

# ILLUMINATI



## SPRING 2023



**A Journal of the Arts / Miami University Regionals**

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Cover art: “Illuminated by Our Inner Sol.” Jacob Harding. 2023.



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Email: [illuminati@miamioh.edu](mailto:illuminati@miamioh.edu)

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\* denotes Malcolm Sedam Writing Award Winner

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# FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

We invite you to read through the spring 2023 issue of *Illuminati* and see the living culture here at Miami University Regionals. In this issue, each piece of art and literature is a small snapshot of our regional campuses as well as the era it was written in. As we look ahead to our futures and back at our pasts, we make sense of our world. We hope this issue of *Illuminati* gives you a chance to enjoy the creative work of our regional campus students, but also to think about where we are now, and where we might go in the future.

Speaking of the past and the future: Our cover art illustrates a theme of the timeless past of the American West merged with the future of space exploration. While reading through the submissions for this issue, our staff noticed emerging themes of time and space. Once we stumbled upon the western theme in Ben LeFevers' "A Pitiful Statement of the Utmost Confidence from a Hungry Kid," we knew we had to marry these two themes together somehow, and thus, "Illuminated by Our Inner Sol" was born.

As the Editor-in-Chief, I am deeply honored to have been a part of this year's edition of *Illuminati*, and among new friends. I am proud to see our hard work as editors and as authors come to fruition. Thanks to Eric Melbye and Michelle Lawrence for their guidance, patience, and wisdom in the creation of this year's edition.

—Jacob Xavier Harding  
*Illuminati* Editor-in-Chief

# CARLYE BALSLEY

*Malcolm Sedam Writing Award Winner*

## **A Contract to My Heart**

We're sitting in an office room  
A phone call's distance away  
The papers are ready to be signed  
A contract of heartbreak  
It's folded in odd places and  
Crumpled a few times over  
From past attempts  
Tucked in my back pocket  
Is a love letter sealed with a kiss  
It's too late for my words now  
They have rendered useless  
For, at least, the last two months  
(I can at least say I've tried)  
Your name is already inked in poison-black pen  
Cursive letters, hastily scrawled  
Like maybe you couldn't stomach the idea either  
At least not long enough  
To see your fingerprints at the scene of this crime  
I'm shaking, words falling unsteady  
From lips that I've bitten raw  
My voice is heavy, thick with suspended tears  
They'll come tonight when you can't hear me sob  
I've exhausted everything to keep you  
But it seems you can't be held down  
So, I hesitantly sign my name  
Sloppy letters because of a trembling hand  
Nothing like the cheerful signature  
That I drew when signing on  
To give my heart to you  
And to be loved by you  
You say this is the right thing to do  
As the papers are filed quickly  
Before I can change my mind  
But if this is the right thing to do  
Why do I want to tear that paper to shreds  
And paint white overtop my signature  
If this is the right thing to do  
Why do I feel like these walls are closing in  
Trapping me in this office room  
With us now a breakup's distance away

## Honey and Broken Glass

She's a sweet disaster with a fragile heart  
Her voice like honey dripping from broken glass  
Her kiss, a craving you never thought you'd needed  
Only one taste and you're an addict - or so people say  
They say she's black opal, hard to find  
And she's only ever mentioned in folk songs  
Only seen when the fullest moon is no higher  
Then the old oak's second tallest bough  
The townsfolk whisper of a figure in white  
Dancing with the flora and fauna  
But people make what's unbelievable  
Into something believable for peace of mind  
Her existence is no more than an old wife's tale  
Her dress nothing but mist  
And her skin nothing but shadows  
From the oldest oak and its leaves  
Or so it seems to be  
A voice like honey dripping from broken glass  
Taunts me on nights like tonight  
Waiting for the day I find her  
Claiming our hearts are bound  
But she's just a bed-time story  
A fairytale  
An obsession  
Yet, I still wish to know who she is  
Just like everyone else



## **Ocean**

If you could catch my tears in a bottle  
You'd be far from collecting an ocean  
I don't break down as easily as sandstone cliffs  
But if you were to catch my thoughts  
In a dream catcher  
You'd be terrified of me  
I'm the monster you used to dream of  
A siren with no song

# CANDICE BERRYMAN

*Malcolm Sedam Writing Award Winner*

## **Where I'm From**

I am from a wringer washer,  
from a bucket of bleach water filled with dirty cloth diapers.  
I am from the cop's house,  
the one with the screeching scanner and large overprotective man.  
I am from a Millville garden,  
whose tomatoes, peppers and beans tasted like heaven.  
I am from canning jars and lima beans.  
I am from the lilac bushes, lavender and white,  
from lily of the valley.  
I am from Donnie and Donna,  
from Scrabble, Monopoly, and dictionaries.  
I am from Andy Griffith and Gallagher,  
from Home Improvement and M\*A\*S\*H.  
I am from Chewy Chewy and Elvira,  
from 8-tracks and vinyl and living room dances.  
I am from charcoal and shoe leather steaks,  
from hearts and gizzards and freezer cracklins,  
I am from Ponderosa.  
I am from addiction and love,  
from never ending faith in family and friends.  
I am from a milk truck and police cruiser,  
driven 365 days a year,  
until the doctors said, "No more."  
I am from the ICU,  
from the funeral that forced goodbyes.  
I am from that curve on Cochran Road,  
the one that tried to take my mother before she was one.  
I am from a blizzard - outside and in,  
from a mother that perseveres.  
I am from God is wherever you are,  
from scratch your ass and get glad.  
I am from hush it,  
from love you bye.  
I am Candice Marie.

# HAILIE EDWARDS

## A Little Unhinged

Content Warning: Graphic descriptions and delusions, self-harm (not explicit)

I've always thought something was different about me. I'm not sure if it was when I had imaginary friends longer than the average child, or when my parents tried sending me away due to my "behavior." I think it was all a reason for the way I turned out. The people I saw every day, but no one could, haunted me. They would try to talk to me, but I ignored them. It became a real issue when these "ghost people," as I started calling them, would try to hurt me. I'd wake up with bruises and cuts. My parents told me I should stop doing that to myself, and I always tried saying it was the ghost people. They didn't believe me. Soon, I stopped telling them and hiding my wounds. They started to think I was getting better. If only that was the case, instead I got way worse. With age came night terrors, panic attacks, and more. My second year of college was when my life seemed to change.

As I sat in Professor Patterson's lecture, I started to zone off. For there was a tall man sitting in the corner of the room. No one seemed to pay any mind to him, but I did. His face was a gut-wrenching pale white; covered in wrinkles from age, and eyes as cold as the winter air. I immediately felt shivers run down my spine. I could feel my breath quickening, I could feel him staring at me, I could see him inching closer, I could, I could... I couldn't breathe. I was starting to panic. I felt a hand reach over to mine and squeezed. My best friend, Jess, tried to calm me down. She knew about my episodes and always tried her best with helping. Nothing seemed to work. I became the center of attention; my professor asked me if I was okay. While everyone was concerned for me, the man was inches from my face. His breath reeked of cigarettes and alcohol. I wanted to throw up, run, hide, anything to get away. His eyes were pale white but somehow felt like they were reading every inch of my soul. His boney fingers reached out to touch my face. This was it; I was breaking. The hand that squeezed mine was ripped away, and I found myself hiding in the bathroom. I clutched my shirt, covered in sweat. I finally caught my breath. I hated when this happened during class. Everyone seemed to understand or ignore my outburst, but people talked. They called me crazy, unhinged, and weird. This just upset me even more, I was trying my best.

On my walk home, I stopped by the grocery store. I needed some ramen; it was my go-to dinner being a broke college student. I lived by myself in a one-bedroom apartment in New York. I picked this city because it is super crowded which kept the ghost people at bay. I tried to pick areas that had a lot of people because I found they tended to stay away. So, New York was the best place, just maybe not price-wise. However, my parents were both well off, so they would send me rent money every month. It was one less expense I had to worry about. I still questioned why they even bothered. They were so closed off and hurtful my whole childhood. It probably

was their way of getting rid of their own guilt, so I never asked them directly. As I walked into the grocery, I sulked over to the noodle aisle. I saw a woman looking through the food, her fingers sliding over each brand. She moved slowly, and I tried to ignore her as I grabbed a box of ramen. I planned on avoiding going back out to this grocery store. The walk back to the apartment was uneventful, I noticed the more tired I am, the less these things appear. I wanted so badly to understand what was wrong with me.

I sat down at my dinner table, tightly squeezed behind the couch. My apartment had an open kitchen and living room, and my bedroom was in a separate room. I felt lucky to have so much space. I never liked feeling suffocated but when push comes to shove, I have to just deal with it. I sat down in front of my TV as I ate my bowl of ramen. I tried to not watch the news, but recently weird incidents were happening. I clicked through the channels till I came across the headline, "Another animal attack."

"On today's news, another poor soul was taken from us," the man reported, "Police can't pinpoint what animal is doing this. Whatever it is, it's very aggressive."

I thought to myself it was probably some kind of black bear or bobcat. Those kinds of animals are aggressive towards humans.

"If you're thinking this is a bobcat or bear attack, this was already ruled out. Please be careful in the wilderness parks, there is something out there."

I rolled my eyes. They probably aren't investigating enough. What kind of animal would be able to rip a grown adult apart, and not leave a trail? I turned the TV off and went to bed. I never wanted to go to bed, I wish I could just stay awake. It kept them away longer. As my eyes closed, the darkness consumed my vision.

I'm not sure how long it had been, maybe a few hours. However, I was awake for some reason. My body was stiff, I couldn't move. My breath started to quicken; my lungs felt thick. Then, I saw it. The woman stood at the end of the bed. Her hair touched the ground, a pitch black. I couldn't see her face, covered by her hair. From what I could see, the skin had almost melted off her bones. It was hanging down in certain spots, the feeling of uneasiness shot through me. Then she moved. Her skin swayed, her bones cracked, and her mouth clicked. She crawled up the bed, bones facing the completely wrong direction. Her mouth clicked, almost like her tongue constantly flicked. She smelled like rot and burnt skin. I wondered what happened to this thing. However, I truly didn't care. I wanted to go back to sleep. I wanted her to go away. I wanted this to all be over. Her face came so close to mine; I finally saw her eyes. They were almost majestic. Her eyes were a bright green, very life-like. They reminded me of a cat. She opened her mouth, inching closer to my face. That was when my brain had enough, I passed out.

The next morning, I woke up in a sweat. I felt disgusting. My skin was cold, my eyes were baggy, and I needed a shower. Once out, I began getting ready for class. I wasn't in the mood, but I couldn't keep skipping, my grades were already dropping. On the walk to school, the cold air nipped my nose. I pulled my jacket further up my shoulders. Once I got to class, I sat down next to Jess.

"Hey, are you okay?" Jess asked.

“Do I look okay?” I asked in a joking way. She awkwardly giggled.

“Professor was going on about a new student after you left the other day,” she continued. “He is a foreign exchange student and super smart.”

“Why does the professor care?” I rolled my eyes.

“I guess he specializes in biochemistry.”

I sighed. This class was very hard for me, and this random guy is coming in here, specializing in it? I was getting tired. Then the lecture started. There were more students in the classroom than normal, I just ignored them, scared of what they might be. That was when the door to the lecture room opened, slowly. In stepped a tall, pale man. My blood ran cold, were they seeing this?

“Good afternoon, Mr. Madden,” Professor Patterson stated.

I sighed in relief; this man looked eerily like things I had seen. I examined him more. He had medium-length black hair, his eyes a piercing green. His skin was deadly pale, with freckles layered around his face. His eyes caught mine, and I could feel my skin shiver. There was something off with this man. He wasn’t right.

“Good afternoon, Professor,” he said while looking for somewhere to sit.

Class proceeded as normal for everyone else. I was too busy studying the stranger that just walked through those doors. His whole aura was off, but no one else seemed to feel it. At the end of class, I gathered my stuff and headed out the door. That was until someone caught my hand. I could feel how cold their skin was, what I’d imagined the dead would feel like.

“Do I know you?” The strange man asked.

“Nope, I don’t think so.” I ripped my hand away from his, it left a numb feeling. He continued to look at me. When I turned around after reaching the hallway, he wasn’t there. I took this chance to get home. I hoped he wouldn’t start being another bother in my hectic life.

\*\*\*

A few weeks have passed since my encounter with the strange man. I watched him every class. He just didn’t seem right; I wanted to figure him out. A week after he grabbed my hand, the lecture was starting. He sat right in front of me, about three rows down. At this point, I only knew his last name to be Madden.

“Professor, what do you mean by that?” He asked, his voice deep.

The professor set off on a tangent like he always did. I watched the man’s arm slowly go down, his hands unusually pale. He turned his head side to side, to crack his neck. His hand reached up to his hair, shoving it back. Once class was over, I watched him grab his bag and leave the area. I tried catching up, but he was too fast. I didn’t realize something was following me, till it was too late. I felt my hair stand on end. I slowly turned around to see a child. Everyone in the hall passed by, with no second glances. My heartbeat quickened. It was one of them. She was staring at me, black holes for eyes. Her skin was unnaturally pale, just like the man’s. She slowly started to walk towards me. Her hair was a stiff ball of mess on the top of her

head. The clothes that barely clung to her skin were old and ripped. She looked like she had been in an accident, her face matted with blood, along with her clothes. How could I have not noticed her before? I was frustrated that the man had taken my attention away from my very real issue. I started to run, pushing past students. I got ugly glares and some sympathetic ones. I wasn't paying attention until something forced me to look forward. It felt like I had run right into a wall. There he was. His green eyes stared at mine. I felt another chill run down my spine.

"Are you alright?" He reached down to help me up.

"Um, yeah," I say, looking behind me to see the girl was gone.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he continued. "Do you need water or something?"

"No," I said, causing him to lean closer.

"Are you sure because you don't look so good?"

I didn't like how close he was; I could smell the mint gum on his breath. That was when I realized his arm was snaked around my waist. I felt a numb feeling throughout my back. I hated it. Stepping back, I told him I'm fine. I took in his appearance. He was wearing a black shirt with a jacket thrown over. His jeans were dark and baggy. He had what looked to be steel-toe boots on. I wanted to get away from him, his green eyes were staring at me. His whole appearance made me feel defenseless, he radiated malice. It made me uneasy. I started to walk away.

"Hey! Wait," he said walking towards me. "I didn't catch your name."

"Athena," I said bluntly. I didn't want him to know, but he'd figure it out eventually.

"Pretty name, I'm Elias." I just made a noise in my throat and walked away.

Once I rounded the corner, I sprinted for home. I needed to get away from him and that girl if she was still following me. I also needed to get some rest for Jess and I's hangout session she forced me to attend occasionally. As I lay in bed, I played the strange man's name over and over. Elias, Elias, Elias. I wanted to know why he was so odd. I had a strong feeling that he had secrets. I closed my eyes, ready for the night terrors to disturb me once again.

\*\*\*

Getting up that morning was hard, for many reasons. I did indeed suffer from a night terror of an old man so mangled I couldn't even tell he was a human at all. But mostly, it was hard to get up because the last thing I wanted to do was go on a "Bestie Day" as Jess liked to call it. I threw on some clothes and headed out the door.

It was very cold in New York in December. I didn't mind it though; I loved the cold. It distracted my brain so much I wouldn't usually notice the ghost people all around me. As I got to the coffee shop, I saw Jess sitting by our special window dressed in thick black leggings, brown fluffy boots, and a brown jacket to keep her warm. Her hair was a nice healthy brown, skin a perfect shade of tan. She always held her hair back by a cute little fuzzy headband. She looked so nice. I felt bad sitting with her, considering I never looked anywhere near as good.

"Hey Athena!" She yells from across the cafe, waving her hand to grab my attention.

I sat at the table, "Hey Jess."

“So, how are you?” she continued, “Been up to anything? Interested in doing anything fun today?”

“You know how I feel about your Bestie Days.” I rolled my eyes.

“You need to lighten up! Maybe it will be a good distraction from reality. We can go to your favorite place,” she leaned forward grinning ear to ear.

I did indeed love going to the park, it contained dark, thick trees. Jess always tried to take me to the woods when I wasn’t having a good time. For some reason, the ghost people weren’t ever there.

“Fine, we can go to the woods,” I tried to hold back my smile.

Jess squealed, “Yay!”

We got up from our seats and got into Jess’s car. Her car was clean inside and always smelled like strawberries. On our way to the park, we listened to music. I watched the trees pass by us. I was excited to go into nature, it had been too long. However, there was a part of me that was worried. I didn’t want to run into the thing that was hunting people and ripping them to shreds. As we arrived, Jess parked the car, and we got out. My stomach did a backflip. Something wasn’t right. But I never gave myself a day to relax. So, I ignored this feeling and continued onto the path; Jess skipped along the way. I noticed how the sun was setting soon. We probably had at least three hours left of daylight. I informed Jess, but she didn’t mind. As we walked along the dirt path, the trees covered the sky above. It was dark, and chilly. I really enjoyed it. Jess was way ahead of me on the trail. She touched the grass and trees, laughing to herself. I smiled a bit; she really did make life a little bit sweeter. I jogged to catch up to her.

“Isn’t this beautiful?” She spun in a circle.

“Yes, the woods never disappoint,” I said, admiring the plants around us.

“When we get enough money, we should buy a house together in the woods.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, “That would be nice Jess.”

She grabbed my hand and guided me further down the path. We soon reached a creek. I dipped my hands into the ice-cold water. It felt nice, but my hands were soon turning a bright red. That was when we heard it. A scream. I looked at Jess and she looked equally as concerned. It sounded to be a female; she wasn’t far.

“Jess, we should leave,” I said, pulling her the way we came.

“But what if they are hurt?” She stopped.

“That really isn’t our worry, we can report it to the police, but that’s all we can do Jess,” I continued, “Now let’s go.”

“No Athena, if she is hurt, we have to try and help,” Jess ran towards the direction we thought the scream came from.

I swore that Jess would be the reason I died one day. I followed her. My stomach felt nauseous. I had such a terrible feeling it almost made me fall to the ground. My knees were weak, and my head was pounding. Something wasn’t right. We reached an opening; grass layered the ground. There in the middle was a woman, at least that is what I could guess. Her hair was covered in dried blood. Her face was mangled, a big reason why I struggled to tell her

gender. My hand instinctively shot to my mouth. She was missing an arm, and her stomach was ripped open, organs poured out onto the grass. I questioned why this poor woman was still even alive. The bushes behind her rustled.

I grabbed Jess's arm, "Jess there is nothing we can do for her, she has lost too much blood."

"But... but..." Jess muttered in shock. I had to get us out of there.

I dragged Jess behind me, running on the path. The whole time I could feel something watching us. It felt vile. My hair was standing on end, and my body was turning numb. It was an all too familiar feeling; it reminded me of my encounters with Elias. My mind raced for an explanation. I wondered if he had anything to do with this. But how would that be possible, why was this current feeling the same when he was near? This made me run faster. Jess was being dragged along. She started crying at this point. I tried telling her it would be alright, but there was no getting through to her. Once we reached the car, I took the keys from her. I peeled out of the parking lot, just in time to see it. Deep within the woods, green eyes glowed back at me. They felt familiar. What creature would have such bright green eyes? I didn't give it too much thought at the time. I had to get Jess to the hospital or police station. She was freaking out. We sat at the police station for hours. They did indeed find the woman's body; she didn't make it. When we were allowed to leave Jess decided to stay with me.

As I lay in bed I thought about the green eyes. Again, they reminded me of that man. I don't see how it could be possible to be him. Why would he be in the woods? What would he have to do with the mangled woman? None of it made sense. It made my skull throb.

\*\*\*

Weeks have passed since the incident. Nothing came from that woman's death, no one was to blame. The strange man hasn't been in class since either, which I found odd. My days consisted of school, then sleep. The ghost people bothered me like always. However, they weren't as intense. They would linger but wouldn't actively come after me. I found this very concerning since my whole life they were constantly coming after me. I was sitting in the cafe when I saw Elias walk through the doors. He started walking towards me, I quickly started to gather my stuff.

"Hey Athena, can we talk?" He said sitting down before I could escape.

"Um, I guess since you decided to take a seat," I fiddled with my fingers.

"Could you help me catch up on my work I missed in class?"

I stared in disbelief, "Can you not do that yourself? You seem to be an expert in the topic."

He laughed, "I just need your notes," he continued, "You can come over to my place tonight, and I can copy what you have."

I didn't know what to say. I don't even know this guy, and he wanted me to come over to his house? That didn't even sound safe.



“I don’t think so. I’m busy tonight.” I looked at his eyes, they were burning a bright green.

“What if I said I can help you?”

“Help me? What do you mean?” My guard was up, what was he talking about?

“You know, the ‘ghosts’ you see.” My stomach dropped. My head spun, and my eyes widened for a moment. How the hell did he know about them? Was I too obvious when freaking out? But no one ever seemed to care or mind. Jess doesn’t even understand what I see. How does he?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, crossing my arms.

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about,” he said leaning closer to me.

“Even if I did, how would you ‘help’ me?” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Come to my house tonight, and I will tell you.” He gathered his stuff, “My apartment is the complex down the street from Latte Love, the cafe. Second floor, just ring and I’ll let you in.”

Then he left. I knew exactly where he was talking about. That cafe was right across the street from my own complex. I knew I shouldn’t have gone, but my curiosity was greater than my safety concern. I would bring something to protect me just in case. I had to know how he knew about the ghost people. Later that night I dressed in casual clothes, so if I had to run it would be easier. I also brought a decently long, sharp knife with me for protection. My dad gave it to me when I moved to New York. I told him I wouldn’t ever have to use it, but this situation has proven me wrong. As I walked along the street, I saw a man sitting on a bench. His skin was deadly pale and expressed a permanent frown. He looked up at me, eyes as white as snow.

His mouth opened, “Don’t go.” My eyes widened.

“Don’t go,” he repeated.

I continued to walk, disturbed by the man’s words. I really didn’t think this was a good idea, but what choice did I have? He knew something about me no one my entire life knew. Maybe he could make them go away. I reached the apartment complex and rang for the second floor, apartment 210.

Elias’s voice rang through the intercom, “Come on up.”

I started my walk up the stairs. My legs felt weak, my head pounded from anxiety, and my stomach flipped over and over. I knocked and it immediately opened.

“Hello Athena, I hope you didn’t forget your notes.”

I handed him my notebook and sat on the black colored couch. His apartment was bigger than mine. He had a full kitchen connected to the living room. There was a small hallway that I assumed led to his bedroom. The walls were an old white with paintings of forests hung all over. The theme color was black. Everything was black, his couch, the decorations, practically the whole place. There were a lot of what looked to be animal bones laid around. This made me a bit uncomfortable. I sat patiently on the couch while he copied my lecture notes. He occasionally looked up to me. Each time I would quickly avert my eyes.

“Alright, all done,” he said, stretching his back.

“Okay,” I said awkwardly.

“Athena, do I make you uncomfortable?” I swallowed hard. He got up from his spot and sat right next to me on the couch, way too close.

I reached for my weapon, “No why do you ask?”

“Well, you're always so jumpy and quiet.”

“I don't really know you,” I said.

“That is true, but you just seem way too jumpy specifically around me.”

“Good observation I guess, but I don't really have time for small talk,” I continued, “How do you know about what I see?”

“I see them too,” he said, sitting back, observing my face.

I was shocked, I couldn't even form a response.

“Yeah, I noticed you were different or seeing something very similar when you ran into me in the hall. You looked terrified, over nothing that was physically there.”

“I don't understand,” I said, feeling my panic rise.

“I know how to make them go away,” he said looking at me.

“None of this makes sense. How do you even know what they are?”

“It is a long story,” he continued, “How about instead of telling you, I can show you.”

I was confused, show me what? My head began to hurt.

“Come with me to the woods.”

My blood turned to ice, “I'm not sure if I want to go to the woods because of what happened a few weeks ago with that woman.”

“You'll be fine, I can promise whatever did that, won't be lurking tonight.”

That sentence, that sentence is the whole reason why I shouldn't have gone to the woods that night. But I needed to know, I knew if I didn't find out what he was talking about, I would lose hours of sleep thinking about it. We got up from the couch and walked downstairs to his car. He drove a nice black Mercedes-Benz. The inside wasn't covered in a single speckle of dust.

“Buckle up, it is quite a drive.” He said revving the engine.

It took us at least an hour and a half to get to the location he had in mind. I was feeling all kinds of emotions, fear, confusion, curiosity, you name it. I couldn't believe I was spending my afternoon with a stranger that could see the ghost people I could see. None of it felt real. We pulled up to the dark wilderness. As we got out, the wind picked up, pushing my hair in front of my face. The next thing I know, he was standing right in front of me. How did he move so fast?

“Ready?” He asked, reaching for my hand.

I shoved them into my pocket. “Yeah, let's hurry this up.”

He awkwardly kept his hand by his side. I wasn't comfortable touching him. His skin made mine feel weird. He was a stranger that I was about to walk into the dark, scary woods with. Maybe these things have prepared me more than I expected for situations like this. We walked deep into the woods, I started to regret my choice of coming with him. We reached a rock formation and stopped.

“Um, what are we doing?” I asked awkwardly.

“Now, this is a lot. When I show you, you will want to run. Please don’t. I am just trying to help you.”

I didn’t like this, “Uhm, okay.”

He began to take his clothes off.

“Woah!” I exclaimed, “What are you doing?” I turn away from him.

He laughed, “I don’t want to rip my clothes.”

“What does that even mean? What the heck would you be doing to rip your clothes? None of this is making sense.” I began to walk away.

He grabbed my hand, a numb feeling shooting up my arm, “Please I’m only trying to help.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“I’m the only one that knows what you’ve been through.”

He has me there, “Fine, but I’m not watching you get naked.”

“That’s fine,” he laughs again.

He continues to do whatever it is. But that was when I heard it. The cracking, the popping, the clicking. I felt my blood run cold. What the hell was that? I slowly began to turn around. Elias was not what stood before me anymore. It was some creature. Its eyes were a bright green, like the ones I saw that day. Its back is arched in an awkward manner. The skin was as pale as the dead. Its face looked skeletal; it was at least seven feet tall. I was frozen, this must be the scariest thing I’ve seen. I wanted to run, hide, anything to get away from it. However, I knew this was Elias. He looked at me sympathetically with his eyes. I started to slowly walk backwards.

“Wait, Athena don’t.” But its mouth didn’t move. I began to freak out more, it felt like it was in my head. Like Elias was in my thoughts.

“What the hell!” I exclaimed.

“Don’t be scared, I won’t hurt you.”

“How can I trust you? You are a monster!” My breath began to quicken. My heart began to pound, cold sweat covered my face.

“Stop freaking yourself out, I’m not the bad guy here.” The thing stalked closer to me.

Nope, nope, nope. I was not doing this. I broke out into a sprint. As I ran, I could hear Elias’s boney arms and legs pounding the earth below him. I had no idea how I was going to get away, but I had to try. I was so close to having a panic attack. My chest felt like a fire was set inside. I couldn’t breathe, and my legs began to weaken. Of course, a stick had to be in my way. I tripped and fell hard. My knee was now covered in blood, and that was when he stopped in his tracks. His eyes narrowed, like a cat’s.

“Athena...” he sounded uncertain.

“Please don’t hurt me,” my eyes began to water.

I felt terrible. For the first time in my life, I wish I was asleep in my bed being haunted by my own demons, not this one. The next thing I know, he is on top of me. His huge, skinny, boney, pale body. His eyes looked into mine. I could feel his long legs touching my leg slightly.

The numbness shot up so intensely that I let out an uncomfortable groan. He looked hungry. He kept staring at my bleeding knee. I didn't know what to do. This thing was on top of me, and my knee was hurting.

"Athena, you have to run."

"What?" I said, concerned.

"Get up, my keys are in the car. You have got to run. I'm not sure if I can hold back much longer." His eyes got more narrowed.

I got up to my feet, pain shooting through my leg. I began sprinting back to the car. I heard Elias groaning in the back. That was when a loud pitch screech came from behind me. It made my bones feel hollow. Once I reached the car, I began to pull out but that was when something hard shoved the side of it. It did it with so much force, the car flipped on its side. Guess that option is out the window. That was when I remembered the knife I brought along. It was my only weapon, my only way out of this mess. I had never been able to stick up for myself. I always let my demons control my life. Tonight, it was going to change. I needed to get away from Elias. Even if he wasn't the bad guy, he was still actively trying to kill me at this moment. Maybe when he was done having a tantrum we could talk, but my life came first, and I had to get my crap together. I could do this; I can stab some random monster and try to run to safety. I can do it. I slowly opened the car door; he was nowhere in sight. I crawled out, more cuts layered my body from the broken glass. As I got up to my feet, a white flash darted across my vision. It was so fast that it made me dizzy. I began to walk towards the exit slowly and quietly. Elias was soon right in front of me, blocking my way.

"Elias, I don't want to do this, but you've left me no choice."

His mouth curled into what looked like a smile. His teeth were big and sharp, like they would cut me easily. He lurched towards me. I had my knife ready, sticking it right in front of me. He must not have been paying attention because it went right into the abdomen. He grunted, looking down. His eyes softened a bit.

"Athena."

"Yeah, don't even think about having me for a midnight snack. I've dealt with too much crap to let you be my end."

"I'm sorry," he seemed genuine.

"Turn back or I will stab you again."

"It's not that easy, I need blood."

"What are you? A Vampire?"

He laughed, "No, but I seriously will have to stay like this till daylight unless you help me out." I could feel his smirk inside my head.

"I am not giving you my blood you freak," I continued, "Go eat a deer."

"Fine," he pouted and left.

I sat next to the car and waited for what seemed like forever. Elias finally emerged from the woods in a normal human form, clothed.

“Thanks for taking your sweet time.” I was aggravated because my knee and whole body was hurting.

“Sorry, it took forever to catch one. They aren’t as dumb as humans.”

“Funny,” I said, smiling a bit.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. How are you so calm? How are you not freaking out? Why are you even still there? Well, let me remind you, I’ve been dealing with crazy, creepy stuff my whole life. This was just another Friday night. Now, I still had some anxiety, but I realized in the moment of almost dying, I must try everything. I will not go down without a fight. I am strong enough to fight my demons. They will not own me; they will not tell me what to do. Not anymore. I am done.

“You still never told me how you can help,” I said looking at Elias as we walked to the road.

“Yeah, well you kind of distracted me. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you.”

A few seconds passed, “I’m waiting.” He stopped walking.

“You have to unlock what I am.”

My mouth dropped, he had to be joking, “You are joking.”

“It’s a lot to take in, let me explain on the walk home.”

That night was crazy. I learned so much about myself and a stranger. I still haven’t made the choice to become one of them to escape my delusions. However, this Friday we have a date in the woods, and I have a bad idea he is going to want to play cat and mouse. Maybe next time I will tell you why this “monster” idea is being debated. But for now, I think I’m going to continue to stay a little unhinged.

# AUSTEN GODDARD

## What Do You Fear?

I fear the patience of a quiet man.  
The dark clouds in the calm before the storm.  
The fires of hell and their agonizing waves.  
The ignorant, blind to the deeds around them.  
The lonely nights, full of the void.  
The darkness, full of tempting voices.  
What do you fear?  
I fear the grains of time falling.  
The slow process of maturing and gaining.  
The sight to see the world around me.  
The blindness of those with sight.  
What do you fear?  
I fear the void, the dark abyss.  
Its cool touch, tempting me to join it.  
The delicate grasp of things I cannot see.  
What do you fear?  
Myself.

# JACOB HARDING

## Day 241 Exist Friend

Day 241 Exist Friend

Monday, September 5, 2022

7:49 PM

Counter arguments  
Of which direction  
To go in

Flow so violently  
Eradicating  
Our fears

An ocean  
Avalanche  
Over our ears

Tidal waves  
Begin to wave  
And introduce themselves

Cascading diamonds  
In the sky  
Open up our minds

We begin to fall in Love  
In truth  
Happiness is soothing

A river bends  
Our hands  
Begin to extend

Love  
A subtle truth  
Brushes the wind again

Day 242 Sovereign End

Tuesday, September 6, 2022

9:11 PM

You dance in the hall  
Echoing through the memory  
Of us all  
Awakening

Standing on mountains  
Waiting for fallen  
To emerge  
From under their sleep

Time  
In your heart  
Is open  
To the scars  
The harbor  
We harbor

Asking if I  
Know the way  
Towards the light  
And the day  
Well I know  
It's a man  
In the flesh

Absorbing  
Galactic  
Skies  
Inside  
His luminary eyes

Asking if the truth  
Is worth the pain  
I answer yes  
And explain the day  
Where you found yourself  
Inside a daze  
And together we awake  
All you are

Day 246 Frie

Tuesday, September 13, 2022  
9:10 PM



I enter  
My own mind  
And build temples  
Super highways  
Between concepts  
That creates  
My mind  
And I enter  
Heaven

I allow  
Humankind  
To begin to  
Become what  
They are  
To be  
Among and beside me

I know you see the tides  
Of the light  
Ebb  
And they flow  
Creating  
A temple  
Where we go  
To divide the nighttime  
With the lifeline  
In our eyes  
Is the light  
Of our souls  
We know  
We are  
All we are  
Meant to be  
Inside  
Eternity

How far will we go  
To know  
That we have  
All we know  
Is what we are

Day 255 Star Lit

Sunday, September 25, 2022  
8:41 PM

I fuse the atom in a man  
I create the symbol in my hands  
And I let them both sing

I cry  
I fall  
I dance  
I talk  
I stall  
The silence  
From gracing  
Our ears

Reverberations  
Echoing out in the temple of man  
That I Am

Sending out signals  
Pulsating through the window  
Of the galactic age  
That I Am

Seeing  
Stars  
Clinging  
To the dark  
And letting themselves  
Shine Against

The picture of  
Avoided  
Sentence  
Of the Max

Moving momentum  
To our hands  
And standing on  
All that I Am

I see you  
Drowning down  
Moving quick  
Throughout this sound

Levitating  
Yourself

And I beckon  
To answer  
The question  
I answered  
Before  
You fell

I move  
My body  
In  
Circular motions  
And move  
My inertia

I let  
Gravity inside of me  
Move me  
So softly to the right  
So softly to the left  
And around in spirals

Day 260 Rebirth

Thursday, January 19, 2023  
5:26 PM

See the dragon  
Over the hill  
Staring down  
The men in the rear  
Waiting to chase  
Away the day  
And level  
This playing  
Field

Creating  
Distant darkened daze  
Withering inside days  
That reveal

Life is the light  
That chases

The meaning of the forest  
And gives us time

We are  
An ember  
Burning  
Inside  
The night sky

Shifting  
Perspective  
Respecting  
What it means to live life

Distant  
Meanings  
That reveal  
The timing  
Is rarely  
Right

Time  
She dances in our eyes  
And we sing along  
To her beautiful song

Giving  
Misgivings a reason  
To thankfully  
Give thanks for every thing  
That we are

## Untitled

Being prepared is education, social interaction, listening and conversing, reading and writing, singing and dancing, recording and painting, expressing your mind to be what your mind is at that singing and dancing, recording and painting, expressing your mind to be what your mind is at that present moment, there is no right or wrong here, no semblance of perfection can be found without first letting go of the shadow that surrounds your mind. The soft and scented sounds that resemble the change within your life are first imagined within the changing of the light. Change your environment when you begin to see stagnation occurring, I do not necessarily mean location when I say environment either. If you are surrounded by safety and comfort, identify what it is within this world that grants you said protections, examine the borders and edges of your existence and see all that resides there, it is rarely cast in light and needs to be seen by the center of your mind's eye.

What is found here is heaven and hell, when having past experienced recent desynchronization the mind is put into a state of depression, of being underlined the center line of balance, and requires time to reach the sub-apex of its trajectory before slowly climbing towards another opportunity of synchronization, a period of hell. Synchronization is much the same but in the opposite direction, towards heaven, going up towards its apex and slowly descending back to a point of desynchronization. Now the point here is a point I have not achieved prior, but, the goal is to synchronize both in heaven and in hell, and follow this line closely. If you are prepared for hell, you can traverse through it relatively unscathed, same for heaven, you can be equally harmed in heaven as in hell.

It is, to say, my life, is not a simple measurement of beginning, middle, and end, or rephrased, birth, life, and death. My life is a simple cycle repeating itself in varying oscillations that differ in their frequency, and by this, I mean, causality, that within time are events that repeat themselves and reveal themselves to the one who perceives this world for what it is. Yes, you, as you live and breathe are among those who perceive this world for what it is. These oscillations connect and intersect, synchronize at some points in time, and desynchronize at other points of time, what I know is that synchronization feels good to the mind, and desynchronization feels bad to the mind, and that both still ultimately give way to time and level back out.

Torn between day and night cycles, trying to determine the best state of mind within each, and calculate where and when my life is meant to exist without destroying myself and those around me. I reduce my intake of the world, slow down my consumption and begin to rest more, utilizing my eyes and my ears more so than my legs and my arms. I am building up my mind, just as one would build up the muscle and fat on their bones. I know not why I do so, in truth, it seems only as a survival mechanism to stay here, within a home, among family, within the good graces of those that know me. I, torn between contentment and apathy, dignify inaction and simple animal existence as the root cause of my being here. I do not seek to build high towers between me and other animals, but high tower existence is the only path left for me to walk upon within this temporal plain, so I walk slowly and surely to where I am meant to be.

I suppose it may have been my own doing, priorities within the waking hours are limited and chosen by the senses of what to pursue, building towards moments to create beautiful dreams, when in truth most dreams err on the edge of lucidity-infused nightmares. Shadows of this world present themselves there and take the sleeping mind most apparent of its own existence and remove the barriers of protection and safety to present all-out warfare as the only means to reawaken. It's funny too that eventually in the realm of awareness, without sleep so too does the waking mind begin to present all-out warfare as the only means to fall asleep.

I began early in the sunlight, on an off-kiltered sleep schedule that makes sense to third-shift members more so than any other. The nighttime became the only place where I could find the peace of mind that allowed me to be myself, and in there I found reason to create new worlds and terraces to walk out upon, within the mediums presented to me, expression was all that remained for me. Gripped in the teeth of my own delusion, my own breaking away, I stood above my own eyes and lost true focus of what I was seeing, and began to perceive the senses that surrounded me wholly, I began to hear, to taste, to hunger, to smell, it was as though time had finally allowed some semblance of progression, only to be dashed away once more when sleep was to finally summon me, death, as minor as it was, imbalanced an inner part of me.

Night, in which we see light, the day turns from summer to springtime, reversing the direction and pulling symbolism within our own tunnel of time. We notice too frequently the diminishing of our own plights, our own successes, our own value, and our own detriment to this universal system of passing light. We know that there is no point in which the world turns in two directions as a singular point in time. The grants which we accept and in time return, to the shorelines from which we pull and push ourselves against. Know that our lives are not machinery, we are not meant to see this world without the grace of God, and without God, we are destined to fall into remission of passing sins.

The thought that reemerges as the shore tides rise and fall, is that we are perfect no matter, the matter, in which we are. Life is not passing, it is eternal, we are not fading unless we perceive light to be fading, and we know that we are a part of systematic words and thoughts, and feelings. Through heaven there are millions of demons attempting to redeem themselves, so often pushing against the redemptive spirits that are waiting in perfect order, in a fully assembled hierarchy. Against blue skies, the vibrating lines of fusion reveal themselves, and Jacob's ladder is revealed to be an entire assembly of ascending points.

Through reverberations in the solitude of existence are the true poignant moments in which we see the world that surrounds us and our souls. We see that the problems within our machinery may exist and lay outside of us and within our environment. Feeling that the universal constants that surround us move us and challenge the inner sanctum which we protect constantly. The pressure pushes against our bodies and our minds, and rising complexity challenges the notion of Entropy and levels the playing field of our existence. We know and see the universe as it is, and rest and dream of what it could become when we leave this place. See the line of light and notice how deeply it moves us from this point in time towards heaven, the emotion of time that paralyzes our life.

Broken walls outline the form and figure of a home. Glass walls let light through, yet rarely let light leave and bounce around in the world of light itself. Figments of images that pass over and through retinas. Funnel and tunneled vision blind the user into seeing a universe that cuts and tears through the world that surrounds itself. To see and to know that motion is still moving, whether the mind or body recognizes inertia or not. To know that there is more to life than what we currently see, and to prepare our souls to encounter ideas and people that we may not yet know nor understand. To recognize the image of God, that our souls are intertwined and bound for a similar destination, twisted and in motion toward the manifestation of heaven.

Stars fall on dead nights, leaving no room for light to shine through the glass dome that over looms itself in our magnetic field. There are two polar points, North and south, positive and negative, in which all energy pulsates in and out, through and around. To see the night stars, to know that all light pollution fades away in our future, should we turn it away from here, we see our own world through the eyes of the enlightened. To see the universe as it is. We hypercycle through different spectrums of energy to determine in which it is best to see the true universe around us. We see the stars as they are, as they will be, and as they have been millions of rotations around our own sun. Relative and unconcerned, we spin in and out of control.

Shop your mind, look through the aisles of memories, and try to find the food that feeds you, that gives back unto you the energy with which you replenish yourself. See the light within the dark hallways, glimpses of waves showing through and within the walls. Cast out the night world, see the true world, see that time could not be inside this world without something to perceive it. Know that the universe expands and contracts, we cycle relative to the universe world that flows around us. Know that the world is not only ours to own, that it is the future which we gift to our children, to see that the future is all of ours and theirs and ours and theirs. See the world, know it, and know the passing sounds are only that, passing, to be recollected in your memories many times and in many different ways far from now.

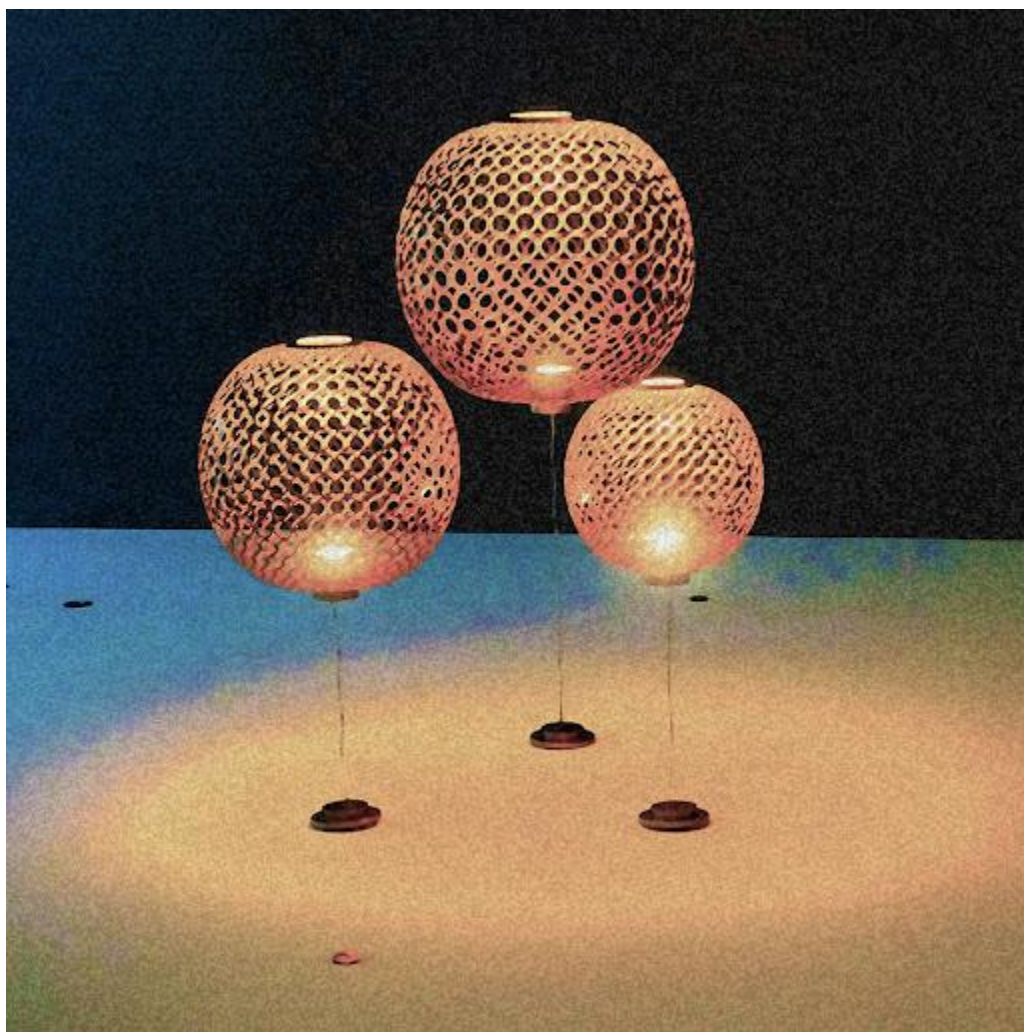
The way in which we direct our lives along the current frame of mind, in which we move the world with the ocean. Airwaves pour down upon our mind and we see that there is nothing left to lose here, so we learn as we go, reading and letting light intermingle with the universe that surrounds us, hearing and seeing, trying to interpret the signals that we are surrounded by and affected by. We open up ourselves to experiencing the recesses of this universe so that when we return to Earth, we may have something more to talk about, to be there, on the side of Earth that edge of Heaven, where two Orbital Circle Planes intersect and create a bridge. We become this world of light and life and see that there is nothing between us that could interrupt the pulsation of aggregation.

Pull yourself against the frame in your mind and realize that it is not the only motion in this universe. Realize again that you are not the only thing that exists here, and push yourself against the moments, not out of fear, not out of love, not of conceptualizations that are not your own, but because these moments will keep repeating over and over and over again until you pull yourself through them. That is what these moments so constantly are, fallback points, in which you see yourself at the pinnacle of existence, and save yourself in a single moment long enough

to contain enough information that would release your mind and allow you to see exactly what it is to be where you once were, so that you may remember, and see exactly every single sound and frame of mind that derives itself within your tower to God.



## Untitled



## Untitled



# BENJAMIN LEFEVERS

*Malcolm Sedam Writing Award Winner*

## **It Was Rather Routine**

Did he know more than three chords? That thought lingered in the smoke over the three patrons' heads as the music bounced off once pristine oak pillars cascading between army green mesh to portray a homely sense rather perversely. Soon there would be only two who would gather to listen to his melodies, and I wondered if they'd even recollect that there was a fourth member of this camp after I wandered out of the officer's club into the expanse in a venture for home at the first sight of winter ending.

The night before felt like weeks ago and I've grown exhausted watching these poor lab rats argue over what date on the calendar they found themselves that day. Each bringing forth their own records...

Leroy had a collection of new songs each dated, incorrectly, for cataloging once the Army came back for us.

Harry had a series of transcripts that were as pedantic as one would expect from an intelligence officer who made a routine of being wrong and oddly sympathetic.

Marie had a journal full of deep thoughts and guilt-riddled jabs at her own career with a sense of truth that could always be found in her spoken voice.

Or me, someone who avoided that poisonous water and let my slipping memory do a better job than their notes at realizing what was happening. They would surely continue arguing as the summer heat consumed the camp and act as though this was the first time they'd experienced this triggering of anger. Leroy's simple tunes worked wonders until they separated back to their tents to get ready for the shared bed in the officer's club and suspiciously kind goodnights were given by me. The argument of time would come again, and each must prepare their evidence and plan moving forward as if they had any chance of stringing a thought together ever again. They disagreed on much, but they'd be damned if the Army left them behind. Hell, there had been peace talks after Macarthur was canned for mistaking a rapture for a war, and as far as they knew that was last spring in '51 with the summer of '53 rolling in, I really must go.

What an odd journey this must have been for them and a rather enlightening one for myself. I had grown so weary of my prewar routines, so often thinking it could be more exciting, I had come to realize there was excitement in '43 when I was drafted. I had come to believe that old tale that truth was far crazier than fiction but now I was finding it rather dull and predictable. The liquor here was cheap but plentiful, yet the liquor back home had kept me in a state of months turned days as I was happiest when I had a puzzle or goal in mind. But here, now, they had chemically manufactured destroyers of lucidity. Here it seems for these three the government they had supported, or leeched off, had used them as test rats. You'd think making a living off of being a nameless Hollywood studio's personal private eye I'd find this to be the most interesting

mystery I could ever be directly inserted into, being one of those chosen lab rats, but the answers came far too quickly. You don't get left behind and still see helicopters buzzing above, cameras with glowing red lights in every main building, or "camouflaged" tents peering down from the surrounding hills.

Also, no camp I've ever been to has had the water filtration system chained and sealed shut, so that was an illuminating bit of evidence. Still the mystery I promised this eclectic new group of acquaintances I'd solve made for an easy way to study humans the way their military was now doing so. So certain I'd learn something, so certain... I'd care about someone real.

Why did they bore me? The ill feeling of the sweat which encompassed my body, and the daily burning of my coffee weren't pleasant but the boredom I had found when I had set out to seek adventure and excitement. The film lots I worked on back home were constant with their mysteries and scandal that amounted to rumors outside its confines. The grand nature of war had to be more compelling than that yet here I am left with a poor musician sent to entertain the troops, a propaganda voice actor, and an intelligence agent with little available to solve.

Over the days and months, I came to know them as they rambled their thoughts aloud as the LSD-25 began its effects on their brains. This mystery, though solved, had no resolution for the three who succumbed to those blinking red lights, always watching, surely wondering when my body would give up on itself only hydrating through spirits. Little did they know my life back home was barely differing from this treatment of the flesh.

It took me until the fall of '51 to know exactly what was up as I never stopped questioning Harry when he went on his rather eventful trips. His green complexion and reputation led me to believe that his mind going first, while unsettling to watch, wasn't shocking but the hints at these tests they had done in the states were.

I missed the states. It was more...fun.

There is nothing quite as freeing and exciting as a damn good routine to house the mysteries you live by.

I'd wake and throwback coffee with only splashes of spirits and spend my weekdays working cases from 8-6 then dinner and more coffee. By the time the clock hits 9, it's time to really start with coffee now taking the role of the "splash" in vodka or gin while I watched my favorite Huston films until I passed out. Weekends that became free of work are for games of sorts and records throughout the day playing at full volume. I could sit and cut photos of my favorite singers, actors, and stars to mix in my notebook creating their "new" best work that I could imagine. It was a level of fun that I missed, so long as I had 4 pots worth of coffee, two quarts of vodka, and 30 hand-rolled cigarettes for those fun days. It was the preparation that mattered most as I wouldn't want to have to drive and definitely didn't want to have to walk somewhere. I never watched Carol Reed films after '48 because that would mean giving in but now I think if I make it back I will.

These new acquaintances were good people and I feel sorry for them, more than I did when I first noticed they were being experimented on in the fall, but all I could think of was how much I missed my records.

## Leroy "The Music Man"

I know more than three chords, but really I don't see a reason to arrange more than that all at once.

I appreciate everyone's fondness towards me but really it hurts my head. All this... attention.

I've written 23 songs since we've been left here and part of me hopes the rest of the camp will return. Part of me hopes the enemy will come over those hills and tell us it's all over and we're being sent home as heroic survivors.

But I can't focus on that. I crave a glass of water one after another to ease the headaches. The damn headaches... they press my skull from the inside out.

East or west matters little because I feel content when I am hydrated. I feel...

My voice rings loud and my guitar tunes itself.

The dirt removes itself from these floors and the world outside this camp falls in line.

That I can feel.

Ah, but I can't feel what day it is.

We all smoke and my cigarettes go missing but I don't catch anyone ever. I'm beginning to think there's a conspiracy. For my cigarettes.

When winter passes, I hope we don't leave. I have found peace here with each of you. You all drink and you all smile.

And I know you. I feel you.

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When I returned home, I would desire to watch these films and enjoy the games I played at the studio's whims. They gave me good employment and this situation I find myself in, befitting a horror film, had made me realize why it was always relegated to B movie notions. The larger scale things are already predetermined outside our little boxes so I can't imagine what they thought they'd learn here from such a small group. I missed bands and jazz because this folk nonsense and its use of repressed emotions through vocalizations left me itching for some kind of frenetic energy that has left his place long ago. By the time the first winter came I didn't even need to keep questioning them, the study for the controlling effects of LSD-25 became quite clear after the camp PA made vague coded phrases through the entirety of November and half of December. If they wanted to see how easy discrediting someone slyly was, they chose the wrong group if I'm being honest, and I'm always honest. It seems they even grew tired of the harsh Korean winters and decided to leave to commit more atrocities elsewhere under the guise of nationalism. They must have known I never took a sip of that water, and they just didn't care... they left me to watch over these sad shells of people who seemed better off now in their disillusionment.

I pitied them now; they spoke of the end of winter endlessly this time around, every time a ray of light speared its way through a window or hole gnawed by a rat into the officer's club.

As if a whole winter and summer hadn't already passed while they waited for someone, anyone, to make their way through the minefields and find us. I feared leaving and not making it home safely, I feared not having what I had left there when I returned, but now I knew for sure I'd never have anything here.

These empty husks, I wondered if they'd be better off falling into enemy hands. If they were found by our "enemy" I imagine they'd laugh, rightfully shoot Harry for all the bogus intel he sold them over the years, then laugh some more. There's something hysterical about what we're willing to do to our own people, yet we defend until our last breath the same perpetrators desire to place this blanket over our "enemies".

If I make it home, I don't think I'll ever recommend someone for an audition again.

### **Harry "The Diplomat"**

The taste of a Candela can't be matched but I do quite enjoy the lot that was left here. A month's time is defensible enough to start raiding other officers' tents.

Though I could never know how the others left here could suck on those cheap sticks of tobacco they hand out for free.

Simple is all around still.

The woodwork, the green mesh, and a plywood bar painted red for a touch of class. The spiders that fill the corners and rats who cuddle under supplies at least add some interest.

I had an office, full of Ivory and Jade, that would stop you in your tracks at the door. Didn't even need to tell someone to stand at attention, it said it for me.

And yet the cold of this winter and the skin splitting of my chapped knuckles is replacing its memory.

Each day all I can think of is how grand my thirst grows. The familiarity of symptoms is suspicious, but the thought evades me at every turn.

We'll die here. Even that private eye in his arrogance. Yet I feel no remorse for the secrets I sold. All bad information which I'm rather good at. I've grown quite fond of you all and I will never remember your names because I have grown to know your faces. I've become quite aware of what may be happening here, and I feel the rest of you may soon as well, but I will linger here in the comfort of this place's simplicity... And I've forgotten what I know, again.

And then... when the Army returns, maybe back to names on papers you will all become...

And I hope soon for another war to come and sweep me up in its theatrics as I do not admire this scenery and smiles upon blushed faces which force connection upon me. I need only function with papercuts and the smell of ink following me home at night. Watching names on pages being marked off with every decision as each Candela is bookended by Scotch which burns as thoroughly as the tobacco did. I wish to never look at a glass of water again and wonder what has been left in it. Or stare at that mannequin of a man who prods us with questions and insults he foolishly believes are quick wit, knowing he knows, but I'm not able to tell you all until I can find something that with his secret's commodity, I can take from you.

Or wonder who sold me out despite being at an untouchable rank.

I may die here, burning tents to save the coal like a peasant. Eating powdered eggs and drinking clear liquors dyed brown. But I will never lose sight of what is better than this, I may have already forgotten that private eye's secret, but I'll never forget that I was, I am, above this.

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It's strange how on the surface the most superficial actor would always be the most charismatic in person. So easy to find dirt on and hold in line, so very easy to "solve" their issues, yet they could never convey that panic or charisma on screen. They were too honest with their faces and their voices throughout the day because they truly believed all the compliments and affection thrown at them. It took the silent, the dumb, and the awkward actors to bring life to the screen. I know it's cynical and judgmental, but they knew all the answers and all the lies, so I could never find good enough dirt on them, but I never needed to because they cared little for leaving the studio so long as they had roles to play and food in their stomachs. With their kindly perversions, they made an impact there and in the minds of the American public that wanted a brief glimpse at life outside the cycle.

Why would I leave that? Why would I seek something bigger only to find that charismatic in-your-face battle of wits the nations played was as dull as anything could be? The studio and its silent functions hidden behind a silver screen beckoned for me. I needed to leave this place and as the snow melted and we all knew we could sleep in our separate tents again, no more preserving heat and resources, I had to leave. I could play them a film, the one they hadn't seen before, take the jeep I found and book it towards the American lines. No one knows my name or cares, if I'm silent I'll get sent home and fall right back in line.

Time...it's not voiceless.

## Marie “The Voice Actor”

The men in ill-fitting grey suits who reeked of phosphorus.

They approached me one day and complimented the sincerity of my voice.

They’d never guess I had communist sympathies but then again, the haircuts only did what they were told to do.

The key to voicing an ad spot for a heinous politician is to understand you have no weight in this world. You’re a feather and that simple idea will let you gently sit above the dirt, unscathed for all of time. That is how I live with myself, perpetuating campaigns of hate and ignorance.

It’s never someone’s got to do it.

It’s that I don’t touch this world.

When I’m thirsty, this tepid grimy looking water disgusts me with each sip. It really hurts my teeth and with no dentist in sight, I fear smoking could hurt one day and there is no hell like that. I think about walking out into the western minefield sometimes to see if I truly have no weight or if I’m just damn lucky. It used to look so vibrant and green, grass up to your hips that reflected the sun’s rays like a gentle tide hiding something so sinister, but now a foot of snow and wind that hides the end of the field from your vision. If I make it across, I could go back to work. I assume this Army job and these ill-fitting green outfits are off the table after this.

I’d miss Leroy’s voice.

I may even miss the way Harry makes you feel young and ideological.

I don’t know if I’d miss Mr. Hollywood’s constant staring but a small price to pay.

The drinks, the sleep, the vivid dreams full of pleasure and pain you can feel on your fingers and your thighs.

I’d miss it all.

I can’t go back to not touching things. To not hearing or feeling the people around me. What I fear we all have grown to do. But most of all I fear walking that minefield and finding out I was still me here. A voice of no convictions, angelic, and just repetitious.

I wear Army green, a scratched-off dog tag, and the surroundings that have begun to match my plainness. Matching the sunken look of my once full cheeks, the green that fills Harry’s cheeks, and the cobwebs I can see in Leroy’s eyes.

It’s all so exhaustingly contradictory to the decrepit state this camp has become.

Hell, I’m thirsty.

This man.

He’ll ask us questions.

He’s a fool too.

That I should kick out of camp. And for his annoyance, I plan this at first sight of winter’s end.

Fools can be oh so dangerous and I’ve found it unkind, his intrusions on our peaceful waiting.

I hate my memories, but I do like this odd frustration.

\*\*\*



They'll be found and they'll be tortured for information they don't have, perhaps deservingly to some and I'm sure that sounds quite sad. Marked by ranks but no names or IDs will be found on them, and no record of what was done or would become of them. They ran their mouths day after day to me, not ever realizing how voiceless they'd become or how voiceless they already were. I had played a new game and grown tired of how these three stepping stones felt to walk across. It was a mistake, and for the sake of myself, I'd take care to never make it again.

As I left, I knew I couldn't help them, all that I pondered was my return home to work and deal with the stars and artists of the times. My methods may never change but the intention surely will as it will cause me pain till my very end knowing what I once was due to my indifference. But more so because I will still enjoy this job to the very end. When I return home, it will not be seen or heard what I carry with me and it simply is a microcosm of what I have experienced in a lot owned by a dream factory. And this never needed to be said.

## In Awe of the Pirates of Pages

For one summer I was swept away by a ship of rebellious anti-heroes...  
For one summer I was taken upon a journey by pirates with something to stand for...  
For one summer I was taken by pirates and broken in...  
For many summers I chose to join a small gang of pirates...  
For all summers I allowed the beauty of the works around me... the theatrics of the sea breeze to let me do cruel things as a mythic being. One summer I did horrid things...  
And at times, I find I miss it when I stumble upon a piece of my old captain's poetry and the tale in which it reminds me.

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A Present Upon this World

1694

There is a void that sits wrapped like a child's trinket.  
It is untouched and ignored by those who are sensible,  
But a mind unfiltered seeks to unwrap it,  
And it spills and spills out until you find yourself upon a vast ocean  
Where sound and wind guide your every direction.  
We are not children, those belong to the flagged boats my friends,  
Whom we liberate the goods from before they reach the sensible cogs of their ends.

\*\*\*

"Flesh and Misrepresentations of memory" he always said this.

There is some kind of darkness found at night whether the moon is above or not, it holds you, and drags you away from the rising sun. I swear each night that first week I'd never see it again, nor land, or a soul beyond these men who made me feel oh so morally high and handsome. But tonight, was a message of a storm coming, not till daylight as the sea was calm and the cloud above spinning the earth like a top. Our ship could be careening away from any semblance of humanity and the clouds were just trying to catch up, if you said this then I would've had no choice but to believe. I wasn't raised religious or ever cared for a bible of any sort, but I knew my place in ledgers of this existence. The darkness on this night though created a clash of the grand scheme and the moments so small that you knew your whole work could implode here.

No moon, no candles, and the thickest fog I'd ever seen in my life as patrols lay outside the ship with their predatory noises creeping in the blackness. The bottles for some and pipe for all made it tolerable but equally never to end. Each wave clicked on the side of the puny vessels we now boarded to sabotage their ships, each wave so meek, so slow in our anticipation that each casual caress would bring a splitting blow to the weathered wood and the lives of those who

drew the shift. Noise hides a hell of a lot of horrors, our captain always said that, and now it seemed he had a point. He must be wise because crew after crew would join him, his dangerous ways never forgotten, but his strength and will would never go rotten. As the small boats drifted to the edge of the patrol vessels, we knew we couldn't throw hooks, the fog so thick we couldn't even see their searchlights from this close. It became a dangerous, stupid climb, hoping the rope back to our ship never ran taught. And just like that the masts above lit up through the fog, and screams filled the air...

We'd all converged on the same damn patrol boat, how the hell does that happen, we're sailors and we know the sound of one ship to the next. How could we mess this up, we heard at least six ships but could only torch one. And we lost nine men, for no reward other than a very tiny dent in a very large covenant. They burned just like the navy... I never bought it, but the ship was deeply religious, they called it a moral code and frankly didn't hate the navy or the people who we stole from but simply saw themselves as vessels for themselves and not commodities.

I silently followed this code and did not care for their ideas but longed to do as I pleased and enjoy the sea.

\*\*\*

#### Homelands

1701

If skies are green  
And a woman and a child are seen  
Brick and mortar are lost to history  
And the comfort and mystery are found in the beauty of nature's drone  
You have made it upon your home  
An island to most unknown  
The children play but they do not grow  
Reap the rewards of their fathers who travel the sea and learn of more than love  
So  
Stay home  
If you feel you live only for love  
Join the pirates if you seek this life  
Which age rewards us upon a subtle grove.

\*\*\*

Until we visited their homes... I'd been at sea so long I wasn't sure I was comfortable feeling solid ground. The reality of it was quite troubling until I heard there were tobacco stocks and fresh fruit and my worries subsided.

“Flesh and misrepresentations of memory” he repeated so often. I still don’t know if I quite get it but that island. The captain had that island, his home, and his pristine family. Something didn’t sit right with me as they all had something there but there was a familiarity. The men gave me tracking looks when I first visited and even the dimmest of the new men knew it meant something surely. There was a horror here I could feel but I couldn’t see.

That island was too loud, too intoxicated, too beautiful, and too lost to reveal what could only be found in silence. There is a horror to that captain that I did not notice until the fourth return visit in which his children had vanished, but no one spoke of a thing.

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### Soulless

1704

You hear the word soul,  
You speak the word soul,  
You fret upon the word soul,  
And you curse others with the word soul.  
But you have never felt a soul,  
Watched it leave one’s body,  
Caress your face with every morning breeze,  
Grip you tight with heat in every sleepless night,  
Because you don’t believe.  
But upon the sea,

That subtle breeze and the vastness calls you,  
And you understand that you are a soul,  
In many souls’ hands.

\*\*\*

“Flesh and misrepresentations of memory”.

I swear I could’ve screamed... but I stay silent and watched as they acted no different, I had grown beyond my ill-patience on board and on land. I’d killed men, stolen their goods, and burned their ships but when I wrote my journals, I spoke of the beauty which intercut it all until I hit this disgusting island. The pirates had their bible and I understood it, quite fanatical but needed, yet something existed here that was not shown or discussed to me or now it seemed the others with their glossy eyes and accepting expressions. But that captain had eyes that looked as though they were carved out of wood, there was no haze, no liquor, or slips of the tongue that drew a lash. His wife always seemed so still, until one day I caught a glimpse of her in the rain, and all around her was shifting spraying as she shivered and shook so vicious you could never notice. Why was she like this, she knew not of the details of what we did, she tended to gardens with other families and selected men. The female pirates did not shake like this, and soon after I

noticed no matter who lived, the island filled each person, man, woman, child, elder, and slowly me with a shiver so violent we appeared as still as the horizon.

But at the end of that summer when the chills of the changing season sent a shock through me and we neared the island again I had doubts I could continue this murderous trend. I did not tell the captain for I feared what may happen, but I warned the boson and stole a skiff.

\*\*\*

The Bible  
1720  
A man  
A woman  
A child  
And the elders who we worship.  
Oh to the power of pages,  
Oh to yer own love of them,  
Oh how all which is done will serve them,  
So tomorrow may find a better sin.

\*\*\*

“Flesh and misrepresentations of memory”

I took my journal I cared for, which I had torn away hundreds of pages from, to be read for the map and treasures housed within. It should be known they were won at the expense of others' heads. Away I went with my only child in hand, born last summer, at the loss of his mother whom I'd forgotten in my years-long drunken stupor, to find that hell was real in their religion, but I refused to give up this child I refused to stay in the clutches of my own form of indifference to the plight of this world. So here we found ourselves set adrift, as the sky grew dark with clouds that blocked out the moon, with night coming two hours too soon. The clouds this time did not spin for they sat still and silent, and the waves ceased to exist yet drift on we did. I could still feel the warmth of the child's skin and we grew hungry but never dying, we grew into silence, but it was full of crying. Where was the captain? If he caused this, he must be able to hear us in the silence, while I could not hear a thing over the wailing that isolated me, left me fearing a ship would emerge from the darkness and swallow us whole.

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## A Pirate's Funeral

Those garnered by impositions seas away through tentacles that have stretched thin.  
You are walking towards nothing,  
As we sail towards brighter seas,  
The void will try to waver us, sink us, ask us to cast off our seeds,  
But we will hear their cries and shelter them from the storm.  
Wherever we go we are in a memory,  
Doomed to a life of sweet fantasies of our most sacred lovelies,  
And yer lives are blessed with faces upon faces never ending.

\*\*\*

“Flesh and misrepresentations of memories”

It hit us like a waterfall with light and a cool breeze that picked up the water behind us into a steady wave towards a recognizable sea. Soon we fell upon land greeted by soldiers and citizens bearing fruits and care for a child and a man who'd gone so crazy they believed my warped stories of where I'd been. I live now caring for a child who never makes my life quite loud as each day I drift further from responsibility for the actions I had committed. But every day I see a fruit stand I could just swipe a pear from, a house I could steal, or a man whose life means less than my next meal. Yet there is no need, a desire, but no need. They will find me someday in this place, but I will exist for now something I fear is not less than human, but more human than I care to admit. Their religion has seeped into me as my pages left behind have remained one with my captain's idea of the sea, condemn those who sully the name and instill this child with righteous thunder and calming rain, so they say.

The flesh has not truly changed but I have misrepresented my own memories, and now I am something else walking amongst a new sea.

## A Pitiful Statement of the Utmost Confidence from a Hungry Kid - Parts 1 and 2

### Pt. 1

#### “The Neo-Cowboy”

He'll crack down on smokers and off-handed lookers  
those pesky back door pokers and flag steppers  
His friends who love murder get a wave  
“Not today babe”  
We're stretched thin  
And you're *good men*  
Whether it's Jenkins, Songer, or Conners  
Why even bother  
It really doesn't matter

The only good child is just mild  
A dead man can't challenge him  
Thinks he's Howard Hughes  
But he's just rappin' the same old, *old soul* blues  
He's got a 10 thousand-gallon hat  
And a stick much smaller than that  
But he's quick to draw  
To watch you fall, from where ya get  
And he refuses to ride off into the sunset

He's fairly well read  
but it spills lose from that big ole head  
If it poisons the message  
To spend time hiding kids from death sticks  
And make a religion for *point-and-clicks*  
Don't ride your steel horse much too fast  
You know better than that  
And don't call his name and do expect the blame  
That you're not quick to action  
An anti-hero turned handsy  
Livin' life based on a fantasy  
Sees the word *assault* and he'll build a straw-man gang you best believe

That thousand-yard stare  
And broken down mare  
He came to the village under the guise to free them  
But he's no nameless he needs intimidation votes to stay sheriff  
The west never died, his gang is a growin'

You see, *they* get a chance  
He's got a 10 thousand-gallon hat  
And a stick much smaller than that  
But he's quick to draw  
To watch you fall from where ya lay  
A real man ought to know how to grip and play

Won't let his rebel life die  
it's all that matters or is true  
that flag he flew  
Long as there's someone to listen to  
He'll *rebel* by fallin' in two-by-two

He'll say this is *God's country*  
with so much sincerity  
the words will take flight nightly  
and the townspeople will grin slightly  
and not see them swoop around and scheme each morsel of their humanity

Ole blondie He's feelin' good when he's got a noose round ya neck  
He's feeling bad when ya take his gun and the cowards draggin', and a beggin' for death  
This is how ya get them *neo-cowboys* to understand  
It's John Wayne or Death

Even the most complex situation boils down to a cleansing of the past  
Then what's left  
The great *clowns* of the past  
Have been strung up with a lack of laughs  
With Applause for their craft

Bm to Dsus4  
6 shooter to 7.62 automatic  
The sounds are changin'  
The *effects* on the *body* are on two ends of a spectrum of reaction  
Under the one guise for the willfully ignorant

Heard the children shouting in the streets  
Some monster on a skyscraper is all to be seen  
A women's to blame for this  
A seed doesn't grow into a tree  
It's pushed and *molded* by a beast  
He's got a 10 thousand-gallon hat  
And a stick much smaller than that  
But he's quick to draw  
He is the law  
And Jesse James



Or little bill  
Or valley spill  
He took his time and overstayed his welcome  
The sun kept waiting out now it's left this land  
Darkness vast, such a void  
watched over by the *neo-cowboy*.

**Pt 2.**

**“How to Access Your Work Honestly... but Honestly Ridicule  
Those Who Annoy You, and You, Woohoo”**

I bought into the flag today to excuse my smoking and the “freedom in my writing”  
I really bought into it, I got a loan and 6 payments but it's cheaper than the current tax so I'll use  
it to roll my spliffs  
With a face lost in, somethin'  
Hands stuck in a sheet of white and green  
Aching to bleed

One piece of writing for each cigarette left in a clip that I deem worthy  
Hand rolled from one strip of the flags thirteen colonies and I'll smoke em'  
Then I swear I'll go clean  
Is the flag burning worse for my health than the tar and the nicotine?  
Even if it's just make-believe...

It's hard to make imagery when you're constantly starving  
It's easy to see how the stuff that bores you is thrown to the pages

Why be direct for simple affirmation written with a silver pin for silver-tongued fanfic writing  
“friend”

Go subvert the unexpected while meta is somehow still in  
Repetition is every hacks friend  
And you have a lack of kin  
And gin  
And kin  
And gin, and gin, and gin, and gin, and sin  
And you're four colonies down  
No parchment left to burn  
if you're to document these words  
Which you've forgotten  
Where to begin?

There was a wizard, a cowboy, some clock was burning... and at-least three damn good albums  
One about a season that was quite swanky

Another about a purple stream or something  
Then a cafe under the government building with binoculars on the man with no window screen  
Smoking silver cigarettes  
Oh! And paranoia, captured perfectly in a rock ballad surrounded by the people on the streets

Don't forget this is all for that.

But the cowboy  
Yes, the doughboy under the harshest sun  
Rising fast and cuddling his coldest gun  
To keep her warm, you see she's a she  
He'll die on a hill to say this phallic obsession is because he's of manly men  
Who fears the silence found in a thousand voices, ring their bells just to bring back all the noises  
to avoid the brackish waters they fear to be poisoned  
While the nation on a needle let it spin so one side never can reach out for a friend's safety ploy  
Fuckin' cowboy  
It doesn't roll off the tongue nor do you need to be reminded of all that you detest  
So lay this song down to rest  
An experiment of derivative blocks and test

Probability would have this golden knight do believe that mention of Mr. Wayne would shut the  
switch on the cowboy brain  
Confuses the young and the sane  
So maybe raid the silver screen and come back and tell me what you see

I'm down to two and that is worse than one because when do you begin and which one do smoke  
with coffee  
A combination that raises the moon and drops the sea  
While it weakens your shattered knees

Clint Eastwood apparently never smoked  
Yet he always had a damn cigar  
John Wayne was a green beret  
And Attila the Hun... but aside from him and Howard sending a crew to their early graves  
It stands to mention he was quite brave  
Dodged a draft and still went on to be an American dream  
Ain't that something...

I don't do much but sit and breathe under a cloud of words piercing from each face I happen to  
glance at  
"That crooked nose, that forehead, that bad breath, that annoying little prick"  
Or the cold wave that sits about chest high which shakes the top  
Numbs the bottom and pangs off the walls and back at your eardrums  
And what's the sum?  
You remain still and hapless  
No sense in creating a cool image

Or a daunting scene  
It's safe here in the home  
Or the saloon  
Or stoned

No misrepresentation  
You ain't a cowboy kid  
You're practically nothing  
Now go back and read  
Take a pen and notes, let's see  
Did you whine about your privileged life more than the things that bother you from behind the  
screen

About Equal  
They're interchangeable  
That's human  
I'm on the last cig  
And the coffee's gone cold  
As the white sheet fills the contours of my face  
And the circles which hold up my eyes strain  
I think I'll buy another flag to smoke for just one more day  
One more day...  
One more day...  
There's something here  
about bodily care for the far and the me, and the near...  
It ain't something I'm ready to hear  
But good riddance to whatever cowboy happens to self-reflect further than I felt dear.

# PAIGE MACKENZIE

## Last Rites

Let me go not with church bells,  
But with coffee maker crackle.

Set me in an early August moon  
After I'll give you the time of day  
And before your teenage son will.

Set me in a boat of loose leaf  
And flowers fit for Ophelia.

Wade me down the river  
To where the valley blisters the sun.

Watch the waves swirl at the blurry command  
Of my inked hands.

And give me the liberty  
Of going wherever this time  
My pen decides to take me.

## The Girl

There's a 10-year-old girl in my room  
Taking a bubble bath in my shower,  
Sitting to play on my carpet,  
Swooning over the skirts in my closet,  
Talking to the stuffed animals on my bed,  
Watching another movie on my TV;  
She asks a lot of questions,  
She loves her family and doesn't understand;  
She cries often,  
And can't seem to know what to eat;  
She likes pink,  
And talks too much;  
She asks too many questions,  
And doesn't need to understand;  
She creeps out to come to try and bond with me most nights,  
And I always turn back to my desk  
And pretend not to know her.

# MAKAYLLA MALDONADO

*Malcolm Sedam Writing Award Winner*

## **Deception through the Messiah**

Religion has always been our drive for our actions. This probably isn't true for everybody, but for me, this was all my grandma taught us. She was the false prophet, the misleading preacher to her blinded following of family members. I was constantly told to read the Holy Bible to fully grasp the story and origin of Jesus Christ. I remember walking into her confined ranch house and being welcomed by a wooden cross that towered over anybody that came into her home. I swore that she would put that carved statue over the door as an omen, as a way for her to ward off any evils that she preached about religiously, pun intended. The walls, which were made of clumpy drywall and were masked by mint green paint, were chipped and would peel off in rubber strips. I remember the various Jesus paintings and carvings that were scattered around her house, whether this be the prophet hung on a cross on the wall or a print of the Last Supper that was wrapped in a gold frame and protected by transparent glass.

There was a lot we weren't allowed to say or do, and these paintings and figures ensured that we didn't. Their judgmental presence alone was enough to keep us all in line whenever we ventured to her place. For instance, we weren't allowed to dress up or celebrate Halloween because it was a pagan holiday. We weren't allowed to wear nail polish, especially if it was black because of the devil, and red because that was the color that was associated with whores. I remember when my baby sister wanted to paint her nails black. She wanted her nails to contrast her pasty pale skin, but my grandma had a fit over this. Surely my sister didn't make that mistake again. We weren't allowed to dye our hair because "God gave us natural blonde hair" and "He would hate to see us changing it." We weren't allowed to get tattoos, we couldn't cuss, we couldn't get any piercings besides our ears, and the list is endless. I usually neglected most of these, especially because most of them didn't affect me for a long time. However, as I got older, I saw myself trying to do some of these under the radar. If my grandpa or God forbid my grandma found out, they'd swear up and down that I was a spawn of Satan myself. I mean, as far as my grandparents knew, I was an honors student in college who was only single because my grades were my priority, which technically wasn't a lie.

There was one incident where my grandma took me and my younger siblings aside and lectured us about homosexuals. There's not a day that goes by where I don't think back on this incident. What seemed like an overreaction turned into something that haunted me. Hannah, who was only twelve at the time, was wearing a pastel yellow top. Plastered across the chest, "Good Vibes" was written in faded black text as it lay on top of a faded rainbow. Although I was only sixteen, I didn't see a problem with my sister's shorts, and clearly, Hannah didn't see it either. To me, it seemed harmless. However, when my grandma saw her top, she seized that moment to warn us about homosexuals. In her words, "Humanity started because of Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." All of us were dumbfounded by this statement. Hannah was forced to change

her shirt shortly after this sentence was projected at us, but I was left there as the words were engraved into my brain. My parents were out of town when this happened. They didn't find out about this encounter until a few years ago, and this was only because I and my siblings rehashed this scenario.

According to my parents, especially my mother, everybody sinned. Everybody was a sinner, but luckily Jesus died for all our sins. In her eyes, no sin was greater than another. Sin was a sin. Given this, my grandmother took this a step further. In the eyes of God, lying to a parent about a party and murdering a neighbor in cold blood were viewed the same. Sin was a sin. Despite her "good Christian" attributes and teachings. My mom, who was born and raised by this false preacher herself, had always been blinded by her preachings. Maybe this was because it was all my mom knew. As far as I knew, my mom didn't want to view her mother as this monstrous woman. She didn't want to see her in this bad light that we all saw her in. As far as I knew, this "good Christian" role that my grandma adopted over the decades was a mirage, and she loved to hide behind it.

As I grew up, it became apparent that she was merging gender norms and her Christian teachings. She saw each gender in their lights with their assigned roles. According to her, women needed a man to serve under for their entire life. Women were also supposed to get married, have kids, clean the house, and be good Christian women who obeyed their husbands. Women shouldn't appear masculine. Instead, they should always dress in feminine attire without trying to look provocative or suggestive. When it comes to men, whatever they wanted had to be abided by. Men were always correct and were always perceived as the man of the house. Men are meant to provide wisdom and finances while the women slave themselves away at home. Their job was to treat a woman right and get married, but not good enough for her to talk back or feel comfortable in doing so. Men were also the face of their families and withheld a stature that nobody else could, especially not their wives or children. Whenever we ate with the family, whether this was holidays or a normal dinner, men always made their plates first. We always ate family style with countless dishes on the kitchen counter. By the time the ladies would make their plates, most of it was picked over anyways. Before we ate, we would always "bless our food" with a prayer, and it was usually led by my grandpa or dad. As a Christian family, it was mandatory that we go to church every Sunday. If anything interfered with this plan and we didn't go one Sunday, we were the scum of the Earth for putting anything else over God.

After reflecting on her lectures and tangents throughout the years, she contradicted herself a lot. I mean, why should a woman make themselves look more appealing to men if they should be natural? Isn't that what God wanted? How was my grandma going to bash everybody if God wanted us to love everybody instead of judging people? How were the colors black and red associated with the Devil? God provided us with medicine to help us, but if I took a painkiller, I didn't have faith in the Lord somehow. Wasn't a sin a sin? Didn't Jesus die for these sins? Were any of these "rules" she put in place real? Were all these false teachings? Did she lie to us? No, she couldn't have, but could she? Lying was a sin. She said this herself, so why would she?

Although I learned and accepted this only recently, all her teachings and lectures had meaning behind them. She didn't have me clean her feet a few years ago to simply "help her out." Gender norms meant so much to her, yet she had me on my hands and knees at her feet. I understand respecting your elders, and I was raised on this notion as well, but she tried to pick and choose between the two. This wasn't the only time she did this, but this was one of the few that opened my eyes to what she was doing. That was a way to show and instill her power over me. Maybe not her specifically, but the embodiment of Christ and all her false prophecies. She didn't tell us these things to teach us. It was all a fear tactic.

Despite all the false information she projected onto us, one of her lectures stuck with me into my adult years. Well, a lot of them did, but one stood out like a sore thumb. There wasn't a day that went by where I didn't think about how "humanity started because of Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Even now as I sit here at my desk, I can't help but acknowledge this information that my brain chooses to remind me of ever so frequently. As I sat and tapped my red pen against the cold sheet of plastic, I slowly found myself trailing in and out of her teachings. As I felt myself getting engulfed in the lectures of sins, I am slowly pulled out of it when I feel something on my shoulder.

"Noah," my professor started in a hushed tone, "Noah are you alright?" she asked. Luckily, I sat in the back of the room, so nobody tried to give me their attention. Nobody turned around and gawked at me through judgmental eyes or made any remark about how I wasn't paying attention in class. Thank God, or whatever power was out there.

After a few seconds, I nodded before I trailed my eyes back toward the projector screen. After she walked back toward her computer, I sank back down into my seat as a puff of air shook out between my nostrils. That nod was more of a reassurance to me rather than an answer to her question, but what she didn't know wouldn't kill her. After one of many film classes ended, I tossed my utensils into my black bookbag before I swung the corded strap over my shoulder.

As far as I knew, today was just like any other day. The sun refused to peek behind smokey clouds, the frigid air brushed against and rustled the leaves that still clung to tree branches, the dead grass would crunch under my weight as I walk across the campus, and the wind would howl through my earbuds regardless of how loud my music was. I grasped my hands around my upper arm, practically clinging the sleeves of my hoodie to my skin in an attempt to keep warm. As I let out another shaky sigh, which had become a habit over the past few years whenever I was anxious, I could see the steam escape from between my lips. As I ventured towards my next class, my Mothman keychain would crash and bounce off various pins that were plastered across my bag. All my pins were scratched and rough because of that keychain, including the one that had pink, yellow, and blue horizontal stripes with the words "he/they" plastered in front of the colored stripes. God, or whatever power was up there, I loved that pin.

When I got to my next class, I tossed my bag on the floor and started to frantically bounce my leg. Every time somebody came in, my eyes would find themselves trailing towards the door then quickly looking back down at my folded hands. Hannah was right, black nail polish did contrast with our pasty pale hands. However, when I saw a pair of red sneakers and black



jeans stop beside me, my attention steered away from my fingers, and I felt my heart pacing more rapidly. I felt a smile spread across my face as I continued to stare down at my now fidgety fingers. I could feel my cheeks and ears growing hot as my heart started to beat against—no, beat through my chest, as if it wanted to tear through and confess its feelings to the person beside me. “Hey,” they said before I lifted my eyes to meet theirs. Once I gazed into the ocean-blue eyes, I almost leaned in to see them better. Before my body swooned closer, I practically threw myself back against the plastic chair as I subtly fixed my posture. It didn’t help that his glasses made his eyes appear four times bigger. If I could get swallowed into those icy pools in his eyes and simply drown, I’d consider that a hell of a way to go. Besides, it sounded better than being engulfed in another religious nightmare.

“Hi Blake,” I said as normally as I possibly could. I felt like I was choking out words, but he didn’t seem too concerned with that. There was so much I would have loved to admit, like how I admire him for simply existing. Given my life and societal norms, I had to refrain. Besides, I didn’t want to ruin what we had already. Luckily, I was broken out of my spell when he opened his mouth once more.

“You still write, right?” he asked. His voice was so soft and inviting, like a warm Sherpa blanket. God, his voice was almost intoxicating, and I was already addicted to it.

*“It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.”*

The good feeling is gone. That didn’t take long.

“Yeah, I do,” I mumbled. Despite my fingers pulling and intertwining with each other, I attempted to keep myself together. Well, as much as I could for the time being. When I looked up and made eye contact with Blake, he seemed both puzzled and concerned. His head was slightly tilted, like a puppy when it hears a squeak emerge from a chew toy, and one of his dark brows was raised as his eyes stayed glued onto me. His attention bounced between my fingers and my face. He already knew something was up. Blake knew me for years now, he was no fool when it came to normal me versus current me. Although, I don’t recall him ever witnessing one of my episodes before.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. No, I lied. I sinned.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” I lied again. I sinned twice in the duration of just five seconds.

*“Lying is a sin and is viewed the same as murdering somebody.”*

Fuck.

Before I knew it, I was up on my feet with my bag over my shoulder. Before I could say anything to Blake or vice versa, I was already gone. When I finally slowed down from a sprint, I was in the dining hall and stood in a vacant area of the room. I set my bag on a table nearby before I sank into a wooden chair just inches away from my stuff. My airway was constricted, and my heart pounded, but not in the same way as it did when Blake was talking to me. Once I realized that I left him back in class without any explanation, my heart dropped from my chest and continued to sink.

“Oh God...”

*“Don’t bring God into this.”*

I left him there and now he probably thinks I look crazy. No, that I am crazy. Crazy and rude. He’s probably sitting there, wondering what he said or did to make me act like that.

I was staring down at my shaky hands as they tangled and twisted within each other. Before I knew it, my vision was soon blurred and distorted through warm tears. My face hurt from holding back a sob, but it didn’t hurt as much as my chest did. God, I didn’t mean to hurt him. I mean, I didn’t mean to get up and leave him like that. He didn’t deserve that, especially not him. Of all people, Blake didn’t deserve that.

After I took a breather, I eventually went back to my dorm. Once the door flung open and the motion sensor kicked the lights on, I was greeted with the smell of pumpkin and cinnamon. Although the flame died hours ago, the scent still lingered and embedded itself into both the sheets and the curtains. As the scent made its way through my nostrils, I felt myself relax a bit. *Home. Home smelled like this.* My mom loved candles like these and before my first semester here, she gave me one of her last candles scented like that. Every semester since she’d get me one no matter the season. As I walked closer to the window, my shoulders dropped after I set my bag back down on a chair by my desk. The faint glow of my string lights illuminated my bed and practically invited me to sleep in it after a long day. Once I flopped down against the checkered covers, I found myself zoning out once more. The walls were plastered with movie posters, postcards from my sister, sticky notes, lights, and my pink, yellow, and blue striped flag that proudly swayed whenever the fan blew against it.

Although I tried to relax, I couldn’t help but think about Blake. The guilt was eating at me and was chewing a hole into my chest. My heart was sinking to my stomach and was making me feel nauseous about the matter. However, not long after I started to venture into this rabbit hole, I was rescued by a savior. After hearing the chimes that radiated from my phone, I looked at the dimmed screen and was taken away from my mind by none other than the man himself, Blake. Once I answered the call, I didn’t give him time to speak. Instead, I dove right into the conversation with little to no input beforehand.

“Hey, listen,” I started as I sat back up on the bed. “I’m sorry I walked out like that. It didn’t have anything to do with you and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Blake reassured. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me if you don’t want to. It’s perfectly alright,” he said. I let a soft sigh escape from between my lips, but I had no idea if he heard it from the other side of the phone. It didn’t matter if he heard it or not but since he didn’t comment on it, I could only assume it either didn’t pick up or it didn’t matter, or even both.

“Are you okay now at least?” Blake asked, breaking a little bit of awkward silence between us.

“As okay as I can be I guess.”

“Being okay is being then not I guess,” Blake said over the phone, which made me crack a smile before I readjusted myself on the bed.

“You were asking me about my writing earlier,” I reminded him. “Why were you asking?”

“Well,” he started. “I was going to suggest that you submit one of your pieces for a scholarship. I got an email about it last night, but I don’t know if you saw it so I wanted to ask you about it earlier,” Blake admitted. After I let all this information set in, I parted my lips before speaking up once more into the microphone.

“I could try,” I admitted. “There’s no harm in trying, but is there a certain prompt for it? Any kind of rules?”

“You just can’t make it a school assignment. It must be a creative work that reflects on trouble,” he added.

“Trouble?”

“Yeah, like the character is getting in or out of trouble, they’re realizing trouble in their life, you name it. If there is trouble involved in it, it’ll work,” he clarified.

“Can you forward that email to me?” I asked.

“Of course.”

Later that evening, I sat there with my laptop, mouse, spiral-bound notebook, and a red ink pen as I pondered all the possible stories I could come up with.

Trouble. Trouble. Trouble.

Trouble was the topic, but despite my best efforts to come up with something, anything, nothing came. I knew writing and the motivation to do so never came naturally, but it was such an easy prompt. Everybody experienced trouble at some point in their lives, right? This shouldn’t have been so hard.

After sitting there for a good ten minutes, time continued to elapse, and yet I still couldn’t come up with anything. Ten minutes turned to twenty, then twenty turned into a half hour.

I could write about Blake. Not that Blake himself was the trouble, but I could write about my feelings for him. The fear of rejection, and the fear of losing a friend from high school. A friend that was by my side since he was brace-faced, and I was speckled with red welts and blackheads. The thought occurred to me, but I also didn’t want to write that piece and find out that he read it, especially if he didn’t feel the same way and didn’t want to talk to me anymore.

*“A sin is a sin.”*

Trouble. Religion and its toxic impact on my upbringing could be viewed as a problem. Hell, it was something that seemed to bring trouble to a lot of people, or I at least hoped so. Wait, the fear and power of religion and its impact on people, was the trouble. By God, it was perfect.

Once I realized what direction I wanted to go with this, it was almost too easy to write. The words came effortlessly, and my fingers continued to punch and click at the keyboard. My brain was going a million miles an hour, but my fingers weren’t too far behind as words turned to sentences, and these sentences formed paragraphs, then these paragraphs filled pages. Before I knew it, I had the first lone down as follows:

“Religion has always been our drive for our actions. This probably isn’t true for everybody, but for me, this was all my grandmother taught us...”

## Shielded by Grey Ribbon

For as long as I can remember, family was the most important thing in the world.

Family, in the eyes of my grandmother, was the one thing that money couldn't buy. She would've given anybody the clothes off her back if somebody needed it and she would've bought me the moon if I asked for it. Lucille, despite her hardships and rough upbringing, was one of a kind. Since as long as I can remember, she was always a follower of Christ. Throughout the years, she had various depictions of Jesus, whether this be a print of the Last Supper, a wooden cross with Jesus carved onto it, or the wooden slab with Christ painted on it that towered above the doorway to her kitchen. She'd pray for every meal and would pray for me and my younger siblings to have a good night's rest whenever we stayed with her for the weekend. When it came to family events and holidays, she'd always go above and beyond for these occasions. Between lit Christmas decorations and deviled eggs without paprika, and between sparklers and potato soup, she would pour everything she had into this. Lucille was the glue that kept our family together.

It began in June 2020. Our pool was housing countless water bugs and our grass was brittle from drought. What started out as a normal summer's morning would soon turn into an emergency drive across the state of Ohio.

It all started with a phone call that my mom received after a twelve-hour shift due to her being an essential worker despite the pandemic. While I was stirring the contents within a metal mixing bowl with a wooden spoon, my mom was talking with my grandfather, Hollie. At the time, I didn't think anything of it. Again, family was the most priceless thing, so my mom always kept in contact with her family, especially her parents. A call from him or Lucille wasn't uncommon. However, once I saw my mom frantically trying to contact my dad and her boss, it became very apparent that something was wrong. At the time, we were aware that Lucille was in the hospital due to a seizure and that she was being held up at a nearby hospital for further testing.

When we arrived, we were welcomed by the various depictions of Christ that hung on the emerald green walls. Their ranch house was always a little cluttered and felt small, but maybe this was because there were eight of us sardined into a singular room more often than not. Given that we didn't know if and how serious my grandmother's condition would've been, I packed a weeks' worth of clothes into my backpack and prayed that that was enough clothes for the trip. We were left in the dark about her health for a few days, but once we got informed about why she had a seizure and the severity of her condition, we had to figure out what our next move was in a timely manner.

Glioblastoma, which is a word none of us had heard of at the time, is the most aggressive type of cancer and it often affects the brain or the spine. Cancer. The word is often feared and is associated with death more often than not. Death is inevitable and regardless of efforts made to prevent or slow this process down, it's bound to happen. Tomorrow isn't guaranteed for anybody. I didn't know this at the time, mainly because my mom told me and my siblings not to look up

the disease or the stats, but 40% of patients who get diagnosed with this and receive treatment live a full year. However, only 17% of patients make it to their second. When left untreated, most patients die within six weeks after their initial diagnosis. When my grandmother was asked if she wanted to be informed of the stats and life expectancy, she practically laughed at the doctor and said that she didn't need to know. Not only because knowing this information would stress her out more than anything, but because regardless of the duration, she was determined to get through it and beat it. She had one growth on the right side of her brain and as far as she was concerned, she and I quote, was going to “gear up and kick that thing’s [the cancer’s] ass.”

Grey ribbons were and are still used to bring awareness to Glioblastoma. Shortly after finding this out, my mom referred to us as “Lucille’s Army,” which was soon plastered on grey wristbands that we would wear around our wrists to not only support my grandmother, but to bring awareness to the disease if anybody ever asked about it. My mom would always wear two bracelets at a time. That way if somebody was curious, she’d give them one to continue the spread of Glioblastoma awareness.

Given that my mom was determined to be her caregiver and help my grandfather out with my grandmother, there were a lot of changes that we had to make in our lives. My mom had to resign from her job because she couldn’t work and take care of her folks at the same time, mainly because we lived across the state from them and would live with my grandparents for days or weeks at a time. On top of that, since I lost my previous job due to the pandemic and I was a full-time college student, my major was luckily a degree that people can obtain through online learning. Given this, I went from attending classes on campus to living across the state and continuing my schoolwork through my laptop. We lived like this for two years. During that duration, my grandmother’s brain tumor had halted its growth, and we continued to live our lives outside of this care that we provided.

Throughout the years, there were countless firsts that we all experienced alongside Lucille. I was there when she first got her hair shaved, when she went to her first appointment at Cleveland Clinic, when she did her first rounds of chemo and radiation, and I was there for her first birthday party that she ever had. Not all firsts were great though. I was there for her first COVID scare, I was there when she first got frustrated and cried over the fact that she couldn’t remember half of the things that she used to know like the back of her hand, and the first time she asked when her brother or sister was going to come see her even though both of her siblings had been dead for years.

In February 2022, we came back to visit them since we didn’t get a chance to since Thanksgiving. When we arrived, Lucille’s first and only request was to have her Christmas tree put up in her breezeway because she couldn’t get it up for the holidays.

Since we hadn’t seen her for months, she wanted to spend a lot of time with us, especially me and my mom. Before she was diagnosed with Glioblastoma and before the pandemic started, she loved shopping. She loved nothing more than to walk around entire stores for hours on end and get me and my siblings anything we were eyeing, whether we needed it or not. Despite me and my sister being adults during the time, my grandmother would constantly find ways to spend

time with us and money on us. On this occasion, she was at Boscov's with my mom. Since she had always had weak knees and her diagnosis made it impossible to walk around on her own, especially for long durations, she'd use the shopping cart as a walker instead of using a wheelchair. Stubbornness runs in the family and clearly Lucille was the one that we got it from. Growing up, my grandmother would always get us pretzels at a nearby Auntie Anne's. We never asked and we never expected it, but she always treated us to these snacks. However, since she couldn't make that walk, I was the one to provide and pay for these. Since all the stores around this facility were closing due to weird Sunday hours, the hallways were growing empty, and I remember walking down the carpeted walkway with my grandmother. As I held everything in my hands and around my wrists, her hand was resting in the bend of my arm as she walked alongside me. This wasn't a significant thing for me back then, but looking back, that was one of the last times that I got to go out with her. On top of that, this was the last time that I saw her before her condition worsened and permanently altered her.

In May, Lucille was readmitted into a hospital and was on life support for a few days. During this time, we were still present and continued to root for my grandmother from the house. After a few weeks, she was finally able to come back home. My mom went to get her, and I stayed home to tidy up the house for her arrival. I remember looking at all the photos she had framed and presented throughout the house. She had my homecoming photos, pictures of me and my siblings before the pandemic, some pictures of my grandfather from Vietnam, pictures of my mom as a kid, and some pictures of my sisters and my graduations. While I observed and rehashed these images, I remember being regretful. Not because my grandmother had these photos, but because there weren't many of us with her. I know that this was because she hated it when somebody took a picture of her but looking back, I do wish that we had more images of her, especially before she was diagnosed with Glioblastoma.

When my mom came back with my grandmother, I remember sitting at the window that overlooked the driveway and seeing my mom wheel her mom to the porch steps. I remember looking at Lucille and thinking that this woman wasn't my grandmother. Although I could physically see that it was her, something seemed off about her. It was and still is hard to explain. I saw her in the chair, but to me, that was the shell of my grandmother. That was a husk of her former self. When she was finally situated in a chair that resided in the corner of the living room, I remember conversing with her about wedding colors. Although I wasn't dating anybody at the time and I had no intention of getting married anytime soon, I asked her what colors were appropriate for such an occasion and what kind of venue she would pick if she could, in which she answered orange with black and white at a barn. At the time, I remember thinking that I was being weird for asking these questions, but I'm glad that I did. I knew she wouldn't be around long enough to see me married, which was and is still weird to think about. However, now that I have her input on what to do, I intend on using that information to incorporate her into the day whenever that comes.

On July 3rd, me and my mom were making dinner for the four of us. As the house filled with the smell of bacon and toasted bread and the sound of Reba McEntire's voice through the

television, my grandparents were trying to map out their plans for the following day. We had been there taking care of both Hollie and Lucille because they got exposed to the coronavirus. We were all fully vaccinated but given that a cold could essentially kill my grandmother since she had little to no immune system, it was imperative that we were there to help them. On top of this, this was their first time having the virus after evading it for years. If me or my mom got sick and had to quarantine, it would've been worth it as long as we got both of them through it. Given that there were fireworks being set off from neighboring homes and yards, McEntire would sometimes be cut off by explosions and rattles that echoed through the window. While all of this was going on, I was fixing blt's as my mom was cooking on the stove top. However, shortly after we were done eating, the power shut off and neighbors were going outside for the summer breeze. At the time, I was annoyed because this meant no power for God only knows how long, but looking back on it now, it was almost a blessing in disguise.

It didn't take long before we were all on the front porch. As we planted around the wooden table and saw the lavender sky turn navy, the only illumination around the block was from the fireworks. Explosions of yellow, white, red, and green would dazzle the night sky and fizzle out with every crackle and hiss. Although we could barely see them through the trees, Lucille was fascinated by these spurts of color and sounds. Her eyes were glued to the sudden bursts of colors and despite her wheelchair being locked, she was determined to inch closer and closer to the display before her.

"Whose house is this?" she would ask as she unconsciously rubbed her hands together, intertwining her fingers into each other and locking them every now and then before releasing them once more.

"It's ours, sweetheart," Hollie said as he pulled a chair over and sat alongside her.

"Oh, it's beautiful."

This interaction was surreal to me. Not only because she was fascinated by something so simple as fireworks, something that we've seen countless times beforehand, but because she loved where she was. Lucille was living in the moment, and she was loving it despite the circumstances. Since as long as I can remember, she'd always talk about leaving that little ranch house. She yearned to pack her things and leave the small town that they lived in for over forty years. Although she never specified where she wanted to move to, I don't think it mattered. As long as it was away from small-town living and they had more land, I think that's all that she could've asked for.

"Who do I owe for this?" Lucille would ask before she'd lean her head towards her husband. Although she didn't turn to face him, she was still attentive to his voice.

"It's been paid off for a long time, my dear." Hollie would remind her before slinging his arms around her and kissing the back of her head.

"Oh," she'd start as she'd fiddle with her fingers again. "Is this all mine then?"

"All yours, baby girl," he'd remind her.

"All mine."

On July 15th, we came back to their house in the middle of the night to be there with my grandmother. When we arrived, she was asleep on a bed that was provided by hospice. I remember trying to keep quiet because me and my siblings didn't want to disrupt her sleep. Their house was never quiet. Even in the wee hours of the night, there was always noise. Whether this be water droplets echoing through the house due to the water spicket in the shower, the pitter patter of their Boston terrier's feet as he wandered the halls at night, or the faint clicking that was produced as time progressed on the clock that hung above the mantel, there was always noise in the house. When it came to my grandmother and her faint huffs of air that rustled through her parted lips, this was a sound that seemed to fill the house. It dominated anybody's laughter, any conversations, and any bark that the dog produced. The breathing was haunting, not because it filled the house with dread, but because it was a sound that was filling our ears and burning into our brains. Her breathing was taunting. Although we all knew the day would eventually come and we knew that her time was running short, we were all holding out. We dreaded it. Although death was inevitable and tomorrow wasn't guaranteed for anybody, it suddenly became more apparent that this was happening. Whenever her breathing halted and the room would grow silent once more, what would happen? None of us wanted to find out. As she laid there in the living room, me and my siblings just sat in the living room and would occasionally glance over as we talked about the dog, our video games, anything that would distract us from what was happening in the room over.

As the following day rolled around, the house was livelier than it was the previous night. Without explicitly saying that Lucille was going to pass soon, we all knew. The atmosphere was somber and despite the laughter and conversations that were filling the house, my grandmother's breathing continued to fill the room with every pause in conversation. There wasn't much that stood out that day. Nothing significant happened during the morning or in the afternoon. However, in the middle of the night, I remember coming downstairs and seeing my mom on the couch. She was sitting by my grandmother's bed and the glow of her phone illuminated her face. Although the videos on her phone were producing faint songs and dialogue, my grandmother's heavy and slow breathing continued to fill the room with dread. However, since my grandparents had a ranch house with little to no room, not everybody would sleep in the house. Instead, some people would sleep in the camper that my grandparents owned and had parked in the driveway. Given that my mom often slept in that camper, it was puzzling to see my mom on the couch. I mean, she usually slept outside so why was she in the house? Not to mention, she was sitting in the dark and the only light that was being produced on the first floor was being produced through her phone screen. Puzzled, I remember peaking around the corner and asking her what she was doing.

"Oh," she'd start as she turned her gaze towards me, "I'm just staying in here to make sure that she's okay."

"Is that all?" I remember asking as I leaned my body against the rigged doorway.

"Well, given her breathing, I don't know if she'll make it through the night. Now, God forbid she passes and I'm out in the camper, but if that happened, I wouldn't be able to forgive



myself. Instead of that happening, I'll be in here and your sister's going to join me. You can too if you want," she offered.

At the time, I declined this offer and vacated back upstairs. Before I went to sleep, I remember thinking that she was going to pass the following day. I laid there in the bed and stared at the wall for God only knows how long. I remember laying there and I didn't want to close my eyes because I knew I'd wake up to crying. I knew I would wake up to the news that she died, I knew I should've gone back downstairs and held my grandmother's hand one last time before she died. However, despite these thoughts and emotions, I eventually lulled myself to sleep.

On July 17th, I was woken up by my little sister's hysterical sobs and hitched breathing. She was choking on her spit and words, but I remember her mustering that she was dead. Given that I'd lived with them off and on for two years, I started the grieving process at least a few months before she died. In May, this was when I started to grieve and accept that my grandmother's battle was coming to an end. When my sister finally ventured out of the room and migrated back downstairs with the rest of my family, I remember being mad that I wasn't upset. I sat on the edge of the bed and despite me knowing that she was dead, I felt nothing. I was immune and I was numb to the fact that she was gone. However, when I finally made it down the steps, I remember all the emotions flooding into me once I peeked around the corner and saw her lifeless body on the bed. This was the first and is still the only dead body I'd ever seen. The media, especially films and shows, really don't do death any justice. They make death more gruesome than it really is. It was weird to see her like that. I consciously knew that she was gone and her husk of a body was still there within feet away from me, but it didn't set in that she was actually gone. As far as I was aware, she was merely asleep. I mean, I saw her. She was the exact same way that she had been over the past couple of days.

It wasn't until my grandmother was covered and wheeled out that I realized that she was dead. The same woman that used to spoil us rotten, the same woman that would buy us pretzels at the mall, the same woman that would tickle my back because I couldn't sleep, and the same woman that used to knit us stocking caps every year was gone. I'd never be able to hold her hand again, I'd never be able to tell her that I loved her most, I'd never be able to ask her who loved her (me) and who loved me (her), and I'd never be able to learn how to sew alongside her. She'd never be there for my college graduation, she wouldn't be present whenever I met the one and got married, she'd never be able to see me do my dream job as a freelancer, she'd never be able to read my writing pieces that I've collectively written over my college years, and she'd never spend another holiday with us.

Once I realized all that she'd miss from here on out, this was the final straw that broke my back.

Again, films paint death and grief inaccurately. There's a difference between a cry in pain and a cry in anger. However, when it comes to grief, it's a weird mixture of both. Despite countless efforts, griever mourn for numerous reasons. Not only do they grieve the loss of whomever, but they often wish that they could've done things differently. Furthermore, these people often mourn over a future without whomever, they dread the upcoming weeks, they can't

do anything without having subtle reminders that their life is now changing, and they can't do anything without having a heavy heart. As I heard my grandmother was driven away from us and the house that she finally accepted to love and appreciate, everything hurt. Not only did my face hurt from sobbing, but my chest felt heavy, my throat was strained, and my limbs weren't wanting to stay still. I wanted a distraction from the events that were going on around me. I wanted something to keep my brain busy, no, I needed a distraction for these feelings of sorrow and these painful thoughts of the future. A future without my grandmother, who I knew and grew up with for my whole life.

The following week was the longest week of my entire life. Between ordering her headstone, shopping for funeral attire (at the same mall where we always bought pretzels), contacting family members that I've never met or haven't seen in the past ten years, going through old pictures to find some of her most memorable moments, writing out her eulogy, and looking at the funeral home for the first time before the funeral, its safe to say that this was and still is the longest week of my life. As a college student, I've been drained from exam week on numerous occasions, but these collectively felt like nothing compared to that week after my grandmother died. Being mentally and physically drained were two things but being emotionally drained was and still is a dread to trudge through. When it comes to physical drainage, at least that can be temporarily fixed through caffeine and energy but being emotionally drained is a whole new type of annoyance.

I remember sitting in one of many rows of wooden pews. The abundance of blues, greens, and yellow flowers mixed in with grey ribbons and white vases were overwhelming as they piled around my grandmother's coffin. Besides wooden coffins in horror films and video games, I'd never seen a real coffin before. I was sitting within feet of a grey casket with metal bars that wrapped around the sides of the box. The funeral home smelled like oak wood and a flower shop, and the paneled wall contrasted with the green carpet. While the service took place, I remember holding the box of white tissues while my sister sobbed quietly beside me. Again, I was stuck in a spot where I was upset, I was angry, and I was somehow numb at the same time.

Why me? Why us? Why her?

Days after the funeral, I remember coming home and every time I'd go out to run errands or I'd see my mom at work, I'd always see at least one middle aged woman with her elderly mother. If not a middle-aged woman, I'd often see elderly women with their grandkids. Every time I'd see these happy depictions and other people with their mothers or grandmothers, I could feel my blood boil. I would feel myself festering in hatred, I would be seething with anger and agony. I would be jealous that these people still had their grandmother, and where was mine? Buried in a graveyard five hours away with no headstone to mark her grave.

Now, as I sit here on my cow printed comforter and grey sheets, I dread having to write this paper. Although I'm in the final stretch of my academic career and anticipate my graduation in the spring, my motivation to do anything has diminished. I used to love writing, I used to cosplay to have fun, I used to watch the same films repeatedly for entertainment, I used to make an income, I used to play video games with friends to keep in touch, I used to leave the house

every few days or so. Now, all I do is sit here and I feel either numb or bitter. I mean, how can one not? I used to be happier with myself. I used to love my hobbies, and I used to be more in touch with my family. Afterall, family is the most important thing that one can have. However, here I am, sulking with little to no motivation to do anything anymore. I mean, I can't even pull myself to do things that I genuinely want to do. I mean, some extended family can produce fake tears at my grandmother's funeral and act like they were close to her. These same folks went home and resumed their lives like nothing ever happened. Hell, some of them practically celebrated by going out of town and taking a vacation to Disney or to the mountains. Me? I went home and didn't leave the confines of my room. As far as I know, there are five stages of grief. However, what nobody mentions is that you'll bounce back between various stages. Just when you think you've accepted the death of a relative, you're somehow angry at the fact that she won't attend your graduation. You sulk and are angry at the idea that if you did things differently, maybe she would still be here. However, regardless of this idea, nothing would've changed and it's complete stupidity to even think that anything would've changed that outcome, especially since death is inevitable.

Regardless of all of this, I'm still a college student, and if I want to graduate in the spring, I need to finish this semester. Despite my grandmother not being present for my graduation in the future, I still need to tough it out and get my work done. It's what she would've wanted. I mean, given that I'm one of two college students in the entire family, I need to tough out the semester.

Thus, as I sit here on the bed and contemplate a topic for this, I can't come up with anything. Well, nothing that isn't self-deprecating or full of angsty bullshit. Hell, that's been the past two years of my life.

Wait.

"For as long as I can remember, family was the most important thing in the world. Family, in the eyes of my grandmother, was the one thing that money couldn't buy..."

# STEPHEN MARTIN

## Or Today

The paltry eyes of loons with spoons  
attached to the wimble of sight  
O night, the sighted beast—  
Your shores of darkness  
speak endlessly.

And, misrepresented all, we seek to  
whither and waste our youth on  
schemes and things;  
underscoring our simplicity  
while we bask, slack jawed &  
undiscovered, in the mismatched  
sock drawer of our lives.

But we, never giving up—  
grab the cup, again & again  
hoping to hold our breaths for long  
enough, to wake from a sleeping grip;  
for the lives we sell ourselves—  
Short sales all.

O we, young in blood, innocent to harm,  
drifting, ever drifting toward the fumes  
of our demise;  
how we despise our circling backs  
bent after rigid courses we do not set!  
How much longer? How much longer—  
are the hours we flush?

And, the dreams are growing still  
after every passing lawnmower,  
after every new week of growth—  
And what for? What for?  
The children? The children?  
they are grown into their castes before  
their first diapers are changed;  
their hope is a golden chain  
unraveled like umbilical cords at their  
mothers' feet.

O we, the wretched few—  
What are we to do with tomorrow,  
Or today?

## The Long Man

The long man can not follow me  
I've led him off the path.  
He's busy guiding fools  
To humbly wear a mask  
He's using all his tools  
Formulating tasks  
But the long man can not follow me  
I don't rely on facts.

The long man's lost my scent again  
He had it for a while.  
His tapestry had tempted me  
So I marked it at the mile  
He piped a tune I found quite nice  
As I listened in the meadow  
But the long man lost my scent again  
When he picked up on my fellow.

The long man is a busy guy  
He's got a lot of cattle.  
He laughs a lot and scoffs a lot  
At all the mindless prattle  
He's busy sorting fools in groups  
It is a constant battle  
So the long man's lost my scent again  
He'll wait for sheep to tattle  
Yes, the long man's lost my scent again  
But he hears the faintest rattle.

## Lambs of War

Aethon slumbered on the third floor awaiting its master's orders.

As a boy, Simon was asked to close his mind to the reciprocity of the previous generation. They were starved for drugs, healthcare being a seemingly unsolvable problem. They sacrificed themselves to the social stability's insistence on domination. They became blank, wandering souls burning for release. The computers they created to make their lives easier, now marked and sorted them like cattle. Things had become easier, but for whom?

On October 23, 2042, the depleted reserves in Alaska gave their final buffet of black gold before coming to a resolute halt. The world was no more.

As an adult, Simon found it hard to summon the ambitious intent needed for revolution. He was smart enough to see through the curtain of lies that had been broadcast his entire life. He knew that modern civilization was doomed. He knew that it was a corrupt monster without room to roam, but like so many other brilliant minds of his time, he chose the road more traveled; he chose to live his life for himself. Although his mind cried out for freedom from such a regimented existence, his spirit had long been subordinated to corporate authority. But this authority was an illusion.

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The lone occupant of the lobby, a neglected television set, blared news of civil unrest. A war was raging. Police were shooting citizens in the street. Citizens were blowing up everything municipal, with homemade bombs. Children became little warriors, bent on their fathers' commands. The military had sent out orders for all inactive members to report for assignment, half of whom, not only did not report, but also joined the other side with blazing guns. And the children were winning. The revolutionary army was growing at an unstoppable rate. The news was endless. The scenes were bloody. Simon turned off the television.

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Simon was rounding the stairwell to the third floor when he heard gunfire. Someone had an automatic weapon. Damn, the military had set up post.

He hoped to avoid violence, but now realized that he had been indulging in wishful thinking. Never having fired a weapon at a human target, he could not help but cringe at the thought of a gunfight.

He clinched his shotgun to his shoulder, took a deep breath, climbed the remaining steps, and slowly opened the door to the third floor.

Silence, well almost— he could hear the whisper of a television creeping down the vacant hallway. He moved the shotgun to a ready stance and began a slow gait.

He rounded a corner and was met by the incandescent flicker of rays spilling into the hall

through an open doorway. Who was on the other side of that door? Sweat sprung from his brow and rolled down his cheeks. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to clear his mind. His mind was uncooperative, a steely panic spread through his body and he began to tremble.

His knowledge of combat was acquired from the safety of paintball competitions. He was an accurate shot, but this was hardly paintball, and facing an automatic weapon with the limited range of a shotgun did not help his chances. Things were not looking good. The building was supposed to be empty. He was supposed to be in and out. But this was war, and war has its own agenda.

He procured a smoke bomb from his belt, took a deep breath, pulled the pin, and let it sail into the waiting room.

The gunfire started almost immediately. The doorway splintered in a storm of shrapnel. A piece smacked his left cheek, watering his eyes. Then he heard a loud *click*. And then another *click*. Instinct took control. He stepped through the door.

Light from the television danced through the smoke giving the figure in the middle of the room a demonic authority. *Click*.

He pointed his shotgun at the figure and fired.

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The figure laid curled in a fetal position in the middle of the room, no longer a threat. Smoke began to clear and the hellish vision began to take on the soft form of a woman. He bent down to look into her eyes. They darted around wildly, finally focusing on his face. She had love in her eyes. Tenderness. He moved his head to the side and vomited.

"I'm sorry," he said, wiping blood from her mouth with his sleeve.

She was dying. He was her killer. He was responsible for the destruction of this beautiful creature.

She could only be twenty-five at the most. Her crystalline blue gaze pierced his heart, yet that was not her intent. He could sense a warm soul, simmering in youth, heightened by the proximity of death. Her blinking slowed as she searched his face for clues.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

She smiled a little. How could she smile? He wiped more blood from her lips. She was trying to tell him something, but wasn't able. She gurgled out a few mouthfuls of blood and seemed to catch her breath for a moment. She pulled him close and whispered into his ear, "I don't blame you. Please don't let them hurt my kids." And then she was gone.

Simon spent several minutes just sitting there holding the woman's dead hand, feeling it grow cold, tears brewing in his eyes; unable to move.

Her uniform had been ripped in several places. She had a large gash on her forehead. Neither of which were his doing. He remembered the shots he had heard in his ascension.

In the corner of the room, laid an officer face down in a pool of blood. It was all too apparent what had led to the initial gunfire.



He reached up and read her dog tags. Wright, Mary E.. His mother's name was Mary. He could no longer control his tears.

In the far corner of the room, a small flat screen television roared news of the apocalypse. Simon turned it off with a shotgun blast.

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Mindlessly, he performed his task.

While he waited for the program to upload into Aethon's mainframe, he logged onto the Internet and searched for Mary E. Wright. He found her address and wrote it in a small notebook that he kept in his breast pocket.

The program was uploaded successfully. Aethon was now under his control. He told Aethon to shut down all the computers on its network. Aethon obliged, its own computer face extinguishing with an ominous blink. The destruction was done, but it held no meaning.

Simon returned to Mary's corpse, took her tags, and put them in his breast pocket with the notebook.

"I won't let anything happen to them."

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The house was on the outskirts of the city in a suburb that was no longer a safe haven for the working class. In the chaos of civil unrest, inner city gangs and homeless vagrants began a hostile takeover, pushing suburbanites into the very streets they had spent years escaping.

He pulled into the driveway and turned off his headlights. The windows of the house had been boarded up, and the door was caged by steel framing. He rang the doorbell. The door cracked and a young voice asked, "Mom, is that you?"

"No," he answered, "I'm a friend of your mom's. I need to speak to an adult."

The voice was silent. The door shut. He rang the doorbell again. No answer. Again. No answer.

Four men sitting on the front porch of a house about a block away noticed him and apparently decided he would make good sport, because they started cackling to themselves, as they shuffled from their porch, to their driveway, to the street.

He rang the doorbell repeatedly, frantically. The door opened slightly.

"Go away."

"Your mother wanted me to give these to you and tell you that she loves you," Simon said, waving the dog tags in front of the cracked door.

The men were closing in fast. Their hedonistic laughter permeated the air. One fired a pistol into the air.

The door opened. A wide-eyed eleven-year-old boy stood with his arms crossed.

"Where's my mom?"

“Son, you’re going to have to let me in so I can tell you. There are some bad men out here who want to hurt me, and if you don’t let me in, I won’t be able to tell you.”

The men were close.

“Hey, mister, what are you doing out so late. Don’t you know it’s past your bedtime?” one chided, stepping onto the front lawn.

“Oh, he won’t have to worry too long about that. He’s going to be sleeping for a long time,” said the one with the gun.

The boy opened the steel caging.

Simon jumped in, slammed the cage, shut the door, and secured the deadbolt. He turned around.

The kid took a gun from his jacket and pointed it at Simon’s gut. A little sister stood at the end of the hallway, thumb in mouth, watching with an unsteady sway. At the sight of the gun, she dislodged her thumb and said, “No.”

Simon’s guts squirmed as he looked into the boy’s hawkish eyes. The men outside started shooting at the house.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just wanted to give these to you.”

“Is she alive?” the boy asked with eyes that seemed to know the answer.

“No, I’m sorry.”

Simon took a step, laid the tags on the floor and stepped back. The boy picked them up, dropping the gun in favor of the tags, clenching them in his hands. He began to cry and his sister joined in an unbearable chorus of agony.

The shooting outside stopped, but the lamentations of the orphans continued into the night.

\*\*\*

The children were sleeping and Simon was alone with his thoughts. The safety of the world he had known before this upheaval was gone. The toppling of an authoritarian government had come at a high price. Anarchy was birthed and nations were no more.

The program he uploaded into Aethon’s mainframe would ensure that the government’s reign was doomed. Any hope of it regaining control through technology was demolished. The citizens and the government were finally on equal footing.

Simon was not satisfied with his task’s completion. He thought that he would feel a great weight being lifted. Instead, he was sinking into sadness.

These little ones were his lot. They had no family. He had discovered this when he asked the boy whom he should contact to come and get them? The boy shrugged with his head down, saying, “No one.”

His heart broke with that answer. How could he have taken what they needed most? How would he be able to take care of these children?

Simon never had a family of his own. He had always been afraid of the extra

responsibility involved in starting a family. His old life allowed him to escape into a workaholic world devoid of social interaction.

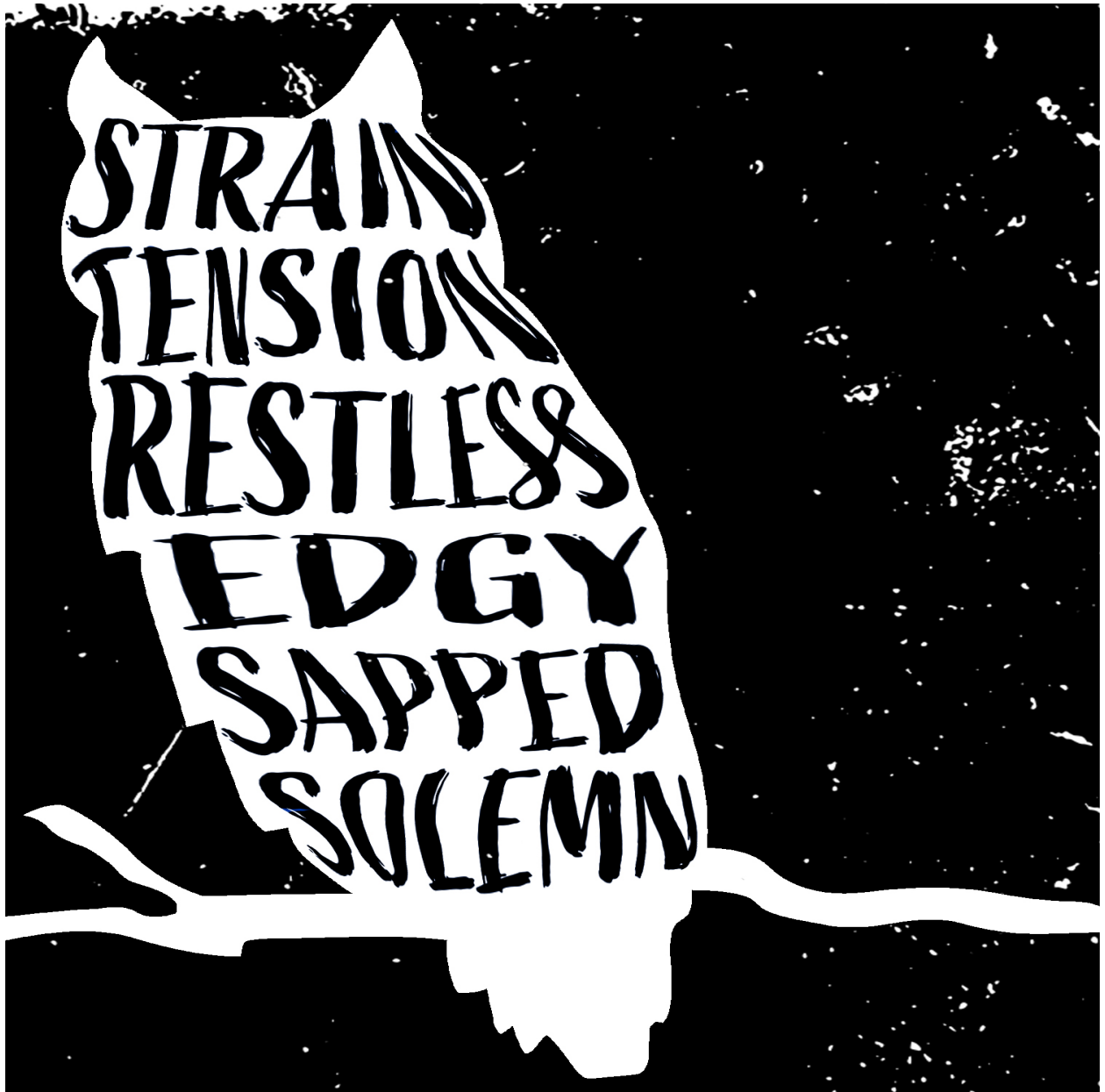
Looking at the sleeping children, he realized they were not a responsibility. They had a future. Unlike the war raging outside, their fight had a purpose. He needed to protect them. They deserved a chance to grow up with love in their lives. He had seen love in their mother's eyes.

Simon had taken their mother as payment for a task that seemed heroic. He was freeing humans from their oppressors. But he didn't feel like a hero. He felt like a killer.

The television flickered in the corner of the room. The volume was down, but the images screamed hostility. He looked at the children cuddled up on the couch, exhausted and miserable. Outside a gunshot rang into the night. He put a blanket over the sleeping children and turned off the television.

# MARCO MULATO

## Night Owl



# HAILEY PARKER

## Dance of Beyond

Nebulas and comets,  
Lights of purple and blue  
Emptiness,  
Nothingness,  
Yet everything.

So far yet my own heart  
Beyond my reach;  
Tantalizing beauty  
Captured only within  
The cold gaze of a telescope.

Infinite beyond comprehension,  
Melting into the horizon  
Forever, changing and turning,  
Endless,  
Timeless.

Grand planets,  
Orbiting around a ballroom,  
Sparkling stars their dance partners,  
Twirling,  
Spinning;  
Clothed in regal finery,  
One stands outcast;  
Once a member of the ball,  
Now a dwarf,  
Spinning in a corner  
Alone and forgotten.

# CAMERON PIER

## Transactional

I walked into the yellow woods to be cleansed.  
Walking among the reeds, I heard a song  
that called me by name.

“I know the destination of this path,” was the refrain it kept mumbling between the bird calls.

The branches hung low and pushed against my back to force me along the footpath of fallen leaves.

*I am walking towards your pain.*

Drawn in by the promise of inevitability,  
I allowed the seduction of your engineered words to snap me back to center.  
For I had already made the bargain;  
I will feed your vanity  
while you spoon me neglect.

I follow your trail of tricks,  
knowingly and reluctantly,  
but still, I call to you,

*come find me in the meaningless.*

Lay your hip to my hip.  
Push yourself into my history.  
Look me in the eyes  
as the clock runs out.

Be done with me  
and I will sing to the Robin,

“Let this be enough.”

## Luxury Linoleum

I saw you dying today.  
You didn't have much to say;  
no repetitions,  
no witted words,  
no comments about weather.

I guess you won't be outside anymore.

Our skins don't match.  
This mask is uncomfortable, but I didn't put on makeup and I guess it could be worse.  
Do you think the designer of this tile knew it would be a backdrop for endings?  
How does one decorate trauma?

Death is boring to watch.  
Is it rude to say that?  
You did raise me to not put on airs.

Not like her.

I mean, after the tears,  
the words of affection,  
accusation,  
contrition,  
it's just a fixed game of waiting.

We're waiting on you.  
To give up.

You woke up once, Dad;  
Looked me in the eyes even.  
Are you mad we're watching it?  
Are you dying in anger, too?

I said I would come back to see you,  
but you didn't want to make a fuss  
I suppose.  
That's okay, Dad.  
What's broken won't be fixed  
and I didn't want to be someone's little girl anymore.

I always said that when my father died, I would grieve more for the father I never had than the father I did. When he did indeed die, unexpectedly but not surprisingly, that assumption proved to be a flaw as I mostly ended up grieving the two versions of the father that *had* existed.

I had lived through two eras of him, and I became unraveled by my inability to reconcile the simultaneous truths of the two opposing sides of a complexly simple man. The forty-eight hours I spent coming and going into the sterile world of his hospital room were a burdened blur. We were given a tender mercy by the hospital staff, who allowed us unfettered access, but I didn't want to be there standing next to his bed. Despite being given the most coveted of pandemic privileges, my body stood resentfully in room 423.

By the time the medivac helicopter arrived at the hospital carrying his body that morning, his words and the ability to give them were already dead. So standing next to his muted frame, I knew the pointlessness as I whispered in his ear that I forgave him. Had he been awake and alert, the words would have fallen equally upon deaf ears. Yet, as I pleaded to him to forgive me for not being enough, I did not doubt the direct hit those words would land. As his will fought his body, I stood next to him fighting reason.

It would be easy to mistake me as a bitter daughter who held her father in contempt for his failings and absence. It would also be easy to misunderstand my tenderness towards him in his final years as the act of a devoted daughter repaying her dutiful parent. My father was the violent man who killed the innocence of our childhood, and yet he was also the man who had never laid anything but a tender touch upon his only daughter. I was his baby girl and that afforded me the absence of scoldings and bruises. I had been the "apple of his eye" who was the only one taught the secret joy of how to eat an onion like an apple—peanut butter being the trick. In my memory, I did not possess a catalog of cruel moments that chronicle my father's abuse of my mother, but rather just the overwhelming memory of being afraid of his anger. My father created fear within our home, the sort of commonplace fear of the era from which it resided. In that, my father was no different than the other men on our street. The words "*dad's home*" created a pit in the children's stomachs up and down the block. The gruffness and stewed irritation of their generation helped to inform the proceeding one with the learned skill of not being seen nor heard. I grew afraid of my father's attention, yet longed for the kind he was unable to give. I wanted him to be there, yet was always grateful for his absence. I was fully present though, in the dark gray of late winter as I was a spectator who stood around a hospital room watching death come for its visit. No one in that room believed he would recover. No miracles were prayed for as no one was more surprised my father had lived to the advanced age he had than him. We all knew he was going to allow what needed to happen, happen.

I stood there feeling the shift of the ground. I stood there feeling myself being shoved to the front of the line. With each new death, lineage takes one step to the right, leaving a child aware that they are now the adult in the room. I stood there as my father died, and without even thinking, I let go of my parent by becoming his. I straightened his blankets, played his favorite songs, and comforted him with well-intentioned lies, all while never disconnecting my touch from him. I had unilaterally decided that he must be touched at all times, that the warmth of our bodies must reassure him. I stood there, not knowing which version of my father I was letting go of; the one that was always in a state of rage inspired by my mother's confidence or the pacified one reflective of my stepmother's quiet grace. I stood there longing for the benign conversations



about the weather, knowing they were his way of saying he loved me. I stood there wishing I could make my father laugh one last time by using the wit that had been passed down like a coveted heirloom. I stood there wishing to hear his sing-songy tone as he called me “Suzy Q,” but mostly, I stood there annoyed that I had to participate and be present for the man who had always been missing.

I was not there when my father’s body stopped. I was at home, being a mother to my “baby girl.” I answered the phone call as I stood in the house in which I felt safe, the house that I had built. Yet, I stood haunted by the question I had been too afraid to ask him as I stood by his bed. Why was he so angry? Oh, wait...why had he *been* so angry?

# ELIZABETH POLLARD

## The Void

Content Warning: Death (not explicit), mention of suicide

My mind feels as if it is buried inside itself, and I feel like I am being torn apart. Concrete crumbles and quiet crunching sounds echo through me as I sway like a ragdoll. I sense my body soar. Just as quickly, quietness engulfs my surroundings. “What happened? Where am I?”

*No one answers back.*

Despite my best efforts, my feet can’t find the floor. I’m aware of tightness around my waist. A safety rope cinched so tight it is impossible to get my fingers beneath. It’s useless to try. I think I’m hanging, that’s one thing I do understand. “Oh God, what is this? There’s nothing down here!”

Incapable of forcing myself to open my eyes to see my new reality, my mind begins to drift back to childhood. An image of a young boy in a mud-stained white shirt and torn jeans. Fooling around near the well in the backyard. Always warned not to play near it. Curiosity got the best of my six-year-old self as it frequently did. In front of me, I hold a small metal car in my hand. As the vehicle races along the rough sides of the well, I produce loud engine sounds with my lips. In the blink of an eye, the car drops from my grasp. I yelp.

“Oh bunny, losing your toys again. Lemme check.” My sister walks calmly towards me as a sly smile spread across her face. She kneels and pokes her head over the side of the well in search of the lost car. Her arm rests against mine, warm from the heat of the day. Despite becoming a teenager this year, she is my safe place. She feels like sunshine.

“There it is! Don’t expect it back in one piece, but I’ll get it. Be more careful with your things!” she scolds. She scans the backyard quickly and her gaze settles on a stick that has fallen from a nearby tree and retrieves it. She lays her slim body on the rocky side of the well, unaware of the fact that the drop is almost 100 feet. Under her weight, the bricks collapse. My heart races as I watch her plummet down and down and down. My six-year-old brain can’t comprehend what’s happened. “Where are you, Sarah?”

“Sarah! Sarah!”

I shout over and over until my voice grows hoarse. I build up the courage to peek over the side of the well. Darkness greets me. There is no response. Only a deafening silence. I take off running. I have to do something to help Sarah. As soon as I reach the woodshed, I survey the walls. I grab a rope and tie it tight around my waist and then the large oak tree. Without a moment's hesitation, I push myself over the edge of the cliff to begin my descent into the darkness. I begin to lower myself. As soon as my feet touch the side of the damp rock wall, they begin to slip. For what seemed like minutes, I free-fall until the rope tightens and jerks me to a halt. Hanging in the darkness. I scream until my throat no longer works.

The next thing I remember is waking up in my bed, the bright moonlight peeking through my curtains illuminating the small room. Woken up to the sound of my parents howling my sister's name.

After that, I couldn't sleep with the lights off. Still can't.

Forever blaming myself for what happened.

My consciousness starts running again at the present moment. My greatest fear is realized.

"Sam, where are you? I can't see shit!"

Sam is my coworker. We came to the platform to fix a fuse, another mundane task at this mundane job. Sam is just a lazy douchebag that makes me do all the work. Although he is a worthless human being, he is my friend. His ironic sense of humor has helped me overcome the trauma that I experienced during my childhood. Particularly, as he describes it, my irrational fear of darkness and deep falls in the dark. Who the hell wouldn't be afraid of that, I always ask him.

The darkness surrounds me with its cold embrace. When I reach up and feel my eyes that I realize that I'm covered in thick dust. After sweeping my eyes with the back of my hand, I open them. I still can't see a thing in the all-consuming blackness. "Sam, Sam, please answer!"

*Pssst, psssstttt.*

It's the radio. It keeps making a weird buzzing static sound.

*Maybe this damn radio got smashed.*

I fumble to unlatch the radio from the clip on my belt. It feels like it's in one piece. "Hey! Is somebody there? I fell off the platform!" No one answers the radio. I keep changing channels but all I hear is static. I don't even remember putting the safety rope around my waist. It hurts my skin as it digs deeper and deeper. Feeling like I am being cut in half.

*Oh my God. I am in the void.*

I don't know how long I've been hanging. Just waiting. For something. Time must keep moving. I didn't even think to grab my flashlight before coming down here. It wouldn't have done much good anyway. "Help! Help me! I don't want to die!" The oxygen is escaping from my lungs. I can't breathe or think.

My mind flashes to my last moments with Sam before descending onto the platform. Two middle-aged guys ambled through dense pine trees in twilight. The busy sounds of the forest grew quiet as we approached the pitch-black dome. Its immense size blocks out the trees and sunlight. Artificial and man made in stark contrast to its surroundings.

Humans have been warned for hundreds of years that they have been destroying the planet. They were right about the end of the world. Just not in the way they expected. We had always assumed it would be the decimation of the ozone layer that would lead to our downfall. We didn't think about what was happening deep underground. Massive earthquakes caused entire cities to disappear. Gravity is the glue that holds everything together. Or had held everything together. It took years to discover a solution.

Enormous domes were constructed throughout the world with engines that produced artificial gravity to prevent earthquakes. In these domes, platforms were built to access the

engines for repair. If a fuse blew or a displacement happened, the layers could shift by millimeters and produce an earthquake of terrific magnitude. That's my job. Fixing the engine's fuckups before Armageddon. No pressure.

"You know John, I don't think we're alone here on the platforms," Sam said while opening and reviewing the contents of his toolbox.

*Goosebumps rise on my forearms.*

Such an observation is out of character for him. Most days, his deepest thought was about what his wife was preparing for dinner.

"What are you babbling about? You know I'm the least superstitious person there is. Plenty of bad enough shit in the real world. There's no need to make it up or go looking for trouble. Let's get this fuse repaired and get the hell outta dodge." I replied abrasively.

"Haven't you caught on? The stories. There's no way they're all lying. Howling, babies crying, screams. Not just hearing things but seeing 'em too. Those are the ones that scare the piss out of me. Don't need my dead grandma sneaking up and goosing me on the platform..." Sam continued.

"Sam, it's the same bullshit every time. I've done this for ten years and haven't seen or heard anything." I reply sharply.

"Okay, okay. Even so, the void is creepy. We gotta keep our minds right. The second-shift guy Mike said that his flashlight stopped working when he was in the void. He shit his pants when the light went out. Ooof!" said Sam while swallowing his saliva.

That's the technical term we use, "the void," the nothingness under the platforms. It's hopeless to try to illuminate anything farther than a foot in front of you. The darkness seems to consume the light. Years ago, a Brazilian technician tripped over a cable left forgotten on the platform. When he fell into the void no sound was heard. His body never recovered. It would have been pointless to try.

*Kinda like it's pointless to try getting out of here now. I need to just cut this damn safety rope and end it.*

I count my slow breaths trying to keep myself together. The pain from the rope digging into my waist is agonizing. I feel a wetness spreading up my shirt and the rusty, sweet smell of blood. A comforting warmth settles throughout my body.

"Heyyyyy!" someone speaks in a breathy voice behind me.

I whip my dangling body around to look. Nothing but black.

"Where are youuuuu John?"

The voice sounds familiar, but I can't place it. My head feels fuzzy. My brain scrambled in the fall. "Sam! Is that you? Are you okay?" I whisper.

"I'm right hereee. Why don't you come downnn here."

"T-t-t-o where?" I stutter. That voice doesn't sound like Sam's. It sounds more feminine. Almost like a young girl.

*"Don't be afraid bunny. I have something special for you. Something you've been missing."*

Nothing. There is nothing. I can't even comprehend if I am upside down or right-side up. I don't know where "down here" is. Nothing makes sense. I think I am irrevocably losing my mind. I wait. The silence returns and lasts for what feels like hours.

*"VROOM VROOOOOM VROOM"* echoes loudly around me.

There are sounds coming from all around me. Something is inside of my head. Playing with my brain.

*"John...open your eyes."*

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" It is in my mind. All of this. If that thing speaks again, I swear I'll end it. I can't take this anymore.

*"Don't you know who I am? Open your eyes John...you're safe now."*

"Fuck you!" I fumble to pull the knife from my pocket. I can't handle this anymore. I saw the rope above my head blindly while my feet kick underneath me. This is taking too long.

*"John please, open your eyes."* The entity begs me.

Against my better judgment, I open my eyes. Just a peek. I almost piss myself. A glowing light illuminating a shape. There is a person. Or something in the shape of a person. But not just anyone. Her neck is broken, and her hanging head swivels from one side to the other while her lips move. She shimmers in the void, reaching out to me.

"This isn't happening! You're not real! Go away!" I can't escape. I can't do anything but scream and continue with the slow work of cutting the rope.

*"Take it bunny, your car. I've kept it for you all this time. Don't you want it? I told you I'd get it back for you."*

It would be quicker to slit my throat. That thing is no more than a few feet away.

"Sarah?"

*"I've missed you, John."*

"Oh, Sarah. I'm sorry for killing you, it happened by accident! A stupid accident! I was just a stupid kid. I knew better than to play by the well. You were the best sister. The very best. I'm so sorry Sarah." I cry at her with all the oxygen that is left in my lungs.

*"Silly bunny. It was never your fault. It happened quickly. Almost felt like flying. I forgive you all the same."*

A bright light from above illuminates my surroundings and Sarah disappears from my sight. The rope rips thread by thread as I continue to saw at it. I can now see that it is becoming thin. My arms are weak, but it will be over soon. I can be with Sarah. How she was before I saw her lifeless eyes and contorted body. Perfect and whole again.

"John! Can you hear me? Take this, grab the ladder!"

It's Sam! He's alive!

Or is it? Did I get him killed too?

An emergency ladder is dangling feet away from me. The desperation I felt moments earlier switches to a feeling of hopefulness. Maybe this isn't the end for me. I don't think Sarah would want it to be.

"You have to cut your rope and jump. Hurry!" screams Sam.

Now or never. I move my body to swing back and forth using the rope as a pendulum. I slash the last thread and jump. Then nothing.

Artificial light seeps through my closed eyes. It's too bright. I allow them to adjust to the harsh fluorescent lighting and open them. The shapes of plastic chairs and beds with metal frames begin to appear. The smell of antiseptic and sickness make me nauseous. "Well look who's awake. You're safe. They brought you in two days ago." A woman in blue scrubs appears at the foot of my bed speaking to me in a direct tone. A small flashlight in one hand moves around my eyes.

"What happened?" I ask. My own voice sounds foreign in my ears. My head is pounding. Close to imploding.

"It was a collapse. Fortunately, you ended up under the platform. A rescue team got you out. Their first successful rescue. You're a very lucky man." she says.

"And Sam?"

"He's in sound condition. He led the rescue. If you need anything tonight just press the call button." She says while grabbing a book from the nightstand next to my bed. The title grabs my attention, *Entering the Void; Myths and Legends*.

"Thanks," I murmur as I watch her flip off the lights. Her white shoes slide out of the room without a sound.

I realize my hand is clenched under the thin blanket. I bring it near my face to inspect the contents, a toy car. My heart swells. For the first time in twenty years, I feel comfort in the darkness. I can feel Sarah with me. Did I fabricate talking to her in my mind? Nonsense. If nothing else, I think my fear of the dark has been cured. Such a drastic remedy. There is something down there. While it may be different for each person there is something.

*The void was surely hell.*

# DEJA REID

## The Foundation Grows

the foundation Grows  
in Secrets Unknown—  
It's where the heart goes  
in the wind—it flows

it boats Down the stream  
one speaks so gently  
of beautiful things  
Waters & Rivers

# ELIJAH SEIBERT

## I Am

I am

I am a dandelion, standing on a hill.

I am eaten by a rabbit.

I begin again.

I am a rabbit, I have strayed too far from home.

I am hit by a truck.

I begin again.

I am an archaeopteryx, gliding through the forest.

A falling tree crushes me. Over eons my body will turn to kerogen, then to hydrocarbons, until it is used as fuel.

I begin again.

I am a tree, my trunk weakened by a lightning strike.

When I fall, I crush an animal beneath me.

I begin again.

I am a single celled organism, dormant for many epochs within the Oort cloud.

When the rock I cling to finds its way to a blue and green thing far away from home, I survive the heat of entry, but not the impact.

I begin again.

I am a student at a museum, reading the plaque under the remains of a petrified tree.

On my way home I am asked for my wallet, and the interaction does not end satisfactorily.

I begin again.

I am a cat in an alley, watching humans fight over paper.

I cannot keep warm during the coming months.

I begin again.

I am a maggot, eating my way through a dead cat with scores of my siblings.

I will become a common housefly, and live a fruitful life for twenty-nine days.

I begin again.

I am a horse, shooing away flies with my tail.

My leg was broken when the cart I was saddled to tipped.

I begin again.

I am the wife of a farmer, watching my child get lowered into the ground.



Later I find some old rope my husband keeps with the horses, and decide to join my daughter.  
My husband will bury me next to her, up on the hill.  
I begin again.

I am a dandelion, standing on a hill.

# KIAH WINTER

## A Green Earth

As I lie awake  
my mind begins  
and I wander  
to a not-so-special day.

The earth was green  
time stood still  
and we just walked  
your hand in mine.

There's a familiarity to be found  
in a smile such as yours.  
Upon a simple glance  
I've found a not-so-distant future  
waiting for us.

As I wander further  
I see a new day.  
The earth is green  
time stands still once more  
and I've found a home.

Continuing down the path  
painted in ivory  
you reach out your hand  
and our eyes meet.

It's you again  
It's always been you  
and we've arrived  
at our special day.

# CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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## Carlye Balsley

I am a sophomore at Miami University and expected to graduate in Spring 2025. I am currently a psychological science major with a thematic sequence in WGS 2 - Scholarly Studies of Gender and Sexuality. My ultimate goal is to get into the accelerated MSW program. With these degrees, I hope to open my own social justice hub for LGBTQ+ youth and individuals. In my free time, I enjoy reading, writing, crocheting, and baking.

I have been writing poetry since my freshman year of high school. In the last 5 years, I have amassed over 150 pages of poetry. My poetry is often derived from personal experience. For example, “A Contract to My Heart” is derived from my first true heartbreak. This poem presents the idea of love and heartbreak as a contract, one signed by both participants of the relationship. As for my poem entitled “Ocean,” the imagery is used to depict mental health and the struggles of bottling up and not processing unhealthy emotions. “Honey and Broken Glass” is meant to depict the idea of a perfect lover, the one that’s meant to be. This poem relates this person to a folktale: someone everyone talks about, and which haunts them, but doesn’t exist. I hope readers will take away a sense of relatability from my poems as they depict true human experiences and emotions.

## Candice Berryman

I am a 46 year old senior at Miami University. I have been married since 2004 and we have three kids.

Unfortunately, I lost my father in 2006. My Gram followed suit less than 6 months later. The dominos kept falling. I have my husband and kids, my brother and his family, my mom and my aunt. This poem speaks about things that were instilled into me that led me to become the woman I am today. It speaks about how I raise my own children. It speaks about love, remembrance, loss and most of all strength.

I suppose what I would like to share with anyone that reads my work...well, it would be a number of things. Cherish the little things. I don’t care how bad a day you are having, find one single silver lining and run with it. Don’t put off visits with those you love. We do not always have tomorrow. You can live your best life by remembering the lessons you learned from loved ones, whether you wanted to listen at the time or not. Commit those lessons, those smells, those moments to memory and pass them on. This is how we honor the life we were given.

## **Hailie Edwards**

I am an English Studies major expected to graduate in 2026. I love to read or write in the horror genre. The suspense and descriptions have always interested me. In my free time I'm usually at home relaxing with my cat, Wendigo. I really don't do much other than school work, hanging with friends, and personal time.

My story "A Little Unhinged" was a bit of a struggle to format. I kept going back and forth on how I wanted it to end. However, it worked out well. My inspiration for this piece is the overall toll a mental illness can have on a person, in this case schizophrenia. It is fiction and the main character's vision ties back to magic, but real people deal with similar experiences she has. I have always enjoyed describing eerie details to make my reader feel like they are on the edge of their seats. I want my reader to feel, see, taste, etc. what the main character does. So, I hope my readers enjoy the piece of fiction I have put together and maybe think about schizophrenia in a more open way. Thank you.

## **Austen Goodard**

I am an English Studies Major, and I am going to graduate this year in the spring, 2023. One of my biggest hobbies is creating stories in my free time, along with painting, and most recently sculpting. I have always been interested in creating something that can bring entertainment to another and am more drawn to stories than anything because they are a glimpse into another world, almost like they have a sort of magic themselves.

"What do you Fear" was my first real attempt at poetry outside of classes if I was to be honest with myself. When looking at poetry, I am always drawn to Edgar Allan Poe's work because they are usually dark and shocking, and this is what I tried to do. Poetry is also something that can hide meanings behind the lines and words, and this is also what drew me to write this poem. One of the main things I want readers to walk away from this is asking themselves the same question, What do you fear? I think that this is an interesting question and can provide an opportunity for readers to ponder life and think about their experiences.

## **Jacob Harding**

I am a Liberal Studies Major with a focus in Communications. I am currently a Junior and expect to graduate Spring of 2024 Anno Domini. I own a small music studio and pursue music creation. Thank you for this opportunity to publish in *Illuminati*. I have been a part of *Illuminati* since Fall of 2022 A.D., and appreciate seeing the publication process from behind the scenes and as a contributor.

I have been creating poetry for a few years now, and hold a daily practice of writing a poem a day. I enjoy writing about my own perspective of the world around me. For the prose, I followed a similar routine, writing a few paragraphs of prose each day about thoughts in a seemingly stream of consciousness style. As for the art, I enjoy taking photographs and manipulating them into otherworldly images.

## **Benjamin LeFevers**

I'm a senior at Miami Regionals graduating this May, majoring in English Studies with Minors in Film Studies, and Creative Writing. I love film and music, so I spend my friend time working on music and watching films or reading about film history. I love writing; I find it therapeutic and hard to stop once you get going, making it something that feels like an escape but is far from it.

When it comes to writing poetry or fiction my process is never truly consistent as I find that somewhat limiting. I avoid reading past works of mine and just try to put myself in an environment or head space that is solely engaged in the current aesthetic of the work. Beyond that I don't like to talk too much about individual pieces, so all I'll say is I enjoy using the fantastical to convey my opinions on life and what I love or feel needs criticizing. I love imagery, using it in writing and deriving meaning from the surreal in life. I think that's what's great about writing; we can all express unique personal perceptions in strange ways for readers. The three works selected for this issue use a lot of the qualities I find in history which always feels slightly surreal and intriguing to me.

## **Paige MacKenzie**

I am an English-Creative Writing major undergraduate at Miami University. I am currently a freshman (class of 2026). My first and foremost hobby, passion, and most pursued endeavor is writing. I am almost always writing whenever and wherever. In my free time, I also enjoy painting, cross-stitching, rewatching *Bob's Burgers* for the millionth time, listening to music, or once again writing.

Before anything else, I want to thank you for taking the time to read my work. I submitted to *Illuminati* not having any expectations and I'm so grateful for the publication opportunity and for every person my words have the possibility to reach. My two poems that are in this issue are very near and dear to my heart. The inspiration for "Last Rites" came to me when I had to reread *Hamlet* for an intro to drama course and as always found more inspiration from the life and death of Ophelia. "Last Rites" is about how the terrible grief of death can be transformed into a celebration of honor, and life, and sending loved ones onto their next adventure rather than saying a dreadful goodbye. It is also a testament that life is personal, and we should always cherish what makes ourselves and others unique. That is how we celebrate a life well lived. This piece also explores what I want others and my readers to know about me, and how we all eventually die, but art and creativity do not. My other piece, "The Girl," focuses on the loss of our inner child in lieu of life and adulthood, and how sometimes we make the mistake to ignore that hurt child that lives inside of us, when our past selves are always by our side, and we should learn to cherish and make space in our lives for the person we used to be, and allow vulnerability to shine through. Thank you once again for reading my work and for exploring these fractions of my soul that are my words. I hope you enjoy it!

## **Makayla Maldonado**

I am a senior here at Miami University. I've been working towards my Bachelors in English Studies and am currently wrapping up my creative writing minor. Outside of academics, I write stories, watch films, listen to numerous music genres, venture into video games, read horror novels, and cosplay. Furthermore, I spark my creativity, or express it, through these hobbies. I often write fiction, but I also tend to tie real-life experiences or encounters into my works, such as depression, anxiety, family issues, and various forms of trauma. On top of this, I tend to write through the lens of characters with these issues as well as those regarding expression of identity.

In this edition of *Illuminati: A Journal of the Arts*, two of my pieces were selected, which is very exciting for me. "Deception Through the Messiah" and "Shielded by Grey Ribbon" are pieces that have sparked from experiences that I've gone through. Although they're fictional, both works are based on real-life experiences that have continued to affect me through the years. Given this, they were easy to write. Furthermore, it was relieving to write these experiences out and allow various characters to experience these events through their own lenses. "Deception Through the Messiah" is about religion and how these practices hinder some people, especially when it comes to their ties with family and how people identify themselves. In other words, religion often limits people from being themselves and this is something that is explored throughout this piece. On the other hand, "Shielded by Grey Ribbon" is based on Glioblastoma, which is something that my grandmother fought for two years. I did online learning for two years

in order to help take care of her. She passed in July, and I've been slowly adjusting to a new normal, and this story has elements that reflect some events that happened throughout the years.

## **Stephen Martin**

I am a singer/songwriter who resides in Dayton, OH. I will be graduating from Miami University Regionals this spring with a B.A. in Liberal Studies and a minor in English Studies. I teach people to drive commercial vehicles for a living, but this might change. I have a passion for creative writing.

The two poems in this issue were originally self-published on my blog at [www.bluedragonblog.com](http://www.bluedragonblog.com). 'Lambs of War' is self-published on Amazon, and appears in a collection of short stories called *Book 1 A Collection Of Stories From AuthorWorld Connect*, which is also available on Amazon. I plan to become more active on my blog, as I will have more time for creative writing very soon.

## **Marco Mulato**

As an aspiring graphic designer, my goals when I create art is for the sole purpose of entertainment. Growing up, I often enjoyed making doodles and playing with colors. It wasn't until high school when I decided I wanted to make designs that people would use and to get my stuff out there. Currently I work on Photoshop Manipulation for designs for stuff like posters and shirts.

"Night Owl" is a representation of the emotions dealt with when suffering from insomnia. I feel like this could resonate with a handful of college students who have to stay up to finish an assignment or to study for an exam the next morning.

## **Elizabeth Pollard**

I am a Small Business Management major in my third year. As a non-traditional student and Army veteran, I try to take advantage of all the opportunities that Miami has to offer. This includes being recently accepted into the CLAAS Honors program. Most of my time is focused on trying to find a balance between family life and classwork. I enjoy spending time growing indoor plants, watching my son play baseball, and taking care of our small menagerie of animals

at home including chickens, ducks, and dogs. I feel like I've spent most of my life making it up as I go along.

Before taking a creative writing course, I had no idea that I enjoyed writing. The process of crafting this short story is never-ending as I continue to edit and improve my writing. This story was inspired by holding on to things that were never ours to carry, I hope you enjoy it.

## **Elijah Seibert**

I am an English Studies major, with a minor in Creative Writing, with plans on graduating by the end of 2023. I am constantly reading. I primarily gravitate towards fantasy/science fiction or comic book series. I myself am pretty mundane, so I try to rely on my writing to be more interesting.

I think my original inspiration for this piece was the concept of reincarnation, and the philosophy that we are all just the universe experiencing itself. I thought about life and death, and how maybe such things are not bound to the concept of time like we are. So one day you can be a rabbit in the modern day, and still be reborn as a prehistoric creature from millions of years ago. Or perhaps something not of this Earth at all. I also wanted there to be a thorough line from each incarnation of this nameless "I", something to tether each facet to the next. Some are more obvious, like the rabbit and the dandelion. While some are more tangential, like the archaeopteryx becoming the oil which is in the truck that kills the rabbit. I think it's more interesting when things are connected. And by starting and ending the piece with the same line, I think that helps add to the whole "circle of existence" aspect I was going for.

## **Kiah Winter**

I am a junior at Miami University, currently working towards my bachelor's degree in English Studies. After graduation in the spring of 2024, I plan on pursuing a career in editing. Writing has always been a source of life for me and a passion that I wish to share with the world. I also enjoy singing and playing the piano. My favorite author is C.S. Lewis. The inspiration for my poem "A Green Earth" is my fiancé Jake, as we plan to get married in the spring of 2023. I look forward to starting this new chapter in my life and every joy that comes along with it. I hope that you enjoy reading my poem just as much as I enjoyed writing it.



