

ORPHEUS

ISSUE XL

ORPHEUS XL

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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.

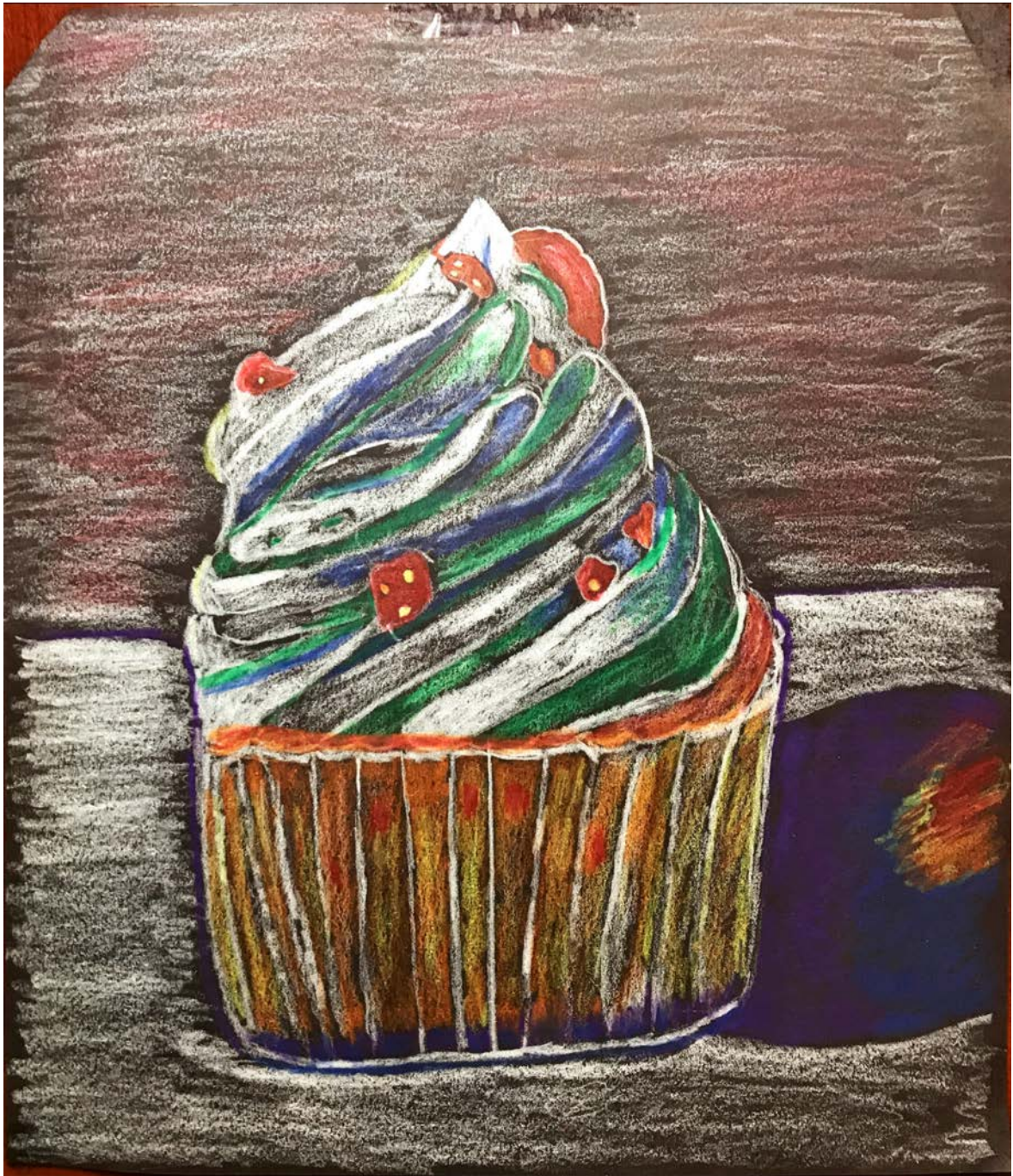
A Note from the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Carol Dell'Amico

Thanks to my fantastic student-editors, I had a wonderful time in the *Orpheus* class this semester. The vibrant, playful calls for submissions they created at the term's start set the tone for me. Then, in editing, they married real critical acumen to an insightful understanding of what our authors were trying to do that further inspired me. Their always lively dedication to the job was truly admirable. The rain poured down this semester, the mountains were sometimes impassable and the highways sometimes closed, but *Orpheus* made it to the printers on time. I could not be prouder of my team: Alea Gaona, Yvette Meza, Victoria Owens, Matthew Phengdy, Samantha Rhodes, Esmeralda Sanchez, Tyler Tangen, and Averi Yanney.

To this year's fortieth (!) *Orpheus*, my students and I welcomed the visiting international students of Katie Gonzalez's *American Language Institute* class, all of whom contributed a poem in English. Their translations of their poems into their native languages are also presented here, in Arabic, French, Japanese, and Mandarin.

Many thanks to Dean Frakes, Provost Harper, and Dr. Frye for funding *Orpheus*. Thanks also to Analia Rodriguez, for helping with so many things, and to Melanie Ascione at the Print Shop, for patiently answering so many questions. And many thanks to Yasmin Marcelo, ASI's Director of Humanities, for helping us to organize an *Orpheus* XL Launch Party. Celebrating the accomplishment of my students and all of *Orpheus*'s contributors is, to me, the perfect ending to this course.

BLANK



Cupcake
Victoria Owens

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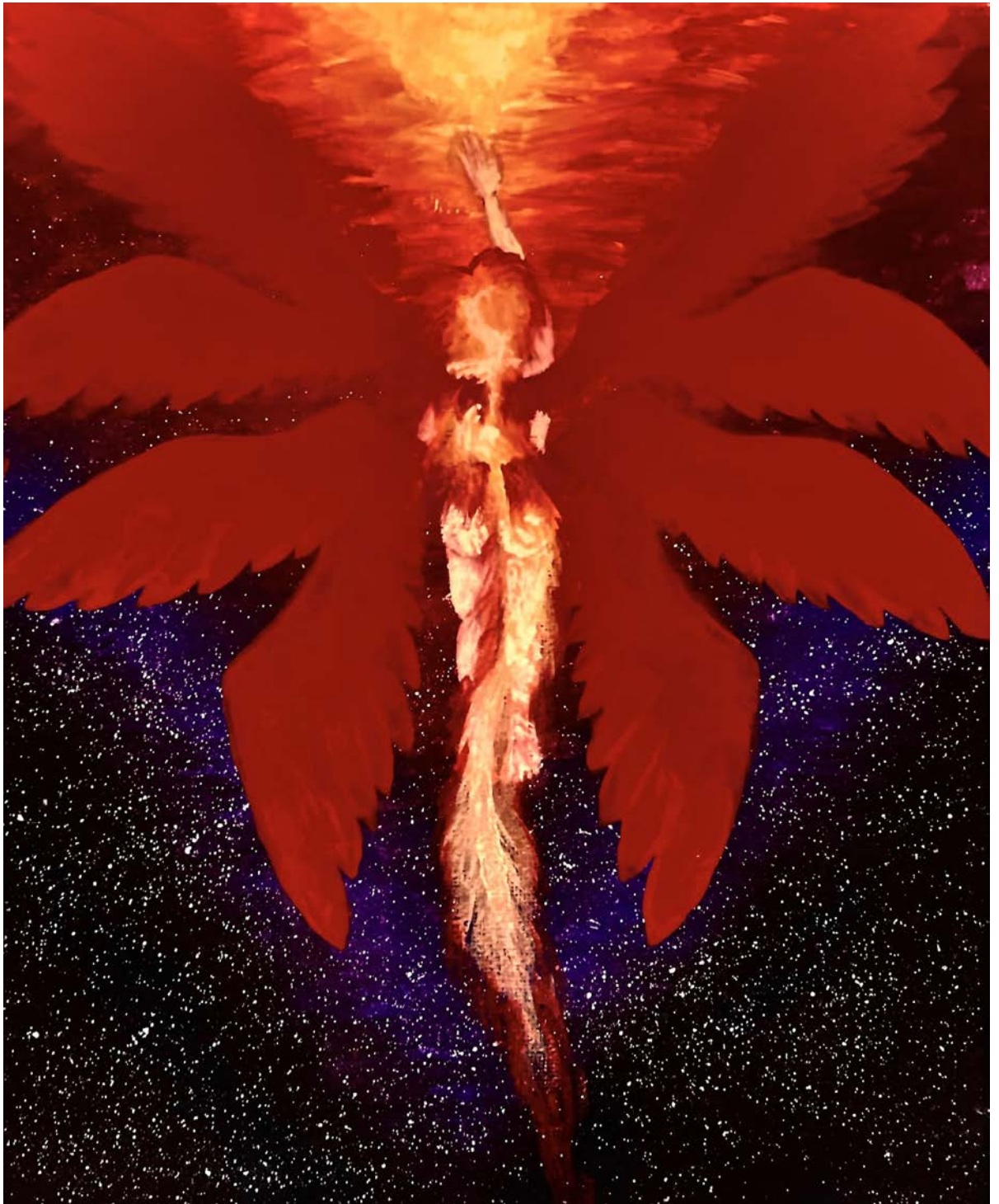
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Uriel
Wes Werner

POETRY

Azam Abbasi

Who Am I?

I am a ceaseless wave of serenity,
diving into a profound ocean of mysticism.
I am a bird of hopes and wishes,
flying above a holy night of prayers and tears.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.

I am a clear mirror of honesty,
reflecting a shining light of truth.
I am a replication of beauty and harmony,
dancing into a world of colors and sounds.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.

I am a mesmerizing nightingale of love,
singing a sanctified song of oneness.
I am an infinite rain of forgiveness,
falling throughout a dawn of salvation.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.

I am a delicate dandelion of hope,
smiling in a deserted desert of solitude.
I am the last prophet of wisdom,
wondering in meandering alleys of doubt.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.

I am an angel with burning wings,

flying above a glorious heaven of peace.
I am a divine wine of eternity,
glowing into a glass of bliss and joy.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.
I am a harmonic song of mercy,
pounding into a compassionate heart of empathy.
I am a curious child of life,
sleeping peacefully into the arm of death.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.
I am the green memory of Eve,
yearning for the forbidden knowledge.
I am an extreme feeling of nostalgia,
dreaming about my lost holy garden.
Not more, nor less,
I am just myself.

I Lost Myself

I lost myself;
through cacophony of my thoughts,
in tumultuous ocean of my feelings,
and in chaos of my emotions.

I lost myself;
among hallucination of my silence and screams,
in illusion of my dreams and nightmares,
and in my macabre imaginations.

I lost myself;
into mistiness vertigo of my soul,
during wondering moment of my doubt and uncertainty,
and in wavering minute of my decisions.

I lost myself;
in a bitter river of my memories,
into piercing cries of my pains,
and in a sad echo of my unfathomable voice.

I lost myself;
through dark comedy of my life,
into acrimony of my tragic death,
and during this melancholic interval.

I lost myself;
behind sadden solitude of my soul,
through crowded century of obliviousness,
and in emptiness of my desires.

I lost myself;
in my intense seasons of existence,
through my incessant years of nothingness,
and in my aching centuries of experience.

Abdulrahman Alsakran

Missing Home

I miss my family
I miss my friends
I miss my car
I miss the food
I miss the streets
I miss the hot weather
I miss hanging out with the boys
I miss having lunch with my family
I miss watching a movie with my sisters

I wanna get back to them and say
Don't let me leave you, I wanna stay
I know I should face my fears
But it's hard to be alone, feeling my tears

لهال ق ح قاتشم
باحصال ق ح قاتشم
يترايس ق ح قاتشم
لكال ق ح قاتشم
عراوشل ق ح قاتشم
راحل وجل ق ح قاتشم
باحصال عم دعلطل ق ح قاتشم
لهال عم ادغل ق ح قاتشم
يتاوخ عم مل ف فوشا قاتشم

مهلوق او مهل عجرا يبا
دعقا يبا مكاعم عجرا ينولخت ال
يمال حا رو عسا مزال يردا
دي ح و نوكت بعص سب
ي عوم دب س حا تبعت

Ann Antonio

Instead I Said I'm Fine

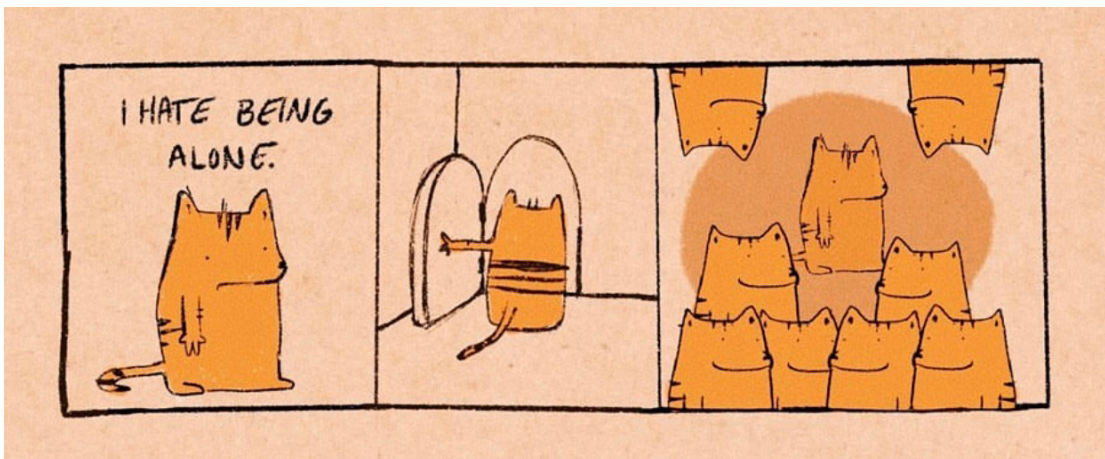
I was just thinking about the way I'm thinking and how I should stop. Or change or disintegrate with the realization that I'm a walking contradiction of everything I believe in because my mind starts to spiral down an existential drain every time I remember. I heard from an empiricist that moderation is key, and I believe him (though he's yet to show me the numbers or maybe they're floating somewhere in one of his discourses), but there's just no standing ground. I wanna pick a side and die there – that's romantic – but the rationalist in me is in love with temperance, so I'll dabble with a few extremes here and there for shits and giggles. But I'll always be in the middle, never quite crossing a finish line, which in theory is right, but in reality, we cross infinities all the time. I just saw a runner do it for her debut in the NYC marathon. And maybe I have passed by an infinity but was just too wrapped up in my growing nihilism to notice. Let the records show I'm not a nihilist – I just have nihilist tendencies. My hand is still on my stupid heart, always cognizant of its beating rhythm. I still dance.

Soshi Arai

In The Room

I am lying on the floor.
I don't hear any sound from below.
Where did they go?
Maybe I left him out in the cold.
Because my love is true.
You can't take it with you.
Without it, I can't leave the room.

私は床に横になっている。
下からは音が聞こえない。
何処に行ったの？
寒空の下に置いてきたのかも
私の愛は私の真実。
あなたは持っていけない
それがないと、部屋から出れない。



Faith Tangen

Sarah Atkinson

Innocence in Theft

There was innocence in your theft.

You stole from me.
Maybe accidentally,
Maybe mistakenly,
Maybe unknowingly,
But you stole.
You're a thief.
What was once mine,
Now crumbled in your hands.
What did you need it for?

You smiled as you ran.
You giggled like a child.
What was once mine,
You held in your palms.
Stared in amazement.
Focused on what it was,
Instead of what to do with it.

You didn't know.
You thought it was yours to take,
Made me think it was ours.
But it had already been inside of me,
And you just took it.
And used it,
And used it,
And used it.

I was an accomplice.
You brought it out of me,
As we both smiled.
It was fragile in my arms.
And you said,
"Well maybe I can keep it safe."
Before I could answer,
Your cold hands wrenched it from me.

It beat fresh in your shaking hands.
I was now empty,
But you didn't notice.
Too preoccupied with what you stole,
To see what you'd left behind.

It kept you warm at night.
It mended what was broken.
It listened in the darkness.
It listened to your darkness.
It provided.
And it cried.
And it begged.

And when you became tired.
When it no longer kept you warm.
When it no longer mended your broken.
When it stopped listening.
That's when you noticed,
It's lifeless body,
Aching, breathless, begging.

You were distraught.
How did you let this happen?
You said to it,
"I don't deserve this anymore."
And innocently,
You offered it back.

There was innocence in your theft.
You were protecting what was mine,
Assuming that was enough.
But what's the use of protection,
When you were the thief.

Lily Bussel

Beowulf Boast

My eyes have seen the red dirt roads
Scarred by donkey-drawn carts digging into the soil.
Cars, buses, matatus cough oily black smoke into the air.
Throngs of dark-skinned people walk to work;
Women tie baskets to their head,
Weighed down with murky water and sticks for building.
Street markets filled with wooden sculptures, paintings, jewelry
Red, black, white, and green - the colors of their country.

My mouth has tasted the sweet mandazis
Soaked with marsala and chai, coaxing saliva from my tongue.
Mangos and passion fruit ripe with sugar and juice
Bought from a woman who visits each week.
Ugali-heavy, sticky, filling cornmeal paste with its partner
Sukuma Wiki-soft, dark green, aromatic spices.
Roasted maize from men along the road
Quiets my stomach on hours-long trips beyond the city.

My hands have touched the rough skin of chameleons
Armed with horns and roving eyes,
Leather giants with long noses and tusks,
Speckled fur of cats with black teardrops marking their faces.
Giraffes leaning over railings, reaching for food with their protracted necks
Smother my face with their thick saliva as a “kiss”.
Fingertips of an adolescent vervet monkey
Anticipating treats from people gathered round a Duka.

My ears have heard the Muslim call to prayer
Echoing melodies throughout the street before the sun rises,
Chants of the Maasai as they shake their beads
Jumping in synch to display their skills.
The quiet whistling of our house-help
Humming hymns as she cooks and cleans.
The gunshots of rioters outside our home
Kikuyu and Luo tribes protesting the elections.

My nose has smelt the festering raw sewage;

Open drains littered throughout the slums of Kibera.
The air heavy with promised rain
Turning streets to mud and ditches to rapids.
The gamey smell of fresh pork, lamb, beef, and fish
Lining row upon row in a small butcher's shop.
The saline scent of the Indian Ocean
Warm, clear, welcoming a swim.

I could boast of many things
But my greatest is of my life, my home, in Kenya.

C.A.D.H

The Ocean Under the Moon

The light that shines through the moon sees through me,
leaving me naked before Jehovah.
Is it the light cast forth that made Him see
the new distribution of fat in me,
the evolution He had not ordained
taking place within the body He once
called "perfect" to house the soul of his son?
Would He smite me if I posed the question
of whether or not my body received
the wrong soul or my soul received the wrong
body? I don't think it's the curvature
or anatomy I desire that makes
me a woman. It's something intrinsic:
I feel it and it burns inside of me,
slowly ridding me of the qualities
that would make someone that I do not know
address me as "sir" or call me "mister".
Or perhaps He had bestowed upon me
the tools I needed to become someone
that I had the ability to love?
Maybe the Lord, whose reflection I am,
birthed me in the form of what is the shape
of water. And it is He who guided
me to the place where the ocean kisses
the sky and I know that kiss is His love
planted on my cheeks as a reminder

that my faith, my love, and my devotion
stand in perfect symmetry with his love,
devotion, and faith in the person I am
trying to become. Living and breathing
are the ways that I pray and give thanks, so
with this breath You have blessed me with, I say
Amen.

Alyssa Cantu

Fever Dream

Phantom pools cover the streets, rippling over sunbaked asphalt and concrete.
The singed leaves of succulents line driveways throughout the suburbs
and decorate wheat-yellow front lawns past the point of no return.
Idle sprinklers that broke long ago make their homes in the crumbling dirt.

Blasts of sunshine steal the royal blue from the backyard umbrella.
A tile-infested hole cuts salamanders' tails that sweep
across its dusty surface. The old seat of a backyard lawn chair
remembers the smell of chlorine. We made these homes
and their furnishings.

What is heavenly if not our creation?
Do we not deserve to live comfortably with the fruits of our labor?
The fire within us burned brighter than the sun above us.
Too late did we realize that God's rainbow should have been
a broken promise.

Smiling demons walk the earth to de-sanctify
church grounds and make holy water boil. Unholy children
damn their home. Bury our sins and exorcise the demons that linger.
Purge the soul of the world and save the survivors. And now
that it has passed, what will become of the church
without the devils who built it?

Dreamcatcher

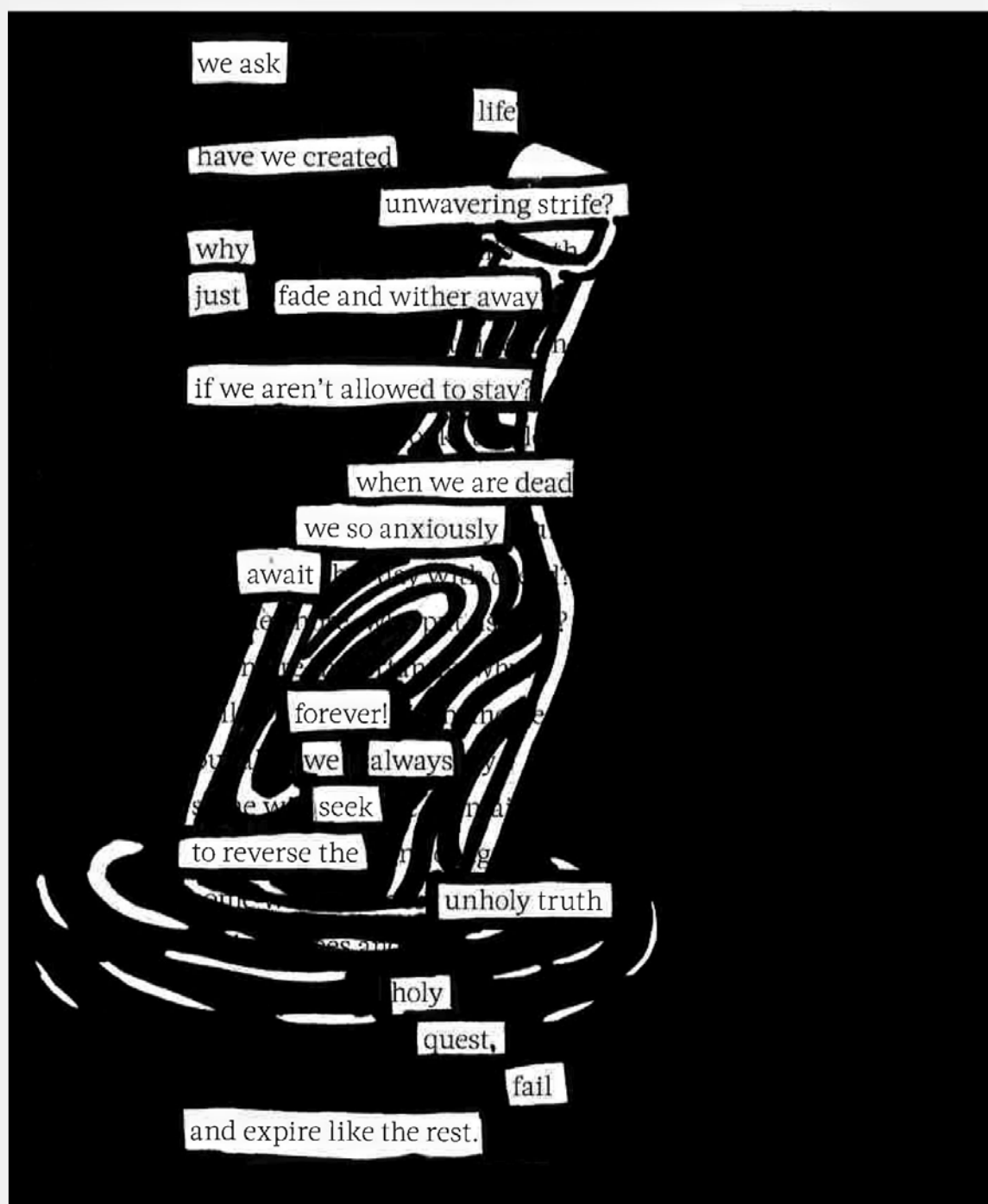
Eerie night terrors ceased
Once you gave me the dreamcatcher.
But now that you have gone,
The nightmares go uncaptured.

I lie awake at night and wonder,
Do I replace it above my bed?
Then may I get my good night's rest?
Will the storm ease inside my head?

I befriend my feathered web,
Bereft of rest and peace.
What haunts me during the day
Returns at night and does not cease.

An epiphany abounds:
Your dreamcatcher is not the cure.
The nightmares stayed away
because your love endured.

ANSWER



Moriah Conedy

Etymology: On the Aging of Words

Words have descendants and ancestors
Words have families and expectations
Words have birthday parties and graduations
Words have progenies and a future
Words have blessings and a thousand generations
Words have curses
Words have unknown destinations

Miyu Furuichi

Five Years Old Me

I am 5 years old and the final year of kindergarten. I am in a class of St. Anna.
Everyday, I like to go to kindergarten on the back of my mommy's bike! Seems I'm a little elephant lately :(

My latest treasure is my bike.

For my 4th birthday, I got a really radiant red bike from the bike shop.

My brother rides a big, bumpy bike with bigger tires, it is super-duper cool like a super hero! I wanna ride that one someday!

私は年長さん。アンナ組。

毎日自転車でママの後ろに乗って幼稚園に行くの。でも最近はちょっと重たそう。

最近の宝物は自転車。もう補助輪なしで乗れるんだ。4歳のお誕生日に近くの自転車屋さんの真っ赤の自転車をもらったの。

にいにはもっとおっきいぼこぼこしたタイヤの自転車に乗ってるんだ。いつかもらえるかな～。

Mallory Gardner

Bakersfield Sounds Like

There's a million new people
Signed up for urban sprawl
Been here since Buck Owens
Paying fifteen dollars at the local strip mall
She shops at Nordy's
Neighbor drives a Tesla
Oil rigs and a gig at Smitten
I came here for the mimosas.

Ruben Gladin

Coffee and a Talk

The bold smell of coffee and cinnamon
Wafted out from the porch every visit.
The cats welcomed me meowing.
The talks we had were lively,
Time always seemed to fly.
Time took you away from me,
Yet gave me so much.
I cannot get my coffee to taste the same.
Our conversations are a memory.
The cats are scattered now,
Still they watch the porch,
Waiting for a visit.
Till next time, mother.

Karina Hurtado

Tired

My heart is tired, but my will and spirit are still strong;
My eyes are tired of seeing disappointments, but they won't stop believing;
My hands are tired of carrying the weight of the world, but my fingers won't lose their grip.
My feet are tired of walking and not getting far, but my knees won't buckle;
My mind is tired of all its thoughts, but it won't stop dreaming.



Del barrio - *Patty Martinez*

Leah Jaymes

Burdens

Someday my words will
change you
in ways I never thought.
You'll read a sentence that
I wrote
of which I'll have forgot.
You'll remember
something,
words that cut
you deep
or numbed you, sweet with syrup.
How you'll slumber
off to sleep.
But the words all will have
left me.
Every syllable
cut short.
Every vowel
so *voiceless*
now,
memories distort.

*remember love,
how heavy our words can be*

Emi Kimata

My Family

I can't live without them.

She's the funniest, smartest, kindest, and strongest. She's like a lion.

He's the smartest, nicest, most mature, and most intelligent. He's like an owl.

She's the most thoughtful, smartest, and cleverest. She's like a fox.

I cannot live without them. I wanna be like them.

This is my family. This is my dream.



Fun and games
Patty Martinez

Simple Truths

You are child
You are daughter
You are sister
You are aunt
You are cousin
You are mom
You are woman
You have faults
You have emotions
You have downfalls
You have desires
You have needs
You have guilt
You have goals
You have regrets
You have trauma
You are imperfect
YOU. ARE. ONLY. HUMAN.
You did the best you could
You did the best with what you had
You did the best with what you knew
My trauma is yours too
These are truths
Truths that are reminders
For me and him
For him and I
For us together
That maybe one day
We can forgive you
-your children

Hands

I was four when I first questioned gender.

My mother used to say she has big hands for a woman.

She'd stretch them out, starfish of beauty
and my eyes would outline each fingertip.

Fingerprints spelled out words like
strength and
gentleness.

I wondered how gender played a role.

My father used to say he has small hands for a man.

He'd ball them up, stone-rock fist
and my eyes would trace each knuckle.

Every callus spelled out words like
strength and
gentleness.

I wondered why gender played a role.

Now, slightly wiser in my years,

I stare at my own hands –

They're big for a woman.

They're small for a man.

I hold them up, rub them together

I close my eyes and let myself feel

the braille-like ridges of my mountainous hands.

Their power emerges from history.

My ears hear the wind of times whisper

strength and

gentleness

and I wonder why we all play

these broken roles of gender.

Standing in the WinCo Checkout Line

Dear stranger,

I know you don't know me but...
how does the silence feel lodged within your throat
as your dark, beady eyes scan my body
for some faint remembrance of Vogue magazine...
or is it GQ?
Like, are those breasts or do you bench press
too much?
I feel the
"What are you?" pours out of eyes trying to drown me
and gravity feels heavier than ever.
I want to scream the sharpest of profanities
but my tongue feels dull.
How is it that you need,
no,
demand so much space
but I am forced to hold my breath –
life-line cut while you profit off of the oxygen I spare
and your eyes spear me –
blood-soaked tennis shoes cover my feet
leaving a path of my identity behind.

Dear stranger,

Did you know what that look tried to take from me?
That my anxiety is a fire fueled by gaslighting eyes
that stretch themselves across the depths of my body...
all without my consent.

Dear stranger,

What does it matter to you?

Villagers on Horseback

Hands travel like
villagers on horseback
like villagers fleeing
the wars of their past
like villagers looking forward
and never looking back
Hands travel – Explorer
Hands travel – Unknown Expedition
Hands travel – Hands have found you
perched in the middle of a garden
more luscious than Eden
Hands have found your flower
more luscious than the first apple of our sin
and God Damn! Where do I begin?
My hands find a rare flower
and they travel
they travel, they travel
they learn the lay of the land
and they find your source of life
dripping wet in the depths of you
dewdrops dripping
dripping off the petals of your flower.
Do you even know your
magnificent power?
Hands travel
My hands traveled like villagers
fleeing their heart's drought
fleeing their mind's famine
fleeing the war zone of their past
when at last they found in you
an oasis
a loving land
that loving hands
can call home.

Otoka Miura

Myself Ten Years From Now

Where do you work now?
What kind of work do you do?
Are you a working woman or unemployed?

Where do you live now?
What is your favorite area?
Are you in your hometown or in the city?

Do you have a happy family?
Do you lead a lucky life?
Hello to myself ten years from now:
I hope that you are having a great time.

今どこで仕事をしていますか？
何の仕事をしていますか？
バリバリのキャリアウーマン？それとも無職？

今、どこに住んでいますか？
どこの地域が好き？
地元？それとも都会？

幸せな家庭を築けていますか？
充実した生活を送れていますか？
10年後の私へ
充実した時間を過ごしていますように。



blue side of town
Tyler Tangen

Joe Louis Naval Nitro

Fog.

Step into its illusion,

Whether you wandered in or have been lured by it

Let the whispering of its false hopes drive you

Like many others, driven to their madness or drowned in ecstasy

As it showers you with tiny droplets that weigh you down ~~to the earth~~

The Seeping cold bites into your bones, numbing the sober mind

It will whisk you away in dreams of your deepest desires

That will take you to the edge of the world

But at the very edge, before you take the plunge, it will abandon you

Or will you resist its final temptation?

Then you have escaped the fog that clouds your mind.

While many others will be sent to their deepest graves.

You will be left yearning for more...

As it recedes into thin air.

Drunken

Nurse the bottle of which you lay waste

Drowning your sorrows with a soju taste

Down by the lakeside you rant on and on ...

In the wind of wordless elegies

A song of pure red melodies

In a glass *reflection* of you, I never tread upon

And I still wonder, why I deserved

Such a woman so much older than me, we gave each other our bottled hearts

which became refined, distilled, and lastly preserved

Asking the stars, why it took this long for our story to start

Crying and laughing all the while

That you kept tightly closed in your smile

As you poured out so gently

Saying all the while "*How much you mean to me!*"

Slurring your words, you tried to walk

Upon the lake water, if I had not stopped

Flushed red your face became

As I held you tight it began to rain

From your swollen eyes came a hurricane

Oh, how deeply wasted in love we became...

Sutures

Scars that never heal, will be with us forever

As we bury our emotions as we did our loved ones

That sense of relief is an amicable façade we hope to truly achieve

Yet never do.

And sometimes the wound reopens, oozing out convoluted memories

That asks us...

What if I had never done that?

What if I changed?

What if I was better?

What if I was stronger?

"Will it make a difference?"

The questions burn to sear the wound to a close again

As we find an answer for ourselves it will weave itself once more.



Ana
Patty Martinez

Yuka Narushima

Dear My Best Friend

Thank you for always taking my call.

I want to go to a mall.

Thank you for being kind.

I want to be by your side.

Thank you for talking.

I want to talk while walking.

When I go home,

I'll meet you there, I hope.

—私の親友へ

いつも電話に出てくれてありがとう。

一緒に買い物に行きたいね。

いつも親切にしてくれてありがとう。

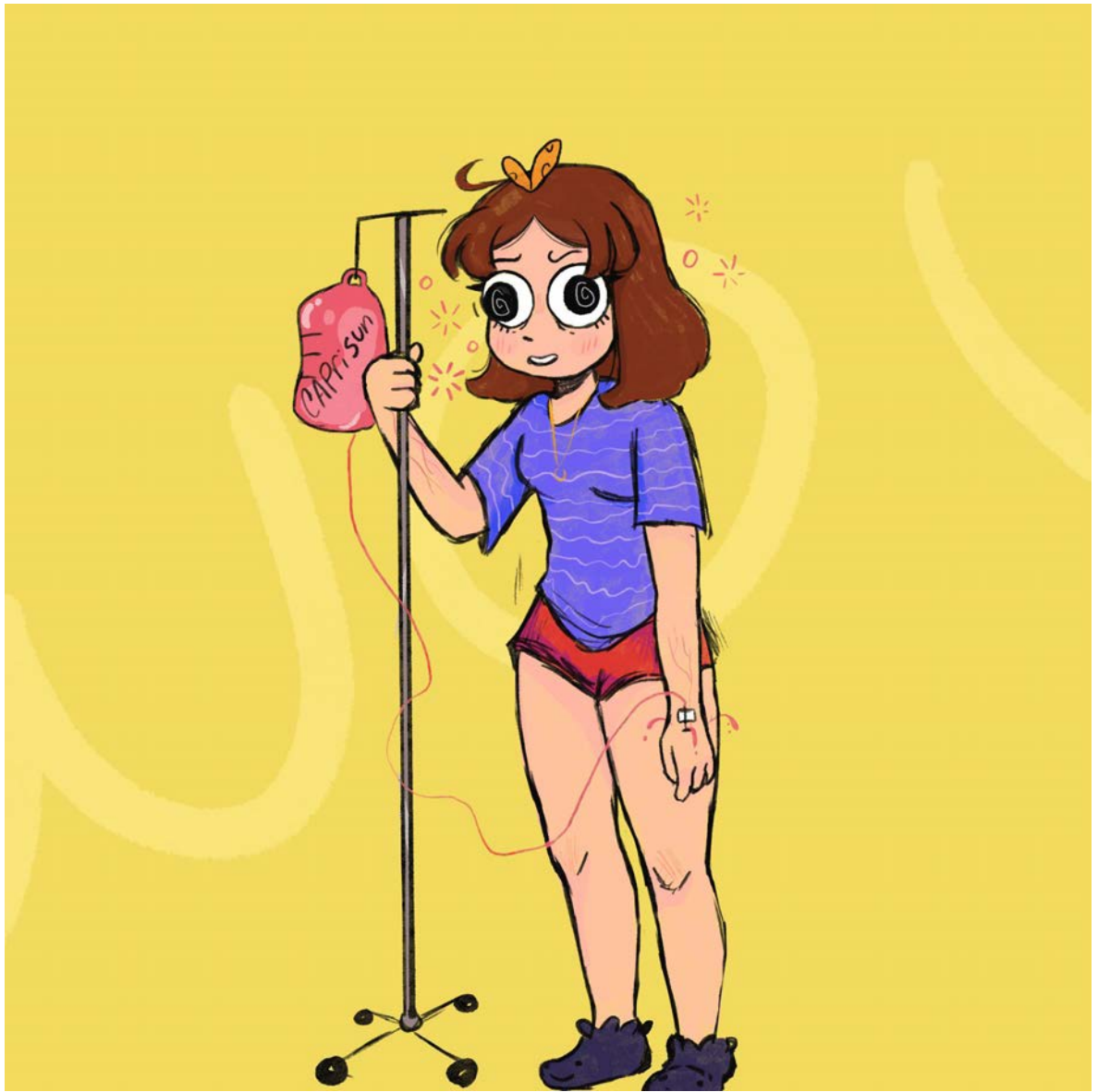
私はいつもあなたのそばにいるよ。

いつも話してくれてありがとう。

散歩しながら話したいね。

私が家に戻ったら、

会えるといいな。



Capri Sun
Emseralda Rivera

Sayaka Oki

My friends ‘till the end

My friends ‘till the end.

I want to laugh holding my stomach with them ‘till the end.

My friends ‘till the end.

I want to laugh about dumb things with them ‘till the end.

My friends ‘till the end.

I want to share all the happiness with them ‘till the end.

My friends ‘till the end.

I want to share all the sadness with them ‘till the end.

No one can take their place.

They sparkle like space.

Meeting them is the greatest gift of my life.

生涯の友達

生涯の友達。

生涯彼らと腹を抱えて笑いたい。

生涯の友達。

生涯彼らとくだらない話で盛り上がりたい。

生涯の友達。

生涯彼らと全ての幸せを分かち合いたい。

生涯の友達。

生涯彼らと全ての悲しみを分かち合いたい。

彼らの代わりは誰もいない。

彼らは宇宙のようにキラキラしてる。

彼らと出会えたことは私の人生で一番の贈り物。

Matthew Phengdy

The Day Spring Came

The day spring came, no one knew
How lives would end up snuffed
Burnt, and left with no sinew
People closed their eyes
Their ears, and mouths
As flames from the north came
Charging in without doubt
Giants of steel, who trampled the living
Men on gilded thrones who looked down
But without any concern for the living
They kept their charges well-worn down.

The children left behind grew up faster than the living
The thunder that cracked, the lion's roar that kept on living
"Heave-ho, heave-ho, make it to Jabura, make it through hell
Win what war? There's one already here? For sure, for sure!"

Hoist up your flags, the young, and the able
As the White Devil and the Greatest shield travel eastward, hello!
Face off against tyrants, despots, and more.
"What reward? Do you mean being a hero? What can replace such a thing!
When children's childhoods become kindles for all such things!"
Jabura must fall, but it mustn't, no way
Think of what would happen, when Space becomes Earth!

Think of the man riding the silver chariot, one with a golden spoon, one who orbits mars,
The other, the moon! Sitting on gilded thrones
They send millions to die, their warriors indeed perish, and the ones that still live
Scarred for life, that must be said.
In the end, what happens when children charge forward?
Emissaries of new death, leaders of war?

Results dear child, death dear child, the cog continues turning, Zeus is already looking
When Spring comes to an end, and Winter sets in, what does Apollo say as the Armistice
begins?

“Congratulations! You, who have braved the perils of death,
leave here heroes of fortune!

As the flames of purity burn away innocence, so you too, have grown without a childhood!
Fear not, but instead, take solace!

Those innocent days marked by innocence were never gifts. Instead, a
curse that all adults take away.”

As you wonder about adventures

Of castles big and small

Of dragons that breathe fire, no matter the cost

Of knights of round, who could be squared.

Or, of Human nature so enthralled with tears

Where loss is a lesson, the only fair pain.

Winter comes to earth, with spring a final lesson.

There is only one thing left that must be said.

“All ye who hear me, the time is now midnight

Muster up your courage, your will, and all your hindsight.

Today’s enemies are now allies, brothers and sisters in arms

Let bygones be bygones, let all hold hands and rejoice!

The sacrifice?

The White Devil’s Head, its arm, and its other leg

One final shooting, the shot heard around the world

The war is now over. Spring is never coming.”

Jasmyn Qiao

My Dream

I think,
I have many dreams.

I want to open a dessert store and make a lot of delicious tarts.
I want to travel around the world and want to visit many bars.
I want to spend more time with my mom and dad and be with them as they grow old.
I want to have a kitten and watch TV with it.
I want to have a puppy and walk with it.

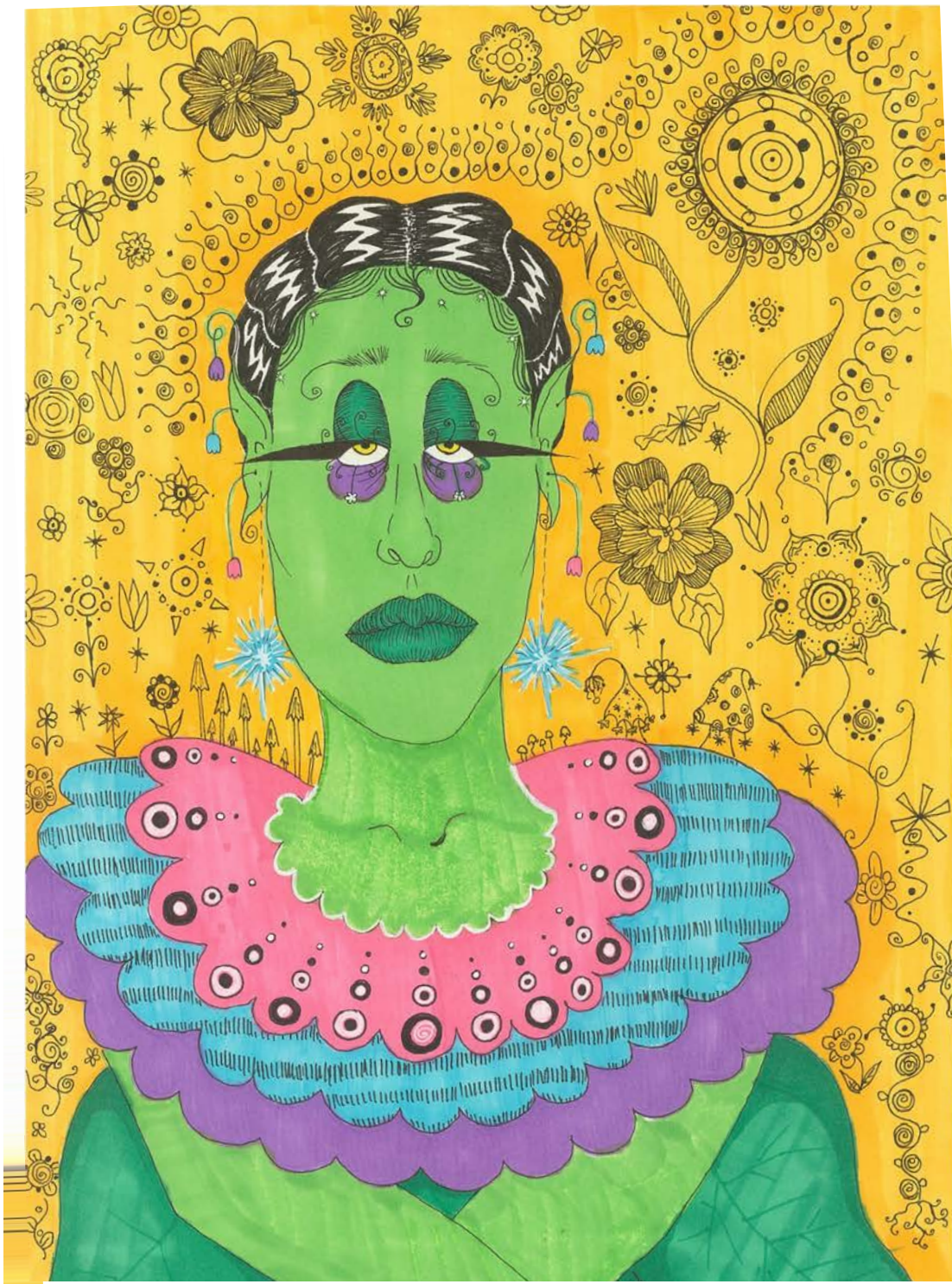
But I can't achieve all these at the same time,
Maybe,
I'll give up on it.

So,
what kind of dream is it?

我想，我有很多梦想。
我想，开一家甜品店，做很多好吃的蛋挞。
我想，环游世界，想去很多国家。
我想，多陪伴爸爸妈妈，陪伴他们变老。
我想，养一只小猫，在家和它看电视。

我想，我无法全部实现，
也许，放弃。

所以，
我的梦想是什么？



Universal Flower
Lauren Esqueda

Melinda Quach

From the One Who Loves Their Other Self

In my heart, you are real.
You are there.
You exist like any person has ever existed.
You are me
And I am you;
My precious other self.

To love you is to face ridicule and mockery:

Only a narcissist would love themselves the way I do you.
But you are more than just me, and I am more than just you.

Why can't we be?

Our love does not break the laws of man,

Nor turn against the ways of heaven.

Why can't we be?

I love you and you love me,
That's all there is to it.
We are one, but we are two.
If in romance, two can become one,
Then why is it wrong to be one at the start?
I love you(me). That's all there is to it.

Why can't we be?

From the One Who Has Become a Living Corpse

Sunlight,
I cannot touch.

Home,
I cannot return.

Alone,
I am alone.

Alive,
I am not.

Eat— I cannot
Sleep— I cannot
Dream— I, of home.

Then, I wake
And again
I'm alone.
Last one left.
Having not succumbed
To the wills
Of a master puppeteer;
I'm still here.

But what's the use?
My heart cannot beat;
My tears cannot cry;
I cannot breathe;
I've lost everything,
Including myself.

Taylor Redstone

To Make a Poet of a Woman

To make a poet of a woman,
You must first make her a fool
You must belittle her
You must crack her open and examine her shards—
How light dances and refracts around her and
How the darkness bows to her-
Test her capacity to shatter
you must Pour acid inside of her
And tell her to describe it
Make her burn and wince and scream
And once she's finally gotten used to the way the sizzle sounds,
fill her cracks with salt
Ask her how it feels
She will start to laugh with the pain
She will mock the pain
She will dance with the pain
Then
you must extract her tongue—it will be guiled by this point—keep it in a secret place
She will wear her heart on her sleeve,
And her tongue on the other
Stuff her neck with posies and
Her eyes with gems and gin
She may be unrecognizable by now-
She may offend
She may stir chaos
She may find the coldest corners of your soul and build a fire
She is a mirror
She is both the sacred and the grotesque
She is a poet

Deadwood

I turned him to wood.
Time and time again he wronged me—
A thoughtless, hardened fool,
A wicked, weakened wart

He looked at his logs for limbs,
His warped flesh.
He cried out to his gods but
They found the whole affair amusing.

He sat, petrified.
I took pity for the wooden boy,
The spinney, splintered soul
And his weathered wooden wounds

So I chopped him up.
I chopped the wooden boy to bits
And fed him to my fire.
At last he kept me warm.

José Rios

The Mortar Among Us

When I pray
she's next to me,
breathing like an old MacBook
in the middle of an update
and during my crisis.

She's the mortar among us,
she crunches her eucharist
grinding Jesus into dust,
letting Him get stuck,
in the gaps of her teeth

She coughs up phlegm
so thick
she chews it as bubble gum
and I can hear every
mushy moment.

She finishes Him off
loudly sipping her communion wine
I look at Jesus on the cross and plead:
"Rip the nails from your body
And come help me!"

The Stars Don't Align For Us

I used to go out every night
And check the sky
For stars that fell.

I reread the sky
and saw our lives
still cosmically cast.

I called you disobedient
for going against
the universe's plans for us.

But I read it all wrong.
Stars don't align,
they stay in one spot.

We move around them.
But as for the planets,
I'll wait without you,

if I have to.

Marin Sato

The Presence That Cheers Me Up

He is always happy as a clam.

Whenever I feel down, I cry, I am sad.

He cheers me up bright as a shining star.

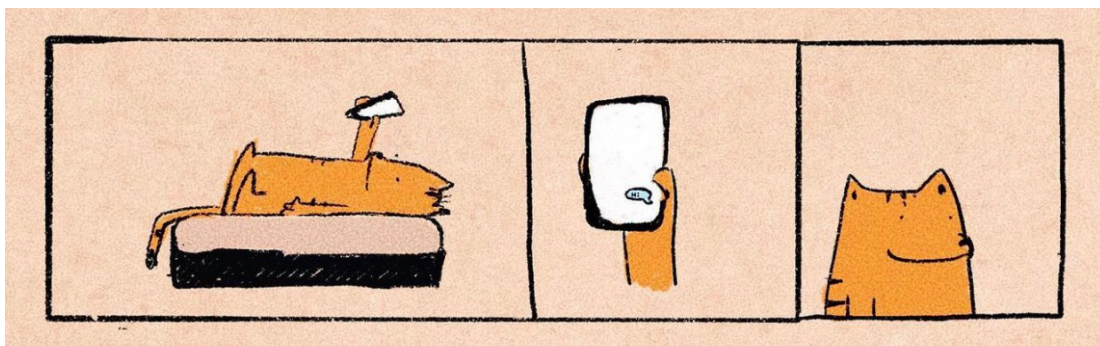
Whenever I feel down, I make mistakes, I fail.

He is indispensable to me.

Who is he? He is my pet.

Let's play a lot when I get back from studying abroad.

彼は貝のようにいつも笑ってる
私が落ち込んでる時も泣いてる時も悲しい時も
彼は流れ星のように明るく元気づけてくれる
私が落ち込んでる時もミスした時も失敗した時も
私にとって彼は必要不可欠な存在
彼の正体は私のペット
留学から帰ったらたくさん遊ぼうね



Faith Tangen

Lydia Shimeall

The Highway

we are a country of straight lines
of getting where we're goin,
no stops in between except out of necessity
and even then, gas stations and therapy
are shameful things.

we carry our groceries all twelve bags
at a time; going back for a second trip
is repulsive – a sign of weakness –
double tracking is inefficient. a waste of time.

we skip our breaks and double our shifts
we brag of short sleep or none at all
we are a country that built the highway
we speed at 85 mph and still have guilt

apologizing for coming late, for wasting
time on the road – but really I think
we're never content except when on the road.
that endless, straight highway under a pale sky

it's a highway that makes America
gas stations, roadside diners, Elvis & Kerouac
Route 66 and the highway desert mirage
that becomes a scarecrow, that becomes Death,
that asks the question:
Where are you going?

Laying Down On Saturn

The universe, stars, and planets were aligned the
day I looked into your beautiful eyes
You are unreal, your love is unreal like the type of
shit I see in movies
You are my favorite work of art, with your perfect
imperfections (hardly any) that make me smile with
my heart
The mystery of you and I and the new moon that
brought us together
You give my life the right dose of romance that I
need, passion like I never felt
You love on my body with such care, yet my body
explodes with fireworks with every touch
Nothing like I've ever known, a high like no other
Prince Charming or Lucifer
Either way, I've never been afraid of love. Let's
keep this going my lover

Tyler Tangen

Exhalation

Rarely is one's breath visible
Yet in passing, cold demeanor shows
It clings though not permissible
Drawn deep; a feeling not so visceral.

A soul that's passing
Akin to what he's not
Neither black nor white
Neither cold nor hot.

Why lie?
as white lies pass time
In the past, eyes of mine
still found you beautiful.

Monotonous day breaks
So ready known
Up still tired, yet dawn has called me on
Longer, Longer, days so somber; so, I will never know

If rarely one's breath is visible
Your heart must never been cold
I forgot your breath existed however,
so and so, we ready know

Rarely is one's breath visible
My hands begin to slow
My nose is way too runny;
my eyes still found you beautiful

NIGHTS

Restless comforts laid,
a head rested pillowed on,
an arm stresses, veins pressed in
a head too heavy, for what the neck is

Pins and needles,
like the trees that seeded
acupuncture,
deeply rooted, green, still brooding

The thoughts of his
that sheets can't cover,
minds still wander
all but wonder,

So long as one dreams,
one still wants.

To sleep is all,
at Night, for once.



Red
Tyler Tangen

Reiteration

How long does a lie last?
to others: as long as it's perceived true
a lie lasts, as long as it can be kept,
positioned out of view.

Then how can one lie to themselves?
If I know it to be wrong,
how can a lie last?
If I know it to be false.

At last, I might add,
When does a lie begin?
How does it lose its truth?
Perceptions never worked for me,

I still perceive it true.

Perception lied to me
my brain told me the truth
My eyes would never lie to me
but something else, it could

Something deep inside of me
wanted it all to be true

Tawny Timmons

Metamorphosis

A child does not think about the world,
They can't even comprehend
It's hard to sit and listen
It's tough to understand.

It ruins a person's innocence
It hardens a person's heart
It makes you see what's wrong
And then you choose your part.

Optimists choose to ignore it,
Soldiers choose to fight,
Dreamers dream of better days
Sleepers sleep at night.

When you are of age,
And you must choose your stance
Please, remember this my friend,

Ignorance is man made
And you only have one chance.

Adriana Toledo

Butterflies

When a loved one passes we're taught that they left this Earth.
But you never left.
I hear you in music,
I feel you in happiness,
I smell you in automotive oil and Irish Spring,
And I see you in Butterflies.
Grandpa you're not gone.
You're here with me living inside me.
All the memories, lessons, sayings, and laughs are still here with me.
They guide my days and fill my lonely nights.
I'm never truly alone
because when I'm at my lowest
I see butterflies and feel at home.

Steve

You always hated your name, but I always loved it.
You claimed no Mexican ever had the name Steve.
You never realized you weren't like everyone else.
You were special.
You were mine.
The life we created was everything my inner child dreamed of..
We were magical.
We grew
We hurt
We lied
We hid
We cried
We laughed
We loved
Together..
Now that there is no we... I must go through this life as just me...
Forever grateful that I was able to know and love, Steve.

Identity

We're given names at birth that dictate the rest of our lives.
Our names dictate our family, gender, and sometimes futures.
Our names tell people who we are
But what if our names never encapsulate who we are?
I was born Adriana
But I don't feel like Adriana.
I hated my name growing up because it isolated me
Growing up in a Mexican culture everyone around me carried who they were within their name,
But not me. I was just Adriana. The only Adriana amongst the Marias, Crystals, and
Leslies.
My name was meant to make me unique built instead it made me feel alone.
I've evolved and experienced so many heartbreaks, tragedies, and traumas
That I don't know who Adriana is.
The girl that went by Adriana endured so much
She allowed herself to be disrespected, hurt, and embarrassed
by those whom she believed loved her.
I don't want to be Adriana.
I grew. I'm not naïve Adriana anymore.
Hi, I'm Adri,
I now know who I want to be
You'll just have to wait and see the new me.



Transparency - *Patty Martinez*

Mariam Traore

Ma Magnifique Maman

Toi ma magnifique Maman,
Tu as toujours été là pour moi.
Toi ma magnifique Maman,
Tu m'as toujours montré le bon chemin.
Toi ma magnifique Maman,
Tu as toujours supporté mes caprices.
Toi ma magnifique Maman,
Tu es la lumière de mes yeux, quand je te vois, j'ai une seule envie c'est de te prendre dans mes bras.
Toi ma magnifique Maman,
Tu m'as toujours appris à surmonter les problèmes.
Tu es loin de moi, mais près de mon cœur.
Je pense toujours à toi.
Je t'aime de tout mon cœur.
La prunelle de mes yeux.

My Beautiful Mom

You are my beautiful Mom,
You are always there for me.
You are my beautiful Mom,
You always show me the right way.
You are my beautiful Mom,
You have always put up with my whims.
You are my beautiful Mom,
You are the light of my eyes, when I see you, I only want to take you in my arms.
You are my beautiful Mom,
You taught me how to overcome problems.
You are far from me but close to my heart.
I think of you always.
I love you with all my heart.
The apple of my eye.

Toshiki Tsunoda

To My Future Self

Toshiki Tsunoda - To My Future Self

Have you decided on your future direction?

You don't need to aim at perfection ,

but you should always do your best.

The waves never rest .

Don't stay a dunce.

You only live once,

Might as well have fun.

Your life is as bright as the sun.

将来の方向性は決まった？

完璧は求めなくていいよ

でも常に自分のベストは尽くそう

常に行動し続けよう

バカなままではいるな

人生は一度きりだから

楽しんでいこう

あなたの人生は太陽のようにまぶしい

Aloe “Two Brains” Vera

Résumé

Oh dear cicada,
You sleep for seventeen years
When will you wake up?
A decade passes by, a century more
It means nothing to your unblinking eyes
As you rest beneath the dirt
May the palm leaves grace you
As you sing your endless song
Drowned out by the voices of a million more
Relinquish then, the ember that,
Borne from sparks and spat,
And burned this house to structures charred.
The Ferryman
The water, as dark as the ink I use to write,
Cold, and familiar, in which I sought respite
My reflection bore a crown, I stood like a king
But that which bowed before me, not a living thing
The vast reaches of my pow’r being that which I could see
In the depths of my mind, an old friend spoke to me:
“The cross between the worlds of living and dead
Is a wound to be healed and a bridge to mend
The golden hour’s upon us, and soon will be read
An obituary of lies and falsehoods to rend
Then all will unfold and you too will see
The truth, as it was hidden, no longer shall be
In solitude, you rest, in silence you breathe
When you are alone, you will be set free”

The Ferryman

The spire falls tonight
Crumbling under the tide
Awaken, at last, and rise
Look upon the stars, my love, and fly
The tide is pulling in
The numbness comes from within
I can see the stars in your eyes
The sky as black as night
At last, at last, he's risen!
My greatest gift, forgiveness, will not be given
Tear asunder those who dare forsake your name
Cull the ignorant voices, for they're the ones to blame
As Above, So Below
I am the prophet of the god of holy sin,
My mind is crumbling and the walls are caving in,
The stars align and the barrier wears thin
Two worlds unite, my vision grows so dim
My god, he spoke to me, my mind was soon at ease:
"In storms take sanctuary, in music take reprieve
Be my emissary, be my guiding light
Such haunted times, this too you will survive
Take peace in knowing, soon will fall the night
In strange aeons even death may die."

Poem For A Lover

There is a fire where my heart burns. Spite will fuel its flames by a ghostly hand-
A spectre, deprived of all its character but an ethereal howl of agony.
I am alive! And that is the truth.
I will be the flame that consumes your papers of love, your silly letters, notes of fondness,
written on
wrinkled receipts. I will terrorize your kitchen in every waking moment, a flickering, fester-
ing anxiety,
building to the hissing of a gas line and the ticking of flint.
It is an unrelenting, impersonal terror.
It is you who set the flame- I am just fire.
You sliced your hand on the blade which stood idle, mixing your blood with the guts of
fruits and
vegetables as if it belonged there.
I am alive, and that is the truth, though scorching remains may confess otherwise,
It is the truth, everlasting, until the day my body is corroded by sand
And my bones are bleached by the desert sun.

Maiju Wada

What I Want To Do Before Dying

What do you want to do before you die?
I want to go to New York.
I want to go to Hawaii.
I want to eat whatever I want as much as I
want.
I want to buy a lot of clothes like a celebrity.
I want to have a happy family.
There are many things I want to do.
But most of all, I want to die with a smile on my face.

死ぬまでにやりたい事は何?
ニューヨークに行きたい。
ハワイに行きたい。
好きな物を好きなだけ食べたい。
服を沢山買いたい。
幸せな家庭を築きたい。
やりたい事は沢山ある。
けど、1番は笑顔で死にたい。



Untitled
Lauren Esqueda

Radio Frequency Interference

Motives are not known at this time we would like to announce the supreme court has decided to shut down all economic activity deemed inessential by the weather patterns we are seeing we can predict a one-hundred percent chance that no one will be left unscathed nor will the ensuing violence inhibit our ability to report the world's most pressing matters most is that we all try to remember and honor those who died here coming home from work last Thursday evening where all along the freeway we are seeing cars burst into flames when a gas pipe burst right below the locals are protesting police for their passive stance against all odds he is expected to make a full recovery of the millions of dollars worth that was stolen from local produce farms have become overrun with detrimental pests are swarming in cities during this unprecedented heat wave of viral pathogenic bloodswapping carnivorous airborne carriers of the disease will no longer be permitted amongst the clean air laws are now in effect across the nation's heavily restricted inner-city movements to a five mile radius of one's home should be one's central place of rest and work and life will no longer be the same as this is the new normal concentrations of ethylene glycol monobutyl ether have been restored to its former glory since the sudden economic crash involving a head-on collision of these particles within the accelerator nearly reach the speed of light may soon be a scarce resource depletion is expected to affect the human race against the negative effects of global warming as we implement new ways to reduce reuse recycle the plastic in your household or the oceans are showing signs of acidification reef reduction thermal coral bleaching with algal blooms visible from the sky we are following the suspect it might be caused by excess salt levels the playing field amongst candidates for their upcoming hearing on prohibiting the illegal isolation of sounds.

Efface

Please, if you'd
 just| tell me
 who I am,\ /so I can un-
 der-| stand
 the| w a y t h a t |I
 look.| **My** **eyes** |do
 not allow| **what** **you** |can say to
 me.| |The
 words\ **won't** /pass
 through| |the body.
 I'll| **swallow** |them
 \ all /
 \D **OW** N/
 \so you/
 \ enter me /
 |slowly, but|
 |I will stop|
 |them just|
 |before my|
 |throat. I can|
 |spit them all|
 /outside of me,\
 /out, so they never take. My body will not let\
 |the words of another latch themselves to it.|
 |Insomuch that my heart will rend,|
 |taken from me so **I** become disowned|
 |from breath, mind, body, soul. Be vanquished|
 |from all that makes me, it never was your words . . .

Sana Yamasaki

My Happiness

What in the world am I dreaming about?
Holding a suitcase I bought for the first time
Eventually reached LA
This is my world

What in the world am I experiencing? the whole world?
My heart is like a flood with it all
It's in front of me, the view I've dreamed to see
Can't sleep, too thrilled
At night I'm like the sun

What in the world am I feeling? happiness?
A compliment from a distance
A letter with celebration to me
Someone smiling just by making eye contact
Am I still in a dream?

一体全体私はどんな夢を見てるんだろう
初めて手にしたスーツケースを抱えながら
LAに到着した
そしたらここは私がいるべき場所だって思った

一体私はなんて素敵な世界にいるんだろう
ここにあるもの全てで心が喜んでいる
夢に見た景色がここにある
毎日が楽しみで寝るのが大変
夜なのにまるで太陽のように心が踊る

なんて私は幸せ者なんだろう
遠くから聞こえる私を褒める言葉や
祝いに満ちた手紙
目が合っただけで笑える世界があるなんて
やっぱり私はまだ夢の中にいる気がする

Misaki Yoshimi

Things I Want To Do Before I Turn 20

Twenty is the beginning of adulthood.
I want to remain a child forever.
But I also look forward to growing up.
I want to be as happy as a clam during my teenage years.
I want to have lots of fun with my friends.
I want to sleep like a log.
I want to find a hobby.
I want to enjoy my life without regrets.

20歳は大人の始まり。
ずっと子供のままでいたい。
でも大人になるのも楽しみだ。
私は10代をたくさん楽しみたい。
私は友達とたくさん遊びたい。
私はたくさん寝たい。
私は趣味を見つけない。
とにかく後悔ないように人生楽しみたい。

CREATIVE

NON-FICTION

Fatyma Cendejas

Household Machismo

Personality Quiz

Topic: Machismo

Household Machismo

Question 1: Who recommended you to take this test?

- a. The oldest daughter. You put her through so much of your machismo without noticing. You always treated her differently from her brother. *She is a woman and knows what her roles are in society.* Remember when you taught her how to wash clothes at age 10 because she was old enough to do her own laundry? Have you taught your son how to wash clothes? Hmm, isn't he already 18 years old, and you still think YOU should be the one who washes his dirty underwear?
- b. Your perfect son, who would never recommend this because he is treated like a king in your household.
- c. Your guardian, the one who taught you all your life to be the machista you are today.
- d. You looked this up yourself. You want to make a difference and be the generation that stops this machismo culture.

Question 2: Picture this scenario and type your response...

You are at home on a Monday morning, drinking your coffee, watching TV, and waiting for your kids to get out of school. You begin to consider your reactions if your children had a boyfriend or girlfriend. What would you do if your daughter had her first boyfriend in the 8th grade? What would you do if your son had his first girlfriend in 7th grade?

I would be very disappointed in my daughter for having a boyfriend in 8th grade. I will not give her the quince she always wanted. I caught my daughter walking with a boy, and he walked her home. I was spying on her because uno nunca sabe. I waited in a far corner, where she could not see me but I could see them. They were not holding hands, and it seemed as if two friends were walking. Personally, I believe the worst of all possible outcomes. I kept observing them for a couple of days, thinking she could not see me. I saw her—always there, always at the farthest corner. I was not stupid. I look around and stay aware of my surroundings. I know what she was thinking. Why couldn't she ever just ask me about him? If she sees, what is taking her so long? I was waiting until I saw them do something worse than walk together. The boy walking her home is already bad enough for me. I will never let my pride get in the way. She has to come clean. I am tired of secrets being kept. If she is honest with me, I would still be highly upset, and if she lies, I would still be upset. I saw it, and my world came crashing down. My daughter's reputation was ruined. They were making out in the middle of the street, and she was not ashamed. She let him. He finally asked me to be his girlfriend. I was very shy because he was my crush. I gave him a small kiss on the cheek and a hug. I was so happy; no one can ruin what just happened. It was our first relationship, and we knew to respect each other. I rushed out of the car to her and started yelling at her. I told him to leave immediately. How dare you do this to me? I am your mom. You should never let a man touch you. But mom, I just gave him a hug, and I only kissed his cheek. It wasn't like we were making out and cars were passing by. I know what I saw. You saw what

wanted to see, not what happened. Call your dad right now and tell him what you were doing. I cannot believe you just let any boy kiss you. Why do I call my dad? I didn't do anything wrong. **starts crying*
** Of course you did; tell him how people were passing by and you were there making out. *I call my dad and I tell him I was walking home with a boy, and I kissed his cheek. My mom snatches the phone and tells him HER story. From this day forward, I kept everything to myself, and I never trusted my mom. I got my phone taken away for four months. I have never felt like this before. How can parents be so cruel?**

If my son has a girlfriend in 7th grade, then I will be very proud of him, and everyone should mind their own business about how I am. This proves he is a man, and I could not be happier. I remember when he was in 9th grade and I found a used condom in his drawer. I told everyone about it, and they all laughed! ** But if there was a closed condom in my room, who knows what would have happened to me?** This wasn't the first one I found. I discovered them several times before they were used. I told his dad, and we both laughed ... jaja.

Question 3: Do you feel any remorse about treating your daughter and son differently?

- a. No. I know what I did was right. I have to treat her a certain way. I want her to trust me and know that I only want what's best for her. I will not let my pride get in the way of acknowledging my problems. She is under my roof; therefore, she must obey my rules until she leaves, *or until I learn to speak up*. I would never raise a bad-looking daughter — a daughter who would reflect poorly on me. What would my family say if she acted in a certain way? What would they say if she had a boyfriend? If she dresses in a way that is too revealing, what would they think of me, given the way I raised her? *not your perfect Mexican daughter*.
- b. Absolutely, I do. I will never admit this, though, because I never want to be wrong. Where is the perfect answer?
- c. I will make her the perfect Mexican daughter, no matter what. My son is perfect in every way. He needs no adjustments.

Question 4: Has your daughter called you a machista?

- a. Never. She knows better than to speak badly to me.
- b. She has. She called my husband and me machistas. Instead of acknowledging that, I told her to never tell me how to raise my kids. That should put her in her place. *I was scared. I wanted to finally tell my parents that their machismo was hurting me deeply. I had just gotten home from school, and I went straight to my room. I like to debrief my day alone and reflect on what happened, so I don't carry hate or bad energy with me. I start crying because I remember everything my parents' machismo has put me through. I am trying to build up the courage to go tell her, to be honest, and to feel heard. I go to the living room, and I ask if the food is ready (just because I don't want to be touching pots, not because I am waiting for her to serve me). She looks at me and tells me that I am grown and that I*

*can serve my own food while serving a plate of food for my brother. I told her how she treats me so differently from him. We are the same. I bring up the time I had my first boyfriend and how she treated me so wrong. It is a memory that will never go away. I reminded her of the time my brother went home with hickeys on his neck, and she just laughed and called him crazy. Why don't you ever get him in trouble for everything he's done wrong? I get in trouble for giving a boy a hug; meanwhile, you laugh because you found used condoms in the bathroom trash can. *How dare she speak to me this way.* You will never tell me how to raise my kids. You need to mind your own business and worry about yourself. The decisions I choose to make are completely up to me and no one else. It is not up to you to tell me what is right and wrong.*

- c. I am not a machista.

Question 5: How is your daughter now?

- a. The perfect Mexican Daughter
- b. The perfect Mexican Daughter
- c. She does not ask me for permission to go out; instead, she just leaves. She took up a job just to not be home and not be expected to cook and clean the house. She made sure she had classes every single day and added night classes to avoid being here at all costs. She respects me, but I believe it is only to an extent. Everything I did for her will never leave her. It is part of who she is, and it will make her stronger. I will never put my future kids through what they put me through. *I will never make a difference. I'll treat them the same and get them in the same trouble. I want to be the person I wish I had. I will make sure my kids will be able to trust me the way I wish I would have been able to trust my mom. Is this maybe why I don't see myself having kids? I wouldn't want them to ever feel what I went through. Or does this make me want to have kids and give them the life I wanted?*

Results: *Learning how to ask for help does not contradict your culture, and if it does, it is time for you to break that toxicity off. Going to therapy is for everyone, not just white people. We all have problems, and it is OK to ask and receive help. Treating your children differently from one another will only ruin the parent-child relationship. If you are not ready to put machismo down, please do not have kids. Learn to be open-minded so your kids can fully trust you from the beginning. You will create sneaky kids. The new generation is not going to put kids through generational trauma. It stops with us.*

Lischa Mears

Hanging by a Red String

The words finally escape the depths of an oceanic trench, rising and rising by the gravity pulling them above until they break the surface to a sun's embrace. No longer submerged by the saltwater drowning them in blue silence, I take the first breath of air I've ever had. My lungs expand and my heart rate slows as the impermeable stone wall grounded in my chest collapses in heaps of grey.

My words are now a wish as my thumbs smooth over the black ink engraved on the 絵馬 hanging by a red string. I close my eyes and hope the kami of this shrine can hear me. I hope they can see the darkness billowing around me, constricting and crushing my essence in a black mamba's embrace. I hope they grant me the vision of a light, any light.

I can't see a path that lies ahead without him.

Without my father, how can I see through this darkness? How will I know which path doesn't lead to an end where a burning venom seeps through my veins, destroying and decaying until I collapse as he did?

While his heart still beats, the thrum wavers like a candle in a hurricane. Soon, the flicks of his ember flames will lose to the harsh winds. Kami, he's hanging by a red string.

He is the color of the world, the foundation who keeps the world upright, cementing faults in the Earth as quakes tremor and self-destruct with each rise and fall of the sun.

He is my best friend. A world without him will be a world of dusk.

Kami, I'm hanging by a red string.

Set Your Heart Ablaze

On 3570 South Las Vegas Boulevard lies a Roman Empire where imagination becomes reality. From the depths of the Earth, where desiccated dirt collides with sprouting green, tall buildings reach above to a limitless magenta sky, caressing each cloud with its seductive golden glow. The countless opaque windows of the palace radiate a luxury that calloused hands cannot reach, yet the ember luminescence of the sign-Caesars Palace, without the apostrophe of intangibility, emanates a silver moonlight gleam that shines in the starry eyes of all who face it. Fountains of brilliant blue dissipate pangs of the heart left by conceptual audiences. In synchronous time, breath stills as water streams into the air, accelerating with an intoxicating rush that shatters atmospheric glass. From behind those wide, glass doors, the melodic beat of city pop thrums like an alluring call of a siren at sea. The call is a sweet, viscous honey to those with parched tongues and essences of solidarity. Floating in an oasis of blue, Augustus Caesar maintains the pristine pose of a flaming sun. Untouched by the cracks of a scorching desert, in smooth sculpted snow, Caesar's deep and stern voice rattles the cores of wandering souls who hover like will-o-wisps. *Set your heart ablaze.* Inside the palace, a purple suitcase traveled alone becomes a pair connected not by the swirls of a red ribbon, but rather by the crystalline grasp of a fishing line. When the palace is met with the twilight of a plummeting sun, fire extinguishes in the absence of desert winds.

The Whisper of My Heart

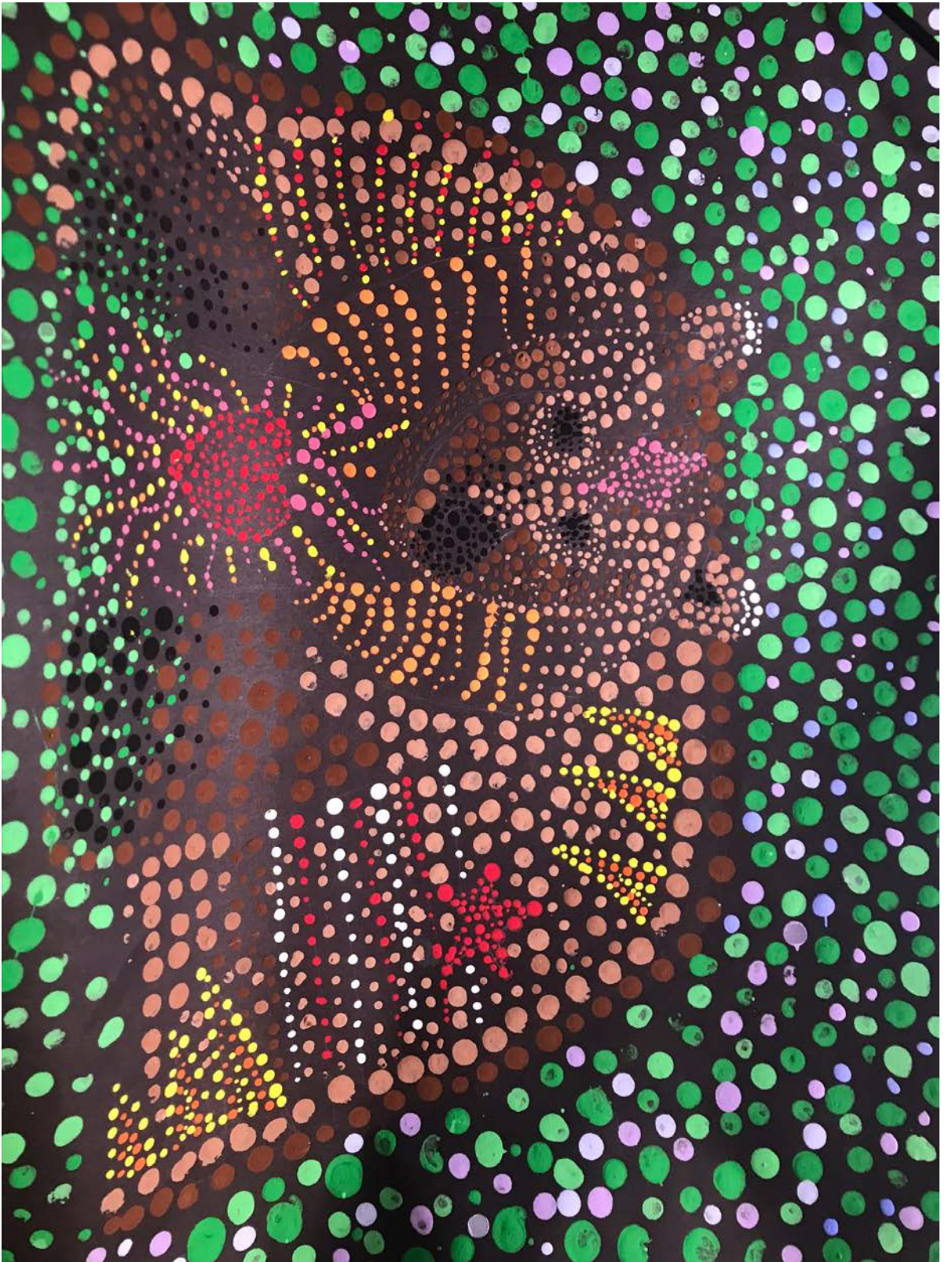
Gleaming eyes look ahead and small, smooth hands reach above to the sea in the sky. A plane jets through tranquil waves and sea foam leaves a contrail before these bright eyes. I could trace these temporary tattoos with the tips of my fingers, but where should I start? Should I let my fingers paint the sky in alternating swirls from south to east or north to west? I close my eyes and now I'm the pilot, a cerulean wave surging towards expansive shores without breakwaters. I open my eyes to an atmosphere scorched by wildfire and the sea foam evaporates. The glimmer of white vanishes and these shining eyes dissipate along with it.

I'm chained to a desk and my vision is clouded by the eternal night that plagues my eyes. I look outside the classroom window, searching for the warmth of that sky, searching for the swirling clouds of white I used to see. I remember the clouds were contrails. *Artificial.*

I look down at the hollow words on the paper before me. I can't recognize who wrote it. Who am I? My hands are rough and callused, decorated by the searing craters that are permanently inked into my skin. A worn-down pencil sits between the fingers of my right hand, fitting right into the bloodstained indents as if meant to be. Is this who I'm meant to be?

The clock on the wall is frosted over in black ice and with each breath, a misty cloud escapes from my lips. I want to erase the ink on the pages, write from the domains of my own color, write from the soul filled with chapters, but my attempts are futile as the chains laugh and pierce deeper into my skin in waves of red.

I gasp sharply for air when the biting cold bursts into my heart like molten lava. I finally understand. You and I were doomed from the start, weren't we?



Bear- Victoria Owens

Alyssa Morales

Self-Portrait as a Heartbreak Playlist

“Adelaide”

I found love, I lost love, and now all I dream about is her.

“Adelaide, wish I didn’t think about you every day.”

“Black Hole”

Relationships are as complicated as 5000-piece puzzles, especially when they end. We spend weeks committed to and concentrated on this one person just for them to call it quits at the end of the day and go their separate way. But what happens when we feel empty?

“There’s a big black hole where my heart used to be
And I’ve tried my best to fill it up with things I don’t need
It don’t work like that, no, it’s not easy
To fill this gap that you left in me”

How alone we can feel when it is all said and done. We devote so much of ourselves to this person; in the end, they leave a person-shaped hole in our soul, and there is nothing we can do since they still have our heart. They take a piece of us with them, leaving us gasping for air as we are left to drown in our emotions, never really knowing if we will ever get that piece back or breathe easy ever again.

“Congrats”

When a relationship ends, there may be some bitterness and regret about how it ended. Not all relationships end on good terms where your ex-partner respects you and doesn’t take

cheap shots.

“You broke my fucking heart
You tore my world apart
Went so low, I didn’t know that you were capable of that
So here’s to all the times
You made me wanna cry
Got your way so celebrate and pat yourself on the back
Baby, congrats
Congrats”

Sometimes you just need time to relieve your rage as you book an appointment at the nearest breakroom due to the sudden urge to pummel and destroy everything in sight. You feel the desperate need to let go of your bitterness and frustration at the situation you find yourself in. All heartbreak sucks, but when the person you used to know and trust the most turns into a heartless ex, you can’t help but go into a frenzy and break every object in sight, outraged at the situation, that person, and yourself for falling in love again.

“Dumped”

Going in and out of relationships all the time can become frustrating and exhausting. You are left wondering what you did wrong. Why can’t I hold down a stable relationship? Why won’t anyone just stick around? Is it me?

“I’m getting dumped all the time
You won’t stop messing with my mind
For whatever it’s worth
I’m the last thing you deserve (I’m getting dumped all the time)”

You begin to question your sanity and your self-worth. Am I the problem? Why don’t they want me? Will I ever be able to find someone who will love me regardless of the trials we will face? Why won’t anyone love me?

“Enough”

After spending copious amounts of time with someone, finding out that they were unfaithful and untrustworthy hurts more than snapping your femur. An absolutely excruciating feeling that only makes the healing process long and strenuous. Now left feeling betrayed and terrified, you begin to wonder if it will happen again.

“Please stop calling
You’ve been dishonest
I’ve been through enough
Two face promise
Scars and traumas
You put me through enough
Yeah I’ve been through, through
Enough with you, you”

Having that person call you repeatedly to explain the situation becomes exhausting. Their actions leave you so severely crippled that you feel as though you could sleep for a thousand years and still not wake up refreshed. You don’t want to deal with their split personality where they pretend to love you one moment and go back to cheating on you the next. The scars and traumas this person leaves behind will take longer to heal than any physical wound.

“Fight or Flight”

When the relationship ends and our ex immediately gets into a relationship, it can be easy for us to suppress our emotions, not wanting to show how deeply affected by the breakup we are. We will lock them inside a box and bury them six hundred feet below sea level.

They are especially hard to find when we run into the ex everywhere we turn.

“Well, fight or flight, I’d rather die
Than have to cry in front of you
Fight or flight, I’d rather lie

Than tell you I'm in love with you
My eyes are welling up as you admit there's someone new
It's my move, fight or flight"

When it all comes crashing down, being around the person we haven't stopped loving is excruciating. Our adrenaline starts pumping because we don't want them to know how deeply their disappearance from our lives has left us. Curled up on the floor and pulled into fitful rages, we'd rather run and hide until it destroys us before we fight to express how we truly feel.

"Glimpse of Us"

When we meet someone who provides us temporary happiness after a breakup, we try to fit them into the ex-shaped hole within our hearts. Unfortunately, they rarely seem to fill up the whole space. Sometimes after a breakup, we jump back into a relationship before we are ready.

"Cause sometimes I look in her eyes
And that's where I find a glimpse of us
And I try to fall for her touch
But I'm thinking of the way it was
Said I'm fine and said I moved on
I'm only here passing time in her arms
Hoping I'll find
A glimpse of us"

No matter how hard we try to fit this new person into our cookie-cutter life, they aren't our person. They aren't the person we kissed in the rain, danced with at 3 am, or woke up next to on cold mornings imagining the future. And we are once again reminded of the person-shaped hole that no other individual can fill.

"Happier Than Ever"

You had them, you lost them, and now you've never been better.

“And I don't talk shit about you on the internet
Never told anyone anything bad
'Cause that shit's embarrassing, you were my everything
And all that you did was make me fucking sad
So don't waste the time I don't have
And don't try to make me feel bad”

“I hope ur miserable until your dead”

When some relationships end, the messy breakups may make you feel so much rage and pent-up aggression towards that individual that you truly wish them nothing but the worst.

“... I still hear your voice, tryna rip my world to pieces
But I'm not your toy, you can break and leave there bleeding
The damage is done, moving on if I'm ready or not
But you drag me through mud, here I come now, I'm petty as fuck
(I'm petty as fuck)”
“... I hope you never fall in love again
I hope you be yourself and lose your friends
I hope they call you out for shit you said
I hope you're miserable until you're dead”

You want to watch them fall flat on their face, stub their toe, and maybe fall down a *small* flight of stairs. The impulse to hold their head underwater is overwhelming and you would surely take the chance if an opportunity ever presented itself. You're over the love you had, and now all you hold is hatred for the person who still invades your life from time to time.

“Jessica”

Some of you may experience regret after your breakup, feeling that you should have done a better job of loving your person.

“Did you miss me on the way down
Are we history? Are we done now?
Cause I checked in, are you checked out?
Two nights too long to be alone

Kiss me on the way down
Are we history? Are we done now?
Cause I checked in, are you checked out?
Two nights too long to be alone”

While there is so much history between the two of you, both parties need to be willing to make the relationship continue to work. Just because you are invested in the relationship doesn't mean they are still committed and willing to fight for it. Their radio silence will soon become unbearable. Before you know it the silence you've endured will become New Year's Eve in Times Square, hundreds of thousands of voices all screaming out as the clock runs down, but in this case, there won't be a celebration when the clock reaches zero in your relationship. At the end of the night, you've got no one to kiss and no one coming home. And in the end, when you are still fighting for the time left on the clock, it can rip your heart apart when there is no time left and they've stopped fighting.

“Keep Hoping”

There is always that love that takes you to your highest peak and lowest valley, but when you finally find that middle ground, it usually hurts more than you expect it to.

“You made me grow up, guess something in me shut
I'm cynical because you walked away
Used to be a hopeless romantic
Now I try to hope less cause damn it
You made it hard for me
You made it hard to keep
You made it hard for me
To keep hoping”

This is the love where you did all the cheesy dates and let loose your hopeless romantic side. However, in the end, when that person left you, they left you to question your love, your relationship, and ultimately made it hard for you to believe that you could ever have

another loving and trusting relationship with someone else.

“Liquor Store On Mars”

Breakups suck. They make it difficult to talk to your ex, see your ex, and the mere thought of even crossing paths with this individual is enough to make you wish you could hop on a rocket and fly away to another planet entirely.

“I hope there’s a liquor store waiting on Mars
With cheap cigarettes you can light with the stars
‘Cause that’s how far I’ll have to go
To see you and not say hello”

You don’t want to run into them and have that awkward interaction where the conversation feels foreign since you have both alienated yourselves from one another. In these instances, you believe it would be easier to pack your bags and move to Mars.

“Main Character”

Do you know what the worst thing about a breakup is? The worst thing about a breakup is knowing that the person you love with every fiber of your being is living their best life without you. And when the time comes, and you are still heartbroken and crying on the floor, they won’t even acknowledge you, talk about you, and will ultimately and completely forget about your existence altogether.

“You don’t want me
Yeah, I’m always the other guy
‘Cause in your story
I don’t even get a line
Oh, baby, it don’t even matter
I’ll never be your main character
I’ll never be in the stories you tell
When you’re drunk with your friends
I know how this ends
And I’ll never be your main character

I'll never be your main character"

You realize that in this book called *Life*, you are nothing more than a blip in their story. You were never the main character, the side character, or even the comedic relief. No, you were a background character that's barely acknowledged and completely forgotten before the end of chapter two. And it stings to know how truly dispensable you are when it is all said and done because you gave them everything, and they didn't even give you a line of commentary.

"Not my job anymore"

What do you do when the person you are still in love with is in as much agony as you are over your breakup? The answer is nothing, you don't do anything.

 "Wish I could be the one that you call too much
 At 4 a.m., 'cause you can't stop cryin'
 Drive you home when you get too drunk
 And you say you're fine
 But I know you're lyin'
 Wish I could be the thing you need
 And I could come and save you like before
 Oh, but that's not my job anymore"

Why not? Because no matter how much you want to pick up the phone, drive them home from the bar, or tuck them into bed, that's not your job anymore. Not even a text? No! You've got to walk away and never look back. Keep moving forward, and hope you don't have to witness them with another before you heal.

"Only Love Can Hurt Like This"

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of heartbreak? Is it good riddance? Will I ever love another again? Or only love can hurt like this?

 "Only love, only love can hurt like this
 Only love can hurt like this

Must've been a deadly kiss
Only love can hurt like this"
"Say I wouldn't care if you walked away
But every time you're there, I'm beggin' you to stay
And when you come close (when you come close), I just tremble
And every time, every time you go
It's like a knife that cuts right to my soul"

Studies have shown that when you experience extreme heartache, the mental capacity of it upon your brain then translates into a physical affliction upon your body, meaning that a once beautiful relationship full of love and acceptance is now left in pieces. Like an exquisite stained-glass window, your heart is now shattered into 3,579 pieces.

"Paramedics"

Nothing is worse than loving someone and letting them go because you know, without a doubt, that you will never be enough. You let the love of your life go because your presence in their life does nothing but suck the sunshine from their eyes and, in place, sets rain clouds.

"Lately I've been living in a ghost town
I hate how I'm making her feel right now
I don't wanna leave her feeling so hurt
I know when I try I make it all worse
I don't know what I should do with these words
But I really fucking miss her"

You can't seem to do anything to make them smile, but putting a frown upon their lips and waterworks in their eyes is all too easy. No matter how much you depend on and miss this person, all you can do is walk away. Because why tear someone else's world apart when yours is the only one that really needs to crumble? No need to crush someone else's life with your burdens while watching yours become trampled. It may be miserable, but you're saving them an even bigger heartbreak in the end.

“QUIT”

When you spend all your time around the person you love, it can be easy to become addicted to their presence, smile, laugh, and just about anything else your brain finds adorable. These different aspects of your breakup are what make balancing your emotions and independence as stable as a playground teeter-totter.

“I tried and I tried to run from it
But it’s hard and it’s harder to admit
In this game that we play, I never win
Something about you, I can’t quit”

Moving on is the best choice after you break up, but sometimes you get drawn back into the vicious cycle of codependency. You know that going back to them is wrong, you know that it is going to mess you up, and you know that it only makes you an option, but you are intoxicated by their presence and can’t deny them when they come beckoning for you. No matter how badly you want to quit them, you’re stuck in their game of ring around the rosie until you can fight your addiction or until you can put more pride in your self-worth.

“Remember To Remember Me”

Some would say that the most challenging part of any breakup is remembering the good memories you made together at the end of it all.

“Please don’t let me go
We’ve been wrong before
Don’t want to lose the memories
Remember to remember me
Thought I’d let you know
You only have to call
I’ll remind you how we used to be
Remember to remember me”

Remember all the text messages and facetime calls, all the handwritten letters and polaroid

photos, and all kisses and cuddles forever etched into your skin. Remembering who they were when you were both madly in love can make moving on with your life a futile effort. Soon you will find yourself drowning in an ocean of untamed memories. Salty tears cascade down your face as you realize the vast hole within your chest and the unknown of what lies on the other side of those tidal waves of feelings. This then leaves one question remaining: do you choose to remember the good and hinder your healing process, or forget every moment you both ever shared?

“Stick Season”

One of the hardest parts about being in a relationship is not wanting your relationship to end up like your parents', the type of relationship where you bring out the worst in each other until you are both screaming until your face resembles a bright red balloon or avoiding one another like the Black Death.

“So I thought that if I piled something good on all my bad
That I could cancel out the darkness I inherited from dad
No, I am no longer funny 'cause I miss the way you laugh
Once called me forever now you still can't call me back”

Many who have not seen or experienced healthy and loving relationships will often struggle with their inner critic about how to express certain emotions and love languages. They will struggle to comprehend how to love someone properly, even if they love them with their whole being. Unfortunately, since they may have never experienced true love or witnessed it, there is a chip on their shoulder where they are missing those special moments. However, when they have finally loved and lost it, this will ultimately tear them apart and leave them wondering if they will ever truly be worthy of love and a person to love.

“3 Moods”

Trying to understand your emotions after experiencing a breakup leaves your mind jumbled, confused, and sometimes foggy.

“I’ve only had three moods for two months and one week
Alone, and confused, and empty
I’ve never seen this side of me when I wake up
At three to see if you called me
Your face is still on my home screen
I’m breaking down and breaking up”

Almost effortlessly, after a breakup, your brain will immediately revert to common and painful emotions as you wrap your mind around the agony you are experiencing. You find that you have yet to make changes to your daily routine that do not revolve around your ex and that there is a gap within your life. There was a before your person, a during your person, but nothing could have prepared you for an after your person. And this can be a devastating revelation for those whose futures seemed so clear only moments, minutes, or days before.

“Unlearn”

Rarely do people talk about the difficulties of being in a healthy relationship after so many toxic ones. After being in so many awful relationships, sometimes we begin to believe that this is all we deserve until someone crosses our path and proves us wrong.

“Cause if I’m gonna learn how to love you
I need to unlearn how to love too
Need to unlearn how to run when it feels right
Oh my God, I’m tryin’
If I’m gonna learn how to choose you
I need to unlearn what I’m used to
Need to unlearn how to run when it feels right
Oh my God, I’m tryin’”

There can be confusion, aggression, and shame when your new partner treats you correctly,

especially when all you can seem to do is lash out at them. You can apologize for your behavior and promise you'll be better, but the fact of the matter is that you are still experiencing a learning curve. You must now unlearn all the detrimental habits you learned in your toxic relationships and create new habits that benefit your person, your relationship, and you personally. This can be a long, complicated, strenuous process.

“Vicious”

I trusted them to take care of me, to guard my heart, and to keep me safe, but all they did was play with my emotions and show their true colors.

“You don’t feel remorse, you don’t feel the effects
‘Cause you don’t think you hurt me if you wish me the best
I shoulda known all along, I was only the next one
To take your love songs as a promise”

“Where’s My Love”

Loving someone is indescribable, like celebrating after catching a massive wave on your surfboard. However, when the thought of losing the person you love most arises in your mind like smoke encasing all your thoughts, you are left terrified of the future and the well-being of the one you love. These thoughts can feel like ice running through your veins.

“I got a fear, oh, in my blood
She was carried up into the clouds, high above
Ooh, if you’ve bled, I bleed the same
Ooh, if you’re scared, I’m on my way”

While loving someone is a blessing, many would say it is a curse. Loving someone requires sacrifice and the knowledge that one day they may leave you or worse, be taken from you before their time. These thoughts can make it difficult to breathe and keep your head above water as you continue to wonder if your person is staying safe throughout the day. Especially when all you want to do is be near them and hold them in your arms to

know that they are safe and well taken care of. When you don't have that knowledge, it leaves you wondering where your love is and if when you see them again they will be safe and sound.

“XO”

Falling out of love can feel like taking a baseball bat to the brain. When you knew it was doomed from the start, all you can think about is all the time wasted when the end finally comes.

“‘I don't think I love you no more’
‘You never seem to call me lately’
But I don't think she knew me at all
‘Cause I never thought I'd have to say this
But I'm no liar
And I never hid anything
You should've seen it coming to this, just know
I'm not singing for an EX though
I'm just singing 'cause it's over”

It's a difficult concept to accept, like striking out in the last inning of the championship game. You spent so much of your time committed to and invested in this one person only for them to acknowledge that they don't love you and you feel the same way. This may leave you with feelings of resentment and bitterness toward the situation since you checked out a long time ago, and you're just now pulling off the blindfold. This situation may not be gut-wrenching, but it is still heartbreaking.

“You're Somebody Else”

One of the worst feelings you can have as your relationship falls apart is looking at your significant other and not recognizing the person staring back at you.

“Well you look like yourself
But you're somebody else

Only it ain't on the surface
Well you talk like yourself
No, I hear someone else though
Now you're making me nervous"

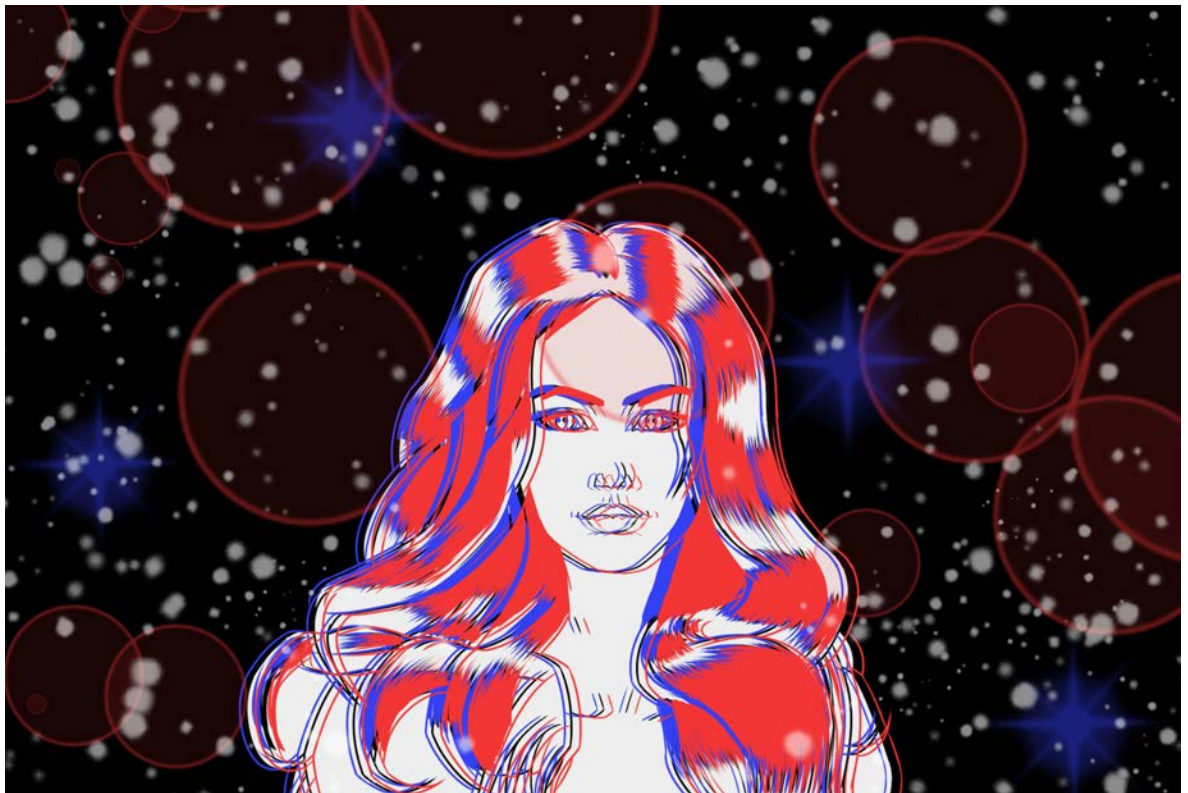
If it is not bad enough that your relationship is crumbling like the skyscrapers during 9/11, now you have to stare at the person you once loved and admit that you no longer recognize them. It's heartbreaking. While they may look the same on the outside, you know that the inside no longer reflects the character of the person you fell in love with. You're left feeling anxious and unsure of the person you call yours, knowing that soon enough, you won't call them at all.

"Zero Feelings"

As we come to a close on loving and toxic relationships, we finally realize that the freedom and independence we find in ourselves is more satisfying than any relationship. It's the feeling of finally achieving a life goal you've dreamed of since you were five, like skydiving and experiencing those 60 seconds of pure bliss as you free fall.

"I got zero zero feelings
I don't really feel things
Is that such a bad thing?
Cuz I like how I'm so self sufficient
You don't know what you're missing
Life is fucking sweet
when you got zero feelings"

Now, without a doubt, we realize that being self-sufficient and living on our own is more satisfying than having to worry about another individual's feelings, thoughts, and opinions. We recognize that we could not care less about being out of a relationship and having to worry about another person's wants and needs. Now that we are out, we are never going back.



Yvette
Cameron Dominguez

Melinda Quach

Marriage is Like a House

In my mind's eye, I can see my childhood home in all of its dramatic glory. It is a relatively large house on a corner lot with reddish-brown brick columns surrounding the exterior of two of the house's sides like sentries or rusted prison bars. The walls of the house are painted yellow with a short layer of bricks that reach about a quarter of the way up the wall like a decorative border. Embedded in the wall, there are two visible entrance doors to the house. The door on the right side of the house, in respect to the front yard, is the main entrance, while the door on the left side of the house is the side entrance. Be that as it may, most who enter the house usually take the side entrance for convenience sake, seeing as it is the door closest to the driveway. According to Doctor Nici Curtis, a clinical psychologist, doors can symbolize new beginnings¹ and, as in the case of matrimony, represent the entryway into a couple's marital relationship. In terms of my family, the constant usage of the side door as opposed to the main door almost perfectly mirrors the reality of my parents' marriage. Symbolically, as side doors are usually associated with crime or unsavory behaviors and secrets, their constant usage portrays the lack of communication and trust between my parents. Additionally, it also emphasizes my father's crime against the sanctity of loyalty in marriage, as in most novels and films, side doors are notorious for their usage by side partners of cheating spouses.

For this story's purpose, I invite you to enter the side door with me as we begin this trip down Memory Lane. Once we cross the threshold of the house, one of the first things that most people tend to notice is the round wooden dinner table sitting to the right of the door in its little nook against the wall with a glossy set of wooden chairs surrounding it in a loose ring. The table is usually decorated with various flyers, bills, junk mail, and magazines that take up at least two-thirds of the mahogany-colored surface at any given time. However, if we travel a few years back in time, at around 2004 or 2005 C.E., a different picture enfolds around the cluttered table. Instead of letters and flyers, the table's

1 Quote from paragraph 6 of Nici Curtis' "The Symbolism of Doors." This article was published in *The Psychology Center and Ta Moko Services*. As of February 26, 2019, it could be found at <http://www.psychologycentre.co.nz/the-symbolism-of-doors.html>.

wooden surface is clear and clean with a small floral centerpiece that time has blurred into abstraction, and there is a delectable meal waiting on one side of the table. It is a simple meal of rice and meat that has been braised until its juices have caramelized into a viscous brown sauce. Despite its relatively simple image, the scent of the meat was enough to make mouths water and stomachs rumble with hunger. However, I remembered that, in spite of the pangs of hunger that gnawed at my stomach like a mouse nibbling on a wooden block, a phone call from my father was all that was needed to settle my mother and I down at the table in wait of his arrival. You see, my father was an especially traditional person who believed that wives belonged in the home and kitchen, and that dinner must always be prepared in preparation for his return. Regardless, eating dinner with him, and even conversing with him, was an immensely stressful experience. But, rather than to listen to his lectures or give him a reason to start another quarrel, my mother and I decided to wait. We waited together for what seemed to be like an eternity to my childish mind. Half an hour passed, then another, and another, until the clock struck terrifyingly close to my bedtime. At that point in time, feeling drained from the dull pangs of ebbing hunger and exhausted patience, my mother and I decided to eat our cooling dinner and leave my father to simmer in his pride and archaic ideals alone. Nevertheless, I feel plenty justified in ignoring his demands, for, I later found out that it was not until dawn had broken over the horizon and the chickens were crowing from their coops, that the man of the hour finally deigned to return home, having already had his fill of food, beer, and women with his drinking-buddies beforehand. Indeed, it was no wonder that in my parents' last few years of marriage together, our dining table amounted to nothing more than a glorified mailbox.

Coming back to the present-day, I implore you to take a few steps ahead, to the living room, where you may take a seat on any available surface, within reason, and relax. Oh, and do watch where you step, for, the living room is situated in a shallow, den-like dip about two stair steps down. Below, the living room floor is covered in a soft, white carpet that is speckled with tiny specks of grey. It is on that carpet that my family (my mother, cousins, and myself) have spent many a night gambling with land and luck over a board covered in property, colorful money, and shiny silver figurines. Granted, in some distant memory, I can vaguely remember a time in which my father used to join us in our antics. In those memories, I remember how he made both my mother and I laugh for hours on end, and how our games went on until the night sky began to lighten. However, it is not long before the righteous fury of betrayal flares up with a vengeance, and those happy

wisps of memory are quickly replaced with my mother's tears and my father's absence and uninvited, emotionally-draining criticism and lectures. Then, my heart closes its doors to the memories without a second thought: rejecting them; rejecting hope; rejecting love. Anger and fear replaces safety and happiness in a heartbeat, and I am brought back to the reality of my childhood home, still teeming with the ghosts of treachery that even time could not erase.

To clear my head, I crane my head up to look at the dark, wooden fan hanging from the ceiling. Almost nothing stands out about the fan, being as it appears to be no different from any other fan, save for the decorative, red or pink, sphere-like object made out of paper hanging upon the center of it. The paper decoration was once from my aunt's wedding reception and it probably symbolizes happiness in marriage (or something along those terms) in both Chinese and Vietnamese culture. Thinking back, I remember that my aunt's wedding had been a large affair, with relatives from all corners of the United States visiting California for the sake of both attending the festivities and reuniting with one another. During that time, I had found the event to be every bit as suffocating as it was nerve-wracking, but now, I marvel at the phenomenon with wonder. All of my relatives had their own busy personal lives that ran counter to my immediate family's, yet somehow, they all still found the time to converge together for the sake of a wedding celebration. This leads me to wonder: are weddings so important to our Vietnamese culture that no other celebration can compare to it? And is it this type of thinking that led to my mother's miserable marriage, so filled with bitterness, tears, and hair-greying stress? It is true that Vietnam, being a developing country, would have few celebrations in life grander than their marriage ceremonies, but what is so important about marriage, anyway? According to Sheri Stritof, a known marriage and relationship expert, marriage was intended for both procreational purposes and the "protection of bloodlines," and for forging alliances between families.² Thus, it is possible that one of the few reasons as to why marriage would be perceived so highly in Vietnamese culture is that it ensures an alliance between two families, which would, then, allow both families to add to each other's strengths and prosperity, and to defend against one another's weaknesses and shortcomings. Nevertheless, such profitable alliances can only occur between families of similar standings and wealth. As a result, most traditional weddings of old were arranged for more economic

2 Quote from paragraph 1 of Sheri Stritof's "How Long Has The Institution of Marriage Existed For?" This article was written in *The Spruce* on January 9, 2019. As of February 26, 2019, it could be found at <https://www.thespruce.com/history-of-marriage-2300616>.

reasons rather than love.

However, in my mother and father's case, they had ignored traditional arrangement and married one another for the sake of love rather than economic security. In those days, my mother's tales painted my father of a prince: a kind gentleman who loved her to the point of begging off his previous engagement to another woman all for the sake of marrying her, and only her. But now, in present-day, her tales take on new meaning. Her most recent rendition of the event revealed that my father's previous engagement had been arranged by himself, and, after having gained an interest in my mother, he had cast aside his responsibilities like a charlatan to propose to another. This new tale, then, makes me wonder: had my parents' marriage ever meant anything to my father? Throughout my childhood, I have noticed that more often than not, my father was always gone. The days in which he had returned home were few and far in between, and even so, he returned to only either eat, sleep, or criticize. As a result, the only ones that occupied that house for over the course of ten long years were my mother and myself. Albeit, being as I had school and my mother had to work, the house was only occupied for about eight to nine hours at night by its sole masters. Grievously, this led to a lack of care and maintenance of the house, thus, many of the unused rooms were left to gather cobwebs and dust. In fact, since my mother and I used so few rooms by ourselves, we also rarely ever bothered with house-wide air conditioning and heating, and instead, often used portable fans and heaters. Due to this, the house was left in a perpetual state of frigidness for most of the year.

Chilly and bitter; exhausted and abandoned-- my parents' marriage was every bit as healthy as the house was (that is to say: not at all). With the divorce underway at the end of my eighth grade year, the house was also put up for sale not long after. The move felt like a nightmarish dream, and the days that followed were filled with both wistful longing and nauseating homesickness. Just as the divorce was a conclusion that had long been coming, the loss of the house was also inevitable, for, if homes are representations of marriages, then my childhood home was a marriage long frozen.



SHORT FICTION

Michelle Coral

The Generational Curse

I avoid mirrors all the time. Every time I look at myself in one, I see you, and I hear those words you always said to me when I was a little girl. *Don't wear this color you'll look darker*, you'd say to me. *Don't eat so much, you'll become fat and hate yourself*. You were never my friend or my mother, you were always, my biggest critic. I always told myself I'd never be like you, and yet here I find myself, 21 years old now, being my biggest critic. I always wished you'd heal, and we would get another chance. We would seek better relationships and friendships and treat one another better. You always said *terapia es para los locos, yo no soy loco*. It hurt so much hearing those words come out of your mouth, because my heart knew you'd never get better, and you being a caring mother would never happen, the version of you that my mind made up would only exist there, in my mind. Whenever I see mothers and daughters together in public, I fight every muscle in my body to say, *please, take me home. Take me home and I promise to love you*. I always imagine what my life would be like if I was a daughter with a loving mother. Would other girls look at us and also want to build a home with us? I hope one day I can look in the mirror and not see my mother. I wish she had the strength to get better, not just for me but for herself. I see how unhappy she is with us. I wonder why she has stayed so long. Does she find comfort in the pain? I sometimes have dreams of my mother where she finds a husband who loves and cherishes her. In my dreams, she never has kids, she lives on a beach, and she has a smile. That smile I only ever see in old photos of her. My mother has wounds as big as the ocean. I know she only "loves" like this because it was how she was taught. Yelling meant you were loved because it meant you feared losing them, right? I look in the mirror and see my mother, but I refuse to be like her. My reflection says I am unlovable and unworthy but that is my mother's voice not mine. I am not my mother, and this generational curse ends with me.

Leah Jaymes

Darling

“Write the world away darling, and everything shall be yours.”

It was a silly promise that he made me, that day, when I thought my life had reached its final page. I would have been wary, if I hadn't been so very desperate for something to change, *anything* to change.

Yes, I was desperate.

That is what I tell myself now, as the rain falls so frantically on the pavement outside. As every crash of thunder threatens to sever my soul in twain.

I suppose you may wonder why this has been happening here, to us of so little water. California is drowning, and it is because of me, I'm afraid.

I made a deal with the wrong kind of man, and I relied on him to change my life. I traded what I had left for this typewriter, and I am not typing fast enough to please him.

Well, that isn't quite true. Not completely. You see, he wasn't a man at all.

I have a confession to make, and I suppose that was what he was after all along, when he promised me the world for a few paltry parcels of words. He wants to feel bigger than life, to control me in ways that I can't help but react to in a silly little pantomime as I try to type faster than that flood outside.

I made a deal with the devil.

I wouldn't have lasted long otherwise, but I suppose that doesn't make it any better, not when the world is drowning around me.

Yes, he must crave a confession. I can't imagine what else he would be after, not after all the poetry that I tried to please him with, the screenplay that only soured his expression, the countless short stories that I have siphoned from my deepest well of insecurities and imagination. What else could he want at this point, when I have typed for so long that my fingers bled, the rusty residue still splayed across the type keys?

I can't do this anymore, so if the world drowns I'm sorry. It was a mistake that I won't have the chance to make again. This is the last story I can write for him and, even then, I don't think he will keep his promise.

But if it works, then the rain will finally subside.

If I believed in anything anymore, I would pray. But I'm afraid the world is empty now.

There is only the typewriter and his reflection.

It started just about 72 hours ago. It was a day like any other, I'm sure. The sky was probably clear (a dusty shade of blue that I'm sure you will recall) and I think I remember the blue jay that lives in the pomegranate tree outside teasing one of the neighborhood cats, tempting death. The sun was shining then. I was a fool for thinking it was too bright and shielding my eyes. How I would welcome that burn in my corneas now.

My heart was not whole, unfortunately. I had been burned in ways other than the sun.

I gave parts of it away, hoping for it to be returned, none too worse for wear. But we are often far too avaricious for love. Our hearts are fragile, and we forget how easily they can split; it is far too easy to leave a capillary cracked carelessly on the concrete.

One, two, three.

Four, five, six.

Seven times severed.

*Angie took an artery, Vanessa a vein.
Trevor, like the ring I offered, threw my heart right down the drain.
Sebastian split my septum, and Hyacinth my valve,
G skipped it like a stone, to see if it'd dissolve,
Heather kept a piece of it, said I shouldn't mind.
Told me only fools
leave their hearts behind.*

Yes, I already said I was a fool. You should have known; I am a maker of mistakes, and a miser for misery. I'm the one who cries when I can't see constellations. I should have known long ago that I wasn't deserving of shooting stars. Wishes aren't for the wistful, dear. They are for the wanderlusting.

I was sick of my heart getting strewn about and I was a selfish one.
I could have asked for anything, I suppose, if I had known it would turn true.

I remember it clearly. After all, it wasn't all that long ago. The day was dawning and new, replenished by Night as she knit her dark blanket across the skyline, cuddling us in comfort until the last dregs of darkness disappeared across the skyline. And before I gave up, before

I made sure that this was the last sunshine I would ever see, I stood outside and breathed in the crisp autumn air.

And searched myself for regret.
And I found nothing.

Today, I thought then, *will be my last*. It was too much for me, too much for anyone. A heart can only take so much.

A dandelion stem, robed in its gossamer gown of fluff and fantasy, caught my eye before I headed back inside. I used to love dandelions, the whimsy that they released into the world on a single solitary wisp of wind.

Make a wish.

Because all my wishes had gone so well so far. Why would a wish change anything? Could it make me feel less empty inside? Could it fill my hollow heart with hope once more?

Make a wish.

Nothing would change. Nothing ever changes.

MAKE A WISH.

And I did, even though I thought I had nothing left to live for. I wonder if I should have just died instead.

The seeds spun sporadically into the wind, and I turned around, away from the sun and wishes and hopes and dreams, straight into the arms of a man I had never seen before and hope to someday never see again.

“A wish like that doesn’t come cheap, darling.”

Ann Marie Lawson

Wilton And Hudson

Wilton, who is named after his grandfather Wilton James Abrahams, the former mayor of Savannah in the city Mandeville, sat on the windowsill watching the rain as it poured on the window. The drops became bigger and bigger as the rain became more of a downpour. Wilton was filled with excitement as he anticipated seeing his father for the first time in eighteen months. He hugged the pillow tightly as he thought about what was going to happen when his father arrived home if his mom refused to give him another chance to fix their marriage. Cassie and Jeffrey had been separated for close on two years despite Wilton's plea to allow his father to stay in the guest house so they could continue being a family. However, Cassie would have none of it. Wilton's excitement suddenly turned to fear which made him wish his paternal grandmother was close by.

Wilton's paternal grandmother Sheila died in a car accident when Cassie was only eight years old, and Cassie was raised by her father with the help of his youngest sister Jenny.

Cassie, who is now thirty-two, had Wilton when she was nineteen and was supposedly in college. Her father had a fit when he found out Cassie had dropped out of college to be on the road with her high school sweetheart, Jeffrey. That did not sit well with the mayor of Savannah, there was no way his daughter was going to be roaming all over the country with some two-bit-wanna-be musician who could barely afford to feed himself. That was how Wilton described Jeffrey, a bass guitarist and lead vocalist for the pop group, "New Breed." Wilton and Cassie never saw eye to eye on anything, not even school. The day he forbade Cassie to see Jeffrey anymore was the day

Cassie decided she was quitting school to be with Jeffrey, that way she would not have to deal with her father and the constant arguing just like when Sheila was alive.

Cassie remembers all too well the many nights she would be awakened by shouts coming from the kitchen, the back porch, or her parents' bedroom; they fought over everything and for nothing. It drove Cassie crazy that they could not have a conversation without it becoming an argument. What was even worse is that Cassie blamed her father for Sheila's death. Before Wilton senior went into politics he was head of the sheriff's department in the county and Sheila was the head nurse of the county's hospital. They had a beautiful life and things were going according to the plans they had had since they met at a career expo in Montego Bay. They had worked hard and made a lot of sacrifices to achieve their goals, even with Sheila getting pregnant, as planned, except for the sex of the baby. Wilton's heart was set on having a son but the ultrasound revealed it was a girl, and so it was when Cassie was born.

Things were not the same once Cassie was born. It was as if something in Wilton died. Or someone swapped his heart for a distant, unempathetic, and emotionally detached individual who had lost touch with himself, and his young family. Sheila was crushed and distraught over Wilton's distance from her and Cassie. She tried everything to make him see that there was no difference in Cassie as a girl or a boy. Cassie was here, and he had no right to reject her. Though Wilton did not say outright that he was disappointed, his actions indicated otherwise. He did not make much of the child, and began spending more and more time at work, rather than being at home. It broke Sheila's spirit and she was no longer the same. She kept Cassie close to her to avoid feeling any indifference. She wanted Cassie to have a normal life, after all, he was an innocent child and deserved to be loved. And Sheila intended to do just that!

Young Wilton's heart pounded as the hours drew closer. At any time now his dad would be pulling into the driveway.

Suddenly, there was a little image with a cute white face on the corner of the sidewalk. Wilton's curiosity got the better of him and he opened the window, stuck his head out to get a closer look. It must be a cat he thought to himself, as he pondered why a kitten would be out in the pouring rain on the street. The image walked toward the driveway and stood still as if to say, I'm here! Come get me!

Upon realizing it was a pup, Wilton flew across the living room toward the front door. He grabbed the door without thinking and immediately the door flew from his hand and banged into the wall. He ran outside into the pouring rain and froze when he got close to the pup. He was ecstatic, a Pomeranian Poodle, how cool! The thirteen-year-old was so excited that he forgot he was standing in the rain hugging and kissing the dog.

It was headlights shining at him from the street that brought him back to the present. The boy lifted his head long enough to realize it was his father, and you could not tell the difference between the rain and his tears as he quickly hustled over to the side of the car with the pup still in his arms. He threw himself into the arms of his father while still clinging to the dog. It was then he realized he was soaking wet. The dog whimpered as father and son embraced for what seemed like forever, sobbing as they rested in each other's arms. I think we need to get out of this rain, Jeffrey finally said, and they huddled together walking to the front door.

The door opened the minute Jeffrey placed his hand on the doorknob. To his surprise it was Cassie's aunt Jenny. Jeffrey was delighted to see her. She opened her arms with a huge smile on her face as she welcomed him home. The two hugged and laughed, releasing their embrace only long enough to look each other over before embracing again.

Jeffrey was very fond of Jenny, she was sweet, caring, warm, and he considered her his second mom. For Jenny it was good that Jeffrey was home to help raise his son. Wilton had been a different boy since his father left to grant Cassie's request to give her some space. It had been difficult for the entire family. Cassie would cry a lot at night when

she thought everyone is asleep, and poor Wilton, he yearned for his father's return so they could be a family again. Jenny had had numerous heart-to-heart talks with her niece about throwing away her marriage over a stupid misunderstanding and had made her promise to reconcile with Jeffrey since he had done nothing to cause their separation. It was the bad blood between Cassie and her father that had caused the bickering between her and Jeffrey, but Cassie was her father's daughter. They were one and the same; stubborn, hardheaded and refused to acknowledge that they were wrong and that was the root of all the problems between Cassie and her father, neither would forgive or even attempt to discuss their misgivings.

Now that Jeffrey had returned home he would need to take some time off work to address the situation that should have long been dealt with and Jenny would see to it that Cassie kept her promise. Jenny played the perfect host as she hurried Jeffrey and Wilton to their rooms to get out of their wet clothes and have some hot cocoa while she finished preparing dinner. The two ran up the stairs like children playing as they went with the pup at their heels. Jenny called out to them to get the dog a blanket and t-shirt while they were at it. It felt good to be home. They huddled in the bathroom while drying with the same towel. Jeffrey picked up the pup placing him on the sink. The dog was very small and Jeffrey wondered how old the dog was and who was missing their pet; he immediately informed Wilton that they couldn't keep the dog, at least till they made every effort to find his owner and Wilton agreed. They happily utilized the blow dryer to blow the water from their hair then turn it on the poor dog. The sudden change of temperature made the pup whimper and he backed into the far corner of the bathroom counter. They both laughed as Wilton picked him up and dressed him in an old shirt and wrapped him in a small blanket and headed down the stairs. Suddenly, the room was filled with life from the conversations and laughter, there was much harmony in the atmosphere; Jenny and Jeffrey must have felt the change because they both turned and looked at each other in a unified rhythm that can't

be explained and Jenny assured Wilton that everything would be alright as if she knew what he was thinking.

The weeks went by in the hot summer with Cassie and Jeffrey hanging out by the pool at night sometimes till way past midnight. It was obvious the two were working out their issues, and Cassie had even made an effort to speak to her father. It was not an easy task since they were both stubborn and determined to hold their position but slowly they found some way to release some of their resentment to where they managed to clear up a few misunderstandings. They had lunch together at the bistro twice one week and made plans to have a family fun day at Wilton senior's country villa a few miles away.

Young Wilton could not be more happy, the boy could not sleep due to the overwhelming surge of emotions. He was thrilled to see his parents holding hands and showing endearment toward each other. He often watched them from his bedroom window with the lights out so they could not tell he was watching. He was even more happy because although he had spent a good three weeks passing out flyers and knocking on doors in search of the the dog's owner, it had been to no avail; his father told him he could keep the dog if no one called or showed up by the end of the fourth week and he should start thinking of finding a name for him.

Things could not be better for young Wilton but it did get better. He had his father home, his mom was behaving herself and not arguing anymore, he finally had a pet, Hudson, a beautiful dog that acted older than he really was, and then there was his name sake, his grandfather. The man who supposedly gave him his name because when Cassie was born he wished she was a boy so he could carry on the name of the family bloodline. He was all too happy to name his grandson, and though he and Cassie had no real relationship he loved the boy without seeing him. The only thing that mattered to Wilton senior was that he was a boy child and according to him, all that he had belonged to the boy and he saw him as the son he never had. So, although Cassie had decided to deny

her father the pleasure of spending time with her son since he did not spend much time with her growing up, and which contributed to the death of her mother, they had recently decided to work on their differences. The two Wiltons were finally spending time together. This brought much joy to Jenny as she looked forward to her time at their family estate, the country villa had been very sentimental for her.

Jenny had spent most of her childhood there with her siblings, she was elated when she found out that Wilton was having it renovated with the intention for them to spend Christmas there (even if it didn't get finished in time). In the meantime, they would enjoy the summer and what a time they would have. The old movies would be coming out as well as the old family recipes; Jeffrey loved to cook and would have a blast with his son in the kitchen if he was able to separate him from Hudson for a minute. For the first time young Wilton was able to relate to Wilton senior, calling him grandfather, which made the old man swell up with teary eyes and hug the boy. He asked young Wilton why he named the dog Hudson and the boy responded saying that the dog's name was spiritual, meaning heart, mind, spirit; or powerful and hardy, which was saying he is strong and has endurance. Hudson is medicine, the boy said, he brought healing to all of us and his presence made a difference, and we were happy to welcome him as the newest addition to the family. They all agreed. The family for the first time since Sheila died sat together at the dinner table holding hands as Jenny blessed the food and asked for a special blessing in keeping the family together. Sheila must be looking down on us whispered young Wilton squeezing his father's hand. There was much work to be done but for now it was time to just be thankful.

Mary Killeen Pena

I / us / we

mary:

“beloved” if you ask the egyptians, who i read the other day were the original migrants to the island of Éire. before brigid or our lady of the holy rosary, the virgin mary. before them, there was Ériu. now they call her “mary,” but the stones at Sí an Bhrú and in the wall marking the boundaries of the field where my patrilineal ghosts live remember Ériu. (clifden, the field is called. every field is named.)

“bitter” or “rebellious,” or “drop of the sea” if you consult the bible. or if you ask the question in hebrew. it’s how i’ve always felt i moved through the world, or at least how the world moved me through it. they say the same things about Éire. i think she is *resilient*, but that’s just another way to say “bitter” if you love her. a teenager from nazareth, who men in robes, like magicians, morphed into something sinister in their cavernous, stone buildings and in their leaden books. gave her an unfamiliar face and told lies about her body. but still, i am her. i felt i was her when i was four. i saw the three-foot-tall statue of her in the hallway alcove at my catholic school, and her blue robes were alive. her feet overwhelmed the porcelain globe beneath her and i believed she could see through my skin and reach into my chest to stop the beating of my heart if she wanted to.

my great-grandmother. not born in ireland, but a child of it. family lore recollects that she gripped prejudice in one hand and a bad mood in the other. like a spiteful goddess in a pantheon of immigrant deities. she must have been emotionally aching, embarrassed,

stuck. willing to be an attitudinal blight upon her neighbors. a name, excerpts of dna, and natal anxiety are the inheritance she bestowed, without my consent. they say my great-grandfather, john, attempted suicide after she died. he was naked, holding a knife, standing in the basement, when my grandmother found him. what did mary and john say to each other at night, before they fell asleep? did she know about Ériu?

clare:

“plank” or “board” if you ask any of the wrinkled men sitting in the pub on Inishmór. but no one names their daughter after a dead tree.

“bright, shining, clear” you might think, when you look into your baby’s eyes for the first time. maybe a monk, between fishing off the edge of a precarious rock or saving civilization with biblical transcriptions, saw the name on an anglo scroll and told a villager to name their newborn daughter after a word that described a star.

a place. “clare, but not the french spelling.” my dad wanted me to be sure anyone who asked knew where my ancestors came from, what his grandfather had to leave behind. “it’s the county my family is from.” my genetic laurel, emblematic citizenship papers, spelled out on my math homework and in my diaries. what i thought made me the “most irish” of my siblings.

killeen

too ancient to point to any one definition with confidence. Ó Cillín (son of Ceallach)? missionaries, apostles, saints. farmers with no shoes, drunks, dissenters against the english crown. Keeill (a monastic cell)? only locals will tell you that it’s the name for the part of

the church graveyard where they bury the babies who never received the first sacrament. the killeen is closest to the ocean (liminal), reminding visitors that there are babies' souls floating between heaven and hell. i saw one, semi-neglected, right beside a narrow road and a farmer's home. uncanny. i was hiking (walking) through connemara. just like that one john wayne movie, but also not. it was the same day i ran through another farmer's field to see an ancient tomb. at least four-thousand-year-old thought and craft, labor and touch. "it might mean 'of the little wood,'" my tour guide said, "no one would name themselves after a graveyard." only a few thousand people in the united states have this name, and all the ones i've met share some ancient lineage with me. "killeen. that's a county clare name." the customs agent looked at my passport with sober indifference. he's stamped thousands of american passports, visitors giddy at the prospect of finding a piece of themselves, to be in "the mother land." like they're expecting some kind of reward for knowing they have ancestors. they will disappear a pint or more of guinness and pose for photos in front of temple bar and kiss the blarney stone (ok, i've done all these things). and then they will tell their friends when they get back to the states that they felt "at home" there.

peña

"rock," "crag" or "cliff," but before it sailed from iberian shores it was "of the rock"/de la peña. a name that has asserted itself onto bearers for generations and across continents. a name that would have been impossible for me to possess if genetics were the currency. funny how it still describes me. describes where the women who carried me inside of them would sit when looking for storms. the name doesn't match my husband's skin tone nor the shape of his nose. his grandfather, indio they called him, probably wouldn't have picked the name if he had a say. lipan apache warriors know which battles to fight and which ones to lose. this addendum on my social security card has caused so many headaches, so many

extra words. “yes, two last names. no, no hyphen.” patriarchy could be easily defeated by clerical errors, strangled by its own bureaucracy. two babies between us and innumerable meals and words and stories of childhood, braided together like a rope, pull me under the texas/mexico sky. my children carry rocks and seashells in their pockets from the coastlines of almost every continent on earth. what names will they use when they understand the implication of that bounty?

Matthew Phengdy

Armored Suit Guyframe: White Angel ~An Armored Suit Guyframe Side-Story~

Three years have passed since the end of the Earth Federation's war with the Republic of Bardone. In what is considered the bloodiest war in all human history, its effects can still be felt throughout the earth sphere and the recovering colonies. By no means was it an easy war, with the population of humanity being reduced to mere millions from the billions that once walked the earth and traversed the far reaches of space.

However, for someone like Saki Graham, the war's end meant that soldiers in the Federation's ranks were given something that the war had long taken from them.

Peace.

Not that it was anything exciting to talk about. Saki had graduated top of her class a month before the war's end and hadn't been sent out to the frontlines. Instead, she got to play double duty training the recruits that popped up in training camps and writing papers in an office until the late hours of the night.

Saki was sure that her high marks meant something at Colonial Rogers Academy, but all that did was doom her to a life of incessant paperwork and dealing with the bureaucracy of the Federation. She wouldn't have minded it. After all, it was a safe and easy job, a bit on the boring side of things but no chance for bodily harm unless someone were to accidentally spill coffee on themselves or fall asleep crunching numbers in their chair.

But she had big plans for life after graduation.

"What do you mean that my request to be reassigned has been denied!?" Saki yelled, slamming the palms of her hands onto her silver desk. The large rectangular monitor in front of her displayed an image of a grizzled man in his fifties with graying hair and a mouth full of beard, looking back at her. "Do you know how long I've had to wait to get an answer from you!?" The man in the monitor simply shook his head and began to motion with his arms.

"2nd Lt. Saki Graham." The man's voice had a rich, almost syrupy tone to it, as though it were bathed in honey and drenched in thick crème. "We have looked over your request and while you may think otherwise, you are a perfect candidate for White Angel. We believe that your skills and experience will best serve our—" The man stopped. "White Angel's best interests." Saki's right eyebrow twitched slightly.

Her hands trembling, she slammed on the monitor's power button with the palm of her hand, spun about, then stormed out of her quarters.

Four Months ago, Saki had been assigned to White Angel after a group calling

themselves The Hounds of Barbatos suddenly appeared in the Earth Sphere. They began ruthless acts of terrorism all over the Earth Sphere, attacking colonies, raiding ships, conducting mini-asteroid drops on earth, and senseless violence against Earth Federation citizens. They called themselves the true reformers of humanity, but the Earth Federation had another name for them. Bardone remnants. Soldiers of the former Republic of Bardone who refused to answer the ceasefire announced three years ago after their defeat at their major asteroid stronghold, Escudo.

Rounding the corner of the endless gray hallways of White Angel, Saki avoided a head on collision. 1st Lt. Joshua Amerian stumbled backwards, slamming his head on the grey walls, then, with a groan, began to rub the back of his head. Saki looked on as the 1st Lieutenant raised himself off the ground, using the wall to steady himself.

“Lieutenant! I didn’t think anyone would be up at this hour! Are you okay?” Rubbing the back of his head, the Lieutenant looked up, gave a thumbs up and straightened himself out. His pale skin, blue sea eyes, and lanky figure gave away his Caucasian heritage. He wore the Federation’s standard navy-blue colored uniform and his hair was cut short, but not fully military. He carried an air about him that reminded Saki of a squirrel. Always fretting about and doing multiple things at the same time. Almost.

“It’s no problem. I was just getting restless. Couldn’t sleep at all. Nerves on the fritz. What about you?” Joshua’s eyes lit up, almost inquisitively, searching, looking for any sign of trouble.

“Not much. My superiors got in touch with me regarding my request for transfer,” Saki explained.

“Wait, you’re trying to get off of White Angel!?” Joshua’s eyes widened into the shape of a deep oval. His legs slightly shuddered as he began to gesticulate with his arms.

“Why?! What’s going on!?” Saki would have given off a tired sigh had it not been for the fact that the Lieutenant was standing directly in front of her.

“Not so loud! You’re going to wake the others. Let’s chat about it in the cafeteria.” Nodding, Joshua followed Saki. Saki walked with a brisk pace, careful to not be too slow, nor too fast. She didn’t want to give off the impression that she was in a hurry or wanted to be friends with Joshua. After all, she was going to leave White Angel soon whether they wanted her gone or not.

The cafeteria at eleven before midnight was just as expected. Drab, grey, and lifeless. The rectangular television mounted on the ceiling was playing reruns of some old cartoon from back in the day before the Federation had been formed. The tables were of a slick rectangular design, with rounded edges and benches attached. On the surface, paper napkins, salt and pepper shakers occupied the center.

Saki chose a table near the back of the cafeteria. It was well lit but also inconspicuous. Perfect for speaking undisturbed and away from any prying eyes and ears if need be. Saki didn’t know if the White Angel had a rumor department, and she didn’t want to find out. Joshua chose the seat across from her and, lightly rubbing the back of his head, sat down with a muffled groan.

“That’s going to leave a mark.” Slouching back, Joshua took out a white round tube,

pushed it into the side of his lighter and pressed a button on top. A pink, almost red flame appeared. Saki could tell it wasn't real. It flickered and moved with a non-existent wind, and the color was just faded enough that she could see right past it. "E-Cigs. Must love them." Saki gave a weak 'right', as Joshua began to puff the tube. He sucked in the virtual vapor through his teeth, and into his lungs.

"You know, you're the first person that I know who would willingly talk back to the commander," Joshua finally said, allowing the sense of euphoria he felt leave him. "Most people shut up after they get refused, but you? It's like I'm looking at one of those Bardone-Independence War Vets. You know, the real badassess of the military." Sucking in another breath, Saki watched as Joshua heaved a heavy sigh.

"Yeah, I know. My father was in the war as well. He was the Captain of the Aegis II." Joshua raised an eyebrow.

"Aegis, as in the warship that basically won the war?"

"No, I mean the Aegis II. It was a cross-gap prototype warship, using technology developed near the end of the war and for current use in the military. It was only called the Aegis II because the original was never shot down." Saki thought back on her father, a proud man who would never admit weakness. "My father was meant to lead the final assault if the crew of the Aegis were unfit for duty."

"I heard about that. Papers said a real war hero was captain. Didn't know he was your father. Then again, I don't think I know many people who have celebrities for parents."

Wrinkling her nose, Saki leaned back slightly, leaving her left arm on the table and her gaze fixed on Joshua's face. "You wanted to know why I want to leave? It's simple. I didn't sign up for the military to be sent to die fighting against ghosts." Saki spat the words out with an edge of steel. Joshua, sucking in the last remnants of the vapor, scowled slightly, looked up at the ceiling, then said.

"Fuck me."

The loud wailing of the ship's alarm system suddenly switched on. Saki and Joshua shot straight up from their chairs. Looking at one another, they both scrambled out of the cafeteria. The hallways of White Angel began to fill up with bodies as the hangar bay came to life. Changing into her pilot suit, Saki hurried out onto the catwalks that connected to the berths where her Armored Suit was stationed.

Saki saw the humanoid giant enter her field of view. It was roughly around twenty meters tall, and ten meters in width. A gray and blue bipedal giant with two arms, two legs, and a head that resembled a faceplate of a welder's mask. In its midsection, slightly near the belly, the cockpit was wide open. The engineering team on the gantries were running around in a mad scramble, shouting at the top of their lungs to even get a message through the chaotic noise.

Jumping in, Saki hit the release switch inside as she settled into the pilot chair. With a soft hiss, the outer cockpit doors sealed, and the main monitor display swiveled down, booting up and displaying the front of the Armored Suit's main camera. Two monitors to the left and right of her turned on simultaneously with the main display in front.

“How’s the machine faring 2nd Lieutenant?” Joshua’s voice came in loud and clear from the closed radio circuit between Saki and Joshua’s machines. “Mine has seen better days, but I’m pretty sure they’re have to be calling me an Ace when I get this thing souped-up into a Custom.” Saki could imagine the 1st Lieutenant making one of his vulgar faces as he prattled on about how great he was and his piloting expertise.

“Sure. Come find me when you do. I’ll give you a pat on the back and a congratulatory salute,” Saki fired back with a slight frown beginning to creep up on the side of her mouth. The cramped confines of the cockpit reminded her of the days she spent training in the simulators back at the academy. She could never forget the fear and anxiety of sortieing out into the vast darkness of space and not knowing where up or down was. “Damn Red Comet. Even after the war you still haunt new recruits.”

The long catwalk in front of Saki retracted and the ground crew made way for her. Pressing down onto the foot pedals, the Armored Suit placed its right leg forward, then left, then right, and then left again.

Saki and Joshua sortied out from White Angel, two tiny specks among the vast canvas of darkness and looming death. Saki had heard about how the previous Armored Suits of White Angel were temporarily out of commission, but she didn’t think it was that bad. Until now.

“Five bogies up ahead. Computer is identifying them as Vesper II’s. They seem to be coming straight for us in an attack formation.” Joshua’s voice said.

“Yeah, I got the memo. This isn’t my first rodeo.” As Joshua had pointed out, the targeting computer identified the vague almost define-less shapes as Vesper II’s. Licking her lips, Saki pushed on the throttle, watching as the meter in the cockpit started to slowly climb, and her Armored Suit began to pick up speed. As soon as the five Vesper II’s entered her field of view to be seen fully, Saki pressed down on the trigger.

The Vesper II’s broke formation, flying outward in an elliptical arc. The first shot went wide, passing through empty space. Saki kicked up the throttle some more, sending herself arcing through space. With incredible speed, she whirled around two Vesper II’s, spun around, and fired off two short bursts of gunfire. The machine gun in her machine’s right hand lit up the surrounding area as the propellent spit the bullets out.

In space, there isn’t any sound. It was usually down to who showed up on the radar first and who was the quickest to fire. However, Takan Particles, discovered by the late Dr. Romansky Takan, made conventional radar and long-range communications impossible when these particles were present. Now, it was back to good old line of sight, and close combat.

Inside the cockpit, Saki could hear her machine gun firing normally. It was all thanks to the audio system devised by the Federation to help with situational awareness out in space. The Armored Suit’s main computer, upon identifying the weapon, type of round being fired, and appropriate sound effects for if a machine was walking, using its thrusters, or even punching, the computer would generate those sounds and play them back through the cockpit’s built-in audio system.

It’s against military regulations to change the stock sounds to something else. Few

pilots care for the rule, and instead choose to load sounds from famous Sci-Fi movies and Television shows in place of the stock sounds.

However, Saki was one of those who kept it at the stock settings.

The Vesper II on the right was struck, bits of shredded metal and sparks erupted from the side of its torso as the bullets teared through its armor. Screaming, the Pilot inside fought against the rushing tide of hydraulic failure warnings, and the impact shaking the cockpit back and forth. Reacting to its ally being struck, the Vesper II on the left reacted by firing its own machine gun, resembling a long-barreled rifle with a round drum on top for a magazine.

“Dammit! Goddamn piece of shit Federation pig!” The Bardone pilot yelled into his headpiece.

“Pull back Greg!”

With an almost silent roar, Saki’s machine circled around, slamming into the Vesper II still recovering from the initial burst fire. “Ahhhh!” The enemy pilot screamed. “Save me! Save meeeee!” Thrashing about, the Vesper II lost its grip on its machine gun.

“Calm down! I can’t get a clear shot with you moving like that!” The Bardone Pilot yelled over the screams of his frantic ally.

“Save meee!” Greg slammed repeatedly on the ejector switch, but his machine’s main monitor gave him a red error message. He looked to the picture of his fiancé e, mounted on the dashboard.

Saki eyed the second Vesper II, pushing up the throttle once again to its breaking point. The enemy machine opened fire as she approached, but with the body of the disabled Vesper II as a shield she was safe. Twisting the control sticks, she threw the Vesper II at its ally, then slammed on the foot pedals with full force.

The Vernier meter on the main display began to go into the reds as she shot straight up, firing full auto. Each round slammed into a separate part of the enemy machine, but the damage had been done. The right manipulator, in other words the right arm, took the brunt of the recoil from the fully automatic settings and the Vesper II was shredded like paper.

“Amelia!”

“Agh! It burns!”

In a bright explosion, the Vesper IIs turned into a bright yellow and gold splatter of paint in the darkness of space.

Pulling back on the control sticks, Saki watched as the explosion died down back into the empty void. Then, with a swift motion, she raised her left manipulator up. With a loud clang, a Vesper II had slammed its heat axe into the tip of her shield. The hydraulic pressure on the left control stick began to pull back as the Vesper II began to pour its weight into dragging down Saki’s shield.

“Damn you, Federation Bastard! You killed Greg and Jayson!”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, recruit!?”

A slap rang out in the docking bay of the Jupritris. Sgt. Ray Palmer stood over a girl, no younger than sixteen years old. His hand was raised in an upward slant, with his

palm outstretched. The other recruits stood at attention; their eyes fixed to the far-off steel wall.

“You! Little uppity little shits are the worst batch of soldiers I’ve ever seen since the war ended! You think you can waltz on in here, on daddy’s money and get hooked to some cozy desk job in the Bahamas!?”

Another slap, louder this time. A girl’s moans can be heard over the sound of shuttles beginning their docking procedures.

“Answer me, Maggot! What’s you’re reasoning for being here?! Besides trying to look good to mommy and daddy!?”

Getting up, Saki held in a heavy sob. Tears began to flood around in her eyes. Looking straight at the Sergeant, she simply saluted and with a quivering voice replied, “To fulfill my duty sir!”

Sgt. Palmer raised his hand again and struck. This time with twice the force. One of the cadets standing behind Saki held out their arms as she landed, head rolled to the side, her eyes closed.

“Miserable little wretches!”

“Tch! A custom model? Or is it just lucky?!” With a mighty heave, the heat axe tore the shield from the left manipulator’s hard point, spun around, and gave a mighty kick to the center of Saki’s Armored Suit. “Agh!” With a yell, Saki’s machine flew backwards.

“Hah! Not so tough now, huh!?”

The Vesper II’s single red mono-eye glowed with an intense luminosity as it charged with its off-hand manipulator sporting another heat axe. Pulling back on the control sticks, Saki went for a downward boost with the thrusters, but the engine gave a loud shutter as the main monitor displayed a warning about the AMBAS being offline.

Raising up the right manipulator, Saki pressed down on the trigger, but an empty click confirmed her worst fears. The ammo counter on the center dashboard read zero in bright red.

Saki’s heartbeat accelerated like a drumbeat growing in intensity to the rising of a song’s climax. Everything seemed to slow down as she raised her arms instinctively inside the cockpit to block the death approaching her. It was an instinct to protect one’s body against possible threats, but it was impossible to protect against this.

“Hey, White Angel! Don’t give up yet!”

A familiar voice echoed through the built-in radio in the cockpit. A large explosion of light pierced through the charging Vesper II from the back of the machine, punching through to the front like a drill. The enemy pilot never saw it coming, save for the brief millisecond they would feel pain, then nothing.

Saki watched with wide eyes as a familiar machine entered her field of view.

“You, okay? One of those bastards broke away from me,” Joshua said, voice crackling. His machine detached its shield from its left manipulator and attached it to Saki’s with an audible click.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just got surprised, that’s all.” Saki shivered slightly. Removing

her helmet, letting her slightly longer than shoulder length hair flow out, and wiping the bead of sweat off from her forehead.

The instruments inside her cockpit were still operational, but the warning message was still there. Sighing deeply, Saki restarted the AMBAS and looked on the radar. The empty black background stared back at her.

Leaning back in her chair, she ejected the empty clip in her machine gun and inserted a fresh new magazine in. "So much for being an ace." Saki heard Joshua laugh over the open radio.

"Well Ms. White Angel, you're always the one, and only, White Angel for us. I think you'd fit in with the crew." Rolling her eyes, Saki placed her helmet back on, made sure it was secure, and moved to open the communications channel with White Angel. Being the only woman on the pilot squad for the ship was getting annoying. As she began to switch the thrusters into cruise mode, a corner of the main monitor lit up. Saki saw a small dot in the corner as the computer began to track it.

"It's coming," Saki absentmindedly whispered.

"What? Did you say something Saki?" A giant beam of purple light shot through the empty void of space. Like a toddler finger painting for the first time, it streaked through the black heavens like a divine wrath from God and melted the bottom foot of Joshua's right leg. "Oh shi--!"

Yelling obscenities, Joshua slammed on the pedals, pulled his machine back into a lying position then fired off the main thrusters. A second later, another purple beam shot through the empty space where he had just been. Saki's main display magnified a purple Armored Suit around one hundred meters away. Next to it, the main computer displayed three question marks in a row. An unknown machine.

Saki fired off the Vernier thrusters and shot sideways to the right as a purple beam of light shot out and through the area that she had previously occupied. The purple machine began to move in a straight line, firing off shot after shot at both Saki and Joshua as their machines tried to weave in and out of sight.

"What the hell is this thing?! A new model!?" Joshua yelled as his machine took a major dive to avoid several shots fired in succession.

"They still have the resources to develop new machines!? Let's try a flanking maneuver!" Saki's machine screamed out into the depths of space as the G-Force began to rack up in intensity as she sped up. Joshua, muttering a concerned 'Okay', followed suit as he fired off several long bursts of fire from his machine gun.

As the pair approached the unknown purple machine, a single red mono-eye lit up from the darkness of where its eyes should have been. Two prong-like devices suddenly shot out from its backpack, connected by two long lines of wire. Saki could hear her heart again, pounding in her ears as the prongs flew out and began to sneak their way forward like snakes slithering up to their prey.

When Saki and Joshua approached within fifty meters, the prongs came to life. Moving through space with tiny, mounted Vernier thrusters, they began to move in erratic and unpredictable patterns. They moved in eight directions, unhindered by the concept of

up or down. The unknown pilot smiled in glee, as they manipulated these prongs.

Joshua gave a startled cry as one of the beams slammed into his machine's right leg, shooting it off. Twisting the right control stick at an angle, Saki began to fire at the prongs as they darted around like dancers on a stage. The Purple machine's single red eye appeared to mock Saki as the prongs began their dance of death.

"Saki! Pull back! It's too dangerous!" Joshua screamed out, firing his machine gun at the prongs.

"We can't! If we do, White Angel would be at risk!" Slamming back down on the pedals, Saki zoomed past the prongs and towards the purple machine, floating, with its single mono-eye a crimson red. As she neared, she pulled out the targeting scope behind the head of her chair and aligned the targeting reticle right on the center of the machine's torso. As she moved to press down on the trigger, she saw it.

"You can't win."

Whirling back, she raised her left manipulator right to her chest. The shield took the brunt of the attack, the beam coating melting away along with the shield in a small explosion. Swiveling around, Saki fired the machine gun full auto into the purple machine's torso. Even after emptying a full magazine into its body, the machine was still in one piece, save for the newly formed dents.

"You. I thought I had finally found the White Devil, but it was only a fly."

"Saki! Pull back! I can't lose you!" Joshua felt himself reliving the moments his squadron was cut into pieces at the Battle of Luna III. He couldn't have it happen again.

Releasing hold of the machine gun, Saki pulled the right manipulator to the back top of her machine's backpack. A thin purple beam cut the machine gun right in half, showering the area in a small explosion. Pulling out the thin silver tube locked in the backpack, a beam of hot plasma erupted from the tip into a sword like shape.

"I'm using the beam saber!" With a yell, Saki boosted upwards, pressed down on the right foot pedal, angling her machine into striking distance and slashing downwards vertically. As the beam of plasma encountered the outer armor layer of the purple machine, the prongs retracted, fired off a short burst from their Verniers' and clamped down on both of Saki's manipulators.

"What!?" Cockpit shaking, Saki could only watch as two more prongs shot out from the purple machine's backpack and restrained her legs as well. At the back of her mind, a strange sensation began to creep up to the front. It felt like the back of her eyes were on fire, as though something, or someone was watching her.

"You're just like me." A quiet feminine voice spoke. Saki realized what was going on. As long as there were Takan Particles in the air, radio communication was impossible between different frequencies and long range. However, the enemy pilot didn't need to know the specific frequency that she and Joshua were using. If any metallic part of their Armored Suit were in contact, they could communicate through a Contact Link.

"But it's too late. You've rejected the next stage of humanity. I can't have a fossil like you continue to live." Two additional prongs suddenly slammed into the sides of Saki's machine. They began to push inward, using pressure to slowly rend and crush the frame of

the Armored Suit.

On the main monitor, warning messages began to appear. The display on the dashboard showed that her machine's arms and legs were gray, signaling they were completely detached. Only the head and torso remained, with the torso blinking a red crimson.

"Is this where I die? Crushed to death by a damn ghost!?" What remained of Saki's machine began to spasm, its head jerking back and forth, the Vernier thrusters firing off in random directions, the main thrusters firing at full blast, and then the screams of Saki's own voice that only the purple machine's pilot could hear.

"Saki!" Joshua pulled out a beam saber with his off hand, firing his machine gun with the main manipulator. The shots were wild but struck the purple machine's main camera. One of the prongs came flying towards him, but a quick slash with the beam saber cut it free from its wire. "Damn!"

Abandoning the machine gun, he pulled out a second beam saber with his offhand and slashed at the purple machine, two prongs slammed themselves into Joshua's machine ripping its left leg and right arm off in a shower of golden sparks. "AGH!?" The inside of the cockpit glowed red as the status display on the dashboard grayed out the parts missing. "Not yet! I can still fight!"

Rotating the left manipulator's hand, into a backhand stance, Joshua stabbed the beam saber into the glowing red mono-eye, grabbed the hilt of the beam saber and began to pull down. Sparks of gold and yellow began to fly from the exposed circuitry and the beam saber began to melt through the thick armor. "Come on, come on!"

"Bothersome fly."

Saki screamed as she saw a single prong slash into the front of Joshua's machine. Rending through steel as though it were paper. Then, another smashed into the cockpit. Saki screamed, the image repeated itself like a broken record, always before the tragedy. Always beginning at the best part but loops back from the worst parts of the record.

"Isn't it so sad?" Saki heard herself saying. In her mind's eye, she saw herself as a child once again.

Joshua felt himself falling. Falling through air, but not quite air. It was like free falling through the sky, but the more he fell, the more speed he lost. He couldn't tell if he was falling for minutes. Maybe he was falling for hours, perhaps even days. However, he knew one thing and one thing only. He could finally see the stars.

The dark sky slowly began to brighten. One by one, lights from an unfathomable distance turned on, one by one. As though it were someone flicking on the lights in a house. He could count them.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...

One million.....

Three million...

One trillion...

"So many stars out there."

Joshua reached out, he expected to feel the sensation of warmth, but instead found himself shivering as though he had a nasty cold.

“That’s right,” Joshua thought to himself. “I am cold, sick even, I was ----- , but I think ---- got away. I must go and make sure.”

Turning his head, he saw a vast expanse of light, angels flying, or perhaps they were more stars that came into being when he lost count.

“So cold.”

“And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One two! One two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.”

“So empty.”

Saki’s eyes opened. The inside of her cockpit glowed a sickening red. The main monitor and side monitors were still on, displaying the darkness outside that wanted to swallow her up. She raised up her hands. They were colored in blood, black from being exposed to the air. Saki felt a dull pain shoot through the side of her abdomen as she tried to shift her upper body.

Looking down, she saw a thin piece of metal sticking out.

Joshua’s machine floated limply ten meters away, its main torso having been completely caved in. Saki swallowed her saliva, stared at the wreck and spoke.

“1st Lieutenant, are you there?”

The limp machine gave no response it had heard her. Nor did its pilot who would always respond with a confident quip.

Something inside of Saki was welling up, but she didn’t have the words to say it, or the desire to admit it.

In her field of view, something moved among the silent canvas of space. With bloodshot eyes, Saki turned her attention towards the main monitor. She expected to see the purple machine, ready to end her life just as it had the 1st Lieutenant’s. Instead, she saw a miracle. An angel from the heavens that had descended from God’s domain to grace the world of man with its presence.

“It’s beautiful,” Saki whispered.

Joshua, if he was still there, would have most likely agreed.

It floated there; its head turned towards her as if regarding her existence as something precious. Tears began to stream from her eyes, the pain in her side lessening as she began to bawl. It was unsightly for a grown woman to cry out like this, especially over the radio.

The broad white body of White Angel came into view, with more machines like Saki's and Joshua's sortieing out.

"Hey, you alright!?"

"Someone! Get the emergency net readied and the retrieval team!"

"Takan Particles are becoming dense again! Fan out!"

"Shit! Joshua!"

"Ten new readings! High Mobility Zak Models!"

But they were too late. Too late to help, and too late to stop the dance of death.

The grizzled man whom Saki spoke to before listened in, his eyes shifting to his secretary who only looked back at him with the same bored expression that almost all secretaries had when asked to answer how their day was going for the tenth time that day.

Saki knew the design of the Armored Suit before her. She saw it many times featured on posters and in Federation propaganda pieces when the war was still going on.

"It-it's-" Saki stammered, the words getting stuck in her throat. "A White Angel."

With a body of white and blue, rectangular and hard edged, and with a head that had a V-fin, eyes with a blue laminate finish, the machine looked divine in every aspect.

The Guyframe stared back at her, almost as if it had heard her cries.

~End of Finality~



Out Of This World
Lauren Esqueda

Melinda Quach

Through a Child's Eyes

I was curled up on the sofa with my mommy, who was sharing this large bowl of ice cream. It was vanilla and strawberry flavor with rainbow sprinkles and a shiny red cherry on top of it. It was bigger than my head!

Then, I heard a strange sound.

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

For some reason, I don't think I like the sound very much, because it sounds familiar somehow— but, in a bad way...

Buzz! Buzz—

“Kels! Wake up or we'll be late for school!”

Oh... That's why. I opened my eyes a tiny bit (just enough to peek out at my mommy) and had to close them again when the light hit them. The light hurts! Bad lights! I used my hands to wipe away the tears in the corner of my eyes before I sat up, criss-cross-apple-sauce, under the blankets. I squinted my eyes at the window to check if it was morning yet (because the silly adults liked to make kids get up *waaaay* too early) and found that it was still gloomy outside.

Yeah, it's *waaaay* too early to wake up!

I mean, the sky outside is still dark and that means it's still nighttime, and nighttime means that it's still sleep time, so, why do I have to go to school now? Can I go to school later? Or maybe never?

Across the room, I could see Mommy trying to get my big brother, Willie, to wake up, but he just turned over on his side and ignored her—he's sooo lazy! Why do I have to have a big brother? Can I trade him for a puppy instead? He's the only one in the family who's allergic, anyways!

“Willie, must we always be late? Why can't you be like your sisters and get up when you're supposed to?” Mommy's voice sounded angry, but in a tired way— kind of like when, after a day of playing too hard, you declare that you're “still not tired” in this really sleepy voice that tells adults that you're actually very tired and you would like to nap now... I wonder if Mommy should take a nap, too?

Suddenly, this horrible, weird, almost talky sound echoed from the bathroom. I covered my ears and screamed out, “What is that horrible, ugly sound?”

Mommy told me to “Be quiet! And stop that nasty face you're making!” in her

angry voice as she began gathering up my hair to brush out its tangles. Then, she yelled at my sister, Tink, to “Stop singing and hurry up with your bath!” Tink immediately stopped singing and, already, my ears felt much better (I could even hear the whooshing sounds of water from the showerhead, now!)

See? This is why Tink should never sing! Ever!

Mommy had just finished tying my black hair into a ponytail when Daddy called for us to hurry up. His eyes were half-closed, his short hair was messy (Why doesn’t Mommy yell at him for that like she does for us?), and he was still in his PJs. Why can’t I wear PJs to school?

After a quick breakfast of pancakes and orange juice, Mommy and Daddy took all three of us—Willie, Tink, and me—to Walnut Elementary School. We go to the same school, you know, but we’re not in the same grade. Tink is in third grade, while Willie is in fourth grade.

I’m in Kindergarten and I hate my teacher.

My teacher is mean and doesn’t seem to like me very much. She helps the other kids when they need help on their drawings or with reading, but almost never helps me, even when I ask for it. Why does she do that? Why doesn’t she like me?

...I like me!

* * *

Mommy is usually busy with work, so, after school, my Aunt Cherry picks up Willie, Tink, and me, instead. Since I’m only in Kindergarten, my class ends at around twelve- something o’clock. So, because of that, Aunt Cherry and I have to wait outside of the school gate for almost an hour for Tink and Willie to be done with their classes (big kids *ALWAYS* take long). Standing still made me tired, so I walked in circles around Aunt Cherry until she let out this loooong puff of air and asked me to “please stop walking around like that. You’re making me feel dizzy... and tired.”

Silly Aunt Cherry. She’s not walking, so she can’t feel tired from just watching me walk.

That’s just ridicol-redicu- silly!

But, I stopped walking after that (just to be nice) and ended up standing next to Aunt Cherry. I waited with her until my feet felt tired. I waited for *aaaages*, but Tink and Willie still hadn’t come out of their classes! This was taking foreeeever... Could we go now? When I asked Aunt Cherry this, she made this funny, huffy sound that grownups make when they think something is *dumb* (Willie told me that it’s a bad word, so don’t tell Mommy, okay?) and told me, “I’m afraid not. We still have to wait for Tink and Willie.”

“But, why?” I asked, turning my puppy eyes at my aunt.

“Because I said so,” my aunt replied and left it at that. Grownups always do that when they don’t want to give you a *real* answer. Grownups know all the answers, but they just don’t want to tell us kids the truth.

It’s like when adults tell us not to eat too much candy, and we ask, “Why?”, and

they say, “Because I told you so!” But, that’s not the real answer. The real answer is that, if you eat too much candy, you’ll get sick with ‘Cavities,’ which causes all of your teeth to rot down into little brown stubs. Then, a guy in a white coat, who can sometimes turn into a great, big giant, will have to punch you and knock all of your teeth out to save the world. Mel, my big cousin, told me that this was the real reason why I couldn’t eat too much candy and that the adults didn’t want to tell me the truth because if they did, then the giant would punch them, too. I’m not too sure about that last part because Mel started laughing really loudly at the end, but the first part makes a lot of sense!

...I still like candy, though...

BBRRANGGGG!

The bell finally rang and the classroom doors started banging wide open. How come big kids were allowed to bang doors? That’s not fair... I never got to do that before! Big kids of all sizes (Hey, look! That boy looks shorter than me! How could he be older than me?) ran toward the school gates and jumped on the bars like they were monkeys climbing out of their cages. I let out a huffy sound. Even I know we’re not supposed to do that and I’m only five years old!

Even after one of the big kids’ teacher had opened the gate, Aunt Cherry and I still had to wait some more for Tink and Willie to come outside. They ALWAYS took forever! Tink likes to talk with her friends on her way out (She knows everything about everyone in the entire school! She even knows teachers who aren’t even hers!), while Willie likes to drag his feet as he walks out (I told you he was lazy!). This is why both of them are always the last ones to come out of the gate.

Even though Tink and Willie got out late today, like always, today is a little bit more special than other days. Today is Friday, and Friday means no school tomorrow, and no school tomorrow means we got to stay out with Aunt Cherry a little later than usual!

So, when Aunt Cherry asked us where we wanted to go after school, I danced around her and yelled, “The park! Please? Can we go?”

Tink and Willie started smiling like crazy and they pleaded with Aunt Cherry, too. Aunt Cherry agreed! Yay! Four against none. We won! We all got to go to the park! Best day ever!

When we got to the park, Tink ran toward the swings, Willie ran toward the twisty slide, and I ran toward the normal slide... That was a bad idea. The slide was so hot that it burned my butt when I slid down. So, when I got off it, I ran toward the monkey bars, instead. At least if the bars were too hot, then I could just let go! No biggie!

When I felt my throat start to dry up, I left the playground and ran over to where Aunt Cherry was sitting in the shade. Aunt Cherry was a very smart person because she had already known what I needed even before I knew what I needed!

Before I could even reach the bench she was sitting on, she had already taken out a mostly-full water bottle from her shiny black purse, and had it open and waiting for me to sip from.

Ahh~! That water tasted sooo delicious!

I took a seat next to my aunt and continued to take more sips out of it.

“So...” my aunt began in a ‘spicious voice, “I just got a text from your mother.”

Uh oh...

“And do you know what she said?” Aunt Cherry asked with a raised eyebrow. I shook my head no.

My aunt said, “She told me that your grades have been dropping lately and the reason for that is that you haven’t been paying attention in class or doing your homework. **What** have you got to say for yourself, young lady?”

“I don’t know...” I answered, looking down on the ground. That dirt looked really brown. I wonder why *all* dirt is brown?

“Oh no. Nuh uh, kiddo, I need a real answer,” my aunt said, “What’s going on at school?

What aren’t you doing your work?”

I didn’t think she would appreciate it if I told her, “Because I said so,” (Adults are so confusing like that) so, I quietly told her, “...because I don’t like my teacher...”

Aunt Cherry looked so shocked by what I told her that she stared at me with her big brown eyes almost popping out of her head and her mouth wide open for a long time before she finally asked, “Are you sure?”

I nodded, but maybe that wasn’t clear enough because then she asked, “Why?”

I wonder why, too—why are adults allowed to ask, “why,” but get so mad when we kids do it? That’s not fair! But, still, my aunt wanted an answer, so just this once I’ll be nice and tell her the truth.

“Because... because she likes the other kids better than me,” I whispered quietly, “She helps them out on things they don’t know, but when I don’t know the answer to something, she gets this really sad look on her face and she tells me to ‘try harder’ and ‘maybe try to read the book next time!’ I do try to read! I try really, really hard, but there are just so many words that I just don’t understand!”

“Then, why don’t you ask your mommy for help?” Aunt Cherry asked with a frown on her face and a skin-line between her eyebrows, “I’m sure she could read with you when she has time.”

“But she doesn’t have time,” I whisper, “She never has time.”

* * *

When I got home that night, I asked Mommy if she could read my reading book with me. She waved me away, telling me, “Later. Later, okay? I’ll read with you when I’m done.” I looked at the piles of paper on her desk and wondered if she would be done by

Christmas or even by my birthday next year... This was going to take foreeeever... I let out a puff of breath and answered, “Okay...”

I waited (bath time came and went) and waited (dinner time came and went) and waited (brushing-teeth time came and went) until Daddy asked me if he could read with me. I told him, “yes,” but still looked back at Mommy in hope that she’d say that she

would read with me, instead. Mommy didn't look up from her work, and Daddy read the tale about the *Little Yellow Bear* with me in bed.

Once we finished reading, Daddy tucked me under the covers, kissed my head, and whispered, "She loves you, you know. She just doesn't want people to accuse her of favoritism— which is to say bad things about her where she works."

"...I know," I whispered back.

They say that all the time. But, if she really loves me, then why can't my teacher turn back into my mommy?

Tyler Tangen

THE PRISONER & EXECUTIONER

You burden me. My neck swells under the weight you've tasked me with. You watched my veins pinch and rearrange themselves under the pressure. Deceptively, you asked if I would like to take them off. A trick question. For the ropes that kept the parcels fastened to my back also wrapped about my neck. My sunken shoulders, rather than my hung head. I know for certain you'd never let these vanities touch the ground. I'd dangle from a tree, before you'd set me free.

The criminal was I. In your eyes you were merciful. You would leave me every so often, checking back on occasion to make sure all was still carried. Did my voice sound off to you? I'm guessing it did because you've tightened the ropes some more, squeezing, as if the ropes could change my vocal chords to sound the way you'd rather. I've come to this conclusion many times, but execution I could never.

They say an executioner has no love for the prisoner. But maybe in their swiftness there is empathy. Sometimes I think you feel some for me. I see it in your eyes, you never meant to harm me. Too bad unpreparedness leads to tragedy.

I've started to lose myself, I see it in the puddles. As my face no longer looks up, sunken from the weight. With the rain comes my reflection. A shadow of the former.

Don't worry about me. I just want to reassure you again that it's fine. I know you never meant to harm me. In fact I'm sure you've forgotten more than half the weight you've roped to my back. But I can no longer carry them. I tug at the ropes each day that bind my neck. Surprisingly they loosen. Tears are in your eyes when you see me nowadays. I'm sorry, I'll let them tighten.

You sense it, as do I. We've reached our journey's end. I apologize as I take the packages off around my neck. I am the criminal, I know. I broke a promise that I made. Although irrational. I thought before I'd find a way. The price I pay now twice as heavy. Two broken hearts. Too many memories.

Wes Werner

They Unnamed Me

I found M Lafayette, or she found me, at my worst. Everything had begun to feel mundane, meaningless, but when she appeared before me I became anew. She gave me a place to belong, some larger story to be a part of. It had been a while since I last felt like I was supported by my mother, by anyone. It seemed everything I would say to mother just made her want to tell me how I was a failure, how I needed to make something of myself or else there wouldn't be a place for me in her home or in this world. Even after finding a place that accepted me and gave me purpose, I knew she would still tell me how it wasn't good enough.

Mother always told me how I needed to stop hiding from the world like some baby and get out before it's too late. She said once the fear consumes you, that's it, but she doesn't know that I can go anywhere without ever needing to leave the safety of our home, or my room. The whole world has been compacted into my palm-sized, mass-produced smartphone. Maybe it doesn't contain the entire world, but it really is a world in itself. Every person should have their own portal to the "phone world." This tiny digital realm welcomes all who are willing to enter. There, here, I am, we are free. At times, the light of the stars prove dim and dismal when compared to the blue, eye-pierce of my phone's spectral stare. Its body emits warmth and a faint pulse, a small life in my palm. This tiny beating heart contains limitless realities, but I found the one that best fits me.

...

M Lafayette appeared on my screen like most other people with a platform do, by

a complete and unpredictable coincidence, by fate. With her pale blue eyes and jet hair, I was immediately drawn to her aquiline face. She didn't need to proclaim her own influence since the thousands of followers she garnered made their devotion to her power clear. When proclaiming, "she only speaks truth" or "her words are the way," they made me realize the power she held. She promised all a cause that was irresistible. M Lafayette promised she knew the way for each person to find their true self. Her guidance could lead anyone down their destined path and save anyone from their darkest times. It wasn't long before we began a correspondence. She had seen my devotion in the messages I sent to her and the others within her growing following. Once we had started conversing with one another, I knew that my viewing wasn't one-sided. She was watching me, too.

I was ecstatic to comply when she requested me to help her reach out to others who would join her cause. She said my success was guaranteed so long as I shared her message with those who needed her, those who had the will to heed her words. I felt the pressure of finding my own way disappear once she gave me such an honorable task. How could I reject her wish? I knew she was being truthful when she promised me a position in her cause once I proved my ability to amass a greater following for her. My time was completely invested in the viewing and understanding of every word she spoke. Every video she uploaded became a new means for my own extension of her reach. I ceased to view anything besides her videos and memorized them all. Her words resided in my head as readily as they did in the digital world, with the noise originating from my phone speaker emitting directly in my ears. The *S*'s she softly whispered touched my senses with the feel of an earsplitting hiss. There were instances when I'd look around me to see if someone's face was next to mine. I figured my mind was just confused by the high frequency of the digital sounds.

...

When M Lafayette decided to have a private video conference with me for the first time, I felt compelled to tell her my reasons for seeking her guidance. This came after I had greatly assisted in her quest to build a larger following. I told her how my apprehension with the outside world and lack of initiative disappointed my mother. M Lafayette reassured me and said she saw more initiative in me than any other devoted member of the cause. She sympathized with my fear of the world and told me how she had also experienced great fear of the unknown. She had seen so much evil in the world she was compelled to change it. In order to restore some morality to the world, she had to seek out people like me. People who need help the most are the ones most likely to strive to better others. Our conversation ended with her expressing gratitude for everything I've done. She asked me for my address so she could send me a gift of appreciation. I graciously accepted the generosity of my personal savior.

...

The package arrived in the mail, and before my mother could see, I quickly took it to my room. I held the small cardboard box in my hands for a moment and looked at its label. There is no describing the sense of appreciation I had for being honored by someone I regarded so highly. I felt a strange warmth from the box in my grip as I stared at my name knowing that M Lafayette had personally put this gift together. She was the only person who actually saw me for who I could be. I could no longer resist opening this kind offering. I tore the tape with my hands which stripped some of the cardboard's skin and revealed its light brown dermal layer. Beneath the mess of pink packing peanuts emerged a red-velvet jewelry box much smaller than its container. I plucked it from the wounded box's pink cavity. My palms felt even warmer as I caressed the soft token of love. I noticed a glint of gold on its lid and brought it closer to my face to read it. Embossed in gold cursive letters was *Lafayette*. I felt the heat begin to rise through my body and settle in my cheeks as I

gently pried the velvet open. Embedded in the peach interior was a polished silver ring set with a clear crystal half orb. Shining through the orb was a gold triangle designed in the shape of a hollow play button. I removed the ring from its holder and hastily tried it on every finger. It only fit on my ring finger, the left one. I thought this was a bit unfortunate since it would look like a wedding ring, but then I realized no one would likely notice it since I never left the house. I saw a spot of white peaking through the pink peanuts from the box on my lap, so I set the ring box on my bed and grabbed at the residual of M Lafayette's gift. I pinched from the cavity a small envelope. There was a red wax seal with an eight-pointed cross protecting its contents. I recognized this as the symbol of her cause. I used my nail to peel the cross and open the letter. It read:

My Dearest ———,

I send you this gift as a symbol of my immense appreciation for all that you have done for me. Your contributions to my cause will forever be rewarded so long as you continue on the path that has been set before you. Never forget how much you are loved. I hope you find the ring to be a perfect fit and enjoy its beauty as much as I do. It is made of the finest metals from the earth's core. The crystal orb is made of pure quartz free of all impurities. I felt that someone as pure and precious as you should be adorned with something to match. The golden triangle is known as the ARC triangle which represents the three components of understanding: affinity, reality, and communication. Without these three interdependent components one can never have an understanding of the meaning of life. You have already exemplified your possession of these three to me. I have no doubt that you will be key to our success in carrying out what my husband and I started decades ago. I hope that you wear this gift as a symbol of your pride in our cause and your devotion to me.

Much love,

-M. Lafayette

The brightness of the ring solidified in my mind the idea that I truly belonged. Her words etched their black ink bodies into my mind. I imagined her face smiling down at this letter as she wrote it. I decided I would never remove the ring for any reason. I just hoped mother wouldn't catch sight of it and make me explain. The ring felt as if it were conducting heat that resonated through my entire hand. I felt as if M Lafayette had unlocked some part of that which had eluded me for a long time, the desire to completely devote myself to some greater responsibility. I clutched my hands together and brushed the orb with my right fingers to feel the glass-smooth hemisphere. For a moment, I wondered what she meant by saying I was a "key to our success." Then I eagerly resumed my important work.

...

Some time after continuing my work of viewing M Lafayette's videos and reaching out to potential followers, things turned strange. I began to hear noises coming from the outside of my bedroom wall. It started as a small scratching noise along the outer wall that was accompanied by the rattle of the storm drain hitting the same wall. I assumed it was mice running up the storm drain to our attic, but I hadn't seen any of them in the act of climbing the wall. This was something I was certain I should tell my mother about. I knew she would want something done about the possible pests that could be trying to get into our home. I told her and she said she hadn't heard anything. That it's just wind. That I shouldn't worry. I knew she probably couldn't hear it because her room was at the opposite end of the house. I tried to do as she said, but the noise continued. It started happening more often, but it seemed it would only occur at night. I would lie in bed, waiting for sleep, when all I could hear was the mice's incessant scratching and rattling like a bunch of bones raking

the outside of my room. I told mother again. I pled with her to inspect the attic. When she refused, I asked her to try hearing it one night. To come into my room when it was at its worst and see if she was still deaf to the tiny lacerating claws. I heard it so clearly that night, so I went and got her from her room. I grabbed her and pulled her down the hallway. As soon as we entered my room it was completely silent, aside from my heavy breathing. There was no noise. She became furious with me for waking her. She told me that I needed to stop freaking out over nothing but the wind. That's all there is since there's a storm nearing our area. It was just the squall blowing before the rain. I knew it wasn't. I know what I heard. I couldn't believe she could doubt me. Mother told me if I was less afraid of everything it wouldn't bother me. She told me to just go to bed. When she returned to her room and I to mine, I sat with myself and the pain of knowing she could never believe in me. It wasn't just fear causing my brain to be overly sensitive, I never even said I was afraid of the stupid noises, because I wasn't.

It actually did rain for an hour or so that night. Once the rain stopped the scratching began, but this time it sounded like it was above me, in the attic. I wasn't sure if the lacerations were emitting from the attic or right within the ceiling. It grew louder which made it even more difficult to distinguish its place of origin. I heard it on or in every wall, in the floor, in my head. I pressed my ear against my bedroom door and heard it there, too. I could feel the tiny patter of claws running up the wood and scraping bits of it off. That's when I became frightened. I pressed my left hand against the door and still felt them. I quickly threw open my door but there was nothing on the outside of it. No tiny black furballs were running in the hall, but I still heard them inside my room, everywhere. I slept very little that night. I resolved to seek M Lafayette's guidance in the matter.

M Lafayette agreed to have a video conference with me the next day. I told her everything that had happened, how I'd heard the strange, relentless scraping, how my

mother refused to believe me. She became upset at my story and grew concerned with my safety. She said it really could be something only I could hear. How sometimes people will hear their own personal torment at the hands of some devious beings. She was more convinced than I was the occurrences were supernatural, but I felt inclined to follow her direction regardless of what she said. She told me that in the case that someone holds on to some secret sin, they will be plagued by the forces of evil. It's their way of getting people to be consumed by their own evil will. She never asked me what sin I committed, and I did not desire to share it with her. I didn't have any sin that I was holding on to, nothing I was aware of. Even if I did, I wouldn't want to confess any embarrassing deed I committed to someone I idolized so much. M Lafayette offered me a solution. She told me there is a way to cleanse myself and get these pesky things out of my life. Her promised solution would be sent to my phone later that night. Before our conversation was over, she asked if I was still resolute in my devotion to her and the cause. I assured her that of course I was. How could I not be? She believed in me when my own mother wouldn't.

When I opened her direct messages, I saw a large chunk of text and a video attachment. The message read:

You must follow the instructions i give you closely. This video is a guided meditation that will allow you to enter a state of deep relaxation. In this state you will be most perceptive to the cleansing process. The video i've sent you includes a brief introduction to arouse your susceptibility to what follows. The remainder of the video is a looped clip of me

reading the cleansing incantation from our sacred teachings. For this process you must

be laid face up on a flat surface, the floor works best, and make sure the lights in the room are all turned off. You must do this for the entire incantation or the cleansing will

not be completed properly. I wish you the best of luck, and i look forward to your renewal

once this affliction has been cured.

Stay strong,

-M. Lafayette

I treated her directions as I did all of her proclamations and readied myself for the process. Once my mother left for work, I cleared a space on the living room floor for me to lie. The lights were all off, as my mother had left them. I held my phone in my hand, the bright black screen illuminated the room enough for me to see where I was going to lie. I had lain on the floor, my hand held the phone hovering just above my face. M Lafayette's video was loaded and ready to be started. Overlaying the screen's luminous umbra was the light of a small white play button. I noticed the time stamp indicating the video's length to be slightly over three hours. I dreaded how long it would take, but I was still going to do it. Anything for the cure. All it needed was my touch to release its voice. I pressed the screen and soft waves of music began to play.

The instrumentations were that of a piano and chimes. This was the intro. Various images emerged from the darkness, there was a meadow, a forest, an empty beach. Then came short video clips of people laughing, a gently streaming river, a baby yawning in its mother's arms. After a few moments, the video cut to M Lafayette with her piercing

blue stare in her signature up-close position; she was only visible from the chest up in front of a white background. She began speaking, but I could not understand what she was saying. Her voice emitted as a whisper of nonsense. I turned the phone's volume to maximum before placing it on the floor beside me. My ears could still only perceive her as a faint, unintelligible whisper. Her words flowed continually as I couldn't perceive the cuts between her repetitions. I relaxed my body entirely, slowed my breathing, and closed my eyes. At once, the scratching started. It was audible at a louder volume than it had been before, but now, the rattling began to sound like the banging of something other than metal. Some solid object was being thrashed against my home. I kept my eyes closed despite the great fear I began to feel. As the immense noise continued, M Lafayette's voice did too. I could hear for certain now that it was a language I had never heard before. It began to surround me until it sounded as if it was coming from right above me. I refused to open my eyes to check if someone really was there. I needed to stay relaxed. I used her voice as an anchor that kept me from drowning in the onslaught of the scratching and banging. It had grown so strong that I began to feel the large thumping claws dragging along the floor nearly making contact with my back. The voice that read the incantation began to change, it no longer sounded like M Lafayette was the only one speaking. There came a much deeper voice that spoke simultaneously with hers. The voices directly above me seemed to be coming from the same throat. The room became unbearably hot, but still, I kept my eyes shut. I became drowsy as the smell of smoke filled my nostrils, the noxious fumes shoved into my throat. I could taste the burnt soot in my mouth before completely losing consciousness.

...

I woke to the distant sounds of a heart monitor beeping in my ears. My eyes slowly opened to see myself laying in a hospital bed with my mother sitting beside me.

“Baby, thank goodness you’re okay,” her muffled voice whispered. “Never scare me like that again.”

“Mom? W-Where am I? What happened?”

“You’re in the hospital, sweetie,” her voice became more audible as she spoke. “The neighbors called and said they heard our fire alarm going off. No one answered the door when they knocked. They saw a light on through our living room window but couldn’t see you. I left work immediately since I knew you were home. When I found you, you were unresponsive on the living room floor. When the paramedics arrived they noticed this ring you had on your finger that looked like it was cutting off circulation. They noticed the redness was covering more than just your finger so they tested the ring and found it had large traces of lead. They think it caused some kind of seizure. Where on earth did you manage to find the world’s deadliest jewelry?”

So was M Lafayette trying to harm me with her gift? “I didn’t find it anywhere. It was part of an internet giveaway,” I lied, and hoped she would believe it. “What about the fire alarm? Before I fainted I heard the rodents again and smelled smoke.”

“Not again with those noises,” she said, briefly showing her anger. She continued, “The strange thing is there was no sign of a fire anywhere. It was just you lying there on the floor. Your phone is what was making the alarm noise.”

“My phone . . . where is my phone?” I remembered the incantation and became concerned that I might not have done the process properly.

“I smashed it.”

“You what? Why would you break my phone?” Now I was the one who was angry.

“I panicked—I had to. It was blaring so loud it made my head hurt. I swear I thought my ears would explode. I picked it up to turn it off and it nearly burned my hand, it was so hot. The screen was frozen on some blank orange image. I even squatted on the

floor to try and use the screen or power button to make it stop, but it just kept that shrill scream going. I picked it up and threw it against the wall as hard as I could. That killed the noise.”

“But that noise was supposed to help me!” I don’t remember M Lafayette mentioning screaming in her video, but regardless, I failed to complete the cleansing process, so the noises would certainly return. “M Lafayette said—”

“Wait, who is M Lafayette? Is *she* the one who gave you that death ring? And what did she tell you to do, exactly?”

“Yes she did give me the ring as a token of her appreciation. She’s my mentor, she is the only one who’s made me feel welcomed or appreciated in this world. She believed in me when you wouldn’t and she was the only one trying to help me stop the noises.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I’ve done nothing but provide for you and push you to find your way in the world. You think that means you aren’t welcome in my home?”

“I feel like I’m just a big disappointment to you, that nothing I do could ever make you proud of me,” I said desperately. I began to cry. “I swear it feels like you don’t want me around, like you don’t love me.”

“Baby, how could you say that?” She started to cry with me, “Of course I love you, there will never be a moment of my life that I don’t. I love having you around, but you really need to start thinking about your future. You can’t live with me forever.”

“I know that, but I just wish you would give me time to grow and figure out what I need to do.”

“I will try, but you have to promise me that you’ll try, too. I need you to start putting an effort towards your own wellbeing and future. No more being a homebody.”

“Okay, I promise.”

My mother leaned in to embrace me. I wrapped my hands around her and clasped

her shoulders. When we separated, we both wiped our eyes and gave a small chuckle.

She said, “You know, to cheer you up a bit we could go pick out a new phone once you’re cleared to leave.”

“Actually, I think we can hold off on that for a while.”

The Gentlewoman

The house began to quiver as the whipping of the wind ripped the structure at every side. A young Philip sat reclined upon the upholstered chair listening as chaos ensued beyond the surrounding walls. His companion Weston sat writing fervently at his desk. The rain quickly began to downpour.

As loudly as the rain pounded, this did not prevent the young fellows from hearing a wailing in the midst.

“My goodness Weston. Is that the wind?” asked Philip.

Before his friend could reply, a loud banging rang out from the door.

“Ohhhpen thee door! I say ohhhpen!”

Both men looked at each other with a puzzled expression and Philip rose to see who was outside. As he opened the door, a heavy-set woman trudged in like a raging bull, pulling an old fellow behind her.

She immediately began to crone. “There’s a violent storm out der. The wind was whippin’. I nearly lost the soles off ma shoes. Don’t you see the storm? I am dripping. Oh lord—”

“Excuse me,” Philip replied aghast.

“You must have mistaken our home for company of another as we have never seen your faces before.”

The crying woman shut up right then and gave him a stern look. “If you haven’t heard me before there is a storm. Nearly lost the soles off ma shoes. We ‘sa walkin’ by when the wind started whippin’ at us. If we did not see your house, the storm coulda’ killed us. Isn’t that right Herman?”.

The old man said not a word but gave a small nod.

“Philip, it seems our guests have had a bit of an exhausting journey. Let us welcome them in for some supper,” beamed Weston.

Philip, although unsure about the invaders, lead them into the dining room. The old woman rambled on about the storm at a blaring volume while her doting husband Herman sat silent. Philip found sensed nothing off about the man, but he seemed to have relinquished all control to his wife.

“This is such a large home for just the two of ya. Did you ever think that a family could’ve lived here if you hadn’t of bought it?” said the woman.

Philip was suddenly irked, but Weston seemed completely unbothered. In fact, he had a bright smile upon his face.

“Why no,” Weston replied.

“But that is a considerable thought. This house would have well-suited a big family. Well suited for a family with many children.”

“Ahh children,” started the woman. “Herman and I wanted children. So badly we wanted them. We tried so many times for children. We just kept tryin’. It was like every week we’re trying to have em’. But nothin’. That never stopped us though. We just kept goin’ and goin’ and go—”

“I think the food should be ready soon,” Philip interjected loudly.

This got the old woman going again. She gasped, “Ahh I am starvin’. I could eat just anything. Except pickles. You MUSN’T GIVE ME PICKLES. Don’t tell me the meal has pickles in it. I am deathly allergic to pickles you see. If I even have just one lick my throat can’t seem to get no air. Herman is always so good to make sure I am not even 1 foot from a pickle—”

“There’s nothing to worry about. We’re having pork sausage and potatoes,” assured Weston.

Within the next 30 minutes, the woman had recounted each of her favorite

childhood memories, asked at least 3 times what was for dessert (there was no dessert), and insisted upon setting Philip up with her darling cousin Martha's daughter Tabitha as "Not everyone can attract the ones they want. Sometimes you have to settle for being set up".

Philip hoped once the food was brought out that the woman would finally be so consumed with her meal that she would stop talking. However, the old woman had her way around that, gobbling and spitting out chatter as was her way. Philip began to drift from the one-sided conversation. It was one against three. The house maid Bette brought out the rest of the course, which only delighted the old woman more.

She cleared her throat with a deep cough. "Let me ask you. How did you get to be in service of these here men? I once thought about what it would have been like to be a maid. Workin' in a big house like this. I think I would feel unfulfilled. I wanted a more fulfilling life for myself."

Bette left back to the kitchen without a response.

"Your maid is very rude. Not ev'n answerin' like that. Oh well. I think I've had too much supper. My belly is yellin' at me," said the old woman.

After the meal, all of those in attendance retired to the drawing room. The men sipped on brandy and the old woman neglected to show any sign of tiring out. Eventually she started mentioning the idea of dessert. She continued to make subtle hints that she wanted dessert until Philip couldn't take to hear her anymore. He suggested she go to the kitchen and ask Bette to find her something to satisfy her craving. This seemed to work so up the woman went.

The men were then able to have fruitful conversation about the work that they would get done in the following days and even managed to get more than two words from Herbert. It turns out the men quite liked Herbert. He may let his wife drag him around on a leash, but the man was quite collected and articulate. A delightful fellow to have around. Why he chose the life he did was a mystery to Philip but quite frankly he hoped he never had to see them again after this night. There was no use imploring.

Suddenly Herbert quietly said, “My wife has been gone an awful long time now. It has been nearly forty-five minutes. I was so distracted I did not notice she was gone. She must’ve eaten far too much. She does this often. Eating far more than she can fill and then she’s ready to fall asleep.”

“Why don’t we go to the kitchen Herbert. There you can gather your wife and get headed home. It sounds like the storm has finally subsided,” said Weston.

Satisfied, Herbert made his way behind Herbert and Philip to the kitchen.

Upon entering the kitchen Herbert shouted, “Dear God!”

Lying on the floor was the old woman. Her face two times its normal size. Her body a sickly green. Bette sat upon a wooden stool reading from a cookbook completely unphased.

“Bette what have you done?!” Weston raised his voice in authority.

Bette’s eyes arose from the book with an unbothered expression. “She kept demanding dessert, and I told her over and over we do not have dessert. She would not listen. So I told her I could make her a snack with leftovers from the meal and she agreed.”

“I said, ‘how about some cucumber with the pork sausages?’ and she said she had never had fancy food like that before.”

All eyes darted to the cucumber slices sitting on the butcher block.

“My wife’s been pickled!” Herbert said with alarm.

“Bette...we informed you of her allergy...” Weston said with caution.

“The woman was so insistent she would’ve eaten me too if I hadn’t,” replied Bette.

The men had never been faced with death like this before.

Weston clasped his hands together. “Shall I say a prayer. To pay respects to this woman and her husband here. Let’s see...Herbert? I am sorry not to have asked before, but what was your wife’s name?”

Herbert looked despairingly at his wife. His eyes brimmed with tears as he replied, “Dillilah.”

DRAMA & FILM

<Kamen Rider: The Origin>

by

<Matthew Phengdy>

Adapted from Shotaro Ishinomori's Kamen Rider

FADE IN:

EXT. CAFE - NIGHT

Tokyo, Japan. A salaryman exits a nearby cafe. Girls in maid uniforms all say goodbye to him. He waves back, clearly intoxicated. His suitcase in his left hand, and a bottle of alcohol in his right, he continues on his way.

There is no-one on the streets. Wisps of smoke make their way towards him from the gutters. He continues walking, singing a song. It sounds sad.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The same man continues on his way, stumbling all around. The few people that do see him mind their own business. In Japan, it's rude to bother him. He's on his way back from work.

Up ahead, a strange fog begins to gather. The man stops. He doesn't seem to notice. Instead, he falls on his knees and begins to cry.

SALARYMAN

It's all over. I'm done. I'm
going to tell my asshole boss
to cram it. Always telling me
to go out and drink with him!
I want to stay and die! I want
to work until I can't move
anymore!

It's clear the man is having a breakdown. The fog begins to expand outwards. It envelops the street. No one but the man is on the streets.

SALARYMAN

I should've done what dad told me to do. Find work in that goddamn company. Damn you, Furosaki! If only you didn't steal my goddamn position!

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - NIGHT - FULL SHOT

Out of the fog a figure appears. He appears as a shadow, but as he advances, his body comes into view. He looks like a chameleon; he certainly has a helmet that looks like one. He is constantly shifting into and out of existence. He claps, the sound of his claps echoing throughout the empty street.

He eventually settles on a black color on his outfit. It looks out of place. Like he's a cosplayer. The man sees this. He is not impressed.

SALARYMAN

Who the heck are you!? Coming out of there like... like... a freaking costumed freak! You ain't in Akibahara!
(Slurring Words)

The chameleon-looking man continues advancing, but stops when there is about several feet left.

CHAMELEON-MAN

(Delighted)
Congratulations! Mr. Jougasaki! You have been invited to join our most dearest family! Your contributions to the world have not gone unnoticed! Our Great Leader has noticed your efforts where others have not!

CHAMELEON-MAN produces a bouquet of flowers. As he does so, figures emerge from the shadows. They are wearing what appear to be gas masks. On their waists, the symbol of a great bird, with a lightning bolt struck through it can be clearly seen.

SALARYMAN

(Angry)

Shut up! I'm tired of you
people and your scams! I ain't
interested in joining your
cult, I'm ready to lay down and
die! Go away!

The SALARYMAN begins to get violent. The gas-mask-wearing figures begin to crowd him. They all grab at him, and the gas-mask-wearing figures drag him kicking and screaming to CHAMELEON-MAN.

CHAMELEON-MAN

(Amused)

Mr. Jougasaki. You have
already been chosen. There is
no rejecting our love. Our
ambitions for happiness for
you!

The SALARYMAN is grabbed by CHAMELEON-MAN. He lifts him up by the collar as he screams for help. There is no help. As the camera pans down to see his only his squirming legs, we continue to hear his pleas for help

SMASH CUT
TO:

EXT. TACHIBANA'S RACING TRACK - DAY

There are two people at Tachibana's racing track. One, an older gentleman in a white shirt, and white pants, watches through binoculars as a lone figure on a motorcycle drives through the track. They are dressed in casual wear, with a black leather jacket on their person. After some time, the motorcyclist does a big jump and lands perfectly. They drive to a stop next to the white shirt man.

TACHIBANA

(Impressed)

Well done! You cleared it faster than before. You shaved off ten more seconds off your time. You keep this up, and everyone will know your name on the track. Heck, maybe the world.

The motorcyclist deploys the motorbike's stand, then places his right leg on the dusty ground. He removes his helmet, revealing his handsome face.

TAKESHI

(Grateful)

And I'm thankful for you taking me under your wing, TACHIBANA. To think you'd give me a chance to race under your banner.

TACHIBANA

You're going to make me blush,
HONGO. I've said it before, and
I'll say it again, you have
talent. I do wonder sometimes.

TAKESHI

What's that?

TACHIBANA

Why you chose to take up
racing. After all, you have an
IQ of over eight hundred! You
could be working in a lab right
now, for example, finding the
cure for cancer, or building
space ships. Instead, you're
out here driving bikes, trying
to break world records.

TAKESHI

Another one of life's great
mysteries.

TACHIBANA

I'm just still in disbelief
that someone like you would
rather chase after my old
dream.

TAKESHI

Our dream, TACHIBANA. I'll win
you that cup, you deserve it.

TACHIBANA looks down, almost as though he wants to hide
his face. In the background, a cloaked figure hides among
the stands. Because of the shadows, he is hard to see,
but in his hands is a bouquet of flowers.

TACHIBANA RACING - TACHIBANA'S KITCHEN

TACHIBANA and TAKESHI head inside. TACHIBANA fixes up a

quick lunch. As the pair sit down, the cloaked figure moves from window to window. He is spying on them.

TACHIBANA

The Grand Prix is close. How
are you feeling?

TAKESHI

I'm not worried. After all,
I was taught by the best.
With the training that you've
given me, and my passionate
fire, nothing is going to stand
between us and that cup!

TACHIBANA has a smile on his face. TAKESHI as well.
There is a deep understanding between the two. Of
master and student. While they are completely different
as individuals, their goals allow them to synch up
together.

The cloaked figure fades back into the shadows. They are
watching.

FADE TO:

INT. TOKYO UNIVERSITY - EVENING

The camera pans over to Tokyo University. There aren't that many people on campus. Flyers are posted. On the flyer is a message advertising MARIA TAKEUCHI's concert. All around that flyer are missing people posters. A janitor puts up a new one. As the camera pans, you can hear on the radio that more people have gone missing the past month.

Zooming into a laboratory, we see a woman with her hair tied back. She is conducting an experiment with some chemicals.

TOKYO UNIVERSITY - LAB A - EVENING

The laboratory is a mess. What should be clean and orderly is a chaotic scene of beakers, test tubes, materials, and papers attached to nearly every random object. The woman gazes at some measurements as an elderly scientist walks in. He has shades that barely fit his face. He appears to be sickly, but tries to hide it. He walks around to SETSUKO, and comes to a stop behind her.

DR. HAN

Looks like you're still here.
Have you made any progress yet?

SETSUKO is annoyed, but hides what she's feeling. Dr. HAN is a respected member of the faculty. He's been around longer than she has. SETSUKO puts down what she was doing, and moves on to a computer nearby.

SETSUKO

It's slow, but progress is steady. The new DNA splicing technique that I devised is working.

DR. HAN

But is it showing any tangible

results that we can use?

SETSUKO

You know that's not how this works. Doctor, you of all people should know how groundbreaking this is! We can't rush this.

DR. HAN

But the others do. Listen, SETSUKO. I know that you are brilliant. You're probably the most brilliant mind that I have worked with for the thirty years I have worked here.

SETSUKO

But it's still not enough.

DR. HAN

You're young, and the others don't see the potential within you. They think of you as a threat.

SETSUKO

Because of my groundbreaking theory? Because of what I have accomplished in my short tenure here after graduation?

DR. HAN

Because of your youth.

There is a silence as this sentence sets in. There is a beep as the computer finishes doing calculations. In the middle of the room, a futuristic looking device is connected to various wires. There are various tubes that are inside of it; with two bigger tubes inside with strange fluids within that bubble.

SETSUKE gets up from the computer, and heads towards the machine in the center of the room. There is a familiar looking symbol on the center of it. A great bird with a lightning bolt through it. As SETSUKE pulls out one of the tubes, she sees out of the corner of her eye a shadow move.

SETSUKE drops the tube. There is an explosion of glass and liquids. Dr. HAN runs over, concerned.

DR. HAN

What's wrong!?

Suddenly, Dr. HAN begins to cough violently. A coughing spell. He collapses onto his knees as he clutches his chest. SETSUKE's eyes are wide as she kneels down by the old man, but her attempts to render aid make it worse. As she panics, suddenly the lights go out.

Clapping suddenly can be heard throughout the room. It echoes off the walls, and each time it occurs, there is the sound of glass shattering.

SETSUKE

(Frightened)

Who's there!? Stop that!

The lights suddenly turn back on. SETSUKE turns towards Dr. HAN who is no longer on the ground. Instead, in the room with SETSUKE is a robed figure. The figure begins to clap. He is dressed in a skintight suit, with lines that resemble a spider's webbing. On his head is a helmet that looks like a spider's head. On his waist, a familiar symbol of a great bird, with lightning through it is present on the outfit.

SPIDERMAN

(Excited, jubilant)

Congratulations, SETSUKE

OHARA! You have been chosen to
join our big family! For too
long have you been alienated.

The ones who should be your
kin look down upon you as an
eyesore. But we at SHOCKER care
for your happiness, and for
your aspirations. For that, we
welcome you into our loving
embrace!

SETSUKO doesn't respond. There is an expression of fear
on her face as she runs away from SPIDERMAN. She knocks
over some more science beakers in her attempt as she
slides her keycard over the door and runs out.

SPIDERMAN does not say anything. He walks over to the
table that SETSUKO was working on and picks up a journal
of hers. He then turns his attention to the fleeing
SETSUKO.

FADE TO:

TOKYO UNIVERSITY - PARKING LOT - NIGHT

FULL SHOT OF SETSUKO AS SHE RUNS

SETSUKO is running out into the parking lot. There is no
one around, but cars that belong to various employees of
the university. She only makes it several meters in the
parking lot before SPIDERMAN suddenly jumps down onto a
nearby car. The impact sends SETSUKO to the ground.

SPIDERMAN hops off the top of the car he landed on. He walks towards SETSUKO with no real sense of urgency. Almost as if he has all the time in the world. SETSUKO scrambles up. One of her high heels breaking in the process. She screams for help.

INTERCUT SECURITY BOOTH

Inside the security booth at the far end of the parking lot there are two officers. Both appear to be doing paperwork. They have a mug of coffee at their side. The walls are plain besides a a calendar.

SECURITY OFFICER A

Did you hear on the news?
Another person has gone
missing.

SECURITY OFFICER B

Missing? What happened?

SECURITY OFFICER A

Yeah. KOUKI KUROGANE. The
CEO of Kurogane Electronics.
Seems it was his mistress who
reported it in.

SECURITY OFFICER B

His mistress, but not his wife?
I can never understand how rich
people do the things they do.

SECURITY OFFICER A

Wait, do you hear that?

The security guards stop talking. They listen intently as SETSUKO's scream for help pierces the silence. The pair look at one another before rushing out of the booth.

PARKING LOT - NEAR BOOTH

SETSUKE runs towards the security booth. She stumbles around, raising her voice. SPIDERMAN is no longer visible, but she is near hysterics. The Security officers rush out. They see SETSUKE and rush towards her. She is in full hysterics.

SECURITY OFFICER A

What happened!? Are you okay!?

SETSUKE is in hysterics. She talks fast, stumbling over her words. SECURITY OFFICER A is forced to try and calm SETSUKE down. SECURITY OFFICER B looks around, his hand on his hip. He has his hand on his baton. The pair have no guns.

SETSUKE

(Hysterical, Scared)

There's a man! He broke into the labs and started chasing me! The doctor...! Dr. HAN he... he... vanished!

SECURITY OFFICER A

Slow down, just take some deep breaths. Let's start from the beginning.

PARKING LOT - NEAR A CAR

SECURITY OFFICER B has wandered off from SECURITY OFFICER A and SETSUKE. He notices that one of the cars nearby has a roof that is completely caved in. His eyes widen in shock, then in confusion as he looks around. He turns back to the others checking that they are still there. Then, he looks around the car. SPIDERMAN appears behind him.

CUT TO:

PARKING LOT

SETSUKO

(Calm)

LAB A. That was where it happened. That's where he showed up! Dr. HAN, he disappeared, but his heart...

SECURITY OFFICER A

I'll call it in.

SECURITY OFFICER A reaches for the radio on the right side of his shoulder.

SECURITY OFFICER A

Come in, I have a report of a disturbance at LAB A in the science building. I'm requesting backup. I have Dr. SETSUKO OHARA with me right now.

SECURITY OFFICER A waits for a response. There is none. He repeats what he just said. The same response. He looks around for his partner, but SECURITY OFFICER B is nowhere to be found. When he looks away from SETSUKO, she suddenly screams. SPIDERMAN is approaching, he is running. As he runs, the air around him seems to be parting from his incredible speed. SECURITY OFFICER A takes out his baton.

SECURITY OFFICER A

(Panicked)

You! Sto-!

He doesn't get the words out. SPIDERMAN runs towards SECURITY OFFICER A. His arm is extended outwards to the side of his body, and parallel to his body. The Clothesline. A common wrestling move used. SECURITY OFFICER A is sent flying back. The impact sends him crashing into a nearby car. He goes through the side

windows, the upper half of his body sticking out the other side. He doesn't move. He's dead.

SETSUKO

(Hysterical)

No! Why are you doing this!?

SETSUKO can't believe her eyes. Someone was just murdered in front of her. Her thoughts are scrambled like eggs. SPIDERMAN is not human. What he did wasn't what a normal human can do. Not even the athletes at the olympics could have done what he just did.

SPIDERMAN cranes his neck towards SETSUKO. The eyes on the helmet he is wearing flare up blue. He doesn't waste any time. With an inhuman quick lunge, he grabs SETSUKO by the neck and lifts her up. She tries to scream, but she is choking.

SPIDERMAN

I told you, Ms. OHARA! You are part of our family! As such I have gotten rid of all and any possible obstacles that could get in the way of that! You just don't have the proper context to what I'm offering you. I am offering you the happiness that you no longer have. The gratitude that you no longer have. The life that you no longer have. Shocker, is the great granter of happiness!

CLOSE UP OF SETSUKO'S FACE

SETSUKO struggles, as SPIDERMAN monologues. Her face is one of great desperation, but she eventually loses her will to fight as she runs out of air. Before the scene shows her going limp-

SMASH CUT:

TOKYO UNIVERSITY - A DAY LATER - PARKING LOT - MORNING

WIDE SHOT OF THE UNIVERSITY

Opens up back into Tokyo University. There are a number of people milling about as the police have erected a crime scene that extends to the science building. Uniformed police officers are walking around, and some patrol cars are parked in the nearby area. It appears that what happened last night has already been reported.

TAKESHI HONGO arrives at the University. He is dressed in his iconic leather jacket, with his racing helmet on. He pulls into the parking lot, and selects a parking space that is far away from the commotion.

FULL SHOT OF TAKESHI HONGO

TAKESHI deploys the motorcycle's stand. He takes off his helmet. His gaze is looking at the crime scene. However, a man walks past him, but stops when he sees TAKESHI. This is KOUTA, one of TAKESHI's friends.

KOUTA is wearing a distinct looking green trench coat. Around his neck is a camera.

KOUTA

What a sad day it is when
someone decides to go and
commit a crime in a place of
learning.

TAKESHI

I saw it on the news. To think something so terrible would happen nearby.

KOUTA

Anyways, I need your help with something.

TAKESHI

That's what I'm here for. Show me the way.

TOKYO UNIVERSITY - MECHANICS WORKSHOP - LATER

KOUTA and TAKESHI are in a well kept garage area. In the center of this is a bright red car. A racing car to be exact. The front hood of the car is open. Wires extend into and out of the engine bay. Another man enters the scene. He is wearing a mechanic's uniform. His hair is unkempt, but upon seeing KOUTA he tries to smooth it out.

ABE

You two are early! I didn't even have time to eat breakfast and change!

KOUTA

Not like that would help you, ABE. After all, you lose track of time easily.

ABE

And you have HONGO with you! I wasn't expecting the racing prodigy to grace us with his presence!

TAKESHI

Well, KOUTA said you were having problems with your new engine. Asked me to take a look at it. You mind?

KOUTA

(Jokingly)

I suggest you say yes.

ABE takes off his cap and holds it close to his chest.

ABE

I won't say no to some help. Especially when the one offering to help is you, Hongo! Go ahead. Have at it! I took TAKAGI's advice and installed in that new part-

TAKESHI

The Firestarter?

ABE

Aye, that's the one. The Prototype that Narumi Heavy Industries is having us try out.

As ABE is talking, TAKESHI is already fiddling around with the engine. As soon as ABE finishes talking, TAKESHI peeks his head out of the hood.

TAKESHI

KOUTA, hit the ignition.

KOUTA does as told. The engine roars to life as a nearby instrument begins to record the data. ABE yells out in joy.

ABE

You did it! You won't believe the trouble I've had with this

thing! And the results are
off the charts! Narumi Heavy
Industries is gonna be happy!

KOUTA and TAKESHI head to the back of the garage.

KOUTA

That was easy for you. Guess
what they say about you is
true.

TAKESHI

(Cocky)

I am a certified genius.
Anyways, when are you going to
cover TACHIBANA's return to
racing?

After the mention of TACHIBANA, KOUTA's face suddenly
becomes conflicted.

KOUTA

I... listen, TAKESHI. I have
to come clean with you. They
don't want us covering you, and
TACHIBANA. It just wouldn't be
good for business.

TAKESHI's face falls. He is not happy.

TAKESHI

KOUTA. You can't mean...

KOUTA

I'm incredibly sorry about
this. That's just how the
industry is. But, well... look
on the bright side! If you do
come out on top on the big
race, I'll... I'll cover you
two both! That'd be a reason!
Anyways, I gotta photograph ABE

for this.

KOUTA gives TAKESHI a clap on his shoulder as he walks past to the jubilant ABE. TAKESHI looks over the two as he begins to walk out the room.

Out of his field of vision, another mechanic is walking by. As TAKESHI leaves, the mechanic looks at TAKESHI as he pulls the cap over his face.

FOCUS ON MECHANIC'S FACE

The mechanic has a grin on his lips as TAKESHI leaves.

FADE TO:

HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The roar of a motorcycle fills the air as TAKESHI is riding his bike. He passes by cars on the way as he just indulges in the night air. As the ride continues, there is a noticeable decrease of cars on the highway.

A thick fog begins to roll in, and eventually TAKESHI is riding among a thick fog. He keeps on going the speed he is going, but then he notices something up ahead. A thick wall of fog that he cannot see through. His motorcycle begins to slow to a crawl. TAKESHI is confused.

When he slows to a complete stop in front of the wall of fog, suddenly, a blast of intense light from the fog blinds him. He shields his eyes as the sound of clapping begins to echo around.

BAT-MAN
(Jovial, ecstatic)
Congratulations, TAEKSHI HONGO!
You have been chosen, no,
ordained by the great heavens
to join our family!

Takeshi lowers his arm as he sees a figure emerge from the wall of fog. Wearing a skintight suit, they are wearing a helmet that resembles a bat. On their waist is a symbol of thunder going through a great bird. Takeshi grips the handlebars of his motorcycle.

BAT-MAN
You are one of the rarest
individuals in the world! A man
with an IQ of 800, a racing
prodigy, and a local hero to
many youths here in Japan. I,
BAT-MAN am here to welcome you
into the fold of our family,
SHOCKER!

TAKESHI revs the engine, does a 180 degree turn and races off. BAT-MAN laughs in response to this. He is not worried. His fog continues to expand outwards.

As TAKESHI races to escape this strange occurrence of events, he sees that there are no other cars out on the road.

WIDE SHOT OF TAKESHI AND HIS DISTANCE TO BAT-MAN

TAKESHI is focused entirely on the road ahead of him. He fails to see BAT-MAN is trailing behind, gaining great speed as he flies through the air. TAKESHI does not have time to react as BAT-MAN slams into TAKESHI.

FULL SHOT OF THE CRASH

In SLOWMO: TAKESHI is launched from his motorcycle.

He flies with remains of his bike. It slowly twists, and crumbles like a tin can. TAKESHI himself is not an exception. AS he slams into the asphalt, and into his bike, he loses his helmet which explodes apart, his body turning momentarily into red paste as parts of him skid across the ground. There is a look of abject terror on his exposed face. SLOWMO ends.

BAT-MAN lands on the highway as TAKESHI skids to a stop before him. BAT-MAN kneels and grabs TAKESHI by the hair to reveal his bloodied face. BAT-MAN's helmet retracts, showing his very human face. He looks no different than anyone else.

BAT-MAN
Congratulations, TAKESHI
HONGO. Our goal for Shocker
is to spread unyielding, and
unending happiness to the rest
of the world. You will be the
first part of our family. And
will be part of the great will
of Shocker. Happy Birthday,
TAKESHI HONGO. HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

SECRET LABORATORY - EXPERIMENT ROOM - TIME UNKNOWN

WIDE SHOT OF THE EXPERIMENT ROOM

A top secret, highly classified, and futuristic room. TAKESHI HONGO is restrained with metal restraints on his arms and legs. He is affixed to what appears to be a giant circular table. The table is large, TAKESHI is restrained to the center of it. There is a symbol of a thunderbolt going through a great bird as part of the

surface of the table. This is Shocker's symbol. Its emblem.

There is a long piece of cloth covering his body.

There are scientists in white scrubs, covered from head to toe in these scrubs. There is an uneasiness as it is hard to determine their identities. They may as well be faceless in the current situation.

TAKESHI is now beginning to wake up from unconsciousness. When he is aware of his surroundings, he begins to frantically look around him. The scientists all begin moving, some have clipboards as they observe TAKESHI. Takeshi begins to try and fight against his restraints. There is a sound of an intercom turning on. Sounds like something from the 70s.

A voice begins to speak. A deep voice mixed with a grainy effect.

???

You are finally awake, TAKESHI
HONGO.

TAKESHI looks around in a panic, which is then replaced with anger.

TAKESHI

(Angry)

What is this!? Who are you!?
What have you done!? Answer me!

???

Quite the temper you have,
TAKESHI HONGO. You will feel
at ease soon. Your anger
is misguided. It should be
society you should direct it
to. The world who must face
retribution. You are an agent
of that. Of Shocker's great

will!

The voice echos through the room. TAKESHI is having none of it. He begins to try and escape his bindings.

???

Show him! He can never go back!

The scientists grab the cloth on TAKESHI's body, and pull it down.

TAKESHI looks at his body, and his eyes widen in shock. It appears to be dressed in some kind of black bodysuit, with armor pieces on his torso, legs, and elbow. On his waist is a strange looking belt. The frontal piece has the symbol of Shocker on it.

TAKESHI

What have you done to me!? My
body is... changed!?

???

Improved. You were hurt,
TAKESHI HONGO. A normal human
would have died from the
injuries you sustained.

Takeshi flashes back to his encounter with BAT-MAN.

TAKESHI

You mean the ones you
inflicted!?

???

Hahahaha! You are now improved.
You are now Shocker Combat Unit
#1. The first to be grafted with
Shocker's newest cybernetic
technology. You are stronger,
faster, and more resilient.
You will outlive humanity by
thousands of years. You are the
embodiment of Shocker's plan.

To grant happiness to all of
humanity!

There are screens in this room. They all begin to turn on, showing Shocker's various cybernetic humanoids including CHAMELEON-MAN and BAT-MAN attacking people, and abducting them. TAKESHI looks at the screens.

TAKESHI

(Angry)

No! Never! You all are
terrorists! You think hurting
and terrorizing people to join
you is the right thing!? You're
nothing more than monsters!

???

No. We are not. We are the next
stage of humanity. You as one
of Shocker's enforcers will
help lead the rest into an age
of happiness and enlightenment.
You are against us now, but
once you experience the bliss
we will offer for the rest of
humanity, you will join us of
your own free will.

The intercom cuts out. A device emerges from the ceiling and begins to descend. The scientists begin to crowd around the numerous computers in the room.

Prongs then appear from the device. TAKESHI recoils upon seeing them. He begins to struggle against his binds.

NAO

WATCH OUT!

A gunshot rings out. One of the scientists falls over. Gunfire strikes the descending device. It's a mind control device. It stops about a quarter way from

TAKESHI. Summoning an inhuman amount of strength within him, he manages to break out from one arm restraint, then another. TAKESHI then raises his right leg which easily removes the restraint. He follows up with the other leg.

TAKESHI is momentarily shocked. His mental mindset was stuck to him being a normal human. With him summoning his strength, he has broken the mental block that prevented him from accessing this superhuman strength he now has.

A woman in a brown coat is on the balcony above. She has a revolver in her hand. This is NAO. She fires another shot, shattering the supports on the mind control device. TAKESHI lunges forward, evading the falling death trap. Other parts of it fall, crushing the scientists.

NAO

Through the door! Follow the
lights!

NAO disappears through the door behind her.

TAKESHI begins to move towards the exit, but several scientists try to stop him. TAKESHI runs through. His enhanced strength is like a 400 pound boxer's punch. They are sent flying away without any effort.

SECRET LABORATORY - HALLWAY

TAKESHI has been running for several minutes as he sees an exit. Suddenly, a large bulkhead begins to descend. Shocker Grunts, all dressed in black begin arriving behind TAKESHI. In their hands are guns. Some drop to their knees to steady their arm. The rest stay standing and aim down the sights.

TAKESHI doesn't stop. He continues running. In fact, he

begins to speed up to a speed faster than Usain Bolt. As the bulkhead is about to close, TAKESHI slides across the ground and through the exit just as it closes.

The Shocker Grunts have not fired a shot. Instead, SPIDERMAN walks past the firing line. He does not have his helmet on. He grins.

CUT TO:

MOUNTAINSIDE - DAY

TAKESHI emerges out onto a flat area on the mountain. The ground is dry dirt. The mud has long since dried up. Tracks run through it from various vehicles that have passed through the area. As TAKESHI runs, he almost runs off a cliffside, but stops just in time. He looks down the cliffside. It's a long fall.

TAKESHI tries to retread his steps, but he stops. Suddenly, Shocker Grunts appear on motorbikes. He looks around as they drive circles around him. As they do, more of them appear from over the horizon. Reinforcements. They all circle around on foot. They are trained in hand-to-hand combat.

Looking around, TAKESHI spots someone at a higher elevation. The figure swoops down, and the Shocker Grunts all make way.

FULL SHOT OF BAT-MAN

BAT-MAN walks forward. Arms extended he begins to speak.

BAT-MAN

(Disappointed)

TAKESHI HONGO. I'm very disappointed in you. I thought we were going to be family. I thought we would rise up against the stagnant human race, and help guide it to a better future. But you go and do this! You are hurting me. You are hurting us!

TAKESHI doesn't even appear to be listening. He sees BAT-MAN, but he doesn't see him. He only sees the event of the BAT-MAN crashing into him on the highway. Of the terror and pain that brought him.

TAKESHI

I have nothing to say to you! Shocker is nothing but terrorists playing an act! You may have changed my body, but you haven't changed my mind! As long as I can see from right from wrong, Shocker won't have its way! I'll make sure of that!

BAT-MAN

Do you intend to fight against Shocker? Against happiness for all of mankind? TAKESHI HONGO. I would choose your next words carefully. For once you renounce Shocker, our family, you'll be nothing! You will have nowhere to go back to. Shocker will stop at nothing to destroy you, and the people you love will shun you once they figure out what you are. Neither an agent of Shocker nor

a human!

TAKESHI has a look on his face. He remembers the atrocities on the screens in the lab. All the people that Shocker hurt, and killed to get their way. Their way of intimidating him. But they were wrong. They didn't create a scared man. They didn't create a weak slave that would obey their every whim. What they made was something more than Shocker.

Several meters away. The female police detective Nao is hiding behind a large rock. She peers out to see the confrontation. She grips the handle of her gun, and then begins to sneak away.

FULL SHOT OF TAKESHI

TAKESHI

(Determined)

Shocker has no reason to exist!
No matter what you say, what
lies you spout that you believe
to be the truth. What Shocker
is is clear as day. I reject
you! I reject Shocker! And I
reject everything that Shocker
stands for!

The Shocker Grunts all begin to get agitated. BAT-MAN begins to laugh.

BAT-MAN

Then so be it! I will
personally send you to hell
myself!

Cool fight scene happens. TAKESHI vs the numerous Shocker Grunts. At first, he appears to be losing, but realizes that he is no longer human. He breaks out of the mental blocks he has placed on himself, and begins to destroy the Shocker Grunts. The fight against BAT-MAN is a brutal

one. TAKESHI doesn't have any hand-to-hand techniques and is demolished almost single handedly. BAT-MAN picks up TAKESHI and throws him down the mountain.

MOUNTAINSIDE - ABANDONED WAREHOUSE - EVENING

TAKESHI crashes through into an abandoned warehouse. He lies there in pain. Blood on his lip. It seems he bit himself from the impact. Using a nearby box as support, he raises himself, but then ducks behind it instead as a shadow rushes by. It is BAT-MAN looking for him.

Suddenly, as TAKESHI tries to hide further in the warehouse he is grabbed by BAT-MAN! BAT-MAN throws him through several stacked crates. TAKESHI lands and skids across the floor to another section of the warehouse. There is a giant tank of flammable gas built into the side of the warehouse. TAKESHI struggles to his feet, he looks at BAT-MAN. Not in fear, but in anger. Not anger for the sake of it, but anger of what BAT-MAN represents. The impact has turned on the giant industrial fans and are blowing a powerful blast of air towards TAKESHI.

BAT-MAN

Have you had enough?

TAKESHI

(Fearless)

No.

TAKESHI stands up. The belt on his waist has split open, revealing that it was instead a cover. There is a cylindrical looking buckle behind the cover that is now open. It is powered by a miniaturized nuclear reactor. However, as the powerful winds blow blast. It begins to power the turbine in the buckle. TAKESHI walks forward as he does there is an epic transformation as the cybernetic body of his resembles a black suit with armor plating on the important bits of his body. His head is then covered by a helmet that resembles a grasshopper.

The eyes then flash red, and stay red as he comes to a stop.

BAT-MAN says nothing but charges at TAKESHI. He takes flight, intending to grab him and throw him. But as he makes impact, tries to move TAKESHI, but fails. He soon realizes his mistake, as TAKESHI now fully transformed, grabs BAT-MAN, then throws him down. BAT-MAN, now aware of TAKESHI's true power begins to fight him on the ground.

A cool fight scene happens.

Eventually, BAT-MAN is injured critically. He rolls around and gets up near the flammable gas tank. He groans in pain as he tries to ignore the pain. TAKESHI doesn't even wait for him to recover. He breaks into a full on sprint, jumps into the air several meters and then drop kicks BAT-MAN. The force is incredible. BAT-MAN is sent flying back, screaming in terror as the force generates enough friction that when he slams though the tank, it ignites, then explodes.

The entire warehouse begins to fall apart as the explosion causes a chain reaction with the other materials in the warehouse. This warehouse was a Shocker supply base.

As the explosion consumes the warehouse, TAKESHI manages to make it out. He watches from a distance as the warehouse goes in flames.

TAKESHI (V.O.)

Shocker changed me. Made
me more than human. They
claimed that I would be hated,
ostracized because I was no
longer human like the rest
of mankind. That if I were
to reject them, I would have
nothing. Not my original self,
my old world, or my ignorance

of the threat that Shocker posed. But, I am my own man. Shocker cannot choose what I become. I made my choice long ago. When I realized what Shocker was, lying on that operating table, seeing the atrocities they have committed on those screens. If they want to spread what they consider happiness to humanity, then so be it. Because I, TAKESHI HONGO... No... KAMEN RIDER, will be there. To crush Shocker's Ambitions!

FADE OUT.

Shadow

by

Jan Mateo Tugab

Characters:

Karl - a gritty detective; thoughtfully depressive

John - a highly functioning alcoholic; crazy, but honest

Judge - a pompous and righteous judge; highly manipulative

Setting:

1920's-1940's

Karl's office in a bustling metropolitan area, in the late hours past midnight

[At rise, KARL is sitting at his desk typing on a typewriter. A half-bottle of whiskey is on the desk next to him. KARL takes a page out of the typewriter and throws it into a trashcan near the door. It is full of crumpled balls of paper. There is a picture frame on the desk. He places a new page and starts typing for a short beat. The door to his office opens. The JUDGE enters with a folder in hand.]

JUDGE

Inspector.

KARL

How can I help you, your honor?

[The JUDGE sees the bottle of whiskey.]

It's to get the imagination going, for my book.

JUDGE

Ah, what is your book about?

KARL

Nothing important, just something to kill the time...

JUDGE

Frustrated, he balled his fist and cursed the sky, for he had no one else left to blame. Is it fiction? Non-fiction?

KARL

Fiction.

JUDGE

I'd sooner trust you with charcoal and parchment for art than a book.

KARL

How can I help you, your honor?

JUDGE

I'm here about a case.

KARL

Which case? DUI, domestic violence, self-defense case--

JUDGE

September 1991.

KARL

The '91 case? That case was closed.

JUDGE

It was.

*[JUDGE hands him the
file.]*

I want it reopened.

KARL

Why is that?

JUDGE

I want a reexamination of the criminal's psychological profile.

KARL

Anything come up recently?

JUDGE

I am afraid that something was overlooked during the investigation phase that led to a mistrial.

KARL

Mistrial? He was found not responsible from the evidence provided.

JUDGE

I have no doubt that the *physical* evidence points to his innocence, but that his *psychological* profile points to his guilt.

KARL

You want me to psychologically investigate the killer? You know that's not my job, right?

JUDGE

Do not lecture me about whose job is whose, inspector. It is my job to uphold the power of the law. I have hired you for a very specific purpose. What is that purpose?

KARL

To discover the truth behind one's actions.

JUDGE

And if they are guilty?

KARL

To execute them.

JUDGE

The mind is its own judge, jury, and executioner.

[beat]

Are you afraid of the shadow, inspector?

KARL

No.

JUDGE

Have you judged yourself today? Lying in bed, thinking of all the things that you had done in the past? The psyche is

precious, inspector. What will you do when the shadow of your mind covers you in darkness?

KARL

I'm not one to judge. I leave that to you.

[beat]

Why should his verdict be revoked?

[The JUDGE places his hand on the file.]

JUDGE

You have a strong memory, inspector, as do I. Relive the memory.

[The JUDGE picks up the bottle of whiskey. He looks to KARL in disgust.]

Pitiful.

[JUDGE drops the bottle into a trash can. He uncrumples a page.]

JUDGE

You never could write.

[JUDGE exits. KARL opens the folder and reads the case. He collects the bottle from the trash. He takes a small sip for a beat.]

JOHN enters without knocking.]

JOHN

Ooh, Jack?

[JOHN swipes the bottle and starts drinking.]

I'm not a fan, but I'll take it.

KARL

Good to see you too John.

JOHN

What're ya writing?

[JOHN types.]

KARL

A book but now you've got your hands all over it and you're ruining the page.

[KARL yanks the paper out.]

JOHN

Fiction?

KARL

Yeah.

[JOHN takes the paper from KARL.]

JOHN

He drank and drank because it helped him sleep at night. Doesn't sound like fiction. Are those all parts of your book?

[JOHN uncrumples one of the binned pages.]

Damn Karl, are you depressed or something?

KARL

Why are you here John?

JOHN

I just wanted to catch up. With an old friend. And, I had a feeling that you needed a drinking buddy.

[JOHN taking a drink.]

KARL

We're not friends John.

JOHN

Whaaaaaat? That's a lie. We're in this deep buddy.

[beat]

KARL

Since you're here, I want to ask you a few questions.

JOHN

What kind of questions?

KARL

You should have a seat.

*[JOHN sits in KARL's
chair.]*

JOHN

Already sitting.

KARL

Comfy?

[beat]

What's your name?

JOHN

Young.

KARL

First name?

JOHN

You know my name Karl. But if you want, I prefer "John".

KARL

How are you feeling today, John?

JOHN

Good. Wonderful actually. I feel like I'm free, not really worrying about anything.

[JOHN drinks.]

KARL

You like alcohol?

JOHN

Oh, a favorite. Though I much prefer a cocktail over straight.

KARL

And how does alcohol make you feel?

JOHN

Good. Duh. Why else would I be drinking it?

KARL

Well, some people prefer to drink in a social setting. Are you a social person John?

JOHN

Nah. Never really clicked with other people. Some though...

KARL

Hmm.

JOHN

...Shouldn't you be writing these down? Aren't you like, a detective or something? Writing down stuff in your tiny notebook?

KARL

I have a mental one.

JOHN

How does that work? I mean, you know they say that writing stuff down actually helps with remembering things? Like if you were to forget, you're done! That's it, thought gone. Forever.

KARL

You said you never really clicked with people. Can you tell me more about why you feel that?

JOHN

Well, it's not that I never really clicked with them, it's that they never clicked with me.

KARL

Like an outcast?

[beat]

JOHN

Yeah, like you.

KARL

I am not an outcast.

JOHN

. . . Yes, you are not. Yet, you are.

KARL

Stop.

JOHN

Why are you an outcast?

KARL

I'm the one asking the questions.

JOHN

You're not anti-social at all. You are viewing yourself as an outcast. Why are you hiding from people?...

KARL

Stop.

JOHN

...What are you hiding from people?

*[KARL closes his eyes
and tries to shut JOHN
out.]*

JOHN

What happened on September of 1991?

KARL

Bad things happened.

JOHN

"And it was never the same." Is it embarrassment? Shame?

KARL

Please stop.

JOHN

Is that why you write? What happened that made you write about it?

KARL

Don't make me relive it, please.

JOHN

Tell me.

KARL

[beat]

I write to help accept some things as fact.

JOHN

What kind of facts?

KARL

The fact that my wife is dead.

[JOHN pours a glass.]

I got promoted at work. I wanted to get drinks to celebrate; she wanted wine at home, just the two of us. So, we stop by the bar. She waits in the car and naps because she was exhausted.

*[JOHN downs the glass,
pours another one, and
downs it while KARL
speaks.]*

At some point I have about four or five drinks. Pretty hammered,
but, I get in the car anyway...

JOHN

Pretty stupid idea.

[beat]

KARL

It wasn't my idea.

JOHN

Who's could it be then?

KARL

It was your idea.

JOHN

That's funny Karl! Real funny! I'm dying. I think you should
write about that.

KARL

You made me drink.

JOHN

Come on, Karl. Can't blame me for your faults.

[JOHN drinks.]

I think you like alcohol a little too much.

KARL

I've never had a problem.

JOHN

I think you're lying to yourself Karl.

KARL

You caused all of this. Everything. Everything that I'm...

[beat]

He was right...

JOHN

You can't be serious...

KARL

...He was absolutely right...

JOHN

...Karl, come on.

KARL

...you're guilty.

JOHN

Are you even hearing yourself right now?

KARL

I know what I said! If you didn't make me drink so much-

JOHN

No. No, no, no, no, no, Karl, don't pin this on me. No, I'm doing everything that I am supposed to...

KARL

You're a GOD DAMN LIAR!

JOHN

...YOU. You're the one that's not in control!

KARL

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

JOHN

But this damn horse was *thirsty*!

[JOHN hands him a
glass.]

Drink!

KARL

You killed Anna!

JOHN

Drink.

[beat]

[KARL drinks.]

If you're gonna find someone to blame detective, the first thing you need to do is to inspect yourself. Yes, you drank. You drank a lot because you loved drinking. It was a release for you as much for me. But you can't blame me for something that you lack control of. I may love to drink, and you may love drinking with me but at last call, you're the one calling the shots.

KARL

You didn't even try-

JOHN

I did Karl. I did. You were so out of it that you didn't even realize I was holding onto that steering wheel so hard, keeping it straight that my arms felt like they were being ripped off. I wanted her to live as much as you did.

[beat]

It wasn't your fault, Karl. Hell, it wasn't even my fault--well partly, because...

[JOHN drinks.]

Someone else hit the car.

[JUDGE enters.]

JUDGE

Those that lie, lie to themselves first. Have you found the answers, inspector?

JOHN

What that I'm "guilty"?

JUDGE [to JOHN]

I have witnessed truth and you are guilty.

JOHN

Truth? There's only one truth here bud, that you like to twist the facts so that you can create that judgment that only you want.

JUDGE [to KARL]

What has this imbecile told you?

JOHN

The truth.

[beat]

[KARL reads the file.]

JUDGE [to KARL]

Karl, Karl, Karl. This *thing* is a fraud. A cheat. A liar...

JOHN

Oh, bullshit!

JUDGE

...You don't need to believe him. He's trying push you away from the truth!

JOHN

That's a load of bull-

JUDGE [to JOHN]

YOU ARE A LIAR!

JOHN

How did it happen then, smartass? What's your point of view?

JUDGE

The car went off the side because you were drunk at the hands of this animal! Don't listen to him, you know he's lying!

JOHN

Another drunk driver hit the car!...

JUDGE

Liar!

JOHN

...The car veered off and rolled down the side of hill!

[JUDGE places a knife on the desk. KARL takes it and runs it over his wrist, along his arm.]

JUDGE [to JOHN]

Why don't you take this and run alongside the road? We'd all be better off if you were gone.

[beat]

KARL [to JUDGE]

Have you read the file?

JUDGE

What? Of course, I have!

KARL

Who was driving the car?

JUDGE [to KARL]

He was driving the car!

KARL

And you're so sure?

[beat]

KARL

Why are you so quick to judge? You come here acting high on your authority, acting like your word is the truth and the truth only.

JUDGE

My word is the truth! It is law!

KARL

You are so cynical. You imprison, not rehabilitate; you kill, not nurture. You don't always have to kill every part of yourself when you fail!

JUDGE

You lack spine and control.

KARL

And you think you're in control?

JUDGE

I AM IN CONTROL! He is dead wood! He must be burned and cleansed so we can be reborn! It is his judgement! Kill him!

KARL

The only one that should be killed is you.

[JUDGE lunges for KARL. They fight. After a few beats, KARL stabs JUDGE with the knife. JUDGE moves to the door and dies offstage.]

JOHN

You killed him. I mean, you did. He'll be back—not as *himself* but—he'll be back.

KARL

He will.

JOHN

You disagreed with what he said but you still did it. You killed a part of yourself. Why?

KARL

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He will.

JOHN

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KARL

Look at me John. I'm a mess. My whole life is a mess. I'm a drunkard... I lost my wife, John. She was my world and I lost her. And it sucks.

[KARL grabs the picture frame on the desk.]

We both know the truth, John. I wasn't the one driving. Ana was. Somewhere down the line I hated myself for what happened. It wasn't my fault, and yet: I found every way to blame myself. To judge myself.

[beat.]

But he was still right, John.

[KARL uncrumples a page in his trash can.]

I could not do it. Because he was me, and I was him. To kill a part of yourself is the worst crime you can commit. Well, now I can be the judge of that.

[JOHN tries to pour him a glass. KARL stops him.]

I'm not thirsty anymore.

[Blackout.]

Hotline Miami

Written By

Michael Zegarra

based on Jonatan Soderstrom & Dennis
Wedin's top-down shooter video game

FADE IN:

INT. TOP FLOOR, MASTER BEDROOM - JULY 23, 1985 AT 6:45 AM

A loud gunshot is heard from the sophisticated bedroom. The sound echoes out through the wide-open, glass-paned balcony doors. The floorboards are layered with a dark purple while the king's bed, corner couch, and plant decor are a light green. A variety of animal carpets and mounted heads give the notion of a hunter having been put to rest as the perspective switches to a wide shot, providing a clear picture of a bloodied, cut-up figure pointing a smoking golden pistol toward the direction of an elder's corpse. The body is sprawled onto the floor and his wheelchair is laid against its side, including a BLINI. The BORODINSKY BREAD appears to have been served alongside the meal, but seems to have been completely untouched. Beside that, a bible is left open on [John 6:50].

The blonde-haired man removes his mask and walks out onto the balcony, tucking the firearm underneath the back of his pants, notwithstanding its EMPTY CLIP. A handle stuck into his abdomen. The camera crawls up to the stranger, spiraling up his body until arriving at a close-up; all in a smooth fashion. The state of his face alone says it all. This man has gone through Hell. The anchor tattoo left crusty from the blood. His eyes close for a brief moment before taking one deep breath. Then, his eyelids open to reveal his tired, sad, yet killer-like gaze.

MATCH-CUT

TO:

INT. TWO-BED APARTMENT - APRIL 3, 1985 AT 6:50 AM

In far better condition, the person is sitting on his couch, thinking deeply. He's clothed with blue jeans and a white undershirt. A CELTIC BROTHERHOOD tattoo can be made out on his left bicep. In his right hand, a lit cigarette. His serious demeanor depicts unpleasantness. Then, we turn to his apartment phone HANGING off the end table. Dreadful phone call? In mild anger, he extinguishes his smoke onto the dials. He pops some Tylenol pills for his headache from the drawer.

We're granted an angle on the contents of the drawer and trash bin. An open pack of cigs and a picture of himself standing beside his BAND OF BROTHERS.

Where the bin's concerned, 4 PURPLE HEART MEDALS lay on top of other discarded items.

Closing the drawer, he flips down another photo of him and his girlfriend, RACHAEL, at the beach. He can't bear to see her blonde hair and blue eyes. The better times.

He gets up to grab his jacket, intent on heading out the door. Prior to doing so, our protagonist stops to look back at the phone. His gaze switches to the drawer, and he returns to acquire the pack of cigs & the Tylenol canister. We get a longer look at his belongings. From the photo, it appears that men named NICHOLAS, BARNES, DANIELS and possibly two extra are or were the closest he had to family, although a part of the image is torn apart. That piece is close by, but flipped down as well. If they cause so much grief, why not dispose of them?

He closes it again and exits the apartment, shutting the door behind him after grabbing his signature jacket.

OPENING CREDITS

TITLE: HOTLINE MIAMI

(Remastered Version) Dust by M.O.O.N BEGINS

EXT. STREETS OF MIAMI - NIGHT

CAIN drives along a road in his Acado GT through yet another bright & beautiful night in Miami. 3 DOG TAGS swing and dangle from the rear-view mirror. So many colors & lights, like his thoughts, blur as he drives towards a destination unknown to us, for now. It's almost psychedelic. [Credits to Director, Writer(s), Photography, & Cinematography are shown appropriately and creatively.] With nowhere else to go, he makes a risky turn, passing by a person setting up a flier stand of sorts, and parks next to a cafe diner.

END OF OPENING CREDITS & MUSIC

He turns off the radio and exits the vehicle to lean against it, staring through the windows. His eyes target directly at a gentleman with long shaggy brown hair, a scruffy-trimmed beard, green eyes, & an ARROW tattoo on his right cheek. The same man who stood next to CAIN from the group photo!

In any case, this individual seems to be doing his job; taking orders and transferring the information back to those working in the kitchen. It takes some time for this clerk to notice CAIN's presence outside. He's skeptical, at first, but smiles once he recognizes him. Some friendships are timeless. However, CAIN's expression doesn't change. The smile changes

to worry as the clerk feels that something may be wrong.

CUT

TO:

INT. DINER - NIGHT

CAIN grimly ponders in a booth with NICHOLAS, drinking his coffee while his friend sits across. He avoids his gaze for the rest of this scene, almost like he's embarrassed, mostly looking outside. CAIN doesn't feel comfortable talking about it nor does he want to...but knows that he might need to.

NICHOLAS

(sincere)

"I'm sorry,
man."

(pause)

"Best not to dwell on
it, y'know?"

CAIN's silence speaks for himself. A car passes by the window. Meanwhile, a few people from the front counter watch the news coverage. 'WORLD WAR 3?' can be read from the news ticker.

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

"She ain't the only
one."

CAIN's gaze is elsewhere throughout most of the one-sided conversation. This is not what he wants to hear. Detached, serious, and depressed.

NICHOLAS

[sighs]

"Okay, look at it this way.
You might as well be Rambo
getting mixed with Dorothy."

With this statement, CAIN finally cracks a smile. Brief laughter can be heard beneath his demeanor. From the bridge of understanding constructed between them, the tension is put to rest.

NICHOLAS
"Respectfully, it was
doomed from the start,
man."

CAIN nods, knowing that his friend has good intentions.

NICHOLAS
(jokingly)
"Anyway, you learn how to
smile by yourself or did
Rachel give you an acting
lesson?"

Both share a laugh and catch up on other factors, regarding each of their lives. A couple of hours pass... Though strain may not be present, concern takes its place once NICHOLAS takes notice of CAIN's gaze towards an army recruitment stand. The person behind it seems to be giving away fliers and such in hopes to enlist veterans or some fresh meat into the ongoing war. CAIN is familiar with only one world...and it's not this one.

NICHOLAS
"Listen, I gotta go. Stay
strong, alright? Try not
to work yourself over
nothing, like usual."

CAIN takes another sip, not really applying much to his wisdom. Then, something catches NICHOLAS's attention, but the camera does not show what he's looking at.

NICHOLAS
"If you ever need me
again, you'll know where
I'll be."

NICHOLAS scooches up and off the seat.

NICHOLAS

"One day at a time, CAIN."

He nods and NICHOLAS leaves. A female server approaches CAIN without even acknowledging NICHOLAS's presence, but it's subtle.

FEMALE SERVER
(plainly)
"Need a refill,
hun?"

CUT

TO:

Blizzard by Twxg BEGINS

MONTAGE

- Sleep, Wake Up, Breakfast, Work, Drive Home, Dinner, Repeat. Stuck in a loop. CAIN works as a car mechanic. The paycheck helps him survive, though he prefers to live. Newspapers pile at home, mostly regarding the ongoing war.
- Headaches return in waves every now and then, which prescribed medication pills are swallowed every time to suppress the painful memories, but never forget.
- Each week, he attends a Veterans Help Center to cope with getting back into civilization. A MALE JANITOR with a green uniform and cap can be seen cleaning the floor from the background.
- As scheduled, he sees a shrink. She asks about the incident during CAIN's time in VIETNAM. He doesn't budge. The psychologist's notes can be seen briefly. <Aggressive behavior links back to PTSD. DEPRESSION and TBI are treatable, but refuses antidepressants. Fatigue relates back to his dejection. Daydreaming remains a concern.>
- A FEMALE JANITOR with a green uniform and cap can be noticed off the side after CAIN's session has concluded.

MUSIC ENDS

- On the job, CAIN sees an upset customer complain about how slow his car's progress is.
- Our protagonist returns his focus when installing a

tire. He hopes to never deal with that pompous guy.

- Unfortunately, that day does arrive. The heated interaction between CAIN & the disgruntled customer leads to a PTSD moment which triggers CAIN to severely injure him.
- Other workers manage to pull CAIN off the beaten individual, but we cut to him being spoken to by his manager in his office. The conversation doesn't look good.

CUT

TO:

INT. CAIN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

CAIN arrives home to his small, lonely, messy apartment with no job. The kitchen floor has a chess board appearance and the dining table is simple but adequate, two chairs standing on opposite sides. The kitchen, itself, is sufficient, but filthy An empty pizza box and various amounts of Chinese food containers decor the room. Additionally, the living room is unusually spacious and would be considered empty if not for the small dining room and the dark-green couch, dark-red carpet, and the landline phone stationed beside the couch within the living room. He displays no sign of enjoyment as he tosses the mail onto the dining table and heads to his restroom to prepare himself for a shower.

A BRIGHT-PINK ENVELOPE lays amongst the rest of the mail pile. The symbol consists of an American flag with the term 'Blessings' overlapped. After drying up and getting dressed, he heads to the kitchen to make dinner. With the dish placed on the table, he doesn't bother going through his mail, but instead takes out a newspaper from the table. CAIN skims through the text that contained information in regards to a series of killings.

Reports say that a masked individual supposedly attacked and killed everyone in a bar. It's speculated that most of the victims are related to the RUSSIAN MOB. 'UPGRADES IN POLICE ARSENAL?' can be read from the left which details officers seen with lethal hand grenades. Some speculate this change in relation to the current political war climate. Concern from citizens rises, morale plummets. Signs of a new line of mob-related narcotics have surfaced.

In other news, American & Russian relations are escalating

following the assassination of MIKHAIL GORBACHEV and a question hovers over a picture of billionaire JOSEPH BERG.
HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

MATCH-CUT

TO:

INT. BERG MANSION - NIGHT

Pulling away, we're introduced to someone else. He's bald and seems a bit stressed when reading until he's pulled out of his deep fixation on the photograph from the calling of his name.

ROSA
"Richter!"

RICHTER snaps out of it. Returning his gaze to the papers, he sees blood on his hands. His heart suddenly beats so rapidly to the point where he feels like passing out. Closing his eyes, he slows his breath, his heart settling. After a few deep breaths, RICHTER gets up from the chair. A quick montage shows this man preparing food, slicing any and all into smaller pieces before resuming to an appropriate walking pace upon entering a bedroom. RICHTER's mother is sitting upright on her bed, watching T.V.

She seems to be in poor condition, hooked up to a machine which monitors her heart rate, temperature, brain activity, and oxygen intake.

Her selection of prescribed medicine canisters sit on her right nightstand, although mostly empty containers fill the surface. Lastly, a folded wheelchair seems to be leaning against that same nightstand.

RICHTER
"I'm sorry, I got distracted."

RICHTER unfolds the bed tray with only his left hand since the other is occupied with the actual dish. After setting the tray over ROSA's blanketed legs, he places the food on top of it with extreme care. The television set is top of the line. The big screen sits at the far end of the bed. The news covers poverty in the community, racial tension, the rise in drug use and some thoughts over the current status of The Cold War. Then, an announcement

interrupts to send word that the U.S president has been shot. Only 3 months in office. A silent shock hits the room. It's uncertain how or when, but the news anchor tries to assure that any new info will be provided as soon as possible.

ROSA
(quietly)
"Oh my God."

With Reagan dead, George H. W. Bush will hold the position as president. God only knows what will take place next, according to His despicable plan. RICHTER rubs his hands together nervously, his right heel lightly tapping the floor. Gloomy conceptions of the future worm inside. Too much uncertainty. His mother takes notice of this.

ROSA
(tenderly)
"It's okay, dear. Things have to get worse to get better. Even the other way around! That's what your father always says."

[returns attention toward the screen]

"Though, I would appreciate it if people would stop acting like animals."

RICHTER tries his best to avoid showing any sign of his anxiety in an attempt to lighten the mood.

RICHTER
[switching the channel]
"Please eat. You shouldn't be watching this stuff anyway. It's bad for your health."

ROSA
[struggles to find the utensils]
"It's not healthy for you either."

RICHTER acknowledges the issue and assists his mother by acquiring the fork, which was in front of her the whole time,

and placing it in her hand. Shortly after realizing her error, she quietly laughs it off. It may be mild for now, but her illness will worsen without her prescribed medicine.

RICHTER
(reassuring smile)
"I know."

Consuming her meal, it took no time for his mother to come up with another thought.

ROSA
(innocent)
"Have you heard from your father yet? Joey usually arrives home quite late."

RICHTER
(holding back sorrow)
"I-I haven't yet."

ROSA
[eating & watching T.V]
"When do you think he'll be back?"

RICHTER
(deep inner gloom)
"I don't know..."

ROSA
(sighs)
"I wish you two would talk. Families shouldn't be divided."

In that moment, RICHTER's eyes are in gloomy contemplation. Subsequently, his mother's gags and messy hurls prompts RICHTER to jump into action by sprinting to the right side of the bed & aiding ROSA to aim her vomit downward into the black, plastic trash bin. While the sound of puke carries on, it fades and transitions to the POV of the droplets of fluid within the canister beneath the I.V bag, tenderly zooming in. The rhythm of the droplets landing syncs with the ticking of a clock.

DISSOLVE

TO:

INT. RICHTER'S HOUSE, DINING ROOM/KITCHEN - MIDNIGHT

The hanging clock on the wall lightly suggests an invisible tension. RICHTER seems to have an everyday routine as each duty is sorted and completed like clockwork. Dish-washing, Laundry, Cooking, even helping his mother bathe.

He sacrifices every ounce of his personal life just so ROSA can survive and he can be with her since she's all he has left.

RICHTER is rummaging through scattered papers of medical, housing, water, gas, and electricity bills. So many zeros to process with not enough funds to make up for it.

Too many problems. Would he be able to pay for all of these expenses in time and save his mom? The odds sure are stacked against RICHTER. Thinking back on a time where it was simpler, an image of his father going out the door fuels him to push forward.

A New Morning by Eirik Suhrke BEGINS

MONTAGE

> The next early morning, he preps himself for work as a meat delivery driver. Though the job is lousy, the pay is decent. Still, if he plans on solely relying on his job to fulfill all expenses, they'll succumb to the deadline regardless. RICHTER gets blood on his hands from the meat and runs away. He struggles to wash it off in the public men's room.

> One day, after getting ready for work, a foreclosure notice attached onto the front door catches RICHTER's eye. Before driving to work, he makes a detour at the bank.

> The conversation with the manager is tame, but not for long. Frustration and stress is written all over RICHTER's face.

> He leaves EMPTY-HANDED.

> With no plan at all, anger builds in his place of work.

> Eventually, the company is forced to shut down due to economic conditions, leaving everyone from the business without a job, including RICHTER.

CUT

TO:

INT. BERG MANSION - EVENING

Arriving home, exhausted, he gathers the mail from the floor before checking on his ROSA only to find her resting peacefully in her room. A brief clarity is present until RICHTER gently closes the door.

MUSIC ENDS

Eventually, he rests his legs by sitting down at the dining table. Going through countless spam & bills, he stops at a PINK ENVELOPE.

He examines it briefly, reading the address and number of the '50 Blessings Organization'. Same signia as CAIN's letter. Curiosity pulls him in once RICHTER opens the envelope and pulls out the pink letter. Upon reading the word 'job', it was over. This was an opportunity he simply could not pass up. Hanging from the end of the memo, a strange symbol fills the empty space. A red circle with the line slashed across, toward the left.

SMOOTH TRANSITION

TO:

INT. CAIN'S APARTMENT - LATE EVENING

CAIN grabs the phone to dust it off and presses the provided numbers from the pink newsletter. Planting himself on the couch, he waits. He holds the phone next to his ear with his left hand while the right carries the pink.

It reads, 'Thank you for subscribing to our newsletter. We appreciate your interest in our cause. America is a tune. It must be sung together.' As the phone continues beeping, images of a mission flash before his eyes. Jungle, his comrades, unidentifiable bodies, communism propaganda, computer consoles, an enemy power plant stronghold. The beeping syncs with the beat & pace in 'M.O.O.N - Paris'. Eventually, the noise and PTSD cease.

FEMALE OPERATOR

(friendly)

"Thank you for calling 50 Blessings! Your business is OUR business. How may I be of assistance?"

CAIN doesn't answer, rather he is unable. Signs of doubt & regret can be read from his face. Would this attempt even aid his situation? Should he just give up? An overwhelming sense

of emotion and claustrophobia around the chest push CAIN into a quiet panic attack. A long and awkward silence hangs the call in the balance until the operator chooses to break it.

FEMALE OPERATOR

(friendly)

"Please wait while I transfer your call."

The quick response from the operator and relocation of the call had caught CAIN off-guard. The American anthem chorus plays for only a short duration.

MANAGER

(warm)

"Evening, Cain! How are you?"

The sniffing ceased after realization strikes. Cautious, at first, now puzzled. How? Why?

MANAGER

"Yes, I know who you are. But most importantly, I know what you need."

CAIN remains silent, listening closely.

MANAGER

"I realize this is intrusive, but I'm a busy man. I'm aware of your current situation and know what you've gone through. I'm sorry that you, an individual that deserves nothing but the utmost respect, were so unfairly disposed of like trash."

CAIN finds this call becoming increasingly strange.

MANAGER

"I'll take your silence as a sign of impatience, so allow me to cut to the chase."

MANAGER (CONT'D)

"America is a land of opportunity and that's exactly what I provide for those who have none. Though, you must first ask yourself: Do you wish to get out of the hole you're in? And if so, how bad?"

The very question hits CAIN from a personal angle. He looks at his surroundings with uncertainty.

The state of his apartment reflects his lack of purpose, relations, hope, and order. He glances over the end table, the picture of his comrades still inside.

CAIN switches his eyes at the small dining table. A single bullet stands next to his resting handgun, awaiting the final decision. His friend would object to this sketchy proposal. On the other hand, NICHOLAS would wish for him to live. What choice does he have?

CAIN

(hesitant/cautious)

"What do I need to do?"

CUT

TO:

INT. 50 BLESSINGS ORG. LOUNGE - EARLY MORNING

Though the room may be welcoming and professional, RICHTER's thoughts wander.

His right heel rapidly taps against the floor, showing subtle signs of anxiety. Leaning forward with his elbows placed on top of his knees, the ticks from the hanging clock grow louder.

His face carries a serious look as the audience is presented with the activity within his head.

Quick scenarios of his ROSA flatlining or ending up dead in the streets play in front of his uneasy gaze. So many probabilities that aren't impossible for the time being.

FEMALE SECRETARY

"Richter Berg?"

RICHTER snaps out of it and tries his best to avoid appearing unhinged.

FEMALE SECRETARY

"He will see you now."

CUT

TO:

INT. 50 BLESSINGS ORG. - HALLWAY

As the professional leads the way, RICHTER follows her. Rows

of doors stand aside the two while they walk past each one. A majority are labeled 'EMPLOYEES ONLY' and some have no indication to where they lead at all, besides a few. From the sidelines, a gentleman in a recognizable janitor outfit is kneeling down, scrubbing the carpet. Next, an EXECUTIVE walks out of a conference room down the hall and another man with long black hair, green eyes, wearing an all white suit, like a crazed Al Pacino, follows. They shake hands. Eventually, we arrive at an office and the secretary opens the door for RICHTER.

FEMALE SECRETARY
"Sir? Mr. Berg."

The MANAGER waves his hand away until he raises his head and takes notice of RICHTER's presence. Quickly, he changes his mind and kindly invites RICHTER inside. She then exits the scene so the two may proceed with their meeting, leaving the door open for the 'soon-to-be' employee. The businessman holds a great amount of respect for his own appearance as he's well-dressed and properly groomed for an executive. The office is pretty large and expensive enough for any gaze to take in the sight without becoming too distracted. In fact, the whole facility has looked well-funded.

MANAGER
(low-tone mutters)
"With all due respect, you're in no position to negotiate."

(sighs annoyingly after short pause)
"What do you want exactly?"

Meanwhile, RICHTER walks around the room, examining a large shelf of books. A majority of the publications revolve around military psychology, mental practices, and corporation managing. He rubs his hands together to calm his nerves. RICHTER is unable to put two and two together.

MANAGER
[in the background]
"It's unfortunate that you chose to take the mask by heart."

He hangs and turns his attention towards his soon-to-be-employee before getting up from his seat.

MANAGER

"Mr. Berg, how are you this morning?"

RICHTER

"Um, fine, just interviews and all."

MANAGER

(light-hearted)

"I completely understand. I'll keep it nice and simple, okay? Why don't you have a seat and relax for the time being?"

The gentleman then pulls out a chair for RICHTER and gently pushes his seat toward the desk afterwards. The MANAGER moves to a corner of the room where a coffee machine is installed.

MANAGER

(serving himself)

"Coffee?"

RICHTER

"Uh, yes! Thanks."

MANAGER

"Black?"

RICHTER

"Please."

(awkward pause)

"Actually, sugar would be nice. Sorry."

MANAGER

(reassuring)

"No need to apologize. We've all got our own desires."

We get a clear shot of this man adding the sugar. Soonafter, he returns to his future employee and hands him the mug. Finally, the MANAGER takes his seat. Leaning to the side, he pulls a drawer outward and pulls out RICHTER's file; opening it.

MANAGER

"So, you worked as a delivery man for meat products?"

RICHTER
"Y-Yes."

MANAGER
"For how long?"

RICHTER
"A couple years now, I think. Um, how do you know this?"

MANAGER
[closes the file]
"Of course. 50 Blessings is a unique program, designed to assist our dedicated patriots such as yourself, Mr. Berg. However, we also find it necessary to go over the background of any potential employee like any other corporation. Safety precautions, I'm sure you understand."

RICHTER
"Right, the letter mentioned that. Kinda."

The MANAGER chuckles, applying warmth into the conversation.

MANAGER
(calm/welcoming)
"Just to be clear, this isn't exactly an interview. You technically got the job the moment you scheduled an appointment with me. All that's required now is your acceptance...and some particular documentation, so we may estimate how much we can provide for your financial need."

RICHTER
(skeptical)
"Okay. Um, the letter didn't specify that, so what do I need to do?"

The MANAGER carefully reads RICHTER's movement, gives a soft smile.

MANAGER
"That's alright, we can take care of that later. May I ask what made you come to us for aid?"

RICHTER
"I..uh..don't have enough money to keep up with the bills

and, on top of that, the house is heading to the market for sale."

MANAGER
[opens file]
"Really? Woof."

RICHTER
(sadly)
"Yeah."

RICHTER averts eye contact. The MANAGER reviews the gathered information regarding the family fortune.

MANAGER
"Hmmm, says here you were up for the inheritance money from your father, Joseph Berg. Granted, he's confirmed missing. My condolences, by the way. Yet, you're here. Asking for more."

RICHTER is silent.

MANAGER
(closes file)
"I'll go easy on you by choosing not to ring up security, but instead simply ask you...what happened?"

There's a tense pause. RICHTER's hands lightly grip onto one another.

RICHTER
"I came back from a war that's left me confused, frustrated, and...hurt."

The MANAGER listens closely. The story forms in his head and his expression indicates genuinity.

RICHTER
(hesitant)
"I was able to come home, but only to see my mother practically on her deathbed. It was...too much for my father. He let out his frustrations in his own special ways. Then, he vanished...so did most of the numbers on our accounts."

The MANAGER shows compassion and understands how powerful the abuse from a loved one can be. He takes this time to contemplate.

MANAGER

"Do you believe in second chances?"

INSERT CUT: YOUNG RICHTER & HIS FATHER, JOSEPH BERG, HAVING A HARSH ARGUMENT

RICHTER

[avoids only his gaze]

"No."

Of course not. How could he ever forgive a person from breaking his duty as a parent? Leaving his wife & child to fend for themselves out of pettiness. In any case, this response doesn't surprise the MANAGER. Now, for the real test.

MANAGER

(respectfully)

"You ever watched hope die before you. A drowning sense of helplessness crushing your chest."

RICHTER returns his attentiveness after that comment. The MANAGER takes a sip of his coffee before setting it down.

MANAGER

(relaxed)

"Yes, I can tell. You see, I believe in second chances because, like miracles, they come at a rarity. They feel satisfying after the long fight. Though, it doesn't cover all scenarios. Do you know why that is?"

RICHTER shakes his head with uncertainty.

MANAGER

(slightly disappointed)

"It's simple. Not enough people are producing them by taking risks. The appropriate ones, anyway."

RICHTER awaits for further explanation.

MANAGER

"The people can't simply wait for those in charge to make decisions that could likely betray our very way of living. Time and time again, promises are crushed by those who don't seem to know any better when they should, even now."

(pause)

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Given RICHTER's past experiences, particularly with his father's absence, how would he not? In fact, this talk is reassuring in a way. The similarity in ideology calls for a unity in likeness.

RICHTER

"I think I do."

The MANAGER lets out a delighted sigh, showing gratefulness, despite the answer having been predicted. That he had won.

MANAGER

"That's good to hear."

The MANAGER gives off a sense of insecurity. A downplay technique. Every relatable notion increases RICHTER's self-esteem, motivating him. To do whatever it takes to improve personal conditions. To one-up his father.

MANAGER (CONT.)

"I don't know. I guess sometimes I need reassurance that I'm not alone on some matters."

RICHTER

(certain)

"You're not."

The MANAGER looks up to RICHTER. Got'em. It's as if a bridge of emotional bonding has begun construction.

RICHTER

"So, what's the job?"

MANAGER

(soft smile)

"I'm glad you're still interested."

CUT

TO:

INT. CAIN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

CAIN is slumped into the couch, next to the phone. He's waiting for an incoming call. His weighty, still and unwavering stare into the camera is unsettling. The camera slowly creeps toward him. Then, the phone rings and another memory plays before his eyes for just under a few seconds. Some type of explosion went off in front of two armed combat figures. CAIN listens to a cryptic message from the phone, giving no sense of discomfort. Just another order.

UNKNOWN

[from the other line]

"Hello, this is Tim! Sorry to disturb you. I just wanted to inform you that your prescribed medication should have arrived by now. Have a pleasant night!"

The call ends. He takes the liberty to grab his pistol from under a pillow from his bedroom and two magazines. He hides his piece within his person.

MANAGER (V.O.)

"You'll be given a time and location. The message will differ every go-around."

CAIN doesn't bother taking his iconic jacket. He heads for the door. Upon opening it, he's greeted with a package. Now, this has him cautiously puzzled. He stares at it for a few seconds and surveys around with his eyes before kneeling down. His hands carefully examine the box, he even tests the weight. Finally, CAIN brings it in and closes the door. Placing it onto the floor again, he searches for a box-cutter and returns to open the package up from the top. He begins rummaging through the packing peanuts.

MANAGER (V.O.)

"You'll then be provided with the necessary equipment to assist you."

A baseball bat, two knives, & a pair of surgical gloves rest within the box, along with a note. Specific instructions are

contributed, stating that retrieving a black briefcase is of the utmost importance. Afterwards, the case must be placed at the given location, discreetly. Furthermore, a second concealment will not be provided. The last few sentences are separated from the rest of the passage. <Discretion is required for this mission. Assume everyone is a threat. No witnesses. No evidence. Failure is not an option. Look for the sign.> CAIN examines each melee weapon, noticing everything that could've been traceable is completely gone. Upon searching further, a specially-designed, rubber mask is revealed. It takes the shape of a rooster. It has that fresh new scent, but there's something else. Taking further inspection, one breath into the mask was all it took. The lacing jumpstarts his primal instincts. His eyes pop in this narcotic jumpstart.

CUT BACK

TO:

INT. 50 BLESSINGS ORG., MANAGER'S OFFICE - MORNING

RICHTER

"I'm guessing this isn't the usual type of service. Mind if I can have a number to call whenever?"

The MANAGER considers this. Almost like he's debating the outcome in his head.

MANAGER

(professional)

"Of course. Will that be an issue?"

RICHTER

"Depends. How much am I getting?"

EXT. CLOSED BRICKELL METRO ENTRANCE - NIGHT

The environment seems to have suffered through crime after crime, judging from the graffiti and cut caution tape waving in the wind. Just the look of it screams horror-esque. Among the graffiti, a fresh, blood-red circle with three lines stretching across toward the left lays before the other art.

MANAGER (V.O.)

"More than enough, I assure you."

INT. ABANDONED BRICKELL METRO

Through the caution tape, indistinct speech can be heard. Once the camera is close enough, the language is clear. Russian suits? One, in particular, is watching the entrance/exit for any who dares to interrupt the private transaction. Russian radio chatter is captured from his walkie and the goon responds. Just as the conversation concluded, so did his life. [For now, we're never given a clear visual of CAIN nor this savage version of him. Skillfully switching from 1st person to a more fitting cinematic point of view whenever appropriate.] CAIN wraps his arm around the Russian's mouth and violently shoves the blade across his jugular. With haste, he brutally deepens & passes the cold metal straight through the neck and pulls the goon into the shadows in swift succession. The blood squeaks and pours out from the severed major veins. As the helpless thug bleeds out, his shoes frantically squeak against the slippery floor. In the meantime, the knife is messily shoved into his cranium and plunges repeatedly elsewhere. The baseball bat and second blade are seemingly holstered within his person. Gear straps from his time in service grants this assistance. An echoing, whistled tune grabs the attention of CAIN. The source is coming from the bathroom. He carefully makes his way toward the entrance. Peeking through the crack of the door, another Russian suit appears to be relieving himself at a urinal. CAIN controls his breathing within the mask as a way to keep the volume of himself at a low tone. CAIN quietly enters.

INT. MEN'S ROOM

The Russian speaks into a phone from his left hand. He's speaking to someone in a loving manner, toward someone by the name of 'ANGELA'. Wife? Daughter? Doesn't matter. The enemy says his final goodbye and hangs up. After putting away the phone, CAIN's unsettlingly blurry, still figure is revealed, waiting for the proper moment to strike. This man zips himself up at the same time the side of his head meets with the end of a baseball bat. The sounds he makes on the ground is unnerving. At least, they're silenced when the bat strikes his skull again and again.

CUT

TO:

INT. BRICKELL METRO STATION

Three suits are pressuring another man, a nerdy-looking corporate architect, into yielding the briefcase. He shows great guilt over the contents of the case.

What lies within will have the likelihood to create severe changes for the future. A fourth goon is standing watch from the end of the hall. He receives an interrupted transmission from the talkie and attempts to regain communication with the person on the other end.

With no reply, he decides to check up on the other two henchmen which only leads to his own death.

ORPHEUS: XL

