?

SAMUEL

No. You're acting fucking insane. Why would I try to do something to this seed? I know how much you want a tree.

CLARA

But you want it too, right? I'm not the only one.

SAMUEL

(He hesitates) Well, it is mostly your thing.

CLARA

Are you serious?

SAMUEL

You're the one that has an Slamacon wish list full of little tree stuff.

CLARA

Only because I thought we both wanted this. We've always talked about having trees.

SAMUEL

Yes, but we've been trying for two years. Its ruining your old body. Haven't you noticed that I'm not really that into digging the seed holes with you anymore?

CLARA

Don't put that on me, you keep saying you're just tired from work.

SAMUEL

(Looks up at the sky as it begins to pour) Lets get inside, we can talk about this tomorrow. (He starts to walk away).

CLARA

(Grabs him roughly by the shoulder) Don't you walk away from me, don't think I don't know what you've been doing to our seeds. Putting bleach in their soil food? Am I married to a murderer?

SAMUEL

Is that what you think of me?

CLARA

(Clara looks down at the ground and takes her hand off of Samuel) I don't know what I think of you anymore.

SAMUEL

You don't mean that.

CLARA

How can I know what I mean? I feel like I'm going crazy.

SAMUEL

Maybe you are.

CLARA

Maybe you're right.

SAMUEL

I know I'm right. How about we talk to your therapist tomorrow, together? We will figure this out. I am going to protect you. I will make you all better.

CLARA

Okay. I would like that. Thank you. I- I'm sorry. I know I must seem insane right now.

SAMUEL

You're okay, my love. I will fix this.

CLARA

Yes, I know you will.

The two go inside and lay down on the bed, facing away from each other. Samuel falls asleep. Clara gets up from the bed.

In the dark of the night, there is a flowy figure fleeing the

house in the dark and rain. They get into a car and drive quickly away. The sounds of the thunder and heavy rain drone out any other sounds.

Low shot through the house into Samuel and Clara's bedroom. The viewers see Samuel's body on the bed, with a cut all the way down his abdomen, overflowing with seeds. The blood mixed with the seeds drip to the floor into a puddle.



In Bloom (photography) by Kevin Lara

Ian Tash

Keeping Up with the Kattamas

The play opens on a video screen. FATHER and SID, all dressed in designer clothes, standing in a lovely kitchen. There are a multitude of expensive looking gadgets and other evidence that there is evidence of baking. It is messy, but not too messy. SID can be a boy or girl.

FATHER

Alright, Sid, it's time to bake the family bread that makes the world so special. You ready?

SID

Of course, Dad!

Cut to a confessional shot.

I don't know what he's so worried about. I've literally made everything perfectly.

Return to the kitchen shot.

FATHER

Okay, well what you want to do is—

SID knocks something over. A stagehand catches it secretly. Pause. Lights come up on on the FATHER and well-dressed SHAUNA. She is showing a clip on editing software.

SHAUNA

Did you catch that Mr. Kattama? Sid knocked the entire mixing bowl off the counter.

FATHER

I understand, Shauna, but that just means that you need to use a different angle to edit it out.

SHAUNA

I've looked at every angle. We have nothing usable. Your policy of editing around the mistakes so that neither the viewers nor Sid can be aware of imperfections will not work for this scene. You have three options: either we keep the shot, reshoot it tomorrow, or scrap it entirely.

FATHER

We don't do retakes around here, Shauna. And we don't accept mistakes. We'll just have to scrap it and do something else. What else can we do around here to make the show interesting?

SHAUNA

Well, I have an idea.

SHAUNA takes out a letter. FATHER recoils in horror.

FATHER

I've told you once, I'll tell you a thousand times, we will not do an unscripted fan mail opening!

SHAUNA

But why? It'll make people more connected to the show, like they are a part of the process, like your family is actually made of real people.

FATHER

We don't even know what's in those letters. Anyone could have written corrupting influences.

SHAUNA

Lucky for you, I have already opened and read the letters and tossed out the bad ones. I just recreated the original envelopes.

FATHER

Really? (Examining the letter) It's good work.

SHAUNA

Well I just did what I've learned to do best in the business:
fabricate authenticity.

FATHER rips the letter
apart.

SHAUNA

Do you know how long it took me to do that?

FATHER

I need to protect my family.

SHAUNA

What? That letter was sweet. She was saying how watching Sid
helped with her depress—

FATHER

I'm definitely not letting someone mentally deficient influence
my child. No thank you.

SHAUNA

I don't understand what the problem—

FATHER

The problem is that Sid is precious to me. They make the
world seem more glamorous than it actually is. The only way
to preserve that is to make Sid believe that the world is
glamorous. There will be no mentioning of this, or any, letter
to Sid under any circumstances. Got it?

SID

(Offstage) Daddy!

FATHER

We're in the editing room, Sid! Come check out how glamorous
you were this week!

SID rushes into the room,
wearing a new, stylish
outfit.

SID

Daddy, Mr. Truden is here to see you!

FATHER

Oh, I nearly forgot that I had managed to squeeze the president into my schedule. I promised him a meal at one of the bakeries. Shauna will keep you entertained. Have a beautiful day, my angel!

SID

Why wouldn't I? Everyday is beautiful after all.

FATHER

You're absolutely right, my shining star.

FATHER exits.

SID

How you doin' girl?

SHAUNA

I'm, um... busy putting together a new episode of your show. It makes a lot of people happy. You want to watch what we have before everyone else sees it?

SID

Heck yes!

SID rushes over to begin watching it over SHAUNA's shoulder. A phone rings. SHAUNA pulls out her phone.

SHAUNA

You go ahead and keep watching. Just give me one second.

SID

Okay!

SHAUNA stands up and walks away, answering the phone.

SHAUNA

Hey, you've reached Shauna. (beat) Yes. (beat) Well, no, but— (beat) Look, I know I've been a bit behind on payments, and (tearing up) I know that ratings have been down lately, but if you just give me a little more time, I will - (beat) Okay. I understand. I'll think

of something. Just, please consider an extension if the show gets better. It'll be worth it. (beat) Okay. (beat) Bye.

SHAUNA hangs up and puts the phone away. She is careful to make sure she looks okay before approaching SID.

SID

What was that about?

SHAUNA

Oh, just making some special arrangements. How's the episode so far?

SID

It's great. But one thing I've never understood is why so many people like our life so much. I mean, I get bored of it, and if everyone lives like us then why would they want to watch it?

SHAUNA

Well—

SID

I guess it is the only show on TV. I hope someone makes another show that I can watch too.

SHAUNA

Sid. There's something I've been meaning to tell you.

SID

Yeah, Shauna?

A long silence.

SHAUNA

The episode isn't ready yet. Your father and I were just talking about how we need to do one more shoot before I can send it to everyone. You excited to go film some more?

SID

Absolutely! I'm always ready! Okay, what are we going to do? We could do a tour of my room! Oh wait, we already did that. And the closet too. Maybe the kitchen? No, that's in every episode. I could sing

again, maybe? Oh, but I haven't written any new songs. This is really hard.

SHAUNA smiles at the opportunity.

SHAUNA

I've got an idea. Why don't we take a drive?

SID

But everyone's already seen the track.

SHAUNA

No, not here. I mean outside the compound.

SID

Oh, no. Daddy would never let us lea-

SHAUNA

Shhh. It's okay. Your dad already knows that we need more footage. And we should do something new. We are going to record your first reactions to the wide world out there. I just need to know if it's something that you're willing to do.

SID

Well, Daddy's told me every day how special the world is, so why shouldn't I see it?

SHAUNA

That's the spirit, Sid! Let's get this show, literally, on the road! Aaaaaand, Action!

SHAUNA claps and the lights reveal a seating arrangement suggesting a car. SHAUNA gets into the driver's seat, while SID excitedly rides shotgun. The screen plays footage to simulate driving down the Southern California highways.

SID

This is the greatest day of my life! Thank you so much for sneaking me out.

SHAUNA

Well, what can I tell you? I'm a master at controlling what people see.

SID

Oh my gosh! Is that the city?

SHAUNA

Yes. It. Is.

SID

The buildings are so big. Just like Daddy said.

SHAUNA

You know, it's nice to see you smile. I can understand why your dad works so hard.

SID

And you too.

SHAUNA

Huh?

SID

Well, think about it. You make me smile. And you help bring our show to make other people smile. You're just as much a part of it all as he is.

SHAUNA

Awe. Thanks Sid.

SID

Don't mention it, girl!

A silence.

SHAUNA

Oh, there's one of your dad's bakeries. I'll pull over and you can say hi to everybody. I'll record their reactions.

Sounds of a crowd begin to form.

SID

You sure?

SHAUNA

Go for it, Sid. You've got this!

SHAUNA pulls over and gets out a camera. SID stands up and waves as the sounds of the crowd turn to cheers of excitement. SIGHT steps out on the stage. He is an old man, holding a cardboard sign and a cup.

SID

Hi everyone! I hope you're doing fabulously today!

SIGHT walks up to SID's car door.

SIGHT

Hey kid. (Holds out cup) Do you have any change?

SID

I, uh... uh... uh...

SHAUNA

Hey man, give them some space. Here, take it.

SHAUNA stuffs a bill into the cup. SID sits there, horrified. SIGHT steps away to examine the bill.

SHAUNA

Can you believe that guy? They gotta bug the big star? Hey, what's the matter?

SID

Shauna. There's something seriously wrong with that man. Do you not see it?

SHAUNA

What do you mean? (Beat) Oh! That's right. You've never seen an old person before, have you?

SID

Old person?

SHAUNA

Like, you and I are young, but he's been alive longer than us so he's started to look like that.

SID

So I'm going to look like that someday?

SHAUNA

Well, maybe not exactly like that, but your skin will get wrinkled and you will--

SIGHT

'Scuse me, mam! (Approaches the car again) Thank you so much, but I was hoping to get a cup of coffee but that shit is expensive. I don't suppose you could give me a little mo-- (Coughing)

SID

Oh my gosh, does this happen to old people too!

SHAUNA

Not exactly. He's sick, Sid.

SID

Sick?

SHAUNA

You know, like when you get a fever, or throw up, or have diarrhea. We all get like that.

SID

I've never been any of those things. And neither has Daddy. Or you.

SHAUNA

Oh my gosh, that's why they do those medical screenings every time I go into work.

SID

Wait, what? What are you talking about, Shauna? This is really freaking me out!

SIGHT'S coughing worsens, and suddenly he collapses on the ground. The sound of the crowd turns to horror. SHAUNA rushes to his side and begins to give him CPR.

SHAUNA

Come on! Breathe! Don't go out on me like this! Somebody call an ambulance!

SID

Oh gosh! First he's old. Then he's sick. Now he's sleeping!

SHAUNA checks for a pulse.

SHAUNA

He's not sleeping, Sid. He's dead.

SID

Dead?

SHAUNA

Yeah, dead. Like, your mom.

SID

What? Mom's in Central Asia running the bakery, where her and dad came from.

SHAUNA

Oh. I'm so fucking fired. Um, yeah, death is what happens for all of us. It's when our bodies shut down because they can't function anymore. This man was so old and sick that his body couldn't work anymore. And when you die you can't come back. And sometimes people don't want people to come back, and they make sure that those people die. (Beat) Sid, your parents were seen as dissidents back home, as people who were threats to their leader, so they fled here. But when they were fleeing, the leader had... (Beat) your mom was mur—(Beat) Fuck. I knew your dad was trying to keep things hidden from you but

deep he hid this stuff from you. I'm so sorry. I thought you knew. I though he was just trying to fix it, not keep it secret.

SID

I... I...

SID begins to break down, just sitting down on the ground with their hands on their head, hyperventilating. FATHER enters.

FATHER

What's the commo--(Sees SID) Sid! How did you get--(Sees SHAUNA) You!

SHAUNA

Sir, I can explain.

FATHER

What could be the reason you two be in front of my bakery next to some homeless man?

SID

Is it true that mom is dead?

A long silence.

FATHER

Oh. So it's actually worse than what I imagined.

SHAUNA

I was only doing what was best for the show. Your tactics are depriving Sid of living a full life.

FATHER

You have no idea what makes a full life. After... (Tearing up) After she wasn't able to live one. But Sid could have. Sid was safe with me. And Sid would have done the best good at changing the world from that safety zone. But now it's ruined. My darling angel, my shining star has been corrupted by this world before we could change it. And it's all. Your. Fault. Come on, Sid.

FATHER exits.

SHAUNA

Sid, I'm so sorry. I just thought it would be good for you, for the show, for... Please, believe me.

SID grabs the sign, reads it over, and stands up, they hand it to SHAUNA.

SID

What does this mean? "Homeless Veteran. Anything will help. God bless. Matthew 25:35-40."

SHAUNA

Well, since the spell is already broken I guess I can't make things any worse. His life was not great. He's seen a lot of suffering. He fought in a war, which is when countries don't get along, and they have to send people to, well, kill each others. He fought, and then he came back home to a country that doesn't want to protect him like he tried to protect it. And so now he has to accept the help of strangers, appealing to their morality, to their desire to put the world right.

SID

Well, is there a way to make it better? I mean, surely the world can be better, right? What are these people trying to make the world a better place doing? What could they be doing?

FATHER

(Offstage) Sid!

SID

I've got to go.

SID rushes offstage, leaving SHAUNA holding the sign. Her phone rings again, and she holds it in her other hand. She examines the two objects carefully. Lights fade.

Monica Williams

.....

It's Dark Inside Sunshine Market

[Unfinished Script]

Characters:

Lydia- *Obadiah's wife*

Obadiah- *Lydia's faithful husband*

Anya- *her wedding, friend to Lydia*

Adam- *Anya's brother*

Trevor and Bernadette- *good friends*

Michelle- *Lydia's best friend*

Ishmael- *Sad boyfriend of Michelle*

Shane- *lover of Michelle, friend of Lydia*

Setting:

A tree sits right in front of the window of 3402 Maple Street in Valencia, Ca. The sofa sits right in front of the window, so that the sun gives it an angelic halo as though it was a gift from above. Lydia likes to sit on her side and curl up her legs to people watch, sometimes she would sit like a child, on her knees, elbows resting on the back, as she is now. The sound of footsteps coming down the steps gives her a start.

Act One

Scene 1

The house is quiet. It's a peaceful October evening, dusk and the sky is clear. Lydia is staring out of the window her hands hold her head as they rest on her cheeks with a daydreaming look on her face.

LYDIA: You all ready to go?

OBADIAH: Yeah, let's go.
I just need to grab the
invitation.

He's very tall and handsome. He's trotting down the steps in a hurry putting his watch on, not paying attention to his steps because he knows them so well. As he approaches the bottom he speaks to Lydia and makes a quick right into the kitchen and snatches the invite off the refrigerator.

OBADIAH: You sure you have
everything? You're not
forgetting the gift, your
purse, Chapstick, tampons.
*(He says with a smile as he
places his hand on the small
of her back to lead her to
the door)*

LYDIA: *(Lydia rolls her
eyes and gives him a quick
gestured elbow to the gut)*
Don't start, Mr. "it only
takes me ten minutes." I
have been sitting here
waiting on you for fifteen.

OBADIAH: *(Says jokingly with a smile)* There you go, being extra. You always puttin ten on it.

They playfully banter as they make their way out of the house to the driveway where their cars share space. Obadiah is driving tonight. They are dressed to impress for a wedding.

OBADIAH: *(Studies Lydia)* Got Damn! You look beautiful tonight baby, as always.

LYDIA: *(smiles)* Thank you baby, you lookin so good yourself. *(She pretends to lick him like an ice cream cone)*

He flashes that million-dollar smile and lets out a genuine giggle because Lydia makes him really laugh.

OBADIAH: You crazy *(His smile quickly fades)* Are you sure about that? You sure that's not meant for someone else?

LYDIA: *(slightly exasperated)* Please don't. I'm only thinking of you, you only. I want to have a good night.

OBADIAH: Is he going to be there?

LYDIA: I'm not sure Obie. I didn't ask, but maybe. Just so we can brace ourselves, he probably will be. But everything is understood. There's nothing to worry about and we don't have to stay long. We can just have cake and be out. Okay? *(She reaches over and caresses his face. She loves him)*

OBADIAH: So, it must be someone

you went to high school
with,
since they know Anya, and
will be at the wedding.

LYDIA: How do you know that?
I mean, what are you even
talking about? Can we just,
Not tonight, please.

Scene 2

A huge wedding hall with chandeliers that look like giant diamonds and crystal stem silverware and wine glasses sprinkled throughout the venue. Anya, she went to high school with Obadiah and Lydia, is marrying a marine she met at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. There are a few other past acquaintances at this wedding. Sitting at their assigned table, Lydia chats with their group: Michelle, Ishmael (Izzy), Bernadette (Bernie), Trevor, and Shane, who heads for the bar with Obadiah.

ISHMAEL: Heyyyy! Look who it
is *(Izzy stands up with arms
wide open)*

LYDIA: Hey guys! Its so good
to see everyone. Hey Bernie,
Michelle, Shane! Izzy, you
finally cut your hair!

*(Ishmael puts his hands to his hair and gives his shorter,
cleaner cut curls a shuffle)*

ISHMAEL: Yeah, I guess it's
time now, we are officially
done with our 20s.

BERNIE: You're officially
done with your 20s, I have 6
more glorious months to be
an irresponsible hoe!

MICHELE: That is NOT going
to be over in six months
*(she says matter of factly,
but with heavy*

sarcasm)

LYDIA: Girl please! You were born a responsible adult. You had about six months of hoeing. You can't pay a bill late without hyperventilating and of course, the whole, "I can't have sex with him until I see his feet" lookin ass.

BERNIE: *(laughing)* don't you dare get on me for being cautious AND responsible, if I wasn't, we would have gotten in much more trouble than we did.

LYDIA: That is not a lie. Remember the Spring luau of 08'? Oh GOD, that night was a mess.

BERNIE: Yes, it was, and you and Adam...

(Bernadette's words are caught in her throat. It is apparent that everyone has officially decided to change the subject quickly)

ISHMAEL: Can you believe they shut down the Sunshine Market?

MICHELLE: Yeah, apparently there was a huge sex ring going on. People would meet there and have violent orgies.

LYDIA: No way.

TREVOR: Is that what was happening? I heard it was something crazy, but never got any details. That's insane. Is that even illegal?

MICHELLE: No, well it's because of how it was going

down. You have to have certain licensing and all kinds of shit, so maybe they didn't have their ducks in a row. Plus, who wants to buy their groceries from the same building that hosts sex parties? That's hella extra.

LYDIA: Well it's probably all very separate. I'm sure they're not hoisting swings up in the cookies and crackers aisle.

MICHELLE: (*chuckling*) Could you imagine? Going at it on a swing and your toe picks up and Oreos.

ISHMAEL: Your toes would pick up Oreos.

MICHELLE: (*with a smirk and a shrug*) I'm a toe clencher. I'd say it's more your fault than mine.

Izzy leans in and kisses Michelle sweetly. Obadiah and Shane are back with drinks.

Scene 3

SHANE: You're eating Oreos with your toes now weirdo? (*he says to Michelle as he puts her drink down in front of her*)

MICHELLE: Of course! You know I like to do all kinds of things with my toes. (*she winks at Shane*)

Izzy is immediately irritated, his brow furrows, he clears his throat, and gets up from the table. Bernie and Trevor follow. Michelle lets out a sigh and watches him walk away. Waving her

hand at him to shrug off his reaction, her attention back on Lydia. Shane and Obadiah congregate at on side of the round table while the girls stay in their seats.

LYDIA: That was mean.

MICHELLE: It was joke, he's too sensitive.

LYDIA: That's the problem, you think everything is a joke. I can't believe you brought up Sunshine! *(she panic-whispers)*

MICHELLE: I didn't bring it up, Izzy did. I was being casual. What was I supposed to say? You got close too, with all the keeping things separate talk. What if Izzy would have asked how you know?

LYDIA: I didn't act like I knew I was using common sense. That was just dumb.

MICHELLE: How is Obie taking everything? Did he ask about Adam? Shane looks effin good tonight.

LYDIA: Focus. *(she says sternly)* It's been tough. He seems okay sometimes, but then he gets upset all over again, or he'll make comments at moments when I feel like everything is going to be okay. He asked if he was going to be here tonight.

MICHELLE: What did you say?

LYDIA: I said I didn't know. I mean, he could have thought

to skip it.

MICHELLE: You know damn well that he was not going to miss his sister's wedding, come on. He doesn't know exactly who he is though right?

LYDIA: No, he doesn't know who he is, but I think he's trying to figure it out, and he knows that it's someone that knows Anya. I was being hopeful, or I don't know, I didn't want to be like, "duh of course he's going to be there, and I really miss his *(Lydia gestures a phallic shape)*, just in case you were wondering." *(Full of sarcasm and truth)*

MICHELLE: That was mean.

LYDIA: Shut up. Let's go dance.

Scene 4

Michelle and Lydia get up and gesture towards the dance floor, Obadiah gives a relaxed military salute and watches her sort of skip away with her friend like two schoolgirls.

SHANE: *(staring at Michelle)*
Damn, after all this time...I can't wait to take her home.

OBADIAH: *(laughing)* Old habits die hard.

SHANE: She's just so damn nasty! I know Izzy don't know what to do wit it. He doesn't even say anything when she talks shit to guys right in front of him. He just gets all pissy and storms off. It

happened a few months ago too. We all got together for a barbecue, and she was on this dude who came with Anya's brother. Izzy ended up leaving her. Didn't say anything. She got a ride though, no problem and in more ways than one. No shame that one. But damn she's fun.

OBADIAH: Anya's brother was there? When was this?

SHANE: Oh, I don't know, maybe like three or four months ago. We all met up at Magic Mountain, had lunch then walked around the park. Lydia came, I think you were out of town.

OBADIAH: *(deep in thought, trying to remember when he went out of town)* Oh, she didn't tell me. It was a while ago, I guess. Yeah, I tell Lydie all the time, I don't know about Michelle, but that's like her sister, I won't win that fight.

SHANE: Yeah, I hear you.

OBADIAH: So, do you know Anya's brother well?

SHANE: A little, we hung out a few times. He's cool. I'll introduce you he's got a bad ass beach house over in Malibu it's all decked out.

Shane and Obie make their way over to the family tables; from the dance floor, Lydia observes the men leaving the table and makes out their destination. Panicked, her eyes grow twice their size. Obadiah and Adam shake hands and Adam offers a seat at the table.



2022

RA California State University, Bakersfield