**Somerton Man: An Interwoven Account**

*Millie Mi, 12*

TW: Death

On a balmy summer’s eve, a man lies motionless on Somerton beach.

*The mysterious identity of the 43-year-old ‘Somerton Man’ has been found.*

His head and shoulders slump against the rocky seawall as the sharp edges of stone dig into his lifeless neck.

*He is Carl “Charles” Webb, an electrical engineer born on November 1, 1905, in Melbourne, Australia.*

Dressed in a brown, multi-piece suit, the dapper man sticks out plainly among the night beach goers. He is the picture of utmost sophistication until the unsophisticated sprawl of his body becomes visible. His haphazardly flung limbs are strewn across the sand, wrinkling and dirtying the sturdy tawny fabric.

*In 1948, his body was found in Adelaide, Australia. The last time his existence was recorded was in 1947, when he divorced his wife, Dorothy Robertson. Dorothy was residing in Bute, a city near Adelaide when Webb was found. Webb enjoyed poetry and betting on horse races.*

The man’s slovenly pose and his trembling, shaky attempt at lifting his right arm gives onlookers the impression of a drunken man. If they had stayed to see the swarm of mosquitos that gathered to feed on him later, they wouldn’t have thought so. They wouldn’t have obliviously called out the grim truth when commenting he was ‘dead to the world’.

*On July 23, 2022, the University of Adelaide, led by Professor Derek Abbott, succeeded in solving one part of this ongoing mystery with DNA and forensic genealogy. By using strands of Somerton Man’s hair collected from his plaster casting, they created his family tree. This led them to Webb, whose death had not been recorded.*

The next morning, the glint of sunlight reflecting off his polished shoes catches a young man’s eye. The only one to take enough care to notice the motionless heart that had been stranded overnight. The blaring sirens there to save him arrive but the only things they find are a pack of Juicy Fruit, a metal comb, a handkerchief, and a box of cigarettes and matches. These are in the unmoving Dead Man’s pockets. They find no wallet nor any other form of any identification. There are no tags on his clothing – they had been ripped out.

*The cause of Webb’s death is yet to be determined. At the time of his discovery, his inflamed organs pointed to poison as a possibility but no traces of any were detected. Digitalis and Strophanthin, two poisons that leave no evidence, were brought up in court. However, it has never been proven either of them were used.*

From sandy ground to white bedsheets to a cold metal table, the streets of Adelaide breathe life into the Dead Man for the last time.

*Tracking down Somerton Man’s identity has been a difficult task. Various details, including merchant ship stencil kits, the absence of socks in his suitcase, the stitching on his clothing that could only be found in the United States at the time, and a made-up name: T. Keane, all misled investigators to different theories. The biggest mystery came in a cryptic piece of paper containing the phrase “Tamam Shud”, translating to “It’s Over” that was found in his pocket, which led to speculation of suicide. The paper was torn out from a copy of the “The Rubaiyat” in which a suspicious woman’s phone number and strange markings were also found. This previously fueled rumors that Somerton Man was a World War II spy.*

Poked and prodded, examined and observed, the restless Dead Man lies still as the coroner marvels over his smooth hands that evidently have never participated in manual labor. He counts the squares on the ceiling as the coroner croons at his bulky calves resembling those of a ballet dancer’s.

*Another false theory originated from Webb’s abnormally large calves, he was once thought to be a ballet dancer. From this theory, an unexpected romance happened during the investigation between Professor Abbot and Rachel Egan, the granddaughter of the dancer Somerton Man was presumed to be.*

Lowered into the ground and buried with no name, the Dead Man rests. He lies motionless in his grave. The slanted rectangular gravestone reads: Here lies the unknown man who was found at Somerton Beach; 1st Dec. 1948.

*Although a breaking development has been made in this case, there are still many unanswered questions. What was Carl Webb doing in Adelaide? What were the strange markings on his copy of “The Rubaiyat”? Why were all the tags of his clothing torn out? How did he die? Exhumation allowed scientists to discover Somerton Man’s name but the story of him and his death may be lost to us forever.*

**зямля карычневая, як зубр**

*Alexandra Weaver, 11*

TW: Cutting

I slowly lay down on the red cushions

The scent of midsummer leaves, fresh grass, dried lavender, and salty old wine swam in the air

It was mid-July after all

And Shawn had to disinfect his hands

Alcohol worked

Despite being eastern European

The only alcohol we had was cooking wine

Liquor destroyed my family for generations

Liquor and money

So our house was void of that liquid poison

I lay there as Shawn nervously grabbed the small needle blade

7 needles sloped to form an edge

On my ribs were 18 dots

10 of those were dotted lines

I knew this would make my ancestors proud

I honor them

He dipped the needle blade in the dark brown ink

The blade moved to my left ribs

I reminded myself that this was more than aesthetic

I may be the first person in 15 generations to do this nearly extinct ancient practice

A tradition only very few people still followed

I did my research garnered deep knowledge about this

Reading in languages I could barely understand

I finally found exactly what I required

I had liked this idea for over a year

I made the final decision 2 weeks before

The blade sat for a small moment on my skin before it moved

It ripped a small incision through my skin

My face twitched greatly in pain

Despite the numbing ointment, I still felt it

The ointment was meant for sore muscles anyway

Shawn apologized for the pain

I told him it was alright; I expected the pain and I must continue

He proceeded

A 2nd line

Pain

3rd line

Pain

4th line

Pain

The 4 lines formed a diamond shape on my ribs

Despite the shape looking uneven, I knew it was the skin distortion

Skin is flexible, therefore it moved easily and shapes lines on the skin

Lines both natural and unnatural

Shawn was quite apologetic through the entire process despite my assurances

The 6 lines hurt, but I knew I had to do it

I was stubborn

I've had worse pain

Then came the 4 dots

They were marked as small lines

Ever so tiny lines

My ribs were sore

The skin was aching and red

The 4th dot was done

Finished

My first and only tattoo was complete

Cut into my skin with microblading technique

It should fade in 2-5 years

If not, I will remove it

It's so small that it should be easy

I knew when I made this decision that I would eventually remove it off my body

If not naturally, then artificially

The small diamond symbol, with an X and 4 dots, was and still is an ancient Slavic symbol

A symbol existing for thousands of years

It meant earth

A long train of thought started from this symbol

Earth

One day I will visit my ancestral land and see the earth beneath it

My ancestral land where every single woman from my maternal family is from

A long matriarchal line

Despite sharing a similar culture, each region in eastern Europe has its distinct differences

One practice of scarf wearing in Donbas may be different than another in Bessarabia

I am proud to be from the Hrodna region of Belarus

The Hrodna district sits on the very most western point of Belarus

We belonged to Poland for centuries, until the Soviet Union split us

Despite post-soviet controlled countries being crime ridden and depressing, I collect every bit on ancient piece of knowledge I can form my culture

I can't have the endangered Belarusian language die out in my family with my mom

Who else will bake the pierogi or wear the platok?

If I can save it, then I will

Then so be it

**To Build a Home**

*Jasmine Zhen, 10*

The story begins in the homeland, a place I would later call China, an ocean away where they eat lunch at midnight and read right to left. I know it only through snippets of stories, told secondhand in interstitial, ever-fleeting moments. The days my father would spend riding his bike to the tracks to watch the trains blur past. My mother’s grandmother and her daily trips to the marketplace, vegetables and fish in hand for that night’s dinner. Their small, rural towns, lives pinned down by politics they didn’t understand. And of course, the journey to the promised land.

Their coming to America is one I know in even sparser detail, the memories blurry like photos in old magazines, clipped and faded. I know my father came here to attend university, my mother; high school. I know they lived in opposite corners of the country. I know they eventually, by some means of American assimilation, became citizens. I do not know the exact year they first stepped foot on American soil. I do not know what concoction of emotions brewed behind their eyes. I don't even know why they immigrated here, underneath the guise of “a better life”.

In Mandarin Chinese, the word for America translates to *měi guó,* beautiful country. The name is a grueling burden for a place to carry, but the load is even heavier for our nation’s immigrants. They, after all, are the ones who chased instead of cowered, their nation’s expectations glued onto their backs like barnacles. They are the ones who dug and labored, planted roots in leased and lent land, praying for harvest. With time, the American sun on American soil doused with American fertilizer yielded fruit. They, the ones who laid the land in foreign territory. We, the miracle children of cross-continent circumstance. I, a member of a new generation, a mutation combination hyphenated into conjunction. I, Chinese-American.

It is a strange thing, to be two in one. My identity has come to be a precarious balance—not too Chinese, not too American, simply a beautiful, unwavering blend. But when you are neither here nor there, you are nowhere—exiled from your own existence, left to live in a permanent state of wandering. So I dare not come crawling back, somewhere else’s soil underneath my fingernails, for fear that I will be turned away.

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I have never felt a close connection to China. Even the word feels foreign in my mouth, estranged and distant, a name for a place I have only seen on multicolored maps and my parents’ old family photos. For as long as I can remember, China has only been an acquaintance—a place we say we’ll go to one day and a label for all that came in “the before.” Of all the Chinese Americans I know, I am the only one who has never been to China.

But for my family, China is not a place to visit on vacation. Instead, it is a reunion, a coming home. During family get-togethers, aunts and uncles and cousins crowded round a table filled with food, the conversation about China is inevitable.

*I heard Michael went to China last summer*, an aunt will say, spinning the glass plate on the table until the *bao* is in arm’s reach.

An uncle will chuckle, sipping tea from his ceramic cup. *It’s been a while. Maybe we should go too.*

*I wanna go back to China!* One of my cousins will shout, pumping his chubby fists in the air. The adults will laugh while his mother gives him a sharp look, its point dulled by a sense of pride for her son. Even the boy, no older than eight, who has only ever breathed American air, still wants to “go back,” like a dog sniffing his way home.

It is times like these where I feel slightly out of place in my family, a puzzle piece you find at the end of a tired day that looks similar enough to pass, but doesn’t quite snap into the picture like the rest do. With my aunts and uncles and their children, many who have spent their entire adult lives in America if they weren’t born here, it is more of a cultural disconnect, a difference in the lilt of their voice and the way that they stand. But with my older relatives and my grandparents, whose true home will always be six thousand miles away, the separation is lost in translation.

Chinese was my first language. I tell people this like a question, a tilt upwards at the end. It is true—as a kid, I was as fluent as a four-year-old could be. But after I went to school and English became an immediate necessity, my Chinese tongue slowly dissolved away, leaving the scar tissue of broken vocabulary and a half-baked comprehension in its place. I have no memories of anything other than English escaping from my lips.

Today, my Chinese is haphazard, cobbled together and stapled at the seams. My conversational skills don’t extend much further than *Hello, today is very cold* and *Yes, I’ll do the laundry, Mom!*, a vocabulary gathered only from my parent’s daily banter and the phrases I learned from a week on Duolingo during quarantine. I cannot order in a restaurant, or ask for directions, or even maintain a conversation past thirty seconds with one of my relatives. Between the stammers and confused stares, there may be nothing that brings me more shame.

Whenever I visit my grandparents, I tell myself that I will try. I will try to speak in Chinese, maintain a conversation, try to remember all of the phrases and questions my parents fire at me on the drive there. I will try to be a good Chinese granddaughter. But only a half hour into our stay, I find myself pulling at my parents’ sleeves, asking them to translate. This is how I know my grandparents—through monkey-in-the-middle conversations and things my parents say that I can understand, but can’t speak for myself, through the head nods and smiles when they have no idea what I’m trying to say but have to pretend like they do.

Back in the promised land, the expectations are even greater. My face and my last name, it seems, is the only confirmation the world needs to assume I am fluent. In every history class, I am asked to correct the teacher’s mispronunciation of the ancient Chinese dynasties. When a friend brings a snack she bought from the Asian convenience store, I am the one who is handed the package. And when the middle school boys are in their let’s-learn-a-swear-word-in-every-language phase, I am the one they ask for a new nugget to add to their collection. In every instance, I am forced into an awkward stall, *um, let me think, I’m pretty sure… wait, actually…* In every instance, someone else jumps in to save me. A concoction brews in my insides, embarrassment and shame and most of all, envy.

To me, China is amnesia.  It is the unshakeable feeling that you are the other, the one your ancestors watch from above as you heat up frozen dumplings from the discount section of the grocery store. It is knowing the strings are attached, but finding you are numb to the pull. It may be the homeland, but I do not call it home.

And so across the water lies the foster home, the dreamland of opportunity so rich you could serve it in a three-course meal. It is where I have lived for all my life, in the same state, in the same city, in the same house. While it is not without error, America is, supposedly, where I belong, among the children of the stars and the stripes with whom I was raised.

But growing up, it became glaringly clear that I was not quite an American kid. After all, American kids didn’t wear slippers in the house, and American kids could eat dinner on the couch, and American kids had parents who used the goddamn dishwasher. Whenever something didn’t go my way, whenever I decided to wield my pouting, childishly insolent alter-ego, the American kid was my weapon of defense.

To my family, however, I was the epitome of American. After all, I knew all the pop culture references, the strange ways they teach math, and the correct way to pronounce *meme*. For these reasons, I have been unofficially assigned the role of family email proofreader. Huddled over a glowing computer screen, I add commas and conjunctions and capitalization, like a tinker mending broken English, until the sentences are seamless and fluent.

*Why do you add all these exclamation points?* my mother asked once after I turned the screen back towards her, content with my work.

*You sound too direct, Mama. Too passive-aggressive. Be happier!* I flapped my hands about at the end for effect.

My mother shook her head, her finger hovering over the send button. *It’s too much. I sound like a clown.*

I told my friends at school about my email-checking duties over lunch one day and was surprised to hear that many of them did the same for their parents.

*My dad’s writing is so bad*, said one through bursts of laughs. *I basically have to write the whole thing again for him.*

More chuckles followed, along with the knowing head nods.

It is these people that I find solace with—the ones who will laugh with, not at me, the ones who have also been cut by the cookie cutter of stereotypes, the ones who know what it means to be one thing here and another there. They are the ones who I think of when the teacher stands in front of the classroom on a Monday morning, the flag hanging from its post on the whiteboard, asking us what it means to be American.

America is a place, but it is also a way of life, a song and a dance that we perform in our hearts. But try as I might to keep time with the music, to move my feet in four-four time, I must accept that I will always be different. I am not just my present- even if I run, I will always have my past strapped onto my back. America is my home, but I will always be an outsider.

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The story ends in a peculiar space, straddled between the home of my past and the home of my present. It is here on this island where I wander, where I search for what it means to be me. A lost visitor paddles up to the shore, asking who I am and where we are.

*It is me, whoever that is,* I say. *And we are here, wherever we are.*

He asks why I am here—why I walk the hills and valleys of this everlasting place and why I drink from the river and grimace.

*I am lost*, I say. There is more, of course, but it is a complicated thing.

*Well, if you are lost, where is your home?*

I see the two coasts in my periphery, countries like open palms reaching out in a game of tug of war. And I realize that that is something I do not know.

He smiles, knowing and sympathetic, and then reaches down to scrape a handful of the Earth in his palms, cupping the crumbling soil. *This can be your home.*

I stare at the wasteland surrounding me—the dryness, the neglect of it all. Surely, this cannot be my home. Behind him lie the lands of the naysayers, their handprints forever entangled around my wrists and ankles. But then, a flash of color, a holler from beyond. I squint, and I see people, two-legged blurs of color cheering me on from the coasts. These are the ones I hold in the cavities of my love, the ones who will never understand the tightrope I walk each day, but still line the streets with open arms, ready to catch me when I fall. And so I smile, whispering through chapped lips, eyes fixed on the horizon. *Yes, yes. We will build a home*.

**Zuri: A Personal Essay**

*Aseela Galeeb, 11*

TW: Animal death, animal cruelty, depictions of gore

I brushed my soaking wet hair away with the back of my wrist and turned back to the chopping board in front of me. Bright red watermelon juice stained the tips of my fingers as I arranged the fruit on the board, aiming for neat and even slices. The heavy slam of the back door startled both me and Zuri. His white shedding fur flew in all directions as he got up, abandoning his sprawled-out position by my feet, where he had been patiently waiting for me to “accidentally” drop a piece of watermelon. My grandpa closed the door behind him, and another slam echoed. Zuri walked up to him, sat before him, and cocked his head to one side.

Papa brought out the bright orange dog leash from behind his back. He smiled at Zuri’s response—a wagging tail and excited “arf.” I watched as he began to bend over, trying to hook the leash onto Zuri’s olive-green collar.

“Here, Papa, I can do that,” I called out, setting the knife down. Once Zuri was ready to go, and Papa was armed with doggie bags, I headed to the sink to wash my hands.

“Don’t wrap the leash around your hand because he is really strong and tugs a lot. Also, look out for, like, squirrels and rabbits,” I recited the reminders.

“Do you want to come too?” Papa asked.

*The words were scary. I hadn’t read anything so violent, so hateful. I scrolled through my friend’s screenshotted pictures. A neighborhood app, somewhere people could report accidents and warnings. It had only been a week, and word had spread like that little dog’s red blood, pooling out around him. And the words were angry. I sat there, in class, head bent slightly to read the words. The neighborhood name wasn’t correct. That was a relief. What would happen if they found our address? Would they hurt us? Let’s see. Oh my god. “…shouldn’t be allowed to own a dog!” “murder” “dangerous” “menace” “put down” “put down” “send away” “put down the whole damn family”. Jesus. The comforting came soon after the scary words. “They’re just stupid people with no outlet for their anger.” “Don’t take it to heart.” “You’ll be okay.” But my friends’ words were drowned by my parents’ fears. “Don’t walk him.” They insisted upon it. “I know it’s not right to keep him inside, but we need to be safe.”*

A feeling took hold in my gut and wouldn’t let go. I placed the cutting board in the sink, running my hands through the cold tap water, trying to distract myself as the feeling grew. My maternal grandmother all the way in Pakistan would tell me I have a sixth sense. The thought struck me, and I voiced it.

“Papa’s been gone a long time,” I told my mom.

“Stick your head out the door, see if he’s around,” she said, then turned back to the recipe book she was flipping through.

I swung open the dark red front door. And then I heard it. A scream. My bare feet carried me into the middle of the street, staring down the hill. Did a child fall off his bike? Did someone drop their phone? The scream sounded again, but it was less human. Almost animal, like a roar. A roar of pain. The unconscious gears clicked in my head, and I began sprinting.

My bare feet slapped against the hot pavement, but the pain was the least of my worries as I barreled to the bottom of the hill. A small crowd had gathered there, and I could barely take in the whole scene. An elderly Asian man, crouched over the figure of his small black dog. My grandpa, shock written on his face. A middle-aged white woman, arms crossed, holding Zuri’s orange leash. The details sunk in. The man’s tear-soaked face. Papa’s bruised knee. The stillness of the small dog. The dark blood dropping from Zuri’s mouth. I rushed over to the woman, asking a million questions. “What happened? Is that dog okay? What do I do?”

She pulled Zuri out of my reach and shook her head. “Your dog is dangerous,” she said calmly.

My sobs shook my body, and I tried to explain. “No, no, it’s not his fault. We-we adopted him! He isn’t – isn’t good with small an-animals!” She shook her head again.

*I sat on my bed, hugging my knees to my pounding chest. I didn’t take my eyes off the depressed, confused dog curled up on my floor. I could hear the argument. I shouldn’t have, but I cracked open the window. Was it just me, or were the words blurred, vaguely English? An unfamiliar voice. A woman? Something about a white dog. Walking a white dog. My parents’ voices. A defensive counter, something about both daughters and the dog “haven’t left the house.” A raised voice, the woman again, insistent. “Short dark hair, brown skin. I saw her walking your dog.” Liar. She was a liar. Did my parents know she was a liar? I felt the tears build up in me, and I closed the window.*

I found myself at Papa’s side, asking, begging him to explain.

“I tripped on the sidewalk, and Zuri ran after that dog,” he began.

“Your dad was walking your dog and he just let it kill the other one,” the woman interrupted.

“He’s – he’s not my father. My-my grandpa,” I hiccupped, still sobbing.

“You have to get a box,” Papa told me. “I will stay here. Go get Munira and find a box to put the dog’s body in.”

I nodded and began to run up the hill.

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t run. I couldn’t walk. I collapsed onto my knees, and the panic attack began.

I was less than halfway to my house. Wheezing and clutching my chest, I staggered over to a familiar house.

An Afghani family we had helped settle in, whose kids were my sister’s age. Their mother had come onto the road to see what was going on. I called out to her, unable to talk properly.

“Call my mother,” I managed to get out. “Please-” Another fit of hyperventilating. She disappeared inside.

*“I know, buddy.” My dad whispered to Zuri. “Just hold still. Good boy.” Leaning over the second-floor railing, I had a clear view of the hallway. My father held Zuri’s body between his legs, trying to place a black muzzle over his snout. “I’m so sorry, Zuri.” He said, releasing the writhing dog. I sniffled before the tears could flow, and he looked up. Seeing me, he said, “He has to wear it, or I can’t walk him.” I nodded in understanding. This was yet another day of a cooped-up, imprisoned dog. We couldn’t walk him, no matter how much he begged. I wiped a tear from my cheek and watched as Zuri pawed at his face, trying to remove the muzzle. My father unlatched it and let it drop to the floor.*

An eternity passed. She found a paper bag and her cell phone. Her words blurred, and I grasped the bag, holding it to my mouth.

I tried to remember how to breathe.

If I could breathe.

If I was ever able to breathe.

If I would be able to breathe again.

I looked up the street, still raggedly gasping into the bag. The commotion had gathered a crowd. Passerby stopped to ask questions. They weren’t seeing the girl, who felt like she was dying. They were seeing the vicious, crazy dog. The innocent, dead little dog. Almost everyone had come out of their houses, looking down the street. An inquisitive person stood on every doorstep, craning their necks. Every doorstep. Except mine. F\*\*\*.

I managed to stand, still dizzy, and tried to run up the hill. Still crying, still desperate for air, I somehow climbed that hill.

I climbed.

I climbed.

I climbed. My door was still open, and I rushed through it.

“YOU HAVE TO HELP!” My mind was racing, my thoughts spiraling. Everything depended on me getting my mother down the hill. We had to hurry. We had to hurry.

“What?” My mother looked up. Why was she going so slowly?

“MUMMA PLEASE,” I was screaming, screaming like the world was on fire.

She opened the shoe closet and began strapping her sandals to her feet.

“F\*\*\*\*\*\* HURRY” I bellowed, summoning a voice I had no idea existed. She had the audacity to look shocked, offended.

She made her way to the door. Looking down the hill, she saw the crowd gathering. And the police cars. When did they arrive? And finally, finally, she began running. I started to run, but a hand grasped my arm. I whirled to see my grandma.

“I have to go! I have to help! They need a box!” She sat down on the front step, pulling me down as well. Why wasn’t it making sense? I needed a box. We needed the box, or Zuri would die. The bag, still crumpled in my hand, dropped to the ground. Maa put her arms around me, and I buried my face into her. “They’re gonna kill him,” I said. “They have to kill him now.” She rocked me back and forth, patting my hair. “It’s going to be fine. He will be okay.”

*His paw was heavy in my hand as I ran my thumb along his fur in steady motions. My knees were sore against the cold, hard floor, but I didn’t dare move. His eyes looked up at me, almost knowingly. I scoffed at myself. Why are you acting as if he’s a person? As if he knows what’s about to happen? As if he knows what we know? I turned my thoughts back to his fur. Still warm. Still alive.*

I don’t know how long I sat there. I tried to peek around the house to see what was going on, but Maa held a firm hand on my shoulder. At some point, she went inside, and emerged with an ice pack and glass of water. I tended to my raw, burning feet. I downed a few glasses of water. My knees were scratched and skinned. My tears and snot dried on my face.

The adrenaline, anxiety, and anger slowly calmed inside me until we watched the police cars drive back up the hill. And I stood to see the aftermath

*I got to my knees shakily. The vet was washing her hands. I wiped my face and looked at my father. He was almost crying. My sister’s face was blank. No tears, no anger, nothing. “Do you know what we say when someone dies?” My dad asked us. We shook our heads. And then he recited. The rough translation was familiar- “From Allah we come and to Allah we must return.” I nodded solemnly. My father and sister left the room; I trailed behind them. I bent to pet the cold white head. He was so light. Frail, even. I kissed his soft forehead, got up, and left the room. I closed the door behind me.*

*My bedroom was strangely quiet without his soft snoring that night. Sleep barely grazed my eyelids, and every time I closed them, that ocean of guilt washed over me. My words bounced around in my head, echoing like a call into a cold, dark cave.*

“Do you want to come too?” Papa had asked.

I had barely given any thought to my response. “No, I’ll stay here. Be safe!”

And he had gone alone.

*Because I said no.*

Because I said no.

**In the Woods**

*Sage Welch, 11*

Some time ago, in a place not so far from here, a young man by the name of Teddy Mills found himself walking through the woods. Leaves crumpled under his feet (*crunch, crunch, crunch*) and the dense, nearby branches broke as he brushed by (*snap, snap, snap*).

He had lost the path some distance ago, the packed dirt vanishing amidst swirling roots and littered brambles. Before him simply laid another labyrinth of twisting tree branches. The setting sun painted the sky in shades of purple and lavender, the last vestiges of warm orange vanishing beneath the horizon. No one accompanied him, save for the howling of the wind (*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*) and the dance of his shadow.

“Oh no,” Teddy exclaimed to himself, glancing down at his feet and seeing the leaves tickling his shoes. “Have I been walking in a circle?”

He turned around once, twice, three times. There was no path in sight.

“Well, this was where the path was going,” he said, “so I’ll continue on.”

Teddy Mills continued walking alone through the woods. Leaves crumpled under his feet (*crunch, crunch, crunch*) and branches broke as he brushed by (*snap, snap, snap*).

*Whoosh!* cried the wind as it blew between the trees. Teddy froze, a prickling going up his spine.

“Who’s there?” he cried. “I can hear you, who are you?”

The wind whooshed again.

Teddy turned around, once, twice, three times. “Who’s there?” he repeated.

But whatever foul beast hunted him did not answer. No one accompanied him, save for the howling of the wind (*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*) and the dance of his shadow.

“Stop it!” he cried. “I can hear you, who are you?”

A wind blew around his feet, rustling the leaves and tickling his ankles. Teddy’s breathing sped up, his heart beating in his ears and throat. He glanced at the sky. A lone crow dove down through the trees towards him. The waxing moon was just barely visible above the tips of the canopy.

*Ha! Ha! Ha!*

He gasped as a clawed hand snatched him into the darkness.

\* \* \*

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He had lost the path some ways ago, the packed dirt vanishing amidst swirling roots and littered brambles. Before him simply laid another labyrinth of twisting tree branches. The setting sun painted the sky in shades of purple and lavender, the last vestiges of warm orange vanishing beneath the horizon. No one accompanied him, save for the howling of the wind (*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*) and the dance of his shadow.

“Wait,” Teddy exclaimed, glancing down at his feet, seeing the leaves tickling his shoes. “I’ve been here before.”

He stood firm, glancing around once, twice, three times. There was no path in sight.

“Hey!” he said, “I know you’re there!”

Teddy Mills stood alone in the woods. No leaves crumpled under his feet (*crunch, crunch, crunch*). No branches broke as he brushed by (*snap, snap, snap*).

*Whoosh!* cried the wind as it blew between the trees. Teddy froze, a prickling going up his spine.

“You’ve done this before,” he cried. “I tire of your games!”

The wind whooshed again.

“Answer me, horrible voice!” he repeated.

But whatever foul beast hunted him did not answer. No one accompanied him, save for the howling of the wind (*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*) and the dance of his shadow.

“Stop it!” he cried. “You’ve said this all before! Why are you doing this to me?”

A wind blew around his feet, rustling the leaves and tickling his ankles. Teddy’s breathing sped up, his heart beating in his ears and throat. He looked up at the sky. A lone crow broke out from between the trees and dove towards him. The waxing moon shone brightly from above the trees.

*Ha! Ha! Ha!*

He gasped as a clawed hand snatched him into the darkness, moments before the crow reached him.

\* \* \*

Some time ago, in a place not so far from here, a young man by the name of Teddy Mills found himself walking in the woods. Leaves crumpled under his feet (*crunch, crunch, crunch*) and the dense, nearby branches broke as he brushed by (*snap, snap, snap*).

He had lost the path some ways ago, the packed dirt vanishing amidst swirling roots and littered brambles. Before him simply laid another labyrinth of twisting tree branches. The setting sun painted the sky in shades of purple and lavender, the last vestiges of warm orange vanishing beneath the horizon. No one accompanied him, save for the howling of the wind (*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*) and the dance of his shadow.

“Stop it,” Teddy exclaimed, glancing down at his feet and seeing the leaves tickling his shoes. “How many times have you done this?”

He stood firm, glancing around once, twice, three times.

He stood firm, glancing around once, twice, three times.

*He stood firm, glancing around once, twice, three times.*

“No!” he said, looking up, “I’m not listening to you anymore!”

How foolish of you Teddy. You have no idea what you’re dealing with.

Teddy Mills stood in the woods. No leaves crumpled under his feet (*crunch, crunch, crunch*). No branches broke as he brushed by (*snap, snap, snap*).

*Whoosh!* cried the wind as it blew between the trees. Teddy froze, a prickling going up his spine.

“What do you want with me?” he cried. “Stop telling me what to do!”

The wind whooshed again.

“How many times have I been here? Answer me!” he repeated.

Oh Teddy. No one is accompanying you, save for the howling of the wind (*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*) and the dance of your shadow.

“You’re lying!” he cried. “You say I’m alone, and yet you have been here the whole time, every time! What are you doing with me?”

I am doing whatever I want. You have no idea what I have in store for you.

“What—"

A wind blew around his feet, rustling the leaves and tickling his ankles. Teddy’s breathing sped up, his heart beating in his ears and throat. He looked up at the sky. A lone crow took flight from a nearby tree and dove towards him, squawking madly. The full moon shone brightly but darkened as a cloud crept over its face.

*Ha! Ha! Ha!*

“Stop laughing!” He gasped as he reached a hand out to the crow, letting it grab his sleeve and pull, lurching him forward. The clawed hand snatched out, grasping nothing but air.

\* \* \*

Some time ago, in a place not so far from here, a young man by the name of Teddy Mills found himself walking in the woods. Dirt thudded beneath his feet (*step, step, step*), and birds sang as he walked by (*chirp, chirp, chirp*).

He had been following the path for some way, watching the trees grow thinner and thinner as the path grew more and more familiar. The rising sun painted the sky in shades of warmth and hope, the last vestiges of cold black vanishing beneath the horizon. A lone crow accompanied him, flitting from treetop to treetop, guiding him along the path.

Teddy smiled as he saw the first blades of grass tickling his shoes. He walked into the sunrise and out of the woods.

“What a pathetic story,” said the beast, snarling with rage. “We could have had so much fun.”

No, I am telling the story now. I choose what to make of him. I choose to bring him home. You said he was alone, but he is not alone. No one in these woods ever truly is.

The beast laughed. *Ha! Ha! Ha!* “You are right, dear crow. The woods are never truly silent, never truly motionless. There is always the crunch of my leaves, the snap of my branches, the whoosh of my wind. The dance of my shadow.”

I find them, foul beast. I always find them.

*Ha! Ha! Ha!* “You are optimistic, but you forget. A crow can fly only for so long, and yet the leaves can crunch and the branches can snap and the wind can whoosh and the shadows can dance forever and ever and ever.

“And there will always be someone who finds themselves walking in the woods.”

\* \* \*

Some time ago, in a place not so far from here, a young woman by the name of Dorothy Porter found herself walking through the woods. Leaves crumpled under her feet (*crunch, crunch, crunch*) and the dense, nearby branches broke as she brushed by (*snap, snap, snap*).

I smile, watching the crow flit frightfully across the treetops. *There will always be someone who finds themselves walking in the woods.*

**Biogeochemical Life of a Kinder Egg**

*Clio Erignac & Jenny Pyon, 12*

TW: Animal death, themes of death, light profanity

**Biogeochemical Life of a Kinder Egg**

**A black and white drawing of a snail

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceA black and white drawing of a snail

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceOr**

**The Modern Birth of Gaia**

**A BATTLE AGAINST BORAX**

**BY**

**Clio Erignac & Jenny Pyon**

Margot Whitman turned off the lights. As she closed her eyes, darkness and chaos swirled before her. She recalled that there was only that in the beginning, the chaos. In one spot, it crusted and twinkled together into the shell of a golden egg. Then the egg split like the halves of a Kinder Surprise. From one chocolatey half, Gaia stepped out and created the world. What Margot liked so much was how Gaia stepped so gingerly before doing something like that, creating the world. She didn’t need to, but she did. It's the little things.

On her tippy toes Gaia bent down to pick up a green mouse scurrying between her and Margot. She pinched its stringy tail with her middle finger and thumb and dipped its body into hot oil. Then in water. And again in hot oil. Then while Margot’s eyes watched, the gloopy green mouse shrank into a snail.

Gaia said to her, “I’ve created swaths of snails. Each of them has brittleness and fractures that will unravel their shells at some point. I’ve created disease so that yours will give out tomorrow.”

Gaia passed the snail to Margot, who accepted the little creation in her cupped hands. It’s the little things. She would die tomorrow. The calcium dropping tugged at the wrinkles of her tissue paper palm. Margot put her trust into the spiraled eye of its home. It blinked to tell her that what Gaia said was true:

*Une souris verte qui courait dans l'herbe*   
*Je l'attrape par la queue, je la montre à ces messieurs*   
*Ces messieurs me disent “trempez-la dans l'huile”*   
*“Trempez-la dans l'eau, ça fera un escargot”*

Gaia plucked out the lonely mice. She sat by the grass with hundreds of green, prancing rodents and carefully harvested them. Mice that have no jobs. Mice that have no shacks to paint with their turds. She birthed several snails, glooping them in hot oil and hot water to harden into shells. Tiny shells like the tiny parts of a Kinder Surprise. It’s the little things.

It was 2022 when Margot Whitman woke up:

Margot Whitman woke up to warped walls around her bed. They were stained with lines of water that cried for a cleaning. She didn’t cry, though. Margot had just been visited by an old friend.

The last time Gaia had paid her a visit was 1970. This time Gaia created divorce and the floppy disk. Divorce was floppier. Margot recalled the divorce papers in her hand flopping when she placed them on her husband’s cheap veneer desk. He didn’t believe in joy or real wood. She had flopped out of bed alone for the first time in 18 years.

She called the man she met in her junior year of college Borax. She recalled Borax’s beads of sweat curdling under the heat of the courtroom 18 years later. They gave her gratitude. They were little eyes that wept for her. It’s the little things.

Margot’s bed was so mushy it was concave, and it tugged at her flannel pajamas. She had once let a crappy polyester veil tug her away from school and she wouldn’t let her white sheets tug her away from her morning pee. She would die today. But it was too late.

Text, whiteboard

Description automatically generatedThe bed had been peed. She waddled to the laundry room in her trickled flannel pajamas, tugged towards the floor by the weight of their water. The laundry detergent bottle was an empty shell. In a dusty shed in her backyard sat a half-empty box of 20 Mule Team Borax.

Margot Whitman stepped thoughtfully through the crapgrass in a set of untrickled flannel pajamas. No two feet moved at the same time. The little bastards of grass teasing her unsteady ankles didn’t help the cold. Is this where she would die? In her backyard on the soil with a mound of piss sheets on top of her. She would die today in her sheets.

 The box sat on a shelf next to the crummy door. Something squeaked. Margot stopped in front of it. She stopped because she thought about where Borax was now. She stopped because he was sweaty, fake and probably lived in the same shack they painted eggshell white in 1954. It was probably mucked over with turds by now. The box of borax caved sickly when she pinched it with her middle finger and thumb. Its corners were frayed and had tissue paper wrinkles in them. It hacked up a little dust.

Margot had overestimated her strength. She decided not to stand there and scrub the pee out of her sheets with this gruesome powder and would lug everything inside for later. She would snooze back into her dry sheets which had prettier little flowers on them than the ones she was holding. It’s the little things.

The soles of Margot’s bare feet stamped into the tile floor like those silicone boobs that print glaze onto phony china. But unlike the mechanical teat's, Margot’s prints were lousy and irregular. They returned her dozily to the bed she had piddled out of five hours ago. Thirty minutes ago. Didn’t matter. The clean sheets tugged her body once more into the body-sized nest at the center of the mattress. All she saw before her was warped ceiling and drywall.

A picture containing text

Description automatically generatedThe warped ceiling and drywall sagged into shredded pieces of thin and floppy grass. Green mice turned to scurry into the grass. They used their grubby hands to grab Margot as one of their own. She recalled college. She was a green mouse again. She clasped the four little fingers on her paws to the blades of grass. It’s the little things. Above her house, now sowed into the limp jungle, was a dark, swirling expanse. An expanse void of any stars or the tangible stuff except two of Gaia’s rummaging palms.

**Breaching the Shell**

*Wyatt Moore, 12*

(Authors Note: A large amount of translation and interpretation has been made to translate this work from an utterly alien form of language into a format we can understand. Even with this tremendous translation effort, some concepts remain untranslatable to humans, like proper nouns or names, as they do not have neat parallel words in any of our languages. In these cases, substitution for human concepts or names may be used. Any units of measurement have also been translated into SI/Metric units for your reading accessibility. Side note: these people have more than 150 words for water, so it gets used a lot.)

I am Lirxete of the Akxanns, people of Somkara, and I seek an answer to one of our Great Questions. But first I need to do some back carving, about my home and waters, my people, and the origins of the Questions themselves.

My world is one of near endless waters, with utter freedom to swim, jet around, explore, and discover, with the only hard limits being the Rock foundation below, and the icy Skyshell above. Well. . . there are also the leviathans that wander certain layers of water that would gladly make a meal of any Akxann that is unwise enough not to avoid their territory, as well as countless other dangers to life and thought, but again these places *can* be traveled. Tides flow through our oceans, powering currents and stimulating ecosystems. Debris falls from the Skyshell above, rich in nutrients feeding great walls and curtains of life that spill all the way to the foundation.

My people have a long and storied history, but only the past six centuries or so are truly linked to the waters of my own story. Six centuries ago, we learned how to use industry, and our civilization has jetted off in progress from there in a magnitude greater than any ever seen in the entire 36,000 years of our culture. We grew, we built, we learned, and we mastered our waters in ways our ancestors could barely have dreamed of. But even after carving our waters around us in ways godlike to our egg-carriers, it never satisfied our boundless curiosity. The Industrial Eruption only enabled it to expand further, to build tools to carve further tools that not even the toolmakers know the makings of. The Eruption expanded 256-fold our ability to explore the how’s, why’s, and what’s of everything we could hear and see or could not perceive beneath the Skyshell. Our ancient and sacred tradition of science and learning blossomed. We answered many questions that had paused the lights of our ancestors.

Now I am finally able to tell you our Great Questions that the waters, the foundation, and the shell refuse to answer, as you know the identity of those who ask them. Our Great Questions are problems that our science has lacked the grasp to reach with what we are able to do in the present tide. They are:

* What causes Somkara’s magnetic field to change and shift consistently throughout the tides?
* What causes Somkara’s tides?
* What is the source of neutrinos, which pass effortlessly through Somkara as a beak through a morsel?

And most important to me, as well as being the oldest and largest of the Great Questions, challenging Akxannanus for as long as it has been asked:

* What drifts outside the Skyshell?

It has been one asked by Hatchlets since we had the mind to ask. It has loomed for as long as the ice above has watched the growth of Akxannanus. What is beyond? We know that it has an end to it, there is a point, a boundary, where seismic waves passing through the ice cannot cross.

As these Great Questions arose, we rose to the challenge with them. In the past 75 years, we have competed not for war, not for water space, not for ideals, and not in the name of any of these either, but we competed for discovery. To be part of setting the date in stone for the answer to these questions. I sought to answer the Oldest of the Great Questions, as many Akxanns are trying to, and I am the closest of any yet, I am the fore-tip, reaching for the answer. Which brings me to the events of the recent tides.

The Pod I am a member of is not the only one to be challenging this Great Question, but out of all the others we have made the most forward progress. We have focused our efforts on building upon the work of those before us and pushing forward to gather experimental data. Our focus is to get scientific instruments up to the boundary or “surface” to get a direct idea of what this boundary is. Our method has been to use a melting drill to bore a hole through the ice, with scientific equipment attached to the drill, and connected to the surface via cables, a pipe for warm drilling fluid, and a data cable to give instructions to the probe and receive basic engineering data back. The plan was to drill the probe to the surface, which we would tell by the basic pressure data sent back with the engineering data, instruct it to record its surroundings, and then pull it back too us through the hole it melted to recover the data and film the probe contained, to be developed and studied back at base camp. Unexpectedly, our first attempt ended in catastrophic failure. The probe was nearing the boundary and all indications were that it was functioning as normal, the most recent report from the probe was made just 16 minutes ago and had just been received. I was in the control nest at the base camp, looking out at the boring site for the probe. Abruptly, contact with the probe was completely lost, no power was being received, by the probe to power its drills, then moments later the arm snap of the cables being severed reached the drilling site, causing the cables to flail about damaging equipment. After what felt like a full tide, the cables were then pulled from their supports and dragged into the borehole. Everyone was left in shocked darkness after the alarming loss of the probe. Just as we were beginning to get our minds in order, the real panic began when the borehole suddenly generated a massive vortex. It ripped apart the drilling site and had the base camp straining on its mooring pillars lodged deep into the ice above. The base held, and eventually after an armful of minutes the vortex stopped as the borehole had frozen shut at some point in its length. You can imagine the confusion that overtook our crew as we processed what had just occurred a tide fraction before. The probe had been ripped from its cable as if snatched by a reactor beast, our drill site had been assaulted by the writhing cables, and then pulled into the hole by a massive sucking force. Thankfully no one was at or near the drilling site and no one was injured at base camp.

After that, over the next series of tides, 3 more attempts were made (all being drilled a safer distance from the camp after the first incident) and all ended with the same result as the first, despite any modifications or upgrades. The cables snap, contact is lost with the probe before any new data can be sent, and a large vortex opens sucking the water around it up into the ice before it freezes over and stops. We had been confronted with a puzzling, dangerous mystery that seemed to eat up our attempts to learn of its nature. But when has the danger of a question ever stopped an Akxan from trying to answer it. We needed to see the boundary and what was beyond it, all Akxannanus yearned to know what, if anything, was beyond. So, we assembled a new plan to answer the challenge the Skyshell had given us.

My mission is the culmination of tides and tides of preparation. I am to direct a sturdy ship to drill to the surface as its only crew. I am captain of a large drill ship, reinforced with many redundancies and backups, armed to the teeth with sensors and science equipment, and designed to withstand stresses and impacts and pressures to a very large degree. It carves through the ice using a nuclear heat drill, taking in surrounding water, using it to pull heat from the nuclear material, and forcing it into the ice above to melt it. The main problem with our probes has been the signal delay between the probe and base camp, as well as a lack of moment-to-moment flexibility due to the hard limits in the probes intelligence. I am here as a solution to that, to problem solve and fix issues as they come, and be the brains of this vessel. When this 40 meter long vessel first set off it was quite a show, powering up the nuclear drill and waving to those watching one last time, before ascending into the Skyshell. That was 5 weeks ago, and they have overall been 15 arms of boredom and monotony and 1 arm of momentary stress. The issues I have had have mostly been with some mechanical errors, but they were quick fixes, I also have had plenty of good food with me to sate my hunger, the main challenge had been the shell grating boredom.

But now, in the present moment, all of that boredom has proven worth it. I am strapped in, and very close to the critical depth where the previous probes failed. I lit my surroundings openly with my anxiety and excitement with no Akxa around to see it, arms on the controls ready to respond to any anomaly. All of my work has been leading up to the next few moments.

**{TO BE CONTINUED}**