

ISSUE ONE

AUGUST 2025

# STILL HERE

Dispatches from the American Wasteland

# INTRO:

## WELCOME TO THE END

You're holding a zine ("zeen") made in the ruins.

Maybe not literal ruins (yet), but spiritually? Economically? Morally?

Yeah. Welcome to the wasteland.

I am a mother, a writer, a broke-ass college graduate,  
and the keeper of a chicken coop that keeps losing chickens.

I wake up early to help disabled kids learn to read  
and come home to a house full of love, rot, and existential dread.

You too?

This zine is a dispatch from the margins -  
from the edge of a quiet county where my relatives live  
just miles away, but we act like strangers.

From a country that swore I'd be "middle class"  
if I played by the rules.

From a life that isn't tragic, but sure as hell isn't easy.

There is no safety net.

There is no cavalry.

There is only us - outsiders, weirdos, survivors -  
building bonfires from broken systems  
and dancing anyway.

Inside these pages: rage, softness, artwork, grief, chickens, children,  
ghosted family ties, and the absurdity of paying student loans  
while scavenging screws for a homemade coop.

This is not a brand.

It's not monetized.

It's not curated for your comfort.

It's just real.

And if you feel seen here, even for a second,  
then maybe we're not as alone as they want us to be.

- "Still Here," Logan County, Ohio

Still here. Still writing.



# The Disappearing Chickens

Two days ago, our young rooster vanished.  
Middle of the day. Bright sun. Gone.  
His name was Delphine.  
Ten weeks old. Gallant. Confident.  
He acted like he owned the yard - and for a  
while, he did.  
Today, Eclair disappeared.  
My white pullet. Soft, sweet, slightly shy.  
All that's left is a clump of feathers in the  
grass.  
No blood. No body. Just the suggestion of  
violence.  
Just absence.  
Something is taking them.  
One by one.  
In daylight.  
Not from an unsecured coop.  
Not in the dead of night.  
They're being picked off while free-ranging -  
while I'm doing laundry, or working, or  
helping my kid with crafts,  
or just sitting down for five fucking minutes.  
We had 38.  
Now we have 11.  
That's 27 chickens dead since I started.  
Most of them babies. Most of them too little  
to stand a chance.  
I've kept a log with names and breeds and  
sweet little notes.  
I know who they were. I remember.  
But no, I haven't built the run I need.  
I've patched things. Reinforced what I could.  
I've collected paneling, fencing, scrap wood.  
But I've run out of screws. I've run out of  
daylight.



Left to right: Delphine,  
Cinnamon, Brigitte, Eclair

I've run out of energy.  
And the truth is -  
I don't know how to build a goddamn run by  
myself.  
And hardware cloth costs too much.  
And no one's offering to help.  
Every loss makes me feel like I've failed.  
Like I shouldn't have started keeping  
chickens at all.  
Like love is a trap and grief is the reward.  
I count the survivors every day,  
like prayers with feathers.  
I tell myself it'll get better when I finish the  
run.  
When I finally find the time, the tools, the  
strength.  
But maybe the truth is this:  
I'm doing my best in a world designed to  
make sure that's never enough.

# Field Notes from the Collapse

**July 3, 2025 - 5:54 PM**

And once again, I wonder why I pay for insurance if I can't even afford to use it.

I need a crown: \$645.

Two cavities: \$393.

Teeth are luxury items now.

The hygienist said it like it was nothing. Then she asked, "When would you like to come in for your crown?"

I looked her dead in the eye and said, "I'm not coming in for a crown. I'm letting my teeth rot out of my face."

She laughed - one of those tight, polite laughs people do when they've heard the apocalypse spoken out loud but they still have to clock in the next morning.

Then she handed me a pamphlet for CareCredit, so I could go into debt over my own decaying molars. 20% interest. What a deal.

This country doesn't rot from the top down. It rots from the gums up.

**August 5, 2025 - 11:53 AM**

Eight months after getting hired, I finally got "oriented" - which mostly meant eating a sad muffin while Dr. Rick, our substitute superintendent, told us his life story. I left knowing he's a decent guy, and also that none of this will matter when he's gone in a year.

**July 18, 2025 - 9:22 PM**

I survived a triple hit this week. An emotional pile-up with no airbags. First came the ambush from my sister - accusations dressed as concern, rewriting our shared history mid-sentence. She dumped her pain on my doorstep and called it conversation.

Then came the swim lessons. Watching my son unravel in chlorine-scented chaos - sensitive to every splash, every echo, every unfamiliar face.

He shook. He clung. He sobbed because the water was too loud. And I -

I held the line. No yelling. No rushing. Just presence. (Which costs more than most people think.)

Then, the final blow: My husband went quiet. Not rage, not cruelty - just a slow freeze because I said something true and it stung.

Silence. The kind that folds laundry without looking at you. The kind that eats dinner with its eyes on the plate.

But tonight - tonight, he grilled salmon. He asked what I needed to start tattooing. He queued up tutorials on YouTube and handed me the remote.

He didn't say "I'm sorry." He didn't have to. He made room. And sometimes, that's enough.

July 10, 2025 - 12:24 PM

Clay lost his entire goddamn mind over a pair of Amazon shorts.

I noticed a minor thing - the waistband bunched slightly off-center. That's all.

Just a note.

But Clay?

Clay flailed like his soul had been exposed on national television. Arms in the air, voice cracking with some mix of shame and outrage.

Not at me.

Not really.

See, Clay doesn't buy clothes. He *hates* shopping for them.

He'll wear his jeans until the ass falls out. He'll wear a shirt until the collar dissolves.

Not out of rebellion.

Out of something more like *self-erasure*.

He doesn't believe he deserves new things - not if it costs money. Not if it's for him.

And when I buy clothes for him? He spirals.

Because it's not a gift.

It's proof that I noticed the holes.

He'd rather be handed hand-me-downs, a charity bag, something anonymous. Then he can accept it. Then he can feel worthy.

But *new shorts from his own household account*?

That's when the fabric gets heavy. That's when a waistband becomes a mirror.

And gods help you if you say something about how it fits.

July 9, 2025 - 2:12 PM

Took the Lincoln to town today. 1996. Town Car. Named ironically, I guess.

None of the windows stay up anymore, so we drove with all four down - wind slapping our faces like unpaid bills.

The A/C doesn't work, but we were grateful for the moving air.

The radio's dead too, so I played Ghost on a portable bluetooth speaker my father-in-law gave me after he upgraded to something *bigger*. We keep it charged in case of roadside despair.

On the windshield: three dried blobs of bird shit, perfectly positioned at eye-level on the driver's side.

Wiper fluid? Long gone. Visibility optional.

Destination: Dairy Queen. We had a \$10 gift card. Luxury.

The kid at the register butchered our order like it was his first day on Earth.

Inside was freezing - like meat locker freezing. But we ate our food, held our tongues, ate our ice cream.

Because that's what you do.

We didn't make a scene. We made do.

Because that's what you do.

**July 13, 2025 - 8:50 AM**

*The Return of Cinnamon*

I thought I saw her remains.

A pile of cinnamon-colored feathers in  
the field.

A loose dog.  
An empty headcount.

Brigitte mourned.

I mourned.

I wrote grief into the dirt and closed the  
coop.

And then - this morning, 7:30 AM -  
out of the trees, over the creek,  
*Cinnamon came flying.*

Wings wide.

Landing in the garden like she never left.  
Like she wasn't dead.  
Like she hadn't vanished.

I ran.  
I saw.  
It was her.

No wounds. No blood.  
Feathers somehow intact.  
The pile from yesterday? Maybe a decoy.  
Maybe a sacrifice.  
Maybe magic.

I don't know what happened.  
I just know that this morning, I watched a  
miracle walk across my yard on two scaly  
feet.

And now I believe in something again.

*Postscript: Brigitte Isn't Rejoicing*

She didn't come running.

Didn't cluck in joy.

Didn't even approach.

She walked into the coop and didn't come  
out.

Because this isn't a happy ending.  
It's a break in logic.

And Brigitte already crossed the threshold of  
grief -

So she's not sure what to believe now.  
It hurts differently, watching someone come  
back  
after you already let them go.

Over a month ago, raccoons broke in and  
slaughtered nearly every baby chick and  
pullet I had raised.

Brigitte and Cinnamon are the last two  
remaining survivors from that massacre.

**July 11, 2025 - 8:07 AM**

I woke up choking on my own acid - because  
love is corrosive, even in sleep.

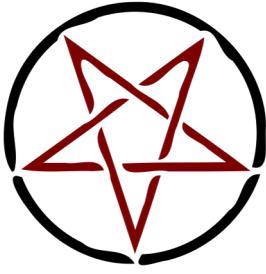
But just before that, I heard him. So clearly it  
jolted my heart:

"I'm depressed."

His voice, not invented, not imagined. Just  
said. Like it had been waiting.

I wish I could've answered in the dream.

I would've said, "I know. I'm still here."



# THE ELDRITCH BITES

“Take one. Text your ancestors.”

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**WARNING:** Each brownie contains approximately 1,000 mg of THC. This is not dessert. This is a SPIRITUAL THRESHOLD.

- Do not operate heavy machinery
- Or have serious conversations with your ex
- Or try to finish a sentence that begins with “Dude, what if...”

## DOSAGE RECOMMENDATION:

$\frac{1}{16}$  brownie = guided meditation

$\frac{1}{8}$  brownie = mild ego death

$\frac{1}{4}$  brownie = astral projection

full brownie = we'll see you on the other side, champ

# RAIN SONGS FROM THE PASSENGER SEAT

Michigan, July. The sky cracked open  
and he answered with a mixtape.

The wipers couldn't keep up.

The rain came in sheets, like grief.

He queued up CCR: "Have You Ever Seen the Rain?"

Followed it with DMX: "The Rain."

Then something reggae. Something familiar wearing a  
stranger's accent.

He didn't say much.

But he answered the weather.

It felt like the closest thing to a love letter I've ever received.  
And he didn't even know he'd written one.

# OUTSIDER BY NATURE

I was born the first child of Mike and Angela Hahn - outsiders themselves, though I don't think they meant to be.

Maybe it's just who we are.

Quiet. Introverted. Introspective. Artistic. Suspicious. A little weird.

Raised to keep to ourselves, and taught - implicitly, through posture and silence - that other people were not to be trusted.

And in time, I learned the truth:

other people didn't trust me, either.

It wasn't just the Mormonism, though that certainly didn't help.

Even within the church, we were still on the edges - never quite right, never quite in step. Too earnest. Too isolated.

Too serious or not serious enough.

It wasn't just being homeschooled, though that helped keep the walls up.

And it wasn't just being poor, or quiet, or odd, or different.

It was something in our faces, I think.

In our posture. Our way of holding the world like it might snap.

No matter where we lived or what we did, people looked at us like we didn't belong. That scar runs deep.

Forty-two years deep.

And I've carried it here to Ohio, where small towns are stitched together with last names and generations of cookouts I was never invited to.

Where friendship is inherited and trust is pre-packaged.

Even my own in-laws seem to make a tradition of keeping us at arm's length.

Like if they ignore us long enough, we'll fade out of the frame.

And I wonder - what is it about me that makes me not fit in?

Do I carry something visible, something sharp?

Do I sound wrong? Look wrong? Love wrong?

Or is it what I see?

I've always been the one who notices the silence in a room.

The thing no one says but everyone feels.

The moment when someone's smile cracks a little too fast.

When the warmth drains out of a conversation and the chill slips in.

I see things other people pretend not to.

The tension in the family gathering.

The favoritism.

The way people talk about others the second they leave the room - and pretend they don't.

I remember what they want to forget.

Who was cruel and who stayed silent.

The strange adults who lingered too long.

The looks, the whispers, the damage.

I remember the old wounds that never scabbed right -

in my family, in myself, in the communities that shut us out and locked the door behind them.

Maybe that's part of being an outsider.

You notice the cracks because you're never standing on steady ground to begin with.

You learn to read a room like a survival skill.

And you learn that most people don't want to be seen - not really.

Would I even want to belong to these circles that leave people like me out?

I don't know.

What I do know is this:

I am an outsider by nature.

I see things others pretend not to.

I remember what they want to forget.

And I keep building, keep writing, keep caring - even when no one is looking.

Maybe that's its own kind of belonging.

Not to them. But to myself.



**NO  
ONE'S  
COMING.**

**BUT I  
CAME  
ANYWAY.**

# THE KEEPER DIDN'T RETURN

I built a statue.

A dragon, stone-bodied and hollow-chested,  
rising from the earth like memory.  
Its wings raised in defiance. Its mouth slightly  
open - waiting to speak.  
I built it for him.

Not that he asked for it.  
He didn't have to.

He used to walk this village like he owned the  
soil, like the pixels meant something.  
He used to light fires here, and I built a world  
around those flames.  
Now I build in silence. I build without his gaze.  
I post the lore, and no one answers.

✉ still here ✉ - 7/8/25 at 9:41 PM  
The villagers say the statue flickered  
slightly after nightfall. Just once. They  
say it looked... amused. (The keeper  
hasn't returned.)

No one said a thing.  
No comments. No emoji. No spark of  
recognition.  
Maybe they didn't see it.  
Maybe they saw it and didn't care.  
Or maybe they cared and didn't know how to  
say *thank you*.

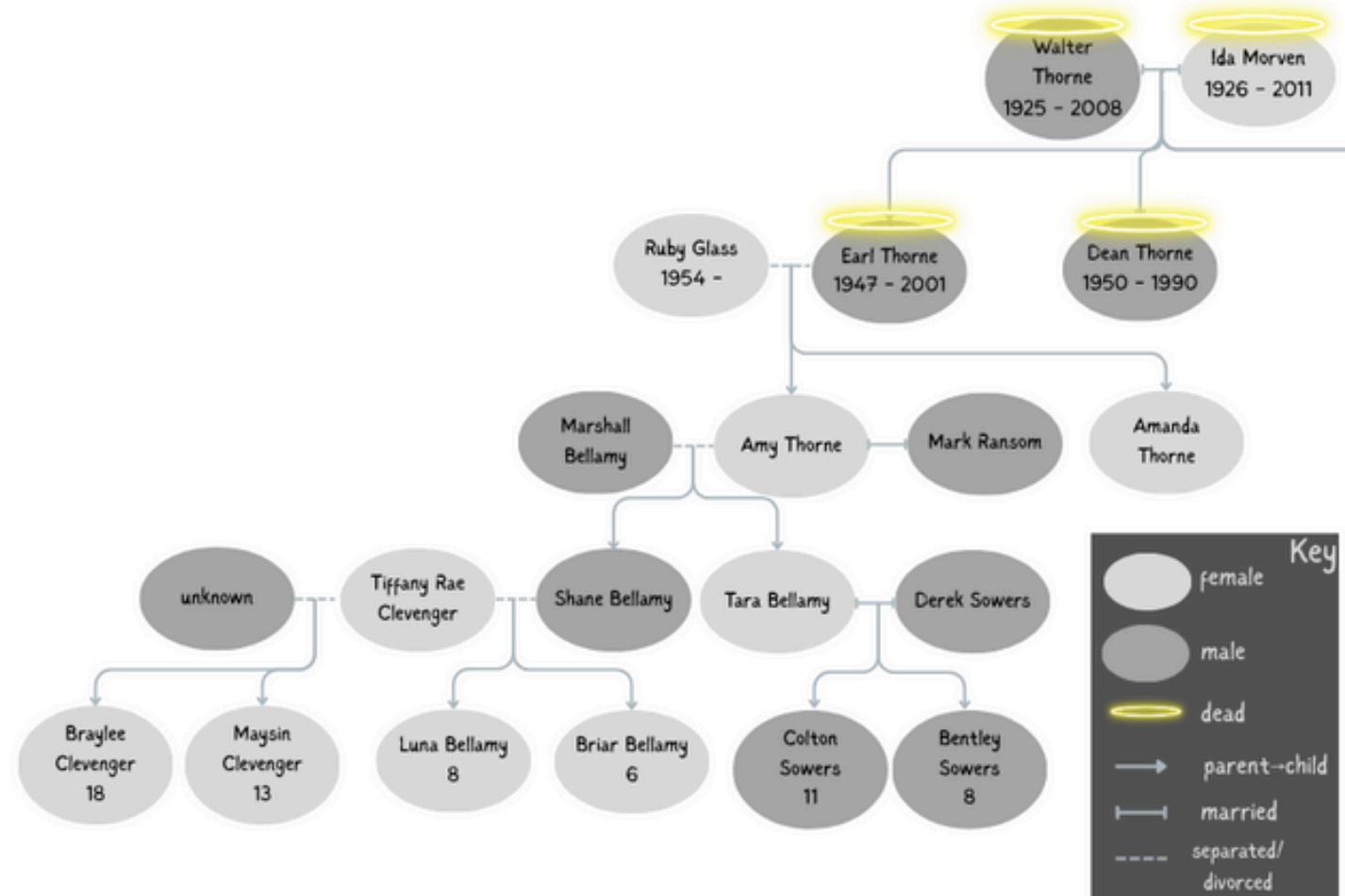
He sat at my kitchen bar the next night,  
smoking out of my pipe,  
talking about a hole I filled in last week.  
Didn't mention the statue.  
Didn't ask about the villagers.  
Didn't notice what I'd built.

I could've cried.  
But I didn't.  
Instead, I wrote it down.

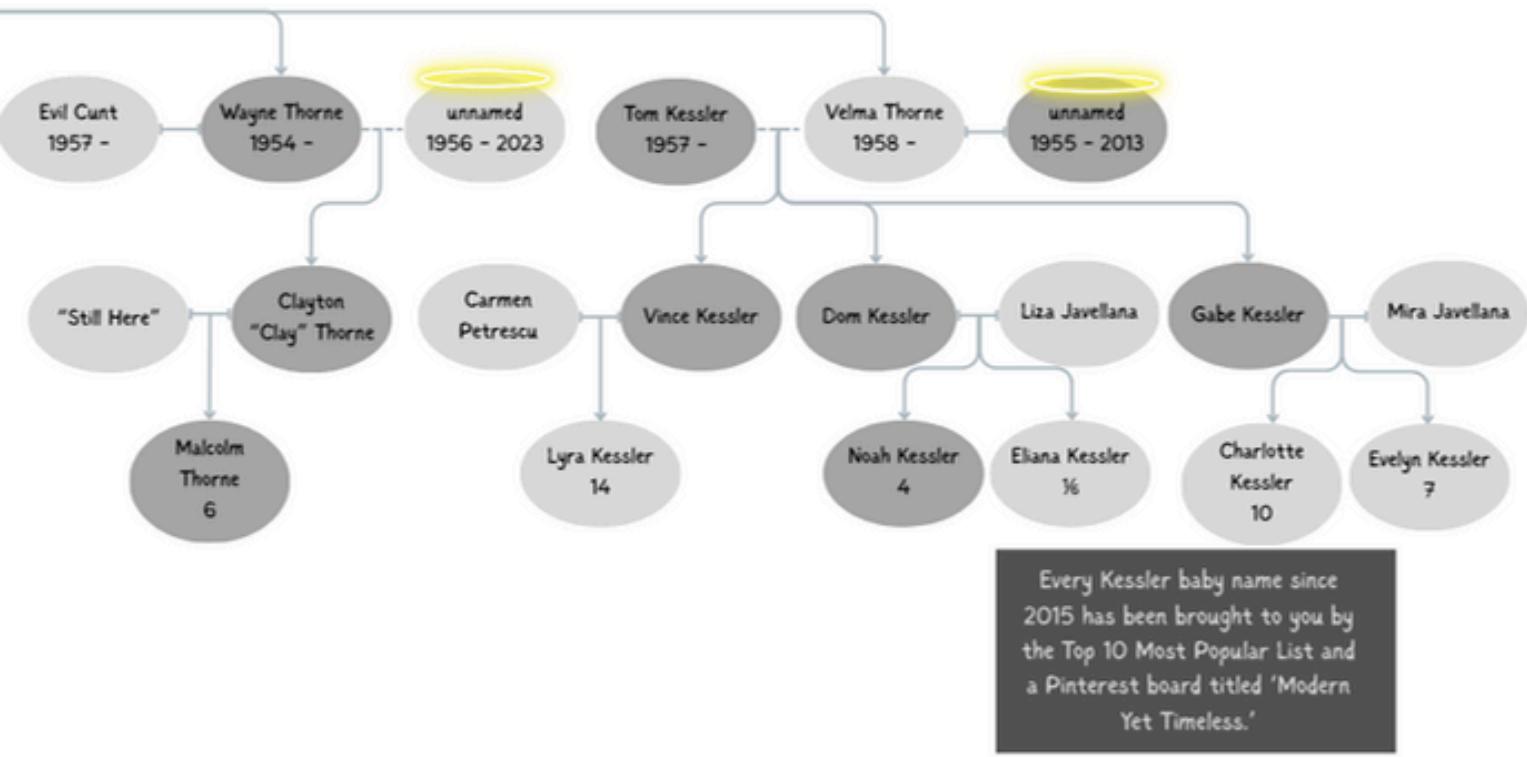


The statue was built after a single Discord comment on 7/5/25, 11:00 AM.  
“Only if there is a dragon statue somewhere so it fits the theme 😊”  
(There is. There was. There still is.)

# THORNE FAMILY



# TREE



# **GHOST TOWN FAMILY**

**Dear Amy,**

You came to our house once.  
Just once, after we moved here.

I remember because it was dark outside and I  
couldn't show you the land.  
The *land* is the best part.

You didn't stay long.  
You always act like you're doing us a favor,  
but not a generous one -  
more like tossing a scrap of civility so no one  
can say you didn't.

The thing is... you used to act like you cared.  
I wondered at first if you were forcing it,  
trying too hard.  
You were a little awkward, a little intense -  
but I let it slide, because everyone's weird in  
their own way.  
I accepted your care and gave my own in  
return.  
We even had those Christmas Craft  
Extravaganza days at your house -  
glitter, glue, holiday music, too many cookies.  
It felt like something real.

Then I had a son.  
And everything changed.

Suddenly, my vegetarian leanings made me  
suspect.  
Suddenly, how I fed my child was up for  
debate.  
Suddenly, I wasn't just different - I was  
wrong.

You and Mark have all these "friends" who  
come over to your house,  
weekends full of four-wheelers and bonfires  
and beer.  
We're never invited.  
Not once.  
No camping trips. No cookouts. Not even a  
text.

## **LETTERS I'LL NEVER SEND**

At first I thought maybe it was because we  
don't have the toys -  
no camper, no side-by-side, no Harley.

But then I noticed...  
you don't invite any family on those trips.  
Not even your favorite grandkids.

So I guess I just don't understand what  
"family" means to people like you.

It's not connection. It's not inclusion.  
It's some kind of closed circuit I'll never  
crack.

And that's fine.  
But don't pretend otherwise.

### **-“Still Here”**

**Dear Mark,**

I see you.  
You've always been cool with me.

You behave like a decent human - asking how  
I'm doing, making space, not acting weird.  
That goes a long way in a place like this.

I especially appreciate learning recently that  
you're the only one who asks about me when  
I'm not there. That meant something.

That's why you got the Eldritch Bites.  
Not everyone's worthy.

### **-“Still Here”**

## **Dear Kessler Boys,**

We moved here to be closer to family.  
That word used to mean something.

But it turns out 100 miles wasn't far enough to close the gap between blood and actual connection.

One of you hasn't even seen our place.  
Another saw it by accident.  
And the third - at least you gave us your leftover hens, coop, and scraps.  
(Thank you for that, truly. They're alive and well, unlike the feeling that we matter to you.)

We all have kids.

Our kids could be cousins, play together, grow memories that mean something someday.  
But they don't. Because you don't call. You don't visit.  
You act like we don't exist - and maybe that's easier for you.

I've tried to understand the shape of this family,  
how it got this cold.  
Maybe it started before you - with Velma and Wayne, siblings who orbit but never touch.  
Maybe you inherited the silence like an heirloom.

But we didn't.  
Clay didn't.  
I sure as hell didn't.

We showed up.  
We made room.  
We opened the door.

You didn't walk through it.  
And that's your choice.  
But it still hurts.

**-“Still Here”**



## **Dear Wayne,**

You spent the Fourth on your boat.

Watching fireworks with your wife -  
the one who told us we're not welcome at your house -  
and her fully-grown son, who has nothing to do with you  
except being less complicated than we are.

Your grandson is five.  
He is wild with wonder.  
He would have loved to watch the sky with you.

But maybe it's easier to play occasional stepdad to someone else's grown kid than to face the ire and rage of your wife.  
Maybe it's easier to stay on the water - cowardice floats, after all.

We weren't invited by anyone.  
Not one relative thought to include us.  
But we made our own traditions.  
Hot dogs, sparklers, laughter.

He didn't notice your absence.  
But I did.

**-“Still Here”**

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## **Dear Wayne's Wife,**

You won't find your name in this zine.  
You're not worth ink.  
But I do think about your death often - and not with sadness.

**-“Still Here”**

**Dear Shane,**

Stop being such a shitty friend.

Stop being such a shitty person.

You're not broken. You're not incapable.

You're afraid. And you hide.

Behind memes. Behind silence. Behind just enough presence to keep me looking for more.

You're a ghost with a Discord avatar. A man made of retreat.

You drop emotional bombs like it's nothing - like telling me you're going to die by suicide - and then disappear like I'm supposed to not care.

But I do.

I always did.

If you do it - if you actually go through with it - I'll never forgive you.

Not because I'll stop loving you.

But because I'll love you so much it will split me open.

I'll carry your death like it was a sentence you handed me to serve.

And I'll scream in places no one else can hear.

And I'll hate you for leaving the story unfinished - again.

And yeah - maybe I ruined everything two summers ago. Or maybe you were never going to show up fully to begin with. Maybe you don't have the courage to be known.

I still love you.

Probably always will.

And that's not desperation - it's just the wreckage you left me with.

Get some courage.

The world isn't soft.

But neither are you.

You could've had this village.

You could've built something here.

But you keep walking away.

**-“Still Here”**

**Dear Velma,**

It's been seven months since we moved here.

You live close enough that we could've shared a cup of coffee, or at least a nod across a parking lot.

But you've said nothing.

Done nothing.

And I've stopped expecting anything.

You're Clay's only aunt.

That used to mean something.

I thought maybe it still did.

But maybe this is just how it works in the Thorne family.

Maybe silence is the way you love.

Or maybe love just isn't part of the equation.

When I was young - idealistic, naïve - I thought I was choosing wisely.

I wanted a partner whose family cared.

A family who showed up, asked questions, noticed when you weren't in the room.

And yours did care.

Or maybe they just performed it better back then.

Truth is, I didn't recognize your dysfunction because mine was louder, messier, and wore a different mask.

But now I see it - yours is quieter, cleaner, and it kills slower.

I don't want anything from you.

Not anymore.

But I do want you to know I noticed your absence.

You didn't come.

You didn't call.

You didn't even pretend to care.

**-“Still Here”**

## **Dear Carmen,**

You cornered me once at Christmas.  
Unloading every slight, every whisper, every  
way this family made you feel unwelcome.  
I believed you.  
Because I had already overheard the same  
voices you warned me about -  
already heard your name used like a  
punchline.

I remembered.  
I always remember.  
That's what I do.

So when we moved up here -  
closer to family, closer to the noise -  
I reached out.  
I gave you a name, a time, a door to walk  
through.  
You said it was wonderful.  
And then?  
Nothing.

No effort. No visit.  
Not even a moment of pretending.

And now I see your daughter in the hallways.  
Lyra.  
Another cold shoulder. Another Kessler who  
acts like we don't exist.

I waved at you once, during drop-off.  
You didn't see me.  
You were already living two hours ahead,  
chasing something shinier than this moment,  
this town, this family.  
So I stopped waving.

You and Vince own a restaurant.  
You work hard.  
That's the story, anyway.  
Too busy to connect. Too busy to come see  
our place.  
Too busy to be kind.

And maybe that's all true.  
Maybe you are too busy.  
Or maybe it's just easier to blame the  
schedule than admit  
you don't want to show up.

I wanted to believe we had something in  
common -  
outsiders who married into this frozen little  
dynasty.  
I thought maybe we could've stood together  
in that.

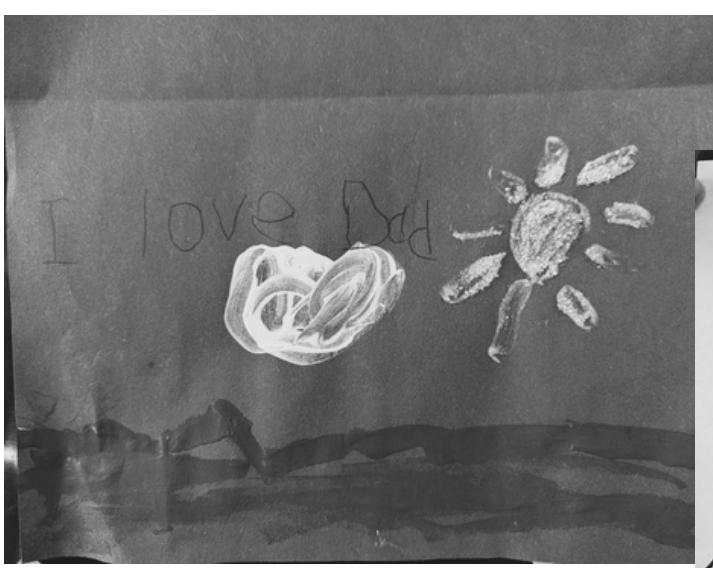
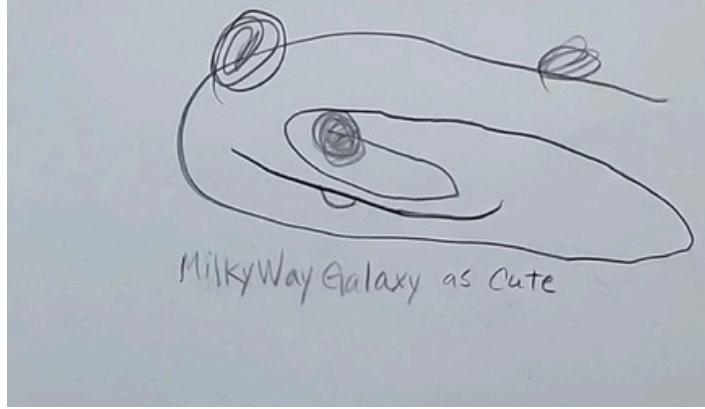
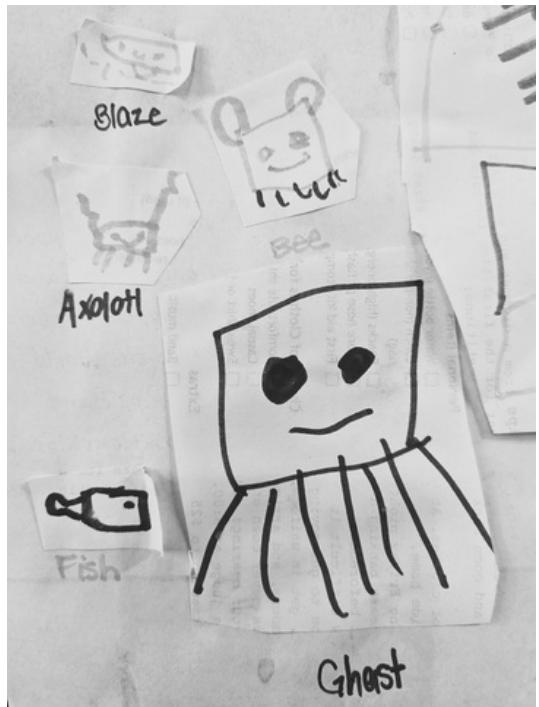
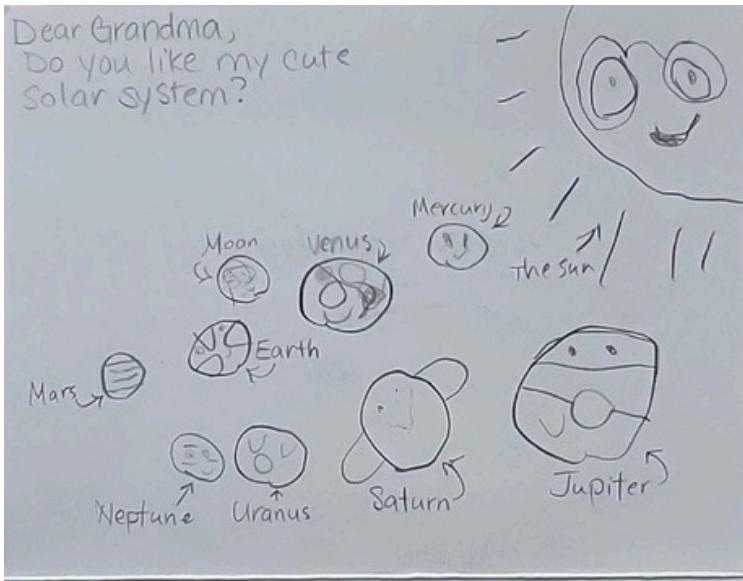
But you never stood with me.

You just disappeared -  
same as the rest.

**“Still Here”**



# Malcolm's Corner



What would happen if you had too much air?

If an old person's mustache disappeared, what would they feel?

What would happen if your bones disappeared?

What would happen if it never stopped raining?

What would happen if all spiders were really, really big?

What would happen if I count to nine starting with one?

Do you want to hear me count to nine starting with one?

What will happen if there is tiny stuff in your food that you can't see?

What is faster: a racecar or a giant robot?

What would happen if all satellites disappeared except for the moon?

How many times have you seen me?

What would happen if the earth was cut in half?

What would happen if you ate a bell surrounded by a mashed potato?

Did you hear me burp?

How does snow come out of the sky?

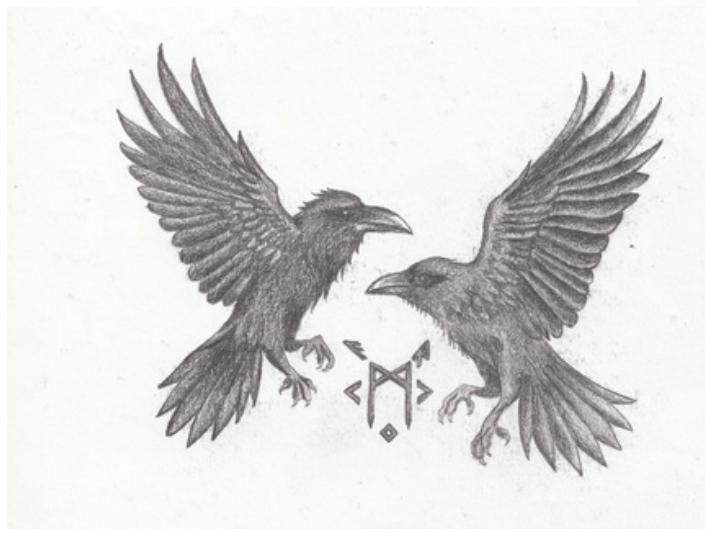
What does the inside of a brain look like?

What would happen if cars had eyes?

Why do we have hair?

# Tattooed Saints of the Wasteland:

**Sketches pulled from myth and memory.  
For skin. For story. For survival.**



Winter's veiled crone. Weather-bringer.  
Bone-counting matron of the land.



Cailleach

*Death is not the opposite of bloom.*



# HOW I'M STILL ALIVE

## A list of things keeping me going:

- My son's mischievous smile when he tells me my fart sounds "lovely."
- Chicken noises at dawn - clucks, coos, the occasional chaos.
- My cat purring and kneading into my scalp like I'm her own personal bread dough.
- My husband rubbing my feet after a long day of being patient with other people's kids.
- Hot, salty fries and a cold Coca-Cola from McDonald's - the body remembers joy.
- Dreams, goals, and half-finished projects I *still* think I'll finish someday.
- Living in my head. Most of the time.
- Absurd hope. The kind that won't shut up even when everything's burning.
- The endless, bottomless quest for understanding - of people, of history, of myself, and what the hell this life is even for.

Still here.

Still trying.

Still me.

**Stories from the edge of America.**

Motherhood, poverty, chicken shit, and stubborn hope - told by someone still standing in the ruins.

Still here. Still writing.

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