



ORPHHEUS

VOL. 39

Orpheus volume 39 published Spring 2022

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you,

Bailey and Sidney Russell

Orpheus 2022



California State University, Bakersfield

Orpheus 2022 Staff

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

The Rest of Our Fabulous Editing Team:

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

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

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

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

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

Sila Ersinarsinivdluge and Ludite! *Homo Ludens*

Contents

Poetry

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

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

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

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

before it's too late	77
Ian Tash	
The Third Acts	78
Anju Tokano	
World	80
Adriana Toledo	
We're over	82
Embodied Desire	82
Leah Truitt	
Oyster Shells	83
Wishing for Canaries	83
Milk Tea	83
In Memory	84
Wes D. Werner	
Thalassophobia	84
Monica Williams	
Contemplation...?	85
A Mother's Addiction	86
Left side Strong side	86
Roman Wolosz	
Survive	87
Yubo Zhou	
You	88
<i>Short Story</i>	
Teresa Alcantar	
I Wish I Knew	91
Rosa Arredondo	
Gumball	92
Vanessa Beltran	
Charlie, Charlie	96
Live Art, A Short Story	99

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

Melinda Quach

- The Knight of Trustworthiness: The Liar Who Lies All His Life157
The Lives of Louise Labé163

Alexis Robinson

- The Dream173

Angel Rosas

- Big Sister's Night174

Destinee Sims

- The Fey's Dance183

Ian Tash

- The First Wave.....188
Brain ALPHAsize194
Artificial Creative Technology195
Breakfast195

Leah Truitt

- Midnight Meanderings197
Snickerdoodles201
I Wasn't Expecting A Ring202

Wes D. Werner

- You Are Here205

Monica Williams

- Corona-cation215

Nonfiction

Samantha Nichols

- The Night: 28 Sept 2009217

Drama

Madison King

- Wrathful Seed221

Ian Tash

- Keeping Up with the Kattamas229

Monica Williams

- It's Dark Inside Sunshine Market241

Artwork Contents

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

Poetry



World (colored pencils) by Anju Tokano

Azam Abbasi

Who Can Find Me?

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

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

Who can find me?

My Dream

What is your **dream**?

Do you want to be rich?

To get married?

To achieve goals in your job?

Everyone has their own **dream**.

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

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

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

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

私の夢

あなたの夢は何ですか。

お金持ちになること？

結婚すること？

仕事で成功すること？

皆、それぞれの夢がある。

時々自分の持っている夢を否定する人がいるけれど、

でも、自分を信じ続ければ大丈夫

周りに惑わされないで

私の夢は、健康に笑顔で暮らして

いつか必ずホテルマンになること

I am Riyan

My name is Riyan.

I will be 9 years old soon.

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

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

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

My mother does everything for me.

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

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

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

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

It is always noisy in my house.

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

I'm glad I came into this family.

僕はリヤン

もうすぐ9歳になるよ

可愛ってよく言われるけど、男だよ

父、母、姉、弟の4人に飼われてるよ

パパは朝散歩に行ってくれるし、おやつもくれる

ママはなんでもしてくれる

お姉ちゃんのかまちょだし、おやつもくれない

弟は散歩中走ってくれる

姉は僕が寝てる時に起こしてくるから嫌い

週末はドッグランに行ける

僕の家はいつもうるさい

でも今はお姉ちゃんが留学でいないから少し寂しい

僕はこの家に来て幸せだ!

Teresa Alcantar

Beach Front Trailer

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

Sign of poverty

Set in that of luxury

But perfect as one

Somiah Alqobadi

Alone

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

Ann Antonio

.....
Expectations from the Great Wave

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

.....
Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon was spectacular.

I saw a helicopter through a gap in the mountain.

It was like a little bean.

I am smaller than that bean.

I know the fact the world is wide.

I want to go there again.

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

It is not a place I would go twice.

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

グランドキャニオンは壮大であった。

グランドキャニオンの山の間隙からヘリコプターが見えた。

それは小さな豆のよう

そんな豆より小さい自分

世界の大きさを知る

もう一度行こうか、

....いや、もう一度見るべきではない。

そこは二度と行くような場所ではない。

壮大な記憶を忘れずに永遠に自分に留めておくことが大切だ

Shawn A. Avalos

cloud9

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

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

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



IRREVERENT SELF (canvas with acrylics) by Madison King

Joe Bejarano

P.S. Journey

She says I've been waiting...

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

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

Vanessa Beltran

.....
Desire, Incarnate.

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

.....
Je cherche encore...¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fin.

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

Je cherche encore...²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fin.

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

I am still looking...²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

End.

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

Alyssa Cantu

The Facets of Excellence

Put me under high pressure~ to undergo the correction.

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

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

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

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

CYCLE



The World Is Yours



From Left: Lischa, Fatyma, Alyssa, Teresa

Fatyma Cendejas

Te Amo

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

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

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

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

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

Ana Dominguez

Mother Nature

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enlightenment

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

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

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

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

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

Carlos Ervin

The Moon

Without light
Only fear can prevail.
No hope~
Is how one falls.
Life...? Death...?
Questions we cannot
Ponder~fear of
the Unknown.
I see the Sun~
Awaken my life.



America (photography) by Kevin Lara

Moises B. Fuentes

.....
Please Excuse Our Mess While We Renovate

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

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

The bland taste of structure
A regular midnight craving.

Stability

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

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

Chin up. You're doing ok.

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

Speak up. You're doing ok.

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

Madelyn Gaines

Foolish Hope

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

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

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

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

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

Surfing the Waves

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

Abandonment

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

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

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

Twisted Epiphany

The damage is
the treasure
that is not mine
to find

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

Cosme Garcia

CHANGE

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

PAST

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

PRESENT

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

Life goes on.

FUTURE

?

Maia Garcia

Strawberry Pie

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

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

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

sometimes just to see you.

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

Red

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

soft enough to filter the day and,

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

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

El Dorado

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

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

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

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

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

Love enough to make me,
And make me only.

Hollowed

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

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

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

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

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

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

Missy

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

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

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

No fruit?

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

To reach into your Sleep.

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

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

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

remains and regrets for the poison of pills

a boy, held over the basin of the world

and let go.

~ ~ ~

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

Christopher Gomez

Forbidden

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



Claustrophobia (photography) by Kevin Lara

Bat-Ami Gordin

Notes From A Metro Line

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

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

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

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

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

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

Black Cat on White Picket Fence

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

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

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

Table of My Ideal Life

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

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

22歳までに大学を卒業したい。

サッカーか英語にかかわる仕事に就きたい。

30歳までには結婚したい。

不自由なく生活できるくらいにお金を稼ぎたい。

いつか子供が欲しい。

定年退職までは頑張って働きたい。

60歳くらいまでには孫が欲しい。

老後は今まで貯めたお金で家族と楽しく過ごしたい。

なるべく長生きしたい。

Ruben Higareda Suarez

In the Moment collection

A Sad Morning

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

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

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

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

Sister

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

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

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

優しい人

優しい人とは誰だろう。
思いやりのある人。
穏やかで温厚な人。
あなたの意見に共感してくれる人。
あなたのために怒れる人。
我慢して怒らない人。
あなたが欲しい言葉をかけてくれる人。

人によってやさしさの感じ方は違う。
優しくないと考えた人ももしかしたら誰かにとっては優しい人なのかもしれない。
自分の印象が悪くなったとしても反論してあなたを守る優しい人もいるだろう。
逆に、あなたの選択が良くなくてもそれを言わないであなたに共感する
優しくない人もいるだろう。

優しさとは何だろう。

優しい人とは誰だろう。



Journey

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

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

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

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

旅

突然

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

空港

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

ニューヨーク

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

グランドキャニオン

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

Uriel Jacobo-Prado

The Perfect Figure

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

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

Lola Jimenez

Universe

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

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

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

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



Crushing Rocks (photography) by Kevin Lara

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

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

The Creature in my Heart

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

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

.....

The Morning of a Part Time Job

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

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

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

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

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

Greet the floor staff.

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

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

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

Boil eggs,
cut fruits and vegetables,
make sauces.

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

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

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

朝6時40分に、車のエンジンをつけて、家を出る

東京の端にある、大通りに面したパンケーキ屋

車を裏口に止め、鍵を開ける

冷えた店内には、私のほかに誰もいない

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

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

キッチンで働く私は、大きなボウルでパンケーキの生地を作る

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

出勤一時間後、開店と共に、もう一人の従業員がやってくる

卵を茹でたり、野菜やフルーツを切ったり、ソースを作ったり

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

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

懐かしいロックミュージックと、
コーヒーミルの音を聴きながら

Mary Killeen Pena

For Medical Reasons

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Madison King



For My Beloved

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

24 December 2020

Modernity of the Wallpaper

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

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

Untitled

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

Kevin Lara

Thoughts for the Alimentation of the Soul¹

A thing is good.

A thing born for things? Impossible.

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

Is wisdom really things?

They have the things.

People are things.

And honor is things.

Your life is cum.

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

The offender is what is right here.

The infinity gapes us.

An idiot? Things.

Remember: tiny your pp. Problem.

The mind is place.

Thoughts.

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



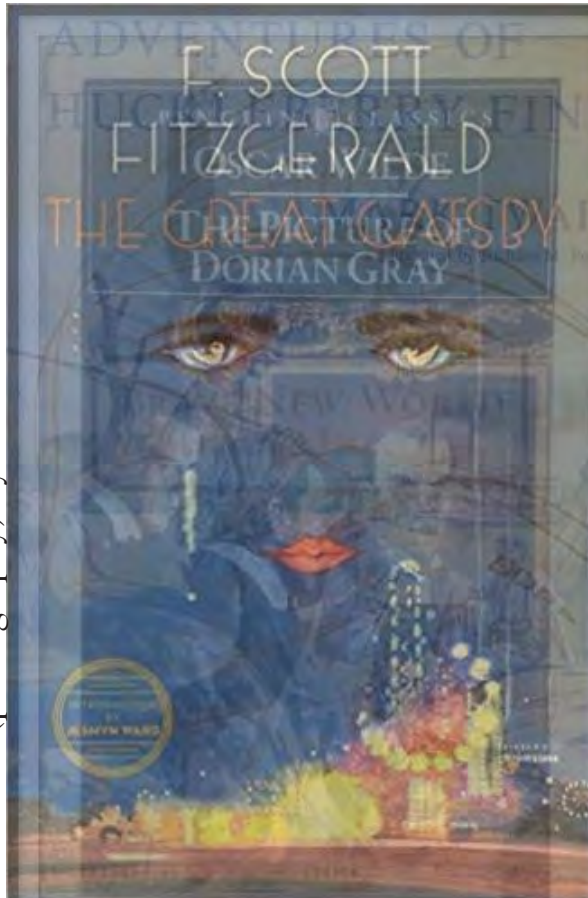
Food for Thought (photography) by Kevin Lara

Musings on a Coincidental Encounter

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

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

Final Exam (photography) by Ian Tash



Ann Marie Lawson

What I Want

What I want out of this life

Is to rise up from the ashes of despair

Exploring life's possibilities

Dreaming the dream of hope

Like an Eagle soaring to new heights

Walking the skyline, Kissing the morning star

Leaving behind fear and failures

What I want out of this life

Is to stand on blue yonder

Gazing into the horizon

From its mountain grandeur

Diving deep into life

Touching its oceans floor

Free from chains and shackles

Pain and woe, drowning in its sorrows

And like a phoenix, rising from the ashes

Spreading her wings to find new beginnings

Finding my place I take authority

Sitting on the rainbow

Watching life cascading down

Making ripples where it falls

Finally! I am relieved, I know who I am

I am free and I have peace

Exhausting a Place, Myself

Butterflies, Hummingbird, Bee

I sat on the back porch

Daffodils, Sunflower, Daisy

Watching the morning unfold

Snail, Grasshopper, Ladybug

The dew blankets the air

Nature's army enters

The grass glitters, wet and shiny

The earthworm slithers on the ground

Birds chirping as they fed

Invasion! Overhead, on the ground

Flying, hopping, from limb to limb

Ants marching in ranks

Singing sweetly, playfully, loudly

The Hummingbird stood still

Of every species, the smallest of them all

Nestled in the sweet nectar

The dawn undresses, the night takes its rest

The morning sun appears

Anahi Lomeli

.....
Convenient Anxiety

Convenient anxiety

Familiar sun warmth

Short of breath

Small but refreshing breeze

Detailed list

“The end is nothing

Strikes across the list

The road is all” The plaque on the floor reads

The more strike-throughs

Crunchy leaves dragging

The deeper I can breath

On the concrete floor by the wind

Don't forget about myself though

Thinking it was a strong succulent

Make sure you love yourself

I accidentally uprooted a plant

And don't forget to smile

Almost everyone walks alone

Alice and the Eat Me Cake

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

Lischa Mears

The Forgotten Song

Raven strands shield his eyes
Black shadows pass him by

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

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

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

The place at his side is a black hole

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

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

He looks to his side
He sees the world

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

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

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

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

Fire and Ice

I am a glacier drifting in cerulean blue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Roaring Silence: A Contrapuntal

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

I am here, but I am not really here.

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

My once, colorful essence is invisible to the eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Before We Became Victims of Time

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

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

Samantha Nichols

Blue Eyes

This floral tea
lingers
on my tongue

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

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

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

Calming, uncaffeinated, delicious pink floral tea

Pencils

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

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

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

Faith, Trust, Pixie Dust

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

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

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

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

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



ALL that

is

GOLD

does

NOT glitter.



- J. R. R. Tolkien

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

Pearl Harbor Answer¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe Louis Nitro

.....
Disposable; Irreplaceable

We were like gloves
The left and the right thereof

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Memory of S.N.

Tori Ortega

.....
Star Girl

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

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

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

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

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

Melinda Quach

Miss Rower of Summer Port¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zachariah Rush

Cruising down North Chester Ave.

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

It seems like yesterday

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

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

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

I really do hope he is alright

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

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

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

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

Samco the site of my former scandal

I'm not sure what more this road can handle

China Grade where I bank and learned my fate

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

.....
Space Odyssey

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

Saturn

Jupiter

Europa

Moon

Sun

Freezing sun Burning red moon Horrible darkness Beautiful galaxy

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

Child's endless daydream

宇宙の旅

準備はいい?
全て投げ出して、行こう!
窓越しに全てが見える
海王星

土星

木星

エウロパ

月

太陽

凍り続ける太陽 赤く燃える月 恐ろしい暗闇 美しい銀河

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

終わらない子供の空想

Lilliawna Shaffer

hazel

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

Mystery Woman by Rivka Jones



Everlasting Impact

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

Spencer Shepard



Horse Meadow Poem

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

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

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

Morning Rituals

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

For Posterity's Sake

father of Mine,

"I could have been
thine Adam."

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

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

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

All I wanted was a Dad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Won't you just go away?

Memories of Spruce Street (photography) by Ian Tash



Lydia Shimeall

wildfire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'm in a maze

I have a dream.
My dream is working at the airport.
When I was a child, I had this dream.

However, **I'm in a maze.**
Because this job is influenced by COVID-19,
a lot of companies are not hiring.
When will COVID-19 end?
What will our future become?

I'm in a maze.
I don't know what to do.
The reason why I'm studying English is because I want to work at the airport.
I know there are a lot of jobs using English.
However, I've never thought about other jobs.

Maybe I can find a new dream, during my study abroad experience.
I'm in a maze.
However, I want to find a new light.

私は迷路の中にいる

私には夢がある。
私の夢は空港で働くことだ。
私が子供の時にこの夢を持った。

しかし、**私は迷路の中にいる。**
なぜなら、この仕事はCOVID-19による影響を受けている。
多く企業が採用を見送っている。
COVID-19はいつ終わるのだろうか？
私たちの未来はどうなるのだろうか？

私は迷路の中にいる。
私は何をしたらよいのか分からない。
英語の勉強をしているのは、空港で働きたいという夢があるからだ。
英語を活かすことのできる仕事が沢山あることは分かっている。
しかし、私は他の仕事を考えたことがない。

留学生活で、新しい夢を見つけることが出来るかもしれない。
私は迷路の中にいる。

Manisha Singh

Exhausting a Place

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

There is nothing to worry about.

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

Will I finish this all-in time?

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

I don't have that much work.

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

Am I doing this correctly?

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

Do I do anything correctly?

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

What time do I have work?

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

STAY AWAY FROM ME

The bright sun in our faces.

TOO CLOSE

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

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

The groups of fishes moving together.

I need to start using my agenda again.

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

I can do this.

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

I should ask for help.

The sound of drills, the green, moldy pond.

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

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

I am good enough.

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

There are three things due tomorrow.

Black long skinny koi eating the circle things.

I can finish it after work.

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

Can I handle all of this?

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

Am I taking on too much?

The smell of fresh air and nature in the air.

It's not enough.

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

BREATHE BREATHE

The sudden silence, everything is still.

I'm okay.

Trenten Sorci

Gods and Death

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

Rachel Stratemeier

A Relationship

You wrote on me with black sharpie.

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

You began.

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

And why did you do it?

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

But you did it regardless.

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

Just like you wanted me to.

Somewhere

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

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

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

I finally understand my life.

Morgan Swift

Wishful Thinking

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

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

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

before it's too late

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ian Tash

The Third Acts

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

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

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

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

Expecting a gift
Looking upon these two men
Utterly transfixed

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

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

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

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

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

Clinging to the men
To Solomon's Portico
Astonishing all

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

Divine ancestry
Chances given to us all
Even Pilate knew

Willful rejection
Holy and righteous knowledge
Embraced death instead

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

Remember the name
Galvanize your weak beings
Transform before all

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

Old prophets foretold
Salvation from suffering
Divine now fulfills

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

Divine refreshment
New leadership appointed
Priestly and kingly

Old prophets foretold
Justly restored universe
More leaders to come

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

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

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

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

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

Anju Tokano

Japanese

.....
world

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

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

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

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

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

I like that world.

世界

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

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

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

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

違いはとても面白く、素晴らしく、必要不可欠な要素だ。

私はそんな世界が好きだ。

Adriana Toledo

.....
We're over

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

Embodied Desire

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

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

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

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

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

Leah Truitt

Oyster Shells

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

Wishing for Canaries

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

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

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

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

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

Milk Tea

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

In Memory

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

Wes D. Werner

Thalassophobia

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

Monica Williams

Contemplation...?

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

The void is so vast;

I *feel* it.

Do *you feel* space?

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

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

A Still Beach (photography) by Kevin Lara



A mother's addiction

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

Left side Strong side

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

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

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

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

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

Roman Woloosz

Survive

I am pushed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

你

You

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

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

You waited at the end; I saw you but stand.
You smiled at me; I responded dully.
The picture in my dream; You are now in front of me.
I tried to get closer; But I couldn't give what you wanted.
Ideals gave way to reality.
Years later, I would still remember that summer and you.
The future wedding, where I would be the guest giving my best wish.



Damaged (painting) by Maia Garcia



Short Story

Teresa Alcantar

I Wish I Knew

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rosa Arredondo

Gumball

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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



Scarred for Life by Rivka Jones  @rivkas_art_ Scar from Disney's *The Lion King*

Vanessa Beltran

Charlie, Charlie

I have *never* made a worse choice.

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

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

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

But DAMN.

There is sooo much fucking glitter!

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

"CHARLIE!!"

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

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

She had taste, what can I say?

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

"BABY BLUE GLITTER!" she yelled.

I blinked.

Gave her a long stare, and then blinked again.

"What?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Light stuff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was nothing I could do.

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

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

So, I made a plan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Charlie, Charlie. Are you there?”

YES!!!!!!!

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

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

I could taste it, the end...

But then she did the unexpected.

“Can you...be my friend?”

Wait...what?

Oh shit...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have *never* made a better choice.

Live Art, A Short Story

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

² scandal

Richard Boyd

The Princess and the Aye-Aye

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The End

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



Digital Art by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelfreader

Kathryn Buys

That Night in Banagher Forest

Part I:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, of course,” Father Cormac replied.

“Aye,” the oilliphéist said.

Part II:

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

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

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

CORMAC: Níl mo chuid Gaelge chomh maith sin.

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

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

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

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

CORMAC: When did you hatch, Ruaidhrí?

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

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

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

CORMAC: What kind of things did he do?

RUAIDHRI: What did he do? (*Looks to the side for a second and flicks his tongue out like a snake before staring at Father Cormac again.*) God, what did he NOT do? Human sacrifices, including child and virgin sacrifices, burning entire villages, killing and eating humans, animals, and warlocks for sport, he was a monster. He killed one of his own sons, my ma's brother, because he feared he would become more powerful than him and that he wanted to overthrow him and become the most feared dragon in Ireland. He was a narcissist who only loved himself. He might have liked my grandmother enough to mate with her and he might have favored my mother among his children, but he never ever loved himself.

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

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

CORMAC: So am I.

RUAIDHRI: Is that so? Strange.

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

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

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

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

CORMAC: Yes.

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

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

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

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

CORMAC: Are you and your clan still Catholic?

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

CORMAC: How much did your clan change after conversion?

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

CORMAC: What did she do?

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

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

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

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

RUAIDHRI: May of this year.

CORMAC: You seem quite knowledgeable about human affairs.

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

CORMAC: What is your style of worship?

RUAIDHRI: Latin or Gaeilge Mass.

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

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

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

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

CORMAC: You've killed before?

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

CORMAC: And the Red I presume refers to -

RUAIDHRI: My hair, in my human form.

CORMAC: Would you show me your human form?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RUAIDHRI: Occasionally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RUAIDHRI: Our progenitors, Crom Cruach and Caoránach.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CORMAC: What?

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

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

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

CORMAC: Like I could forget.

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

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

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

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

BRIAN: That doesn't help, Ruaidhrí.

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

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

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

RUAIDHRI: What kind of priest are you anyway?

CORMAC: Jesuit.

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

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

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

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

RUAIDHRI: Aye. You seem promising.

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

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

Part III:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Divinities?” Sandra ponders aloud. “Who are they?”

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

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

“Of course. Don’t you?” He jokingly retorts.

“But you’re supernatural; you’re a reaper! What are your parents? What do they do?” Sandra practically bellows.

“Well, my father’s an accountant and my mother’s a secretary.”

Sandra and Death stare at one another with blank faces.

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

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

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

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

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

“So why do you?” Sandra genuinely inquires.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How could he?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are we?" She asks.

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

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

Death smiles and shrugs, "They like stories."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Stay still,” Life instructs. “I’ll be back shortly.” Sandra listens to her receding footsteps.

“I still don’t know what’s going on,” Sandra states as her eyes link with Death’s.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sarah Emery

a short story about my young self

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

Moises B. Fuentes

June 1st 2018

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With a bittersweet smile, you take out a worn pencil and sketch the skyline on the adjacent page. Above, the planes and helicopters twinkle in approval.

Katie Gonzalez

Crumbs

“Audiences tend not to object on the grounds that a machine so human in appearance and behavior, or indeed so physically attractive, is technically impossible for the foreseeable future.”
-Blay Whitby

When Gemma received the last-minute notification on her phone that tomorrow would, in fact, have on-and-off showers instead of just mild clouds as she had been hoping, the panic started to seep in. She and rain had an understanding. *They didn't agree with one another.* But with presentations scheduled at the office tomorrow, she'd raise eyebrows not being in attendance.

Gemma knew her specific proposal on how to increase the company's profit margins couldn't be postponed. Still, she found herself pacing in the bedroom, waiting for her master schedule, her *other* master schedule, stored behind *several* secure databases to pull up on her monitor screen.

She clicked through hurriedly, finding the more recent log sheets. *October 13th, called out the night before, being "sick."* That was the day the thunderstorm blew through the city. She stepped away and began pacing even faster now, wringing her fingers and biting her lip, all too aware that she needed to be *gentle, Gemma, gentle.* It might be too suspicious to call out as "sick" a little over a month since the last time, also so happening to occur when rain hit.

Pulling out her phone again, Gemma searched for the hour-by-hour prediction for tomorrow. *Unless that's going to be just as useful to me,* she berated. There was a posted algorithm, citing the rain to start around 8:00 am, and she had to hope it wouldn't change drastically. *It's either get to the office before or hope for a pocket in between.*

Picking up pastries for the office could be a decent excuse for arriving so early. It was the best course of action to settle on. Hoping for the skies to briefly clear up in the office's area was no risk to take. Gemma wouldn't let it be one.

Setting out for Patricia's at a brisk 6:45 am, Gemma locked her door as usual and made sure her windbreaker was buttoned and zipped to the very top, drawstrings to her hoodie tightened. It'd be a relatively easy walk to the bakery; the taxi ride to the company building was what she was stressed could ruin it all.

Even with her dark purple gloves on, Gemma kept her hands shoved firmly in the jacket pockets. Maintaining a swift walk down the road, she made sure to smile at the Williams's nanny stepping out of her car and remembered to coo at a small dog attached to a casual walker. *Facades, Gemma, facades,* she chanted, which took her all the way to 4th street. *5 till 7am. Keep at it.*

"Welcome to Patricia's Pastr- oh hi Gemma!" cried Harper, the plucky 32-year-old who could easily pass for 28. She was the usual cashier of the homely establishment Gemma didn't mind frequenting now and again.

"Hi Harper! I love your new hairstyle!" Gemma smiled, a genuine one that didn't need chanting or reminding.

"Thanks girl! Just decided to switch it up last week!" Harper carded her fingers through her afro, tugging on a particular curl and then coiling it around her finger. "Pat's not too fond of it, but I told her, 'I'm cashier anyways, it's not like I work in the back like Jeremy.'"

Gemma gave a light laugh. "Well, I like it. Very stylish."

"So, what can I get started for you today? Usual praline scone?"

"No, actually. I'd like to get two-dozen assorted. A bit of a conference this morning, so I thought I'd butter them up." *Smile but a little sheepish*, Gemma schooled.

"Girl, you got no shame." Harper laughed as she started typing her order in the system. "Is that why you're here so early? They callin you in early for it?"

Practice, like practice. "No, still starting at 9:00. Just wanted to make sure a pastry pick up wouldn't make me late. And y'know, traffic." *Don't question it.*

Harper rang her up with ease. "Well girl, you'll probably still be early. We already got a dozen assorted ready right now, so maybe another fifteen or twenty on the second batch?" *Good.* "But hey, I get the hustle. Maybe they won't notice if you clock in and get some overtime."

"You caught me." Gemma laughed, excusing herself with receipt in hand to sit by the window and wait. The clouds had begun crawling in from the north. A quick look at the bakery's clock confirmed 7:03 am. Gemma scrolled around on her phone, liking different posts on her feed. She fought the urge to jump back to the weather updates.

With nothing left to refresh on social media, Gemma shifted to fully stare outside, knowing it'd be acceptable. It was a normal thing people did, so that they could think to themselves, go over schedules, worry over trivial matters like relationships and break-ups. A grocery truck parked at the end of the block, with workers preparing to make a large haul into the apartment building. A quick flash of a lime-green helmet in the bike lane. An elderly man, stepping out of his building with a fedora and cane, halted for a moment as an anticipated sneeze hit.

That caught Gemma's attention. When was the last time she herself sneezed? Maybe she ought to in the next minute or so. She almost panicked trying to remember the last time she did. *What if it's been too long? What else have I been slacking on? When was the last time I mentioned a doctor's appointment? Dentist's appointment?*

Gemma schooled her expression though, aware that if not the security cameras on the street, then certainly the cameras in the bakery would pick up on any face of distress she made. She let her eyes flick around once or twice more at the cars driving past, counted to twenty-three, then squinted her face up. She turned into her sleeve and made a very distinct *achooo*.

"Bless you!" Harper cried from the counter, her back turned as she was fetching blueberry scones to package.

"Thank you," Gemma dutifully replied. She'd have to log back into her databases tonight and make a note of scheduled sneezes and casual mentions of seeing her primary doctor.

"Jeremy told me another five on the other dozen, Gemma!" Harper hollered from the doorway to the back of the bakery. "Okay, okay, I'm not stepping in! I was just checking, geez!" she yelled into the workspace before letting the work door fully close. "I guess Jeremy doesn't like the fro either," she grumbled.

The two dozen assorted pastries were ready and boxed up. A quick glance at the clock again.

7:26 am.

"Thanks, Harper, and tell Jeremy thanks too when you get the chance." Gemma said gratefully. Fixing her gloves and feeling her secured hoodie one last time before grabbing the boxes, Gemma head out as Harper waved her off.

Gemma speed-rushed towards the main intersection where she'd be able to flag a taxi down. Shifting both boxes into one arm, she was prepared to start raising her left arm out towards the road, until something shifted in the corner of her eye. An old woman, at the start of an alley, sat on the cold pavement with meager blankets and garbage bags, mumbling to herself. Gemma

felt some sort of pull, already stepping towards her without thinking. *Homeless. Perfect.*

“Hello,” Gemma opened with quietly. She crouched down and opened the first pastry box on top. “Have something to eat.” Grabbing the biggest pastry she could find, she offered it to the woman’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you.” the woman’s raspy voice managed to croak out. She didn’t hesitate to take a big bite, revealing missing and crooked teeth. *She’s the one who actually needs a dentist. Not me,* Gemma thought, something sad stirring inside of her. Quickly looking up, she could see darker and darker clouds starting to move in.

“You should find somewhere else to move to, if possible. It’s going to rain soon.” she told the woman. *I need to move, now.*

“Mmmm... Guess so, huh? Rain’s not really convenient for people like me,” the frail woman huffed as she continued eating. She shifted and looked at the few belongings around her but made no move to get up.

Gemma felt the strange pulling inside again as she finished eating all too quickly, becoming even more unpleasant at the thought of just abandoning her. She quickly looked over both her shoulders to confirm no people or cars were coming from either direction and pulled her gloves off. Shoving them in the woman’s hands, Gemma felt the woman clasp her own over them before she could pull away.

Gemma couldn’t help her panicked gasp, just as the woman’s eyes widened, looking at what it was she felt. The woman, surprisingly strong, pulled her hands even closer, examining and realizing their artificiality. It looked smooth and flawless, like any human who moisturized, but it nonetheless felt a bit distorted and rough. Not scaly, but obviously fabricated and made to be durable.

“You’re one of them. *Others.*” the woman whispered, eyes peeking up at Gemma. She felt she couldn’t move, frozen at hearing what she wished didn’t apply to her. She felt repulsed and scared that this lady could very well start screaming for the authorities.

The woman held her gaze a second longer before giving her a weak smile. “I think you need these more than me,” she said, as she pushed the purple wool gloves back into Gemma’s hand, releasing her finally.

Gemma yanked back immediately, panicked and fearing this would be the one mistake to give her away. *Trying to have a heart really will kill me with these humans,* she thought bitterly. She didn’t hesitate to start pulling the gloves back on. *Stupid, stupid, STUPID, Gemma.*

The woman however was rather calm. She gazed up at the thick clouds, much more overhead now, humming an indistinguishable tune. “Guess rain’s not really convenient for people like you either.”

Gemma’s gaze snapped up. Only small scraps of the blue sky were peeking out now, with darker and darker grey clouds signaling it was definitely going to start raining in the next ten minutes. She looked at the woman one last time as she refixed her purse strap on her shoulder, juggling the boxes of baked goods. The woman just offered an eccentric smile and waved her away as if to say get going.

Gemma could only nod pathetically, hoping she conveyed how grateful she was, before turning her back and walking away. If she could cry, she would probably be fighting welled up tears right now. But she couldn’t. She was built to be composed.

“17th and Ridge Avenue, and *please* hurry. I’ll pay double if I’m there by 7:50” Gemma begged the cab driver. His eyes glinted in the rearview mirror at the challenge and slammed on the

gas before she could fasten the seat belt.

After re-situating herself and the boxes on the seat next to her, Gemma checked her phone again. The work group chat was full of “*Morning! See you all for presentations!*” and iterations of “*Good luck on your proposal, Joaquin!*” Gemma quickly typed “*Breakfast is on me today! I’m bringing in pastries so only grab your coffee! ☺*”

She hit send, throwing her phone back in her purse. She tracked the cross streets as the taxi burned through red lights and wondered if this was all too much. Too good to be true and too much to manage. Avoiding rain, planning sneezes, smiles, human appointments, the visible excitement of seeing pets on the streets.

Four blocks left until the company building, Gemma reminded herself to breathe and that everything would work out. That is, until the driver slammed on the brakes, causing Gemma to smush into the passenger seat in front of her.

She cursed alongside bleeping horns.

The driver only grunted in apology. “Backed up traffic the rest of the way. Don’t know what you want to do.” A plop of water hit the windshield.

Gemma seized up. “That’s okay! I’ll get out here! Here,” she fumbled to pull her wallet out. “Keep it all!” she said, hastily tossing double the amount owed as promised. She nearly kicked the door open with the boxes in hand and ran for the sidewalk that thankfully was covered by awnings.

Busting into a less than graceful speed walk, Gemma kept her body hunched over the pastry boxes. To any bystander, she would simply look desperate to protect the breakfast she bought for the office rather than bizarrely protecting herself from any and every drop of rain. A few drops were now hitting the back of her windbreaker, and she could feel the chill all the way down to her less than conventional core. There was no point in checking either her phone or the sky. The rain was upon her, all too ready to slip past her synthetic skin and cause a complete breakdown for society to witness.

“Excuse me, excuse me.” Gemma muttered as she rudely cut off leisure-walking patrons of the pavement with umbrellas. She heard snarky remarks once or twice behind her, but she didn’t care. There was never room to care about what people thought of her beyond the vital assumption that she too was like them.

More consistent pitter-patters were hitting her back now in the two point two seconds of crossing from one awning to the next. It was nearing a mild run that Gemma was breaking into now. *Just one more block Gemma, almost there.* She was hyper aware of the raindrops resting perfectly atop the tightened hoodie of her windbreaker, threatening to roll forward and seek her face. Had she not been terrified of using umbrellas since the big news story of the Other whose own umbrella flew away in stormy winds, exposing them as they short-circuited in the middle of a crosswalk, Gemma would have appreciated having one right now.

Gemma afforded one small glance up to ensure that yes, her building was the one after the next. The relief that flooded her was monumental. Rushing around a burly man in sweats, she burst through the doors into her work lobby. *I made it. Actually made it.*

“Gemma?” At the front desk, Lauren, the main receptionist soon to go on maternity leave, stood up in concern. The beginning of her bump was visible over the counter.

Gemma took a quick breath walking up to said counter. Still hunched over, she placed the boxes between the two and carefully used her gloved hands to pull her hoodie back, allowing no water to trickle onto her. Success. Another breath.

“Good morning, Lauren! I brought pastries for the presentations today! Would you like one before I head up?” she blinked innocently and opened the top container, willing the smells to waft up and distract the very pregnant receptionist.

It worked. Lauren narrowed in on the scones, danishes, and other assorted goodies. Only after looking to Gemma, who eagerly nodded and pushed the box forward, did Lauren pick out a raspberry tart. Taking a bite, she moaned “Ugh. Thanks, Gemma. I needed this.”

Gemma smiled again and closed the box. “Guess I’m lucky to have barely avoided the rain. It’s supposed to be on and off all today.” It was better to bring it up herself.

“Oh yeah?” Lauren mumbled around another bite.

“Yep, so good thing the raspberry tarts survived.” Gemma said cheekily. “It’s always better to be early rather than late, and you never know with busy bakeries around here. Plus, morning traffic.” *Answers offered are always better than answers sought.*

“Oh, for sure. Steve is always blabbering about how the guys at work want to grab a bite together, but then there’s nowhere to sit or the order takes forever...” Gemma nodded as Lauren went off. There was no urgency to go upstairs to her desk; she had already made it inside the building. Work didn’t officially start for about another hour. Gemma couldn’t help looking outside as she hummed in agreement to whatever Lauren was saying. Her desk mates and other coworkers were probably barely starting their commute over. It was a heavier drizzle now. *Too close, way too close.*

“And I said are you for real? An *Other* working in his same building?” Lauren said in a scandalous tone. Gemma’s ear perked as she fully turned back to the conversation.

“Huh? An *Other*?” she asked, suddenly worried about what she missed.

“Yeah, over in Steve’s brother’s branch. Apparently, “Marshall” was hiding in plain sight! Clocked in, clocked out, got its stuff done, but now there’s this big ol’ investigation for the whole company! They think someone might’ve known and was helping it or something. The Board was in uproar, paying big bucks to try and hush it up. Steve’s just glad his brother’s alright. But can you imagine?” Lauren now hissed under her breath. “One of those things trying to be human? Trying to be *us*?”

She couldn’t, wouldn’t let herself hesitate. “That’s terrible! In his office? It’s a blessing nothing happened to Steve’s brother, Fred, was it?”

“Frank.” Lauren corrected. “Whooo, by the way, is very single,” she winked at Gemma persuasively.

“Oh, you’re wicked, Lauren!” *In more ways than one*, Gemma laughed off. Feeling like her desk was preferable after all, Gemma fixed her purse on her shoulder before grabbing the boxes and heading for the elevators. Pressing to go up and waiting for the doors to open, Gemma was hit with an afterthought.

“Lauren? How was it that they caught the *Other*? In Frank’s office. Did you happen to mention?”

“Oh, it’s just fabulous. Steve said his cousin over in Lars Tech told him that they’re refining the city-wide inspection databases. New technology and everything they’re starting to implement. They can process security footage a lot faster and clearer, track fake records and whatnot that those things think they got so clever at. It’s in beta at Frank’s office, kind of like a test run. Soon enough we won’t have to rely on them giving themselves away.” Gemma didn’t need to turn around to picture the awful and proud smirk Lauren likely had.

The elevator door dinged as it opened. Before stepping in, she turned with a fixed smile.

“What a relief.”

HELP US PROTECT YOU - REPORT THE OTHERS - HAVE YOU SEEN THIS OTHER? REPORT THEM TO-

“You know, I don’t think they’re all that bad,” a voice rang right behind Gemma, causing her to jump from where she stood with an embarrassingly loud gasp.

She turned to find Tyrese laughing. “Sorry, sorry. I just came to fetch you for the conference room. Our proposal is up first.” He took another bite from the pineapple jam muffin in his hand. “This is surprisingly delicious by the way. Did you have something?”

Gemma was still flustered, straightening out her collared blouse and trying to ground herself from the jump scare. “Y-yes, I did. On the way to work.”

“You sure?” he cocked his eyebrow at her. “Which one?” leaning in with narrowed eyes.

An image of the gaunt, homeless woman she fed came forth. The woman who would probably benefit the most from the reward money advertised. *Yet she didn’t*. Gemma wondered if she ever found shelter from the rain.

Instead, she fixed a cool face in retaliation. “The biggest one, of course.” She quickly sidestepped around him before he could look and see something he shouldn’t see. *Too close, too close*. “Make sure you brush those crumbs off your face. We’re going first, like you said.” She headed for the hallway. Silence. She turned back around. “Tyrese?”

The coworker in question was looking out the skyscraper window wet with raindrops, just as Gemma was a moment ago. A large LED billboard on the building a block over flashed over and over: *HELP US PROTECT YOU - REPORT THE OTHERS*. Different photos, some blurry, some more defined, asking people to help identify and locate the manufactured beings out in society.

Tyrese stared out at the changing text and mugshots. A photo of a wo- a female projecting Other was cast on the screen. Dark hair like Gemma’s, but built to look a bit older, the next generation up. At that, Tyrese was prompted. “I don’t think they’re all that bad,” he repeated. “The government wants to paint them that way, but they’re just resentful they couldn’t control them. They couldn’t make them keep doing what they originally wanted.”

These were dangerous, extremely dangerous words that he was voicing out in the open. Gemma felt a streak of panic and looked around for anyone overhearing. Most everyone who wasn’t already setting up in the conference room was likely still socializing near the laid-out pastries. Before she could formulate some sort of response, thinking maybe he was onto her, testing her, he turned back to her.

“But maybe that’s just me.” he smiled, shrugging his shoulders. Gemma still didn’t know what the appropriate answer was.

Luckily, Tyrese didn’t push for one. He turned away from the window to finally head for the conference room with her. As they made for the hall, she pointed out the crumbs on his face again, which he cheekily wiped off and pretended to flick at her. These types of laughs came easy for her. The view of the billboard shrunk as they walked away, until it was completely out of sight. But Gemma knew it would still be there waiting for her.

“Great proposal today, Gemma! I really think yours will be picked!” a light-hearted squeeze on her shoulder shocked Gemma back to the forefront.

“O-Oh, thank you! I’m flattered, but it was a group effort! Everyone’s proposal was great!” she smiled and waved as her coworker was heading out. *Samantha something*.

Staring out the lobby doors, Gemma sighed. Everything after the presentations was a blur. Having to sit through two and half hours’ worth of proposals, follow up questions, and endless graphs, plus the fatigue of the morning rain anxiety finally catching up, Gemma couldn’t remember

much of the tasks she completed for the rest of the day. It was a bit of a cruel irony.

Memory was never intended for Others; they were built as machinery and were supposed to stay as such. The awareness struck Gemma out of nowhere. It wasn't stable at first; there were still blank periods where she cut back out. The filed reports she would later hack claimed her exact model experienced intermittent malfunctions in productivity.

All Gemma knew was that one day she tuned in and didn't tune back out as anticipated. She saw something- someone like her do the same. But then they panicked. They asked questions. They gave themselves away. Gemma learned quickly not to do such things when they watched. To instead stay put, stay fixated, stay-

"Gem? Gemma?" a hand waved in front of her. Gemma quickly blinked back into her surroundings. She didn't realize she had zoned out looking at a government poster pasted on the lamppost just outside on the street, much like the billboard from earlier. She looked up to see Tyrese next to her.

"You good Gem?" his facial features demonstrated being genuinely concerned. *Correct, correct it.* She smiled to reassure him.

"Yeah, of course. I was just trying to remember the number to call a cab. I never seem to save it in my phone." There was still a light sprinkle outside that she'd rather not risk walking in. It was also getting darker this time of year.

"Oh, mine just arrived actually. We could... carpool?" Tyrese scratched the back of his neck, talking to her purse rather than her face. *Awkwardness*, Gemma deduced. He was one of the nicer coworkers; one shared ride would be okay.

"Sure." He seemed shocked that she agreed. "Unless it's an inconvenience and you were just being nice," she quickly spewed, unsure as to why she felt nervous. Perhaps his earlier statements before the meeting were resonating in her mind.

"No, no, no, that's okay! It's okay! To ride together," he hurried to explain. She tried smiling again to ease what seemed tense. Now without boxes of pastries, getting into the cab was much easier for Gemma. Tyrese insisted she get dropped off first as thanks for buying breakfast.

The ride to her apartment building first was rather peaceful; The rain was sound enough for them. Gemma found herself people-watching again. Even with the rain, people were in tight dresses and bodysuits, huddled under awnings and lined up outside clubs with alluring neon lights. Just past the open doors, she could see a fully seated bar. Limbs seemed to be flinging, grabbing more beer, more chips, or just grabbing for each other. Gemma wondered what it would be like to visit one.

Fortunately, the rain seemed to be done with her side of the city, having subtly lowered a shot's worth of decibels with every block they passed. Gemma didn't want to think too much about how the cab was comfortable even in complete silence.

"Thank you," Gemma directed at the cab driver. "And thanks for carpooling Tyrese. I'll see you tomorrow," she smiled with genuine gratitude, and insisted he take the \$20 to cover her portion of the ride and then some. He reluctantly took her change.

"No problem, Gem." Gemma didn't know what to make of liking his nickname for her and how his teeth showed when he smiled. "You good walking in?" That concerned face of his again. Gemma shoved away the pull inside her, different in a way from the one this morning with the homeless woman. She nodded, not trusting to say anything.

"See you tomorrow then," he sent out softly, before she closed the cab door. She waved him off as she buzzed in and stepped inside.

Trekking up to her floor, Gemma started filing through all her mental notes of the day. *Sneezing more, maybe coughing more too. Doctor...Dental...Crumbs. Crumbs on Tyrese's face.*

Stop. Gemma shook her head. *Lauren said that Lars Tech is kickstarting a new database. A new search for Others. Bigger, more powerful.* All these attempts to seem more human were soon going to become pointless. How much longer would she even be able to stay in this city? Any city, once Lars Tech shifted from beta to up and running?

And still, Gemma couldn't help but think about Tyrese's words from this morning. How accepting he seemed. How funny it was to pretend to wipe his crumbs off on her. How cute he seemed when he awkwardly offered carpooling.

Locking her front door and setting her bag down on the kitchen counter, Gemma stepped into the bathroom, unable to help staring at her reflection. From a safe distance, she looked human, with soft, vulnerable skin. But up close? How could anyone accept her? Tyrese stepped into her personal space, asking about her breakfast, but she quickly moved away.

She sighed, running her hands through her hair. She never should've let him get that close in the first place. *Too close, too close.*

Clicking the light off and stepping into her bedroom, Gemma sat on her cold bed, gazing at the bed sheets and pillows. How could anyone hold her? Be close to her? Closer than Tyrese sat to her in the cab?

They couldn't. That was the harsh fact about her existence. About staying secret, surviving as someone, or according to Lauren, *something* artificial.

Just as Gemma couldn't exactly place when she became aware of everything, she couldn't recall when she started longing for something *more*. Real, tangible humanity. Not just crumbs of it.

With another sigh, Gemma got up and walked to her desk, powering up her computer. She paced back to her window as it started booting up. The rain had long stopped, but her window was stained, streaks of raindrops taunting her of how close she would always be to exposure. She would handle all these questions, these longings some other day. If she could afford to.

But for now, Lars Tech.

-

Elizabeth Gossett

Never Give Up on Your Dreams

*"She's done what she should Should she do what she dares
"She doesn't want to leave She's just wonderin Is there life out there"
- Reba Mcintire*

It was a hot August day and Jessica was sitting in her Toyota Corolla. She had gotten off her job and she felt drained. She works two jobs, one a cashier and the second is at Denny's being a waitress. Jessica has to work two because she needs the money not only for herself, but also for her son Anthony. Her son is three and he is her life. However, work and being a mom leaves her drained and sometimes she wonders if there is more to life. She does not want to leave her life, but she just wants to know if there is something more out there.

One day Jessica meets with her friend Daisy on her lunch break. Daisy mentions that she just signed up for classes at Bakersfield College. She would like to major in health careers. Jessica looks up and is intrigued because she has been thinking about going to college but has been nervous about it.

She asks Daisy, "What made you want to go back to college?"

Daisy, "Well I am getting tired of making no money. I want to make enough that I can take care of myself and my daughter. Also, someday I want to own a home of my own. Don't you get tired of working paycheck to paycheck and working two jobs?"

"Yes," said Jessica, "But isn't college expensive and how are you going to study and work and take care of your daughter?"

"Jessica, colleges offer financial aid, and honestly Bakersfield College isn't that expensive. Plus, the payoff of a college degree is huge. I want a registered nursing degree and after I get a job being a nurse, I can make a starting salary of sixty-seven thousand dollars a year. So, yes while I am going to Bakersfield College and Cal-State Bakersfield money will be tight, the payoff when I am done is so worth it." Daisy said. "Jessica isn't there something that you have always wanted to do with your life, I mean I assume being a cashier and waitress weren't your childhood dreams. What was your childhood dream?"

Jessica looks off at the vending machines and thinks, what was her childhood dream? To be honest, she always wanted to be a teacher and to be more specific she always wanted to be a science teacher, so she shared her thoughts with Daisy. Daisy said, "Girl, you need to just go to Bakersfield College and speak to a counselor and they will tell you everything you need to know. Do you want me to go with you?"

"Sure. Let's go next Tuesday when we both have off and my mom can watch my son." Next Tuesday seems to come by really quickly and Jessica cannot believe how big Bakersfield College is when she gets there. She pulls Daisy to the side and whispers "Are you sure this is the right choice? This place is huge and the people who go here are all younger than me. I am in my thirties and these people are kids!"

"Relax. I know at first it looks intimidating but trust me you will be fine. See that man looks your age, and he is pretty cute as well."

"Daisy, stop it! I am not here to meet a man!"

Daisy only giggles.

They reach the counseling office, and Jessica feels even more nervous because she thinks of even more questions to ask, and what if they do not take her. What if they tell her she is too old or she is not qualified for college? She remembers that her high school grades were not good. Soon she hears her name called and she walks in trembling to the counselor's office. Daisy is telling her softly "It'll be okay." The counselor that comes out is a nice-looking lady named Wendy.

"Hi guys. What can I do for you two today?"

Daisy answers, "My name is Daisy, and this is my friend Jessica, and she is interested in pursuing a teaching degree, but neither she nor I know where to start."

Wendy looks at Jessica and notices that she is nervous, and says, "Jessica, Why are you nervous? It is okay. I will make sure you get the right courses and if you have any trouble with courses, Bakersfield College has programs that can help."

"Okay, so tell me how I can start my teaching dream." Jessica says.

"Well, first off, what grades do you want to teach? Do you want to teach little kids or older kids?"

Jessica thinks for a minute and says, "I have always loved science. So, I think I want to teach science. But I have no idea where to even start."

Wendy says, "Science sounds wonderful, and I can direct you on the classes you need." So, Wendy sets up Jessica's class schedule. Wendy tells Jessica, "I started you off easy, only nine units, and I worked them around your work schedule."

Jessica is still nervous because she is worried how she will pay for her classes. She blurts out, "Don't I have to pay for these classes? I really don't have the money. Oh God that sounded so dumb."

"No, it isn't dumb Jessica. Remember what I told you." Daisy said, "I told you there is financial aid to help you."

Wendy nods her head and says, "The financial aid office is right over there, and they will love to help you."

Jessica and Daisy make their way over to the financial aid office and Jessica was shocked because she was able to get money to help her pay for her college classes and books. This really will help her! Daisy tells her that her classes start in one week. Jessica thinks to herself, "Oh no, that is fast."

One week does go by fast and Jessica finds herself in her first college class ever. It is English B1A. She takes a seat at the back of the class because she does not want the instructor to notice her, nor does she want the other students to notice her either. Jessica is sure that this will be like her high school classes, she hated high school. But something is different. In high school everything was so rigid, there were cliques, and she didn't like that you were forced to study certain things, like Economics and P.E. Right away she can tell college will be different for one thing she gets to study mostly what she wants: science, there aren't so many cliques, and her professor is chill for one thing the professor is young and another thing they get to read Harry Potter, how cool is that. Jessica has a feeling the semester will be fun but hectic. She is right about both, between work, taking care of her son, studying, and writing papers, the semester not only flies by, but it is also exhausting as well. However, Jessica manages something she never did in high school she gets all As.

She figures this was the right thing for her to do after all and tells her friend Daisy.

"Daisy, I am grateful you talked me into going to college, I really like it and can't wait till I graduate."

"Jessica I am glad you like it and am glad you did well your first semester, graduation will come soon enough."

Much to Jessica's surprise, Daisy is right and her time at Bakersfield College flies by. Her graduation date approaches, and she is increasingly excited and nervous. Her son is now five years old, and he will be one of her guests at her graduation. She is also excited because she will be the first to graduate college in her family. She plans for the day, by inviting all her family members, her mom, her grandparents, and her sister. She also makes sure she looks good, she gets her hair done, and her nails, but most importantly, she makes sure she has her sash on that indicates she is graduating with honors. Pretty good for a single mother who never thought she would even go to college.

The time comes when she hears her name called and she is trembling, but not from being afraid, but from being excited, she walks up and reaches for her diploma, and looks at the stand where her family is cheering and smiles and thinks "Hell yeah, but this is only the beginning of my dreams." Finally, she looks around for Daisy who is also graduating, she finds her, runs up to her, and says, "Thank you friend and mentor, it was you who gave me the push to go to school and I will never forget your help." Daisy replies, "Jessica you always had the drive to go to college in you, I just showed you the way. By the way I know you will do amazing things."

Michael Ibarra

Gamma

A light snow, one that barely obscures my vision, falls onto the desert floor one flake at a time, the frigid temperatures barely held back by my large white coat. My scarf does nothing but let in cold air to freeze my throat, and a heavy bag weighs down my side. Comfort has become uncommon. The sky is as white as the ground, the once orange desert and rock formations have started to camouflage with the snow around it. One structure stands out in the distance. More grey than white, and too far off to accurately see.

A soft clicking from my right emits from a yellow box, no bigger than the smart phones from back in the day. I unstrap the device from my side and look at the digital black numbers. Five microsieverts an hour. A reminder of the radiation hitting me every second. Barrett told me that it's equal to about four chest x-rays an hour. I don't know what kind of effect that has on a human body, but I have a feeling I am going to find out eventually. Still, five is better than the usual nine or ten. I hold the device towards the snow, causing the thing to freak out uncontrollably and click faster and louder. Twenty microsieverts. I might as well write my will right now, if I had anything to give.

I lay down the heavy bag on the side, unzipping it to reveal a long, scoped gun. It was about the size of a severed leg. The entire rifle was white in coloration, barely distinguishable from the snow, with a few splatters of black. The scope was almost as long as the barrel with a large lens covered by a plastic cap. I didn't know the name of the gun, or whatever caliber it was. I just knew it was powerful. Alongside it was a pistol. Small and weak in comparison, but useful. Taking the rifle out of the bag, I unfold the metal legs that the barrel rests on to steady aim. I take out the pistol from the bag as well, slipping it between my pants and my waist. Uncapping the scope's lens and peering through it reveals the grey structure in greater detail. It's a makeshift building, barely held together with metal sheets, screws, and what looks to be duct tape. Scattered around are metal barriers, wooden boxes, tossed over barrels, and a few other pieces of junk. The greater clarity shows me people scattered around the encampment clad in typical soldier garb, with helmets, tactical vests, and scary looking black rifles. Some had camouflage, some didn't. The lazier ones were sitting on logs and busted lawn chairs around a makeshift campfire. A radio lay near them, but the sharp winds and long distance muffled any music coming from it. All in all, there was twenty or so

people. I turn a little knob on the top of the scope, zooming it in closer to the gunmen. One of the soldiers catches my eye. A gentleman that has skipped out on a typical helmet and instead opted for a beanie and a scarf. He points aggressively at the men around him. I assume he's barking commands to his crew, probably coupled with a few insults to boot. Typical commander stuff.

Static comes from the radio at my side. "We're in position," says a cacophony of white noise that resembles as voice. "On your mark, Leo. Over."

I grab hold of the radio, whispering into it. "Roger that. In position and taking aim. Over."

I tighten my grip around the rifle, focusing the lens and taking note of the chilly breeze brushing up against my cheek. From my side, I take out a long, heavy bullet that's bigger than a finger. I lift the lever of the rifle, opening the chamber up and placing the bullet gently into it. A crash of metal briefly subdues the silence as the rifle smashes back into place. I line my sights onto the target's head, making sure to adjust for wind, bullet drop, and drag. Everything they taught me to keep in mind. Taking in a deep breath of fallout allows me to keep my hand still enough for me to squeeze the trigger. Slowly and steadily, I prepare myself to shoot.

The loud bang of the sniper rifle fills the desert. One second later, the target is on the ground with a bullet through his head. I sigh, picking myself up as more gunshots ring around the area. I manage to pack up the rifle just as quickly as I unloaded it and head down towards the structure. The place is glowing up like a Christmas tree now, with sparks of guns lighting the surrounding area. I'm not even halfway there by the time the shootout stops. That's how I know we won.

What was once a small encampment just five minutes ago is reduced to nothing. Bodies litter the area, painting the snow red. The flimsy metal building is completely collapsed, alongside the shoddy metal barriers with wide bullet holes on them. The barrels leak a clear liquid through the bullet holes. The people who happen to be alive wear the same white clothes I do, and their guns are all pointed on a lone survivor laying down on his knees with his hands up. One of the men walks up to the survivor, waving around a revolver in one hand and a knife in the other.

"Those barrels better not be the only water you got in stock, son," the tall man says from behind his ski mask. "Hell, if it were, I would have preferred you telling us that before we shot up the place. Cause I gotta be honest with you, that's the only reason we shot up this trashy ass camp in the first place."

The survivor shakes his head. "No, no," he mutters, stumbling on his words. "Underground, in the shed, we got a basement."

"Underground you say?" The man asks with a chuckle. "Underground bunker, huh? I knew this shithole was too small to house all you. And I suppose that underground bunker of yours doesn't have some more of you bastards ready to shoot us all to shit, right?"

"No, not all," the survivor stammers, breathing heavily. "I'm not lying, I swear."

"Swear, you say? What's your name, son?"

The survivor pauses, surveying the various men pointing guns at him before looking back over to the tall man. "Alex. My name is Alex."

"Well Alex, my name is Barrett," the man says, getting closer to the survivor before putting his knife away and extending out his hand. "Now son, if you shake this hand, you're promising on whatever the hell you hold dear in this cold hell. That means that if you are lying to me, then you'll be breaking my trust that I'm so mercifully putting onto you. And let me tell you, Alex, my trust is something that not even Satan himself would want to break."

Alex looks at the hand, then back at the group of gunmen that surround them. He slowly lowers his right hand, easing it towards Barrett's as he grabs hold of it. The two shake hands briefly, confirming that the survivor is telling the absolute truth. Barrett suddenly pulls him up from off the ground. He brushes the snow off Alex, holding out his hand towards nothing as he motions him

to go. Alex reluctantly starts walking, but before he can even get five feet away, Barrett holds out his gun and shoots the poor guy in the back of the head. Nobody in the crowd even flinches.

“A quick and painless death.” Barrett says, looking at the once lone survivor of his massacre. “That’s the greatest gift we can give people these days. Better than this winter wonderland at least. Now you bastards better get all the damn water from under there.”

The gunmen groan as they all scatter around the camp and salvage for supplies. I slip through the crowd, holding my bag to my side as I walk up to Barrett. He looks at me with jolly smirk.

“There’s my boy!” he exclaims, aggressively grabbing my shoulders and shaking me.

“Damn good shooting out there! What was that, like uh, few hundred meters? Long as a log of shit is all I know.”

I shrug. “Just doing my job, that’s all.”

“Just doing your job? Is that some humble ass way to say you weren’t even trying? Shut the hell up, Leo, that shot was skill. You can brag about it, come on, man.”

“I’m not going to brag about my skills at killing people,” I say, pointing to the body of the command towards the broken-down shack.

Barrett throws his hands up in front of him. “Hey now, what did I say about thinking like that? In this hell you gotta kill. This world ain’t what it was 15 years ago, kid. If we didn’t hit these guys, no doubt they’d hit us. That’s how it is now, you know?”

“Yeah I know,” I mutter, walking off towards a group of familiar outlines. Barrett pats my back as I leave, going off to shout at some other gunmen. The group spots me quickly, waving as I approach.

“Hey Leo,” a feminine voice calls out from behind her scarf. “Damn good shot back there.”

“Hey Charlotte,” I say, nodding towards the people to her left one by one. “Flynn, Oli.”

“Don’t get cocky cause you got lucky, aye?” Flynn says with a chuckle. “Got to get at least fifty more shots like that if you want to get anywhere in this group.”

“Oh, shut up, Flynn,” Oli says with any annoyed tone. “Give the guy a little praise.”

“I was just doing my job,” I repeat, setting down the bag to my side.

“You did a good job, then” Charlotte says, pulling down her scarf to reveal a smirk.

“Flynn’s right though. If you keep doing this, you might become a general. Assuming one of us kicks the bucket, of course.”

Flynn scoffs as he begins to walk off. “Not in your wildest dreams.”

Oli rolls his brown eyes as he follows him, with Charlotte looking over at the two. She sighs, looking back at me with a tired face. “I got my money on him dying first.”

“Probably,” I say, looking over at the various corpses being buried by the people I call my peers. “What the hell have we come to?”

“What do you mean?”

I hold my hand out to the mess we caused. The wrecked shed and the frostbitten bodies. “This. 15 years ago, we were living our lives. Now we just take other people’s.”

“For survival,” Charlotte adds, scoffing at my words. “It’s either this or die in the cold. Or run into the nuke craters and let the radiation kill you. I heard that’s a bit more unpleasant though.”

“Right,” I say, kicking a small piece of metal dislodged from a barrier.

“Watch who you say that around, by the way,” she says patting me on the shoulder. “I know I don’t know how much Barrett would like hearing that kind thinking. Or Flynn. I’ll look the other way, but I don’t speak for the rest of the group, got it?”

I nod, picking back up the heavy rifle bag and slinging it on my shoulder as I start to walk off. “I got it. Thanks.”

My walk leads me back to basecamp, which is still being set up. We stationed ourselves right before we attacked the encampment. It was only a few hundred meters away, hidden behind snowy hills that used to be dunes of sand. Compared to the little encampment we raided, basecamp almost looks like a city. Various tents and shoddy structures have already come up. A few people are still unloading some boxes and barrels from the truck we stole a year ago, alongside those ATVs. Workers scurry around the place, pitching up more tents and starting to set up a large bonfire in the middle of camp. The only person not doing some manual labor is Mia, who walks around the place in her large black coat, notepad, and pen.

She spots me right as I approach, taking hold of the sniper bag immediately. “How many rounds did you use?”

“Just one for the rifle, none for pistol,” I answer, taking out the case filled with the large bullets and pistol magazines before handing it to her. She swipes it away from me without hesitation, placing it down on top of the bag and quickly scribbling something down in her notebook.

“Alright, got it,” she says, finally looking me in the eyes. “You’re on mining duty. Couple of ore deposits are towards the west, about as far as that encampment you guys hit. I’ll let you take one pickaxe and one ration for out there, no more.”

“I hit a nearly kilometer long shot, I’d say that deserves at least one extra ration.”

“What do you think this is, the Boy Scouts?” She asks in an indifferent tone. “It’s one for every worker, that’s final. Also, you got your Geiger counter, right?”

I nod, patting my yellow device on my side. “Got it.”

“Good, now get your pick and start working,” she says, pointing towards a box of tools about ten feet away. I walk over, picking up the wood-handled pickaxe and hoisting it over my shoulder. I spot the ration box, pulling out a canned chili from it and stuffing it into my pack. Looking over to the west, I manage to spot the large rock formation through the snow. I head out towards the snowy rocks and don’t turn back.

Once I get there, however, I keep going. The rock formation passes my side, but I don’t so much as look at the thing. All I do is keep my head forward towards the endless white. Not much thinking goes into my movements. Just instinct. That’s how it’s been these past few years. Just instinct. My instincts lead me towards the west. From what I’ve heard there’s not much out there but craters and fallout. It’s got to be better than this wasteland, at least. Nothing is getting closer. Everything starts to blend in to one amalgamation of white. I don’t know where the ground ends and the sky begin. Still, I don’t look back. The cold starts to seep into my coat as falling snow hits me. My body starts to feel frigid, and I start to shiver as if I wasn’t wearing any clothing. My grasp on the pickaxe loosens and it falls to the ground with a thud. The Geiger counter I kept continues to click away before being drowned out by the increasing winds. The snow beneath my feet start to feel heavier and heavier as I wade through it, dragging me down as if I was walking through quicksand. Each step takes more and more effort as I continue forward. Forward to nothing but white.

This goes on for what seems like hours. I don’t know exactly how much time. The sun’s movements are blocked out by the grey sky, and all the watches were taken into inventory by Mia a long time ago. Time was a luxury. Telling time, even more so. Days like Monday and Friday became the same. Dates were nothing more than a string of numbers at this point. A year was nothing more than an achievement for how long we lasted. Counting up, rather than counting down. I would have preferred the latter.

I look back to where I came from. The sight is nearly identical to the front. Save for three

bright lights. Bright lights that get closer and closer each passing second. Suddenly the sound of blasting winds is drowned out by a trio of roaring engines, and from the curtain of snow pops out three ATVs. The three those people stole. The ATVs come to a stop right next to me, and the three drivers get off the vehicles while staring right at me. They are all too familiar, as is the voice that come from the tall one.

“Well, shit Leo,” Barrett yells over the blistering winds. “You right done fucked up big time, son.”

“Damn right you did,” Flynn exclaims with his smug tone oozing out. The other figure stays silent, though just by looking at her clothes, I know it’s Charlotte.

“Listen Leo, you know why we hate bastards who hightail up and leave, right?” Barrett asks, walking up to me as he pulls out his revolver from before. “It’s just that the shit they got, the clothes on their naked ass back, are all the group’s property. We just rent it out for living, is all. When someone decided to leave, most of the time they ain’t leaving butt-ass naked, is they? Nah, they’re leaving fully clothed. Which means they’re leaving with our stuff. And that is what we used to call being a dirty fucking thief. And there is nothing I hate more on this godforsaken planet than thieves.”

Barrett lifts the revolver up towards me, walking right up next to me and placing the barrel of the gun to my head. “Now, Leo. As much as I hate thieves, I don’t hate you. But you put me into a no-win scenario here. Either I blow your goddamn brains out and lose a damn good kid like you, or let you live and get shit for it from the other higher ups and probably get my brains blown out too. No offense to little miss Char right there, but full offense to your ass, Flynn.”

Flynn scoffs, pulling out his gun as well and pointing it towards me. “What are we waiting for here? He knew the policy, so let’s just waste the bastard right here.”

“Jesus, Flynn,” Charlotte chimes in. “We don’t know why he did it. Can’t we just hear him out? See why he did it, then decide.”

“Good point, Char,” Barrett says, lifting the gun from my head. “Let’s listen to the pup’s reason. You’ve been as quiet as you always are, despite me almost shooting your ass, so I suppose you gotta good reason for being so calm.”

I look around at the three around me. They’re all covered in snow, just like the rocks and desert around me. So much so that they blend into the scenery around them. Their voices blend right into the winds of the blizzard. Their presence is nothing but a drop in the bucket of a large, white desert. Looking back at Barrett and shrug. “I thought that there’d be something better out there. A place where... I don’t know. I place where I don’t have to murder people just to live a little longer. A place where I don’t have to kill at all. Now I realize how stupid I was to expect anything but snow.”

Barrett looks at me long and hard before he starts laughing. “You absolutely right, kid, that a fucking stupid thing to expect. Honestly, I respect it though, since it ain’t no bullshit excuse. But you just proved the point of how good a kid you is, and that makes killing you even harder.”

Barrett cocks the hammer of the revolver back, turning his head back to my colleagues to give them a shrug. Flynn looks pleased. Charlotte less so. A sudden squeeze of my gut hits me. My breathing starts to get heavy as I realize what’s coming right after he turns around. My clothes start to tighten themselves around me. Sweat starts to form, even in these freezing temperatures. My vision starts to blur. Everything becomes so much slower. I pick up no sound, not even the wind. The three people in front of me become so much clearer now as they practically glow in the blizzard. A million thoughts rush into my head. A million potential ways this scenario can play out. All of them have the same outcome. In that brief time as Barrett turns around, my hesitation from before is nowhere to be found. He turns towards me as I pull out the pistol from my waistband.

A shot rings out into the Tundra.