





OBSCURA

Red Rocks Community College
Literary and Visual Arts Magazine
20th Anniversary Edition

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Obscura accepts original fiction or creative nonfiction up to 5000 words, poetry up to two pages in length, and art in any media (pdf format). A maximum of three pieces can be submitted by an individual per issue. Send submissions to:

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Additional submission information is available at www.rrcc.edu/obscura.

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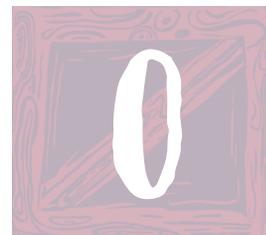


— 20 YEARS OF OBSCURA —

In 2004, a group of students began meeting at coffee shops and Student Life community rooms to put together an experimental magazine of their fellow classmates' creative work. Named *Obscura*, the first issues of the magazine were hand stapled with makeshift cardstock covers. Twenty years later, *Obscura* is a professionally-printed art and literary magazine that functions as the capstone of a flourishing creative community. It is now offered as an official class for credit, creating an opportunity for students to learn editorial, layout, marketing, and communication skills firsthand alongside faculty mentors. This 20th anniversary issue is a celebration of *Obscura*'s journey.

Obscura is highly competitive. The staff receives well over a hundred submissions yearly that are meticulously evaluated for acceptance into the magazine. We take into consideration a range of criteria, from the technical to the emotional. This year's staff passionately debated numerous pieces, many of which did not make the cut.

Students interested in becoming part of next year's staff can enroll in the ENG 2031 Literary Magazine class in the Spring 2025 semester.



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NON-FICTION





CHRISTMAS EVE

Hayden Alexander

That house was my favorite. Every Christmas Eve the house was decorated with lights. Every Christmas Eve all our smiles were so bright. It was tradition.

It wouldn't feel like Christmas without the snowy drive up to Evergreen and the drive home late at night with my parents in the back. It wouldn't be Christmas Eve without you and I making cookies that night while everyone sat around the fire and talked. Or the comment made without fail, "I love shopping for you girls."

Did you know I still wear the bracelet you gave me four years ago? Did you know the only necklace my mom wears is the one you gave her? Did you know my little sister still has the picture you framed for her hanging in her room?

Did you know?

Did you know when people ask me about you, I tell them about the times we went camping and you would sneak me beer? And the time we went shopping downtown and talked about my dad from high school, and why you love my mom like she's your sister.

I always want to remember you that way,

Vividly.

I remember the hikes with my mom and you two laughing like best friends. I remember you taking your oldest to his baseball games and telling him how proud you were. I remember you teaching your middle child how to drive and being annoyed with the youngest when he cried. I remember our trips to Mexico and Europe, how close our families got, and how much we all fought. I remember you braiding my hair and teaching me how because my mom never knew. I remember how your hugs felt and the way you dressed and smiled without showing your teeth. The way you smelled like coffee and something sorta sweet. I remember everything about you. I thought I knew you.

But how could you leave that?



I remember you that way, not the destroyer of my parents' or your child's lives. Not the trauma your husband will hold for the rest of his life. You left without saying goodbye. You left

unapologetically and selfishly.

But I can't be mad in all honesty, no one can. We saw you struggling each day and believed you were getting better when you said you were.

I knew before your boys, did you know? Do you remember calling them that? I DO. I remember the phone call from my dad calmly asking me to come home as he stumbled to get the words out of his mouth. I remember standing in the dimly lit hallway seeing tears run down YOUR BEST FRIEND'S FACE as my dad told me you were gone and weren't coming back. I remember how cold my body felt; it was almost as cold as the time you hit me in the face with a snowball during a fight one Christmas Eve. My tears burned my skin like the hot chocolate you made me as an apology.

Did you know I sat with your youngest at the table where we used to make cookies and laugh and explain to him why his mom wasn't coming back? Did you know I told your oldest how proud I was of him for passing his exam? Did you know your middle child got pulled over for going too fast?

Did you know?

Do you know how hard this year will be? As I drive up the snowy road to what was once YOUR HOUSE. I still do not know what it's like to have you gone. I haven't taken the drive up to Evergreen, to that house, on Christmas Eve to find you waiting with presents in your Christmas socks. Oh, how you loved to shop for us.

I'm not ready to sit around the table without you and laugh about the memories we made together, knowing there won't be anymore.

I'm not ready to see the robins build a nest in the same tree they do every year without fail.

I'm not ready to watch the hummingbirds or butterflies come by the flowers we planted outside your windowsill.



Why did you have to leave us?

I wasn't ready and I don't think I will ever be. I haven't felt the loss of you yet, and I don't know if I ever will. But I always want to remember you this way. I will never not see you on the first snowfall, or walking down the beach, or the butterflies I see. You're just a little too far out of reach. I see you in my mom and in your boys; I always want to remember you this way.

Did you know?

We will miss you every Christmas Eve.



DYSPHORIA

Nerys Glynn

I look at my body in the mirror after a shower, nothing to hide behind.

I do not know why I do this to myself. I know what is going to happen every time.

Every single thing I see will be wrong, and every single thing will cause a feeling that is all too familiar to me.

I do not know why I do this to myself at all.

I start with what is the first thing I see as my eyes slowly scan down. My face.

Particularly the lower half of my face. There is a shadow. What seems like a million little dots of black on my skin. They stick out just enough to make it rough to run my fingers over.

I want to be able to do something about it, but it is too short for a razor to do anything.

I do not have the time or access to materials to take care of it with wax.

I do not have the money to fry it to smithereens with lasers.

There is nothing I can do to get rid of it. Nothing at all.

Makeup may cover it, but it will not hide the prickles from my touch.

My soul is overtaken by a darkness. My stomach churns and I want to hurl. My mind wanders to the corner that I know it should not go.

“You’ll never be a woman. No matter what you do.”

“You’ll never be able to hide what you are. You’re not what you say you are.”

I go just a little bit lower. A little ball-like structure protrudes from my throat. Barely visible, especially if it is covered by something around my neck. Most would pay no mind to it.

But I do. I notice it every day.

I notice how it moves in my throat. I notice how it feels under my fingers when I touch my neck.

I should not have this. But getting rid of it would be far too much money and recovery time.

My soul takes on more darkness. My stomach is now in a million knots and trying to defenestrate its contents, but finding no windows. My mind ventures deeper into the corner it should not be in.



“Everyone notices it. Everyone stares at it. Nobody thinks you’re really a woman.”

“You will never be able to hide what you are. You’re not what you say you are.”

I travel down to my chest and my arms. The little hairs springing off of the skin. There’s far too many to count. Even after being on treatment for months, they’re still thick enough to be very noticeable. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.

Again, I cannot afford to get them removed. And there are spots where a razor would not get. And it never gets close enough with the trimmer.

My soul acquires even more darkness, close to being too much to handle. My stomach is actively lurching, trying to propel its contents out of my body. My mind is now in a downward spiral.

“You can’t possibly think about having your arms or chest exposed. They’ll all see and all know.”

“You will never be able to hide what you are. You’re not what you say you are.”

My gaze goes lower, to the bottom half of my body. More hair that takes an exhausting amount of effort to get rid of and conceal. Legs that aren’t muscular at all, but still for some reason don’t have the ‘right’ shape. And they’re just too long. My entire body is. Too tall to be small and cute, too short to be a goddess towering over the world. My hips, barely wide enough to count as anything other than where my legs meet the rest of my body. There is nothing there, no matter how much I try to cover it up with my outfit choices it won’t bring the width that I want. And then there’s...the biggest problem for me.

I want it gone. I want it gone. I want it removed, never to be seen again. All of it. Every last bit of it. The hair, the parts, the defects. I want them all gone. I want my whole body gone. I want it all replaced. And as I begin to whine and panic, the sound of my voice makes me break and sob. Too deep, too low resonance. The training has yet to pay off yet. ‘Heat from fire, fire from heat’ my ass.

My soul is entirely overcome with darkness. My stomach is a slight breeze away from winning the battle of ejecting what’s inside. My mind is beyond the point of no return.

“You are what you don’t want to be. You have nothing. You will never have any of it.”

“You will never be able to hide what you are. You’re not what you say you are.”

These thoughts plague my mind on a daily basis. I can try my absolute best to prevent them, but there will always be something that I miss. I just hope that in the future I can prevent them for longer and longer.



EUPHORIA

Nerys Glynn

Seven years old.

My sister wants to play dress-up, but her friends are busy.

Dress-up alone isn't fun.

She walks over to my heap of Lego's, surrounding me like a moat.

"Wanna play dress-up with me?"

"Yes. I do."

We go to the costume stash and pull out everything in the basket.

Dresses, tutus, tiaras, wands and wings.

There are some other costumes that were supposed to be mine.

But I paid them no mind. Especially when I am handed something.

"Put this on!"

It's a purple princess dress. Frilled and flowing. A bow on the collar with a plastic gemstone meant to imitate some kind of precious gem that I know nothing about.

Layers of solid fabric and sheer mesh, elastic where it's supposed to fit on the body.

"Ok."

I put it on. Slip it over my head. Pop my arms through the arm holes. Tug the skirt down a little bit so it fits low enough.

I give a look down my body, but only for a moment before my mind's trail is suddenly blocked by the falling tree of another command.

"This too!"

The tiara. A fraudulent purple gemset, plastic masquerading as diamonds following the loops and curls of the stylized polymer. Three quarters of a circlet, with the back open to allow it to flex to different head shapes.

I slip it on my head. I take a breath as I'm dragged to the mirror, my sister having put on her favorite pink dress of the bunch and the one piece of the many petroleum-based treasures that she claimed as her very own.

We look over ourselves in the mirror. Taking in the efforts of our very quick efforts.



I take in the shape of the dress. Flaring out around my hips, loosely hanging rather than trying to fit the form of my legs and midsection. My shoulders and torso being shown off just enough. My legs on full display. My head being topped off with a chrome-painted contraption that was meant strictly for sitting there and looking pretty.

Of course, I did not know any of this specifically. Or how this would make me feel, or why.

My chest began to swell with a warm, comforting feeling. I didn't know what this was. All I knew was that I would very much not want to take this outfit off at any time. I didn't have the concept of what a boy was or was not 'supposed' to wear. All I knew was that I liked it.

And neither did my sister. Because she turned right to me after a few minutes.

"You're a very pretty princess."

"And so are you."

Nine years old.

My sister's birthday. A day that I usually felt like I mattered even less than I usually did.

She had gotten a plethora of gifts to line her shelves, drawers, and toy basket.

But there was one that she was paying the most attention to.

A child's makeup chest. No doubt made with the cheapest possible ingredients. Guaranteed to trigger an allergic reaction.

She had only managed to get one friend to sit still and let her do a child's best to doll them up.

And then she approached me.

"Wanna play makeover with me?"

"Yes. For your birthday."

She sat me down on a bench in the backyard and got to work. Slathering my face with more purple eyeshadow than an entire theater troupe, more pink blush than Paris Fashion Week used as a whole, and more red lipstick than a clown would need to paint on their gigantic smile.

It took twenty minutes, but felt like twenty years.

She made me look in the built-in mirror in the case and she grinned at her handiwork.

I looked like a clown, in the worst possible way. I grimace initially, but quickly realized that my eyes looked softer. My cheeks looked more prominent. My lips were accented instead of blending in with the skin of my face.

Boys weren't supposed to wear makeup though. Why was it feeling so right? Right there on my



very own face?

“So pretty! Right?”

“Yes. Very pretty.”

Twenty-Three Years Old

I sit in the back seat of my car. I had changed out of my work clothes twenty minutes ago and hadn't moved a muscle. Fear had overtaken and immobilized my muscles. My tendons and ligaments were locked up. I was staring at my phone, reading over the messages from friends who had encouraged me to do this. Continuing their encouragement.

“You'll be fine. You look amazing. It's Pride. You'll be safe and you'll be you. You'll love it.”

I look down over myself. Black and purple striped sweater, tucked into a miniskirt that flared out around my hips just as I liked it. Thigh-high socks accenting the feminine legs of mine.

But this wasn't just taking a picture or twelve in my room for validation in my long-distance friend group. This was going out into the real world. I knew I wasn't a boy. I knew I was a girl.

However, the world wouldn't know.

I took a breath and stepped out of the car. I trekked my way from the garage to the ring of stands, a kind woman stopping me for an unzipped pocket of my bag. I plod along among the stands as my fears fade and my comfort comes. I finally feel that warm feeling. I am real.

“Oh my god I love your skirt!” “Your top looks amazing!” “Your outfit is so well put together!”

“Thank you...so much.”

I finally, for the first time in my life, know who I am. And who I will continue to be.



THANK YOU, LADIES

Amanda Hendrix

According to Nana, the last words Steve Jobs uttered on his deathbed were “Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.” Not only did she want to know what made him say that, she was determined to find out because she was dying and, in her words, she wanted the full experience because you only do it once. She wanted to be aware of each step that was happening, every official deterioration in her condition, and she wanted to see what Steve saw.

Hospice care is typically for people who have less than 6 months to live, and Nana knew this when she was admitted to a home hospice. The problem was the hospice doctor had an interesting last name and you didn’t get to meet her unless you were still alive after 6 months. How could she quiz her about her last name if she died before then? I offered to look it up on the internet, but that seemed too difficult in her eyes. The simple solution was to just stay alive for a bit longer than planned, which turned out to be just about a year. A year filled with countless care management meetings, looming dread each time the phone rang, sleeping on couches in an assisted living apartment, and conversations about life. The conversations about life were a change because she used to enjoy talking about death the most.

“Where do you think we go?” she would ask me frequently, starting when my age was still in single digits. While I changed my answer as I

aged, she didn’t. She knew her health was fading fast well before she was admitted to hospice, and the conversations started to shift. She talked about our trips to the UK and China, being raised in London, and her marriage to my grandfather, she wanted to know what happened to people she hadn’t thought about in decades. This caused a noticeable spike in obituary searches in my Google history, but I didn’t mind. She had taken me around the world after all, so I could deal with the influx of funeral home and AARP ads in my browser.

During her year of dying, Nana focused on those words from Steve. She wondered about what he saw, but I wondered about what her last words would be. Would it be as profound as “Oh wow” or would it be a poignant admission, asking for forgiveness for a lifetime of negative behavior? I wanted her last words to be whatever she wanted them to be, but I was seeking a deathbed confession or an apology that would address some things she had said and done. According to my mother, she did say things that would fall in line with my wish – admitting wrongdoing, apologizing, and accepting consequences. I didn’t hear it, and I don’t believe any of it. I saw it in her eyes and heard it in her last breaths – she was, and always would be, too proud to regret anything. Instead, what I heard in the days leading up to her death was criticism for being too close to the bathroom (I was prying a cat’s claws away from her oxygen tubing), accusations of broadcasting thoughts into her head, and disappoint-



ment in my life choices. The blunt commentary wasn't anything new, but it hurt less now, somehow softened by the fact that her time was running out.

Throughout life, we had always had open and honest conversations about death – never afraid to ask the other about their thoughts, beliefs, or wishes. I knew a lot about what she wanted as she was preparing for her departure. The last thing she wanted to drink was a margarita. She wanted her ashes in the backyard. She didn't want an obituary – that would mean announcing her age to the world. But she never shared what she wanted her last words to be. I wanted to ask, but as each day moved on it seemed more and more insensitive to inquire. I think that she expected me to handle the entire process without emotion, and was disappointed in the fact that it was affecting me. She wanted me to ask questions about what dying was like, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. She did have a hospice nurse ask her if she felt like she was dying. In a slight British accent, softened by decades in the US, she smirked and bluntly said "I don't know. I've never done it before."

After almost a year of hospice, we finally got the news that things were coming to an end for Nana, and she only had a few days left. She was moved into my mother's house so that we could take turns caring for her and to make sure she got her last margarita. On one particular day, my mother and I were tasked with helping Nana with a sponge bath and changing her clothes under the guidance of a kind, patient CNA. Each movement of her body caused Nana to yelp in pain because dying... dying hurts. I rushed to the stash of morphine to draw up a syringe of relief,

because she was still taking the minimum recommended dose and could afford to take more on board without being overdosed. In a hushed voice, my mother argued with me, saying that my grandmother wanted to stay on the smallest dose possible because she wanted to be alert. Whispering, I argued back that she hadn't been alert in more than 24 hours and was clearly in pain. The poor CNA was caught in the middle of this, with a dirty adult diaper in her gloved hands. I couldn't tell if my mother was trying to respect my grandmother's wishes or if she secretly enjoyed seeing her in pain. As hurtful as the woman had been during her life, watching her skeletal body writhe and cry out in pain seemed inhumane. After a threat of calling the hospice team, I was allowed to deliver a small squirt of morphine and Nana's body became much more cooperative.

Sponge bath complete, and fresh clothes on, our helpful CNA packed her supplies and let herself out. My mother had daggers in her eyes because she doesn't like confrontation and she felt uncomfortable because not only did I confront her, I did it in front of an outsider. Her mouth opened, ready to place blame on me and shroud herself in excuses, but before she could say anything Nana opened her eyes and began to reach towards us. She wanted to say something, so we leaned close to hear her. "Thank you, ladies." Her voice was strained and sincere. She seemed to have genuine appreciation in her eyes. My mother huffed and puffed and left the room to chase the CNA down, to see which side she would sympathize with. I sat down in the chair next to Nana's bed, reached for my phone, and began texting my husband and sister about the whole situation. Little did we know, we had just heard her last words.

We spent the next two days working in



shifts to make sure someone was always right next to her. One of us sleeping in the chair in the corner while the other sat in the chair next to her bed. I asked her if it was ok if I read “As I Lay Dying” while I was there, or if it was too morbid. She couldn’t answer, but if she could, I knew she would approve. My mother scrolled through Facebook, gossiping about people I didn’t care about. We made sure there was margarita mix handy in case she woke up and wanted just one more. Then, she stopped breathing. We made calls. We cried. We dealt with medication disposal. We said “goodbye.” My mother made sure to cancel her newspaper delivery as soon as Nana’s body had made it to the end of the street, emphasizing to the poor customer service rep that Maureen was no longer in need of their services since she was dead. I made margaritas and didn’t care about it being 9 am. I went home and slept for 16 hours.

Over the next few days, we dealt with the logistics that come along with having a dead body that needs to be handled. Nana had demanded that we ask the mortuary if we could have her gold crowns removed and melted down, so we did. Turns out that you need an orthodontist to remove teeth from the dead. We laughed hysterically, because what else are you supposed to do when you’ve spent days crying and just asked a funeral director about removing teeth from a dead person? It was in that moment when tensions were lifted and we felt silly and awkward, that I heard it again in my head.

“Thank you, ladies.”

While I never got an apology for the mean things she had said to me, I realize now that I didn’t actually need that. She would never apologize,

because that is just who she was. By thanking us she was saying that she didn’t regret anything, but was sorry that she hadn’t appreciated us more. I hope she saw what Steve saw.



FROM BUTTERFLIES TO NAILS

Kapri Riley

My destination dissipates in afterthought as I will my feet to hold their shape. Swirling nausea pools in my gut, sweeping cold tension through my chest to inhabit the base of my skull. Attention is firmly set on my impending step; please, please, please—bones, tendons, and flesh, do as you are bid. The solid concrete taunts my anxieties with its dependability as my knee rises to bring my heel in contact with the ground. Like wisps of rotten roots, my veins burst apart with the pressure of sorry flesh giving way to a jagged piercing fibula. Liquid ice runs down my dreadful limb without a drop of red marring the dry ground. This illusion remains and will continue to remain in contact with only me.

My life's blood suspends mid-air, stomach in knots, as gravity pulls my body to a familiar landing. A seven-foot jump to the ground grows more daunting when phantoms whisper of pain. My hands are adorned in their expected debris and shingle-roof indents that this tradition gifts me. I transfer the grime to my flannel before retrieving the carefully positioned notebook on a ledge below the crumbling roof of my family's barn. I spent too much time sitting on my hands. Rounding the back of the barn I make a beeline for the garage, snatching the outstretched arms of a bag waiting patiently on the outskirts of the lawn. My rushed steps falter as I remember: keys are on the table. With all the annoyance a teenager can muster, I backtrack inside to collect the overlooked essential.

Nothing in this house suffers subtly, the current most inconvenient martyr being the

screeching sliding door that connects the back acre to the house. As if to spite my slow approach, the old thing groans a particularly grumbly alert to anyone who might be inside. Sufficiently introduced, I quickly make my way to the back hallway home to three doors situated at its end. There are no skylights or windows to welcome the snug hall with light until one of the three doors opens to greet me, *not the door I hoped*. Caught red-handed-

"What are you doing home? You said you had an early morning." Sleep still gripped my mother's voice, but her eyes were sober and piercing.

"I forgot my laptop." I lift the bag on my arm for emphasis. "I'm heading back now."

The lie danced on my tongue, desperate to be true. Avoiding her eyes, I opened the door opposite hers and left without a word, clutching my means of escape. The weight of her gaze held everything she wouldn't say to me, and that's how I left her in that hallway, bleary-eyed and disappointed. One set of footfalls drummed like thunder on the weeping floorboards. Only the walls heard the echoes of my mother's sorrow, in the wake of trust withheld.

My teeth grind together as I clench my jaw, the rhythm grating with tension. This too shall pass, this too shall pass, this too shall pass. If I release control over my jaw, I know what will happen; this isn't the first time I've endured this sensation. With a parting mouth, teeth slouch loosely in their gums like land flow sways trees. Rotten roots mush together



teeth and gums until blood and bone flood the cavity of my mouth, suffocating me. There is nothing I can do to cut the experience short, no matter how uselessly I choke on what was once my smile.

With a welcomed thud, my car door envelops me in a momentary silence. Before my senses adjust it's as if I am encased in the quiet of snow, unknown to my surroundings. One breath's beat and the reprieve is no longer believable, so I turn on the engine and drive. I don't remember deciding on any one place to go until the sign "Van Bibber Park" sat in front of my parked car. I slip a notebook from my bag and continue where I left off on the roof of the abandoned barn at my parent's house. Turning page after page, I search for answers. No matter how many times I let my pen bleed on paper I cannot seem to make sense of what is real and what proves that I am delusional. The first five entries were spread over three months, all mild anxieties, the kind that feel like butterflies in their wake. I stopped counting after the third notebook. *I cannot remember a time when I walked through the world without splitting apart.* Each step I dare to take threatens violence; each breath rattles my bones. I rest my forehead atop my hands on the steering wheel and struggle to force air through my lungs.

I need help.

I've never felt particularly comfortable with walking into a psychiatric facility and saying that I have gruesome daydreams about my body tearing itself apart; I mean, would you? At what point after "hello" do you slip that one in? I can't help but rehearse as I walk up to the unassuming brown building. *Hi, I'm here because I have recurring daydreams about my body tearing itself apart, you have anything cheap for that?*

The floor I'm headed to will cost me five flights of stairs. Winded and hesitant, I enter the cramped entry room decorated with cracking yellow walls and nearly turn around at the entryway. *I'm just overreacting, everything is fine, I don't need to be here—* mid-pivot, my thoughts scramble as an exceptionally tall lady assertively asks for my last name. Satisfied with my answer, she gestures to the only other door in the room.

Sweat beads down the center of my back as I sink into the too-soft leather couch. In a matter of minutes, a typical-looking guy asked a few typical questions about why I was here on this particular Tuesday. Simple enough; I repeat my script. He jots down a few things and asks me to clarify the degree to which my "day dreams" felt like reality. *Real enough to get me in here* I intone with a nervous grumble. He looked at his clipboard and scribbled some more, eventually suggesting that I take X drug twice a day and check back in three weeks... *That's it?* I expected the worst when coming here, not realizing I'd leave within 20 minutes, the corner of my mouth raised in something like disbelief.

I had let my fears grow alongside me, which might be the only reason why I had noticed their absence so clearly. Quiet, something I chased and something that felt earned was starting to come naturally to me. Less and less, I paid any mind to my steps or chewing my food. Less and less, was it unbearable to be around people who noticed my fear, *deserving* an explanation. More and more, I realized how unsustainable it was to live so uncomfortably when a solution was just within reach. *Why question the validity of something surely part of my reality?*

I deserved more than "this too shall pass."



SURVIVING THE 9-5: A COMEDIC TALE OF THE WORK-PLACE:

Tyler Wilson

Ah, the sweet sound of my alarm blaring at 6 AM, a reminder that I'm about to embark on another thrilling day at the job I'd rather forget. The only thing louder than the alarm is my internal scream, echoing through my mind: "Not again!" But fear not, dear reader, for I've mastered the art of hitting the snooze button precisely seventeen times.

Chapter 2: The Commute Conundrum

The daily commute, a journey filled with unexpected traffic jams, overly enthusiastic radio hosts, and an endless stream of brake lights. I've developed a talent for creating imaginative stories about my fellow commuters, like the lady in the red car who I'm convinced is training her pet parrot to recite Shakespeare. Anything to distract myself from the impending doom of the office.

Chapter 3: The Coffee Machine Chronicles

At the office, the coffee machine becomes my lifeline, the magical elixir that transforms me from a zombie into a semi-functioning human being. I've memorized the entire coffee menu, including the mysterious options nobody dares to

try. And let's not forget the passive-aggressive notes left by colleagues, reminding everyone to refill the coffee pot as if that's my top priority when I'm trying to survive a meeting with Mr. Monotone.

Chapter 4: Meetings, Meetings, and More Meetings

Ah, the joy of meetings, where the highlight is guessing how many buzzwords my boss can fit into a single sentence. If buzzwords were a sport, he'd be an Olympic champion. As I sit there, nodding and pretending to take notes, I daydream about organizing a meeting to discuss the absurdity of having so many meetings. Irony, my dear colleagues, is lost on them.

Chapter 5: The Office Characters

Every workplace has its unique cast of characters. There's the office gossip who knows more about my personal life than I do, the overzealous intern who treats the photocopier like a spaceship, and the IT guy who communicates exclusively in binary code. Together, they create a sitcom-worthy ensemble, providing endless material for my



stand-up comedy routine (which I practice in the bathroom mirror during lunch breaks).

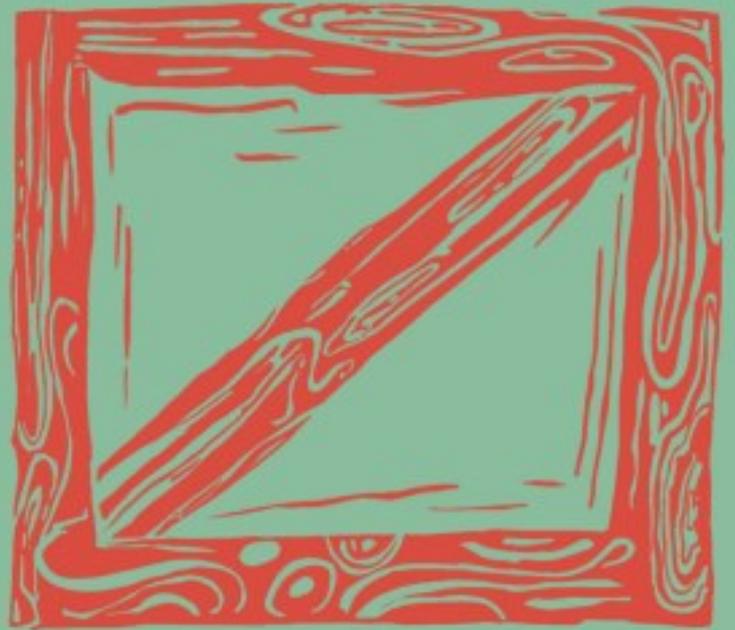
Chapter 6: The Great Escape

Finally, the sweet release of 5 PM. I sprint to the door like I'm in a marathon, leaving a trail of dust behind me. The office becomes a distant memory as I step into the outside world, where the air smells fresher, and the possibilities are endless. As I walk away, I remind myself that I survived another day, armed with sarcasm, coffee, and a killer sense of humor. Who knows, maybe one day I'll look back on this experience and laugh... or I'll just turn it into a bestselling comedy book and retire early. The latter sounds much more appealing.

Epilogue: Embracing the Absurdity

In the end, this comedic memoir serves as a reminder that even in the midst of a job I dislike, humor is my trusty sidekick. Through sarcasm and laughter, I've not only survived the 9-to-5 grind but managed to find joy in the absurdity of it all. And who knows, perhaps one day I'll find a job I love, or at the very least, a workplace with a coffee machine that never runs out. Until then, I'll continue my adventure, armed with wit, resilience, and an unwavering ability to find humor in the most mundane of tasks. After all, life is too short to take the office drama too seriously. Cheers to surviving the chaos with a smile!





POETRY





I SAW A DRAGON

Gage Barnard

I saw it that day
In a dense haze while
wandering the thicket.

A looming shadow outlined by
silver fragments which beamed
through the canopy above.

Its massive wings folded out,
hanging heavy with the knowledge
of centuries.

Its scales were course and jagged,
tinged grey, bearing the countenance
of a survivor.

The creature's weary eyes stared,
with a mysterious curiosity, deep
as a midnight sky.

This monolith of fantasy
stretched and billowed its wings,
unleashing a chilling gale.

And as the fog cleared,
I looked up to see
the sunset silhouette
of a willow tree.

Oh, how I wished, how
I hoped, that I had witnessed
that immaculate creature that
I had imagined.

I would have sat by its side,
listening to the power in
its breaths, as it told
stories of a forgotten world.

But still, as I rested, I still
brushed my hand on the course bark.

The leafsong breeze surely
sung its legend, even if
it was not for my ears.



HURLING

Nicholas Betz

Hurling through time and space,
no destination in mind.
A photon screams through cosmic rays,
and nebulas divine.

As you approach the speed of light,
in case you didn't know.
Time slows down with dilation,
time creeps on real slow.

No mass of any kind,
can reach close to light.
Photons, though are massless particles,
they're ready for a fight.

As they tear through galaxies,
solar systems, and the like.
Their perception becomes timeless,
the dilations force is mighty

Photons born in big bangs,
will reach the end of time and space.

All the while never perceiving what
time means to the human race.



1, 3, 2, 1

Bill Blickerton

I felt you jump on the bed last night.
Years after leaving you with the vet.
Your sister sometimes visits too.
I remember how you picked me.
Playing with my hair like yarn
Sitting on the floor of the shelter.
I remember how I picked your sister.
I watched her shyly stalk the edge of the room.
The three of us, a family.
The loss of you two.
My first adult grief.
Your visits reminders I was not always one.



THE CUSTODIAN ' S PLIGHT

Jaden Bush

You rot, plaguefully crowding space.
You grow, ever more,
taking up real estate that is exponentially growing in value.
You wait to become victim of an act you most deserve,
maliciously immobile, staring at me as if I am in your place.
You plate yourself in bright colors.
Silver, gold and copper.
Hiding blemishes along with cracks branching like a tree.
You speak no words, but your message is all too loud,
glaring at me with smooth faces.
I may overreact,
I may have brought this upon myself in the first place.
I play into an oh-so necessary system,
but replacing you with plastic and paper would never feel the same.
It was me who let you rot, crowd, grow and exploit.
You use me as much as I use you.
So, I bear no ill will to the Dishes In My Sink



NEVER LET GO

Saige Chapin

As you march down a street
everyone can see your little bodies shaking
from the weight of the gun
or how your heart is breaking
you don't want to be there
but you don't want to defy them
for if you were to run
or rise to fight them
you might die then
So you say to yourself
I'll take my chances with them
hopefully, one day, I can escape them
build a life with grace and prosperity
but for now I'll just try to survive then
I'll take my chances with them because I know
that if I try to leave
they wouldn't let me go
they would torture me or someone I love
so I'll do the only thing I know
and go with the flow
eventually when I grow
I'll run, somewhere they wouldn't know
I'll take my chances at freedom
a freedom I've never known
so that one day when I get old
I can let my children know
to Never. Let. Go.



TIME IS LIKE THAT

Joy Cassias

I remember when I was a kid, I always thought time went by so slowly.

I would spend days chasing the same children around the playground,

all of them running a little faster than me,

legs a little longer than mine.

I was never able to catch up.

I would hope for recess to be over so that all the kids would have to wait for me.

I would drown out the groans and pretend like they waited by choice.

Head home with a heavy heart but a hopeful mind,

excited for the opportunity to catch them tomorrow.

Time is funny like that.

Time is more excruciating moments of pause,

eyes glued to the hourglass, willing the sand to move a little faster.

Inevitably, when the last grain of sand slowly falls towards the bottom,

It is begging Father time for a redo.

“Just one more chance, I’ll get it right now.”

As the years went on I never did catch up.

I was always three steps ahead or two steps behind,

never in line, never moving to the same rhythm,

never safe inside the barriers of my own mind.

Adults would heed warnings, “Don’t go too hard on yourself. You still have time. It’s not a race.”



But once you've crossed the finish line you hardly remember the burn your thighs felt,
The resistance of the air against your body, the chill of the wind on your skin.
All you remember is that you ran it.

Time is scary like that.

Its singing the same song everyday for a year,
Humming the melody late into the night, writing the lyrics over and over and over and
until a new song pours out of your speakers.

Then another.

Its five favorite songs later and the beat just doesn't seem as good as it once did.

The singer's voice doesn't carry your emotions outside of your body, the lyrics mean nothing.

It's been countless moons since I've felt like my time was moving with someone else's.

I've gotten really good at learning how to adjust the dials,
accommodate for daylight savings and holidays.

A simple look in my direction and you would never know
my heart is trying to find a melody long forgotten.

A passing conversation would never tell how tired my legs are from running so long.

A smile from across the room will never show the cuts i received from glass ricocheting off my
bedroom walls,

sand covering the carpet.

Time is painful like that.

After the melody fades,

the crowds of fans disappear,

the sand falls deeply back into the ocean,



it still goes on.

I have spent my entire life forcing my legs to catch up only to be met with the brutal truth that they never will.

They never could.

You cannot outrun time.

You can not sing loud enough to drown out Time.

All you will do is wear out your voice, strain your muscles, and lose the race.



THE ME I COULD'VE BEEN

Joy Cassias

You are the poem I keep writing. You
are the paper on my floor. You
are the show i watched a year ago. You
are everything and more.

You are the dream I have been chasing. You
are the wounds on my feet. You
are the fastest thing I've ever seen. You
are the one I wish to meet.

You are more than scraps left over. You
are the bread crumbs on the ground. I
have searched these rooms forever. You
are the one thing I haven't found.

You are the me I wished I was,
before this me got in your way,
You are the calmness and the storm,
You are the one who couldn't stay.

There are many different versions,
but I would abandon all the rest,
of all these girls I could have been,
You are the best.

You could have really done us proud if,

You only had the chance. You
are the songs that play in stadiums. You
are the crowd who wants to dance.

You are the humblest of all of us.
Your presence is relief.
For all the me's I could have been, You
are far beyond belief.

I hope one day I catch you,
walking slowly across my path.
I'll tell you about us.
I hope you say to me, and laugh,

"I have been watching you for years.
I was wondering when you'd come. You
are more than just your parts, You
are greater than your sum."



SEAZONZ

Odin Cuypers

An autumn breeze blows across fallen leaves,
with a chill from that north wind coming through the trees.
The orange and yellow flutters and red speckly fly,
like a kaleidoscope that brings your mind to ease.

A moon passes you by...

Small ice sculptures are dancing in the air, the breath of winter giving their decent flare.

Dashing and bracing, they start with a tease,
the figures finding rest as far as the eye can see.

More of their kin join them in ranks.

The cadence of breaths collapsing their flanks.

A now steady breeze casting blankets of reinforcements atop the many fleets.

The cold begins to shy...

The quiet is so thick it's almost loud, but in the sky no more a single cloud.

The sun has woken up, it's shining proud.

It's amidst this calm in the everstill peace,
with a crack and a thump goes silence's shroud.

Thus the lull ceased.

And so begins the drip of the bough, as spring seeps into winter's long cowl.

Warmth sneaks down from the sky.

Butterflies flutter, hummingbirds hum.



Plants leaves are budding- like the cadence of a drum.

Everything is twinkling; everything is bright.

Here and there the green is thickening,
while the world's children come to life.

Before you've noticed, it's the time of short nights...

The days are warm.

The heat sinks in.

Foliage fills out its form.

Fruit and flowers bursting at the brim,
now the birds and bees are buzzin'.

The fish swim down low.

Storms are a'coming,
Enchanting with their glow.

The sun's shine comes back,
a fresh debut.

After nature has done its cleaning, the world looks anew.

The constant hum and drum of summer unknowingly sucks you in.

But...

The long days start weaning, and leaves start careening.

Everything is seeming a different hue.

The warm hair is staying, but in it, you feel swaying.

You can't help but notice a crisp tumbling starting to whisper in the breeze.

The colors are changing, vibrant scapes painting,
everywhere, there looks a-blazing in the trees.

Awestruck and gazing, you find you feel aloft and phasing into seasonz of make-believe...



EVOLVE

Callisto Giroux

To see with benign naivety.

Blinded by the steep, shining face of a mountain untouched.

Foolish aspirations smother the mind in desperate search of higher meaning.

Of meaning at all.

Eyes rest their gaze where mountain meets empty blue.

Bleeding hands and burning feet accompany tedious ascent.

Pulse rises with each hold as its thump shakes the foundations of constitution.

Was your origin not suitable?

Does lust for unknown heights overpower presence? Rationality?

Are you capable?

To feel the splitting of skin,

of calluses opening,

exposing stinging flesh to freezing wind.

Blood makes pilgrimage down arms, painting skin as red as the rising flags.

To progress is to adapt, to utilize the unstoppable force

of spite,

of rage,

of inferno.

A cacophony of a thousand hideous voices demanding you do not succumb to the weakness

of your addled mind.

To stand atop the steep face of the mountain is to look back through time.

To glare at shredded hands, atrophied muscles, shivering legs.

To stare up into the empty blue, bellowing a guttural profane roar.

Vocal cords giving out alongside the hope of presence from an absent god.

To face the next mountain, to approach with clever hostility.



THE STAR-FOLK

Pheonix Gregg

A star is:

The martyr of its own creation.

The fate of passions:

...to give life to the same hearts they simultaneously doom to destruction.

A star is fueled by nuclear reactions in its core.

Iron is:

The harbinger of stellar death.

The sacrificial surrender:

...positive assumes negative, collapsing under the weight of its own creation.

Iron fusion requires more energy than it produces.

A supernova is:

The art of cosmic self-destruction.

The event of negation:

...through rapid nucleosynthesis, the star fuses every element heavier than iron.

A supernova is the death of a high- mass star.

A human is:



Composed of chemical elements.

Made out of star-stuff:¹

...a vessel for the passions of stars that continue to burn across the cosmos.

A human is born in the heart of a high- mass star.

A star was:

The origin of the star-folk.

The violence of creation:

...and a war between gravity and gas pressure that lasted 15 million years.²

A star was my beating heart filled with plasma.

A star was:

...what remains.

¹They say we're made of star stuff, because the same process of nuclear fusion that sustains stars also produces the elements necessary for life. In the words of Carl Sagan, we're "the matter of the cosmos, contemplating itself."

²High-mass stars live shorter lives because they burn hotter, thus using up their fuel more quickly. Lower mass stars never get hot enough to fuse heavier elements necessary for life. The iron in our blood must come from a high- mass star.



UNTITLED (DUE TO MY INADEQUACY AS A POET)

Nico Hartley

oh, would you look at that?
you're writing this in all caps as a last ditch
attempt to get something on paper
i look forward to the instagram post

YOU CALL YOURSELF A "WRITER"
THIS IS A LIE
YOU SAY YOU CAN'T WRITE AS MUCH AS YOU USED TO
YOU'RE BUSY. YOU'RE TIRED. YOU'RE OUT OF IDEAS.

I SAY "YOU DON'T WRITE AT ALL"
WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

YOU TREMBLE IN FRONT OF THE PAGE
HANDS HOVERING SO SO CLOSE
NEVER QUITE TOUCHING
LIKE THE STAR-CROSSED LOVERS
DOOMED BY RULES WRITTEN BY ANOTHER

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

CALLING YOU A TRAGEDY IS A KINDNESS—TOO KIND
BECAUSE PEOPLE LOVE A GOOD STORY
EVEN THE ONES THAT END BITTERSWEET
AND YOU WON'T EVEN GIVE THEM A BAD BEGINNING



WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

A FOG HAS YOU IN ITS CLUTCHES
YOU'RE LOCKED OUT OF YOUR STORIES
ONLY SKIMMING THE SURFACE THESE DAYS
YOU'RE TRAPPED IN THE SHALLOWS
WHEN YOU USED TO WANDER THE ABYSS

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

YOU STAND IN FRONT OF THE BATHROOM MIRROR
YOUR REFLECTION MOUTHS THE WORDS YOU LOST
AND YOU PRAY SOMETHING DIVINE WILL COME YOUR WAY
AS IF WRITING ISN'T HOLY IN AND OF ITSELF—AN ACT OF CREATION FOR YOU ALONE
AS IF YOUR HEART FORGOT TO POUND ALONG
FOR YOU TO SING YOUR JOY, YOUR TEARS, YOUR LOVE

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

ABANDON SHAME! DIG DEEP PAST FLESH AND BONE
RESTART YOUR HEART: ONE SHORT, ONE LONG—THAT'S IT
REMEMBER THAT INK ONCE FLOWED THROUGH YOUR VEINS
YOUR LIFEBLOOD AND A REASON TO BREATHE
LISTEN FOR THE ROAR OF THE SEA
AND FIND WHAT MAKES YOU HUMAN

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

PICK UP THE DAMN PEN
and write



ANGEL ISLAND

Ana Hernandez

Getting of the ship away from the smells,
that will not be easy to erase from my nose.

I opened my eyes to admire the beauty of America,
I see the breathtaking sky that lights up my face
with an inviting glow that welcomes me
into a new society.

I feel the breeze of water so fresh,
it tickles my broken lips.

That was one feeling that I was sure to feel many times again.

I was searched and questioned about my coming to America.
Feeling terrified
when I was put in a detention center where the years I spent
seemed eternal.

Each day that I got out to breathe fresh air,
I felt different, the sky no longer greeted me.

New York,
the one we all once confused as a change from home
was no longer paradise but a jail cell full of people crowding me,
with their broken dreams showing in their blank stare.



Our bodies full of nothing but air, we lay thinking of our dreams
that were once going to become real. The dreams that were so
close yet so far away. In my future I saw my kids living in
healthier,
more accommodating place, with a better welcoming than the one I was shown.



NO MORE HINTS

Nicholas Macejack

A shaving of something long dead, tremendously tall in my prime.

Deadly, yet I draw no blood, at least most of the time.

I am life and death, enveloped in a shroud.

Made of metal, made of bone,

I have caused many to cry.

None can master me, though I welcome you to try.

A herald of anger, insanity, of pure emotion.

I am a bullet in the form of expression.

My brethren are cursed to forever remain.

I can disappear as I please, though I often refrain.

Yellow is my usual attire, but I dress up on occasion.

My name I will not reveal, lest I want an abrasion.



THE ROLLING PIN

Susan Motika

I am not a baker-

but I eagerly claimed this,

when our childhood was divided into pieces-

I am not a baker-

but I still see the dough stuck to it and clouds of flour in the air.

I am not a baker-

but I yearn for the creaking of the old furnace in winter and me, watching, propped up on two phone books at the table

the rolled dough, thin as paper, covering the vast expanse of a worn, red-checked tablecloth.

I am not a baker-

but I still conjure up the sweet, sticky sent of ground walnuts in honey and butter and plum brandy

a vast, viscous mixture laid on top of the dough, spread from the center to the ends of an empire

everyone, spreading the filling

Even I am given a small butter knife and an admonition:

“Don’t Tear the Dough!”

I am not a baker-

but I know what is next:

3 women, from 3 generations, standing before the dough as if it were a Holy Offering-together, reverently rolling it into a long, white, floury log

that offers itself to the many load pans.

I know that the loaves must rise.

and rise again, while the women sip plum brandy.



I am not a baker-

but I claimed the rolling pin

one piece of pine wood, smooth, carved and heavy.

my piece of the old country.



SHOW AND TELL

Jessica Powell

Show me your seasons. The bitter cold of your winter, the summer sun that lights up your eyes.

Tell me about the colors you would choose to paint your self-portrait. Would you take your blues and your red fury and turn them into a purple the world has yet to see?

Show me the things that your soul calls home. The things that make you laugh so hard you cannot breathe.

Tell me the thoughts that grow in you like wildfire. The hopes and dreams that feel out of reach.

Show me your tears of sadness and why they sometimes feel better than tears of joy.

Tell me the things that finally broke you. The thoughts and words that you crammed into the back pocket of your jeans, forgotten about to either come out in the wash or stain.

Tell me about the pages that you tore out of your book.

Show me the ashes and soot they made when they burned.

Show me what makes your heart flutter inside your gown cage.

Tell me about the rainstorm when you were born, show me the lightning in you.

Tell me all of your unspoken things, things half said, things never forgotten.

Tell me what you hear in the silence, and why it is so loud.



I WANT TO POWERWASH MY FUCKING SPINE

RJ Prince

if i could take off my Skin, i would start at the wrist.

using a clean scalpel and no gloves i would slice up to my elbow

using my fingers to peel the skin away

like removing latex gloves.

i would admire the roadmap of my Veins and Pluck away the nerves like cello strings.

i wonder what sound they would make.

i would follow the Tendons to their invisible end

using scissors to cut away from elbow to shoulder

i would stand in front of the mirror and use my scalpel to cut just

underneath

my carotid down to my belly button i would open my Flesh

like a book?

a butterfly s t r e t c h i n g her wings-

look at my liver look at my lungs

expanding begging for attention as i breathe

i am sure blood may Spill over my legs.

look at my stomach. look at the way she moves

the bright colors from the inside on the outside.

perhaps now

you can see how pretty i think i might be

when i am not being viewed from what you think beauty should be-

i am human

i'll use my hands to pull out my intestines. i'll throw them in a bucket

i'll rinse them in cold water.

Worry not. i plan to put them back.

down at the bottom of the slice i've given myself lies the thing



Valued

above my own life,

its home is in me,

but it's never been mine.

she is Scarred, her insides on the outsides.

she has Bumps

Yellow

and filled with Pus.

she hardly belongs to me she is the master of her own

i'll use my hands and hold both sides of her like i may do a crying child- i toss her

onto the Floor.

perhaps she may not bring me pain anymore

she may not stab me from the inside until my legs go numb and my stomach attempts to leave its home in fear of what she may do to it.

i would scoop out the fat that may lie between the crevices of my organs.

i will reach as far back as my hands will go until my fingers graze the hard bumpy surface in my back

my spine will be strong

tall

confident and knowing

surrounded by its fleshy cages

i will rip it out feeling each Nerve and tendon pop away from it

the sound of my meat prying away from itself

my body would likely crumple to the floor,

but it would feel so nice

to powerwash my spine.



SOBER

RJ Prince

i wonder how our skin would fit

my tongue flicks over it

feeling the g r o o v e s

BuMps and g a p s

goosebumps falling into crevices.

i remember

the addiction.

my veins swelling at the antagonizing itch underneath my skin

where you used to live.

my breath bares the weight of the sun i've created here

your siren sounds beckon me:

no better than black tar.

my sweaty skin sticks to the sheets when i awake at night,

withdrawing from you.

the metallic musky taste of you stains the back of my tongue

remembering thoughts of you

nightly.

i remember your skin was coated in Velvet.

i feel you at the bottom of the Bubble bath

pulled down by what had been

i tried to drown you in what could have been

i held your head under the water until the Bubbles stopped.

my Teeth stick to themselves

when i open my jaw

and i can't not taste you when i swallow



PARASITE

RJ Prince

and i can feel your blood
dripdripdripping
out of my fingers; onto the floor
i taste your blood
slitherslitherslithering down my throat.

and i hear you
whispering into my ears
from over my shoulder
i can see your voices dancing around my head
like a ritual-
summoning your darkness into the open.

and i break open your skull,
pouring out every thought and i sift through them,
taking what i need,
your rot
stainstainstaining my arms,
so i taste it
using my tongue to lick up every last bit of - you.

each time i blink a bit more of your soul leaks out-
onto the floor
into my shoes

and i cut open your stomach,



i welcome myself in-
i chew on your liver to make room for me
and ifeelyourheartpumping
let me
let me
let me
in.
i hear your eyes roll into the back of your head
i feel your blood rush around me
lower
lower
lower.
and i stitch you up,
your heart monitor stops,
i have made my home in you-
Parasite.



THE PLAYGROUND

Haley Bedford

The wood is worn, watered, and frayed. My grandfather's living Grave
I can feel his touch as my fingerprints graze along, connecting our lineage
His dedication seeps into every inch of this ground; a one-man creation
meant to preserve our youth.

Chains rattle and creak as they spiral around
twisting and turning until plastic snaps

Harsh.

Another swing expired.

No fear, a replacement will be in soon enough

(or never again?)

The former equipment's carcass left
whipping in the breeze, our joy just the same

Cobalt and lemon metal line the walls—our watchful eyes
peeking through;

Little Spies

Smooth to the touch, corners pulling from our fortress
victim to those who didn't care, and those who did

Helpless to the wrath of children lost in fantasy
tattered and bruised with the scars of our childhoods...

And when it's finally time to say goodbye—to wash it all away



Each plank torn down, metal squelching into mud

Those scars – memories will still remain in every cog to this childhood machine

Our souls, our youth forever intertwined with the life of this Playground



THE GREAT LOVE OF SPRING

Ani Schwertfeger

Flowers Grow In Salted Earth
In Land That Could Not Prosper
A Whisper Calls On Scented Wind
A Hint of a Life Reborn

Storm Clouds Brew on Dark Horizons
Bring Helpful Rain or Deadly Hail
The New Buds Wait and Tremble
On All that it Might Entail

My Wait Is Much the Same
What Tender Love Might Be
I Do Not Know Of Such Things
And So I Wait, Patiently

When Love Does Come
Will It Be Thunder and Hail
Or A Sweet, Sweet Jubilee?

A Kiss of Fresh, Damp Mist
The Warmth of Sun and Earth
Singing Trees and Buzzing Bees
Wait To Welcome Me

Growing Things Wait,
Dormant, Beneath the Ground
Hibernating Until The Spring

The Sun is Weak,
The Wind Is Harsh
And the Trees Must Wait To Sing

I Wait, Too
I Play My Chords
Hoping For A Symphony



MAKE BUKOSKI PROUD

Brittney Tafoya

I didn't pay my electric bill on time,
or any bills on time.
I watched the money stack in darkened corners beyond candlelight,
sipping fermented hops and yeast as if it were a life force.
I stumbled out of bars with men I didn't know,
women,
anyone looking for a connection that never lasts longer than a heated moment between
unwashed sheets.
I slept past noon and drank away my hangovers.
I fought with my keyboard,
throwing punches,
taking hits,
just for the sake of the art.
and I remembered the olds,
Sexton, Plath, Woolf,
how they drove themselves to the grave
just as I,
in hopes of being understood by strangers who would never give a damn
I drank more beer.
whisky.
whatever you got that's cheap,
imagined it a lover,
and got drunk on a feeling I had been longing for.
cheers to that.



and I found Time,
that old dog,
fooling us into thinking it a scarcity
when, in actuality,
there's just enough.



EPISODE

Maya Valverde

In the depths of a mind a candle wanes
An itch, relentless tapping reigns.
Cease, I implore, like drums that beat,
shoulders ablaze, a heavy heat.

“Why like this?” the whispers cry.
Hate surrounds, time slipping by.
Drowning in blue, a void profound,
deserving, weak, molten lava found.

Water turns black, a cold embrace,
consuming, pleading for solace.
Electric burning, a known decree,
ice cold water, salt in sea.

Everything tainted, grounded in filth,
heartbeat violent, lost, and still.
Ugly tan floor, white-frayed, dirty embrace,
no anger left, frustration encased.

Fire within, warm waters plea,
cells boiling, not me, set me free.
A star emerges, beautifully forlorn,
water descends, oceans reborn.

Space for reflection, regret's embrace,
Growth, embarrassment, life's own space.
Exhausted gas, in cycles confined,
in the vastness of nothing, I find.



A NIGHTMARE CALLED DANCE

Abigale Washco

My feet sting and I can feel
the sigh of blisters through
these pointe shoes.

Still, I dance.

The rustle of tulle fills the
air, and my dreams.

Still, I dance.

The bow wrapped around
my waist is too tight,

it feels like a hand wrapped
around my neck.

Still, I dance.

Soft thuds of feet after a
jump or twirl.

Still, I dance.

Your eyes *burn* into the back
of my head,

making me questions every
step I take.

Still, I dance.

Hair too tight.

Eyes that linger.

Dress too long.
Judgment I feel.

Still, I dance.



THE SUN KISSED ME THIS SUMMER

Addison Wilson

The sun kissed me this summer.

A boy did too.

Hiding for months, the sun began its reimmersion into the world,
Asking, begging, pleading, nearly forcing itself onto me,
and I welcomed it.

I knew its embrace was soft, safe and kind.

The winter did not make me forget it,

It only made me miss it.

It traced its way across my legs, delighting in the flavor of my arms—

Their flesh, their sweat, their shade.

The shade which, all-powerful as the sun believed itself to be,

It knew it could change.

I am nothing but a reptile in the desert,

A plant in the kitchen bay window,

Living for, living because of, the embrace of the sun.

But just as I am a reptile in the desert and a plant in a window,

Depending on my sun for survival, for embrace, for companionship

I, too, am a meerkat—

Insatiable and unfulfilled by the delicate rays that the sun offers me.

As well as it loves me,

I am not its own.

It is mine but the world is its,



And the world has many arms and legs that beg to be recolored.
Its kisses were never meant for me alone.
So, like the meerkat, I cannot accept the sun's adoration in solitude.
For I know I would get too desperate for a love that doesn't need me.
The reptile and the plant in me give nothing back to my lover,
So, I might as well give to my fellow meerkat instead
—that way I can resemble the sun if I cannot be loved by it.
Us meerkats can love the sun for its generosity but
Love each other even more for our intention,
Our relation, our proximity, our intimacy.
For you and I, my fellow meerkat, can bask in the sun alone
Together.

The boy kissed me in the dark.
The sun did not feel the warmth that we'd created for it.
And now I am cold.





FICTION





L'HOMME AU MASQUE DE FER

Gray Adams

My key slid into the lock of Alphonse's apartment in eastern downtown Paris. After not hearing from my childhood friend for about a month, I no longer had a choice. If it had only been a couple weeks or even three since I had last spoken to Al, I wouldn't be doing this. A month, though? Something must've been wrong.

The door swung open, and I braced myself for whatever mental breakdown plagued my friend this time. To my surprise the inside of the tiny apartment was still. Quiet. There was neither the usual crying nor drunken hysteric characteristic of my friend's periodic breakdowns. I passed the familiar entryway, the wall crowded with bizarre archeological specimens and family photos. If I looked for it, I would've seen the picture of the two of us as children on our bikes— a lanky, bespectacled kid with his rough, curly-haired sidekick out to hunt for stag beetles.

Then, I stepped through the kitchen, gagging on the putrid smell of expired milk and moldy leftovers from the dozens of dirty dishes stacked on every conceivable surface. These were often the chores that Al neglected first. From the kitchen I scanned the compact lounge area, if it could even be called that, which had a single loveseat and a TV we would often use to watch VHS tapes Alphonse rented from the store down the street. Everything was intact.

"Al?" I called. There was no answer.

"Alphonse? It's Jaq. You okay?"

There was nothing but silence and my eyebrows came together in concern. This wasn't like

Al's usual breakdowns. Sure, he could be unstable at times, but he was always predictable. He was the guy who wanted to be an archeologist ever since he found an old, rusty nail buried in the sandbox at our local elementary school. It was good that he found it, too, or the damn thing would've given someone tetanus.

I approached the side table near the couch littered with spare change and crunchy leftover restaurant mints and notes scribbled on random scraps of paper to reach Alphonse's answering machine. When I pressed play, I heard a montage of messages from Al's mother, myself, and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, wondering where the hell he was. I hoped this disappearance wouldn't cost Al his dream job, but the Muséum was curiously tolerant of his strange antics. Maybe they knew that genius often goes hand in hand with madness. In Al's case it absolutely did. He was the brightest person most of us would ever know.

With a sigh, I decided it was time to check his room. The last time I was in it I found a two-century-old femur lying on his bed like it was the most normal damn thing in the world. He wasn't always in touch with reality, but that's part of what made him as bright as he was. Someone with a mind of his caliber probably couldn't deal with the gloomy world we live in for extended periods of time.

When I pushed the door open, I felt prickles of dread on the back of my neck. What was once Al's desk was broken apart into splinters of



wood accompanied by down feathers from his pillow and jagged shards of glass from the mirror that once stood by the door. Every precious artifact he owned was knocked to the floor, scraps of white collared shirts covering them. Only a single thing remained untouched: a video camera, and it stood out like a beacon above the sea of debris.

It was like a scene out of a war movie. My head spun.

“Holy shit. Holy shit.”

My eyes darted around the room, wondering who the hell could have done this. Alphonse had broken a few things in drunken fits, but nothing like this.

I hesitated before entering the room. It wasn't every day someone found their best friend's room in complete ruins. I started to worry about him, like actually worry about him. He had pulled a few stunts in his day, like when he was 12 and ran away from home. After days of biking around our small town, I found him half-dead “camping” under a tree. But this was different. It felt malicious.

When I stepped in, I was glad I hadn't removed the steel-toed shoes they made me wear for construction work because glass was everywhere. The air was thick and humid, and I could smell a faint trace of something metallic. I swallowed hard. I had been here a million times, so why did it feel like a different universe?

I searched the broken objects around his room, and to my relief, there was no blood, which I was half expecting. Nothing made me think Al was in immediate danger. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding.

With the room searched, I grabbed the video camera from its stand and opened it, glass cracking underneath my weight. I knew that Al-

phonse often kept video diaries of discoveries he made in his field of archeology to show his colleagues at the Muséum; it didn't seem important until I remembered something noteworthy.

About a month ago, while working in the Bastille district, I came upon a dingy metal box about the size one would keep their shoes in. At the time, my crew was digging a trench for a new oil and gas pipeline. Naturally, everyone was interested about what was in the box, but none of us could pry the damn thing open. Thinking it may be of historical value due to its proximity to where the Bastille once stood, I convinced my team to let me hand it over to Alphonse. After all, this was his expertise. I knew he would go wild for it.

I pulled out the tape, wondering if it could contain any clues about where Al was. The timeline seemed to coincide, so I thought fuck it. Might as well give it a shot, right?

In the lounge area, I plugged in a VCR that could play the special type of tape the video camera used. When everything was set up, I pressed play and sat down on the faded loveseat.

The date showed September 3, 1997, 8:36 p.m.

Alphonse (his thick glasses were reflecting the light in his room) appeared on screen with his goofy-looking smile, the one that he wore when he was doing what he loved.

“My friend Jaq brought me something special today!” he said, showing the metal box to the camera.

“Since it was found in the Bastille area, it may contain something exciting! Okay, let's see if I can get this open...”

The video stopped, only to start again, the time now 9:12 p.m.



"I found something remarkable! I can't believe it! Look! An iron mask like in the old stories of the Bastille!"

He zoomed in on the mask now sitting on his desk. The antique, corroded metal gleamed under the lamplight, facing the camera directly. Instead of holes where the eyes and mouth should've been, there were only "X" shaped indentations roughly pounded into the metal. To me, it looked like the type of twisted thing people would use to royally fuck up someone they didn't like back in the Dark Ages. Or something. This wasn't my expertise.

"I think pretty much everyone in France is familiar with L'Homme au Masque de Fer, but I find the history around it truly fascinating!" Alphonse said, sitting down in a chair facing the camera with his back to the mask resting on the desk behind him. Of course, he found it fascinating. I knew him well enough to know when I was in for a history lecture, so I sat back into the loveseat with a sigh. Here we go again.

"The Bastille was constructed in 1370 and used as a fortress until 1417, when it became a prison. As everyone knows, it was demolished during the revolution in 1789, but one of the most interesting parts of its history was the mysterious prisoner who wore an iron mask! To this day, historians don't know who the prisoner was, though there have been many speculations. L'Homme au Masque de Fer was a prisoner in the Bastille from 1698 to his death in 1703 and was never once seen without his mask. Many details surrounding this man, whoever he was, are spooky and almost read like a ghost story." He paused; I knew it was only to add drama. Al was always a drama king.

"Not only do we not know who the prisoner was, but the Marquis de Louvois requested a

cell with two sets of doors so no one could hear or see him and his guards were ordered to kill him on the spot if he spoke about anything other than his immediate needs. This man either knew something no one could ever know, or he was very, very dangerous. Why did they go to such lengths to keep his identity a secret? Had he gone insane? Was his very existence a sin in this crazy world?" Al was out of breath by the time he posed his last question. "Could this be the same mask Jaq found while working?"

Then immediately, he answered his own question: "The evidence points to— yes! The date on the inside of the box is 1704, possibly when they were looking to discard the evidence of the mask and the man who wore it, yet here it is. A frightening but exciting piece of history, and all thanks to my best friend!"

His smile beamed once again, dimples visible on his freckled cheeks. Sure, he was a total nerd with his glasses, crazy grin, and clean-cut golden hair, but I knew Al was my nerd. Out of all the other kids in the schoolyard, he had chosen me, the impoverished outcast with a harsh life at home. Even here in Paris, he would spend time with me instead of those fancy-ass scholars, saying they were too stuck up for his liking. He would often tell me about his work, which I didn't always understand, but hearing his musical voice was enough. After so much instability in my life, I cherished Al and the permanence of our relationship.

A pang of sadness ran through me when I remembered he was now missing, but I had faith he would turn up sooner or later. He always did.

The scene ended with Alphonse's smile with the iron mask looming in the background. Now, the date was September 6, 1997, 11:58 p.m.

The camera was in the same position in



Al's room, but it was much darker this time. Most, if not all, the lights were off and only a sliver of light shone through the window. Al sat in a chair next to his desk, facing both the camera and the mask from the side. The mask was in the same place, still viewed from straight on.

He wore a frown this time, his eyebrows drawn together. "I know it might sound strange, but... I feel like the last few nights, I've been able to hear something coming from the mask. I'm not sure what it is, but it's almost like... I don't know, whispers?"

A pit formed in my stomach. Something about the mask, now sitting in the shadows, made me feel uneasy. When my shovel first hit the metal box containing the mask, it hadn't felt right, like a jolt of infernal energy through my body. But the excitement of its discovery melted away whatever feelings surrounded it. Did I make a mistake in giving it to Alphonse?

In the video, Al sat in his pajamas, staring at the mask in the dim room. It was unsettling, but I leaned into the TV to see if I could hear anything like he claimed he could.

"H-Hello?" Alphonse asked after an extended period of silence.

I squinted at the mask to see it better, but the low resolution of a home video didn't help too much. There was nothing there besides the cross shapes over the eyes and mouth.

"No, I'm not ... I'm Al." He shifted his chair away from the mask, squirming.

"Al, are you stupid? Don't talk to it!" I told him even though I knew he couldn't hear me.

There was another long, drawn-out silence. One that made me hold my breath.

"Okay. Okay, Alphonse, there's no way

this thing is talking to you. You've just been thinking about it a lot. You need to go to bed. Let's put it away," Alphonse said to himself, moving from the chair.

The video ended as Al approached the camera, his eyes open wide, jaw clenched.

I wanted to reach out to him. To comfort him. I couldn't.

Now, the date showed September 15, 1997, 1:41 a.m.

Alphonse appeared very close to the camera, looking like he just came back from a visit to the trenches of World War I. His ordinarily neat hair was mussed up beyond comparison and his glasses were cracked and smudged. Screw 5 o'clock shadow— he sported what was far more like a 10 o'clock shadow.

"I... I feel like I'm losing my mind," he said, not looking at the camera. His eyes were dull, far from the twinkling azure I always thought of.

"It speaks to me and... It tells me not to call Mom or . . . or Jaq." His eyes welled up, but then he flinched like he was reprimanded by some unseen individual. "No... I'm not doing anything. I'm just talking to myself. I can't use this thing to communicate with anyone anyway."

My heartbeat began to pick up as I drew closer to the screen.

Al backed away from the camera and sat in the chair that was partly facing the mask and partly facing the camera. In all this time, the mask still hadn't moved from its position on the desk.

An unnerving silence filled the room as Alphonse began to rock back and forth on his chair. "I don't know. That... I don't think I should do that," he murmured, trying not to look at the



mask.

As I watched the scene, I realized a few feathers were already on Al's desk and his pajamas were partially ripped down the front. A lump formed in my throat that I couldn't swallow down. I had seen Alphonse in many different states, both good and bad, but this... This was something else. The Al I knew was fighting a losing battle. I couldn't tell if it was against the mask— or himself.

"No, but ... I..." Al spoke again, rocking faster now, "I can't..."

I watched as my best friend's chest began to rise and fall in jerky, irregular movements. His shallow breaths hastened. I'd seen Alphonse through enough panic attacks to know what was happening.

"No... No! I can't! I won't!" Alphonse yelled at the mask between rapid breaths, long fingers clawing at his face.

How could I stop this? How could I stop this twisted, fucked-up situation?

I couldn't.

Without warning, Al leapt from his chair, screaming incoherent things that made no sense. The camera fell over and the scene ended.

At this point I paused the playback, hand shaking. Oh god. Oh god. Al. I had to save him. I had to. I loved him. I always had and always would. He was an absolute fucking fruitcake, but he was mine.

Swallowing with difficulty, I tried to calm myself down with slow breaths. Out of the two of us, I had always been the stable one. I would figure this out, right? I gathered what resolve I had and played the tape.

The date showed September 16, 1997,

3:22 a.m. At first, the screen was black, but I could hear Alphonse laughing. Strained. Maniacal. He picked the camera up from the ground and placed it back on the stand. Now he was close to the lens and his reddened face was distorted into an expression between hysterical laughter and sobbing. I could barely recognize him. Parts of his blond hair had been torn out at the scalp and his eyes were bloodshot. His glasses were missing their lenses, its frame bent out of shape.

He couldn't even speak. He was laughing, or crying, far too hard. Tears glistened in the light and rolled down his face as he picked up the mask from his desk. For the first time, I saw the other side of the mask. I was almost sick.

Where there were eyes and a mouth on the front of the mask, there were reddened, elongated stakes on the back. Alphonse took one last look at the camera.

"No! NO!" I screamed at the screen.

With the side of his face shown to the camera, Alphonse brought the mask closer.

I began to tremble, tears forming in my eyes as I watched something I knew I would have nightmares about for the rest of my life.

Alphonse didn't make a sound when the mask began to sink into his eyes and mouth, forcing bloody pulp out of his eye sockets and down his neck, but he didn't stop there. He pushed the mask through the flesh of his brain. For a moment, there was an audible gurgling sound as the stake in his mouth pressed through his throat. Blood ran from his hands onto the floor; I could hear the liquid dripping. Only when the mask was on completely did Alphonse stop. It was now deeply embedded in his skull.

The body that used to be my best friend turned toward the camera, standing still as blood



continued to spill onto his ripped pajamas and to the ground. I expected it to fall, dead, but it didn't. It just stood there. Staring.

The playback stopped. It was the end of the tape. Tears ran down my cheeks and I stared into nothingness, numb. My best friend of 20 years was gone. I couldn't do anything about it. In the end, I couldn't save him. Not this time.

—

A few months later, I was trying to get along in life as best I could. After Alphonse's disappearance, there was an official investigation. No one knew what to make of the case. Some officers thought Al faked the entire thing with makeup and acting because no blood was found at the scene, but I knew better. Al didn't have that in him. He just didn't.

I woke up for work one frigid December morning. It was all I had left to keep my thoughts from wandering to the haunting videotape. I pulled on my steel-toed shoes and opened the front door. On the welcome mat, there was a box. The cardboard box was about the size of a microwave, beaten and worn, as if someone had kicked it all the way to my house.

It was quite some time since I last ordered anything and the box bore no name or address, so what the hell was it? Wearing a frown, I brought the cardboard box, which was surprisingly light, inside and placed it on the kitchen counter. I took out a knife and pierced its tape, running the blade along the edge of the box to free the top flaps.

When I opened it, dozens of packing peanuts spilled out all over the floor. Cursing, I dug through the peanuts until I realized that as I got closer to the middle of the package, the peanuts began to turn red. It was a dark red, one that coated the packing peanuts in a crusty residue. Immediately, I thought of Al. I swallowed, hands

starting to tremble. I paused only for a second before resuming my search through the box.

It only took a moment before my hand touched something freezing cold and metallic. Holding my breath, I grasped the object and pulled it out of the sea of packing peanuts. A mask. Just like the one I saw on the home video Alphonse had taken, except covered in dried blood. Underneath the red, I could see a silver metal shining through, corroded at the mask's rough edges. Its unseeing, X-shaped eyes were caked with layers of blood, globs of dried muscle or some sort of tissue attached at the sides along with clumps of golden hair.

I inhaled sharply as I thought of Al's beautiful blond locks shining in the summer sun while we played together as children. Him dragging me around by the hand with the smile that melted my heart down to its core. His crying fits and periods of depression, when he would stay hidden under his duvet for days at a time, but always poked his head out for me when I visited. The feeling of his head on my shoulder as he whispered his anxieties and fears, his neglectful father and overbearing mother, knowing I could relate after my father left us, his wife and five children, to fend for ourselves.

As I turned the mask over, the three stakes on its back came into view. Thick masses of something terrible clung to them, shriveled, red, and crusty. The mask weighed heavy in my hands. Tears fell from my eyes straight onto the back of the mask, mixing with the dried blood. I knew I should call the police and show them the evidence, but I couldn't move. I stared at the stakes, wondering how much it would hurt to have them slide deep into my skull.

Al was gone now. Forever.

Should I put it on?



EUGENE THE WOODCUTTER

Juan Ramon Gomez Banuelos

There once was a small village in the far-off corner of The Kingdom of Terra. In the corner of the forest surrounding the small village was a big great cedar tree. This cedar was so massive that it was sucking all the nutrients out of the ground, keeping the village from expanding their farmland. It was decided that someone would spend their days working to chop down the cedar. Three-hundred years passed, but the great cedar still stood. Generations of woodcutters dedicated their lives to chopping down this tree, but even in three centuries, they'd only managed to chop a quarter of the way through the thick wood.

Eugene was chosen to be a woodcutter when he was five years old after the last woodcutter had passed away. From the moment he laid his eyes on the great cedar, Eugene wanted to achieve the impossible. He wanted to be the one to chop it down. The first night, Eugene rendered his hands completely bloodied; he didn't stop swinging until his father intervened. Sunrise to sunset, Eugene spent his days chopping down the tree. The villagers became scared of him. They started calling him a demon child and avoided him all together. By the time Eugene reached his tenth summer, his family moved him out to the shed and left food for him there so they wouldn't have to interact with him. Eugene could not have cared less. All that mattered to him was fulfilling his ambition and besides, Eugene did have one friend.

Strelitzia was the mayor's daughter and a talented sacred arts user in the village; she was

praised by everyone as the hope of the village. Due to her status, people often avoided her. As the mayor's daughter, Strelitzia was forced to work hard at her studies. This put immense pressure on her shoulders. She felt alone, and in her loneliness she was naturally drawn to the apathetic boy who single mindedly chopped away at the great cedar all by himself. She was so inspired by his force of will that she started to take her studies more seriously and started sneaking off to practice her magic in the woods where she couldn't bother anyone.

"Do you want to be friends?" After a month of sneaking off into the woods, Strelitzia worked up the nerve to finally ask Eugene this simple question.

"Sure, it doesn't matter to me." Just like that, the two became friends and Strelitzia made a conscious effort to come see him everyday. And thus began their days single mindedly working towards their own goals. Alone together.

"I learned a new sacred art today! May I try it out on you?" Strelitzia excitedly asked Eugene.

"Hmmf—I don't mind," Eugene answered after scarfing down a sandwich that Strelitzia had brought him. Strelitzia motioned him to stand and face away from her. She gently placed her hand on his back. Eugene could hear her chanting something under her breath and then for the first time felt light and there was no pain anywhere on his body.

"Woah, incredible! I feel great." In his excitement, Eugene jumped five feet in the air.



“Strelitzia could you do this for me every day?” He thought about how much more work he could get done without being dragged down by his body’s need to rest.

“Oh-sure I can do that! It’d make perfect practice for me too!” Strelitzia was caught off guard; she had never seen Eugene show such excitement before.

Strelitzia kept her promise and helped Eugene chop down the tree by using a healing art on him every day until they turned eighteen. Little did either of them know that the constant work and healing Eugene was going through for years massively boosted his strength and stamina to monstrous levels. Until the day Strelitzia had to leave the village in order to go further her study of sacred arts at the most prestigious school in the capital. An achievement that was unheard of for a backwater village like this one.

—————

Age 749, the tree was still being chopped away at. Eugene was twenty-five now and while he had made more progress on the cedar than anyone before him, he knew better than anyone that wouldn’t be able to achieve his goal. I wish Strelitzia was here to use her healing on me. Thanks to Strelitzia’s magic, Eugene already had so much stamina he could chop away at the tree for a week without sleep. That still wasn’t enough. He needed to rethink his strategy; brute force alone was not going to win him this battle.

“I wonder if they’ve even noticed I’ve not come back yet. Knowing them, they’re probably sound asleep by now.” Eugene posited his lonely existence and wondered how his old friend was faring in the capital before shaking his head and clearing those thoughts away. “I ought to head b—”

A loud thundering sound shook even the great cedar tree to its roots. “What could have caused that?” Eugene looked in the direction of the loud noise clutching his ax firmly in his hands.

“The night guards should have definitely heard that noise. I better go take a quick glance to make sure it’s nothing really bad.” The guards may have been more equipped for combat than Eugene, but nobody in the village knew the area as well as he did due to the years of time he’d spent out in the forest. He swiftly navigated his way through the trees towards the source of the sound, making sure he made as little noise as possible. As he grew ever closer to the source of the noise, Eugene noticed the trees in the area were crushed, burned, splintered, and in the middle of all that carnage there was a massive crater in the ground where someone clad in all black armor was currently face down in the dirt. A knight. Eugene had only seen one as a child, but he was certain that the man laid out flat was a knight from the capital. Eugene, not sensing any danger nearby, hurriedly went down into the crater to check on the knight.

“Augh! What a pain in the ass. That’s gonna hurt later.” The knight swiftly rose to his feet.

“Are you okay?” Eugene responded with a start.

“Oh, a civilian. Good day, I am The Unification Knight Killian from house Bercouli,” Killian introduced himself stiffly.

“A pleasure” Eugene bowed deeply “My name is Eugene. I’m but a humble woodcutter.”

“A woodcutter, ey?” Killian eyed Eugene from top to bottom with skepticism in his voice. “Well no matter, Eugene, I need you to return to the village and tell them not to leave their homes. It’s not safe — Hold that thought.” Just as quickly



as he stood up, he swiftly turned around and made his way towards the forest where four goblins had emerged from the trees. The goblins were as imposing as they were ugly. Standing at a good six feet tall, the goblins were all ridiculously buff and wore simple leather armor with stone swords in hand.

“Hear me goblins. For the crime of entering the human territory, I must punish you.” With that, Killian drew his sword and moved so fast that Eugene couldn’t even register what had happened. One second Killian and four goblins stood there; the next, Killian’s sword was in his hand and the goblins’ heads were at their feet.

“So, this is a knight. Awesome!” Just as Eugene was marveling at Killian’s abilities, he heard a noise behind him. Another goblin had swung around to the weaker foe looking to avenge his fallen comrades. On instinct, Eugene readied his ax and swung with the same force he uses on the cedar.

“Hyaaaah!” With ease, the ax cut straight through the goblin’s abdomen cutting him into two pieces, his body fell first then his legs slowly folded to the ground. Eugene stood there staring at the now dead goblin, he was struggling to catch his breath.

“I knew there was something special about you, mister ‘woodcutter.’” Killian approached with a huge grin on his face. “Not many people can take on a goblin much less with such ease. Tell me, have you ever considered becoming a knight?”

“Sorry, there’s something I must do as a woodcutter before I consider switching vocations,” Eugene laughed wholeheartedly. Eugene thought Killian was such a strange man and an even stranger knight, but there was something about him that put Eugene at ease.

“Well, that’s a shame. The knights could

use someone with strength like yours.” Killian shrugged his shoulders. Eugene was taken aback by just how unknight-like Killian was. A far cry from the prim and proper image he had grown up with. Not to mention his strange inclination towards all black that made him look more like a knight from monster territory than a knight from the capital.

“Killian, why exactly were you in the crater when I found you? What made the crater?”

“Right, well my body is what technically made the crater as to what happened to me — well, speak of the devil and he shall appear.” Just as Killian was about to explain, an ear-piercing screech interrupted and Killian pointed towards the air. A wyvern flew overhead. A reptilian-like beast that was akin to a dragon but much smaller. It had scales across his whole body and enormous wings that enabled it to fly; this particular wyvern had a saddle on its back and was about twenty feet long.

“You were fighting a WYVERN?” Eugene screamed.

“Yeah and he was one tough nut. He just wouldn’t sit still even, after I defeated his rider. So I grabbed onto his back and tried to bring him down. Of course he ended up taking me so high up I briefly lost consciousness and fell back down to Terra,” Killian said nonchalantly.

“You know, the fact that you can say all that with a straight face scares me more than the fact that I’m supposed to believe you survived a fall that high. It doesn’t matter. What do we do now?” The wyvern was circling back around.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a plan. Here, lend me your ax,” Eugene tossed his ax to Killian and he tossed Eugene his sword.

“I’m not sure I trust your plan-making after what I just heard. What do you want me to do



with this? I've never used a sword before."

"Simply swing that sword like you would your ax. Trust me you'll do fine. When I give the signal swing with all your might."

"Ok, I'll give it a shot but what are you going to do?"

"Just leave it to me I'll give you an opening, now give me a boost." Killian signaled Eugene to put his hands under his boot.

"Don't tell me you plan on doing the same thing as before."

"This time it'll go different. Just boost me up," Killian said with full confidence.

"Alright then, whatever you say," Eugene lamented.

"Three, two, one!" Killian went flying upwards. Eugene found Killian to be lighter than he looked. Killian was dazed with his sudden altitude but swiftly readied himself as the wyvern flew towards him. Killian took the ax in one hand, took a deep breath, and swung his body and ax perpendicular to the ground, slicing one of the wyvern's wings clean off. With his other hand, he grabbed the reins and hoisted himself on the wyvern's back. Now the wyvern was a wing down and was falling down to the ground. Killian tried his best to guide the wyvern towards the center of the crater where he could see Eugene taking the stance of a baseball player, ready to strike the wyvern.

"EUGENE, DO IT NOW!" At that, Eugene didn't hesitate he swung with all his might and right as he thought was going to hit nothing but air. The wyvern plummeted face first right to where Eugene was swinging. The sword landed directly in the center of the wyvern's neck and Eugene felt some resistance hit his blade.

"This is nothing. Your neck would need to

be a million times thicker to even compare to the cedar." With that Eugene put even more force behind his swing and ripped through the scales on the wyvern's neck, cleanly carving his way through the flesh and bone until the head was completely severed off the wyvern.

Killian and Eugene were standing in front of the great cedar.

"I must admit when you asked to use my blade. This was not quite what I expected it to be used for." Killian gazed at the great cedar while Eugene readied himself in front of it, Killian's sword in hand. After defeating the wyvern, Killian took care of the remaining goblins and spoke to the villagers about what had transpired. Killian was the knight stationed to look over the region of this land and after the help he received, he promised to grant Eugene any one wish he desired. Eugene had asked to use his sword. An obsidian blade forged in the heart of a volcano.

"After using it once I could tell this was no normal sword. To be quite frank, it's exactly what I've been looking for." Eugene was fond of his ax but even he could tell there was no comparison in the quality and sharpness between the two. Killian's blade was on another level. Eugene wound up and put everything he had into the swing. There was a brief silence before the creaking of wood falling on wood and then great cedar toppled over crushing about twenty other trees in the process.

Eugene had done it. He achieved his goal. He chopped down the stubborn cedar that had spent the last twenty years pushing him forward. With a great big sigh, a chuckle, and a huge grin across his face. Eugene turned to look at Killian. "So about becoming a knight?"



LIFEBLOOD OF LAND

Gage Barnard

The teal waves swirled and coiled around her raft as the young woman drifted towards a smog-concealed monolith in the sea. As she grew closer, more details of the island became tangible from the strange, verdant vegetation spanning the coast, which was unlike anything she had seen in her homeland. The jagged red and black rocks reached skyward like a myriad of grasping hands. Most striking of all was the unmistakable crimson glow that gleamed like a beacon high above, shrouded in fog, which had captivated her ever since she had first witnessed it beaming on the horizon from the beaches of her home. Raum had finally reached her destination.

This fascination was not unique to just Raum, however. From the moment this red gleam erupted on the horizon, her entire village had fixated on it, both as an object of wonder and awe, as an omen. None knew the true nature of this light or what its appearance foretold. It remained an indescribable presence that stared from the distance, the piercing glare of some sort of deific being. It had been forbidden for anyone to venture off to try and reach the crimson light on the horizon. Not just for the safety of the adventurer themselves, but also in case tampering with it caused a reaction that put everyone in danger.

The village respected this agreement, allowing the light to remain an ominous yet wonderful thing to bask upon from a distance. Yet despite this, Raum and several others in the village felt an inescapable gnawing feeling at the back of their minds. As though the glow had

seared a brand upon them, which turned fascination, into obsession, into maddening desire. A ferocious, burning curiosity calling to reach out to the light. Yet still, they needed to endure for the sake of the village. It was not their right to take such a potentially dangerous journey. They shackled their minds to the point of growing ill.

For Raum, another feeling shaped her mind's fixation on that warm crimson glow. It was a longing, a pining want, as one may feel toward a desired partner. Her unshakeable need to grasp and hold the light close. It sung to her, in dulcet tones that lulled her to sleep on cold nights. It sung vibrant and vigorous, granting her power and motivation in her long days of hunting and forging. It was rare for her to hear this song to its completion, the comforting sound always fading off into a lonely silence. It always lingered just long enough to unsettle her spirit. This set her plan in motion. The spark that ignited her destined path forward.

Over the course of a month, she had constructed a vessel to cross the sea, using her techniques as a craftsperson. The bright song seemed to whisper gentle motivations that guided her hands. She worked day and night to perfect a stable enough craft to carry her across the sea. She had grown isolated from the village in this time. Her neighbors' concerns had reached a boiling point. She had already vanished, days adrift towards the crimson light she was destined to meet.

As her raft kissed the black sand that rose along the edge of the island, she quickly em-



barked, thanking the ground she walked on as she stumbled with legs shaking as they accustomed themselves to the earth once again. She adjusted her foot bindings and cloak, looking skyward at the grand structure before her. The dense smoke and fog made it hard to tell how far off the peak of the mountain was. Still, she could not let it deter her. The song that had captured her heart and mind was the clearest it had ever been, providing an almost familial warmth that reforged her resolve. As she gripped the pleasantly warm stone beneath her, she could practically feel the vigorous energy of the land surging between her fingers. It stoked the flame that burned in her chest. With that fire she began to ascend the face of the great mountain.

The formation of the rocks she clung to as she climbed was both a blessing and a curse. While there were plenty of points to grasp and press forward with, the severely jagged structure of the cliff face promised nothing pleasant should her strength fail her at any point. As tempered as her resolve was, even the finest blade will shatter when placed under enough pressure. She tried to keep the thoughts out of her mind, instead focusing on the sound that had called her here in the first place. It had only grown duller as she climbed higher up the cliff; however, she allowed her thoughts to wander alone for the first moment in quite a long time.

Raum had been climbing for what felt like hours, with windows to rest becoming less and less frequent. Whether it was fatigue or mental strain, the song that had guided her forward had faded as well. She was high enough now that she couldn't see the base of the cliff through the smog. Alone, with the jagged black rocks she clung to the only reality she could perceive. She pressed herself closer against the stone, trying her best to catch her breath. The heat in the air

had grown more oppressive than anything else, its weight limiting how much she could even move her arms anymore. Vision blurred, teeth clenched, and muscles strained. She reached out to force herself further up the cliff. She pushed herself up off of her previous set of grips; the old stones cracked and gave way causing her to fall back down the face of the cliff.

As Raum was suspended in the murky air, a paralyzing sickening cold bit into her flesh, as though she had been afflicted with a horrible venom. She desperately reached forward, slamming her hands into the jagged rocks, hoping to anchor herself. They cut into her palms, but she managed to grasp the edge just enough to catch herself. The sting was only slightly dulled by the primal adrenaline that surged through her being as she once again pressed her entire self into the rocks. She could barely even feel her limbs, her muscles worn down and numb. A pressure was building in her head. Tight enough that she thought her ears would bleed.

Then it came, in the most subtle tone, barely audible to her. A whispering not too dissimilar to the song Raum attuned herself to in the past. She tried her best to silence her nerves and listen, pressing her head against the stone and closing her eyes. When the whispers were at her side, she was safe. It was what she had to believe. They continued to drone on, repeating the same phrase in some unheard-of tongue which she couldn't comprehend. Pulsing, resonating throughout her body though, she could feel a meaning. With no other option immediately crossing her mind Raum tightened her grip and began to whisper in a nearly inaudible tone.

"Make... make... make... make... make... make..."

Raum continued to whisper alongside



what she was hearing, until eventually she noticed something strange. She felt as though something was grasping at her hands and feet. She turned her head up to her right and as her eyes focused, she was greeted with the sight of the stone reshaping to bind around her hand. Her gaze widened as she looked to her other hand and her feet where the same event was taking place. Panic took hold of her initially as she tried to pull herself free to no avail. She felt the stone bend and morph around each of her fingers and eventually cuff around her wrists and ankles. Her breath hastened as she tried to understand the sight she had witnessed. Raum closed her eyes again, leaning into the stones in silence. The whispers continuing to surround her being.

Raum eventually opened her eyes again, realizing she must have collapsed out of exhaustion. The stone bindings were still present, although they weren't uncomfortable. She was far less fatigued than she had been before. Her vision was less blurry. The numbness that consumed her limbs had faded. The pain in her palm was gone, although she still couldn't discern its state from inside the stone casing. She listened again to the presence echoing in her mind, which had begun repeating a new sound. She tried her best to understand it. While staring at her bound hand she began a new, nearly silent whisper.

"Lift... lift... lift... lift... lift... lift..."

The stone around her hands and feet began to move and adjust, reshaping to eventually become larger and more stable and creating a platform Raum could comfortably stand on. She felt a sense of ease wash over her at last. She sat on the platform for a moment, readying her herself mentally and physically for the remainder of the climb. She listened to the whispers for a while, trying to deepen her understanding of what each specific sound meant.

For the next part of the climb, she moved with the aid of this power of command she had begun to learn. The jagged stones she reached shifted to accommodate her grip, the stones beneath her moved to grant her stable footing. The speed of her ascent increased drastically. The mountain bent to grant her safe passage as she followed the whisper's guidance. She pierced through the smog shroud; the cliff's edge came into view.

Raum pulled herself up over the ledge, the stones beneath her providing a final push, and she was immediately awash in a familiar warmth she had longed for. Although there was still smoke filling the air, she could make out the sky above and the glow of the setting sun. She soaked in the comfort of daylight, casting her cloak aside and taking a knee to observe her surroundings. At the top of the grand spire she had overcome, there was a great crater where she at last could witness the source of her fascination.

A coalescence of scarlet red flames and light pulsed and swirled at the center, radiating a wave that synchronized with Raum's heartbeat. It was as though it was trying to drag her in, each pulse inching her another step forward. The song had returned in her mind. Perhaps it would be better to say it had reached its crescendo, more powerful and mesmerizing than it had ever been before. The whispers too had grown wild, completely different than any she had heard on the cliffside, and constantly shifting. Her senses were completely overwhelmed, to the point that she hadn't even realized tears had begun flowing down her cheeks. Her rapid breaths were as hot as flames. She gazed into the gleaming red vortex, stepping closer to it, the crimson arcs of flame almost reaching out to grab her and pull her in.

She had fully descended into the crater,



face to face with the massive blaze of energy. The longing that strangled her heart was so potent now that she almost choked. Want overwhelmed her mind, the promised embrace that warming song had led her to so long ago. The power that had been her life's motivation. She approached it, arms outstretched, humming to the sound that reverberated throughout her body.

In an instant, the vortex of crimson flame reached forward and engulfed her, pushing Raum to the ground. Searing into her skin an indescribable burning feeling, more impossible than any pain known. She tried to scream but nothing came. She tried move, to get away, but her body refused, as though the scorching had killed any sense of control she had over her body. An earsplitting screech blasted through her mind as the song grew chaotic and terrifying. All she could do was curl up and close her eyes, try her best to make sense of the sound. It was the only path left she could possibly think of.

Raum called out with a vigor greater than she knew she was capable of. The earth around her surged and spiraled but to no effect. The flames were growing smaller, and through burning eyes she could almost see them surging into her body. Her arms gleamed with flames and she swung her body around, striking the earth beneath her. She flailed wildly, crying out to the whispers she had followed on her climb. She collapsed once again, body consumed by the inferno.

She was now inside dark space; at its heart burned a bright red orb. Warm, caring, devouring, embracing from all sides. A sound emitted, words of unknowable origin. Within, meaning was found through gentle rhythms.

*“Vessel of vigor and
flame*

of earth and

blood

let us conjoin.

Endure, and embrace

all life.”

Raum's eyes shot open, orbs of molten gold which darted around in every direction. Her long hair blazed. A wildfire raging in every direction. She kneeled and swung her scorched arms outward, geysers of crimson light raging, as she released the power that had placed itself inside her. She clenched her fists and slammed them into the ground, shattering through the stone. Wild, violent, invigorating, loving, almighty waves of energy carved through the mountain and in an instant, it all exploded in every direction. The mountain collapsed, obliterated by flame, as the crimson light cascaded far and wide, to lands far beyond.

When Raum finally returned to consciousness again she found herself atop the remains of the mountain, her body transformed to embody the power she had taken in. She could clearly understand the whispers now, which gave a very clear direction for her path going forward. The Lifeblood Inferno had considered her a worthy vessel to wield its power, and now having released it out into the wild, it was her duty to guide those who could also hear its call. The power to shape earth, command fire and control vital energies was now awakened. She gazed off into the distance, thinking of those others who were driven mad by the crimson light back in the village. Her new resolve established, she channeled her power into her hands and feet before erupting into the sky. A scarlet comet, drifting off towards home.



AVARICE FOR THE GRAVE

Elizabeth Davis

"If men had wings and bore black feathers, Few of them would be clever enough to be crows"

-Henry Ward Beecher

The air was crisp, the birds singing as the trees danced in the wind. A beautiful day and a gorgeous morning for the kingdom. The only thing out of place was the large gray castle with little greenery surrounding it. It poked out like a sore eye, but this was home for Lord Raphael. A beautiful day to most, but to Raphael it was nothing but another day of dead ends in his research. Try after try, he attempted to understand death and how it happens, every piece of it fascinating him. He couldn't find the details he wanted to though; no matter how hard he tried he would always come up with more questions than answers. He came to nothing, and his servants that wandered around and got in his way didn't help either. In fact, he saw his servants as nothing but useless lumps of flesh, extra meat for his experiments if need be.

There was a particular one that kept bothering him, constantly asking if he needed anything. She was beginning to get on his nerves with every word that spewed from her mouth.

"Lord Raphael," the young servant said, "you've been here all day, aren't you hungry? We can make you some—"

"Sh," he hushed her, his eyes looking at a mixture before him, a light steam floating into the air from it and creating a swirling pattern

that Raphael followed with his eyes for a moment. Would this servant ever leave him alone? Maybe if he just ignored her, she would leave him alone.

"My lord," she spoke quietly, "may I ask what you're doing?"

Raphael, with a twitch of his eye and a quiet breath, turned to her. "I'm working on an elixir that will transform me so I can finally understand how death works. Animals seem to always know when something or someone is dying, and I want to see why. This right here will turn me into a crow, a creature of intelligence far greater than ours."

The servant scrunched her eyebrows together, looking from the lord then to the mixture next to him. She knew he was something of a scientist, even a wizard, but this seemed ...
ludicrous.

The confusion was evident in her eyes, making him wonder if she was curious about it or too naive to understand the great experiment he was performing. He didn't know if he could even explain it to her, if she would comprehend the calculations, the science of it. What fools these mortals be.

"Leave me to my research. I'll be done faster without you bothering me." He turned back to his work, his eyes gazing over the elixir. The sound of the servant's shoes clicking on the floor as she left echoed in his mind, serving as a background noise as he calculated what he may need



to add to this mixture that would make it work. Perhaps he was looking at this wrong, maybe he needed a new angle.

Or maybe he should take the risk.

He didn't know if the elixir would work, but with everything that he had added to it, it should be fine. Raphael was smart, he knew what he was doing, there was no way that his mixture was wrong, no possibility that he had failed. He had to trust himself, had to have faith in his own mind. The world would see him as a genius, the greatest mind to have ever lived.

He brought the concoction to his lips, the bitter taste making his face contort as he quickly set the glass vial on the table. His throat burned as he swallowed, his hands grasping to the edge of the surface as he grimaced. Then, as soon as it was there, the feeling was gone, as if it had never existed. He gazed at his hands, his eyes scanning over each crease and callus that graced along it. No feathers or talons, did he really fail? He didn't want to accept such a thing; he didn't want to accept failure.

Raphael clicked his tongue, stepping away from the table. Perhaps he needed to restart and add a little extra. He turned to gather up more of his ingredients before suddenly lurching forward, his gut twisting as agony rang through his body. The pain ran up his spine, making him choke and scream as he fell to the stone floor with a *thud*.

Bones cracked and tendons tore, his scream ringing throughout the laboratory. His vision went blank, stars and flashes replacing it as he struggled to intake a breath. Was this it? Was this truly how the great Raphael, Lord of the Valley and renown sorcerer, was going to die?

How pitiful.

As swiftly as it came, the pain was gone. His vision came back slowly, the sight of the dull gray stone of the floor making his racing heart slow. Whatever just happened was something he had never felt before and certainly a reaction that was not supposed to happen. He attempted to stand from his place on the floor, but it almost seemed like he didn't move. Was he imagining this? He attempted to bring a hand up to rub his eyes but he was only met with a face of black feathers. Was that...

A wing.

It worked! All that pain was transformation, not failure! He hopped around, ecstatic that he had succeeded at his experiment. Now he would be able to understand more about death, how animals are able to tell when someone will die. This would be a breakthrough, something no other mortal had understood in their lifetime. All he had to do was get outside; there should be no trouble, right?

He wobbled over to the door, his gaze going up to the handle far above him. Flight—

Surely he would easily be able to fly, right? He had the body of a crow, so that must mean that his mind would have knowledge of flight as well. He spread his wings, feeling strange and a little clumsy as he did so. He looked from side to side, his wings looking a little lopsided. All he had to do was flap, right?

He jumped, fluttering his wings as he tried to reach the door handle. Why wasn't this working? Why couldn't he just do it?

Raphael's attempts were interrupted when he heard the door handle jingle, swinging open and knocking him away. His head throbbed from the impact, looking up with disdain at the one who had opened the door on him. The servant from before; she must've heard his screaming. At



least she opened the door for him and now he was able to get out. He began hobbling towards the door when the servant suddenly picked him up.

“A crow! What are you doing here, sweet one?” She looked around the laboratory, searching for Raphael with a frown. “What was that commotion? Where did he go?”

Raphael was almost disappointed in her lack of intelligence. He explained it to her not more than 15 minutes ago and she didn’t even slightly expect that the crow was her master? Her mind was feeble, something so disappointing that it made Raphael wonder if she was listening to him earlier.

“Take me outside this, instant!” Raphael cawed, wiggling in her grasp. How embarrassing it was to be man-handled.

She didn’t understand a word muttered from him, all she did was smile and coo at him. “Do you want to be let out? Don’t worry.” She turned, walking out of the room and through the castle, stroking the plume of feathers on the back of his neck.

He would be sure to chew her out after this, maybe even fire her. He couldn’t focus on such trivial things now though; at least she was taking him outside. As they were walking, he noticed how gray everything was in the castle. Was it always so dull? It felt lifeless, bland even. It felt strange, like this place wasn’t actually his home, it almost felt more like a prison.

He was shaken from his thoughts once again as the servant opened the palace doors and opened her hands, his talons gripping to her fingers. “There you are, fly off...”

What an idiot.

Raphael spread his wings again, attempt-

ing to flap them until something happened, yet to no avail. A caw left him as he folded his wings back at his sides, he was getting nowhere with this.

The servant looked back inside the castle before gently setting him down. “I have to get back to work, be safe out there little one.” She shut the door behind him, leaving him out at the entrance of his own castle.

Raphael glanced around, taking in the dull settings. Strange, wasn’t it sunny out today? Why was it suddenly so dark out? No matter, he should get to the forest and see what he could find. He began to hobble his way to the forest in the distance, slowly but surely making his way to a scientific breakthrough.

It felt like hours until he reached the outskirts of the evergreens, his dark gaze traveling up the dark wood of the tree and to the spiked needles that stuck off the branches. He wondered how dangerous it would be, especially since he had no idea how to fly. He stepped a talon forward, the grayish grass below it barely shrinking under his light weight.

“You there,” a deep and hollow voice spoke to him. Raphael looked around but saw no one, “up here, feeble minded.”

The lord didn’t appreciate the name, but he turned his head upwards to a tree and sitting on a naked branch was a silvered colored crow. He was old, bits of white poking from his gray feathers and and his gray-blue eyes dreary. “Another crow,” Raphael gently flapped his wings, hopping closer to the tree. “Tell me, where may I find—”

“Sh,” the crow hushed him. “Why do you hop on the ground like a lowly creature without the grace of wings on their back?” The old crow flapped his wings, “what is your name?”



“Lord Raphael—”

“Lord?” The crow cackled. “No true creature would take on the name *lord* if it truly knew its place in the world. The title of lord is nothing more than a way of showing how you are better than others, when in reality you are no different than everyone else. Now tell me, why do you sit down there?”

Raphael scowled but answered anyway, “I can’t fly.”

The old crow spread his wings, gliding down to the forest floor and hopping next to Raphael. “You’re different from others, you’re not like us, are you?” The crow looked further into the forest. “What do you gain from becoming like us? The freedom of flight perhaps? Or maybe you tire of the flesh that restrains humans.”

“Neither. I wish to know more about death, about the afterlife that comes with it. You creatures are intelligent. You always seem to know when something will die. I want to see what more animals, such as yourself, would know about those things.”

There was a pause, the old crow doing nothing but staring at Raphael. “Foolish,” he muttered.

“Hey Grey!” A caw sounded, causing both heads to turn towards the sound. A rusty colored crow sat up on a branch, her feathers bright and healthy and seemed to reflect a red hue around her. “New friend?”

Grey turned to Raphael. “Not quite. This is no bird, Rusty, he is a human. One selfish enough to try and uncover things that are better left unknown. A man who calls himself *lord*.”

The rusted crow cackled, her green eyes scanning over Raphael. “What a show! I’m sure Ebony and Alabaster would get a kick out of this.

Can he even fly? Flap your wings, human! Flap! Flap!”

Raphael looked down at his wings, the dark plume of feathers now shining in the sun that was hiding before. Who would’ve thought that crows, scavenger birds that can’t even comprehend science, would be mocking him now. Intelligent beasts, but Raphael refused to believe they were more brilliant than he was.

Nonsense.



THE VAGABOND (NOT THE SHIP)

Nico Hartley

Neptune's not a bad place to die. It's quiet out here. A little empty. Emergency lighting casts a dim red glow across the controls. Drifting is only ever fun if you have control—control being a fuel tank *not* long past empty. It's not the first time he's run out of fuel, but it'll probably be the last.

The Vagabond (not to be confused with his ship, the *Vagabond*) took off on his own a few standard weeks ago with promises to meet back up on Proxima Centauri B exactly one day prior. Give it another day or two and that's when the others will start worrying. Maybe he could send out an SOS, see if anyone's down there listening (there should be—Neptune's population is small, not nonexistent), but he never finished repairing the comms.

Kolya kept yelling at him for it. "It is a necessity," she'd snap in that heavily accented voice of hers. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" He'd make some stupid joke in return, which always pissed her off more and in an astounding demonstration of self-preservation, he'd retreat to the safety of his own ship or room before she could maim him. She'll probably be glad to be rid of him.

An alarm chimes at him from the console, informing him that the life-support systems will fail in 72 hours.

Maybe he should have just replaced the backup generator instead of trusting that mechanic on Caleuche. He's also pretty sure the guy installed the cheapest possible escape pod and

over-charged him for it. Kolya had wanted to take a look at it and replace it if that was the case but with his week-long stint in the sick bay, they never got around to it.

Leaning back in his chair with his hands folded behind his head, he lets out a small huff barely resembling a laugh—too late for the generator now. That damn escape pod probably isn't equipped for an ice giant. Neptune has been tugging his ship into orbit for a while now, so at least there's a chance that somebody will notice him drifting out here. He won't get lost either. Interplanetary space doesn't scare him anymore—hasn't for a long time—but the view isn't as nice.

After several minutes of staring into the abyss he gets up to head back into the little galley, barely big enough for a single person. He has to dig through the back of the freezer for the bottle of whiskey he'd been saving for something special. Ananke gave it to him a while ago when they were on Ganymede for ages. The bottle still has the note on it, written in shaky letters because Ananke's never had the best grasp on written Basic.

VB (*not the ship*), the note reads, *I know you're having a bad time stuck here with us. Consider this a peace offering and expression of gratitude. Maybe it will give you the courage to ~~sosha~~ spend more time with us all! (That's a joke). Ananke*

Despite the cold biting at his fingers, VB holds the bottle close to his chest as his eyes flutter shut. This wasn't the kind of special he had in mind when saving the whiskey. Ananke spent so



much on a gift for him and VB had wanted to share it with him.

He doesn't bother looking for a glass. Instead, he plops back down in the cockpit and offers a silent toast to the vast blue giant that will be his grave and tries to ignore the way his chest burns with something other than the liquor.

The alarms change at the 48-hour mark—meant to get the pilot moving with a healthy dose of fear. VB drifts, immune to the piercing screech thanks to the sweet, sweet gift of Galilean whiskey. He turns off the audio. Nothing he can do about the pulsing light though. He leans his head against his hand and with the pressure he can hear the dull roar of his pulse—slow and steady. His heart beats in time to his ship's final warnings.

The ship screams at him for ten minutes to inform him of his impending demise in 24 hours before falling silent. Only a single emergency light functions and everything else non-essential for the bare minimum of keeping him alive turns off. Sealing off the cockpit takes the temperature from below freezing to just above it. He's starting to feel like he did after recovering from that nasty virus not too long ago. He stole a few blankets for his room during the night cycles because he just couldn't get warm. It hadn't taken long for extra blankets and jackets to start showing up in other places he'd frequented on the *Eurydice*.

Alcohol keeps you warm. Right? Even if it doesn't, he can't waste a gift.

In the off chance someone contacts the others, he tries to write them letters, but his hands ache. He throws up once or twice, but he hasn't eaten much so it just burns. He ends up recording his rambling apologies instead, starting with an apology for never getting another copy of the picture taken of them all. Proper printing's hard, but Earthlings just *adore* that vintage shit, so if they head there, someone might be able to make copies. "Sorry," he says. "I forgot what I was saying first." And then he promptly throws up again.

His head pounds, his fingers turn blue, and his ship lies to him. It says he has six hours left. He doesn't feel like he has six hours left. He's been a dead man walking for a long time.

"Easy now," a voice came from somewhere to his left. Someone readjusted the pillows surrounding his head. "Be gentle with him. He's a bit fragile."

"Don't let him hear you say that," Ananke. He laughed, the sound encouraged VB to fight his way to consciousness.

A weak groan escaped his throat as he tried to move his body. A hand brushed his hair to the side before settling on his forehead. He shivered at the cool touch.

"Temperature's down. Not normal yet, but better." It took him a second to place that Martian-Cydonian drawl. He didn't hear it often since Mitzi usually reserved her voice for her terrible bedside manner (she always claimed the battle-



field had no time for such frivolous things; he thought she just liked calling him a dumbass.)

“Good,” said Kolya, “I do not want a body on my ship. It is too difficult to explain to authorities.”

“He wasn’t *dying*,” Ananke protested, but the slight wobble in his voice betrayed his worry.

VB forced his eyes open, squinting at the light that practically blinded him. He let out another small, confused sound and someone moved to dim the lights. If his limbs weren’t so heavy (almost too heavy—he couldn’t stand the feeling), he might have flinched at the movement. All he could manage to do was clumsily rub his eyes.

“There he is,” Mitzi said. A blurry shape that must have been Kolya clapped Mitzi on the shoulder before saying something about checking on Salwil in the cockpit.

“I’ll be back in a bit VB.” Ananke reached down and squeezed his forearm, careful to avoid the tubes and wires hooked up to him. “Be good for Mitzi.”

“Okay,” he croaked. His throat felt stuffed full of Gaeian cotton—or like something crawled back there and died three weeks ago. “Water?”

Mitzi hummed and turned to the counter. “You’ll need to take it slow.” His arm wobbled beneath the weight of trying to prop himself up on an elbow. She caught him with a disappointed glare. “Have you gone deaf?”

He collapsed back against the mattress and whimpered. His body refused to stop shaking. “Sorry,” he said.

“Why’re you ‘pologizin’ to me?” she huffed. She might have rolled her eyes, but he couldn’t tell with the lighting. “Alright, c’mon

now.” She supported his back with one hand while she rearranged the pillows to prop him up. His face flushed when she had to help him scoot backwards less than half a meter, his skin humming with discomfort at all of the contact. A distinct wheeze filled the quiet air.

“I feel like shit,” he said.

Mitzi let out a small bark of laughter.

“Sound it too.” She held a bottle of water in front of him, guiding a straw to his lips. “Small sips.”

Water had never tasted so *good*. Part of him was embarrassed at needing help with something as simple as drinking water, but the other part wanted to gulp it all down as if he’d just escaped the desert again. The coolness soothed his throat with every swallow, it provided brief moments of relief that he clinged to with the desperation of a dying man.

“That’s enough for now,” she said and pulled the water out of reach. The whine he let out was nothing short of mortifying. “Oh don’t be like that. If you manage to keep that down, you can have more.”

“How long—?” A cough tore through his chest, reigniting the pain lingering in all of his sore muscles. Something in his ribs spasmed and his body strained so hard that he couldn’t help but gag.

It took several minutes of shaky breaths—kept shallow to avoid aggravating his lungs—but he managed to breathe somewhat normally for at least a minute or two. Once he was breathing steady enough to not drop dead immediately, Mitzi began prepping another round of meds.

She kept her focus on her hands while she spoke and practiced motions from her time in the military. “Been out for about a standard week. Kolya was convinced you were a goner.” She



paused, thinking over her next words if her tensed shoulders were anything to go by. “Wasn’t sure I’d get your fever down.”

If that didn’t put it into perspective, VB didn’t know what would. For someone known to work miracles on the battlefield to admit it was close...Well, it was *damn* close.

He wasn’t sure what to do with this serious Mitzi though. She usually laughed at his jokes and made ones at his expense in return. So he shrugged while she fiddled with his IV. “I’m stubborn.”

“Sure are.” She then held out a small cup of bright blue medicine. “Here. Feelin’ up for shots?” It wasn’t an actual question—more of a way to say, “You *will* be drinking this” without really saying it—but he didn’t have the energy for his usual back-and-forth with her.

“Can I have more water?” He made a face at the medicine. He knew it tasted vile—so bitter and artificial that it made bootleg Mercurian liquor taste sweet. The IV wasn’t particularly enjoyable. The sooner he got that out, the sooner he could retreat to his own room. Maybe even his ship if he wanted the most privacy.

“Drink up. Got your chaser right here.” She shook the water a little bit.

VB braced himself and tossed back the medicine, tears welling up in his eyes as he choked down the bitter taste. His hands shot out without permission to grasp at the water blindly and Mitzi guided it to his mouth again. He turned his head to the side to cough up a lung once more. Why did the stuff that worked best have to be the nastiest shit invented by man?

Deep shaky breath (well, as deep as he could get for now). A sip of water. Another breath accompanied by a shudder as he fought his lungs

for control. Eventually, his body relaxed and he noticed a hand rubbing his back.

“There you go.” Mitzi said. “That’s it, honey.” She kept her voice low. It was a little gravelly from a time she rarely ever spoke about, but it was oddly soothing.

His chest twinged, but he snickered anyway. “Must’ve been pretty serious if we’re breaking out the H word.”

She scowled, but her eyes glittered with amusement, her laugh lines and the corners of her lips betraying her. “Fuck off.”

“Maybe if I pass out, Kolya will call me sweetie...”

“I miss when you were out cold.”

“...Or do you think she’s more of a *dear* kind of person?”

VB hated people who told him what to do, and Kolya ran her ship like it’s the goddamn Martian Navy (which clearly worked for all of them, making him the outsider in every possible way). If they would just let him do his own thing, they’d discover that he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Kolya didn’t seem to get the memo though and the others had been walking on eggshells over the last few rotations.

“I do not understand how you are still alive,” she snapped at him. “Your ship belongs in a scrapyard.”

He gasped with mock horror. “Don’t you listen to her, baby.” He pats the hull with affection. “The Captain’s just jealous.”

Kolya scoffed. “Please, I am not jealous of a piece of junk that is the subject of your undivided



attention. That is my worst nightmare.”

“Whatever you say, Captain.”

“Do not call me that.” An especially sharp look from her sealed his lips. “We are heading to Venus for a job. If you wish to join us, you must complete everything on this list.”

He took the small paper from her hand, noticing the flowers that decorated the corners and pastel colors. Combined with her fancy cursive script, he couldn’t help but laugh at how serious she looked while handing over something that looked like it was straight out of an old Earth TV show. Unfortunately, Kolya’s face hardened even further, certainly more in the Danger Zone than he’d like.

“You laugh when I try to help you. Why?” Her cheeks flushed blue with her anger. “When I send information to your datapad, it gets lost. You said so yourself.”

Shit. He did say that. Really, he forgot to read the damn thing and it looked like she knew it, but she offered an out anyway. “Sorry,” he said. “It’s just-, The paper doesn’t seem like your style.”

She nodded to herself as if confirming her disdain. “Ananke offered it from his collection.”

“Oh,” he said. Right. The untouched journal collection. Do they not have any other paper?

“I will leave you to it.” She clenched her jaw. “Earth’s moon is our final stop before we reach Venus, so you must decide by then. Salwil can provide assistance, should you require it.” She sounded like she was reading a list and part of him wondered if she was. He wouldn’t put it past her to memorize a script for interacting with him.

“Sounds good, Cap’n.” He tucked the list

into one of his pockets, ignoring her low growl as she stalked out of the room. A loose vent rattled to the beat of his music when he turned the volume back up.

The list went forgotten in his pocket while he continued to work on his ship. Someone came in and asked him about dinner—probably Mitzi—but he waved them off. He’d pissed off Kolya enough for one rotation.

His arms shook with exertion by the time he replaced the part he could never remember the name for and he should have taken a break earlier because—shit. He flinched violently, enough to smack the back of his head against the ground, but the impact of the falling tool never came.

VB cracked an eye open, only to be met with Salwil’s warm smile. “You dropped this, kiddo.” The tool clinked against the tool bench when Salwil set it down.

“Thanks,” VB said, trying to shake out the exhaustion that took over his arms. He slid out from under the ship and turned down the music. Salwil handed him a rag for him to clean up his hands, he hummed another thanks. The rag had a couple of spots that had been mended with embroidered flowers that he’d seen only once or twice. He tried to avoid them so he didn’t ruin them with grease.

Salwil must have noticed his attention to the flowers because his eyes crinkled again with a smile. “Ever seen the Plutonian Narcissi Bloom in person before?”

“Can’t say I have,” VB said. Salwil held out a hand, so he handed the rag back over, almost feeling bad at how dirty the thing was now. “Never been that way at the right time.”

“You should whenever you can. Some



fields are big enough to never cross paths with another soul—just a million colors as far as eyes can see.” Salwil ran a thumb across one of the flowers, the yellow thread still bright despite other obvious wear. “Kolya wants to go back sometime so she can see it again.”

This caught him off guard, having not heard much about his prickly captain other than the fact that she hated being called captain. “Oh?” he said with a raised brow.

“Mhm.” To VB’s annoyance, Salwil didn’t elaborate on that, but he did continue with, “She fixed this up for me, you know that?” He held up the rag.

VB couldn’t imagine Kolya of all people sitting down to embroider. “Really,” he said, the disbelief in his tone dragging a question down to a statement.

“Yep. Got plenty more in the galley if you’d like to see more,” Salwil said with a sly look in his eye.

“I see what you’re doing here, Sal.”

VB couldn’t help but grin at him. “Don’t suppose you’ve got a meal in there waiting for me?”

“Only the finest of leftovers for someone seemingly allergic to mealtimes,” he quipped right back. A pang of guilt struck through his chest at that, but he hadn’t been traveling with these people for all that long yet. He didn’t know how to integrate himself with them. He shoved the guilt down in favor of making a show out of admitting defeat.

“Okay okay, you got me. I got caught up in these repairs. Think I’m finally making progress though.”

“Well you can tell me about it over a hot

meal.” Salwil practically dragged him out of there and down to the galley. When they walked past the commons, VB noticed the other three crew members sitting together. Ananke seemed to be telling a story with exaggerated gestures—the most expression VB had seen from him yet—while Kolya and Mitzi listened eagerly. Kolya let out a laugh, something so loose and warm compared to her usual icy demeanor. Then, she glanced over at them, her laugh dying down as she made eye contact with Salwil and nodded slightly. An ugly nasty thing wormed its way through his gut. He ducked his head to walk in front of Salwil to the galley without distraction.

While they both ate, Salwil showed off his collection with pride. It was quite beautiful, but VB would be too stressed about messing up the embroidery to use any of them regularly. Kolya would probably kill him for ruining her work. Shit, almost all of the rags he has are either stained with blood or oil, or are just about falling apart. As they finished their meal, Salwil continued to chat with him about whatever topic that popped into his mind—VB didn’t have the heart to interrupt him. Salwil had this way of pulling people in. It was why he agreed to travel with the crew in the first place. He didn’t meet Kolya until it was too late to change his mind.

A few hours later, Salwil’s communicator unit beeped, and he smiled a bit at his wrist. “Alright, kiddo. Sorry for keepin’ you for so long. Good chattin’ with ya.”

VB started to pick up the dishes, but Salwil stopped him claiming that he’d kept VB for long enough. He protested just enough for the sake of being polite, but otherwise retreated back to his ship.

The lights flickered on and almost immediately he felt his hackles up at the completely



pristine hangar. His tools were all put away, actually neat, not just cleaned up and organized under a system he only understood half the time.

“What the hell?” he murmured to himself. A sheet of paper sat on his workbench—a plain one this time still covered in Kolya’s fancy script.

Dear VB,

Ananke kindly informed me that the Vagabond (your ship) was in need of minor repairs before we reach Earth’s moon. Here is a list of completed repairs if you must check my work, but I can assure you that your ship no longer deserves to be sent to a junkyard. There is no need for payment. Please consider joining us on the mission to Venus.

Sincerely,

Kolya

Sure enough, his ship had been tuned up to standards he’d only ever seen when he’s had enough money to go to a proper mechanic and it was completed in about the same time too. The repairs would have taken him ages. Did Kolya have a secret side gig as a mechanic? How did she complete this in just a few hours?

Sitting on the table in the makeshift common area of his ship was a rag he’d lost several rotations ago—perfectly folded without a wrinkle in sight. A single yellow rose (a rose native to the planet the crew met him on) had been embroidered to fix the tear from his second day on board. VB tucked it into his nightstand, unsure of what else to do with it. Maybe he’d sleep in the room offered to him. He could do that. The others wouldn’t mind.

Maybe.

He didn’t mean to snoop for once. Really. People needed to learn to have private conversations in private. The common area was *not* private. VB froze in the hallway on his way to the galley because he heard Ananke on the verge of tears.

“That’s why I can’t tell him!” Ananke hissed, sounding like he was trying to hold back a sob. “He’s not gonna be here forever!”

“He don’t seem to be goin’ anywhere anytime soon,” Mitzi said.

“But he will!”

“Listen, kiddo.” There was some rustling like someone was adjusting positions on the couch. VB held his breath. Salwil must have moved closer. “Kolya and I have been talking about inviting VB full-time because he works well with us now and he seems happy here, but he’s always been pretty protective about his legal identity.”

VB almost wanted to take a step back—turn around and forget he heard anything, but he couldn’t move. They were talking about him. Why were they talking about him? Was this about the upcoming Proxima Centauri trip? He just wanted some time for himself. Maybe go visit Neptune or Saturn for the hell of it.

“I am still not convinced that he is not a criminal evading the law,” Kolya said. “but I must admit he is very skilled and he finally abandoned his mission to anger me.” Mitzi let out a laugh at that.

“He’s already part of this crew,” Salwil said with a firm tone. “We’d just make it official. Paperwork and all that, y’know?”



A creeping feeling took hold in his gut—one that told him to run years ago every time someone got too close. Because last time he didn't listen to his gut (he was just a stupid teenager)—he listened now. Every single time.

"What if I tell him and he leaves?" Ananke sounded so small (it reminded VB of when he first left home—too young and naive to explore the universe without getting hurt).

"He won't leave. That boy's taken a liking to you," Salwil said, light and knowing. "I've seen what it looks like when a young man is in love."

Love?

"He's skittish, Sal. I don't want to scare him off." Ananke took a loud shaky breath, VB felt himself struggling to do the same. "I really love him."

VB didn't hear anything after that. He went back to his room as quickly and quietly as he could, appetite forgotten. He spent the rest of the night in his room, ignoring when the others knocked to ask if he was okay.

It snuck up on him this time. He didn't notice himself getting closer to the others, especially Ananke and the lack of awareness terrified him. What else did he miss? What danger lied around the corner because he got too comfortable?

In the morning, he waved off the others' concern, forcing himself to smile and joke as if nothing was wrong.

"Yeah yeah, be at Proxima B in three standard weeks," he said. Not quite a lie, but he wasn't sure if he actually would be there.

"Yes, my ship's fine. I got everything working enough for this trip." A lie. The comms sys-

tem was still down and his backup generator probably didn't work if it didn't explode at first use.

"I promise it'll be fine. I'll see you guys soon."

Lie.

He has an hour left to live, and he can't stop crying. What the hell is wrong with him? Why does he pull shit like this every time? Does he even have a reason to? Sure, he went through some shit as a teenager, but that was on him for being dumb. Kolya and Mitzi both have PTSD from their time in the military he's pretty sure (he still feels horrible for calling Kolya "Captain" over and over again), Salwil's lost too many good people, and Ananke grew up an orphan. What reason does VB have to feel this heavy weight crushing his chest?

He stares at the forms on his datapad alongside a note from the entire crew written on some of Ananke's precious paper. They'd let Ananke write an invitation to join the crew even though they'd briefly asked in person the morning he took off. Ananke likes to practice writing, no matter how trivial.

"Think about it. You don't need to answer right away—or even when we meet up again. Just know that the offer's there," Salwil said. His eyes were crinkled up at the corners with an inviting smile. VB had just nodded and mumbled a thanks. Ananke had looked so excited and worried. VB wishes he could have erased that worry to leave just excitement behind.

He could have done that. It could have been different this time. But it's too late now. The choice has been made for him. A primal panic ig-



nites somewhere in his chest, a feeling he hasn't felt in years. His heart picks up and his breathing comes in shallow pants.

He has to try.

Kolya will bring him back just to kill him again if he doesn't try, and the combined disappointment from Salwil and Mitzi is enough to change even the most hardened criminal. Ananke...he doesn't want to even imagine that. He can't. VB stands on shaking legs, bracing himself against the console when everything around him spins in a blurry tango. His eyes close in an attempt to stabilize himself. Finally, he stumbles to open the door and the chill hits him hard. His body shivers violently, all of the muscles in his core tensed up painfully while his legs and arms wobble. It hinders his progress, but he tries to ignore it the best he can.

The escape pod. He needs to get to the escape pod.

His lungs scream at the sudden drop in oxygen, and he tries to take deeper breaths, but no matter how hard he pulls on the intake, it's never enough. A dull roar fills his ears as his heart works to keep up. He clumsily slams his hand against the control panel for the escape pod, and the door slides open with a woosh, but he has to turn to the side to throw up bile all over the floor. With a weak wince, he wipes his mouth and throws himself into the pod. The door shuts and the emergency life-support system boots up. He tries to program in the coordinates for Abyssum on Neptune, but he can't tell if he got it right. The air gets a little easier to breathe, but his hands still shake as he straps himself in. A hysterical laugh tears out of his chest when it clicks that he made it. His stomach crawls up his throat as soon as the escape pod launches, his head throbbing and his vision dizzy. A growing darkness lingers

at the edge of his vision.

He missed.

He needs to head to the city of Abyssum. Not to the middle of nowhere, where there's nothing but the storms that make up the atmosphere. His head hits the back of the seat in defeat.

He missed. He's going to die.

Well, at least he tried. All of the adrenaline abandons his body, leaving him feeling heavier than ever before. The darkness grows and grows until all he can do is lazily stare at the blue behemoth in front of him. His grave. Every blink grows longer as his eyes fight to close. There's something in his hand. He doesn't remember taking anything with him. Upon forcing his curled fingers open, he realizes it's the note Ananke wrote with the others, and beneath it is the rag with the yellow rose. His chest shudders with each breath. *I'm sorry*, he thinks. The note crinkles in his fist, and he weakly rubs his thumb against the rose.

It could have been different. I'm so sorry.

All of the strength leaves his body, and his eyes finally close. The escape pod suddenly jerks around with an unexpected movement. His eyes shoot open—an action of pure instinct.

A bright light blinds him.



LOST AND FOUND

Ani Schwertfeger

The forest is dark and deep, and every child in the village forbidden from entering it. There are dark magicks inside, and not even at our hungriest are we allowed to pull the sweet honeysuckle from its bushes to drink its nectar.

Many years ago my older brother was lost in that forest. He and my father were fighting. I can't remember about what, because they were always fighting, and my brother was always losing. My father's screams followed my brother out the front door, and his heavy footfalls followed soon after. My brother escaped to the only place my father couldn't follow, and he never returned.

My father has never laid a hand on me. He drinks, but it doesn't make him angry like it used to, it makes him stupid. Mother is the same as always. Meek and quiet, afraid of a lion that has lost its teeth. The only family I have left is the fox.

The fox prowls at the edge of the woods, and I'm sure that he is my brother, turned into a creature by some dark witch or fairy. He never runs away from me when he sees me and when I throw him food he is not startled. His left ear twitches, his left eye closing, and I am sure that he is winking at me like my brother used to.

"Bael," I call out my brother's name to the fox. His ears twitch. I am sure he understands me.

I sneak away to the meadow beside the wood whenever I can to see him, giving him food even as my own stomach rumbles. As much as I want to though, I never approach the wood, and he never leaves it. I long to hold him again. To

feel his soft, furry body cradled against mine. It would be different than the hugs he used to give me, strong arms blocking out the harsh world, but it would still be him. Not his original body, but a body nonetheless, strong and warm and *alive*.

Everyone but me thinks my brother is dead.

"Ciaran," says my mother one day. "Be a good boy. Go to the market and fetch me some things."

"Yes, ma'am," I say. My father is not at home, but I still feel his presence by the smell of stale drink.

"Bring back wheat flour, raisins, and eggs," she tells me as she hands me a wicker basket and four chipped coins.

"Yes, ma'am," I say again. She nods, and goes back to sweeping the house with an old gnarled looking broom made of twigs.

I leave through the same door my brother did the last night he was a human, and walk up the road towards market. The road is always either too dusty or too muddy, and today it is somehow both: dusty and dry in the middle and muddy on the outskirts. I stay in the middle.

In the market there are women with laundry baskets or children perched on their hip gathered around the well talking to each other. There are men bartering or yelling, often at the same time. To one side, the town drunks gather under an awning and I spot my father among them. We



see each other, and neither of us calls out.

I get the eggs from the Chicken Lady, who has names and personalities for all her chickens and says that the eggs from each one tastes different.

"You've got a lot of Lady Eleanor's eggs in your basket, young man," she tells me.

"Is that a good thing, Miss?" I ask her.

"Oh, yes," she nods sagely. "Hers are always very creamy. It's Lady Tiff you need to watch out for. Her eggs are often bitter. I'll be having her for supper soon, I'm afraid."

"Oh," I say, and hand her one of my chipped coins. I go to the miller for the wheat flour next, and he says nothing as he hands me a sack and takes another of my coins. Finally, the raisins take my last two coins, courtesy of the traveling man.

The sun is beginning to lower in the sky as I make my way along the dusty road home. Suddenly I drop my basket to the ground. The eggs break and run like blood. There in the middle of the road is the fox. My brother.

"Bael!" I call. The fox is still but does not break eye contact.

"Bael!" I call again, my pubescent body making my voice break. My brother turns in his fox body and runs up the road. Before disappointment can sing in my chest, the fox stops again and turns towards me. He seems to be beckoning me to follow.

I run after him. My lungs burn trying to keep up. My heart is pounding in my chest. The sound of my feet against a road beat out a rhythm, saying what I cannot.

Wait. I miss you. Don't leave me again.

By the time we get to the edge of the wood

I barely even notice. All I can think about is catching him. I sail over rocks and roots I was never supposed to see, tripping in the underbrush, scratching my arms and my legs. Still, I keep after him.

Quicker than a flash he darts behind a tree and I lose him. All at once my exhaustion catches up with me, and I hold my hands on my knees as I try and catch my breath, gasping and gulping for air.

I realize where I am. It hits me, really hits me, as I finally regain my breathing. I am alone in the dark wood as the sun is setting. Tomorrow, if I am dead, then perhaps they will see the fallen basket in the road and know what happened to me. Will my mother and father even notice? Surely my mother will, because she will be expecting me to return with her things.

When my brother disappeared I was the only one who cried. You would expect our mother to scream and wail, to blame her husband, or to curse the heavens. But she didn't.

I try not to cry now as I stand alone.

"Bael..." I whisper to no one, my voice catching. I take a step forward, not knowing what else to do.

I hear a crunch beneath me. I look down, expecting to see a twig. Instead, I see yellowish white.

Bone. In front of me, more bones. An entire skeleton. My stomach drops, my sweat turns to acid, as I see the bones have torn and tattered cloth on them.

The bones are wearing my brother's clothes.

It's then I see a flash of orange in front of me. The fox has returned. He winks at me one last time, before disappearing into the darkness.



THE VICIOUS

Tyler Thomas

A squat man born of dirt and of twig collected firewood for his hovel. Each day he would walk down the dirt path that carried into the forest. The man would cut down a small spruce, counting thirty-three pieces of firewood to haul home. One day, the man had begun to cut down a scraggly and misshapen spruce tree when a snake approached him. The snake held a human face and tiny misshapen arms. It spoke to the man in a coarse and croaking voice:

“Little man, little man! With an axe so worn it would cut butter in 3 chops! Lend me your ear. Deep in the forest lies a golden nugget, rich in opulence. Find it and no longer will you have to strike bark!” Eager to find the golden nugget the man dropped his axe and began to scurry through the forest in search of the treasure. The snake had shown him a path that held more of the scraggly and twisted trees.

After a long while- the man found a broken grove.

The center held a golden glow. The sky shone through with the only light in the forest. The man scurried closely to the faint glow and knelt down. To his guffaw, the golden nugget appeared egg-shaped. As he reached down to pick it up, a screech from above was heard.

Torn wings and flesh felled off the bone, the creature had a beak with teeth visible through its cheek. It swooped down and landed in front of the man. The squat man fell backwards as the creature rose, beady eyes gazing upon his small stature.

“Little man, little man!” the creature

squawked. “I am the Vicious! You have approached my unborn, seeking wealth. So eager with your craving, so pitiful in your destitution. I see you work tirelessly each day to bring warmth to your home. Hear me! I will give you this egg and two more! Come back each day, through the broken forest, and I will give you the others! But break just one and I will eat your innards!” The Vicious squawked once more, then opened its leathery wings and ascended through the trees.

The squat little man sprightly made his way back home with caution, heeding his forefront as he carried his precious golden egg. He made the egg a warm and soft bed, next to the fireplace where he stroked his fire. The man had only chopped half the wood he had done the previous day and the night released its cold winds. Shivering in the bite of the night, the man held a smile as his eyes gazed upon his golden prize. The man slept and the night passed.

Dew laid like a blanket across the ground in the morning as the man woke. He grabbed his old blunt axe. The man chopped only half of the wood he needed again and made his way through the dark forest. When he made it to the grove, he spotted another faint glow. As sure as the sun would rise each day, another golden egg waited for him. Gently the man lifted the egg and began his walk back home. As he was walking home, the snake with the human face approached him.

“Little man, little man! Eager to requite home! You have one egg, now two! My body is weak with the chills of hunger, could you offer your wealth to me?” The man pondered, remembering the cryptic words of the Vicious. He shook



his head in denial and carried on his way, gently holding the egg back home. He made another bed and stoked the fire with only half a day's firewood again and readied himself for the cold embrace of night.

The next morning, the man woke up and grabbed his axe again. He chopped down only a third of the firewood he normally did and began to go through the dark forest. The forest this time had become more barren and broken. The trees seemed taller, and it was much darker than before. Many of the trees seemed like they had been burned but still stood. Frightfully, the man found himself upon the broken grove again.

Golden glow gave the only light to the surroundings as the man approached it. The third golden egg laid there, as joy filled the man's heart. Once more, the squat man gently lifted the egg again but was made alert at the sound of rustling twigs and limbs. Egg in hand, he turned and saw the snake. Its face had been distorted and misshapen; its arms had all but become stumps. Its voice had crackled and was barely understandable.

"Little man, little man! You have deceived me! By taking the eggs back home, you have made me starve. A selfish creature like you deserves no wealth!" The snake moved quickly to the man. The man remembered his axe. He swung it down on the snake's body, the dull blade only making its way partly through the scales of the snake. A cry of pain erupted from the misshapen face of the snake, as the man escaped. He ran all the way home, tightly holding the egg to his chest.

Upon reaching his tiny hovel his eyes caught the figure of a creature that stood upon his roof. When he came into view, he saw it was the Vicious, gazing upon him again with beady eyes.

"Little man, little man! You have done as I asked. I witnessed the snake try to deceive you and eat my eggs. He was once a man, but I punished him for his thievery and gluttony. You have given my children warmth and a soft bed and did not break one! Your reward—as promised—is the three eggs for you to keep. They will not hatch and will give you great riches." The leathery torn wings of the Vicious opened as it screeched and flew off back into the dark forest. With a tired body the man built the last warm and soft bed for the third egg. He made a small fire with the little firewood he had and went to bed. The cold night bit viciously through the tiny hovel.

The next day, the man took a small cart and loaded the eggs. Before the man could set off to a town distant from his hovel, he heard the sounds of rustling twigs and limbs. He turned around and saw the snake approach him. His axe still lodged into its scales; its face had completely changed to that of a viper. It hissed and snarled, opening its mouth, revealing long fangs with venom dripping down. The man pulled his cart but turned his head to see that the snake had made its way to his side. As the snake lunged, a caw came from the dark forest. The Vicious, with ungodly speed, swooped down and took the snake in its long and sharp talons. It soared with its wings back to the dark forest with the snake limp and cold.

The squat little man made his long journey to the town. There, he sold his golden eggs and bought himself a nice house in the town. He paid for enough firewood to last him the coming winter and food to feed himself and three others.

At the last light, I leave you with a story, and give myself a dream.



A TALE OF FIRE AND GOLD

Abigale Washco

Eva hopped out of the carriage, bound for the Gold Palace. Needing to find Prince Pierce before it was too late. Before they were found out. Treason would certainly be punishable by death—at least for her. Burned at the stake or drowned in a horse trough in the courtyard of the palace, for all to see.

When Eva reached the hidden entrance on the west side of the palace, there was an unsettling shift. Something was wrong.

Everything was wrong.

She ran up to the wooden door and slid to the ground. On her knees, she brushed the ivy away from the stone, and saw the doorway was sealed. Nowhere to be found, as if it had never been there to begin with. Which could only mean one thing...

They had already gotten Pierce. And were coming for her. She could very well be cornered at this moment. Slowly Eva looked over her shoulder and felt a sudden sense of paranoia in her chest.

Ice grew in her heart and fire fumed in her eyes. One tear slowly fell down her cheek before she stood up and ran the way that she had come. She didn't dare wipe the tear from below her eye. She would not let herself forget the pain that has been cast on her here. She would not forget that they had taken him from her.

A tear fell hard from Prince Pierce's cheek as he was forced to watch Eva find out he was

gone. Then watch her get taken by the palace guards, as one of the guards whispered in his ear, "Next we'll burn her, and you'll get to watch."

Nothing grows quite as fast and fierce as fury and love.

In that moment the prince felt an immeasurable strength, knowing this was the only moment that he would have to escape.

He started thrashing hard against the chains and ropes that detained his body. If only he could get his hands close together, he could melt the chains that wrapped around his legs. The guard that had just been taunting him began to fill ammo into his weapon. The guard's hands shook due to the unexpected nature of the prince's escape attempt.

The prince glanced down the mountain-side where Eva was being loaded into a prison carriage. Rage.

It seemed that he had been forced up this mountain for the sole purpose of watching her get carried away to her certain death.

With any and every drop of strength that he could muster, the prince managed to force the ropes tied at his wrists to break. At the same time an arrow pierced his shoulder, he siphoned the chains from his body. Another arrow went through his thigh as he knocked the guard to the ground. Pulling the arrow out of his shoulder with an unsettling crunch, the prince turned the arrow on the guard and forced it through his heart. All life drained from the guard's eyes.



This made a reluctant grin play on the prince's lips.

So incredibly stupid to send *me* up here with only one guard, he thought.

The day was set, and Eva would be burned at the stake in the Gold Palace's main courtyard. Thousands of eyes cast upon a treasonous woman.

The number of curses he had said to himself today alone was enough to banish him to a lifetime of hell. But the prince would walk through that torture every day if it meant Eva was safe back in his arms.

The courtyard was completely locked down. There would be no way for the prince to get Eva once she was brought out, so he would need to find her before sunset tonight. According to his pocket sundial, that left him only two hours. Barley enough time to get to the palace from here... he had no choice but to make it work.

The stone beneath Eva was hard and nearly frozen.

A single candle sconce dimly lit one corner of the cell. She felt surrounded by shadows and ambushed by fleeting thoughts of what it would feel like to be set aflame. Her skin glowed with imagined pain, and she bristled.

I'm here, please, don't let them take me...I'm here, she continuously whispered to herself like a prayer. Maybe if she said it enough times, Pierce would appear in the doorway and take her far away from this horrible place.

The only time the prince had ever been thankful for growing up in this palace was at this very moment, being able to expertly slip in and out of secret passageways without being noticed.

He was still catching his breath after running thousands of feet in such a short time.

As he was nearing the dungeon, horrible thoughts raced through his mind. *What if she wasn't there? What if they already have her in the courtyard? What if she can't forgive me for not getting to her sooner?* The last one nearly tore him apart.

Shaking his head, he tried to focus.

The further down he went, the less light there was. Only a few candle sconces for each corridor he walked.

This meant he was getting closer, but it also meant that he needed to be a lot more vigilant. The dungeon was littered with guards and if even one caught sight of him then he might as well just hand himself over, because there was no way he would make it out of there alive.

There was an uncountable number of cruel cells down here, but there was only one that they would've surely reserved for Eva.

He looked over each shoulder before he dared to inch closer to the metal door at the end of the hall.

When the prince managed to reach the cell, unscathed, a shuttering breath came from his lips. He took ahold of the lock that was keeping Eva at bay and let all his anger melt it down to nothing. A slow creak made his skin crawl as he pushed the door open to find nothing.

She wasn't there.

Nothing but the stone ground and heavy shadows. For the second time that day, a tear fell from his eye, and he sank to his knees.

It took all his strength not to scream and draw all the guards to him, though it might mean a fate better than this. One where he could be



with her in the end.

From the small circular window at the very top of the cell Eva could see that it was now sunset. It was sunset and someone was opening the thick metal door, and it was not the person who she wanted. *Pierce*. Instead, it was a towering man with a crossbow at his hip and a scowl on his face.

There was no one coming to save her now.

The man grabbed her elbow and pulled her body up with ease. She had no fight left in her, so she was easily pulled from the room. Three other crossbows filled her vision as she was escorted down the steep spiral staircase.

Before she had been brought up here the first time, she had been hit in the head by a rock, so Eva hadn't understood that they had brought her a hundred feet in the air rather than a hundred feet in the ground. As she walked the steps descending the tallest tower of the palace, her only thought was that each tentative step brought her closer to death.

A blinding light shone down moments before thousands of people appeared and they all started shouting at her. Curses and death threats as if she wasn't ten feet away from it.

She was manhandled and tied against a giant wooden pole. Two men started pouring dark alcohol on her. Tears stung her eyes, and the liquid burned her nose.

The crowd was out of control and causing mass chaos, all because they were so excited that she was being made an example of. She could only imagine that many of them wished she were to meet a more violent end in front of their eyes.

With a heavy step, the prince walked fast down the corridor and up the stairs out of the dungeon. He felt like such a failure, and he knew that this

day would haunt him for the rest of his days. In the courtyard of chaos, he felt his heart drop through his body when he saw Eva tied to the wood pole—a torch ablaze inching closer to her.

As if some magnetic force drew them together, her eyes instantly found his. And he wished nothing more that they hadn't.

In the next moment, her life was over.

It might be best if he let them take him



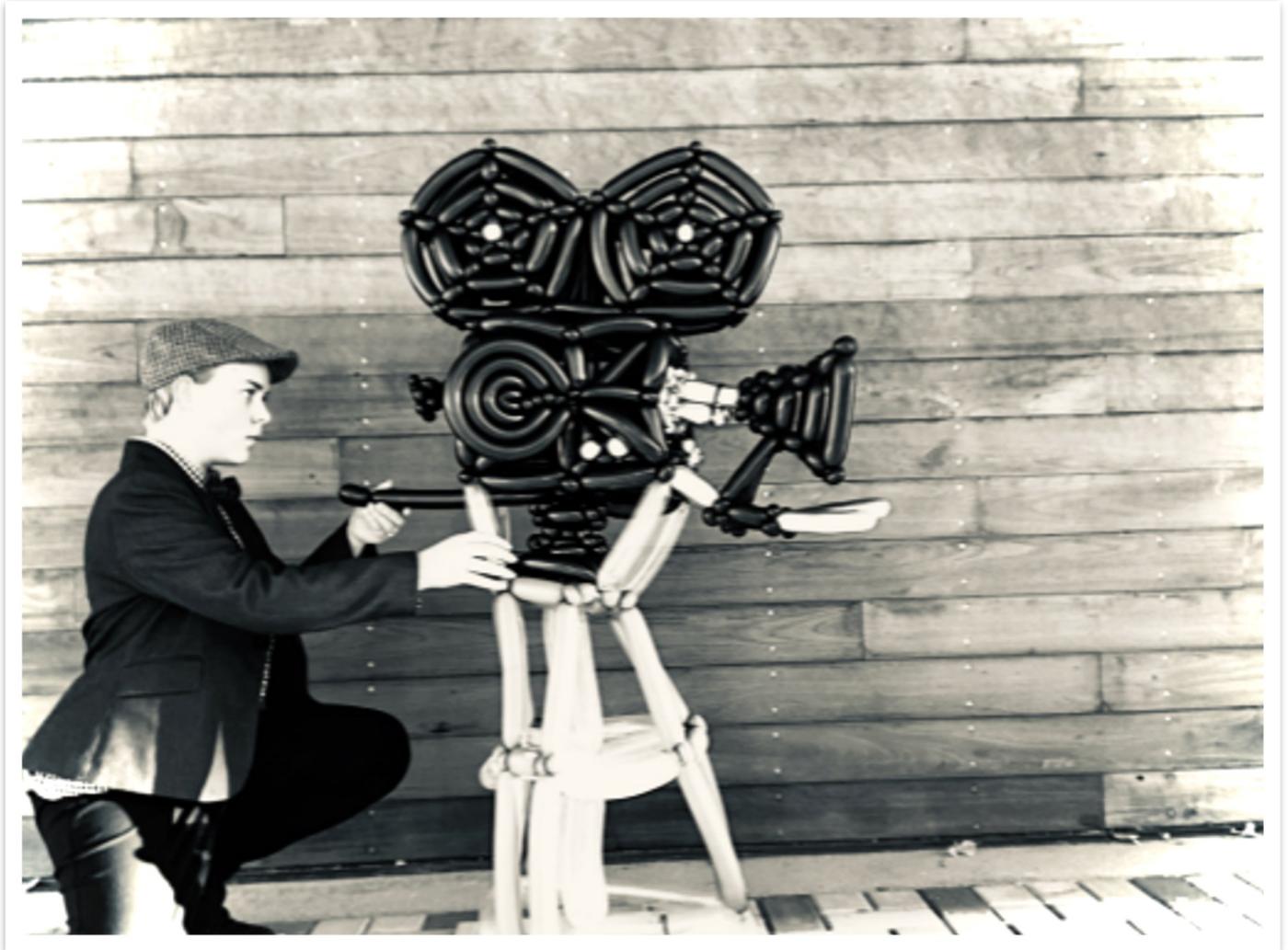
ART 





ACTION

Art by Casey Rosenberg





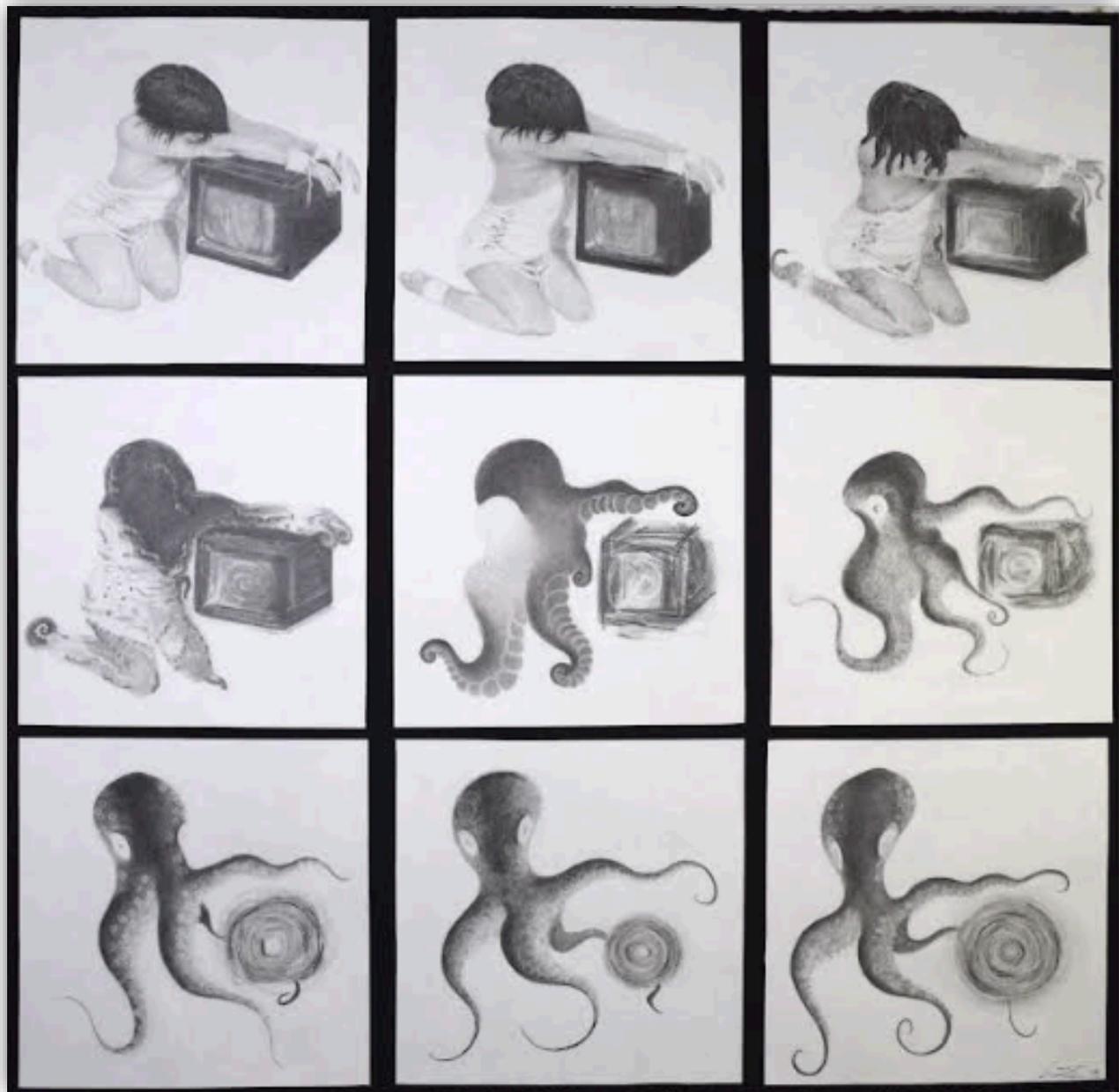
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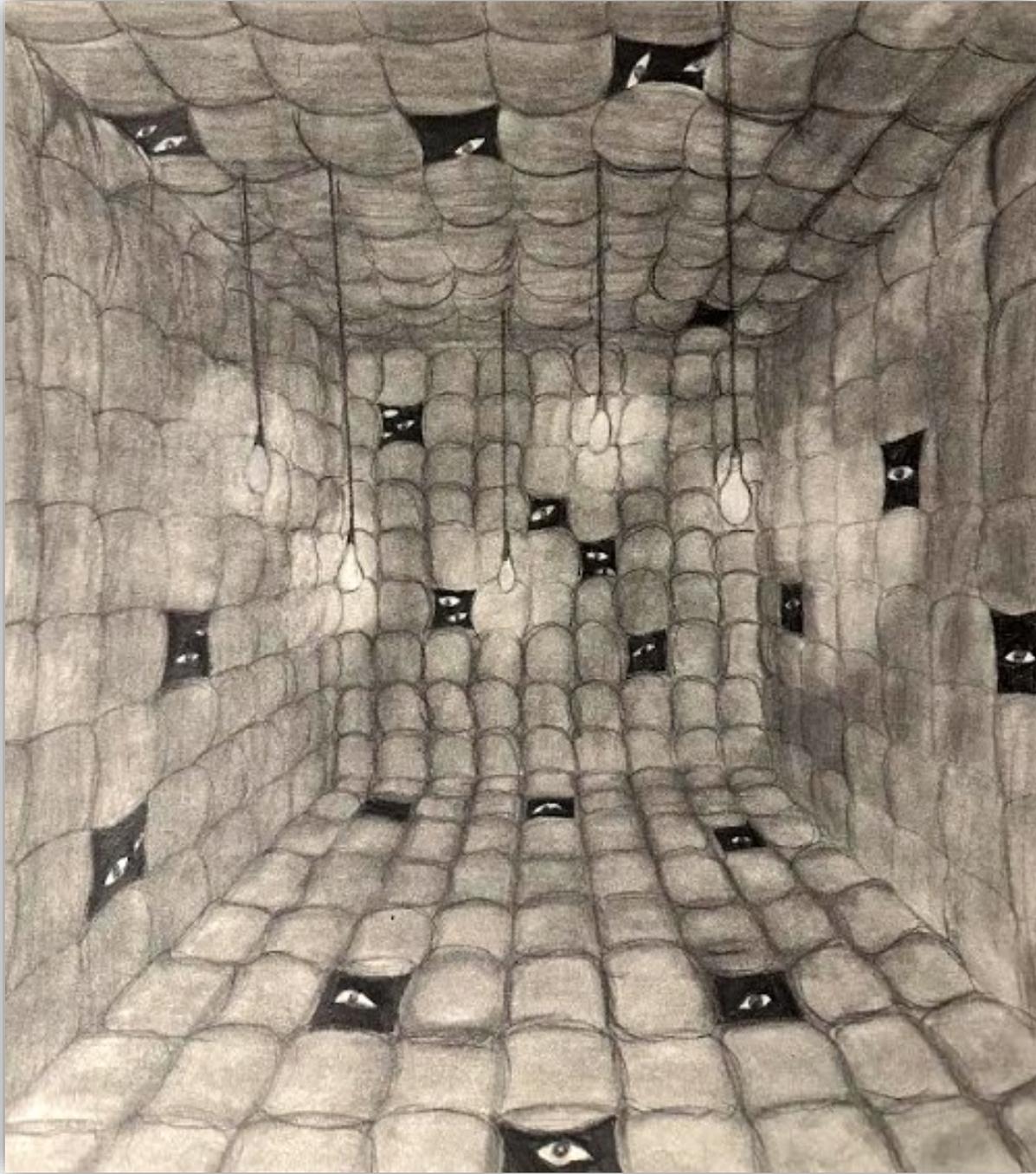
Art by Audrey Wilson



THE KIDS DON ' T KNOW ABOUT ANAMORPHS

Art by *Lion Taylor*





IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Art by Alexandra Richardson



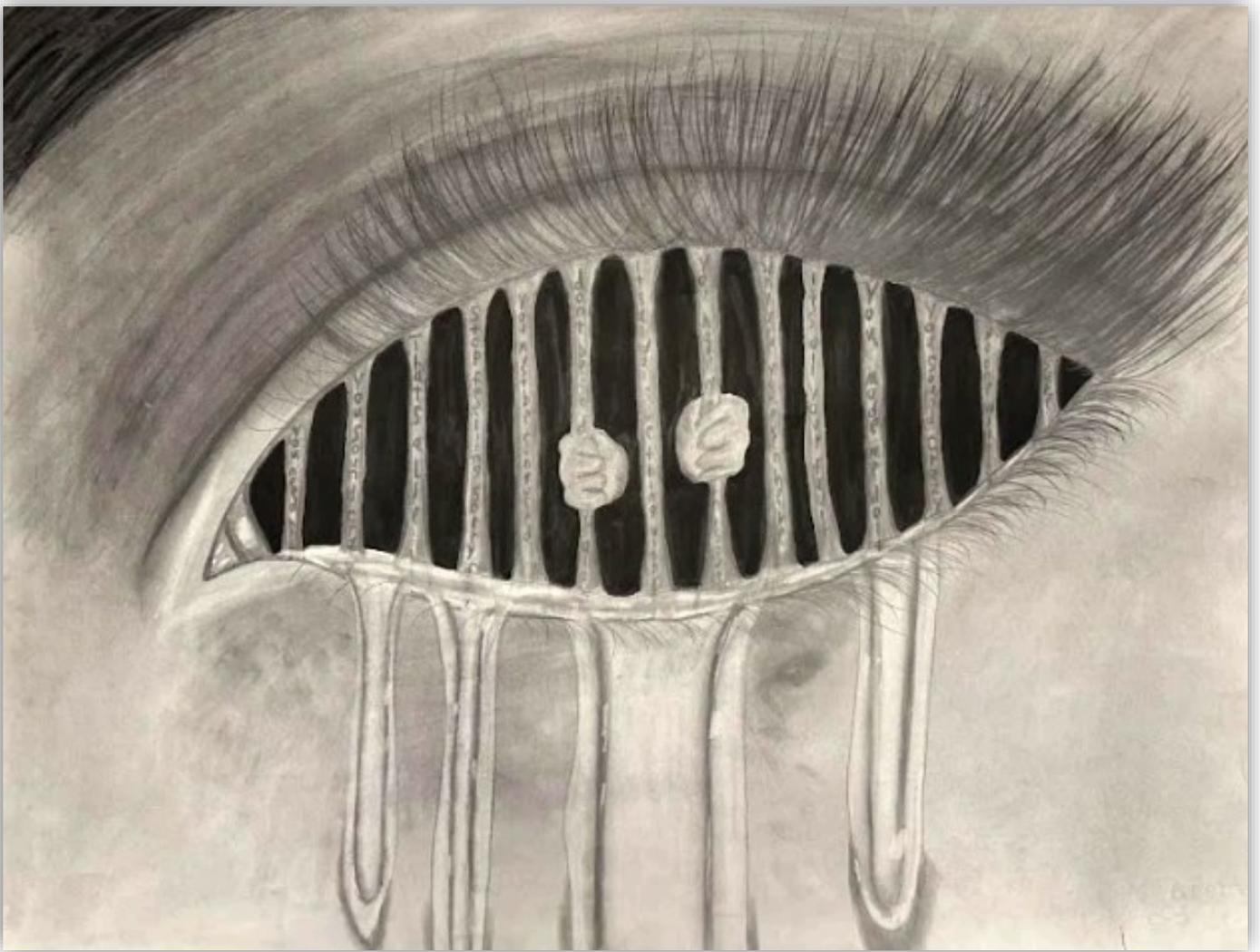
MY LIGHT

Art by *Alexandra Richardson*



CHEER UP

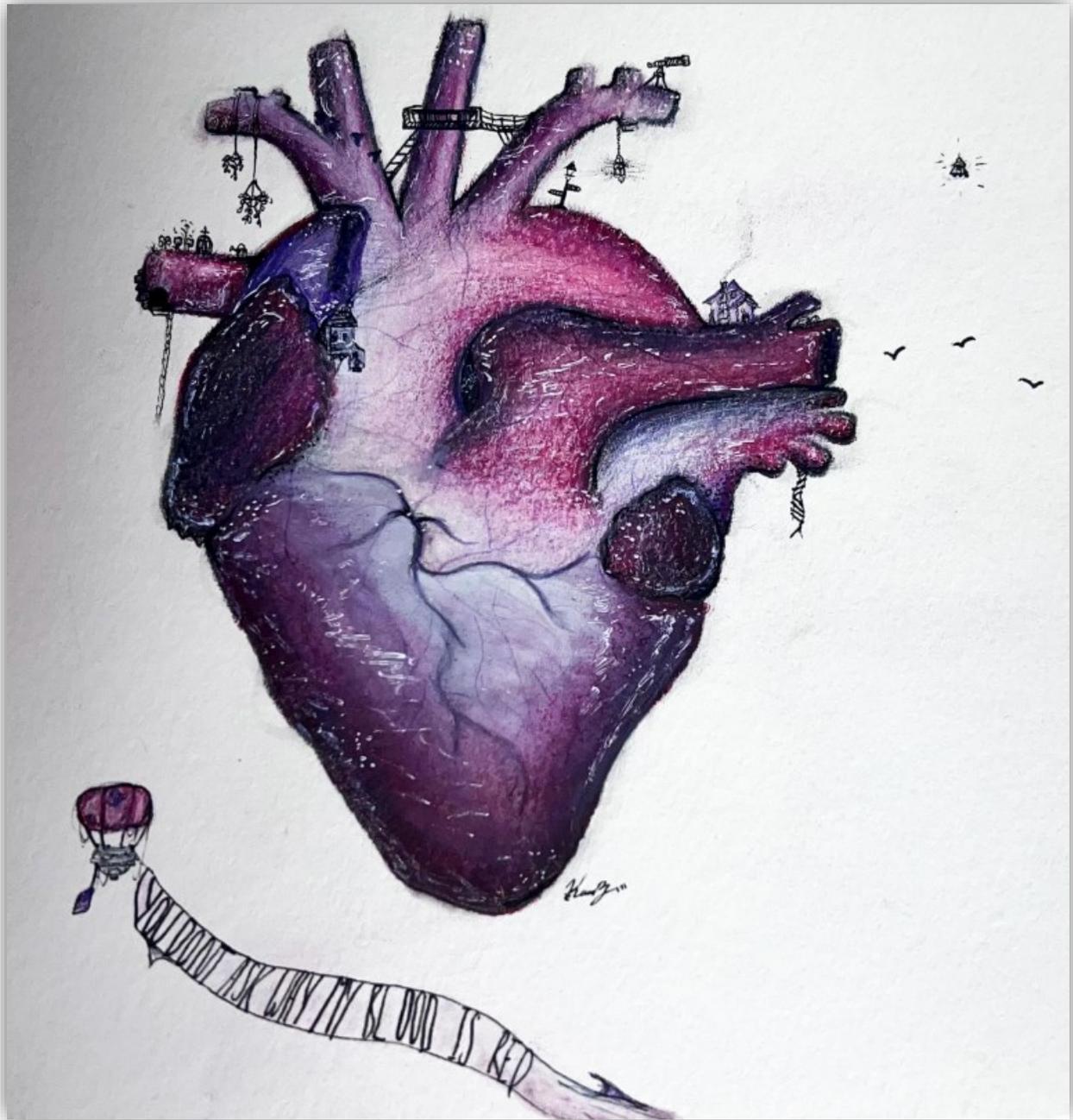
Art by Alexandra Richardson





SELF-PORTRAIT OF DISORDER

Art by Nico Hartley



YOU DONT ASK WHY MY BLOOD IS RED

Art by Kapri Riley



STARLIGHT FLOWERS

Art by Grace Derickson



MEMORIAL FOR LAIKA

Art by Charlee Huggins



BOUQUET FOR KAIA

Art by Mimi Telford



REMEMBERING H* R NAME

Art by Charlee Huggins



BLOOMING BEAUTY

Art by *Katrina Borela*



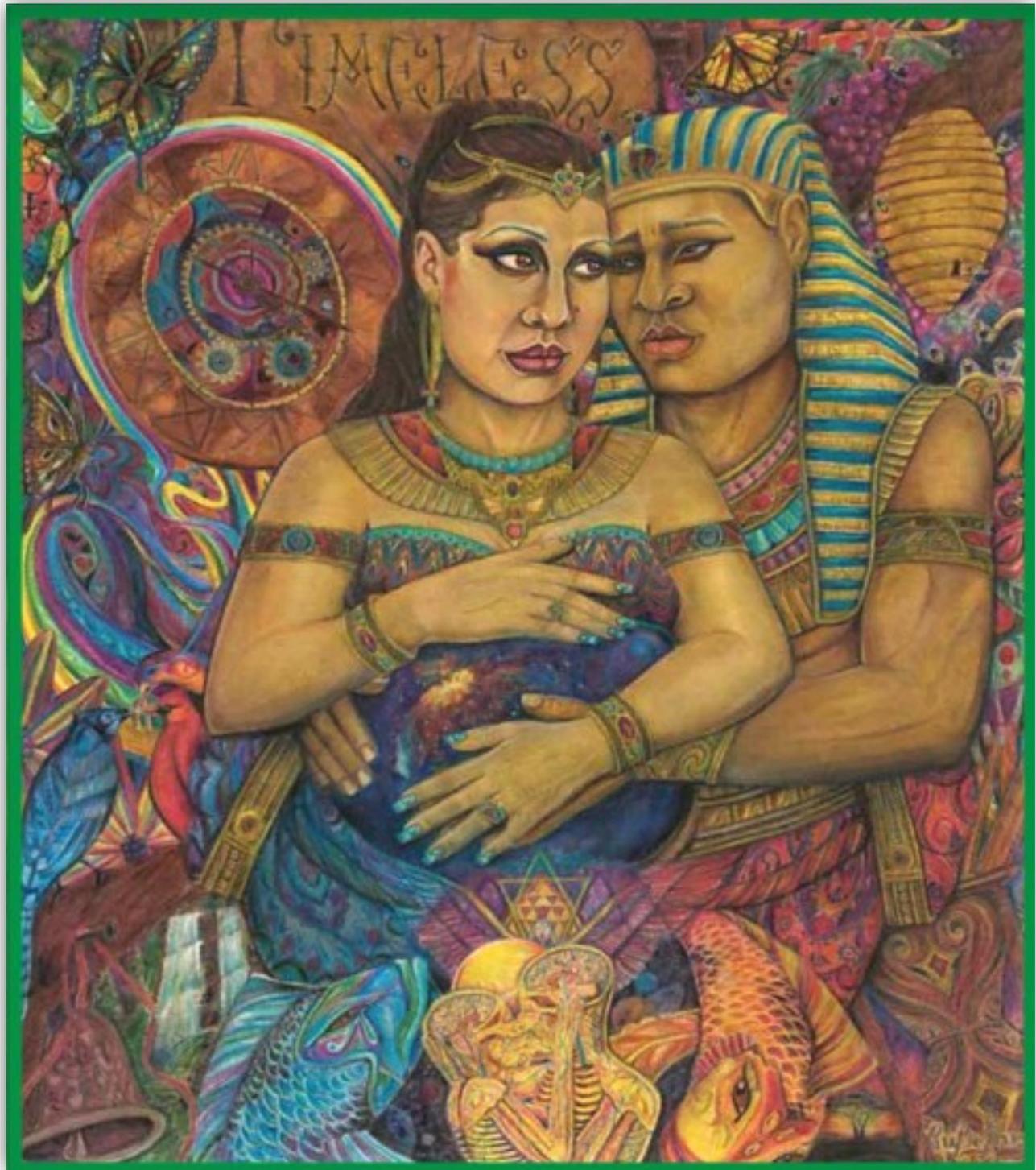
UFO ABDUCTION

Art by Kristen Klotzer



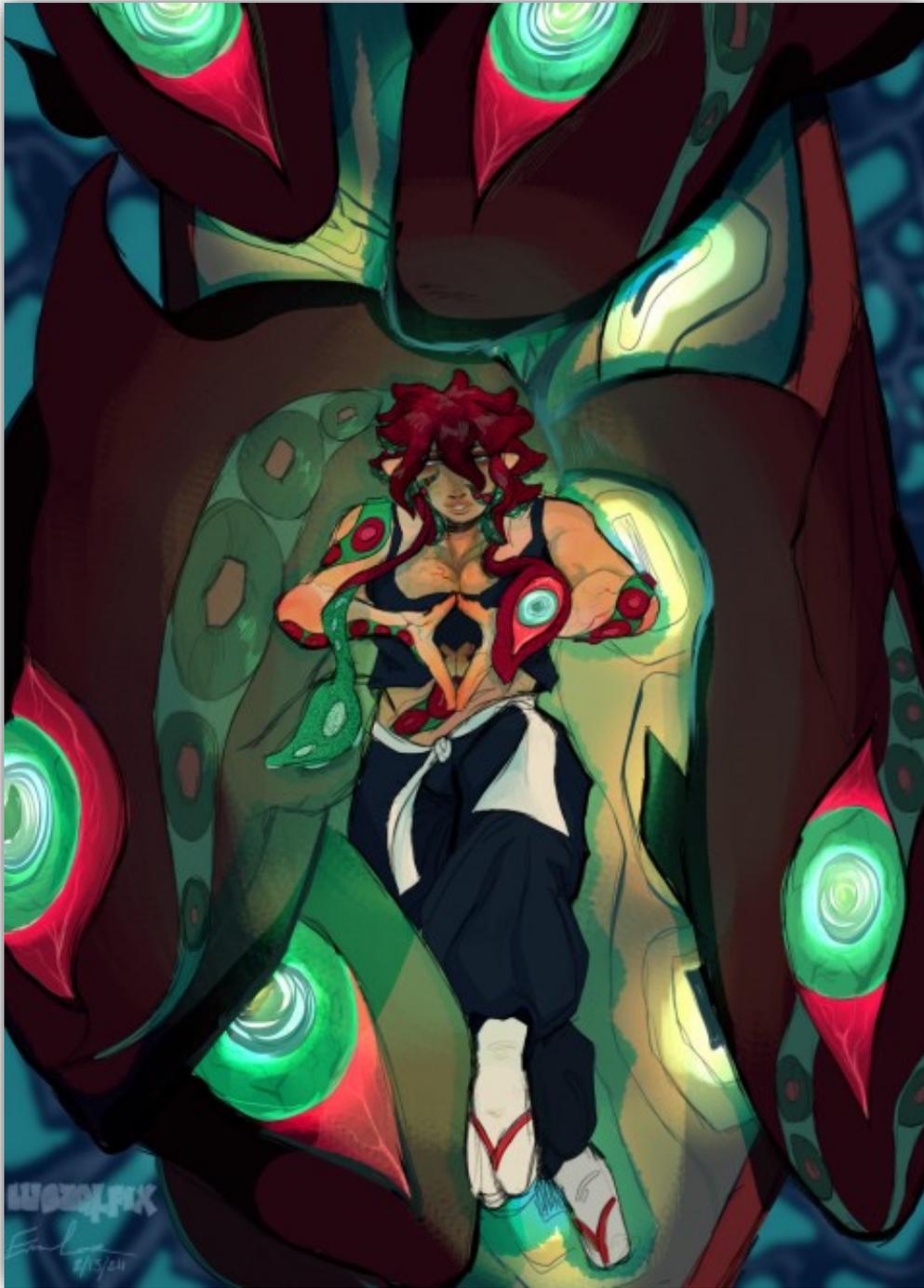
FORAGED

Art by Dexter Lewis



MAJESTIC UNION

Art by Dexter Lewis



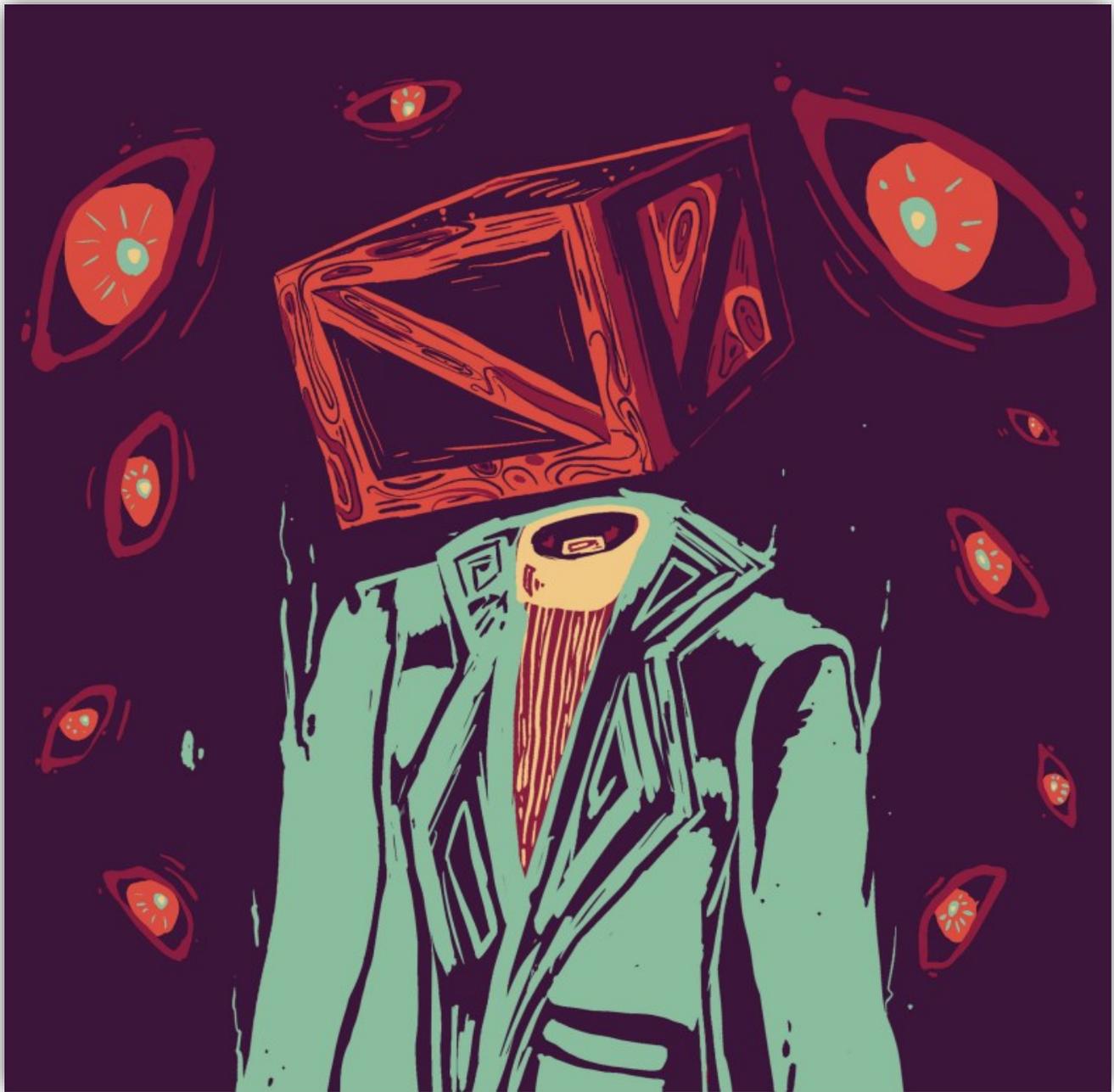
LEVIATHAN

Art by *Encler Meierbachtol*



HOT GIRL MAGIC

Art By Cy Dolph



HELP THEY ARE WATCHING AND TURNED MY HEAD INTO A CRATE

Art by Cy Dolph



CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

GRAY ADAMS —

“L' Homme au Masque de Fer”

Grayson Adams is an author and graphic/web designer who loves writing horror, fantasy, and sci-fi stories. They are currently an intern at Copper Nickel literary magazine and worked previously as lead graphic designer at Heavy Feather Review. During their free time, they are most likely to be found petting good dogs, reading manga, or playing video games into ungodly hours of the night.

HAYDEN ALEXANDER —

“Christmas Eve”

KATRINA BARELA —

“Blooming Beauty”

I was born and raised in Colorado, and highly admire the beautiful nature here. In this piece, each color is intentional, creating a combination of different color schemes including complementary, triadic, analogous, monochrome, etc. Femininity is the main inspiration, nature is another influence on my artwork. Using an array of delicate flowers to create an appreciation for how the world grows yet remains beautiful.

GAGE BARNARD —

“I Saw a Dragon”, “Lifeblood of Land”

Gage is a fantasy writer and literature student with a fascination towards magic, monsters, and other worlds. He has collected a modest assortment of books over time, particularly

graphic novels and manga, which are a prominent piece of inspiration in his own works. When not writing or otherwise creating, he is most often spending time with friends and family, trying out unfamiliar treats, or playing video games.

NICHOLAS BETZ —

“Hurtling”

Nicholas Betz is an aspiring aerospace engineer whose journey has already taken them from lunar expeditions to leading a groundbreaking sounding rocket mission aimed at sintering lunar regolith in microgravity. With accolades including 1st place at Colorado Space Grant's scientific symposium for high altitude balloon launches, Nicholas combines their passion for science with the art of expression, finding solace and escape as a watercolor instructor.

BILL BICKERTON —

“1, 3, 2, 1”

I am a Colorado native who enjoys mountain biking, hiking, snow shoeing and generally enjoying the outdoors. I'm also an avid reader and seem to be on a critical theory (and the seemingly premature “it's dead” meme) deep dive, recently along with mysteries and science fiction. I still miss my cats, Coco and Eponine.

JADEN BUSH —

“The Custodian's Plight”

I'm Jaden Bush. I'm very new to creative writing and “The Custodian's Plight” is one of the first poems I have ever written. During my day I work



with students with severe support needs, and I take a lot of inspiration from them when I'm writing (also from my cat nutmeg). I hope to write more in the future and hopefully publish more works!

JOY CASIAS —

“Time is Like That”, The Me I Could Have Been”

SAIGE CHAPIN —

“Never Let Go”

ODIN CUYPERS—

“Seazonz”

Hi there! I am a student at RRCC pursuing writing! I enjoy writing and reading a wide variety of genres, generally leaning towards poetry and stories of various lengths.

ELIZABETH DAVIS —

“Avarice for the Grave”

“Avarice for the Grave” was inspired by Henry Ward Beecher’s quote: “If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be crows.” The meaning of this piece was to show human’s greed for knowledge, making them go through extreme lengths to retrieve what they want, only for it to backfire on them.

GRACE DERICKSON —

“Starlight Flowers”

Grace Derickson is a second semester student at RRCC who is always up for a new adventure. She's been drawing and writing for as long as she could hold a pencil and been in theatre for almost as long. If not on an adventure, she can often be

found cuddling with her dog, coffee and a book. Her piece “Starlight Flowers” was inspired by the two sides of life and death and her written works.

CY DOLPH — “Hot Girl Magic”, “Help They Are Watching and Turned My Head Into a Crate”

CALLISTO GIROUX —

“Evolve”

My name is Callisto. I'm a trans feminine artist going for my AA here, on what I hope is a path to become a curator for a gallery or museum down the line. I've been pushing myself to be more authentic and healthier as a human while representing that growth - namely the struggles which accompany it - in the art I produce. My hope is that others can relate and use the energy to push through their own struggles.

NERYS GLYNN —

“Dysphoria”, “Euphoria”

Nerys has been transitioning for the past year. She likes writing about her experience and emotions of the process. She couldn't do it without her fiancé and her whole world, Marissa.

JUAN R. GOMEZ —

“Eugene the Woodcutter”

I first realized my passion for writing thanks to my 10th grade writing teacher. Now, 7 years later, I'm about to get my associate degree this semester. This is my first ever fantasy work. I hope you enjoy this brief respite into this strange world that exists within the inner machinations of my mind.



PHOENIX GREGG —

“The Star-Folk”

My name is Phoenix Gregg, and I, like you, am one of the star-folk. As a student of physics, much of what I create is an expression of that love for physics, the universe, and ultimately-- understanding. Physics is how we understand the universe- and art and writing are ways in which we can understand ourselves in the context of that universe. Art and science are connected by beauty.

NICO HARTLEY — “The Vagabond”, “UNTITLED”, “Self-portrait of Disorder”

Nico is currently completing his last semester at Red Rocks before transferring to CU Boulder to continue his degree in English. He often jokes that he’s cursed to write poetry when he wants to write fiction, but he’s always enjoyed writing no matter the genre. His other hobbies include drawing, sewing, and reading. He was an editor for the 19th edition of *Obscura* and hopes to continue branching out as a writer.

AMANDA HENDRIX —

“Thank You, Ladies”

ANA HERNANDEZ —

“Angel Island”

Angel island was a homework assignment for my US history class in high school and never did I believe that it would get published in my college magazine. I am a first-generation student to graduate high school and to attend college and I am so proud to have been given this opportunity to be part of this awesome community of writers and artist. My son and daughter are my inspiration to try something new and out of my comfort zone

this year and the years to come. I think after living in Denver for over 20 years it’s about time I change things up.

CHARLEE HUGGINS —

“Remembering H*r Name”

Charlee Huggins is a student artist at Red Rocks Community College pursuing a major in Studio Art. They work as a Student Ambassador at the LocalWorks Clear Creek Makerspace in Wheat Ridge, where they to get to teach others in the community about fabrication of all types. They love to explore new mediums to incorporate, including sculpture, film photography, cyanotypes, oil painting, and textile work.

KRISTEN KLOTZER —

“UFO Abduction”

Kristen, an aspiring Physician Assistant and multidisciplinary artist, harmonizes her medical ambitions with her creative spirit. Beyond her academic pursuits, she immerses herself in crafting herbal remedies, plant-based dyes, music composition, and captivating interactive art installations. Kristen's dedication extends to nurturing the ecosystem through native gardening, embodying a holistic approach to healing and expression.

DEXTER LEWIS —

“FORGED”

Dexter B. Lewis Jr. is the artistic author of *Caged Bird Syndrome: Life after LIFE*. As a native of the “Mile High City”, life’s been one continuous struggle from the cradle. Within the deepest depths of despair—he discovered precious jewels of hidden talents. Now he knows that uphill battles are the silver linings of overcoming immense



obstacles. While on his ceaseless quest for redemption, art remains a fluid channel for transformation.

NICHOLAS MACEJACK —

“No More Hints”

ENDER MEIERBACHTOL —

“Leviathan”

I've little to say about this piece, other than nothing brings me more happiness than knowing that I've enjoyed creating long enough to see my imaginations and written creations be tangible in drawing. This is a manifestation of my love for the worlds that have found home within my mind, for my interests that have shaped me into who I am today. I hope that looking through these submissions inspires you, reader, to create, too.

SUSAN MOTIKA —

“The Rolling Pin”

JESSICA POWELL —

“Show and Tell”

My name is Jessica Powell. I am a returning adult college student. After getting my associate degree through RRCC, I am hoping to transfer to CU Boulder. There I will pursue English with a creative writing track. I enjoy writing poetry and fiction. I have two children, ages 4 and 9. In my spare time I enjoy reading and painting.

RJ PRINCE — “Power Wash My Fucking Spine”, “Parasite”, “Sober”

Rj Prince is a semi-anonymous creative writer currently attending Red Rocks. They focus on

darker, romance themes in their writing with an emphasis on poetry. When their time at Red Rocks expires, they have plans to take over the literary world, re-claim the poetry genre, and go down in history unknown.

HALEY REDFORD —

“The Playground”

ALEXANDRA RICHARDSON — “Cheer Up”, “My Light”, “It’s All in Your Head”

“My name is Alexandra. I’m a mixed woman from California though I’ve spent over half of my life in Colorado. I’m an artist that focuses on mental, physical, and emotional health ranging from depression and toxicity to abuse and mental illness. I work to create eerie, uncomfortable or unsettling pieces with the goal of spreading awareness on a variety of topics. My mediums of choice are charcoal, graphite and ink though I’m still exploring other forms of art. I work on anything from paper, to wood, to canvas.

KAPRI RILEY — “From Butterflies to Nails”, “You Don’t Ask Me Why My Blood is Red”

“From Butterflies to Nails” was originally a poem written by Kapri just before she enrolled at Red Rocks Community College. In a frenzied attempt to put herself out there, she transformed her poem into the creative nonfiction piece published here in *Obscura*. Before graduating, Kapri wanted to reflect on a past self that hadn’t given herself enough grace. “In my time at Red Rocks I learned to leave behind what didn’t serve me and I will always appreciate that.”



CASEY ROSENBERG —

“Action”

ANI SCHWERTFEGER — “Lost and Found”, “Great Love of Spring”

Ani, pronounced “Annie”, is a 25-year-old who has always wanted to be a writer. This is their last semester at RRCC. In the fall they will be attending CU Boulder as an English major, with the hopes of later going to Grad School to obtain an MLIS to become a Librarian. This is their second time submitting and being published in Obscura.

BRITTNEY TAFOYA —

“Make Bukoski Proud”

LION TAYLOR — “The Kids Don’t Know About Animorphs”

Hi, I’m Lion and I’m an adult learner finishing up my first year in college here at RRCC. I’m a Studio Arts major with a lifelong passion for drawing and painting. I really enjoy reading fantasy and sci-fi, playing video games and relishing in the company of my cats. I’m thrilled to get to share my work this term and am looking forward to incorporating more of my passions into my projects in the coming years.

MIMI TELFORD —

“Bouquet for Kaia”

Mimi Telford is a first year Engineering Sciences Major who enjoys any extent of creative arts. She is at present on a goal to connect art with machine & medicine. Currently, she wants to channel creativity in medical and scientific analysis to find more efficient solutions for current and challenging health issues.

TYLER THOMAS —

“The Vicious”

Tyler is a fiction writer currently attending Red Rocks. They focus on darker dystopic themes in their writing, with a penchant for science fiction.

MAYA VALVERDE —

“Episode”

ABIGALE WASHCO —

“A Nightmare Called Dance”

ADDISON WILSON —

“The Sun Kissed Me This Summer”

AUDREY WILSON —

“Restless”

TYLER WILSON —

“Surviving The 9-5”



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