

Otherworldly Scripts

Issue One



Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Self Inflicted | 2 |
| Ambiguity | 3 |
| Willow | 4 |
| Rebirth | 5 |
| Illusion | 6 |
| Keys and Holes | 7 |
| Amy-My-Amy | 33 |
| Origin | 36 |
| Encumbrance | 38 |
| Ladybug | 58 |
| Perseverance (or The Curious case of Heptaphrenia) | 68 |
| We All Had Gifts | 112 |
| Authors ' Bios | 168 |

A black and white line drawing of a scroll with a laurel wreath border. The scroll is unrolled, showing a central rectangular area. The laurel wreath is composed of branches with leaves and small berries, curving around the top, right, and bottom of the scroll. The scroll's edges are detailed with hatching to show its thickness and the way it is unrolled.

Otherworldly Scripts

Issue 1

Self inflicted

Numb fingers scrape at the possibility of something
from nothing

Sweet and real; smiles and tiny moments, a glimpse;
catching eyes, remembering details

You fall into the reality of unreality for a blissful
second, until it folds into itself

The page torn from your diary to make way for the
truth

It stings

Ambiguity

I am a child of smoke
I am the wistful sound of chimes heard in the wind
I am neither boy nor girl
I am simply surviving
I am a soul with potential born into a life of struggle
I am living out of spite, a need to prove others
wrong
I am anxiously waiting to be free
I am exhaustedly getting through each day
I am an artist painting with my own blood
I am a survivor
I was a stone cast into a river, weighed down by
doubt and insecurity, until the water dissolved the
pain
I was a perpetrator of my own state of mind, until
someone taught me better
I was smothered by loneliness nearly to the point of
suffocation, until she whispered to just lift my head
I will be a fire, burning brightly on my own
I will be no less than what i'm meant to
I will be nobody else's but my own

Willow

Rust behind painted eyes withering away at the
seams
Somewhere a willow tree sways in the dark,
lonesome and powerful
Somewhere somebody is suffering and somewhere
someone isn't
Beauty is pain and pain is beauty
Just take a deep breath, just breathe
That's something I've heard a lot
Somewhere life is beautiful
Somewhere a garden is growing, the sun shining on
glistening tomato's
Somewhere else there's a frost so bitter the
vegetables can't pierce through the ground
Beauty is pain and pain is beauty
Nature is full of opposites, harvest and tragedy, life
and death, beginning and end, pain and beauty
Just breathe and wither away

Rebirth

Streaked tears on sullen cheeks,
crisp winter air
The roads were icy when we loaded the car,
brazen wind whipping my face
Weather is not kind and pays no mind to the range of human emotion
November is unforgiving and I'm grateful for it
This time of year even a bloody nose can freeze and be forgotten
The car stalled to a stop in front of my new
apartment and for once in the dead of
winter there is so much life all over the place

Illusion

I was born inside a looking glass
Two way mirrors lining the womb until I was graced
entry to your arms
Oh how I cherished you and your heartfelt lies
I clung to legs with little bruised hands and stared into
your emerald eyes
Every time you hurt I hurt too, my savior since birth,
the mother I mothered
How could you ever do me wrong?
Who was I without you?
The spell is broken now and I still have no answer,
and no mother

Keys and Holes

They fed me soup with worms in it again. Not real worms, no such luck, but the stringy pale husks of cabbage, boiled down until they looked like something I might scrape from the bottom of a coffin. A colorless muck, heavy as spit. I made a show of savoring it, licking the spoon slowly, slurping loud enough that the sound crawled under the nurse's skin.

She stiffened. Her lips pinched shut as though she might vomit. The tray rattled in her hand. I locked eyes with her and let the spoon drop into the bowl with a clatter. She fled, skirts swishing, shoes squeaking on the damp floor.

There's a peculiar kind of power in disgust. The ones that work here think they're above me, yet one spoonful of cabbage soup can topple them. It's concerning on their behalf.

When the door shut, I slid to the corner where my lovelies waited for me.

My mornings began with the rats. Always rats. Three tonight. One fat, two slender, their bodies wriggling through a hole gnawed near the bedframe. They twitched their whiskers at me, patient, reverent. I let them have the cabbage, though I'd already pulled the marrow from a pigeon's bones yesterday, gnawed it clean, and left them scraps. They were my choir, my soldiers, my little gods. I gave them bread, and they gave me loyalty. They know I am generous, their benefactress.

They do not gossip about Father. They do not whisper about scandal, or about my “condition.” Rats only need crumbs and warmth, which I provide freely.

The lock turned. My darlings vanished in a blur of fur. I recoiled like them, my voice sibilant in the dimness.

The door opened wider than usual. Visitors.

“Darling girl,” came my mother’s voice, soft as spoiled fruit.

I turned slowly, theatrically, so they might see me entirely. Blonde hair hacked short with rusted scissors, my shift stained, my feet bare and cracked. A ghoul dressed in rags. This place had done me a disservice. It had forced my body to appear as sick as my mind, and I was unsure if I would ever forgive that fact.

Behind her stood Eloise, my dove. Nineteen now, taller than before, pale flaxen hair shining even under the gaslight’s jaundiced glow. She clutched her shawl, as though the asylum air might chew through her ribs. But her eyes—oh, those eyes. Still kind. Still unguarded. I hated her for it, though I loved her more fiercely than anything in this awful world.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I muttered.

“Nonsense.” Mother glided in as though her skirts were immune to filth. She had powdered her face, painted her lips, vain to the last. But powder could not cover her exhaustion; it clung to her skin like mold. “Family endures all trials. We’ve always said so.”

I laughed. The sound cracked out of me like a blade scraping iron. The guard twitched at the door. Eloise flinched. I rocked once, twice, then stilled.

A sigh pulled itself from my lungs. “This isn’t a trial, Mother. You know better.”

I was the kind of daughter people prayed wouldn’t survive childhood. She knew that as well as I did, possibly better.

Mother’s gaze slid away to the guard. She wanted me hushed. Always hushed. Always hidden.

But Eloise stepped forward, the shawl still tight in her hands. Lavender soap clung to her. Hearth smoke, too. Warm smells I’d nearly forgotten.

“Alice,” she said. Her voice cracked. “I brought you something.”

From the folds of her shawl, she produced a small leather book, its spine cracked, the corners frayed. She held it out like an offering.

I took it carefully. Flipped the pages. A prayer book. Father’s, perhaps. The smell of wax and dust made my stomach lurch. Memory came unbidden: Father’s hand on my shoulder, heavy and trembling, his breath sweet with wine, his muttered verses dark with despair. The day they dragged his body from the river, waterlogged, stones in his pockets.

I slammed the book shut. “Did you know,” I asked, smiling too wide, “that rats adore the taste of paper? They’ll gnaw right through Psalms. Even the ones about salvation.”

Eloise's lip quivered, but she did not cry. Brave little bird. Weakness laced with defiance—that was the finest vintage. I always felt guiltiest when I thought of her.

Mother lowered herself to my cot. She perched as though the muslin would stain her flesh. "You look thin, my darling," she murmured. "Are they feeding you enough?"

"Oh yes," I crooned. "They fatten me daily. Can't you see the roses in my cheeks?" I pinched my hollow face until my nails left red crescents. "Soon I'll burst with health."

She looked away, regret thick as tar. I wanted to laugh and claw her face in equal measure. But when Eloise's fingers brushed mine, hesitant, soft, I found myself squeezing back, rough but real. Tenderness, that old sickness, still twitched in me.

Mother sighed. "We've petitioned the Board for your release. They will not listen. They say you are... still unwell."

I tilted my head, like a crow inspecting carrion. "A kind description."

Silence thickened. The guard coughed.

Eloise broke it. "It isn't fair," she whispered. "They don't know you. Not really."

I smiled at her. "No one knows me, little dove. That's the trick."

Her eyes shone. She believed me redeemable. That was the cruelest part. I had murdered that hope a hundred times over, yet she stitched it back, stubborn as ever.

“You should go,” I said at last. My throat felt raw. “The walls here listen. They gossip.”

Mother rose, adjusting her skirts. Her eyes glistened with tears she dared not show. “We’ll come again soon,” she said. “Be strong, Alice.”

“Strong,” I echoed, smiling. “Yes, Mother.”

They turned to leave. Desperation prickled my chest. I wanted to wound them, keep them, devour them. Instead, I called softly, “Tell the rats hello, when you see them in the streets. Tell them Alice is waiting.”

The door slammed.

The silence was a velvet shroud.

I pressed the book against my chest. It hurt. Everything hurt. Not the cabbage, not the straw cot, not the chains of this place, but the way Eloise’s eyes still burned with love for me, as if I had not ruined everything, as if I wasn’t our Father’s daughter, doomed to drown in the same black water.

I lay down. The rats crept back, whiskers twitching against my arm. I stroked one absentmindedly, its body warm, its tail rough as rope.

“Shall we read?” I whispered. “Shall we see what becomes of the damned?”

My fingers trailed over the thin pages, stilling when I heard the building moan.

The corner of the room still bent strangely. Not like a shadow, no, shadows obey their masters. This was something

else. A softening of brick, a sagging of mortar, as though the wall had gone slack-jawed and forgotten how to hold its shape.

I stared at it, unblinking. Rats twitched at my feet, their whiskers brushing my ankles in nervous little prayers.

“Hallucination,” I said aloud. My voice scraped against itself. “They wished for a lobotomy, Mother said no. An ice pick right through the eye socket. Goodbye madness. Goodbye, Alice.”

I pressed a finger to my temple, imagining the push, the puncture, the sudden sweet absence of thought. Perhaps that was what the wall wanted, to be my pick, my surgeon, my cure.

I laughed, sharp and hollow. “No, I don’t believe I’d want that.”

The candle spat wax. The air smelled of damp cloth and something strangely floral. My little choir nestled close again, but I ignored them, kept my eyes on that sagging corner. If I blinked, it might close. If I prayed, it might vanish.

So I stared.

Minutes passed. Hours maybe. The wall pulsed. Just slightly. A breath. In. Out.

My tongue dried. I muttered more nonsense to distract myself. “They’ll shave me next, shave my skull clean. Open me up like a melon. Scoop until nothing’s left but rind.”

Velvet, my favorite, glossy and sleek, climbed my leg, curling against my ribs. She nibbled my shift as if urging me to hush.

Then I heard it.

Bootsteps. A man's voice. The scrape of keys.

Doctor Ervin.

I knew which one by the cadence of his heels. The one who looked at me too long, whose hands lingered on the bed, who called me "dear girl" in a voice full of teeth.

"No," I hissed. "Not now."

The key scraped metal.

Panic seized me. I snatched Velvet into my fist, holding her against my chest. Her tiny heart beat wildly against mine.

The lock groaned.

And without thinking, I lunged.



The fall wasn't graceful. No drifting skirts, no wonderstruck.

I scraped down a tunnel that had no business existing, the walls slick and pulsing, as if the asylum's bones had grown soft. The air was thick with grit. Pebbles rattled against my scalp. Velvet squealed in my fist, claws digging into my collarbone.

Down and down I went, until the world spat me out onto a heap of broken mortar. My knee split open on the edge of a brick. I swiped off the blood, metallic and sweet, before pushing myself upright.

The chamber was a collapsed ruin, ribs of stone bending inward, dust rising in every breath. My ears rang. The silence felt deliberate, as if I had swallowed all the sound.

Velvet squirmed. I loosened my grip. She was heavier than she ought to be. I frowned, squinting at her in the dim light.

She had grown. Not monstrosously, but enough that her body filled both my palms now, her fur sleek and glistening as though oiled. Her black eyes gleamed like polished jet.

“Oh dear,” I muttered, “You’ve gotten quite large.”

I staggered across the rubble, searching. My hands came away with splinters of stone, nails torn raw. The chamber offered no door, no window, just walls that pressed too close.

A mirror caught my eye, out of place and cracked.

I stared at myself, not recognizing the woman who feverishly stared back at me.

This Alice had hair that brushed her hips rather than her chin, and a face still hollow, but eyes that held a strange brightness. My stained shift had been replaced with a white dress stitched with scraps and bandages.

“I loathe the color white,” I pointed out, turning away from her. I continued digging through rubbish.

“Velvet, I’m afraid I’ve gone past the point of return,” I hushed, “Surely I’ll be punished in due time.”

She squeaked, a lower sound than usual.

The rock tore at my fingers until a small hole met my eyes.
A keyhole.

At first glance, it was only an ordinary crack in the stone. But when I leaned near, I saw the shape was deliberate: long, narrow, with the round head and slim body of a lock.

I pressed my eye to it. Beyond lay nothing but black, yet it felt deep, like a well or an eye staring back.

I grinned. "Of course. Keys and holes. Always obscene."

Velvet shifted in my hand. Her claws scratched my skin.

"Alice."

The voice was not mine, though it echoed inside my skull. Smooth, low, almost tender.

I froze. My mouth went dry. "Excuse me?"

Velvet tilted her head, whiskers twitching. "Alice," she repeated. "Don't gape. You've been waiting for me to speak."

I laughed, sharp and high. "I've gone properly mad, then. Lovely. I was growing bored."

But the rat only flicked her tail.

Her weight had increased again. I had to cradle her against my chest with both arms, like an infant. Her eyes gleamed in the dust-light, unnervingly lively.

I swallowed, throat raw. "Why is this happening?"

"Because you jumped, I would assume," she said simply. "Because you left the wall behind. Because you chose me."

The keyhole gaped wider, or perhaps my eyes adjusted. Its edges pulsed faintly, rimmed in silver light. I felt it draw at me, tugging some hidden cord beneath my ribs.

Velvet's whiskers brushed my chin. "We must go through."

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't believe I wish to."

Her teeth glinted. “Then we’ll rot here. And you’ll never see Eloise again.”

That name cut sharper than brick.

“Then I suppose we are to find her,” I muttered. “I’ve always wished to be a heroine, Velvet. This possibly has given me a reason to.”

She smiled faintly, or what I supposed was rodent smiling.

I pressed my palm to the stone, feeling the cool edge of the keyhole. It was absurd. How could I fit? Yet the shape seemed to stretch as I leaned closer, as though it hungered for me.

Velvet pressed against my chest, warm and solid, her voice curling in my ear like smoke. “Through the hole. There’s no going back now. Be the heroine.”

My laughter echoed, brittle and obscene. I set my knee against the rubble, scraped my shoulder against the jagged edge, and pushed my body through the impossible gap.

The keyhole widened, stone yielding like flesh, and swallowed me whole before it spat me out like gristle.

I landed on all fours in a clearing, my knees raw, Velvet pressed heavy to my chest. The air stank of wet moss and iron, thick enough to coat the tongue. Above me stretched trees that shouldn’t exist: trunks pale as bone, branches like twisted ribs. No leaves, only strands of glowing moss that hung low, brushing my hair like unwashed fingers.

Velvet squirmed. She was near the size of a hound now, her fur slick, her whiskers long enough to sting. Her voice, still new in my ear, was almost bored.

“Walk.”

So I did, not without a stumble. The ground squelched beneath my feet, mud seeping up to my ankles. I moved deeper into the forest, each step more absurd than the last. The plants glowed in odd colors, large and small and impossible. This place was no dream. Dreams lacked such density, such a taste of metal.

A clearing appeared, and in the middle of it: a house. Its chimney leaned drunkenly, coughing smoke. The thatch roof sagged, the walls bulged outward as though the house itself were sick. Windows glared at me with greasy light. A crooked sign swung from one rusty nail: **DUCHESS**.

Velvet leaped from my arms, landing with a thud. “Go on,” she said.

I licked my lips, sudden hunger gnawing at me. “I don’t believe I wish to.”

“Oh, but you know how you love soup.”

My laugh rattled the trees. “Ah, but only certain ones.”

I pushed the door open. It wailed on its hinges.

The smell struck first: pepper, acrid and heavy, scalding the sinuses. My eyes watered instantly. The room was dark, lit only by firelight that warped the shadows.

And there she was.

The Duchess, squat and immense, her face sharp as a cleaver, sat in a great chair. In her arms squirmed a baby, squealing with an endless, awful shriek. Beside her stood a Cook, throwing fistfuls of pepper into a cauldron that boiled and

spat. And perched on the mantel, grinning so wide I thought his face might split, a black cat. His teeth gleamed brighter than the fire, his eyes of a striking yellow.

I staggered back. My breath caught. Because the Cook, busy at her cauldron, was unmistakable.

“Mother?” I whispered.

She didn’t look up, just tossed another handful of pepper that sent the baby coughing in the Duchess’s arms.

The Duchess glanced at me, her nose curling in disdain. “Late,” she said. Her voice was thick, wet, like the sound of meat torn from bone. “Very late. Eloise will be disappointed.”

My stomach lurched. “Eloise?”

Mother stirred the soup, not sparing me a glance. “Always a step behind, Alice. Always.”

I swayed where I stood. My chest felt split open. To see her here, cooking as though nothing were wrong, peppering the air until we could hardly breathe. It was crueler than any asylum trick.

“Where is Eloise?” I managed. “What is this place?”

Mother only shook her head. I wanted to scream at her.

The Duchess pinched the baby’s cheek. It wailed louder. “You’ve come at last,” she said. “Now take this wretched thing.”

She thrust the child into my arms. Its body was fever-hot, wriggling against me. The smell of sour milk clung to it. I gagged, but held on.

The Duchess rose, her skirts trailing across the filthy floor. She ignored my mother entirely, striding to the door. The baby screeched in my ear, fists pounding my ribs.

“I’ve the Queen’s chess to attend,” the Duchess snapped. She grabbed the doorframe, her face so close I could see her pores. “Mind you don’t lose it. Not that it matters. Nothing here matters.”

She shoved a greasy bonnet on her head and swept out.

I stared after her, heart pounding, until the baby squirmed harder. I looked down.

And froze.

The baby’s face was stretching, skin thickening, nose pushing outward. It twisted in my arms, flesh buckling and folding until what I held was no infant but a pig, pink, wriggling, its snout wet against my wrist.

I screamed and dropped it. The creature trotted away, snorting, disappearing under the table as if nothing had happened.

Mother stirred her pot, humming. The cat laughed, a sharp, metallic sound.

“Mad,” he said, teeth flashing. “All of us. Even you.”

I spun toward him. “Shut your mouth.”

But his grin only widened.

Velvet climbed onto the table, enormous now, her tail sweeping bottles of spice to the floor. She fixed her black eyes on the cat. “Enough games. Tell her where to go.”

The cat stretched, tail twitching, body fading until only the grin remained. “The Hare’s house. Beyond the thicket. Follow the stench of tea leaves gone sour. There you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

“Eloise?” I demanded.

The grin floated higher, then slowly dissolved. “Yourself.” And he was gone.

The baby-pig squealed once from beneath the table, then silence. The cauldron boiled over, pepper choking the air. Mother did not look at me, not once.

I stumbled out the door, coughing, eyes streaming. The forest closed around me again, skeletal trees rattling overhead. Velvet padded behind, her voice curling in my skull.

“You heard him,” she said. “The Hare’s house.”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. My palms shook. “They’re all out of their minds.”

Velvet laughed, low and cold. “And what are you, if not out of your mind yourself?”

I ignored her. Haughty thing.

The forest grew stranger as I pressed on.

I followed Velvet’s directions—though half the time she simply sniffed the air and mumbled, *this way, this way*. Branches clawed my hair, snagged my dress. The smell of pepper had been replaced with something sweeter but more revolting: tea leaves rotted in heaps, sugar damp and clotted, a cloying perfume of honey gone sour.

The trees thinned.

Ahead sprawled a long wooden table set crooked in a clearing. Its surface sagged in the middle like a broken spine, and every inch of it was cluttered: cracked teapots leaking brown, cups stacked and teetering, plates of stale cakes covered in buzzing flies. The tablecloth had once been white, but now was stained a thousand colors of mold and wine.

At its center, two figures bickered.

The first was a hare, or what I assumed to be. An older man with skin the color of candle wax, and stitched into his head were two long, matted ears. His eyes were red and bulging, paws instead of hands twitching as if plagued with fits. He wore a tattered waistcoat and kept beating his fist on the table with every word.

I tried not to look at him too long, though I tended to stare.

The second, a woman my mother's age, sat opposite, tall and thin with deep brown skin. Her hat was too large, tilted like it might slide off at any moment. She stirred an empty teacup with a spoon and muttered numbers under his breath, each syllable bitten off sharply.

Both fell silent when I stepped into the clearing.

"Oh," the Hare said, teeth flashing. "Oh oh oh. A guest, Milli, looks at that."

The woman I assumed was the Millis' eyes rolled to me, pale as curdled milk. "She's late."

I opened my mouth, but Velvet leapt onto the table first, sending cups smashing to the ground. "She's here," she growled.

The Hare banged his fist. "Sit!"

I did, too stunned not to. The chair sagged under me, damp with mildew. The table smelled worse up close, old milk, damp paper, faint coppery tang like blood rubbed into woodgrain.

Milli leaned forward, her pupils pinpricks. "Introduce yourself."

"Alice," I said.

The Hare giggled, spittle glistening on his lips. "We've had Alices before."

My stomach clenched. "Have you."

"Yes," Milli said, voice sharp enough to cut. "Our last one went missing."

I gripped the table's edge, breath shallow. The clearing buzzed with unseen insects.

Before I could answer, a new voice cut in.

"And yet she sits with us still."

I turned to see the cat once more.

He smirked at me, and I felt my chest tighten with fear.

The Hare twitched. "Late. She's late."

"Who's that?" I demanded, pointing at the feline.

The Hare shivered violently, knocking over a teapot.

"Don't ask!"

Hatter's grin was full of broken teeth. "Don't tell."

But the cat only yawned before speaking. "What has teeth but never chews, and a tongue but never speaks?"

I stared at him "A shoe."

His smile widened, sharp and cruel. "Clever girl."

Heat rushed through me, not pride, but irritation. He was mocking me.

“Tell me your name,” I snapped.

He tilted his head, ears flicking. “What is a name but a lie we agree upon?”

Milli clapped, delighted. The Hare shrieked with laughter. Velvet growled.

The cat leaned back in his chair, which creaked as though it might collapse. “Call me what you like. I’ve been called worse.”

Velvet prowled across the table, knocking crumbs into my lap. “Enough chatter. Why are we here?”

Hatter slammed his spoon into his cup. “Because Time is broken.”

The Hare froze, eyes wide. “Yes. Yes! Broken! We’re stuck! We’ve been stuck since—since—since—” He seized and thrashed, froth on his lips.

I flinched back.

The cat only watched, unbothered, like this madness was entertainment.

“Time,” Milli whispered, hunched over her empty cup. “Always six. Always tea. Never dinner. Never sleep.” Her voice cracked. “We’ve been feasting on mold for years.”

The Hare jolted upright again, spittle dripping from his chin.

I couldn’t breathe. The forest pressed close, the stink of rot and sugar choking.

The cat leaned forward then, his voice dropping low, meant only for me. “And what about you, Alice? Are you mad?”

Something in me cracked like glass. My lips parted.

“Yes,” I whispered.

The moment the words left my mouth, the hare flew into a frenzy. He clawed at the air, screamed until his voice broke, then collapsed in a twitching heap beneath the table. Milli muttered numbers, rocking like a broken metronome. Pepper soup clung to the back of my throat even though no one had served me any.

I should’ve been terrified. Maybe I was, and this was all shock. I scratched at old scars, their thick tissue burning. Someone coughed, throwing me out of my daze. Velvet prowled beside me, fur bristling. *Careful*, she whispered, though her whiskers brushed my wrist in a way that felt like restraint.

The Hare shook his head too fast. “She stares too long.”

“She’s rude,” the cat replied.

I bristled, whispering to Velvet. “Can we return home?”

She only looked at me. “And what is home?”

A feline laugh cut through. “Better a game than silence.”

“You keep riddles in your mouth like coins,” I said. “Does that make you too afraid to answer plainly?”

“Plain speech is for plain people.” His head tilted, and I wondered if it would keep spinning. “You’re not plain. Are you?”

My nails bit into the palms of my hands.

Milli clasped her hand, nails painted yet broken. “He toys with you!”

I set my hands flat on the damp cloth. “What do you want from me?”

His eyes narrowed. “What does anyone want? A story. Yours will do.”

Milli suddenly shrieked “SIX!” and hurled her teacup across the clearing. It shattered against a tree. The Hare howled with laughter from the ground.

I laughed. Too sharp. Too loud.

Velvet pressed against my thigh, grounding me. “Enough,” she hissed. “We must go.”

But the cat lifted his paw, palm up, as if offering something unseen. “Stay. Stay, and I’ll tell you another riddle.”

I stared at him. “And if I solve it?”

His smile returned, teeth on display. “Then you’re smarter than I take you for.”

The forest pressed close. The tea table swam with rot and buzzing flies.

I leaned towards the blasted cat and whispered, “Ask me.”

“I am a house of locked doors,

Where windows watch but never open.

I am a bed where you never dream,

A family you never chose

What am I?”

The riddle coiled in the air like smoke.

Velvet hissed. Milli's grin stretched wider. The Hare thrashed in the dirt, shrieking nonsense.

But I only sat frozen, staring at him.

A house. Locked doors. Windows that watch. A bed. A family.

My stomach twisted. My lips parted. "That's..."

But no word came. I couldn't say it. Couldn't name the asylum aloud.

The cat's grin widened at my silence. His eyes glowed with cruel satisfaction, as though he'd plucked something raw and pulsing straight from my chest and held it up for me to see.

"Stumped already?" he murmured.

Anger flared, scorching my throat. "It's nonsense."

He curled in his chair, feverish, smug. "Everything here is nonsense. That doesn't mean it isn't true."

My hands curled into fists on the tablecloth. I wanted to claw his face, to tear the secret out of his mouth. Instead, I shoved back my chair, the wood screeching.

Velvet leapt into my arms, claws biting my dress.

Milli cackled. "She's leaving! Always leaving!"

The Hare scrambled upright, ears twitching. "Late, late, late!"

I turned and fled.

The forest swallowed me whole again. Branches clawed, roots tripped, the air thick with damp and rot. Velvet pressed against my chest, silent now, heavy but small again, no longer speaking. My heart pounded with rage, humiliation, fear.

The riddle gnawed at me, biting every time I tried to shove it aside. *A house of locked doors. Windows that watch. A bed where you never dream.*

I shook my head, muttering. “Nonsense. Utter nonsense.”

Still, the answer throbbed just beneath my tongue, too sharp to name.

Hours, or minutes, or nothing, later, I stumbled into a clearing.

At its center stood a tree.

Its trunk was immense, gnarled and split, roots snaking like veins across the earth. On its side, impossibly neat, was a door.

Not wood, not bark, but painted green, with a brass knob that gleamed despite the gloom.

I approached, every step trembling. Velvet squirmed in my arms, whiskers twitching.

The knob was cold in my hand. The door swung open.

Inside: blackness, smooth as ink.

I stepped through.

I fell, but not like before. No teeth of stone, no broken mortar. Just a slide, gentle and slow, through velvet dark.

When I landed, it was not on rubble or earth. It was tile. Cold, chipped, white tile.

I knew that smell.

Ammonia. Piss. Disinfectant, stale bread.

I blinked. The light above me flickered—the harsh gaslight of the asylum corridors.

My knees hit the floor. My hands trembled.

Velvet squeaked in my palms. I looked down. She was small again. Just a rat, her black eyes glossy and dumb. No voice, no weight, no wisdom.

My throat closed.

“No,” I whispered.

But the cracked wall loomed. The barred window rattled with the wind. The echo of chains, footsteps in the hall.

I was back.

Back where I had always been.

The riddle throbbed in my skull, sharper than ever. *A house of locked doors, a family you never chose.*

I pressed my forehead to the cold tile and laughed. Cruel, ugly laughter.

Because I knew the answer.

And I wasn't ready to say it. Not yet.

The asylum never stopped humming. Pipes rattled in the walls, dripping water somewhere overhead. Nurses' shoes clicked down the corridor in time with the twitch of my jaw. My laughter had settled into my bones like a parasite. I could feel it gnawing, waiting.

The keyhole, the tea party, it was different, wrong. I told myself it was nothing. A hallucination. A relapse.

But the riddle still pressed at the back of my skull, like a thumb bruising something soft.

A house of locked doors. A bed where you never dream. A family you never chose.

I knew the answer. I hated the answer.

The door creaked open.

“Alice?”

Her voice was that of soft leather.

Mother.

She slipped inside, shutting the door behind her. The guards let her through because she smiled at them; she always smiled, even when she should have snarled. I don’t know how she kept her stability, not with this life.

She looked too clean for this place. Too clean for me.

“You’re here,” I whispered.

She set down a little basket on the bed, cloth covering whatever she’d brought. Her eyes swept me, quick and anxious. “You look tired.”

I smiled weakly at her. “I’m okay.”

Velvet twitched in my lap. Mother smiled faintly, though her gaze lingered on the rat with unease.

“I brought bread. Fresh, not stale.” She lifted the cloth to show me the loaf, wrapped in paper. “And apples. I thought you’d like—”

The smell hit me.

Not bread. Not apples. Pepper. Thick, choking, like someone had upended a jar into boiling broth.

I gagged, covering my mouth. “No.”

She frowned, lines carving into her face. “What?”

The air thickened, motes swirling like ash. For a heartbeat, I swore I saw a hand stirring an invisible pot at her side, soup splattering over stone.

“Do you smell it?” I hushed.

She blinked. “Smell what?”

Pepper burned the back of my throat. My eyes watered. Velvet squealed, clawing my shift.

Behind her, on the wall, a grin flickered. Not hers. Not mine. A crescent of white teeth blooming in shadow, wide and sharp, then gone.

My heart hammered.

I pointed, trembling. “There. Do you see it?”

She turned. Nothing. Just the damp wall, paint peeling, mildew blooming like black lace.

Her shoulders slumped. “Alice...”

I sighed. Bitter, jagged. “I’m not mad.”

“You’re not,” she said quickly, too quickly. She moved closer, kneeling beside me, hands cool on my arm. “You’re sick. There’s a difference. Your father was—” She broke off, lips pressed tight.

I stared at her, searching. “You don’t believe me.” I wanted to scream at myself. Of course, she didn’t. I wouldn’t either.

Her eyes darted to the rat, to the ceiling, to the basket. She forced a smile. “I believe that you’re alive, that you’re safe. That’s enough.”

Something inside me cracked. I wanted to crawl into the corner, maybe shake her until she admitted she smelled the pepper too. Instead, I pressed my forehead to her shoulder. Her dress smelled of soap and lavender, too clean, too bright.

“You shouldn’t come anymore,” I muttered.

“Nonsense.” Her hand tightened on mine.
Any words lodged in my throat felt like glass.
The grin flickered again in the corner, wider now. I saw
eyes glow in the dark, yellow and slit.

The Cat. Watching. Always watching.
I shuddered. She pulled back, frowning. “What is it?”
“Nothing,” I lied.

Velvet wriggled free, skittering across the floor. She
squeezed into a crack in the wall, tail vanishing.

My mother startled. “How? How did she...?”

I swallowed. “Rats find holes. Always.”

But I knew better. That wasn’t a hole.

She pressed the loaf of bread into my hands, though it
already reeked of pepper. “Eat,” she begged. “Please.”

I tore it open. Inside was black, moldy, writhing with
beetles.

I recoiled, and they spilled into my lap, crawling down my
legs.

She flinched, but didn’t move. She never moved. She just
stayed there, holding me as if I weren’t already lost.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Her expression softened, one of an old cherub, one too
gentle for this place. “For what?”

I said nothing, just made a humming noise of
acknowledgment.

She leaned her head against mine anyway, ignoring the
smear of dust and shame she was bound to pick up. She’d

always been like this, her and Eloise willing to touch me when no one else would. It was dangerous, the way they loved me. Love always was.

I stilled, slowly picking my head up. “Where is Eloise? She always comes with you to visit.”

Mother’s face twisted into confusion, then something akin to sadness. “Eloise?” She asked.

“Eloise,” I repeated, my ribs tightening.

She sighed, heavy and tired. “I can not see the things you do, Alice. Remind me who Eloise is.”

I laughed, though it sounded closer to a strangled yelp. “Please do not play with me; the doctors have told you numerous times.”

But she only shook her head, standing now. “I...” She swiped off her skirts, her lips in a thin line. “I don’t know who you speak of.”

Amy-My-Amy

Would it be haughty without a twin to invent alanguage of
graws and grunts? To send letters ofmalevolent pictogram out to
the phone-book folks?

No.I've longed. And spent dozens and dozens of days
onthe trail of her—suitable-browed Amy, my
seeming-same celibate friend Amy, seeming-same.

In the outlet malls, we. At the stationery store
in September 1972, a recognition, a glance, and I cleared
my white throat to say 'look out for that manager

eying your stealthy scouring of his leftover Life'—
Amy, can I teach you that graw-graw-grom means
'Life,' and achum 'look out', and oo-eee-oo

'he's got his eyes on you'? Hard as a dog's eyes
on a long-withheld bone? There's implied simile, you see,
in the secret-language of inflection, of course,

inflection is all, Amy, my Amy-my. Achum Amy.

I've got a new phrase ready. It's in the eyes, this, and
it means 'yes, I am feeling mathematically that self-same way',

and it's conjugated thusly: three syncopated blinks, 'I am',
three with a head turn, 'I have', and four blinks for 'I will':
I will feel mathematically that, and then, at that time,

we, Amy, will have translated us into we, matching up
at last, oui stig, at last, and passing through

a kind of moated citadel you've built around your keep,

or I've built. A Citadel only twins can crumble, a moat
only we can leap, moat-leaping with blink and growl
while excluding the vicious hordes, the phone-book archers.

But Amy, you have left your job as dogwalker and changed
our hair and clothes—corduroy?—and I haven't seen
your smile with all of its clever derivations and face-wit.

Grrrrr, out your window, o-far, as you feed the hummingbirds.
Riiiii! In many weeks I've not seen. Achum, Amy. We were
so close, I contend, to having what so few do. Magic union

in a series of tongue-clicks and all the abstracts made bodily.
'Yes, I see what you mean,' said with a 14-second unblinking.
'Love', once hard to call out, now three slaps of the flesh

inside the left elbow, and a pho or a pha for friendship
or romance, a phi and a pheh and a phim and a philm
with harder and softer slaps of the flesh, meaning all we are

for each other, Amy. Unclear. A set of sayings we've proved
together, like an equation, and the answer is, don't you see
with a 14-second unblinking, that we'll invent the new feeling?

Yes, the new word, same, the new word, filled, the new word,
Amy-my, Amy-gone, Amy-back, my self-same sister.
There is no growl for split, no growl for alien, no growl

for the God-thing who made you wonder if there's really
any growl at all for anything we really are, or anything

we'd like to slap out of us and into each other, or any grow

to share. Achum Amy. Graw bound-a-bound. Graw Greek.

(14-second unblinking). Phehphim grow-grow-grom.

Phiphilm grow-grow-grommm. (Three syncopated blinks).

Check your mailbox, Amy. Our language is exploding,

and I've left the dictionary of our resistance there, hearthurt, phe,
all I can say. I can only hope, yrol, you'll memorize our endings.

Origin

I know more about you
than you about me but I
have also forgotten half
of it though

the red hair, the red hair,

and it's an image
on the tip of the—I can't
further fathom.

Sure the light.

That one thing when
on Tuesdays.

But I didn't catch
two trains
in the roundhouse,
a tangle in Chicago,
the flatlands
the agro-corp.

Twin thoughts
conjoined: red hair
swivel chair.

Sure the light.

It must have been nice
weather when
back there somewhere
I knew your name
your heart, a something then

when we became
unourselves
in the gyrating
mobius strip
of unourselvesing.

What it was
I can't remember,
but I have
had my reward.
Sure the light,

a place we remember
all at once maybe,
shaken like a snowglobe,
flashes of red and dimple,
moment of the kindest
instinct improvised.

And someone
who's soon to be
beloved watching.

Encumbrance

Life was stifled outside of his home, it crushed his bones and melted his eyes shut. He nodded off in meetings, shuffled leaden legs across linoleum, and ate wilted greens interspersed with unseasoned strips of pale chicken. Sometimes meat is food, but sometimes it is flesh infesting his own. He felt poisoned, he felt the smog of the city enter his lungs and expand. He felt heavy. He needed his bed. Home.

As home drew closer, the syncopated stoops stood out in his vision. Some distended like beer-filled guts, others barely a step into the road, anorexic, sucking in. He moved slowly. A worm elongating then shrinking, vomiting out space and swallowing the paces ahead. He approached his home.

The door was swung open, the stoop long, steep, and a thousand steps high. He began the climb. The entrance was

black, voided and inky. What awaited, he knew, was not the relief for which he begged. In the hollow doorway's depths, he saw sparking neon light. It made him ill, staring into the iridescent flicker, like a blurry drop of water on his eyelash, an astigmatism turning fluorescence into stretched-out limbs overtaking his vision.

He entered his infested dwelling. Music poured from the walls, beating against the drywall. The hall was crowded by bodies writhing in dance. It merged into a collective, the odd individual thrust from the raving womb only to be forcefully reappropriated. He flattened his body against the wall, inching past the mass, attempting to avoid being devoured. Hands extended out and ripping at the corners of his suit, tearing open the briefcase, papers scattered. Just moments from escaping, the first clear and distinct face stuck out from the crowd. Its mouth was slack jawed, tongue lolling out, eyes dilated until it was

impossible to see the iris, shadowing the sclera. It hissed, breath fanning against his face, wetting his skin like dew.

“Little Jack. Home again... home again...” Its growling voice was hot and rancid like curling smoke trying to crawl up his nostrils. He partially wanted to vomit. On the other hand, he wanted nothing more than to inhale and flood his synapses with the incapacitating acidity. Maybe then he would sleep. He needed sleep.

“Please let me sleep,” Jack begged but he was weak and his body tipped forward, magnetized to the monster in front of him.

“Sleep too quick, you’re too restless. Open up for me. Show me your teeth.”

He wanted to rip away. He wanted to detach himself from the vision, but the intoxication of losing oneself in a horde of others... Jack flinched, nearly imperceptible but not enough to avoid detection. A hand of a different color, seemingly more

feminine and not an extension of the face in front of him, reached around to the nape of his neck and yanked him close. The face ran its tongue along the seam of Jack's lips, and he was helpless to succumb. Jack was *always* helpless. Their frantic kiss grew in fervor, a feral need to escape his body and crawl down the creature's throat rose in his chest like stomach acid. Saliva that tasted like the sound of its voice flooded his system, leaching into his blood and sending an electric shock through his spine. He seized backward at the sensation, falling to the floor away from the crowd. A croaking, graveled laugh rattled out of the slackened face, slinking back into the glob of interconnected bodies.

The laughter rose in volume and multiplied. Every limb shuddered with it. The sounds reverberated in Jack's skull, pounding with a dull pain that shadowed the brief ecstasy of the entity's spit.

He scrambled to his feet and ran to his restroom, feeling phantom hands petting at his back, neck, gripping limply at his ankles. In the warm, dim light of the bathroom, his hands braced the porcelain sink, cold to the touch. He looked in the mirror and was confronted by habit's distortion—pupils dilated, jaw heavy, gray-pallid skin, sharp and wiry facial hair, overgrown and undergroomed. His fingers twitched for the razor. He thought better of it.

He tried to turn on the faucet to splash water on his face. Nothing came from the sink. It sputtered and shook the room enough to chatter teeth. He was sweating, unclean, boiling alive. He made into a dead sprint for the door, skirting past the bodies and covering his ears as the blaring music and echoing collective of laughter threatened to shatter his bones. The door was still open; he escaped and slammed it shut.

Quiet, solitude, cool air. The only sounds prickling in his periphery were the rustling of leaves in the wind, a car rolling down the road at least a half-mile away, and some bird or squirrel skittering around for a late-night snack. He looked up. The stars in the night sky spread across his vision, edges populated by thin, translucent clouds. Celestial lights appeared like a galactic wound. The Milky Way's arm was bruise-purple and bone-white.

It felt like the heavens begged him not to stare—a watched wound never heals. They were tired of seeing his limp, open mouth and expectant eyes asking for the same answer every night. He didn't need meaning. Meaning was something to be found when it was deserved. He needed to quit falling asleep outside. He needed to tighten the screws on his jaw, to anchor the black holes in the middle of his eyes to their expected place and size. Not tonight. Tonight, he would let the maternal

exasperation of the universe watch over, something it couldn't do when he was inside. Too claustrophobic.

Here, breath was easy even as the atmosphere stole it from his lungs. He succumbed for the second time that night.

His legs collapsed and he dropped to the ground. The chalky concrete caught him. It felt like a bed. He wanted to sleep. *He needed sleep.*

The world he woke up in was a wild one. A circular clearing in a forest. Whispers with no visible source barely audible, far away, an implication of vastness like the shadows between lines of trees. Luminescent bugs, glowing flora, pale moonlight reflecting against a small pond in the middle lit the space brilliantly; but away from there was heavy, infinite darkness threatening to close in. Near the pond were bulbous

roots with knobby edges, as thick as the branches suspended high above. A small table and two chairs were carved into the exposed tangle of roots. A being that looked as equally like a woman as it did a monster sat there in one of them. Her body was grayed out, partially camouflaged into the background, maybe transparent. She seemed physical and solid, but something shifted with movement that made her hard to see, details skewed in ambiguity. Her face was... there, familiar yet unrecognizable. He could not pinpoint who exactly it was, nor describe a thing about her. There was no permanence to her features.

“Sit, Jack. You’ll make no progress gaping at me from a distance.” She gestured to the seat across from her. Jack began to slowly move in her direction.

“Who are you?” He asked, one foot in front of the other, eyes never losing contact with hers, suddenly bestowed the wherewithal for caution.

“That’s a loaded question,” She said through a smile, tilting her chin upwards, almost performing the act of thought, though her eyes flitted in a way that betrayed how rapid her internal calculations truly were, “In practice or metaphor?”

“Either?” Having approached the roots, he climbed over them and slid into his seat. She waited patiently for him to adjust.

She leaned forward, scanning her eyes across Jack’s face. “In practice, probably... God or *a* god. Perhaps a vessel for one? Unclear. Metaphorically, I am what I create.”

“That doesn’t help me.”

“Well, what could? I doubt you’d let a life raft save you from drowning. I’m not here to help you.”

“Then what are you here for?” Jack could feel his body heat up, annoyance sparking at every answer.

“To talk. You summoned me. Why do you think I’m here? You’ve got questions and I’ve got... answers? No, *responses*—accusations maybe? Haven’t decided how I’ll play this yet.”

He tried to stifle his frustration. He would play along.

“What kind of questions am I allowed to ask?”

“Anything you want.”

“Where are we?” He asked, his finger tapping on the table in time with his restless leg shaking beneath it. She began to observe their surroundings, to her left, then to her right. Her eyes filled with that same calculation from earlier, the performance gone this time.

“I would say we’re inside your drug-addled mind but, really, it is unimportant where we are.”

“What does that mean?” He inhaled a deep, self-soothing breath.

“God knows,” She said, then broke out into a smile, a small laugh, “I mean, I could know but just trust me that it matters very little.”

Jack did not have time for this. He needed sleep. “Am I dying?”

“You’ll wake up tomorrow, certainly.” She laughs again. “Though you’ve been dead in other ways a long time, at the risk of falling into cliché.”

“Don’t you dare laugh at me like that,” He said through gritted teeth, slamming a hand on the table, “Like- like it’s so *easy*, being *alive*, staying *clean*.”

“Now why would you expect it to be easy? You want pleasure with no strings? That’s just not how this works.”

“Why? Why not? We’re cursed to live in discomfort and punished for trying to relieve it. Fucking bullshit, this world.”

Jack slumped back in his chair, huffing and speeding up his tapping hand.

“Blind and ungrateful.” She pointed her finger at him. He wanted to break it.

“Ungrateful?” He asked slowly, almost under his breath.

She started to stand, putting both hands on the table. “You think the world exists to be comfortable? Does it owe you that? You were given a gift, *humanity* was given a *gift*.”

He looked up at her beneath furrowed brows. “What a wretched gift. To exist in fear. To be born just to die.”

“I gave you the ability to want, to think, to rationalize. I gave you the gift to not only see the bright light of the sun but to know that it is *you* who is seeing it, that it is the apparatus of your body that witnesses it. Is that not enough? I must also make

“Nothing can exist as wholly good or bad. No definition is inherent to its subject. It’s an observation.”

“But you said you created this. *You* could have made it different.” At his words, she shrunk away, her liquid body leaving trails in the air. She waved her hand, untangling the roots to make a path out of the seating area. She walked closer to the pond. He followed, less graceful, more agitated.

“You know nothing. I came into existence in a void. All-powerful and utterly alone.” She stared into the water like she could see her own reflection. Jack saw nothing looking back at her.

“You felt lonely? Didn’t you just call emotion a side effect?” He stood directly behind her. She remained turned away.

“Yes. A side effect of *existence*. I fall under that umbrella too.”

“And you brought others into your world so you wouldn’t suffer alone.” He scoffed.

“You believe me selfish? Sure. But I fixed my problem and tried to right the wrongs left behind, but that which gives you the potential to save yourself can also doom you. It’s a gamble.”

“And how’s that?” If he could get her to keep talking maybe it would all make sense. Or maybe he could prove to God and the universe that he hadn’t done but been wronged.

“The thing that saved me from an eternity of loneliness was my ability to create. I made you in my image and thought the ability to build things, to populate a world with others like you... I thought...” Her voice cracked. Jack averted his gaze in case she turned to face him. He would not see her cry. Emotion welled in his throat, a boulder of phlegm blocking his airway.

“You thought what?” He stared toward the sky. It glimmered, shuddered. He thought it might cry too. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her turn to face him.

“I thought you would choose it. I gave you the ability to *choose* and *create*. The necessary core for either of those to exist is desire. You all work so hard to destroy desire, to pick loneliness at every turn in favor of lesser pleasures, a quick fix.”

“I never made that decision. I was relegated to it.”

“You are a recluse. You could reach out, say yes when people offer company. All of you used my gifts to build a world of threat and survival. Never connection.”

“You couldn’t have implanted us with a stronger tendency toward connection, toward goodness?” He looked at her again. Her face had changed from the fiery rage he had felt moments ago to the utter despair that now diffused through the

atmosphere, the emotion coming down upon them like rain without water.

“Creation, obviously, is a game of chance. Everything holds potentiality. It is a better world if you have free will, but that introduces so much uncertainty, fallibility.”

“So you’re not all-powerful.” The energy between them snapped and disappeared. Her facial features slackened to total indifference, eyes colder than snow. She turned away once more.

“I could restrict you, but that would rob you of either choice or creation, if you mean to kill desire. Desire’s ugly side is greed and pride. Does its love, passion, and happiness not make up for it? If only you’d choose it?” There was nothing of substance in her voice. Monotone. It terrified him more than any comportment she held previously.

“I don’t know.” Jack felt hollow.

“Exactly. Creation saved me, but freedom holds the possibility of isolation if not substituted by joy. It takes time and work. It takes active choice. I cannot implant that in you without robbing you of the chance to do so. I wallowed for millennia, alone in a void that could bend to my will if only I was brave enough to manipulate it.”

He thought about her words. Thought about the concrete sidewalk that his physical body was likely still rotting upon outside of his home. He wondered if his fingers had gone blue, numb from the chill. He wondered if he’d wake up with a dry mouth and burning eyes. There was no way to know within this dream, stuck inside his mind waxing philosophic with God or at least his version of it. He shivered.

“You were right.” Another sudden shift, this time a softening. The fear, the rage, the devastation still remained,

fading in opacity and becoming more residual than oppressive. The clicking-in-place of realization.

“Right about what?” She blinked rapidly, taken aback. He opened his mouth a few times before finally speaking. He looked down at his hands.

“I am a coward. Not brave enough to choose. Even if I did—I have no one to change for. I cannot rewrite a lifetime of missed opportunities.” He went to his knees with a crash. Knelt beneath her, he was barely able to lift his head aloft.

“Are you dead yet?” She stood above him once again.

“Might as well be, you said it yourself.”

“You have as much time as you give yourself. You have as much power as you allow yourself to have. You are the person to change for. Future opportunities are no less important or real than those of the past.” She sunk down to his level. Her descent

was slow and graceful. She brought her hand to his face. He took a deep breath. He got sleepy.

She continued. “When you awaken, you must be brave. I cannot be that for you.”

He jolted up at that, pulling away from her hand. Eyes wide, breath quick and ragged.

“I can’t wake up yet. M’not ready.”

“I can do nothing more for you.” She pet the side of his face, soothing him.

“Speak with me just a bit longer. Will you return? Next time I sleep?” His eyes started to close, urgency leaving his voice, though not as swiftly from his gut.

“I am afraid not. This is an intersection to which you can never return once it has passed. Here is where you choose a direction.” Her voice was soft, encouraging.

“And if I choose wrong? If I fuck up again?” He knew he was whining. It was discordant to his own ears, pathetic and piercing.

“If that happens, remember our time together and know that there will always be time to change so long as you still breathe.” He felt her hand disappear. A tear rolled down his face, freezing cold. Numbness infiltrated his system via the extremities. Angry neuropathy twitched at the edges, safety pins puncturing barely-felt skin. The pain was a warbling resonance, going in and out, gaining in strength with each return until the noise hit critical mass within his skull. He jolted awake.

Quiet, solitude, cool air.

Ladybug

Dean and I have been together for 14 months and 21 days. For the whole time I've known him he's worn the same outfit, no matter the weather. He wears distressed khaki shorts that he bought from the thrift store, they are two sizes too big and stained with paint: red, green and blue splotches, scattered in a pattern that almost looked intentional. For his shirt, he alternates between 3 button down tops; one yellow, one salmon pink and the other blue, this blue shirt matched the blue paint splotches on his shorts perfectly and therefore he wore it the most. He always smelled faintly of smoke, but it was covered by his cologne, a deep woodsy smell with a hint of vanilla. The perfect mixture of masculine and feminine. I love this

smell. He's always chewing peppermint gum, though when we kiss (which isn't often), he would taste of black licorice, the flavor getting stuck in my mouth. That I hate. He bites his fingernails until they bleed and is obsessed with reincarnation. He says he'll come back as a ladybug in his next life.

A usual outing with Dean goes like this. Long walks around town, maybe grabbing something to eat or going shopping. Though shopping isn't as successful as I hope it to be. I tried to buy him a new shirt once, to add a bit more variety into his wardrobe, but he refused. He said didn't need anything else, he was perfectly content with what he had, and perhaps others should follow in his minimalist life. Another typical occurrence on a day out would include Dean fake falling and making a huge scene. He will trip

and fall when he is holding a tray of food in his hands, adding some new stains to his shorts. He'd spill everywhere making not only a scene but a mess for some poor worker to clean up. He'll take a dive as he's holding my hand, almost taking me down with him. He will fall so hard, scraping the skin from his kneecaps, blood running down his calves; that I can't help but pause and think to myself, why is he doing this? Why am I doing this? Why am I still here? I think he just wants the attention, maybe he wants to be a ladybug.

I've seen Dean for 135 days in a row, it would be more, but he went out of town a little while back. I keep a tally of these days on a white board I have next to my bedside table, the edges are red and black covered with glitter. Dean is my fifth boyfriend and I'm in love with him, but I

hate being in love with him. I don't think there's anything wrong with him necessarily, I don't like being in love in general, there's probably something wrong with me.

. . .

We met at the record store he used to work at, the moment I saw him he caught my eye, he was wearing his yellow button down shirt that day, even though all of the other employees had to wear matching uniforms, black collared polos with a red vinyl and the name of the store

placed over their hearts. I didn't even know he worked there at first, I had never been in the store, so I wasn't familiar with the employees, and he wasn't wearing the uniform so I kinda just assumed he was another customer.

It wasn't until he came up to me and asked if I needed help when I made the connection. As he walked, that deep woody smell stuck in my nose. I asked why he didn't

have to wear the uniform, and he looked me in the eye and said, “I’m not like the others.” I held in a chuckle trying to be polite. I left the store with four new vinyl’s and felt satisfied not only with my purchase but because there was a note left on my receipt, it was a ten-digit number and under it in the sloppiest handwriting I’ve ever seen read “call me, xoxo Dean”. I waited exactly 17 days to call him.

Before I called him, I told my therapist about our interaction, he asked how it made me feel, I lied, like I always do and told him it was such a relief and so flattering to get some male attention. In reality, I did not care.

So, after 17 days had passed I dialed Dean’s number into the phone, it rang and rang and rang then stopped. I

dialed the number again making sure I hit all the right numbers and this time someone picked up. Even though I'd only heard his voice once, I knew it was him. The way he said hello reminded me of my father, the way he dragged out the "Ls" and swallowed the end letter "HeLLLLo". It took me about 5 seconds to respond, I introduced myself and then quickly added, "From the record store." "Ahh, yes. I started to worry."

"Oh yeah, yeah sorry it took me so long, I was visiting family in Kentucky." I lied. I do not have family in Kentucky. I hardly have a family at all.

We talked on the phone for about 30 minutes and agreed to meet up for lunch the next day. I think calling the number twice and agreeing to lunch is the best, worst decision I've ever made.

. . .

I picked Dean up and we went to lunch, we had Wendy's, but we didn't go through the drive thru, we dined in. The seating area had seven tables, two of which were occupied. On one side there was a family of four, a crying baby, an irritated mom, an unavailable father, and a teen girl who clearly didn't want to be there. On the other end of the dining room was an old couple, enjoying a simple, peaceful lunch together minding their own business.

Dean and I sat right in the middle. He rushed ahead of me and pulled my chair out before I could sit down and do it myself. He got up and refilled my soda for me whenever it was low. He threw away my trash when I was done. When he got up to throw my trash away was the first time I

witnessed the falling, with the food tray in his hand he put his right foot directly in front of his left then proceeded to take a step forward with his left, tripping himself and causing leftover fries, a burger wrapped and my soda cup that still had ice in it, to fly around the Wendy dining room. Everyone in the Wendy's looked over in our direction. The baby cried louder and the old couple's peaceful time was ruined. I hate to admit it, but I think that was the moment I fell in love with him.

Now 14 months and 21 days later Dean and I are still together, often I wonder if Dean loves to love me or if he loves me at all. I told my therapist all of this at our appointment today. I now see a different therapist, her name is Rachel and I think I love her more than I love Dean. I never lie to Rachel.

She talks with her hands flowing through the air and smells of sweet candy. Her office is always clean and filled with crisp, cool air, encouraging posters around the room and a pale-yellow couch that I sit on.

She tells me I should end things with Dean, that I deserve better, that I deserve to love loving someone. I disagree, I think Dean and I are the perfect couple and that we will be together forever. After my appointment I go home, back to my apartment. I open the door and walk back into my mess. It still smells like oatmeal from this morning. I sank into my worn red leather couch and I called Dean, I don't normally call him after seeing Rachel. It just doesn't feel right, but for some reason I decided to call him today.

I

called, he did not answer, so I called again, he did not answer, again. This worried me a bit but I figured there

was some good reason, maybe he was out with his friends, maybe he picked up an extra shift at work and forgot to tell me, I didn't think anything of it so decided to go to bed early that night. I crawled into bed warmed by my surroundings. I slept, I didn't dream. I was woken up to a tickling on my forehead; I slowly sat up moving the covers off of me and walked to my bathroom mirror. There was a bright red ladybug with seven black dots on its wings sitting on the center of my forehead. I erased my whiteboard and never saw Dean again.

Perseverance

(or The Curious case of Heptaphrenia)

I won't feel the flowing of the time when I'm gone/ [...]

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

- “When I’m Gone,” Phil Ochs

The child was born on March 15th, 1631 in the Southern coast of France, on it’s wrist was a burgundy birthmark. It was seen as a bad omen, and this was confirmed on March 21th, 1631 when the child died from the cold. Though it was a tragedy, little time could be devoted to the act of mourning. Instead the child left their lives as quickly as it had entered, weighing heavily in their hearts.

March 22nd, 1631, on the steppes of Mongolia Hachiun is born. The child bore a butterfly birthmark on one wrist, a wine stain that years of washing could not wipe away.

Though it was the early weeks of spring, a cold spell swept across the steppes. It was a final cold breath of the season, and in its wake, many died, except for the newborn Hachiun who survived when many would have died. It was seen as a sign for good to come. It was in fields of melting snow that the child began to speak.

They grew on stories of distant vistas, foraged foods, and aspirations to be a falconer. Though it was a common practice on the steppe, the child had grown to have a fascination with the talent, and planned to take their skills to the city. Inspired by stories of wily troubadours and smart minded kids, they left their home with a traveling band of merchants, in hopes to make a name for themselves in a distant city. The merchants and their new falconer arrived on the eve of the outbreak of plague. It was in a chapel,

dedicated to an unknown faith that they young child contracted the illness and died.

July 3rd, 1644, Ramos was born in the colonies of New Spain, in a community controlled by a domineering, sadistic viceroy whose atrocities matched his progeny. Here the child with a butterfly birthmark was born again, this time to a native woman and aforementioned viceroy. At his birth, his mother was attended to by the woman of her family, who each took a moment to cradle him closely before passing him along to his reclining mother. Time passed and he was sent to study under a local Jesuit priest, with the permission of his father, who to that point in his life haunted the doorway of their abode. The viceroy was kind to his mother and his son, the blood lust that plagued mind exorcised elsewhere before his weekly visit to one of his many families.

One such arrival that stuck with Ramos for the better part of his life, was the day his father brought an artist. He wanted to have a family portrait done. They spent the better part of the day posing for the portrait, watching in the mirror behind the artist as they took form on a blank canvas. The viceroy was dressed in his regalia, hat in lap; his mother in traditional clothing passed down to her by her mother; while Ramos stood in front, combed, and dressed in the style of the European courts. The painting was shipped back to Spain in the following weeks, the young boy only seeing it for a chance moment in the office of the viceroy when he asked for permission to study under a Jesuit priest.

When he came of age Ramos attended school in the local Church. There he was taught to read Latin, to read scripture, then Spanish, to read literature.

Ramos' childhood was clouded memories of snowy plains, that soon left his mind as he grew into a young man. It was after his

sixteenth birthday that he reflected on his beliefs and began his application to the Seminary. With the permission of his father, and approval of his mother, the boy was taken in by the church.

Ramos study of faith often clashed with the world around him. While working as a nurse in the plague ward of a local hospital, he was stopped by a sailor. Ramos could see he was half his age and had half the life to live. He made no confessions, only questioned him. “Is there but one life father? How can I squander it, dying here?”

Priest replied, “In Christian faith, we have two lives to live. Here and the hereafter.”

“What do we learn, then, father? What do we remember?” The boy let go of the priest’s arm.

Ramos was quarantined with the rest of the ward, and acted as their nurse, took their confessions, and fed them till their time came. All the while the words of the man sat in his mind. “Where does

knowledge go when we die?” He pondered the question of a single life as he prayed for the health of the dying men. At night, as he was locked away in the wing of the hospital with the sick and dying, Ramos was trapped in his mind, where the questions germinated.

It took a few weeks for the sailors to die from the incurable illness. Despite the odds, Ramos never contracted the plague but lived to tell their stories. It was seen as a divine miracle by the priesthood. His acts did not go unrewarded, as he rose in the ranks of the church with his rhetoric and reflections on the time in the plague ward. In a years time he was given the role of a missionary by the head of the parish, which received approval from the Church itself by long delayed notary. On the day of his departure, he said his goodbyes, hugging his mother as though it would be last time he saw her and bowing to his father, who in the years had grayed substantially. Then he set off on his voyage to share with the world what he had learned. Or so he thought.

Death worked on its own schedule, and often repaid those who avoided it with new fates. For Ramos, the collection came during a trip across the Atlantic. His boat met an unknown demise. All that was found was the flotsam of the former ship and the drowned corpses of its crew, picked away at by sea life. Irony was a fickle tool in the hands of death, since in all his years of study, the priest had never learned to swim.

December 11th, 1699, neighboring a different ocean, on the East coast of Africa, Seble was born in the vaulted room on the second floor of the family estate. A modular home built from coral stone; the space took inspiration from Islamic and European homes with individual rooms interconnected by open air walkways. It was in one of these cells that the girl with a butterfly birthmark came into the world. The wet-nurse held the child up to the light coming in through the fabric curtains covering the openings of the arcade

before passing her on to her waiting mother. Below the room was the walled garden where her father conducted his business with various Arabic merchants. Today he was inspecting a shipment of ornamental guns, bejeweled and lacquered with gold as the cries of a newborn filled the yard like chamber music.

“Life perseveres,” the father said as he finalized the deal.

Seble grew up in the painted confines of the home, forbidden to walk into the city in fear she would be abducted for political gain. Though her solitude was never meant to inhibit, since she was tutored by local scholars in various aspects of the world. As time passed, her curiosity grew and Seble began nightly forays out into the neighboring community and beyond, against the wishes of her family.

Her parent’s home sat on a hill above a port village. Below two rivers converged at the mouth of the port, spilling out into the vast ocean. It was a sight the young girl was accustomed to after years of

solitude, but with age became a subject of curiosity. Merchants and pirates came up from the pier to negotiate with her parents, and the young girl spent evenings resting against the railing of her balcony watching the cavalcade of people entering and leaving their home. Some brought gifts of exotic birds in cages that song short tunes, others brought patronage in form of chests that could not close from all the gold, while others still brought slaves bound in chains. The latter gifts fascinated the child since it was a new face in the home, and it meant new stories. They were people who owed debts, that were captured in naval battles, that were petty criminals, or people taken from their homes in the night by raiders. Though their indentured servitude was long, it was not arduous with the constant care from the child, who spent her free time sneaking food and drink to the slaves no matter where they resided in the house. If they worked in the stables, she appeared on the back wall like a slinking cat. If they were in the warehouse moving crates, she appeared from

a vase. On the coffee plantation, she crept up from the shaded roots of Gliricidia tree to ask the question that rested heavy on her tongue, “What is it like out there?”

Seble could only hang on to the words of various men and women to paint a picture of the world beyond walls. Their stories of large cities, vast plains of sand, trees that blotched the sky, fish that could crush ships, and people with painted bodies sparked the imagination of the child, and in turn unlocked portions of her memories that she believed were creative bits of a burgeoning mind. She imagined snow fields seen from the opening of a hut; cities dying from a disease that had no cure; studying late into the night in a church; caring for the dying in a closed off room; drowning at sea. Each story of the world beyond helped this imagination grow until she was remembering words that she had never heard before.

Under the same Gliricidia tree that she had crept from to converse with a Spanish slave, she saw the tree from a new angle,

and remembered lying under a similar tree in a different place.

Though she couldn't recall where she was, she knew its name though she had never heard spoken before, "Madre de cacao." She ran a hand through its low hanging leaves. The man leaned on a basket in front of him, which was filled to the lip with coffee cherries, as the words wrung in his ear like a distant memory.

"I haven't heard that name in some time," he said in the local Amharic. "You are an educated child to know some Spanish."

These rendezvous with servants were a secret between the child and various parties, since the rigid caste structure forbade the intermingling of groups. Still the words of the various people laid heavy in her mind, and she found herself sneaking down in the city to get a glimpse of the world beyond the walls of her home. It was on one of these journeys out in the world when tragedy struck.

The rainy season had taken its toll on communities located inland. Flood waters had rose beyond their limits and many

communities had been caught under the flash flood. Word did not travel fast in the world then, so no one in the small port town could have expected the approaching surge of water until it was too late.

The surge struck in the night, washing away livestock and huts on the riverbanks West of the village. As the wall of water and debris moved into the city proper, people were stirred from their homes. Lantern bearers, who most nights patrolled the town calmly, now found themselves at the forefront of a surging torrent of water set to pass through the community. In an effort to save who they could, the lantern bearers rushed down streets, shouting as they went hoping to stir everyone, they could to flee from the low-lying city.

It was from on top of their hillock that the girl's father and mother saw the approaching towns people, moving up the road to a landing just below their home. Beyond them trees ached and groaned under the approaching water, and the few torches left burning in the city streets snuffed out with approach of water. A priest stayed

behind in the top of the chapel, ringing a bell, waking anyone he could before the river washed out the foundations of the church. The tower collapsing backwards into the waves with a final ring.

It was in the midst of a rushing crowd, that the water crept up on the merchant's daughter. There was hardly time to react, to breathe, or to blink as the water enveloped Seble and the people around her, dragging them out of the port and into the harbor.

A servant, who was stirred awake by the moaning of destruction, went to check on the young child. She found her bed empty, the curtains pulled open. Below the water rushed in dark like a black snake on dark earth.

The news of her disappearance was brought to her parents. Rivulets of sorrow crested their cheeks, as they grappled with the reality. As they sat in their chamber trying to grasp the news in their minds, only to stall in their minds as words echoed again and again,

the sun rose again on another day, time persevering though tragedy had torn the community apart.

The water soon flowed out to the port, darkening the bright sea water, and the people began to move through the wreckage left by the runoff. Homes were caked in detritus, livestock had become lodged in mud, and trees had been washed away roots and all, only to get stuck on the stone landings around the port. Here bodies of those fated to die were piled against the railings, drowning in the torrent. It was among these piles that the slaves tasked with the search made a discovery.

Lodged in the shell of corpses was the merchant's daughter who, despite the events of the night, breathed and moved her head with a life that to that point was absent in the wreckage. She was muddy, smelt of river run-off, and lacked any sense of where she was. As she spoke water ran out her mouth like a hand drawn well, and words followed shortly after, "Home," was all that could be

understood. She was cleaned and presented to the merchants on the hillock, who nearly collapsed at the sight of their daughter.

“Life perseveres,” her father whispered as collapsed back into his chair. A testament to miraculous world beyond the confines of their home, she had survived the flood.

Seble grew old, married, and began to travel with the merchants as an emissary for her parent’s mercantile business then as a representative of it. Accompanied by her partner, she traveled the Indian ocean and the Mediterranean Sea many times over before dying of age in the Spring of 1789. She lied back in bed, surrounded by art from around the world, exotic animals she had collected, and a warm cup of coffee on her table side. It was the same room she was born in; she could only laugh at the fact it would be the place she would die after all those years of travel. As the sun set on her last day, she hoped the memories she had made would stay with forever.

April 17th, 1789, Joshua is born with the taste of coffee in his mouth, though he would not remember this until many years later. His mother was a young milk maid who lived in the countryside around London. She had found herself with child after a chance encounter with a fellow farm hand who fled the country a month after she started to show. Unable to sustain herself and be mother to the child, she spent most of her day carrying milk door to door with a yolk across her shoulders, and a baby sling on her chest. While the milkmaid went from home to home selling milk from the cow, the child cooed.

Though unknown to the child for some time, civil unrest had seized the world at large. First in former British Colonies then on the mainland as Revolution had taken over the minds of men. The freedom of the individual was at the forefront of dialogue, and it was not uncommon for this unrest to foment in to workers revolts. It was in this spirit of rebellion that the young boy took shape, and became

a spitting image of his father, down to the weaselly details and swindler mannerisms. He took on the job of selling milk door to door, for his mother, and took it upon himself to down the milk with well water and dashes of bone mill, doubling his supply and doubling his profit. Joshua took the extra earnings and spent it at the pub his father once frequented.

Most of his teenage years were spent at the pub, taking in drinks and the stories of soldiers. Here he would taste the many spices of life, including a chance drink of pilfered coffee, which had been snagged from a lord's manner the week prior by a smart fingered crook whose hand tattoos spoke of a criminal life that the young man could only sample now with the first modicum of coffee. It was in that liquid, brown drink that the teen recalled a childhood, sitting in a stone palace on the sea, where the air was thick and sweaty. His head was covered, he was dressed in fine imported silks. Hiding in a garden to ask questions of the servants. His skin is dark,

but on the wrist, peeking out from the silken robes, was a butterfly birthmark not dissimilar to his own. “I’ve had this before,” he told the old thief who waved a hand at the boy.

“Couldn’t have, you can’t just buy that stuff. It’s imported.”

“But I remember it’s taste,” Joshua said.

“What you remember? No way a milk maids son ever tasted coffee,” the man snagged the cup away and finished the drink, scalding his throat. “What you even know, lad?” he asked with an incredulous tone. “You are just drunk.

It was after one of these drunken forays that the young boy found himself in the military stockade of the local garrison. He looked about to the several men who had been in a similar position to him, drunken and rowdy in the local countryside, and in turn locked up with the impending ruling of the military judge to be conducted in a kangaroo court outside the holding cell, in a muddy courtyard of a fort. The scene brought up memories the boy knew

wasn't his own, of being locked in a similar stockade. Then people spoke a language he didn't know or hadn't heard before. Yet before he could think more, the guards came. He pushed the stray thoughts from his mind as he went out to the courtyard and was given a simple decision, "Penal colony or France." Unaware at the time what a penal colony was, he chose France. He was trained and disciplined in a camp on the outside of London, before being shipped to the front.

His mother wouldn't speak to him till he returned. In one sense she was glad to be alleviated from her burden and in another she felt a great gap in her life. What simple joys he brought, like a bundle of flowers, a crate of apples, a hug on a cold day, those could not be recaptured. So as she sat in the window, reading over the letter again, she fixated on the last words of his letter, "I will find my way back to you."

It would be twelve years before she saw her son again.

It was in the fires of war that Joshua learned he was not a normal man. The lessons were threefold. First, he never got cold. It became quite apparent during one length of the campaign, whole platoons froze to death in the exposed elements, while he never felt a chill. He survived with the basic materials, ice clinging to his body without freezing.

Second, he never drowned. Though there were many times that he should have during his service, one such occasion saw him and a raft of supplies sinking to the bottom of a river, as canon fire rained down on him from a distant hilly encampment. A day later he washed up on a shoreline downstream miles away from the bombarded landing. An officer found him in the mud, out of uniform, and disheveled and assumed the young man was a deserter. His punishment was to be forty lashings before the regiment, before the proceedings began, proof of his assumed death were brought to the officer. His appearance on the riverbank was seen as a sign of

good fortune, for Joshua. The officer, who had his whip tightened the week before lamented the news with a sharp crack of the woven hide against the dirt next to the solider. “Lucky bastard,” he whispered to the shirtless Joshua. “Cut’em down boys.”

Third, and most important, he did not catch illness. Disease bred with the war, and took the lives of many men, but Joshua never caught ill. In this way he outlived many officers, many regiments, and many enemies through persistence.

It was in this way that Joshua moved up the ranks. He was a Lieutenant by the age of twenty-three, though he had no prior experience or credit like most officers in that position.

The knowledge he learned about himself were not all found on the front. In the Bordellos of the South of France, where he felt a strange attachment to the land itself, he first encountered idea of reincarnation. The madame explained the process as the duo undressed in the open air room on the upper sections of the brothel.

“I met a man, who told me as a boy he had a distinct memory of being a famous painter from the North. His name escapes me now, but he felt that he was once this painter and could recreate the paintings in near exact detail.”

The young man stopped as he undid a cuff link, “Did you believe him?”

“Of course not. He had no proof. Another girl told me,” she slid down a stocking with the liberal movements of a dancer changing between numbers, “That he must have seen some of the art on an altar-piece in his hometown. The artist is very famous, and all.”

“Though you have no memory of their name.”

“I remember the important details, like a returning clients face,” she smiled at him as he finished taking off his clothes. She draped a rope about his neck before knotting it above the jugular notch and leading him across the room to confines of the bed.

It was in the wake of coitus that he reflected on his own memories from childhood. Memories that didn't feel like his own. For a moment he felt that it was possible that he could have been reincarnated, or it could be as she said to him, "The artist is very famous, and all." Though the idea teased him in the moment, it was not till the post war period that he pursued it to the fullest.

Napoleon's defeat, then subsequent loss at Waterloo, marked the end of Joshua's service. His return home came without much ceremony, as a carriage holding him and his newly wed wife arrived at the small country home he grew up in. His wife was ten years his senior and educated him in the few aspects of life that swindling and war had not taught him. He approached the door of his home, leading his wife alongside him, dressed head to toe in regalia of the era. He removed his hat as he knocked three times, to see his mother already waiting behind the door, she had barely aged a day, while war had taken it's toll on the young man. The stub of his right hand

hid inside the breast of his coat, as though pressed against an upset stomach. As his mother held her boy again, she could feel the rounded portion of his arm lurking beneath layers of cotton. She eased to the floor at his feet, tears welling, “What have they taken from you son?”

“Nothing of import, mother. A man is not his hand, after all.” He ran his hand along her head, “Stand and be merry with me, I found my way back to you, didn’t I?”

They moved into the home and soon settled into the trappings of luxury. Left with a decade worth of pensions, the man’s mind moved back to the perplexing question of rebirth, “Who was I? Who will I be?”

The question pervaded rest of his life as the thoughts of rebirth filled his mind during the dull moments of the day. He could not confess to people what the war had taught him, since the things he

had learned of himself would be seen as madness. While questions of the self-took hold of Joshua, England began to change.

What once was an unknown path running past his home, became a bustling road that connected two cities of Britain. As carriages passed through seeking shelter, Joshua added on to their home, converting the cottage into a multi-story hotel.

Along with the renovation Joshua set about making his mark in the world, by adding a studio on to the cottage so he could take up the humble art of painting. His art was partially funded by his pension and a patron out of London, a wealthy donor who was married to one of the men he had commanded during Napoleonic campaigns. “He spoke highly of you,” she told him one evening in the lounge of his home. “He often said that you were a man in two places, that you were as interested in your past as you are your present. That as you fixated on the landscape, one eye could see the now and one could see the past.”

He nodded, “Partially true. I was born with memories that I feel are my own, though I know that could never be the case. They are dreams of Africa and Mexico. Places I have never been.”

“Maybe it’s premonitions?”

“Were it that simple,” he took a drag of his pipe and watched the flames burn in the heart. He could remember torches burning in crowded streets he had never walked before. Then he could feel the rush of water over him. Filling his lungs. “Whose memories are these,” he mused. A log crackled.

The artwork he made was in the style of romanticism. His wife posed as the model of many of his works which recreated the landscape around his home, shallow creeks, thickets of trees, scattered rocky out-cropping’s, moss beds, dirt roads, empty fields, and placid lake, with the casual addition of the figures from his memories. A child taming a falcon, a priest in seminary, a well-dressed merchant bride; their faces obscured, backs or sides turned

to viewer in various positions within frames, lying languid on walls, riding astride boats, or scaling rocky out-cropping's. Each piece was untitled, and he worked diligently through the coming years to make a body of work. His intentions were unclear to his family, since his art never sold and only gathered dust in the attic of their home.

The artist never intended to sell any of his pieces, his fixation was entirely on creating a legacy. A message to himself in the next life that hopefully could perpetuate the thoughts he had now. "Why do I remember you? When was I you?" he asked as he dated each painting.

He knew there was the real possibility that his work would never be seen. That it could be lost to time. During the Napoleonic campaign, how much art had their casual barrages of cities destroyed? Who else was trapped in this endless cycle of death and rebirth like him that got a trapped in the campaign? How many reincarnations did he force? Was he only one?

Questions like this plagued the man's mind, and in turn tainted everything he shared. "What if I were to die tomorrow, would you seek me out again?" He once asked his wife.

The question perplexed her and she spoke plainly, "I don't understand your meaning, husband."

"What if I were to die tomorrow and be born again in a new body? Would you look for me in this world?"

"How could you be reborn? There is only one life, and that's the one we live now."

He nodded, seeing that she did not believe him. While to her she saw her husband's inquiries to be a result of a deep melancholia that disturbed the inner mind and weighed heavy in his actions. She watched him as he sat, smoking, working through the same questions that he had asked her on life and re-birth, getting the same answers from their customers, "There is but one life."

“But what of an apple. A red apple leaves a seed that grows more red apples, which leaves a seed and grows more,” he raised his hand in some debate. “Is there not a system that could apply to man in same way? Could I not be an apple in this world, seeding and re-seeding my soul in new generations.”

“You speak as though this is has happened to you,” one man said to him.

“To me, it has.” He took a draw from his pipe, letting the words sit in the air.

Though the question of life beyond death troubled him, he would not see the truth until two cycles hence, since his time was cut short. At the age of sixty-seven, he succumbed to his poor health and found himself speaking his mind. In the years since the war he had started his own family, now they stood about his bed looking down at the aging soldier turned artist as his mind seem to slip further away as he spoke to them in his final moments with that same

cryptic speech. “It’s simple. I will meet you all again when I come back, we’ll you wait for me?”

There was a pregnant pause, and his wife looked down the line of children who had distanced themselves from their father in the years since his perceived decent began. She turned back to him and nodded, “I will be here.”

He smiled, feeling the warmth of death coming over him again, “Kiss me once before I go love, in case I get lost in this world.”

She smiled and pressed her lips to his, and with that he passed over. Death plucking him once again, so he could grow anew in some other place in the world. While his corpse ripened, and the mourners lamented the loss of a hero, somewhere in the world a life was reborn.

October 1st, 1856, Olga was born in the taiga near the borders of Siberia, where she lived most of her life blissfully unaware of who

she was or who she would become. Living in an agrarian community near the inhospitable regions of the country, her scope of the world was small. Beyond the confines of the township was the nearby wilderness, where large animals stalked. Here the tiger was like a spirit that haunted the outskirts of the village. At night, when she lied awake unable to sleep, she could hear it prowling through the village, coming down from the mountains to eat what livestock it could and drink. At the base of the well was one pail was left year- round for beggars, and another pail was left for the tiger. One night a

beggar was already there drinking from his own pail when the tiger came down the mountain. The beggar was blind and made his way into the village with the aid of road markers. Now he groped at the pail beside the well and drank from it with deep gulps.

The girl watched as the tiger moved up behind him, stopping for a short moment as the man took a breath, before pressing his head once again into the bucket. By the time the man was done

drinking the tiger was looming over him. It's head twice the size of the beggar's, and it's claws barred ready to strike out at a moment's notice.

The girl watched with a looming dread. The tiger could kill the man with a single movement. She would be a witness of it all, but the sight had left her nearly mute, transfixed on the events unfolding. What followed stuck with her for years to come.

The man turned slightly, possibly feeling the breath of the beast on him, and smiled a wide grin before holding the bucket out to the beast. It stood a moment, almost gauging the man or engaging in some unknown dialogue before dunking it's head into the bucket in a similar gesture and lapping up all the water. Once it had finished it moved back, chuffing as it walked out the far side of the village. The beggar soon collected his things and followed suit. Leaving the village as quickly as he arrived.

Olga was the only witness of the events, and she kept it to herself for the rest of her life.

She would die decades later to something entirely out of her control. The Tsar famine that swept the nation, led to a food shortage in the village, nearly everyone perished from starvation. The survivors of the event buried the dead. She died with hunger on her mind, she hadn't had time to remember the lives she had lived, since there was little time left to think on dreams. She passed again in to the cold embrace of death.

January 23rd, 1892, a set of twins—Sam and Matthew—were born malnourished, though they lived in a land of luxury. Born to the daughter of a newspaper tycoon, the children were nursed back to health in short time. The notable feature that their family had fixated on was the parallel ringed scars on their right hands and the birth

marks on the twins' wrists. Like mirrored images of a letter B, the wine stains were peculiarly symmetrical.

Growing up in downtown New York, they were exposed to a culture that was always on the cusp of transformation. For a time, the city occupied them, but with time they looked inwards discovering what they had in common. Specifically dreams of lives they did not live. Where one dreamed of life in a yurt, one dreamed of a tiger and a beggar; where one saw war, the other saw peace; where one drowned, the other starved. Each dream they remembered and recorded encouraged new dreams to appear. It was in the confines of their room, several stories up from the streets of New York, a history was being transcribed into several journals, which the young men stacked up under their bunk bed in various crates. For them the experience of logging these dreams became an endeavor in to understanding the inner mind. The memories told through dreams were seemingly links in an unknowable chain that the boys

attempted to trace to its origin. Some weeks they only dreamed of being in Russia, then some weeks they were an artist in Britain, the some they were sailing the Indian ocean. In the effort of dictation, they seemingly circled around the core question like vultures over carrion. “What are these memories?”

In the background to the boys lives, war swept over the world. Though the twins avoided the service for first three years, they were conscripted in the fourth, providing support in the quagmire of a war, and finding themselves in same battlefields they had seen in their dreams. Though this time what was fields pocked by cannonballs was now the slurry of gore and rainfall that seemed to darken the sky as well the Earth itself. Horrors not meant for the eyes of men, they were subjected to the imagery of war at a young age and found themselves disaffected in its wake.

In the year of service their dreams had been exacerbated. Images of Napoleonic soldiers appeared at the forefront of their

minds as they marched single file across artillery ridden battle fields. Their time in the war was short, and as soon as they entered, they were free to live their lives again. Though they had an opportunity to return to America, they stayed with the generation of men and sought answers across Europe about the meaning of their dreams.

Psychologist: “You are experiencing repressed memories of a troubled childhood. Imbuing elements of stories in to your own narratives to paper over what you felt.”

Chemist: “You have an imbalance in chemicals that has made your brain think of new imagery that your conscious mind can associate with existing knowledge. What you feel as past lives are in fact differing amino acids.”

Theoretical Physicist: “You are experiencing echoes of time. Time cannot be simply created or destroyed, only moved to another place in space, and in the act of movement, time itself is disturbed and we feel those echoes.”

A priest: “Simply, it is god giving you lessons to lead a better life.”

Though the search gave them food for thought, it never fed their unquenchable question into who they were was answered. In a last resort they turned to a mystic in the rainy streets of London.

She was an older matron, dressed in fine velvet and marked across the eyes with a white scar tissue. It was a chemical burn from a factory accident, that had left her blind, but gave her motive to tap into an inner sight. The young men had heard about her on a train in Belgium, from a man on business. He was a stout fellow with a handlebar mustache who felt his insights in the world were a cure all. “You chaps strike me as the troubled types,” he opened the conversation with Sam and Matthew thus, “What would you say to some mystical aid?”

“We wouldn’t be averse to it,” Sam said.

The man turned in his bench and tapped his cane. Behind him the countryside ran by, occasional windmills taking up the view. “I had a similar feeling as you lot. A sense of listlessness in the world, and I turned to a spiritual medium, a mystic really, who was a member of the Theosophical Society, founded by the Helena Blavatsky. This member told me I was one of many selves in a line of reincarnation.” The man licked his lips, “And she put me in touch with those selves. You see, I had been plagued by odd dreams. Dreams of lives I hadn’t lived. And they told me what I was experiencing were those memories.” The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a diary. “Now I annotate my life. Writing it down and reinforcing it in my memory. She told me the act of remembering carves grooves in our spiritual riverbeds, so that thoughts could be re-felt. Lives could be remembered beyond death.” He pulled out his pipe, “Not that it does any good for me. I

don't remember what I had for breakfast. But maybe, in next the life, I will remember this, and wouldn't that be dandy?"

The twins asked for the address of the medium and found themselves in the rainy streets of London, looking through the darkened window of a shop. The door opened on its own, and inside was a child dressed in a broad dress, hair done in pig tails, a thin shroud over her form, and rings on her fingers. "Grandmother awaits you," and she led the two men inside.

The shop was filled with incense, cushy furniture, and totems of various faiths. In one corner a man sat back on a cushioned mattress smoking opium by an open window. The hole in his cheek from a piece of flack seeped out smoke in billowing wisps of blue. Beside him on a pillow was the porcelain mask he wore when in public.

The men continued back through a beaded curtain to meet the blind practitioner of Theosophy who sat bejeweled and layered in various fabrics. Her hands were tattooed up to the nails, which

themselves grew out like sharp spires from the cuticle. “Sit, be comfortable,” she told the pair. They removed their raincoats and passed them to the child who took them to another room of the building. “You seek answers and I have them.” The child returned with a warm cup of earthly liquid and presented one to each man, who hesitated at first, till the woman said, “Drink from them.” So they did. She held out her hands, palms up, “Convene with me so we may know your story.”

The twins unsure of the whole exercise, hesitantly took their seats in front of the woman and held her hands. “Close your eyes, breathe in, so we may dream backwards together.” As she led them on the breathing exercise, music slowly filled the room. A low toned singing bowl that removed all thought, and pierced the line between the dreaming and waking thoughts. It was here that memories left only in dreams came across in various images. Lives lived, people loved, crimes committed, battles fought, foods tasted, art seen, vistas

visited, animals hunted, oceans sailed, and feelings felt through them like a Spirograph of lives, a multitude of experiences. In a single moment of time, they lived seven lives over in a simultaneous experience of heptaphrenia¹, in a comprehensive overview on their minds that gave truth to their current condition. In each time, the butterfly scar had been so clear and now divided between the two bodies it proved to be the visual clue of their shared timeline as the brothers' minds pressed the images together reforming the singular scar that defined their history. Then it was clear, they were not dreaming memories, but relieving lives they had once lived. They were a singular being in a chain of life that died and returned with the seasons of time.

In the wake of the revelation, the duo could only ask “What do we do now?”

¹ A combination of the prefix Hepta- (for seven) and -phrenia (mind); inspired by the portmanteau ‘Quadrophenia,’ itself a combination of quadraphonic (a sound system) and schizophrenic, the word quadrophenia is meant to convey existing in four simultaneous states of consciousness. By extension, heptaphrenia means experiencing seven memories in a single state of consciousness.

The mystic could only smile, “You live. Nothing more to it.”

April 23rd, 1983, the strangest of phenomenon occurred as Sam and Matthew died on same day at the exact same time, in separate places of the globe. Their deaths were entirely unrelated, as one died in a bus crash and the other in a retirement village peacefully in his sleep. Though quite close in their early lives, they had grown apart with the passage of time. Veterans of First World War (known to them as The Great War), they had become well known figures in their communities for their philanthropy and writings on the Theosophical Society which they said they owed a great debt towards. In the years that passed the pair took detailed notes, spent their time learning, and retaining as much knowledge as they could in the hopes that in their next lives “We can get a leg up in the next life.”

Tangentially related to this a child, Bowen, was born in a hospital in Hong Kong. The child of a salary man and stunt woman; they were born healthy if a little scarred. The notes on their birth included a mention of a butterfly shaped mark, and a ring about their wrist. These birthmarks were not uncommon in the world; these specific shapes were well known world over as the signs of the reincarnated twins. Though, it was seen as pure chance to have that similarity, it would define the life of the child as they came into their own.

Bowen traveled abroad for study, and ended up in England, living in a townhouse flat with other international students. they had taken to studying European History and Art in a premiere college. It was on a trip with their class to an art museum that they came across a work of art that they had only seen in a dream, where they had one hand and spent their days painting artwork in the countryside. As they fixated on the self-portrait of a Napoleonic era soldier painting

his portraiture with the aid of a mirror, they began to remember it all again. So, the cycle began again.

Life perseveres.

We All Had Gifts

I remember when it happened as clear as day; ironic, of course, since it was the dead of night. But I believe that's what seared it into my memory like hot iron. There was nothing godly about it.

We were going to be in Colorado for three days, just a ways North of Estes Park, with Rocky Mountain National Park still in view. The Airbnb itself was hugging Signal Mountain, a totem to the natural world that, unfortunately, was razed by recent grassfires. The once-green Eastern face, ripe with fir trees and trickling mountain streams, was charred with ash—suffocating any wildlife. That was life, though. Beautiful things came and went, and it was our job to keep our spilled ink from spoiling the portrait.

So, when we were planning our vacation, we tried to schedule it around summer so a brush fire wouldn't incinerate us. That led us to a deep December stay in mountainous Colorado, where the sky opens like a pillow, and snowflakes spun like feathers. The most dangerous part of our journey was supposed to be that drive, navigating switchbacks before the evening flurry rolled in.

It's important to mention that I'm not a native of Colorado. I only visited a few times after my friend Ibrahim moved there from the East Coast. I guess there's no place farther than half a country, but he said he had despised the urbanity of New Jersey's shores. So, he traded the ocean for the mountains. However, I can't blame him for it. I'd have done anything just to start fresh somewhere else, away from it all. But I didn't have the privilege of uprooting my life like him. So, when I got the opportunity, I brought the idea up to Ibrahim that we should ski

this year. Naturally, he was ecstatic that I came to *him* about that.

Though it was Ibrahim's idea to bring Joseph along, I'm not surprised. Jo's always been closer to Ibrahim than me, even though he and I practically lived on the same street. In hindsight, I think it was a good call. I couldn't imagine spending a weekend with just Ibrahim.

"Alright..." Joseph began while thumbing through his phone. I could see from the back seat that his Apple Maps was struggling to update. "Jesus, c'mon." He muttered.

"Hey, hurry, which way?" Ibrahim turned to Joseph, his dark brows furrowed. The grey road in front of us stretched for just a few yards before turning sharply behind the mountainside, blending into its dark face.

"It's loading, give me a sec- hey! Keep your eyes on the road, asshole!" Joseph snapped. Ibrahim exhaled slowly before

returning his gaze to the white windshield. To our left was the milky abyss, completely clouded by snowfall. We were on the switchbacks en route to our Airbnb, driving on what I assumed was Signal Mountain—though I had no clue. All I knew was to keep my gaze on the thundering stone silhouette to our right, my white knuckles gripping my coat. I wouldn't dare look out the left window, off the cliff. I couldn't even imagine how high up we were.

“Okay, jackass, has it loaded yet?” Ibrahim exhaled and was finally starting to reveal the anxiety I know we all felt. “I need an answer now,” he exclaimed, turning his head toward the passenger seat.

“Right...” Joseph responded while staring at his phone, drawing out his R for a few beats too long.

“Right, when? We passed a few roads already.”

“Hold on, it’s loading a name. I’m at two bars now, so it shouldn’t take too much longer.”

“Shouldn’t we stop while we wait?” I added, shifting my weight uncomfortably from my left to my right.

“Okay, there we go,” Joseph lit up. “Turn right in 1,500 feet on Briar Road, and it should be the only house on the left- keep your eyes on the *road*, damn it!” he snapped again. Ibrahim scoffed before quickly returning his gaze to the suffocating, cloudy veneer.

Eventually, Briar Road appeared, and we turned off the main switchback onto a level roadway toward the mountain. As branches and mud crunched under the tires, my stomach settled for once, far from the cliffside.

“Haha, there she is,” Ibrahim smiled, seeing the Airbnb, “And just like in the photo, too.” Before us was an enclosed inlet, just a hundred feet or so tucked from the road, surrounded

by yards of crystalline snow; in the center was a dark, auburn cabin with a modern finish, fitted with a wraparound porch and rosy shutters.

“Was it drowning under snow, too?” I sneered, the color returning to my face. Ibrahim parked perpendicular to the house, his car trudging through a few inches of untouched snow, before he put the hand brake in place.

“You know, it actually was,” he smirked while turning back to me, unbuckling his seatbelt. The three of us spent the next few hours exploring and settling down in the house, claiming different rooms and their various views. Though most windows weren’t met with any cliff sides like the living room ones, they were surrounded by gleaming fields of snow that spiraled deeper up the mountain. I imagine in the spring, the rocky faces encircling the house would glisten with morning

dew and echo at night. Yet even at winter dusk, the outer perimeter was just as gorgeous.

Our dinner plans for the night were to cook for ourselves. We made the sagacious decision to buy our groceries before traveling up Signal Mountain, so once night fell, we could begin on Joseph's eggplant parmesan. The house was still quite illuminated by the snow, with a hazy moonlight reflecting inside like a soft mirror.

"The plan is to wake up around 6 in the morning tomorrow," Joseph reminded us as he sprinkled another layer of cheese atop his vegetable medley. "Which sounds disgusting, I know, but remember Colorado is a few hours behind EST," he said, mostly to me. Joseph bent to pop the oven open and slid the baking pan in, careful not to singe any of his fingers.

“Okay, that means it’d be, what, 7 am our time when we get up?” I replied, scooping some vegetable scraps into my hand to toss in the trash.

“No, it’d be 8 am. We’re two hours behind you guys.” Ibrahim chimed in.

Joseph pulled out his phone and set a timer for the oven. “Yeah, let’s be in bed in two or so hours.” He pulled up the nearby ski resort’s hours, quietly reading to himself. I watched as his eyes scanned the screen in delicate flutters.

“You got it,” Ibrahim replied with a strained exhaustion, his eyelids half closed like mine. Honestly, I had expected one of them to have already reached for the box of wine we snagged, but we amused ourselves quite well, it seemed. Within the next half hour, Jo’s repas was plated and served. Jesus, was it good. I don’t know if it was because I hadn’t eaten since Denver or

because of the sheer variety of cheeses he used, but it was phenomenal.

We also brought plenty of board games to while away the night, but after finishing our meal, we decided to turn on the TV.

“Julian said we have cable and a few streaming services, but not to hold our breath for anything live,” Ibrahim began, thumbing through the television’s options with one hand, another wrapped around a wine glass. He swept from channel to channel, each one’s sound crashing onto us like waves from a litany of beaches. Some were infomercials, others were music programs. However, each one struggled with a swarm of static and lag that beleaguered the image every minute. “See, there it is,” Ibrahim smirked, drawing the glass of wine to his lips and tipping it. He scrunched his nose slightly and grimaced. “Jesus, what is this?” he glared at his glass as if it personally offended him.

“The best they had,” Joseph chuckled, returning with a few thick blankets from his designated room, sporting some pajamas.

“I don’t mind,” I grinned, enjoying some box wine myself. The TV flickered back to life, showing a late-night news program, before Ibrahim switched off the cable and went to Netflix.

I was lying on the ground, my back against the grey sofa, and my head resting on the flower-patterned pillow I brought with me. It stood out of place in the living room, its multi-colored foundation contrasting with the monochrome house.

Ibrahim had put on some stand-up comic’s Netflix special as we finished our glasses. The three of us enjoyed ourselves for all of 10 minutes before we fell asleep, letting the laughs from the TV wash over us.

* * *

My eyes flew open, and I rose quickly, my heart pounding and blood rushing in my ears. I was quietly hyperventilating, my chest rising and falling at the speed of my heart. *What the hell was that?* I thought to myself, dragging my hand to rest on my chest. My brow furrowed, and I calmed my breathing while adrenaline coursed through my veins.

I swept my gaze from the “Are you still watching?” screen to Joseph, discreetly snoring in my left ear. He was on the floor, too, facing the ottoman away from me. The house was utterly silent; my ears strained for any noise, any stimulus at all, for me to blame for my sudden awakening. The only light I could see was the dim hue from outside the patio doors, that faint, bluish scintillation of the snow. I drew breath through my nose and focused on the moonlight’s glow through the windows, feeling the rug underneath my fingers. With a steady mind, I tried to

pierce the darkness of the house in front of me, beyond the living room.

The television turned off. I breathed sharply, the sudden flicker making my heart pound again. It must have been the remote under one of us, I thought. Turned it off by accident.

I swept my eyes towards the kitchen again, focusing on its looming darkness. I couldn't help myself. What the hell woke me up? I could begin painting the sharp features of the room: the counter, the stove, even some chairs. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I focused on Joseph's steady breathing next to me, the only source of sound. My gaze pierced further now; the patio doors seemed brighter, the darkness less smothering. I repositioned myself to see over the counter, resting my back straight against the couch.

The fridge came into view, with its broad base and dull, eggshell color barely perceptible. But what froze my heart was

the figure to its left—the tall, featureless silhouette billowing at its side. My breath hitched in my throat, my stomach dropped, and ice-cold sweat appeared on the nape of my neck. A man was in the kitchen.

Joseph continued to breathe to my left with that sickly, steady rhythm. The figure was just as big as the fridge, its frame barely contrasted by the smothering darkness around it. I couldn't perceive any features on its face, body, or anywhere else. It was too far; it was like it wore no facial expression and no clothes. But it wasn't nude at all; in no way could it have been.

My hand snaked itself toward Joseph's back and rested on his shirt. I felt his body rise and fall, but his shirt was damp with sweat, just as mine was. I couldn't take my eyes off the silhouette. A primal fear engulfed me. I don't think I was half-asleep or conjuring some hallucination. There was no willing

this vision away. My hand gently rocked Joseph, his light red curls tossing from side to side. The person in the kitchen had not moved. My eyes had adjusted as well as they could, and could perceive no more of its features.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Joseph was still snoring in that same, countable rhythm. But as my hand brushed against his arm, I felt the chill of his skin. It was clammy, but had a feverish pulse. The whites of his eyes were locked in front of him; he was awake, too. But he had been this whole time, pretending to sleep, cause he continued feigning to snore.

I couldn't see Ibrahim on the couch, but I know for certain he sees it, too. None of us dared to move, none of us dared to say anything. No matter how much I willed myself, I couldn't turn toward Ibrahim. I feared the figure would pounce. I'm sure we all flinched, though, once it spoke.

“I hate you,” it whispered, its voice carrying through the house with a quiet poignance. “You aren’t worthy of my gifts. You have defiled my love, and I hate you for that.” The figure remained motionless, its arms limp by its side and its head unmoving. His voice was deep and sonorous, but so quiet that my ears began ringing. A tear crested my eyelid and rolled toward my upper lip, hanging upon it as I breathed haggardly. I could have sworn he breathed too, but I must have imagined it. My eyes burned looking upon him. No amount of blinking brought any comfort to them.

“I am leaving you, forever,” it whispered again, before entering a deep pause. I could feel His eyes staring at me through that shroud of darkness. Then, the tear dropped from my lip, and the figure was gone. No point had I seen the silhouette depart, but I felt its presence less and less, like a shadow disappearing in the summer light once the afternoon clouds

began to roll in. My eyes remained fixed on the fridge even though I felt no more terror—I was at liberty to look elsewhere again, but I did not.

The first to break from his stupor was Ibrahim, who shot up from behind me, flying to the nearest light switch. The ceiling lamp flooded the room with its fluorescence, and a yellow tint flew upon every corner of the nearby kitchen. Ibrahim whipped toward us, his bulky frame juxtaposed by the puffiness of his eyes, tears staining his face, too. He said no words, but brought his quivering hands to his face, his pallor just as obvious even against his black skin.

I jumped up to my feet, the adrenaline dissipating slowly and leaving me with a massive headache. At my feet, Joseph flexed himself into a ball and began to sob quietly. I threw my hand into my pocket to find my phone. I don't know what I planned to do, but it felt like an emergency.

“Help, help, help, help...” Muttered Joseph, a cry you’d expect from a child.

Ibrahim collected himself and darted from room to room, flushing the house with light. My phone wasn’t in my pocket. I fell to my knees and quickly ran my hand across the rug, the blanket, the ottoman. Joseph covered his eyes and collected himself slowly, but the sight was still pitiful.

Ibrahim burst back into the main room, then pivoted towards the kitchen and turned on more lights. Pretty soon, the entire house was illuminated. I’m sure it looked like a beacon to any home below us.

My hand landed on my phone under the couch. I sniffled and wiped my eyes one more time before quickly opening the lockscreen. And dialled 911.

To add even more light, Ibrahim turned the TV back on. He exhaled deeply with his hands on his head, pulling his hair back as if to reveal his forehead.

“Who was that?” he yelled, his mouth stretching the features of his face as he screamed. He wasn’t expecting anyone to respond, since he began pacing back and forth in front of the television.

The phone rang once, twice, thrice. No one was picking up.

“Please, please, please,” I whined. I couldn’t reason; it was apparent none of us could. We’ve all pondered how we would react in an emergency, so why couldn’t we? The adrenaline is making me stupid, I thought. But soon, the phone just clicked—no robotic message alerting me that my call had been forwarded to an automated answering machine. Nothing. I guess I never heard of a scenario where a 911 operator didn’t pick up, so I rang again.

Ibrahim continued pacing before walking to the house's front windows. Joseph remained still. The only thing telling me he didn't fall back asleep was an occasional, infant-like, quivering inhale.

"Why won't anyone answer?" I began to raise my voice, bouncing my leg in an eccentric fit of impatience. My eyes flickered toward the clock in the corner of my phone: 4:23 am. I hadn't even considered whether we could get emergency services up here. Were we too high up? No, that couldn't be. Ibrahim reassured us before the trip that Julian, the older man who owns the house, stated we can call anyone from this mountain. We're only a few hundred feet above the towns.

"All the house lights are on..." Ibrahim spoke, facing the windows by the door. As I looked toward him, the phone clicked again—no response from the police.

“Good,” I replied, my voice cracking. “That makes me feel better,”

“No, I’m not talking about in here,” he turned his head to face me, pointing out towards the window. “The town below, all their lights are on.”

“Ibrahim, what the fuck are you saying?” I enunciated, whipping my head toward him. “Stay focused!”

“I-I checked all the windows, *all* the locks, just now.” Ibrahim stuttered, an alarming sight for me. “Where did he get in?”

“I don’t know!” My phone clicked again; there was no response from the operator. “Call the police from your phone, mine’s not working.” I began.

“Just look, David!” Ibrahim shouted, clenching one fist while pointing again at the window. I started from his words, but began to shuffle toward the front window and glance out. What

surprised me first was how dark it was. The snow shimmered no more from the moonlight, and I could see no star; some dense, nocturnal clouds must have slid to cover them. It was pitch black on the mountain, save for one thing: the sheer amount of house lights glimmering in the distance. Like yellow, glowing ants against a black landscape, every single home in the distance was illuminated. It was the dead of night, but everyone was awake.

“Wh- that’s just...” I tried to begin. “It’s a city, Ibrahim! Of course, there are going to be lights on! Name one city that doesn’t!”

Someone’s phone began vibrating behind me. I turned around to see Joseph peering up with bloodshot eyes, pawing his person to find the source of the noise. Finally, he found his phone beneath him and brought it to his face.

“My mom’s calling me,” he finally said, his voice barely perceptible. He crawled to his feet and accepted the call.

Walking languidly into one of the bedrooms, even at a distance, I could hear his mother shouting on the phone.

“This isn’t Denver, David,” Ibrahim said, pulling me back toward the window. “You don’t see stuff like this in the mountains, not here. Why is everyone awake?”

“You’re scared shitless, just like me, but I need you to calm down, dude.” I spat. “Someone was inside this house, probably a squatter, a junkie, whatever. The bastard was probably cold and would have slit our throats.” Why did I feel like the only one thinking straight?

“Are you serious?” Ibrahim was frothing with energy now. “Whoever that was, I-I don’t know! That wasn’t just some intruder. I felt that in my skin, David. They spoke like the devil,” he said, eyes wide with conviction. Even though I couldn’t tell what he was trying to say, I knew what he felt. Because I agreed.

Joseph walked back into the room after hanging up the phone, his eyes at his feet. “My-” he began, but quickly swallowed. “My mom said there was a man...” he looked up from the ground and met both of our eyes. “She said there was a man in her room. She-she was sobbing, saying he whispered something before leaving.” I exchanged a quick glance with Ibrahim, my heart rate picking up again.

“What?” Ibrahim replied, his voice barely above a whisper. I didn’t move, processing what Joseph just said.

Soon, Joseph’s phone buzzed again. And again. And again. I could see a flood of text messages entering his lock screen, most from his mother, but some from someone else.

“‘The moon is gone’,” he read aloud. I could feel my heart in my throat again. “My mother just keeps texting me: ‘There are no stars, the moon is gone.’” I turned around toward the window and looked as high as I could. She was right. There was

no moon, no stars, but no clouds, as I once thought. My phone began buzzing too, but I didn't care to glance at it. They were just there! There have to be clouds, I just can't see them, it's too dark. "I feel sick, honey. So sick'," he continued in a monotone drone, reading his mother's frantic scrawl. "'Where did they go? Did He take them?'"

My phone continued to vibrate in my pocket. I finally tore my eyes away from the blank night and looked at my phone; it was my Dad. Ibrahim's face furrowed with consternation before he stormed to the television, changing it to cable.

I pressed the accept button on my phone and brought it to my mouth, turning the speaker on.

"D-dad?" I whispered into the microphone. "Are you okay? Is something going on-?" I began before cutting myself off.

"David! David, I'm sorry for calling you this late, b-but the police weren't responding, and your mother is hysterical.

Someone broke in, no, two people broke into the house,” I felt sick. I knew where this was going. “I was sleeping on the couch downstairs, a-a-and there was a man in front of the front door. He was tall and said something to me—a threat or something. I couldn’t move, I was so scared. Your mom was upstairs, the poor thing. After the man left, I ran up to her. And she said the same thing. Someone at the foot of the bed, looking down on her. She couldn’t even scream; she was so scared. I found her covered in tears, babbling that the man didn’t even leave. That h-he faded like darkness. He could still be here, we thought.

“So, I looked everywhere, David. I turned on every light, checked every window, and every door. I couldn’t find anyone in the house. What do I do?” he paused before whispering this last part into the phone, “What’s worse, D-David... is that everyone on the street is awake. No cars are on the road, no one is outside. But Jen’s house is completely lit. Colin and Susan,

the house to our right, also have every light on. It's dead quiet around here. I think these are serial burglars, David. I think every house got hit."

I couldn't speak. Joseph's mouth was agape, his hand rising to cover the shock on his face. From above, I could see Ibrahim watching the static-ridden television. Every channel displayed some technical difficulty. They were on, they were live, but no feed was broadcast. Each channel was filled with preppy jingles or quiet tones.

"Dad... it happened here, too," I finally said. Joseph looked down and turned his phone, displaying the myriad of text messages he keeps receiving, flooding in at an inscrutable rate—friends and family in group chats, seeking solace. My phone, though, was silent for a minute or so; only my father's breathing could be heard.

"...What?" Crackled my Dad's voice from the speaker.

“Someone was here, in our house, and spoke to us too, Dad,” I explained through tears. Ibrahim turned to us and pointed at the television, his jaw clenched tightly. “What’s happening, Dad?” I whispered.

My eyes panned over to the television as I waited for my Dad to reply, but his voice never came back that night. Joseph turned to look at the TV as well, only to find more 24-hour channels offline, their feeds still cutting through the static.

“Why is nothing on?” Ibrahim exclaimed, his forehead tightly clenched.

“Oh my God,” Joseph muttered. Though, as he said that, I found it held no meaning. Not anymore. Whomever he was praying to was gone. And the absence was palpable.

A few hours later, dawn broke. The sun had crested the horizon and crawled over the land below us until everything was covered in the hot light of day. By then, we had gathered all of our bags and planned to head out.

“Do we tell Julian?” I asked Ibrahim, tossing my worn duffel into the trunk of his car.

“I already told him we’re leaving early.” He replied softly but with sharpness. There was an electricity in the air, something none of us wanted to address. What was happening?

Joseph popped out of the house, carrying three brown grocery bags, his face long and drawn from the heavy sags under his eyes. He practically stumbled the food into the car, cursing under his breath when he missed the door handle the first time.

“Where are we headed, then?” Joseph muttered after setting the bags under the passenger seat, his syllables drawn and weary.

“We were thinking back to Golden, for right now,” I replied. “Just so we’re not so high up, and so we can get some real rest.” I’m glad Ibrahim offered his home, but I hope we’re not intruding. I haven’t met his girlfriend yet either, and I can’t imagine this is the best time to do so. We were practically crashing on their couch.

With the rest of our things packed, Ibrahim started the car and opened his phone, looking for instructions for getting off the mountain.

“Hey man, you drove us up here, I’m cool if you want to get out from behind the wheel,” I offered. I didn’t feel entirely comfortable with any of us driving, not with the piss poor sleep we got.

“No, it’s, it’s fine.” Ibrahim acknowledged, waving his hand as if fanning away my words. A part of me was relieved he

did; I would have hated to drive down these switchbacks, teetering on the edge of a cliff for tens of minutes.

Just then, a black sedan turned left onto Briar Road, pulling up to the crook of the driveway. It didn't care to park straight whatsoever, almost boxing us in.

"Who's this asshole?" Joseph sneered from the passenger seat. All of us tried to peer into the sedan's tinted windows, but couldn't make out much. I could see only the figure of a man in the driver's seat.

Quite soon, the driver-side door flew open, and a man in his mid-twenties stepped out, panic strewn across his face. He had a black crew cut and a broad nose, the rest of his body covered with a thick black jacket, denim pants, and leather gloves. Around his neck was a well-fitting scarf that draped to his hips. First, he threw a glance at the house and then back at us in the driveway. Then, he jogged up to the driver's door and

knocked on Ibrahim's window. All that I noticed was that he left his car running.

"Are you guests?" The man asked curtly. His eyes flung from each of us, expecting a response.

"Can I help you?" Ibrahim replied, his brow furrowed and leg bouncing under the wheel.

"Are you guys guests here, at the Airbnb?" The man repeated. "My father owns the house, and I'm looking for him. You haven't seen him at all, have you?" His urgency reflected my own, and I felt a dullness in my gut. I think I knew why he was so unquiet. "Listen, do you have the key? My name is Arthur Tores, and Julian Tores is my father." The man frantically pulled out his wallet and pointed to his driver's license, gesticulating that he was telling the truth. "See?" he muttered, like it made a difference.

Ibrahim didn't say much, but patted himself down and found the key to the home. I'm sure he would have left with it had Arthur not shown up. "Here," he said, passing the golden key to him. "I told your father we're leaving. There was a break-in last night, and we need to go." Ibrahim began, turning back to the wheel and placing a hand on the gearshift. What kind of explanation was that? That was no break-in last night. The man froze and slowly lowered his wallet. He took one more look at the house and back at us. "Have you spoken to my father at all?" He said.

"Look, I texted him earlier that we were leaving early, but the man hasn't replied. I haven't seen him since I checked the house out on the site," Ibrahim replied brusquely and with exhaustion. He pulled the car out of park and tried to give Arthur a hint that we were leaving. Yet, the man had this strange, horrified look on his face for a moment longer. The car

backed up a few inches, Ibrahim pressuring the man to move his car, with the snow crunching under the tires. Arthur took a final glance at the key, then the house, before walking briskly toward his sedan. Just like that, he hopped in, backed out, and turned rightdown the mountain.

* * *

It was a quarter 'til 8 am now, and we've been driving South for a few hours. The drive, unfortunately, has not been uneventful. Cars have been strewn along the side of roads with their hazard lights on, and a few accidents dotted our route here and there. Traffic was markedly heavier than I would have expected at this time of day on a Saturday. Thankfully, there was less snow down here than up in the mountains, but the stopped cars remained voluminous.

Any town we passed was deserted of pedestrians, and pale-faced paramedics surrounded any accident we spotted. If I saw anyone, their features were drawn and weary, painted with hints of alarm.

Inside the car, it's been quiet; Joseph has been scrolling on Instagram for the past 30 minutes. I would peek now and again to see either scrawls of urban chaos or crying influencers with captions that read “We were robbed.”

“Why do you think he wanted to go inside?” I asked nobody in particular. Ibrahim didn’t budge, his eyes wide while facing the road. Joseph remained glued to his screen. “Arthur, right? Do you think he was... trying to find somewhere to stay?” I asked, letting a moment hang in the air for anyone to respond. “Maybe he saw it, too, and wanted to get away. Stay at his father's house or something,” I began before being cut off by Ibrahim.

“Does it matter?” he spat, his knuckles growing white from his grip around the steering wheel. My face flushed immediately, and I looked down at my fingernails, pretending to clean them. I thought he was going to go on, but he didn’t. And that was the end of that.

We weren’t too far from Golden now, but the traffic got thick as we neared Denver. This, I thought, was probably normal. Traffic here was going to be bad, no matter what. Though it was practically a standstill, I appreciated the time it gave us to think. There wasn’t any emergency anymore, I considered. We were out of danger’s way; I see cars at gas pumps and sometimes people walking into restaurants. The world wasn’t ending; we were just terrified last night by something... something going on.

The amount of rational explanations I combed through on that car ride was ludicrous: a political group or some terrorist

organization acting across the nation. Maybe we were too inebriated, or perhaps poisoned by some spoiled grocery. I don't know, any thought to make me feel better off that mountain was a reasonable explanation to me. As the traffic inched along, all I had time to do was think.

Just then, Joseph sat up in his chair and turned up the volume on his phone. It was a clip from a news broadcast; I take it they're back on the air. But what disturbed me immediately was the lack of editing. The news anchor sat alone at a desk with only a digital background behind her. There were no overlays, no additional headlines, nothing. It looked like this was being produced live with minimal effort, as if they didn't care.

The woman herself had sunken eyes and looked exhausted, just as we all did.

"... we are receiving numerous reports of roadside accidents in the downtown area, with eyewitnesses describing cars

abandoned on 7th Ave Parkway. Remarkably, with paramedics swarming each scene, there have been no reported casualties or injuries, and some witnesses have stated passengers walking away from high-velocity collisions...” the clip repeated, with a white caption at the top, reading: “what is happening??”

“Is that here, Joseph?” I asked, my eyebrows knitted.

“Yeah, that’s Denver,” he replied without looking away from his screen.

“I don’t get it,” I shook my head, trying to understand what the point of that clip was. “Why are people leaving their cars?”

“The comments are talking about how people are just walking away from these accidents,” he replied.

“What?” I squinted. He wasn’t making any sense.

As I asked that, our car began to pass through the traffic, finally, with Ibrahim merging into the leftmost lane.

To our right were two ambulances and a firetruck surrounding a crumpled car split by a divider. It was as if the vehicle folded around the divider as well as it could, but failed to be bisected entirely—a sickening sight. Joseph, Ibrahim, and I turned to see the accident, Ibrahim slow-rolling so we could get a good look. Though what we saw answered my earlier question.

One firefighter was retching beside the car at the sight of what looked to be the torso of a man on the cement. The body's hair was matted with blood, and his shirt was ripped at the midpart; I could see no legs, just the contorted image of a broken face atop an eviscerated body. As I registered all of this, I had no time to look away before I realized the man was moving, plunging his fingers into the asphalt and dragging himself toward the firefighter. He was alive!

“Jesus fucking christ!” Ibrahim shouted, shielding his eyes and turning back toward the road.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” Joseph howled, closing his eyes as deeply as he could. The man lifted his face toward the sky and released a fountain of blood, puking as if in defiance of death. I averted my eyes and held my breath, trying to keep my dinner down. Ibrahim merged to the right and sped up, trying to put as much distance between that man and us as possible.

“What the hell was that?” I shuddered, trying to clear away the vision of the blood trail behind that man’s torso. All three of us continued to exclaim for another minute or so, petrified by the gore we had just witnessed. I had never seen an accident, with my own eyes, so bloody and visceral. But even more, I had to reconcile that the man was not dead.

“What’s happening?” Ibrahim choked, his voice cracking. We were only twenty minutes out from Golden, and we spent that time scrolling for news on our phones. Seeing that body

snapped me out of the fugue I was in and finally brought me to search for answers. This was beginning to feel real, like something was happening everywhere.

Every post I saw on Reddit, Instagram, and Snapchat was about home invasions and intruders. Every single person told the same story I lived through: a man appearing from nowhere, speaking, then vanishing. One post labeled this a theological revelation, while another labeled it a political attack. One post was from a woman who was showering when the room went dark, and the water stopped. She said a man was on the other side of the curtain, and she couldn't move or speak; she was petrified with fear and couldn't scream. But above all, the fear of looking directly at him was so acute that she couldn't bring herself to peek behind the curtain.

Another was a story about a man in China driving alone in his car. He was at a stoplight when the whole street seemed to be

tossed into night; he thought a storm rolled over, but it was too quick and too complete. The streetlights were powered off, but his car continued to purr. Then, he felt a man's presence in his passenger seat. He was too stricken with fear to even turn, and could only make out a broad shape from the corner of his eye. The unwelcome passenger spoke softly before daylight returned. And the man was gone.

These videos paled in comparison to the final post I saw: a short, 15-second clip taken from what seemed to be a hospital. The woman filming the video spoke another language, maybe Spanish or Portuguese, but her distress was evident. She panned from gurney to gurney, showing children and parents alike frail and ghostly, each appearing sick. The caption, translated, said “all their vitals had stabilized again.” As the video drew on, it seemed more like a horror movie than anything else. Soon, the

camera panned to a figure crouched in the corner, rocking gently, back and forth.

At first, I didn't understand what I was looking at. I could make out shoulders and a patient's gown, but the hideous ring of red above the collar threw me off. I thought it was some undershirt, and that the patient was tucking their head into their chest, but reality hit me when I paused the video. There was a sickening gash where the head once stood. And they rocked back and forth, back and forth, like nothing was wrong, and were unable to make any other noise. There was no head whatsoever.

I cupped my hand over my mouth and gasped sharply, scrolling quickly to remove the visage from my sight. The next video was a close-up of a woman talking into the phone, with a black caption at the top of the clip.

“No one is dying,” I whispered, reading the caption and tasting each syllable in my mouth. The insanity of a proposition seemed utterly unfathomable.

But it was an answer, and the only one we’ve got.

When we got to Ibrahim’s home, no one bothered to bring our stuff in. We clambered inside and sat down on the nearest couch, Joseph searching for the remote to turn on the TV. I’ve been in this house twice before, under better circumstances. Back then, Ibrahim had just moved out here and was living alone before he met Miriam. Now, he had just collapsed on a chair in front of his kitchen counter, his head fallen into his hands.

We turned on the TV and sat down on his black leather couches. The news just reaffirmed everything we’ve been guessing so far: every single person on the planet has received a

visit from something, but no one could provide any physical description.

“Every single human, no matter how alone or how surrounded, ” the once-suave, now unshaven anchor had just said as we switched to the channel. It was almost laughable the drama in his voice, like he was auditioning for a Nolan film.

Some guests on the network spoke of God's abandonment, of the missing celestial sky. It was as if the Earth wasn't surrounded by anything anymore; no debris, no asteroid, no planet. Yet the hot sun shone brightly against the blue atmosphere, the last bastion of normalcy.

“Countless emergencies reported since last night, regardless of the first-responder response or the accident, have resulted in no casualties”, continued the man with the five o'clock shadow. Quickly, the television flashed images of burning buildings, car accidents, and hospital scenes. Natural

phenomena, I would have guessed. I didn't want to think this was all because of last night. But no matter the scarring or the injury, each victim was alive. And they were screaming.

And so, we had sat like that for two or three more hours. Frankly, I lost track of time scrolling on my phone or switching between channels. It took conscious effort to draw me away from the television to notice how small our appetite had been since we left the Airbnb. I wasn't hungry at all, given the shock and everything.

"Call in a pizza?" I joked, rubbing my dry and weary eyes with a shimmer of a smile on my face. Joseph lay comfortably on the couch with a pillow covering his face, turning in my general direction.

"Pepperoni sounds nice right now", he chuckled flatly. I had no intention to call anyone, though; I'm sure no one would come. So we'd have to make do with Ibrahim's refrigerator.

Ibrahim, though, was unresponsive; instead of staying down with us, he drew himself from the table and took long, heavy steps toward the stairs. I trailed him with my eyes, and I had a dark feeling that this was the last time we were going to see him this weekend.

Next to the stairs sat a digital clock, leaning against a window and facing the hallway. The blue light of day that irradiated from outside made reading the time difficult; honestly, a terrible place for a clock. I slid out my phone and checked the time: it read a quarter 'til 6:00 PM.

“Joseph, I think we gotta start worrying about how we’re getting home,” I muttered, my chin resting on my hand. From the corner of my eye, Joseph rolled inward toward the sofa cushion, obscuring himself completely from view.

“I don’t know how we would,” he said, muffled into the couch. I thought he was going to explain what he meant, but he didn’t. I turned back toward my phone, thinking about it.

Our plane didn’t depart for another couple of days, and seeing the state of transportation right now, it wasn’t looking good. If it weren’t cancelled yet, I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be in the sky. I mean, what if it happened again? The images of rot and decay from the TV boiled in my mind again, those scenes of screaming. Of eternity.

“There’s always the bus,” I whispered, so quietly as if I didn’t want Joseph to hear it. A part of me just wanted to think everything would be alright, and that New Jersey was completely fine. But my father’s call came to mind, and the illusion shattered.

I turned back to the couch and could faintly hear the sounds of Joseph’s rhythmic snoring: a sharp inhale, like wind blowing

through a concrete tunnel, followed by a melodious exhale.
Once, twice, I listened before I found my eyelids heavy, too.
Though the sun shone through the curtains, I closed my eyes and
fell asleep into a dreamless slumber.

* * *

I awoke in my bed, my heart racing and my skull pounding.
It was the only alarm clock I ever answered to anymore. Panic,
that is. It took me two or three minutes just to get used to my
surroundings and feel the bed sheets under my fingers. Blinking a
few times and groaning, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and
leaned toward the bedstand, fishing the green wood surface for
my phone.

“Jesus,” I muttered, one eye closed from the daylight
peaking out from my new blackout curtains, illuminating the

entire room through its single, golden ray. It blinded me from my bed, sniping my eye with precision. With no luck in finding my phone in the dark, I groaned again and sat up straight. Reaching out, I grabbed the hem of the curtain and yanked it, letting it fly and bombard my chamber with light.

I must have been dreaming of December, again, I thought to myself. My heart only races like that when I think of that night in Colorado. Or when I forget to breathe, which happens often these days. If I don't actively will myself to take a breath, I find my lungs sore and weak after an hour or two; when I sleep, it's even worse. That need is just gone, you know?

Finally, I noticed my phone on the ground and off its charger. Rolling my eyes, I picked it up from the ground and prayed it wasn't dead.

"1:03 AM," it read. I didn't even last until 2:00 AM this time, I thought, exhaling sharply. The blackout curtains were

supposed to do the trick, but they haven't been much at all.

Outside, though, it looked kind of nice, for once. The sky was blue and clear, as always. The trees were bare without a single leaf on their branches, as always. I'm just excited for the wind that was said we'd get today, though it looked like it's gonna be balmy. But I blame the heat on the sun, which never seemed to set after that night on Signal.

"I got a few hours before work," I muttered, steering away from the glass and hoisting my legs off the bed. While getting dressed, I checked my messages. Even though there were no red notifications at the corner of the app, I still liked pressing it, hoping for some secret text I had missed. But from Mom, Dad, and Joseph, there was nothing. Frowning, I turned it off and finished buttoning up my shirt. I saw another missed call from Miriam, but I didn't have anything to say to her.

All those months ago, when I got on the bus from Golden, she called me for the first time. I don't know how she got my number; probably from Ibrahim before our trip to Signal Mountain, but she called worried. They were quite lovely, the first few times. The calls, that is. I appreciated talking to someone for a few weeks.

“Have you heard from him?” She would say, practically starting every conversation that way.

“Not since I left your guys’ house,” I would reply. It was the truth; when Joseph took a taxi to the Denver airport, Ibrahim helped me with Jo’s luggage. He hadn’t appeared since I had seen him since Saturday, but then he sported dark circles under his eyes and drooping skin. It was as if he hadn’t moved from his bed at all.

“Please,” she would plead in her quiet, almost straining whisper, “if he texts you, please call me. I never had the chance

to talk to him before I left for California. I thought I would have time after your guys' ski trip." She'd let out a quiet sob here, sometimes. But that depended on the day, on the routine. "Let me know where he is, David".

"Of course, Miriam. You'll be the first to know," I would always end our calls with. The truth is, I didn't care to go through that rhythm anymore. Or to lie, really. As I put a somewhat clean pot under the coffee dispenser and pressed start, I thought about the look on Ibrahim's face. That dreary, empty countenance he had before he hopped into his grey Buick. I don't know what she's worrying about, I thought, pouring myself a cup of scalding coffee. She has all the time in the world to tell him about the little white stick I found in the trash can by accident, with its two damning pink lines. It was so poorly concealed, I'm sure Ibrahim saw it himself. But, *she* wants to be the one to tell him, I thought, taking a deep sip. I don't blame

him for driving away, really; who the hell wants to bring a kid into this world? One where the sun never sets, and your mistakes are permanent? The biggest sin in my book, these days, is wanting a family.

Finishing my cup, I checked my messages one more time—just to be sure. On the bus ride, I heard of many crashes that day. God, it wrenched my soul to see the footage: suburbs razed by fire with aircraft debris sitting on a bed of splintered homes. Two or three flights had plummeted to the ground in the same hour. From the bus, I would scour the sky, hoping to see a plume of ash or something.

But I always wondered why. Disgruntled pilots? Navigation control? What was it that day? I don't know, and it didn't matter. I just blame myself for never asking Joseph which flight he would be on. And for never saying goodbye. As I wiped my mouth with my white sleeve, I waved away that old

dull anxiety about Joseph. Wherever he is, I'm sure he's fine. I know for a fact that he's alive. Somewhere, wandering.

I rechecked my watch: 1:23 AM. Boy, I had time to kill. There are a few books I could get around to reading, since television has only been a supercut of tragedy these days, but it felt hard to do anything anymore. Especially to watch or read things from before. It didn't sit right. The characters' motivations were all different then, as if they were in a rush. Never enough time to meet that quarterly quota, or to marry that cliché sweetheart. That's all we got now, though. Time. Spending our days accumulating scars and feeding our bellies with food we can do without.

With a final brush of my shirt, I decided on what I'll do. Walking past the counter with light footsteps, I headed back upstairs. But on the way, I caught a glimpse in the mirror and saw my figure from the corner of my eye. Quick though it was, I

cussed quietly and slapped the front of my forehead as if a gnat had just landed on it. The image never sat right with me; that frail figure with paperlike skin and sunken eyes—that creature in the mirror with his matted hair and unshaved chin.

I stayed in front of it, regarding myself only from the corner of my eye. My grey fingers ending in points of unshapely fingernails. My once contoured arm became a stick of atrophy, muscles clinging onto it like rotting meat would around a sheep's bone. For the first time, the thought of eternity crept in.

With that, I clambered back to my room and shuffled to the curtains, drawing them. As I did, I watched my chamber grow dimmer and dimmer.

I'm sure I can call in late to work, I thought to myself. As I did, my lip quivered gently, and my heart felt like it was afloat on water. I wish my Mom were here. To hold me; to make me

dinners, like she used to when I was a kid. But she hasn't responded, and I fear for the worst.

"I'm the only one who shows up to the office anymore," I continued, smiling despite my eyes welling up with tears. Turning toward my bed, I climbed slowly under the covers and closed my eyes to the world.

It never took long for me to fall asleep once I got in bed; I was always so tired. So fatigued from the daylight. The oppression of life. The concept of being alive, forever.

"An eternity..." I whispered. And before long, I was dreaming of December.

A decorative border featuring a laurel wreath with leaves and berries, and a scroll-like element on the left side. The text is centered within the scroll.

Authors Bio's

Athors Bio's

Hex Hogan: "Self Inflicted," "Ambiguity," "Willow," "Rebirth," and "Illusion."

Originally from Dayton, Ohio, Hex Hogan is a queer poet based in Athens, where they live with their long-time partner and two cats. They have been writing poetry since middle school, using the craft as a therapeutic outlet to explore trauma, healing, and resilience. Their poetry is weird, abstract, uncanny, and emotional, often pushing past straightforward meaning in favour of feeling. Hex is also a media student focused on audio storytelling and music supervision, always finding ways to bring creativity into unexpected places.

DW Martin: "Amy-My-Amy" and "Origin"

DW Martin is a writer from Ohio who raises bees and dabbles in haberdashery. Sometimes he makes tiny hats for his bees.

Ben Ervin: "Perseverance
(or The Curious case of Heptaphrenia)"

Ben Ervin (he/him) is an aspiring writer who divides his time between reading, watching films, and baking. He has appeared in OUs Sphere 64-67 and The Post, newspaper.

Bobbi Cross: “Ladybug”

I am a second-year student at Ohio University studying English Literature. Reading and writing are something that have always been important to me. I consume as much literature as I can, and I am always looking to improve my writing skills. I believe literacy is very necessary and should be accessible and loved by all!

Danae Pickens: “Keys and Holes”

Danae Pickens (she/her). Danae is currently in her senior year at Ohio University, majoring in psychology. She believes every good story needs a bit of grossness, a bit of heart, and at least one unreliable narrator.

Lauren Chase: “Encumbrance”

Lauren Chase is a senior at Ohio University studying English Creative Writing. Their writing focuses mainly upon the ways in which metaphor, surrealism, stream of consciousness, and other more nebulous forms of thought define and add depth to all aspects of life.

Isaac Ehmann: “We All Had Gifts”

My name is Isaac Ehmann, and I’m a freshman at Ohio University. Currently, I’m majoring in History and Pre-Law, with a minor in French, and I hope to earn a certificate in Music Composition. Likewise, I’m a ginormous fan of classical works and have always had a penchant for the horror genre; I love to see them combined!



Otherworldly Scripts



otherworldlyscripts@gmail.com