

THE GUILD

2026



BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK






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ERROR ✕



Where did we go so wrong?

I cannot help you now

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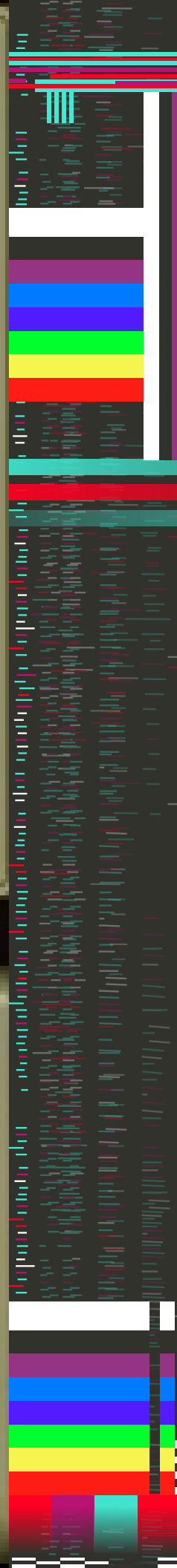
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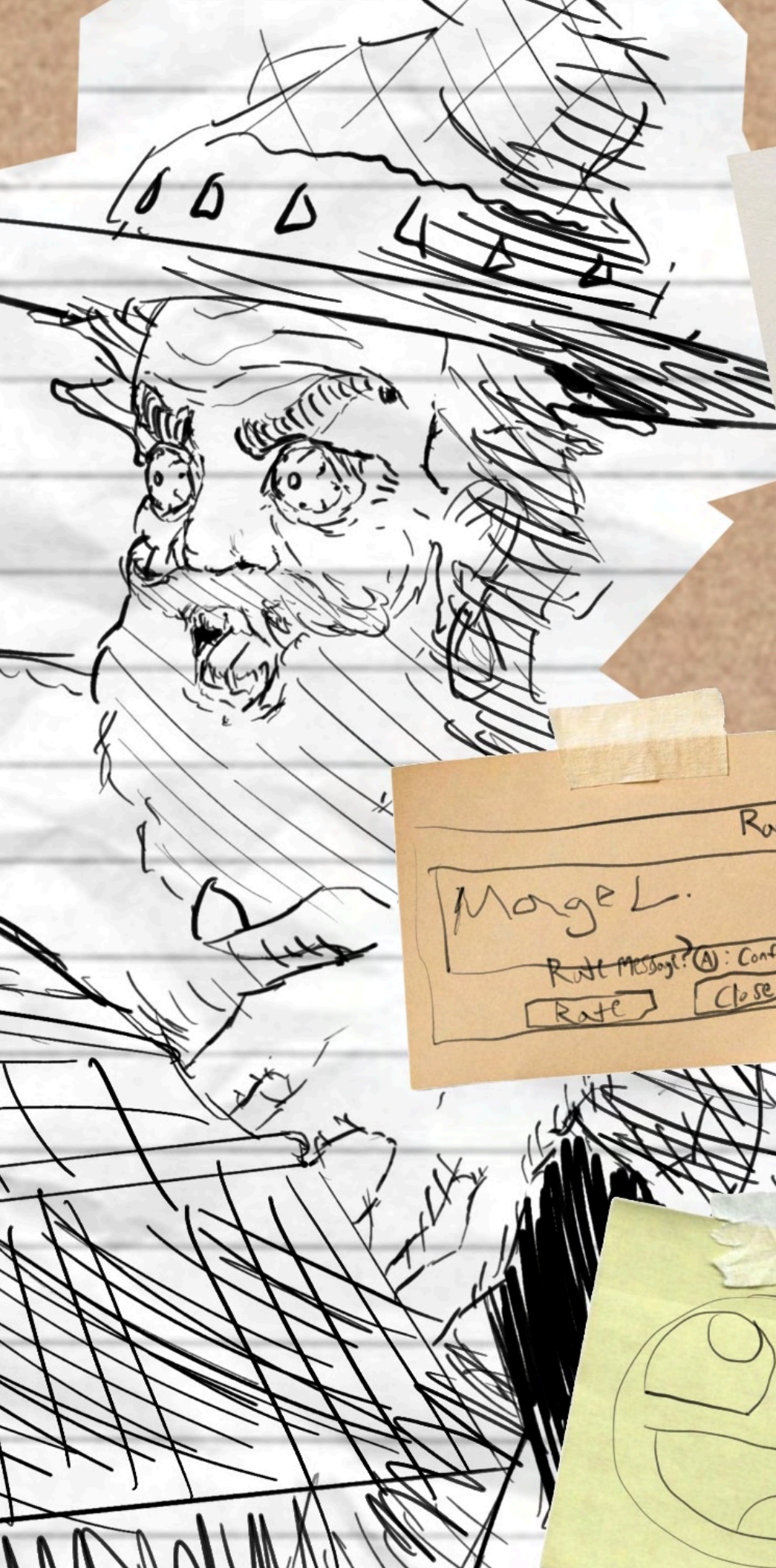
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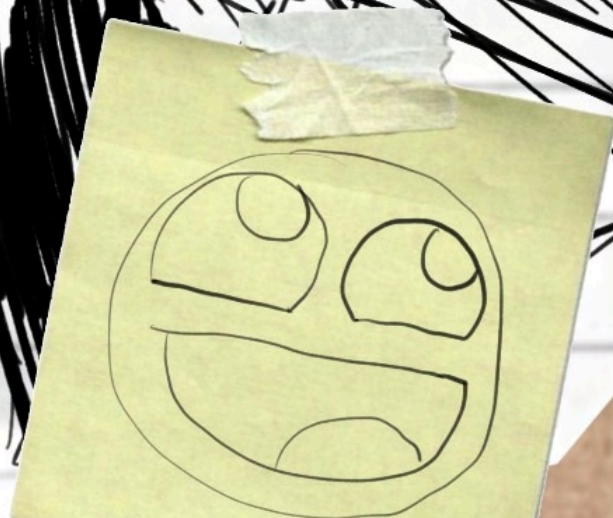
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They Glow - Javier Castillo

The one day he was sick was the day the incident happened and he feels guilt over it. He woke up with a jolt, drenched in sweat. His dreams were never normal, but they were especially distorted after the incident. Looking around at the squalid space that he used to call his bedroom filled him with disgust and his skin always shrivelled at the sight. Sighing, he hesitantly rose out of bed and started the day.

Trudging through the ruined home he grew up in, a longing for the past gripped his heart and weighed his soul. Preparing a table for four in a daze, tears rolled down his cheek, knowing those beloved souls will never partake of this meal again. Each chew was accompanied by bitter tears, souring the food with every drop. The veil of silence hung over the expanse as he cleaned. Roaming around the space aimlessly, lethargy seeped into his bones and threatened to engulf his soul. Emptiness haunts the ground he walks on while he shuffles to tidy up his birthplace.

Daily chores were a task enforced with strict discipline by his father, an activity he has come to enjoy and used to distract from the mundane drudgery of this hell he finds himself in. A trip to town is something he has been dreading but unfortunately needed after running out of money. The mountainous terrain around his home was treacherous, but years of childhood adventuring gave him more than enough practice to effortlessly traverse the land.

Traveling down the landscape always brought back memories, now turned sour and rotten. He hurried down the mountain and arrived just in time to greet the entourage of courtesans. They always greeted him with sad smiles and gave him gifts. He used to refuse, but after a few days full of loneliness and the stubborn intensity of the head courtesan, he gave up.

Heading to the coal smith to sell the coal, he watched the happy families and felt a twang of guilt for the jealousy and dreadful thoughts that crossed his mind. The coal smith beckoned him inside from behind the flap, and his guilt was replaced with surprise. The coal smith explained that only one customer of hers stood outside the shop in a trance every weekend at noon.

He laughed at the accurate depiction and nodded. The sale went smoothly as it always did, and the smith asked the usual questions. He smiled the well-practiced false smile he always did when people asked how he was or showed any affection. The smith's face darkened and she leaned in close. She wanted to make sure he wasn't going along with that reckless plan anymore. Taken aback, his eyes wandered for a moment as his gaze couldn't match her fiery gaze.

Taking a deep breath, he stared at her with genuine clarity and confirmed he wouldn't go through with such a dangerous plan. They parted ways after she felt convinced he was telling the truth. He hadn't technically lied to her. He wasn't going along with that reckless plan anymore; he had another one in mind. His mind refused to believe the truth that everyone else chose.



As he walked out, he could hear those regular whispers of the town gossipers, the ones who always gawked and wondered about the poor orphan boy living in the mountains. They all had their own rumors as to what happened to his family, ranging from he killed them in a fit of rage to a hungry bear found them and made them its meal. He knew the truth and was tired of waiting. His patience was wearing thin and the time to enact the plan grew closer and closer each day. His daily routine blended into a blur of motion and noise, one he could not escape from until the fated day arrived

He pulled up the list the shaman had given him and procured the necessary contents: The ribbon from his older sister, his mother's favorite pearl comb, his father's ceremonial dagger, and a drop of his blood for each item. Mixing them in a clay jar, he enchanted them with the words the shaman taught: Seek and you will find, see them in your mind, travel near and far, show me where they are!

At first, no effect was seen, but after a while, a red mist rose from the jar and drove a chill up his spine as it covered the entire room. As it dissipated, he heard a faint hum and light from each item. Lifting them out of the jar, he examined them but found no difference apart from the light and humming. He hoped that this would lead to his family as he was promised, but all he could do was trust the word of this shaman. After packing up what was needed for this perilous trip, he looked at the remains of his empty home for what he hoped was the last time.

He slinked off the beaten path and found himself at the bloodstained site of his family's last whereabouts. As he held his family's enchanted artifacts up, the glow and hum intensified when he followed the trail of blood, and he prayed to find them safe and sound.

The sun slowly disappeared, and the only source of light that remained was these newly enchanted artifacts with their ethereal glow. At first, they glowed deep crimson, but as the night came in, the shift was quick and eerie. A pale blue hue shone almost alive with malicious intent that shook his very soul. He could barely see in front of him and would be totally blind if not for this nefarious glow in his hands. Distant rustling alerted him to the presence of another, a person if he was lucky.

A sudden cry rang out, and he knew exactly who it was. He called her name as loud as he could, sprinting faster than he ever had in his life. It had to be his older sister; there was no mistaking her voice.

Dropping the artifacts, he grabbed her in a heartfelt embrace and spun her around. His happiness was quickly replaced by fear as he felt the immense heat radiating from her body. It was so intense that he could not hold her for more than a few seconds and even felt burns all across his body after he set her down.

As he finally got a good look at her, he realized she was emitting a faint glow similar to the artifacts. She had been just standing there with no reaction, almost like a vacant statue, until she saw his reaction to the glow. Her face suddenly lit up with an eerie smile unlike any he had ever seen from her. She asked him to join her in basking in the divine light. He backed away, terrified, and wondered who was speaking to him.

He stared at her for a while and questioned whether it was safe to say no. His fear gave way to anger, knowing his sister was being taken advantage of by some unknown force. He refused and shook her shoulders, begging her to come back to her senses and return home. She intensely stared at him as her expression shifted to rage, turning her pale, cerulean glow into a horrifying dark indigo. The artifacts on the forest floor intensely glow the same indigo hue, and the sound they emit increases to the point of a shriek.

At the peak of their intensity, they shatter into mere shards. In his partially deaf state, he failed to notice the faint footsteps behind him. Glowing arms reach out, restraining him, and he hears the voice of his father right by his ear, beckoning him to join their light. His mother walks out and holds his face in her hands, pleading for him to accept the divine light.

He continued to refuse, tears streaming down his face, as he realized his family was likely gone and he would soon join them, whether he wanted to or not. They started speaking in unison, almost like they were one being, promising that all his fears, pains and troubles will fade away if he joins. He looks up, filled with despair, and sees the source of his current pain: an Onibi (a flame yokai) smiling while it controls his family. It floats down until it's right in front of him and tells him to give up. It promises the glow will spread no matter what and will be painless if he just lets go. He asks why it does any of this. It responds that fire and light is life and all will be united within the glow.

The Test, by Atticus Corbitt

Undisclosed Song Group Proving Ground
December 4th, 2891

In an empty, warehouse-sized room in a classified Song Group facility that had once been used as an airbase during the Korean Unification War, [A] had spent the first two rounds fighting wave after wave of Song's lanky, mannequin-esque K100 Security Frames, and was thoroughly unimpressed. [A's] battery had barely dropped past the eighty percent mark. So, to her, she had barely broken a sweat.

[A] is an Artificial Frame. A prototype machine made in humanity's image. However, her abilities extend further than many of her contemporaries, with her speed, strength, and reflexes being upgraded over a standard Frame.. However, the most profound of her upgrades is in her "mind". The Soul Engine. A hybrid quantum/optical processor capable of crunching exabytes of data in a fraction of a second.

"Good work, [A]. I think you're ready for a harder challenge," Dr Reeves stated. "Finally." [A] groaned, hands on her hips, blowing a lock of ash blonde hair out of her face. A panel in the wall opened, revealing a small armory allowing [A] to stock up on ammo or swap weapons. She strolled over to the armory panel, exchanging her dual batons for a Bo Staff. Suddenly, a portion of the floor gave way, revealing an enormous construct that, at almost 10 feet tall, towered over [A], who stood at around five feet four. Did this faze her? Not a chance.

"I said I wanted a challenge, doc." [A] complained, arms crossed.

"Then allow me to introduce the K800 Cerber. A collaboration between Song Electronics and Song Heavy Industries. The latest heavy assault and riot control mech. Titanium composite armor, full AI control, and multiple interchangeable hardpoints. Cerbers can be outfitted to counter a wide range of enemies." Layla, the Doctor's Frame stated. Her tone was sharp but measured.

Layla wasn't wrong. This particular K800 was designed specifically with electric-based, counter-Frame weapons, but that's not all she would have to contend with. The K800 Cerber is powered by a set of three radioisotope thermoelectric generators, or RTGs, housed in the rear carapace section of the mech behind thick composite armor. Downing the Cerber without rupturing even one of its RTGs may yet prove to be the challenge [A] was looking for. She sized up the towering mech, looking for any weaknesses she could exploit. But just pinning it down may prove to be difficult, as the enormous Cerber was also highly maneuverable. Extendable, omnidirectional wheels affixed to the Cerber's calves and shins meant that the mech could move incredibly quickly in any direction.

"Begin Final Test."

Said an automated voice.

"Hostile type: mechanical. Frame R80-001 Type-A identified. Engaging target," the Cerber barked in a low, mechanical voice. [A] drew her Bo Staff. The air crackled as arcs of electricity danced across the ends of the staff. Her mind was clear and quiet; she knew what she had to do. Disable the assault mech without rupturing the volatile nuclear batteries in its back. [A] rushed the mech's right leg, dodging blasts from the railgun on the Cerber's right arm.

She was able to land a hit on the small, exposed joint section before the massive mech smacked her away like a fly with the large riot shield mounted to its left arm.

"Hwah!" [A] yelped as she fell, landing on her back. She quickly recovered, leaping onto her hands, then back onto her feet. She rushed for her staff, which was lying about two or three feet away from her. The Cerber caught on to this and spun about 180 degrees to face her. Thunk, Thunk, Thunk. Three shots could be heard from the M60G heavy grenade launcher on the Cerber's right shoulder. She watched as three small balls of electricity arced overhead and directly toward her. She quickly strafed to the right, standing in the radius of just one arc grenade would be enough to down her.

"You want a show, Old Man? Fine, I'll give you a show." [A] seethed. The first grenade hit the ground, sending sparks in all directions. Then the second one hit, then the third. [A] stopped for a beat, sizing up the Cerber again. Attacking the leg joints was both a waste of time and left her open to being hit by the mech's riot shield, so she couldn't attack the Cerber from the bottom. She couldn't attack from behind either, as the weapons she was provided wouldn't be enough to pierce the rear carapace. She could attempt to remove one of the RTGs, which are accessed using a service hatch on the Cerber's back for swapping in replacement modules. She didn't like the idea, but that might be the only option. She quickly darted left, then right, dodging blasts from the Cerber's railgun.

Now for the next trick, accessing the RTG service hatch. Her body gave her heightened abilities over a standard Frame - she could move faster; her reflexes were sharpened. However, she lacked the force required to mount the imposing Cerber in a single bound. She'd need to think creatively. Or do something really, really, stupid! With the imposing Cerber bearing down on her, she chose to do the latter.

It was the Old Man's idea for her to fight the Cerber, a test for both machines. In every previous fight against more conventional opponents like the K100, she had fought more conservatively. Her moves were precise, programmed, predictable. There was no room for independence. Now, she was thinking,

She dashed in front, waiting for the mech to draw its arm-mounted R/A 88G railgun before bolting forward, strafing from side to side to make herself harder for the Cerber to target. She sprinted forward, building up speed before leaping into the air, landing on the very edge of the railgun barrel - running the length before hopping onto Cerber's shoulder, onto its back. The Cerber's turreted sensor pods spun wildly as it tried to target the diminutive frame.

"Impressive..." the Old Man murmured. [A] clung to the Cerber like it was a mechanical bull. 'You made it this far, [A]... what now?' she thought to herself. She glanced around for the RTG service hatch, which wasn't too difficult to find. She spied the rectangular hatch near the top right of the back caprice section marked - RTG access panel. Radiation hazard. Authorized personnel only! - along with a prominent radiation hazard symbol.

"Gotcha..." she murmured, grabbing the panel latch with one hand with the other hand simply holding on for dear life. She used her extra strength to wrench open the latch, revealing a set of three octagonal cylinders the size of two propane tanks stacked on top of each other. These were the radiolotope generators that powered the Cerber, nuclear batteries that used isotopic decay heat to generate electrical energy. On their own, they don't provide enough electricity to power a huge mech like the Cerber, which is why three are used. [A] figured if she could remove two of the three RTGs, she might be able to cripple the Cerber by starving it of power. As luck would have it, removing the RTG modules seemed fairly straightforward. She spied a set of smaller latches connected to each of the modules. The mech continued to fall wildly as she clung to the hatch. Repositioning, she unclamped the first of three latches, then the second, then the third, each with a metallic clank until she could free the first RTG module. It slid out with a slight hiss as the internal cooling loop was disconnected, but in doing so, [A] had inadvertently triggered the Cerber's anti-tamper failsafe.

"Warning. Generator module 1 has been disconnected. Warning. Antitamper Failsafe Activated."

The Cerber barked in the same deep robotic monotone. "Tch, cheap trick," she thought, pushing off with her feet and launching herself off the back of the Cerber. "Hup!" she grunted, landing feet first. Clutching the cylindrical RTG module like a football, she was nearly knocked off her feet when the Cerber violently detonated. Shrapnel from the destroyed Cerber ripped through her white bodysuit, tearing gashes through her pale synthskin. Bluish green liquid dripped from the open wounds.

"That's one way of doing it. Good work, [A]." The doctor spoke over an encrypted link. A glanced up to an observation deck that overlooked the large test chamber. And there he was, the Old Man looking down from his ivory tower of sorts. Hojin Song, founder and executive chairman of the Song Corporation. The man who commissioned [A]'s construction. He was tall and sticklike, with a thin gray beard and even thinner graying hair.

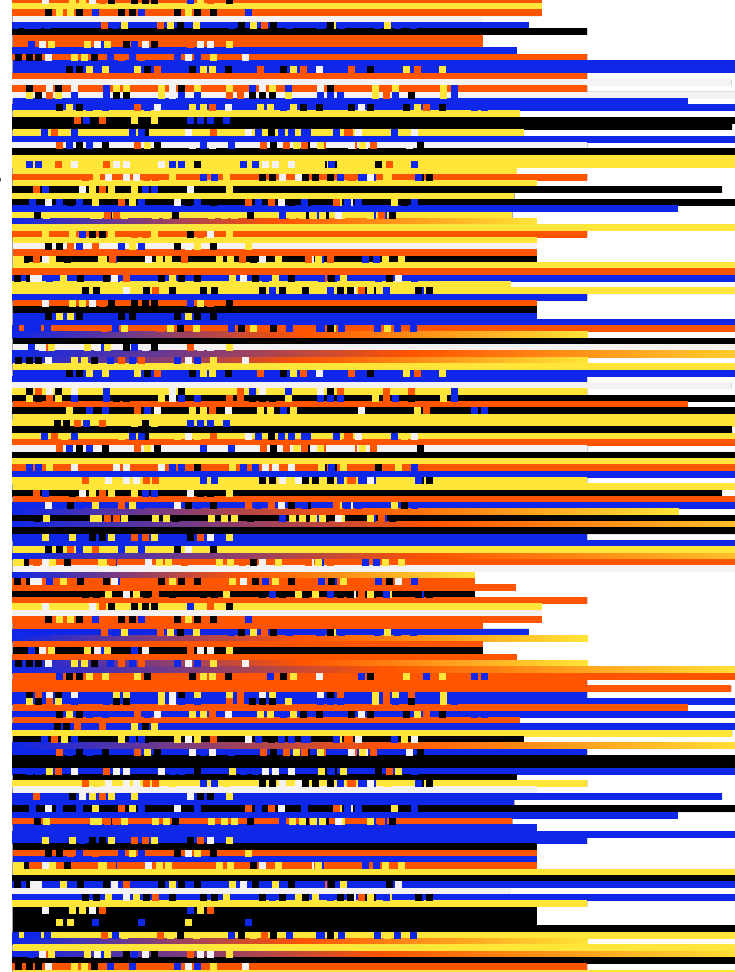
"Had fun, Old Man?" [A] screamed up at the platform, seething with a newfound emotion. Anger.

The Old Man, Jo-Hyun, didn't say a word; he simply slunk back into the unit section of the test chamber's observation deck, surrounded by his cadre of Corporate Security troopers, clad in show white tactical gear. That's when [A] froze in place, text flashed on her heads-up display



REMOTE SHUTDOWN
IN: 5 4 3 2 1 0

Static filled her vision before completely fading to black.





*The Works of
Phoenix Correa*

"I'm done."

Two women leaned against a brick wall in the alley behind a bar, the subway rumbling under their boots as they shared a cigarette. The moon hung high, but it was the neon sign above them that really lit the alley, casting a red hue across their faces.

"Fuck, I hear you," the shorter woman said with a husky laugh. "Tour's finally over. Can't wait to laze around and do nothing. Your band was shitty as always, by the way." She took a hard drag, then passed the cigarette back.

Times like this were the only times they ever really talked. Their bands always ended up at the same bars after shows. On the outside, rivals. Behind closed doors, a smoke and some tolerance.

"No," the taller woman said, eyes fixed on the dark sky. "I'm done. Touring. Shows. I'm done." A long silence stretched between them. The only sound was of strained leather from the taller woman's jacket as she dragged on the cigarette. The shorter woman slowly turned her head.

"Don't bullshit me," she said, her voice sharp now. "We've still got a long career ahead of us. We're only twenty-three."

The taller woman smiled, but it was small. "Thought you hated me and my band."

"I do," the shorter woman said. "With my whole heart. But—" She stopped herself, pushing off the wall, restless. "I mean, we—we just started. Is there a reason?"

"Do I need one for you?" the taller woman asked, calm but firm. "I've had my fun."

The shorter woman tried to laugh. "I just thought we'd have more time. Of course I mean me beating your ass and being back, her voice breaking at last. "I better." A weak chuckle slipped out, her pain written all over her face.

"It's over," the taller woman said with a shrug. "I told the band. They'll decide if they want to keep going without me or split up. It's all set." The cigarette burned low between her lips, smoke slipping out with each breath.

"But I—I'm not ready." The words spilled out. Her face flushed hot, her hands trembling just enough to notice. The taller woman only stared at her, her face empty of warmth.

"Don't give me that look!" the shorter woman snapped, suddenly roaring. She stepped closer, right into her space. "I always hated your stupid blank face." The taller woman could feel the heat of the other woman's breath.

"I know," she said, unable to hide a faint smirk.

The shorter woman's voice softened, barely above a whisper. "You made me better than I ever thought I could be."

Her eyes watered, and she lunged forward, clutching the taller woman's chest, burying her face in worn leather.

The faint trace of her rival's perfume made her chest ache.

"I know," the taller woman whispered back, her voice breaking at last. "I kinda had a crush on you," she added softly, a breath of a smile there, "but you're such an ass."

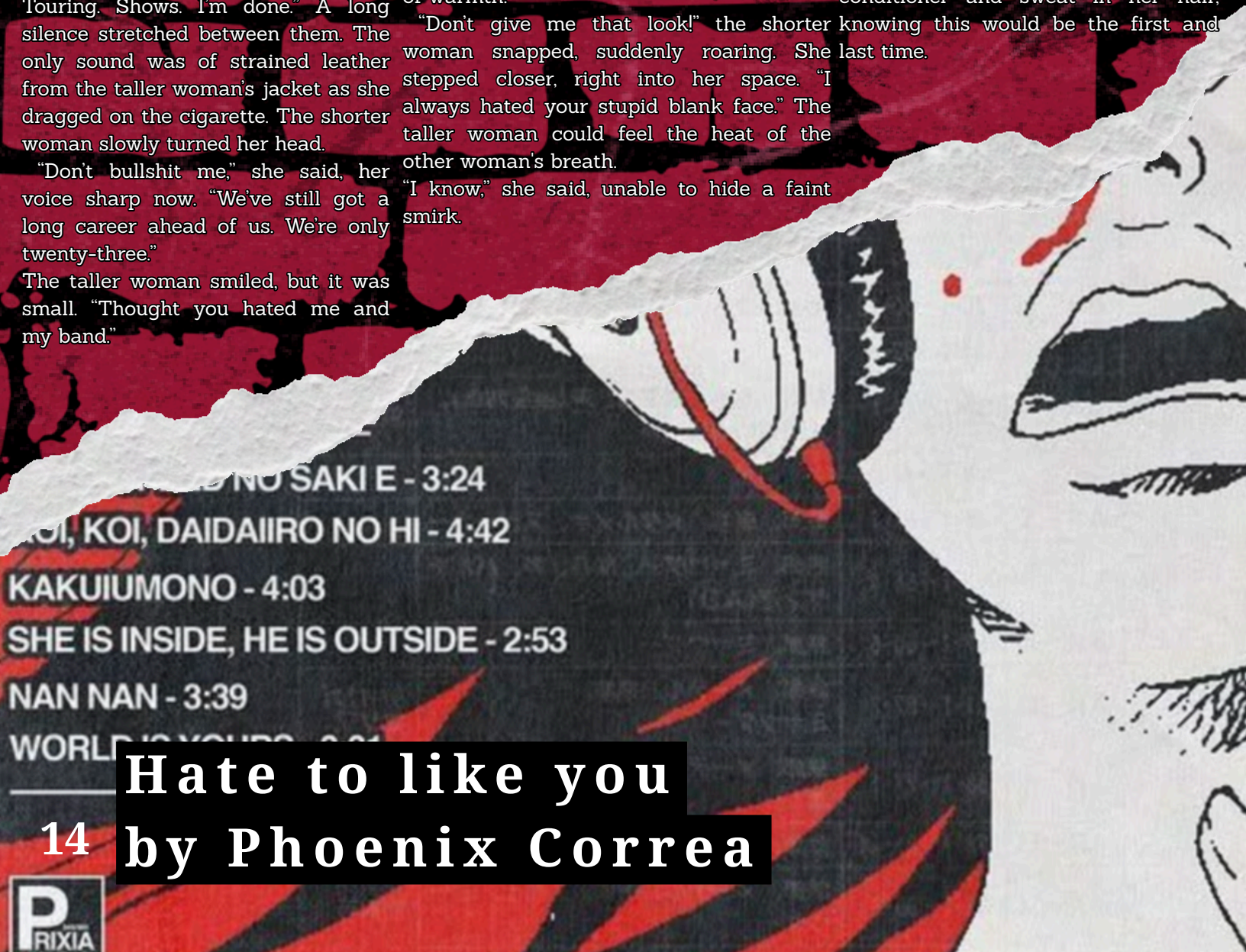
The shorter woman huffed out a quiet laugh, and the taller woman followed, the sound low and shared between them, like an old habit.

The woman's lips grazed near the hollow of the shorter woman's neck, close enough to feel the warmth, just stopping short of a kiss. Instead she held her tight, breathing in the mix of conditioner and sweat in her hair, knowing this would be the first and last time.

- NO SAKIE - 3:24
- KOI, KOI, DAIDAIRO NO HI - 4:42
- KAKUIUMONO - 4:03
- SHE IS INSIDE, HE IS OUTSIDE - 2:53
- NAN NAN - 3:39
- WORLD IS YOURS

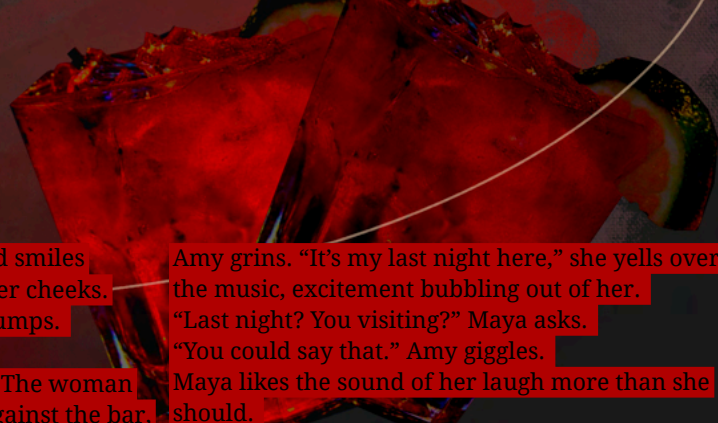
Hate to like you

14 by Phoenix Correa



Last Night

by Phoenix Correa



Loud city streets are packed. It's Saturday night. Brooklyn clubs and bars spill music onto the sidewalks, bass thudding through concrete, neon lights flickering against brick. The sounds call in the young crowd. Tonight feels special. At least, that's what the young woman tells herself. She goes bar crawling and club hopping every weekend without fail. She boasts she is not good with women, but she has never honestly tried. She is scared of what she likes. It's autumn, and she hugs her light coat tighter around her frame as she walks. The air is crisp, sharp in her lungs. She moves quickly through the streets, alone tonight. All her friends chose studying over drinking. "We can't do this every weekend," they told her, half worried, half annoyed. She brushed them off and ran out anyway. Love can't wait, she echoes in her head. An excuse. A justification. A hope. Tonight is the night. It has to be. She arrives at the club, neon lights glowing pink and electric blue. ID ready, she steps inside like she owns the place, like it is just another dorm party and not a room full of strangers. Heat wraps around her instantly, music vibrating through her chest. She goes straight to the bar. "Vodka cranberry," she says, confident enough. The bartender slides the drink over, ruby red with beads of condensation running down the glass. She takes a sip and scans the room, trying to be subtle. Looking for the crush of the night. A flicker of panic sparks in her chest. I can't do this. The thought itches at her mind. She has no crutch tonight. No friends to laugh with, no one to hide behind. Just a drink in her hand to ground her. She inhales deeply. Then takes a long gulp. She winces at the burn and turns her head. Black eyes lock onto her brown ones. A woman. A good looking one.

The woman tilts her head and smiles softly, dimples carving into her cheeks. The panic does not settle. It jumps. Is she looking at me? She glances away, then back. The woman still there, leaning casually against the bar, gaze steady. She forces a small smile and nods, stiff but trying. The woman pushes off the bar and starts walking toward her. Oh shit. She is coming. She straightens her posture and finally releases the breath she did not realize she was holding. "Hey," the woman says, stopping beside her. Her smile is gentle and confident. "Hey," she replies, eyes still wide, genuinely shocked that someone this pretty is talking to her. "Got a name?" the woman asks with a soft chuckle. "Oh. Yeah. I am Maya. What is yours?" Maya shifts her body to face her fully now. Up close, she is even prettier. Around the same age. Shorter than Maya, but she carries herself like she owns the room. Flawless skin, dark hair styled perfectly. She is wearing a tight tank top, a black mini skirt, and boots that hit just below the knee. "Amy," she says. "You looked a little lonely over here. Thought I would offer some company." She steps an inch closer. Maya's pulse jumps. "That's nice of you. I usually come with friends, but they were being bums tonight." She laughs awkwardly. "Want a drink?" "I would love one." Amy turns slightly toward the bartender. "Tequila sunrise, please." "Make that two," Maya says quickly. The drinks arrive, bright orange fading into red, like a sunset caught in glass. Amy takes a sip, lipstick staining the rim. "So what got you spending your night here, Maya? Don't have midterms to study for or something?" Maya rolls her eyes playfully. "I cannot be stuck studying on a Saturday. You get what I mean, right?" She studies Amy's dark eyes, her precise eyeliner, the shine of gloss on her lips. "Why are you here?" Maya asks, a question she usually does not care enough to ask.

Amy grins. "It's my last night here," she yells over the music, excitement bubbling out of her. "Last night? You visiting?" Maya asks. "You could say that." Amy giggles. Maya likes the sound of her laugh more than she should. "You give LA vibes," Maya teases. "Am I close?" "LA? Really?" Amy laughs, eyes squeezing shut when she does. "I am from wherever you want me to be," she says with a smirk, bumping Maya's shoulder playfully. Maya laughs. "I like that." She hesitates, then asks, "You mixed? You look mixed." "Yeah. Korean and American." Amy winks. "I'm a cutie, aren't I?" Maya feels heat creep up her neck. She nods. "You?" Amy asks. "My parents are Jamaican. Third generation though. Born and raised in good old NYC." "Cool. Very good food from both our cultures. Well, at least my Korean side," Amy jokes. Maya smirks. "Yeah, you're right. I think we would make a good mix." Amy raises an eyebrow. "Mm cute. You dance?" She pushes off the bar and steps back slowly, swaying to the beat. Maya takes another sip of her drink, courage pooling warm in her stomach. "Oh, you know it, beautiful." Amy loops her arm around Maya's neck and pulls her close. Maya's hands settle on Amy's waist as the bass pulses through them. Amy sways, hair brushing Maya's cheek, hips moving to the beat. Maya laughs and follows her rhythm, their bodies in sync, the rest of the room fading until it feels like just the two of them. The music swallows them whole. One song bleeds into the next. Then another. And another. Lights flash pink, then blue, then blinding white. Their drinks disappear somewhere along the way. Amy throws her head back laughing as Maya spins her once, clumsy but bold. They dance like they've known each other longer than an hour, hands wandering but innocent, playful, testing. Sweat gathers at their temples. Amy's gloss fades. Maya's twists tossed around. Time seems to soften. When they finally stumble back to the bar, breathless and flushed, it feels like coming up for air. "Okay," Amy pants, fanning herself with her hand. "You did not tell me you could actually dance." Maya scoffs. "I did though. You just weren't listening."

They order waters this time. Then tequila. Then waters again. The bass is still heavy, but here at the bar it feels distant, like background noise to something more important. They lean in close to hear each other, shoulders touching now without hesitation. Amy tells her she hates goodbyes. That she moves a lot. That staying too long anywhere makes her restless. Maya admits she comes out every weekend hoping something will change. That she tells people she's bad with women because it's easier than saying she's scared. Amy's expression softens at that. "You don't seem scared," she says. "I'm very scared," Maya replies honestly. Amy smiles like she already knew. Another song they love comes on, some early 2000s throwback, and without even finishing their drinks, they look at each other and burst into laughter. "Absolutely not," Maya shakes her head. Amy grabs Maya's hand back into the crowd. They jump and shout lyrics into each other's faces, completely off-key. Amy climbs onto the small platform near the DJ booth and pulls Maya up with her. Maya almost slips. Amy catches her. They're laughing too hard to be embarrassed. Hours pass like minutes. When they return to the bar again, the club is thinner now. Jackets reappear. Bartenders look tired. The neon feels softer. They sit this time. Knees pressed together. Sharing a drink with two straws like it's a joke neither of them comments on. They talk about childhoods. About strict parents and first crushes. About food that tastes like home. About how New York makes you feel invisible and seen at the same time. At some point, Maya realizes she's not performing anymore. Not trying to be cool. Not scanning the room for someone better. It feels less like flirting now. More like remembering someone she just met. Amy nudges her knee gently. "See? Not so bad with women." Maya smiles, slower this time. Softer. "Maybe I just needed the right one to practice with." Amy's grin lingers, but her eyes drift toward the bartender, who's drying glasses a little too pointedly. "I think it might be time to leave."

Maya cackles, a little too loud, a little too gone. "You might be right," she loudly whispers. They laugh all the way out of the club, the cool night air slapping their flushed faces awake. On the sidewalk, Amy keeps dancing to music that isn't there, humming off key, arms swaying above her head like she's still under neon lights. "Ugh, I wish there was a beach we could stroll down," Amy sighs dramatically. "I love the city smog, don't get me wrong but imagine a slow walk by the ocean." Maya laughs. "Okay, romantic. I'll do you one better. There's a park by the river. Water. Skyline." Amy spins toward her. "Hell yeah! But we have to skip there. I don't make the rules." She takes off skipping down the block. "You don't even know where we're going!" Maya calls, already laughing, already chasing after her. They skip anyway, past confused pedestrians, past honking cars, past their own dignity. Two drunk girls tangled in giggles, clinging to the night like it might end too soon. By the time they reach the park, they're breathless again. Amy slows first. The river stretches out before them, black and shimmering. The skyline glows across the water, windows lit like constellations, bridges strung with gold. "Wow..." Amy breathes. "The city that never sleeps," Maya says softly, but she's not looking at the skyline. She's looking at Amy. "All those tiny people," Amy murmurs, eyes sparkling. "Living tiny little lives we'll probably never know about. It's kind of... beautiful. And sad. And amazing." The wind lifts Amy's hair, and for the first time all night, neither of them laughs. Maya notices the goosebumps rising along Amy's bare arms. "Wait, you don't even have a jacket." She shrugs hers off quickly and drapes it over Amy's shoulders. Amy pulls it close, breathing in the warmth, her gaze still fixed on the river. After a moment, she steps back from the railing and begins swaying down the dimly lit path, humming softly to herself. "That was the most fun I've had in ages," she says, voice slower now. Quieter. "Thank you... for one good last night." She spins lazily around a lamppost, giggling. Then jumps off walking along the path. Maya follows, blush creeping up her cheeks. "I know you said it's your last night, but maybe we could, I don't know, keep in touch? I don't mind long distance. You never even told me where you're from."

"How would we keep in touch?" Amy calls over her shoulder. "Text. Call. FaceTime. I'm flexible," Maya shrugs. "But it's my last night here," Amy says again, tilting her head. "Oh, you're going overseas or something? That's fine. We can use WhatsApp," Maya laughs nervously. Amy slows her steps. "Mm. I don't think you understand, Maya. I'm going far away." "How far?" Maya asks, hands sliding into her pockets. "Really far. Maya." Amy smiles softly when she says her name. "Not very specific," Maya tries to joke. Amy stops walking. She turns. "A place I don't even know yet," she says lightly. "Kind of scary, right? But I like mystery." Maya steps closer, unease creeping up her spine. "What do you mean?" "Well... some people believe in heaven. Or hell." Amy glances up at the faint stars above the city haze. "I think we become part of them." She spins in place. Maya's stomach drops. "When you say last night, you mean—" "I mean leaving this world," Amy says gently. "It's my last night here. In this place we call home." She points upward. "I think somewhere up there would suit me. I've always wanted to be a star. Sounds exciting, doesn't it?" She starts walking again. Maya can't. "Why?" The word scrapes out of her throat. "I don't understand." "What's not to understand?" Amy says softly, almost kindly. "It's the end for me, Maya. But I'm really glad I met you. Maybe we'll find each other again someday. We can dance in the sky." And then she laughs, light and distant, then she breaks into a run down the concrete path. For a second, Maya's body refuses to move. Then she snaps out of it. "AMY!" Her scream echoes through the empty park. She runs. Hard. Shoes slapping pavement, lungs burning, heart pounding in terror now instead of bass. But the path is empty. The river keeps moving. The skyline keeps glowing. The night carries on like nothing happened. Amy is gone. No last name. No number. No proof she was ever there at all. From that night on, two things never left her. She hopes her jacket kept Amy warm. And she never stops looking up at the stars. Hoping just maybe she'll be there looking down.

The Neighbor and the Piano, by Phoenix Correa

I rush out of the bustling train, people pushing through to escape the musty subway. I'm winded from the steep stairs, but I keep walking, taking no breaks. Clutching my bag as I skip up the steps of my apartment, I quickly pull out my keys from my pocket, they slip from my grasp and fall to the ground with a soft clatter. "Shit," I mutter under my breath. My desire to collapse onto my couch and bury myself in blankets growing.

Pushing open the door I walk towards my apartment on the first floor. I only have three other neighbors, not that I know them much.

Then that's when I hear it. I stop in my tracks and back away from my door. The melodic tune of a beautiful piano takes over the small building completely. I close my eyes and take in the sound, taking a deep breath, inhaling the dusty scent of the apartment building. I sit on the steps, listening to the symphony. I do this often. It calms me down from the busy city life. Time completely stops when I hear the piano play. I've never had the pleasure of meeting the pianist, and sometimes I entertain the idea that there might not even be a player, only a mysterious being that enjoys pressing the keys. I take another deep breath, taking in the moment once more, then I open my eyes and unlock my apartment.

Later that month, I lay awake in bed, tossing and turning, insomnia taking hold of me. With my head in my hands, I sighed loudly, rubbing my tired face. Unable to find sleep, I threw off my blanket and stumbled into some clothes. Hoping for a change of scenery, I tried lying on the couch, but nothing seemed to work. Then, in the silence of the night, I heard it. A faint melody, as if it were whispering to me. Pressing my head against the door, I strained to hear, but the sound remained too quiet. Stepping out into the hallway, I found the melody still faint, barely audible. Then, I tried something I had never done before. I took a step up the stairs, each creak under my feet echoed in the quiet. Then suddenly I was standing in front of the door where the music came from, I realized where I was and sighed. Taking a step back, I settled on the steps outside the third-floor apartment. The piano continued to play, its beauty only increasing with each passing moment.

As I lay on the dusty steps, I closed my eyes, allowing the melody to envelop me. It was as though I was laying on a fluffy bed, surrounded by countless feather pillows. My mind drifted into a calming blankness, my body completely at rest, and my breath steady, with nothing but the soothing vibrations of the piano flowing through me. Suddenly, a cold substance caressed my cheek, jolting my body upright. An unfamiliar face grinned down at me, the woman's voice smooth as velvet as she greeted.

"Hello," she said, her tone soft. I gasped in surprise, confusion written all over my face. The lady backed away from me, chuckling softly.

"I'm sorry to disturb your sleep, but I can't imagine wooden steps are comfortable."

Looking around, I realized I was indeed lying on the floor. Quickly getting up and dusting off my sweatpants, I glanced back at the lady in front of me. She stood taller than me, holding a plastic bag.

"You must have been here for quite a while," she said, still grinning. "I left my apartment and you were lying here. You looked so peaceful, so I left you be. Then, when I came back from the store, you were still here."

It had only felt like I closed my eyes for a second. How long have I been here? The lady's eyes traced along my body like she was taking in information about me.

I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late," I said, trying to walk past her. However, she held her arm out, blocking me. I glanced back at her face.

"It's been quite hot lately, take this," she said, holding out the cold soda can that had awoken me.

I gave a polite nod and took the drink quickly before making it back to my apartment. Groaning to myself, my body beginning to ache, I wondered if she was the person who played the piano. I couldn't have made a better first impression. Placing the soda in the fridge, I took off my clothes and laid in bed again. This time, sleep came easier, my mind dreaming about the melody.

The morning arrived, and for the first time in a while, I felt well-rested. I went through my typical morning routine, finishing earlier than usual. I was about to leave when I heard footsteps descending the stairs. Paying it no mind, I locked my door behind me.

The person came to a halt and turned to me. "Hello there, neighbor," the woman from last night greeted me with a wide smile. Nervously nodding, I walked towards the door. She followed behind. "How did you sleep?" she asked, maintaining her friendly demeanor. I gave a thumbs-up and quickly walked down the sidewalk. She effortlessly followed. "Hm, not much of a talker," she remarked, still smiling. Politely waving, I crossed the street. This time, she didn't follow, just waved slowly, maintaining the same smile.

That lady is strange, but I had just met her. I can't seem to shake her unsettling smile. As the week goes by, she haunts my thoughts for some unknown reason. I find myself bumping into her more often than before, despite never seeing her.

"Hello, neighbor," her smile beams as usual. I nod, attempting to retreat back into my apartment. "We never exchanged names, you know," she remarks, her gaze fixed on me, awaiting my response.

I turn to her and mumble, "Juliet." Her face lights up, and she steps closer, only a few feet apart.

"What a wonderful name; it suits you well. May I ask if it's related to Shakespeare?"

Her eyes brim with intrigue.

I shrug, "I never asked." I gaze at her, waiting for her to reciprocate with her name, but instead, she simply smiles and walks up the stairs.

"I'll see you, Juliet," she waved and disappeared. I nodded and went into my apartment. What a strange lady. She ended up taking over my dreams if I could even call them that. She would be playing the piano then stop suddenly and grin at me like she usually does. I would wake up feeling uneasy.

When I came back home the next evening, I heard the piano again. A very pleasant tune, this song I enjoyed most, though I have no clue what the names of any of them are. I can't believe that lady is really the one who masterfully plays. It adds to her mystery even though I hate to admit it I find myself intrigued by her. Another week passes, and my insomnia has come back to greet me.

"Hello, Juliet," the lady greets, waving. I nod in response, our interactions becoming somewhat of a routine. She draws closer, noticing my fatigue. "You look rather tired. Have you been having trouble sleeping again?"

I take a step back, surprised. Again? How does she know about my insomnia? She chuckles lightly, "That's why you were in front of my doorstep that night, isn't it?" I blink and then turn away. "Yes, your playing is rather... soothing," I admit, surprised at my own confession. The lady grins from ear to ear. "You really think so? I had no idea you were a fan. I could always play for you one of these days," she suggests, noticing my reaction. My eyes widen, my face betraying my thoughts. "That idea seems to intrigue you. I'll be back to invite you sometime," she declares before waving and disappearing up the stairs once again. I sigh and enter my apartment. My sleep worsens. I toss and turn, and when I do manage to fall asleep, it's only for a few minutes. It's been affecting my everyday life. Then one night, I hear it once again, like it's calling me ever so beautifully. I stare at the moon before getting up and moving towards the sound. I close my tired eyes and let it guide me until, once again, I'm standing outside the third-floor door. I rub my face and groan. I can't be caught here again. That lady would just tease me like last time. As I start to walk back down the stairs, a loud creak from the floorboards echoes. The piano stops, and I hear footsteps approaching the door. "Hello there, neighbor," she greets like always, her smile different than usual now, more sly. I stayed still, hoping she would just disappear. "How about you come in? I have been meaning to find the right time to invite you," she offers, opening her door completely and gesturing for me to come inside. I rub my forearm and look around, debating whether to accept the offer. I was going to decline, but the warm smell of vanilla wafting from her apartment ushers me inside. I stand awkwardly in the large living room, taking in the warm and inviting scene. The lighting casts a cozy glow, complementing the vintage furniture and decor. The house is warm, with a cool breeze drifting in from the cracked window. The moon peers through, bathing the room in its gentle light. The lady walks over to the oven, pulling out a tray of cinnamon buns. The delightful aroma hits me, and my mouth begins to water. She smiles and chuckles, "Good thing I made extra, should be enough for us both." I can't shake the feeling that she planned this whole thing out. There's no way it's a coincidence. With that thought, should I be worried? What does this woman want from me? I shouldn't be so calm right now.

"I made tea as well. Is milk and honey good?" she asks, pouring the tea with a smile. I nod and take a seat on the couch, trying to ignore the feeling of unease. As I sat down, my gaze landed on the large grand piano positioned across from me. It was the beautiful being that blessed my ears with its enchanting voice. My eyes widened in awe at its pristine beauty. Not a single speck of dust or dirt grazed its surface, truly living up to its grand name. Finally, I was face to face with the one that granted me peace and rest from the loud outside world. The lady placed the sweets and tea in front of me. "Ah, you noticed her. She's quite a beauty," she remarked, taking a seat beside me. But I was too enthralled by the stunning instrument in front of me to pay much attention to her presence. "She's... divine," I managed to get out, unable to tear my eyes away from the piano. A loud laugh escaped the lady. "I'm sorry, I've never seen such an amazed look at a piano before," she said, holding her mouth with a wide smile. Suddenly, I stood up quickly, overcome with emotion. "She's not just a piano! She's an instrument of pure beauty!" I exclaimed passionately. The lady stared at me in disbelief, and I realized the intensity of my outburst. My face grew warm. "I'm sorry for that... I don't know what came over me," I apologized, holding my arms. The lady stood up as well, smiling softly. "You're so passionate towards her. I understand quite well. Allow me to play something for you," she said, pulling out the seat from under the piano and gesturing for me to sit beside her. I hesitated, then took the seat, positioning myself furthest from her. She pulled the piano open, revealing the beautiful ivory keys, and caressed them softly before halting to pull out a sheet of music. "I think you'll enjoy this one," she said, her hands hovering over the keys. With a gentle press, she began the masterpiece. I'd never heard such magical music before. Every note resonated through my body, reaching deep into my soul, like something slipping through me and settling somewhere I didn't even know existed. Her fingers danced around the keys with precision and elegance, a sight unlike anything I'd ever seen. But it wasn't just dancing, it was flowing. The sound felt like water, soft at first, like little drops tapping against glass, then suddenly rushing, spilling over itself, bright and alive. It shimmered, like light hitting a fountain, like something you could almost touch if you reached out fast enough.

My mouth hung agape in awe, and a smirk appeared on the woman's face as the intensity of the music grew. The piano didn't even sound like a piano anymore. It sounded like it was speaking no, like it knew something. Like it was teasing me, pulling me in, then rushing away before I could catch it. I gasped in shock, watching as sweat began to bead on her forehead. She closed her eyes, becoming one with the piano. And when she did, the sound changed. It got deeper, heavier, like the water wasn't just playing anymore, it was hiding something underneath, something I couldn't name but could feel pressing against my chest. The music wasn't just music, it was a trance, casting a spell that left me unable to move, my eyes fixed on the performance before me. I didn't know an instrument could do this, could make you feel like this. Like it could put thoughts in your head that weren't yours, or pull emotions out of you that you didn't even know you had. It felt like the piano was telling a secret, but in a language made of feeling instead of words. It made my chest ache and swell at the same time, like I was about to cry and smile all at once. Overwhelmed yet delighted, I couldn't control my emotions any longer, a tear trickling down my cheek. It wasn't the piano that was divine, it was the mysterious woman before me. Without her, it would just be an instrument, but she made it more. She made it come alive. She turned it into water, into movement, into something that wrapped around me and didn't let go. I couldn't find the words anymore. There weren't any that fit. She stood up, still hitting the keys in an intricate way, and the sound rose with her, like water reaching higher and higher before it finally fell. I understand now. It was all her. She's the true beauty. Not just how she looked, but how she made things feel, how she made something ordinary turn into something I'd never forget. With a final slam on the keys, her body flopped back down, the music coming to a sudden halt. The silence felt wrong. My eyes were solely on the sweat slowly dripping down her face, her lips, her throat, then on to her chest. I hadn't realized how tightly I was holding my breath until I let out a loud gasp of air. And even then, I swear I could still hear it, the water, the movement, like it was stuck inside me now, like it never really ended.

The woman looked over at me, her body and eyes completely glistening, mesmerizing me. She laughed breathlessly, throwing her beautifully slender hands up into the air. "I did it! I finally did it!" Her blissful gaze met mine as I stood up quickly, then just as quickly fell to my knees, unable to tear my gaze away from her radiance. She smiled softly once again, melting me, and reached out her hand. I took it, and she pulled me up, tears still flowing from my eyes. She gently wiped them away and then held my hand. I couldn't speak, I just stared in fascination.

I could smell the sweat dripping down her. Salty yet sweet. "That piece is called 'Jeux d'eau' by Maurice Ravel. I've been having some trouble with it, but finally, I did it."

I choked out some words, "And your name?"

She laughed loudly, a beautiful sound. "I'm such a horrible host. It's Helena." I chuckled, "It suits you. From Shakespeare?"

She laughed and smiled, "I believe so."

"Helena, you're playing... it's unlike anything I've heard before... I can't even describe it," I said, staring into her raven eyes. Her gaze was always soft when looking at me.

"I appreciate it. I mean, it is what I do for a living, I would hope it was enjoyable," she replied, releasing me, her warmth fading with her movement. I reached out and grabbed the cuff of her shirt.

"Teach me. Let me be your pupil. Teach me the notes, the strings, the terms, the songs, the language, the names, everything," I pleaded, staring into her lovely shimmering eyes. They glimmered as she smiled, her teeth shining.

"You enjoyed my playing that much? You flatter me, but I couldn't teach you, I don't know how," she said, looking away to gaze at the moon.

"You've already taught me something just from watching you play," I smiled. "What was that?" she asked, still facing away.

"That it wasn't the piano I was captivated by... it was you," I confessed with my whole heart. She turned quickly to look at me, her eyes wide. Silence fell between us.

"That's the first time I've been speechless," she then chuckled warmly, walking closer. "I'll teach you under one condition."

"Anything, Helena," I replied with desperation.

She laughed once again and smirked, "Your company is all I ask for. I get quite lonely up here," she said, taking a seat on the couch. "Come now sit, the tea's getting cold." I nodded and sat beside her. I sensed there was more to her, a story I didn't know. I wanted to know. That night was the most peaceful I ever slept.



Hope We Meet Again, by Phoenix Correa

"This is the last time." Her brown eyes held mine.

"Yeah... but is it?" I smirked, meeting her gaze easily.

"Come on, you know damn well, when else would we meet?" She smiled, something sad tucked behind it.

"Paths cross," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "Could be a month from now, or years. You never know."

"You're too optimistic." She glanced away, fingers fidgeting with her purse. I put on my best smile. I couldn't help it, the thought of it felt sweet.

"I might pass you on the street. Or in a bar, maybe." I paused. "Mm... I really wanted to go to the aquarium."

"I wanted that too." Her smile softened.

"Then maybe that's where we'll meet." I grinned, holding onto the bittersweet feeling. "Our story isn't over yet. We just need some time apart."

"You're so cheesy, god." She rolled her eyes, but her smile stayed. "Don't give me false hope." She glanced at the time. "You should go. You're already late."

"Fuck... yeah, I gotta go." I hesitated. "Oh, one more thing. I—mm, actually, I'll save it for next time." I laughed under my breath.

She sighed, smiling. "Whatever you say. You might never get to tell me, you know." "I know."

We hugged. A handshake didn't feel right.

It was warm, she smelled nice but at the same time I wish we didn't hug at all. Why?

Well now I wanted another, I wanted to take it like vitamins daily but I knew it'll just sit in the cabinet and I may never take it again, let it expire. Or just maybe with time I'll take that pill and the warmth will come back.

Only time will tell. "Bye. Don't be a stranger." I stepped back, eyes still on her.

"Oh, brother. Such a cornball." She laughed. At least, I think she did. I hope she did.

That was the last time I saw her.

I hoped she thought of me sometimes. When she saw little trinkets and keychains, when a show reminded her of something I'd like, or even just in the middle of having fun. I hoped I crossed her mind.

Selfish, I know. But I hoped her heart still kept a little room for me.

Years passed.

I graduated college again and moved on to the next degree. I talked to other people, but nothing ever really stuck.

The summer heat was heavy, pressing against everything. My best friend wanted to go to the beach, but today felt different. It felt right.

I got dressed, stepped out the door, and let hope walk with me.

Train. Steps. More steps. Then I was there.

I hesitated at the entrance. Behind that door was too much.

Maybe she'd be there, different, somehow. A new haircut, or maybe she'd grown it out. Maybe she stood taller now, more sure of herself.

Her smile, though, I knew that would be the same. Just as bright. Or maybe she wasn't there at all.

Maybe she came earlier, wandered slowly past every tank just to stall, just to see if I'd show up. I don't think she'd be sad. I think she'd smile, enjoying it anyway, alone, or maybe with someone else.

Would I enjoy it?

I'd spent so much time alone, working on myself. This shouldn't be any different. Maybe I'd be disappointed. Or maybe it would just be another lesson.

I took the deepest breath I could, stepped forward as I exhaled, and went in. I had never been to the aquarium.

Kids ran wild between tired parents and oversized strollers. Couples held hands, lingering by the gift shop, pointing at plushies. There were people like me too, alone, but not out of place. I grabbed a map and wandered.

Otters. Penguins. Tiny fish flickering like moving light.

I felt like a kid again, staring too long at the octopus, pressing closer to the glass for the starfish. Eventually, I found myself in a long, quiet tunnel, fewer people now.

My last stop. It was beautiful.

Fluorescent blue light washed over everything, soft and endless. Water surrounded me completely. Sharks drifted overhead, slow and weightless, like they belonged to a different kind of time. I stood there, unmoving. Life passed around me, but for once, I didn't follow it. I just... stayed. I smiled, wide, unguarded. A small laugh slipped out of me. "I had fun," I murmured, locking eyes with a passing shark like it might understand. I was alone. But not lonely. Not here. I closed my eyes for a moment, holding it all in, the blue, the quiet, the feeling of being exactly where I was supposed to be. I hadn't even looked for her. And I was glad. If I had, I would've missed this. Missed the way life can still surprise you. I took another slow breath, eyes still closed. I can go now, I thought. I hope one day I come back and share this with someone. "So... what were you going to tell me? I know you forget things easily." The voice was warm. Familiar. Right beside me. My eyes opened instantly. I smiled before I even turned, our silhouettes blending into the deep blue glow. "I missed you." A soft laugh slipped from both of us.

Picking up Sketchy Chicks by Phoenix Correa

1 EXT. WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK - NIGHT 1

The night air creeps along the skin of those wandering the New York City streets. CITY LIGHTS glow across the dark skyline. Two friends, SARAH (20, sharp eyed, restless, with a charm that flickers between bold and shy) and HELENA (20, confident, magnetic, always the loudest laugh in the room.), lean against the famous fountain in Washington Square Park. Smoke from distant street vendors and car exhaust lingers in the air.

Sarah pulls out a pack of cigarettes, offers one to Helena, then takes one for herself.

SARAH

(sighs, lighting her cig)

We come here almost every other day... and still haven't got any.

She lights Helena's cigarette too. Helena laughs.

HELENA

You ain't even tried! Last time we came, we saw a girl just your type— but nooo, you said "Nah, not that one." You always do that. Bitch and moan about having no bitches, but when they come... you run.

She takes a puff, smirking.

SARAH

(rolling her eyes, chuckling)

Man, shut the fuck up. It's not easy, you know. What if one chick turns out to be fucking crazy?

HELENA

You don't need to worry about that. You the crazy one.

She laughs loudly, coughing from the smoke.

HELENA (CONT'D)

Today we gettin' you a girl. No fussin'. So pick one out.

They both scan the park. It's dead, cold air pushing the crowd elsewhere. A few DRUNKS and DRUG ADDICTS lurk near benches and street corners.

SARAH

(scoffs)

There's basically nobody here. Just drunks and druggies. We should just head back to the dorms.

She pauses—eyes locking on someone.

A stunning WOMAN (mid 20's, pale, poised, beautiful in a way that feels unreal) sits alone on a nearby bench, reading a book. She's elegant, poised, and captivating.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Wait...

Her eyes widen.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Her.

Helena follows her gaze, then grins wide.

HELENA

Oh, it's your lucky fuckin' day. That bitch is sexyyy. Damn—she got that classy look.

SARAH

(smirks, dragging from her cig)

Mmm hmm. Just my type.

HELENA

Alright. Shoot your shot. Tonight's the night.

Helena gives her a wink. Sarah starts to rise nervously.

Helena stops her, grinning.

HELENA (CONT'D)

Wait. Liquid courage.

Helena pulls out a mini bottle of alcohol.

SARAH

(grinning wide)

You've been hiding that shit this whole time?

She takes the bottle, swigs it, and winces.

HELENA

Saving it for the right time.

They both laugh. Helena gives her a little shove.

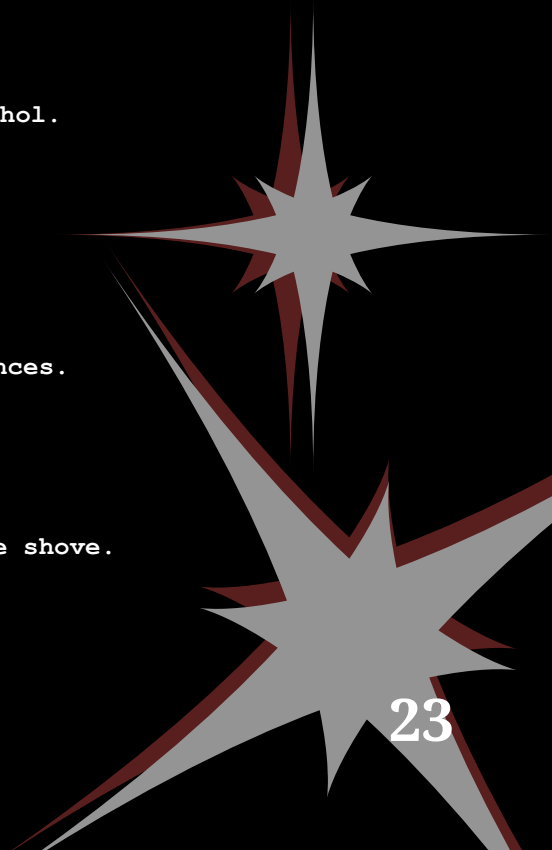
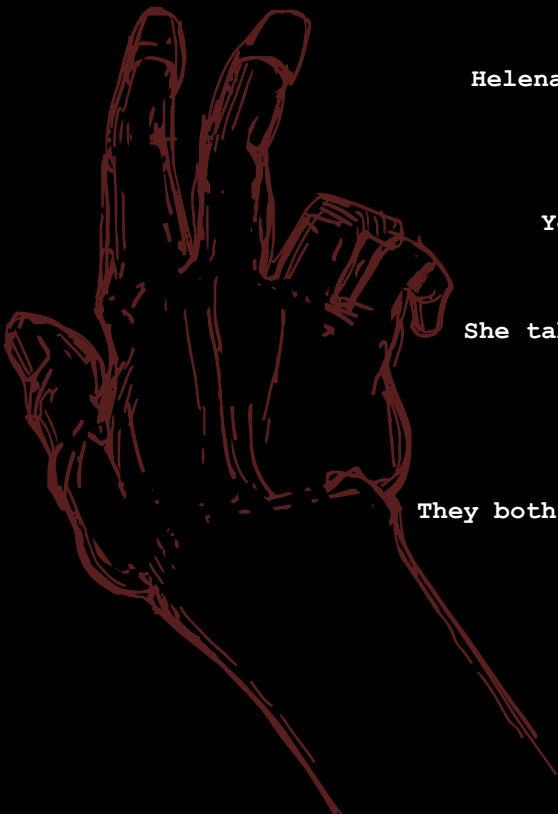
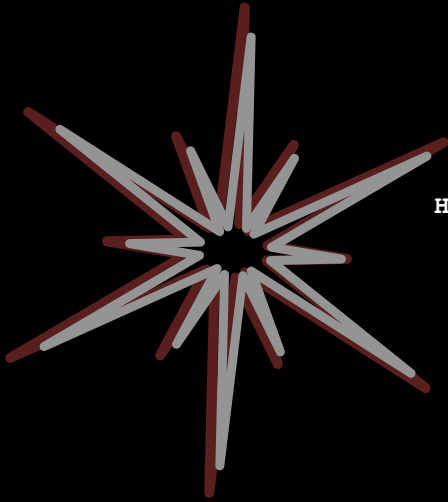
HELENA (CONT'D)

Now go.

SARAH

(deep breath)

Here goes nothing.



she takes slow, cautious steps toward the woman on the bench.
Cigarette still lit. Eyes locked on the woman.

2 EXT. PARK BENCH - CONTINUOUS 2

Sarah approaches slowly. Fog curls around the light poles.
The sound of the city fades, replaced by the faint rustle of pages.

SARAH
(smiling nervously)
Hey, mind if I sit?

The woman looks up, eyes calm and unreadable.

WOMAN
Not at all.
Sarah sits beside her, tucking her hands into her pockets.

SARAH
Didn't think anyone actually reads
out here. Too cold for that.

WOMAN
(smiling faintly)
I like the cold. It keeps the noise
away.
(beat)
Besides, it's beautiful tonight.

Sarah studies her face, her stillness, her voice, the way her
words seem to linger in the air.

SARAH
It is.
(beat)
I'm Sarah, by the way.

MELANIE

Melanie.
(her eyes glint)
You have a lovely name, Sarah.

A pause. The air thickens.

SARAH
What're you reading?

MELANIE
Something old. Something about
history.
(tilts her head)
You don't strike me as someone who
reads much.

SARAH

Hey, I read!

(grinning)

Mostly menus and bad texts from my
ex, but it still counts.

Melanie chuckles softly, a sound both warm and chilling.

MELANIE

You're funny.

(she stands, closing her
book)

Come, walk with me.

SARAH

Now?

MELANIE

Why wait? The night's young.
Sarah hesitates, then gets up and follows.

3 EXT. SIDE STREETS - NIGHT 3

They walk side by side through dimly lit streets, fog swallowing the city sounds. The distance from the park grows, buildings turning older and quieter.

SARAH

Do you always walk alone at night?

MELANIE

It's the only time I feel alive.

She tilts her face toward the moon. Her skin seems to glow faintly under its light.

SARAH

You look it.

(smiling softly)

Alive, I mean.

MELANIE

And you look like someone who
doesn't walk away easily.

Sarah laughs quietly, her breath fogging in the cold.
They stop before a crumbling townhouse, its gate half-
hanging, the windows dark.

MELANIE

Home sweet home.

(turns)

Not going to kiss me goodnight?

SARAH

(blushing)

That's kind of fast, don't you
think?

MELANIE

Only if you want it to be.
Melanie steps closer. Sarah follows, drawn in.

4 INT. MELANIE'S TOWNHOUSE - NIGHT 4

The door creaks open. Inside, it's silent and cold, the air thick with dust. Candlelight flickers faintly upstairs.

SARAH

(nervous laugh)
You really live here?

MELANIE

It's peaceful. No neighbors, no
noise.
(leans close)
No interruptions.

Sarah's heart races as Melanie brushes a strand of hair from
her face.

MELANIE

(whispers)
You're trembling.

SARAH

Just cold.

Melanie smiles and kisses her - soft at first, then deeper,
hungrier. For a moment it's tender. Then her grip tightens.
The kiss becomes fierce and possessive.
Sarah pulls back, breathless.

SARAH

(laughs shakily)
You really don't waste time.

Melanie's eyes darken, her smile widening unnaturally. Fangs
glint in the candlelight.

SARAH

(startled)
What's wrong with your-

Before she can finish, Melanie lunges, pinning her against
the wall.

MELANIE

Hush. It'll only hurt for a
moment.

Sarah fights back - shoving, scratching, kicking - but
Melanie is too strong. A vase shatters. Candles topple. Wax
spills like blood.

SARAH
(screaming)
Get off me, freak!
Melanie bares her teeth, eyes glowing crimson

MELANIE
I told you, Sarah. I like the
night.
(leans in)
It's when I feed.

She goes for Sarah's neck, but Sarah grabs a broken candle
holder from the nightstand and jams it into Melanie's
shoulder.
Melanie shrieks, stumbling back.

SARAH
Oh my god, you're actually—
Melanie hisses, baring her fangs, clutching her wound.

MELANIE
You shouldn't have done that.

SARAH
Yeah? Well, you shouldn't bite
people!

Sarah grabs the nearest thing an empty bottle of cheap wine
and smashes it over Melanie's head. Glass flies everywhere,
leaving Melanie dazed.

Melanie collapses to the floor, groaning. Sarah stands
frozen, panting, covered in wax and blood.

(A beat.)
Then, Melanie starts to move.
Sarah's eyes widen.

SARAH
Fuck no. I'm out.

She sprints down the stairs, trips once, catches herself, and
bursts out the front door into the cold night.

5 EXT. EMPTY STREET - NIGHT 5

Sarah stumbles under a streetlight, gasping. Her shirt is torn, her makeup smeared. She looks back
toward the dark townhouse. Nothing moves. he lights a cigarette with shaky hands.

SARAH
(to herself)
Never... picking up chicks again.
She exhales, smoke curling in the moonlight.

FADE OUT.
THE END.



The Brute & the Pompous

by Phoenix Correa

“Who am I kidding... this isn’t me.”

Jennifer studies her reflection in the fancy bathroom mirror and lets out a long sigh. The silk dress clings just right, too right. The saleswoman at Bloomingdale’s had sworn it would turn heads at any event, and she hadn’t lied. Heads had turned all night.

Just not the one Jennifer wanted.

Of course she had to attend the gala. She was the office manager for the nonprofit hosting it, and events like this were practically written into her job description. Donors, board members, speeches that went on too long. She smiled through all of it. But tonight she had hoped for something more. She smooths the fabric over her hips, squares her shoulders, and heads back out onto the floor. The ballroom glows warm and gold, full of laughter and clinking glasses. She accepts champagne from passing servers, one, then another, anything to quiet the buzzing in her chest.

“Jennie. I feel like I haven’t seen you all night. I hope you’re not drinking yourself to death.”

A louder, charismatic woman appears beside her, already laughing.

“I’m joking,” the woman adds, smirking as she leans against the bar. “You know you’re always so uptight.”

“Maddie. I’ve been here for a few hours,” Jennifer says. She winces at how stiff she sounds. “You look nice.”

Maddie does look nice. Effortlessly so. Maddie is the development director, always working the room, always remembered.

“Oh, you think so?” Maddie grins. “Pantsuits never do me wrong.” She giggles, then nods toward a group of coworkers stealing glances their way. “You look good too. Got all the douchebags checking you out.” Jennifer follows her gaze, then looks away quickly.

“Enjoying yourself?” Maddie asks, taking a long gulp of her drink.

“It’s fine,” Jennifer says. “I’ve just been to too many work events lately. It’s starting to get to me.” She hesitates, then takes a breath. “I was hoping maybe, if you wanted, we could get out of here.” She holds her breath.

“Get out of here?” Maddie laughs. “Where would we go?”

“We could get food,” Jennifer says, suddenly more confident. “I know a good late night sushi place.” She smiles, genuinely this time.

Maddie tilts her head, confused, then amused. “Yeah, I doubt you want me to be your scapegoat. Sneaking out together would just start work drama. Especially if people think you’re running off with the lesbo.”

She smirks. “You should ask Josh. He would beg for that opportunity.”

Jennifer’s smile falters.

“Unless,” Maddie adds casually, “you’re still with what’s his face. Danny. From finance?”

“No,” Jennifer says quietly. “We’ve been apart for a year.” She looks at Maddie, really looks at her. “I wanted to go with you.” The music swells around them. Glasses clink. Somewhere, someone laughs too loudly.

“Jennie,” she says, lowering her voice. “I did not mean to come off like that.” She smiles, but it does not reach her eyes.

“I just... I am not sure what you are doing here,” Maddie admits, looking genuinely confused. “You always seem so... serious. This is not your kind of night.”

Jennifer feels the words like a punch she can’t flinch from.

“I just thought,” she begins, then stops. “Never mind.”

Maddie steps closer, her tone softening, almost apologetic. “Look, you can stay if you want. But if you are feeling uncomfortable, you don’t have to.”

Jennifer forces a small smile. “I think I am going to head out.”

Maddie blinks, surprised. “Now? Why?”

Jennifer looks away, pretending to scan the room, trying not to look like she is searching for an escape.

“I am tired,” she says simply. “It has been a long night.”

Maddie nods slowly, as if trying to make sense of it. Then she offers, almost instinctively, “Do you want me to call you a cab?”

Jennifer turns her head slightly, meeting Maddie’s eyes. She can see the genuine

concern there, the confusion.

“No,” Jennifer says quietly. “I will take the train.”

Maddie pauses, like she did not expect that answer.

“The train?” she repeats, then laughs lightly, a little unsure. “Okay. If you are sure.” Jennifer nods.

Maddie watches her for a moment, then shrugs, almost dismissive, like she is letting go of a thought that does not fit.

“Alright,” Maddie says. “Well, I will see you on Monday.”

Jennifer gives a small nod, the smile now gone.

“Yeah,” she says, and starts walking away.

Maddie turns back toward the crowd, already slipping into her role, already forgetting.

Jennifer stands there a moment longer, champagne warm in her hand. The music swells. Someone brushes past her shoulder. The room keeps moving. She takes one last look toward the bar, then heads for the exit. Stepping out into the night, her heels click against the pavement as she makes her way to the subway.

“Another round,” Julie says loudly, like she owns the place. Her voice cuts through the bar noise, confident and careless. Her crew is all for it, except one.

“Don’t give me that look, Daniella,” Julie rolls her eyes, lifting her beer and taking a long sip. “Like you know it all.”

They’re at their usual spot in the city, the kind of bar where the bartender already knows what they drink and nobody asks questions. The group hadn’t planned to meet up. It just happened the way it always does after work, a couple phone calls, word of mouth, everybody showing up tired and ready to drink it off.

Daniella takes a slow sip of her drink, eyes never leaving Julie. She watches her like she’s trying to read between the lines, like she’s heard this performance before.

“Something’s bothering you,” Daniella says. Her voice stays calm. “But you just pushing it down with that bottle.”

Julie scoffs and leans back in her chair. “Ain’t nothing bothering me. I’m sitting here with my homeboys and homegirls, drinking after a good day at work.” She gestures around the table with her beer. “Might flirt with that chick that’s eyeball fucking me. Then I’ll go home and do it again.”

She winks toward the girl at the end of the bar, who doesn’t look away. Daniella doesn’t blink. “You’re lonely. I can tell.”

Julie laughs, sharp and quick, like she’s trying to cut the moment short.

“Nah. I’m good. I’m fine.”

Daniella leans in a little closer, lowering her voice so the rest of the table doesn’t catch every word. “You say that every time. But you keep coming back here like you hoping something changes.”

Julie stares down into her beer, watching the foam cling to the sides of the glass. For a second, it looks like she might not answer. Then she looks up again, chin lifted, like she’s daring Daniella to keep pushing.

“You always got something to say, don’t you?” Julie says, forcing a half smile. “Why you so pressed?”

Daniella just shakes her head, like she’s tired but not surprised.

“Because I care,” she says, plain and simple. “And you not fooling nobody.”

The group fills the space again, laughing and talking, stories overlapping, glasses clinking against the table. Somebody tells a joke. Somebody else talks too loud. But the air stays a little tight, like something unsaid is sitting right there between them.

Daniella looks back at Julie, her expression softening. “You good though. For real?” Julie nods, fast and automatic.

“Yeah,” she says too quick. “I’m good.”

She grabs her beer, takes another sip, then pushes her chair back with a scrape against the floor.

“I’m gonna grab another drink,” Julie says, already standing, not waiting for a response.

Julie walks up to the bar and rests one elbow against the counter. The girl from earlier is still there, still watching like she never stopped. Julie catches her eye and gives a small nod, something casual but intentional.

“So,” Julie says, easy, “you gonna keep lookin’ at me like that, or you tryna say somethin’?”

The girl smiles, slow and confident. “Guess I’m saying somethin’ now.” Julie smirks. “About time. What’s a pretty thing like you doin’ here?”

The girl laughs softly. “Same thing as you, I guess. Drinking. People watching. Trying not to go home too early.”

Julie nods, but her eyes drift for half a second back toward her table, where Daniella is still talking, still watching her when she thinks Julie isn’t looking.

“Yeah,” Julie says. “That sounds about right.”

The girl notices the shift. “You good?”

Julie snaps back with a smile. “Yeah. Sorry. Long night.”

The bartender sets another drink down in front of her. Julie wraps her fingers around the glass but barely sips it.

“So,” the girl says, leaning closer, lowering her voice, “are you always this quiet, or am I boring you already?”

Julie chuckles, shaking her head. "Nah. You cool. I'm just... somewhere else right now."

The girl studies her for a moment, really looks at her this time, then smiles again, softer. "That's okay. Happens."

Julie nods, grateful, but the feeling doesn't lift. The noise of the bar feels louder now. She glances back at her table again, then toward the door, like she already knows what she's about to do.

"I should probably head out," she says, almost to herself.

The girl tilts her head. "Already?"

"Yeah," Julie says, pushing off the bar. "Rain check."

The girl smiles. "I'll hold you to it."

Julie nods and walks back to the table, grabbing her jacket off the chair. "Yo, I'm headin' out," she says.

"Y'all be safe."

Daniella looks up right away. "You sure?"

Julie forces a smile, pulling the jacket on. "Yeah. I'm good."

Another friend lifts his beer. "Get home safe, Jules."

Julie gives them a quick wave and heads for the door.

The noise of the bar fades behind her as she steps outside, the humid night air hitting her, and she pulls her jacket tighter as she walks away, cutting toward the stairs that lead underground.

"Next stop is..." the train's mic cuts in and out with static.

Loud footsteps echo across the platform. Sneakers slap the concrete from the right staircase. From the left, heels clack sharply until one snaps off mid stride.

The subway doors begin to close just as the two women reach them. One slams a palm against the metal. The other catches it gently, fingers slipping as it seals shut.

"Open up! Come on!" she yells at the conductor, who only glances back before disappearing into the train.

The other woman lets go and steps back as the train pulls away with a huff. "Fuck you, piece of shit!" the louder woman shouts, flipping the train off.

They stand at the edge of the platform, panting, disheveled as they stare at the disappearing train.

The gentler woman's heel dangles by its clasp. She limps toward the wooden seats, massaging her foot.

She's dressed for a formal event, Her fitted gown is now rumpled, strands of hair sticking to her sweaty face.

The louder woman's hair has gone wild in the humidity. She shoves her hands into her worn jacket pockets, groaning. Her jeans sag lower than usual from the run, she kicks some dust into the tracks.

As they both collected themselves, they glanced at the announcement board flickering overhead, for the time of the next train.

2 UPTOWN — 45 MIN

"Fucking great." She sighs.

The seated woman groans, staring at her foot. The platform raddled with passing by express trains shooting through the tunnels.

The louder woman pulls a cigarette from a crushed pack, "You got a light?"

"No." the seated woman says with disdain and slight slur to her words. "And I'd rather you not." The other woman raises a brow.

"Nothing? Not even a match?"

"I already said I don't." She folds her arms and leans away from the standing woman.

"What, always this stuck up?" The woman tucks the cigarette behind her ear, with the same amount of tipsy in her voice.

"Are you dense? We just missed the train, I snapped my heel, and now I have to wait 40 minutes... with- with you!" Her face turned red.

"Aight, damn. Relax," the standing woman says, sucking her teeth. "Fucks your problem." She walks off toward the announcement board.

Silence stretches over the platform, they glance at the board every now and then, but nothing changes. Then the screen flickers before going completely dark.

The louder woman paces faster.

"Can you cut it out? You're making me uneasy," the seated woman sighs. "I'ma check if there's other people around." She heads to the far end of the station.

"Finally." The seated woman closes her eyes, savoring the brief silence. Until eventually heavy footsteps rush back.

"There's not a damn soul out there!"

"It's one in the morning on a Thursday. It doesn't take a genius to know the station might be empty." She rolls her eyes.

"How long you been a bitch for?" the standing woman snaps.

Before the seated woman can snap back, a train barrels down the track, doesn't even slow, then vanishes into the darkness.

"Fuck... that train didn't even stop," the standing woman mutters, rubbing her forehead. They stand there for a beat, neither of them moving.

"I'm sorry," the seated woman finally says. "About my attitude. It's late, I just want to get home. I've had a long night."

"Well, no shit. You and me both." She rubs her neck.

"I'm uneasy too, just stop lookin' at me like I'm gonna rob you lady." The seated lady huffs trying to shoot down the truthful accusation.

"It's Jennifer." She clears her throat.

"Huh?"

"My name. You keep calling me lady. It's rude."

Jennifer inspects her nails, avoiding eye contact.

"Mmh. You gonna ask me mine, Jennie?" The woman smirks.

"Jennifer. Not Jennie. And I'm sure you'll tell me anyway."

"It's Julisa. Call me Julie."

"Are you going to stand all night, Julie, or are you going to take a seat?"

Julie hesitates, then drops at the far end of the bench, leaving space not wanting to get too close. She lets her cigarette dangle from her lips.

"What got you stuck here all dolled up?" Julie asks, tilting her head as she stretches along the bench.

"A work party, nothing special," Jennifer smooths her dress.

"If you're wearing all that and it's nothing special," Julie eyes the fabric, "your job must be somethin' else."

"You'd be surprised," Jennifer huffs. "Why are you here on this... charming night?"

Julie laughs, cigarette bobbing between her lips. "Bar around the corner. Friends, too many shots. Someone got promoted, someone dumped, same old shit."

Jennifer hums.

"Wasn't even supposed to stay out late," Julie continues. "Got stuck talkin' to some chicks at the bar, lost track of time. You know how it be."

"I actually don't," Jennifer snorts.

Julie grins. "Figures." She pauses. "Starting to think I had a better chance just heading back to one of those girls' places... a warm bed sounds way better than freezing my ass off down here."

Jennifer chuckles softly. "You're quite the lothario."

Julie blinks, confused. "Loth... what now? I have no idea what that means." "Really? You've never heard the term?" Jennifer smirks.

"Sounds fancy," Julie shrugs. A comfortable silence hangs between them. The sound of water dripping filling the void with the occasional loud train never stopping.

loud footsteps echo down the stairs, followed by a bottle smashing against the platform. Both women jump out of their seats.

A drunk man staggers toward them, reeking of liquor. Jennifer instinctively moves closer to Julie, fear in her eyes.

"Pretty lady... you got a dollar?" he slurs, staggering forward.

Jennifer freezes as he comes closer. Julie quickly slips an arm around her, stepping forward to block him.

"Ay, keep it moving, man," she snaps. The man grumbles but stumbles off toward the far end of the platform.

Julie turns back to Jennifer, holding her close. Jennifer was shaking like a leaf and breathing uneasily.

"Scared of a drunk bum?" she asks, chuckling softly. Jennifer pushes off of her. "You're such an ass! An Oaf!" She yells from embarrassment.

"Fucks that supposed to mean? Mind you I just protected your ass" Julie snaps, narrowing her eyes.

"Of course you don't know it. It's a bit outside your usual vocabulary." Jennifer smirks glad she holds something little over her.

Julie scoffs. "So now you're calling me uneducated?"

"You said it, not me," Jennifer replies.

Julie lets out a short laugh. "You got a smart fucking mouth. Get off your high horse, princess. We're more alike than you think."

Jennifer shakes her head. "I'm nothing like you."

Julie gestures around the empty platform taking a step closer. "And yet we're both stuck here, miss perfect, waiting on the same busted train."

Jennifer meets her gaze, edged. "Yes. And that's precisely where the similarity ends."

Julie gets in her face. "You know you got a real stick up yo ass. Who the fuck you think you talkin' to? You don't know me."

Jennifer closes the distance between them, not wavering.

"I'm talking to a damn brute of a woman. You understand that word?" she snaps, their breaths nearly colliding.

"Oh yeah?" Julie fires back. "If I'm a fucking brute, then...you're a pompous ass!" They stand there, chests rising fast, the space between them charged.

Then Jennifer laughs. Soft at first, like she didn't mean to but it spills out anyway. Julie frowns. "What the hell are you laughing at?" Jennifer shakes her head, catching her breath. "You're unbelievable."

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

"Where'd you learn a word like that?" Jennifer wipes her tears.

"I read it somewhere..." Julie tries not to smirk.

There's a comfortable pause, the sound of their breathing softening. "...You didn't have to do that," Jennifer says, quieter now.

Julie tilts her head. "Do what?"

"With that man," Jennifer adds, avoiding her eyes.

“You stepped in like it was nothing.” Julie shrugs, but not as careless as before. “Wasn’t nothing.” Jennifer looks at her then. Really looks. The noise of the station hums around them, distant tracks, flickering lights, but it fades under the weight of it.

“...Still,” she says softly. “Thank you.” Julie’s smirk doesn’t quite land this time. Something more real slips through. “Yeah,” she says. “Don’t mention it.”

Julie glances at her, then back again, like she’s trying to read something she wasn’t expecting to care about. “You not as bad as I thought,” she mutters.

Jennifer huffs a quiet laugh. “Careful. I might grow fond of you.”

Julie grins. “Wouldn’t want that.”

A beat.

Jennifer reaches forward, fingers brushing the front of Julie’s jacket, smoothing it without thinking.

They both notice.

Neither pulls away.

Julie’s voice drops. “You get this close to everyone you argue with?”

Jennifer meets her eyes, something warmer there now.

“No. Just you.”

Julie leans in slightly, but doesn’t close the distance.

Jennifer does.

Her hand tightens in Julie’s jacket as she presses her lips to hers, firm but gentle.

Julie freezes for half a second, then melts into it, one hand coming up to her waist, pulling her closer fingers threading into her silk dress.

A train barrels into the station, lights cutting through the dimness. A cold breeze tangles their hair and tugs at Jennifer’s dress as Julie dips her, the kiss deep and urgent. The doors hiss open, but they stay locked together, laughing softly, breathless.

“Next stop is...” the train’s mic crackles from static.

“Train’s here,” Jennifer smirks, still holding Julie close.

“I would have kissed you sooner if I knew that would bring it,” Julie teases, and they both chuckle.

The Bridal Whore by Tyonna Cruickshank

The bells rang and the piano sang

As she walked down the aisle grey and graceful. In her hand, instead of flowers, she held slacks of wood. Each slack of wood from each man that she met throughout her life.

There were no maid of honors, no families, no friends, or any other guest to witness this remarkable ceremony. She sent out an invitation to all, but no one arrived except their husbands, brothers, and sons.

At the front of the aisle were all the men that she thought she loved. They kneeled down together, side by side naked and woodless, because that's all they had to offer. They weren't dead; however, their eyes were sewn shut, their heads were covered with black veils and all you can hear were their soft whimpers of agony and pain.

Closer to the altar, was no minister—but the groom. He wore pages of the Bible across his body. He had his hands out in acceptance. In his palms read lord Jesus Christ be with me and forgive me for my sins. His head, she wore around her neck like a diamond necklace. She wore his lips upon hers, his eyes for earrings, and his nose as her wedding ring. She left his ears on hopes that her would hear her say I do.

As she uttered the words out of her mouth, she did so in a manner of rage. Just her siren alone pierced through the hearts of the men beneath her and one by one their bodies collapsed. The cries that filled the room were no longer, and all you can hear was silence.

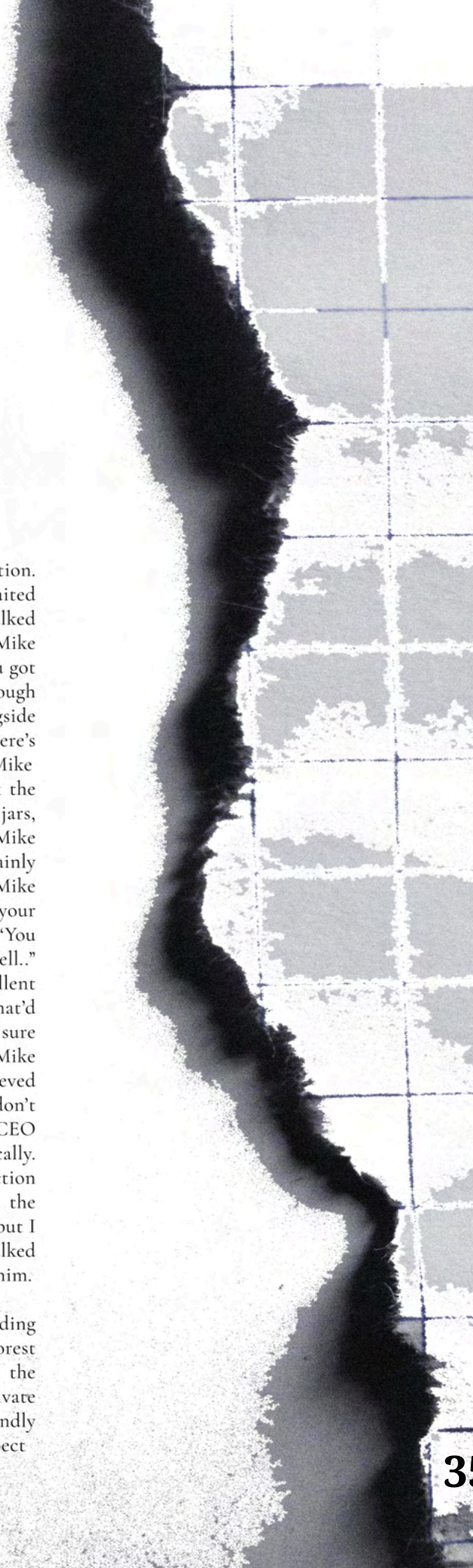
An Ordinary Day

Ben Gudzy

The day began as usual, with the examination of the blood jars in the fridge. There were five filled mason jars, just as there had been the night before. He always checked the fridge each night and morning. Jackie understood the value of this ritual and made sure to follow it with a religious adherence. The acknowledgement of his supply set his mind at ease, knowing he had enough to last a while was reassuring. He needed the feeling of security, the same feeling a man might get looking at a hidden gun he has never shot. Jackie closed the fridge and sat down at his cramped kitchen table, fumbled around till he found a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and began to think. He would have to feed soon, that was clear enough. He could barely taste the menthol and the total darkness inside his trailer was becoming difficult to see in. As a final test he took his dying cigarette and pressed the smoldering tip against his hand. He held it pressed against his skin till could feel it, about thirty seconds.


The gas station sat alone at the intersection between the fields. The lights could be seen for miles around, a beacon for wayward souls unfortunate enough to find themselves traveling in the night. Jackie knew this place, he had been countless times but had never exchanged anything other than a few words with the elderly owner. That owner must have been losing his mind Jackie surmised, he never showed any acknowledgement of their previous encounters. It was all good by him though, the cops never bothered to ask the old fool anything whenever there was a disappearance. The owner's gross negligence made the gas station a favorite meeting place for the desperate and the mad, business could be done, lives bought and sold. The store was empty save for Jackie and the old man, who never looked up from his phone and was visibly startled when Jackie spoke. "Can I get a pack of Newports?". The old man dutifully reached behind him while Jackie went for his wallet. "These are too damn expensive," Jackie said. "I remember when they were a couple bucks.". The clerk briefly snorted as he made change. "Son you weren't even born yet when them things were so cheap." The old man said as he handed Jackie his meager change. Jackie got back in his truck, turned the engine off, lit a cigarette and waited. Someone would come along, he told himself as his leg began to shake.

A small mountain of cigarette butts and ash had formed on the ground



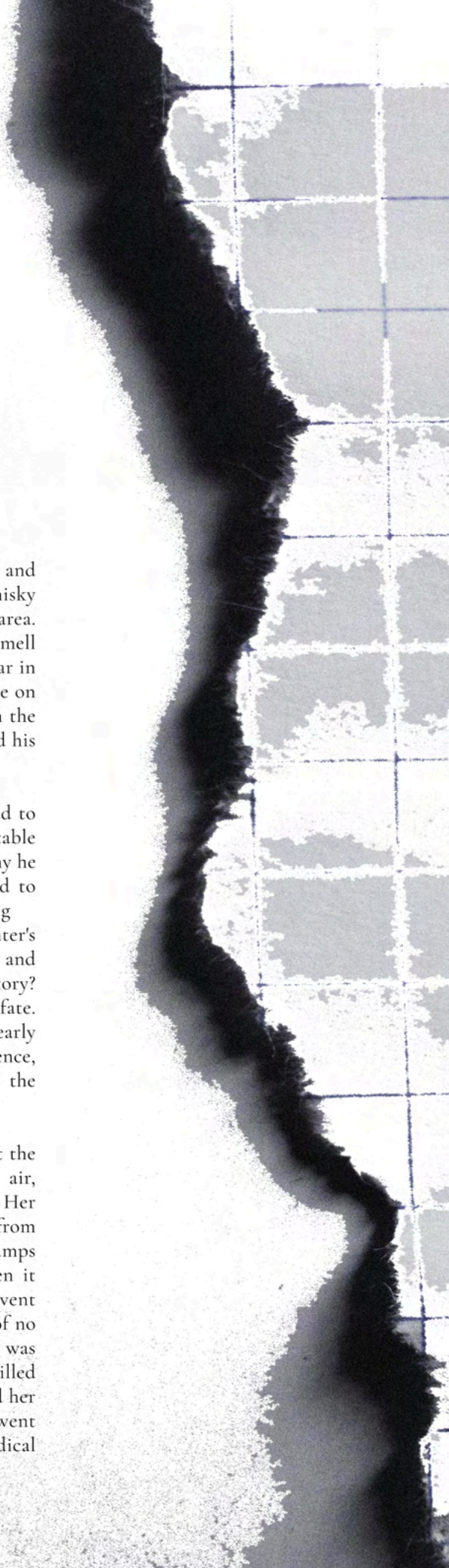
outside Jackie's window by the time another car pulled into the gas station. He saw the driver enter the store, then he got out of his car and waited leaning against the storefront wall. "Yo Mike." Jackie said as the man walked out. "Shit Jackie, couldn't you greet me like a normal fucking person?" Mike said, unfazed by the sudden greeting. "Whatever, I'm looking to feed you got any gear on you?" Jackie asked. "Nah not on me man, and I ain't got enough to be charitable right now". Mike said as he stood against the wall alongside Jackie. "I do know of an opportunity only a fool would turn down. There's nothing in this world for free though, anyone with a brain knows that" Mike said as he opened a tallboy from his bag and took a swig. Jackie took the beer from his hand, took a drink and asked what he wanted. "Two jars, which is pretty fucking generous considering what Im gonna tell you" Mike said as he grabbed back his drink. "No, I can't spare it." "You certainly fucking can! I'm talking about a great fucking opportunity here man!" Mike said with an air of indignation. "Besides, it's a chance to expand your inventory." Mike added sheepishly. "Fine, what is it?" Jackie sighed. "You know that weird fucker Earl?" "Yeah, I've bought off him before." "Well.." Mike lit up with anticipation for a chance to share such an excellent opportunity. "Guys been going feral lately, going after the rich fucks that'd been moving in" An unspoken death sentence had just been issued. "I'm sure he has a shit ton at his place, probably out hunting tonight anyway..." Mike let his voice trail off, as if he had subliminally planted the idea. He believed himself a master orator and spoke in misused business terms. "Why don't you go get it?" Jackie asked. "Let me ask you something man, does the CEO go lay the bricks for a new building he wants?" Mike asked rhetorically. "Depends on the CEO I suppose, for instance if he ran a construction company..." Jackie added in obvious annoyance. "What, no! He gets the workers to build it and both get what they fucking want!". "Fine I'll go, but I want this as payment upfront." Jackie said as he grabbed the beer and walked off towards his truck, ignoring the barrage of swears and insults behind him.

The Cabin lay on a plateau at the top of a steep hill. The area surrounding the cabin had been cleared of trees, giving it an unfettered view of the forest around it. Only an unmarked road led up the hill to it, but around the surrounding miles signs were plastered announcing that the area was private property. The closer to the cabin you got the warnings became less friendly and announced that since ammo was expensive, trespassers shouldn't expect



a warning shot. Finally, a chain link fence surrounded the hill, its barbed wire top glinting in the moonlight. Jackie sat in his truck outside the padlocked entrance of the fence, his car engine off, watching. Even with his senses dulled he could only detect faint signs of life and he was already fairly confident what they were coming from. He sighed deeply and got out of his truck. His attitude was that of minor annoyance, far disconnected from the perils he was about to put himself in. He didn't fear death, he used to believe he was going to hell but not anymore. After such a long life he had come to the conclusion that if there was a god he'd have struck him down long ago. The mere fact of his continued existence was proof that either god had simply forgotten about him, or that he was never there to begin with. With the urgency of a calm Sunday morning he began to arm himself. When he reached his truck bed, he carefully reached inside a loosely rolled up carpet held down by a tarp. His hand quickly found the pistol grip and as he pulled it out the moonlight began to dance on the nickel finish. He slung it around his shoulder as he reached into the carpet for a box of shells. The shells had been refilled with silver pellets and he fed the gun, the shells filling the empty air with a satisfying clink. Heading to the passenger seat of his car he opened the glove compartment and produced a Bowie knife the size of a small sword, its silver blade having been forged by and given to him by a friend now long dead. He attached the blade to his belt as he strolled over to the lock and tore it off the gate with some difficulty. It should have been easier, and the horror of withdrawal entered his mind again with a vengeance. Picking up the pace he made his way to the base of the cabin.

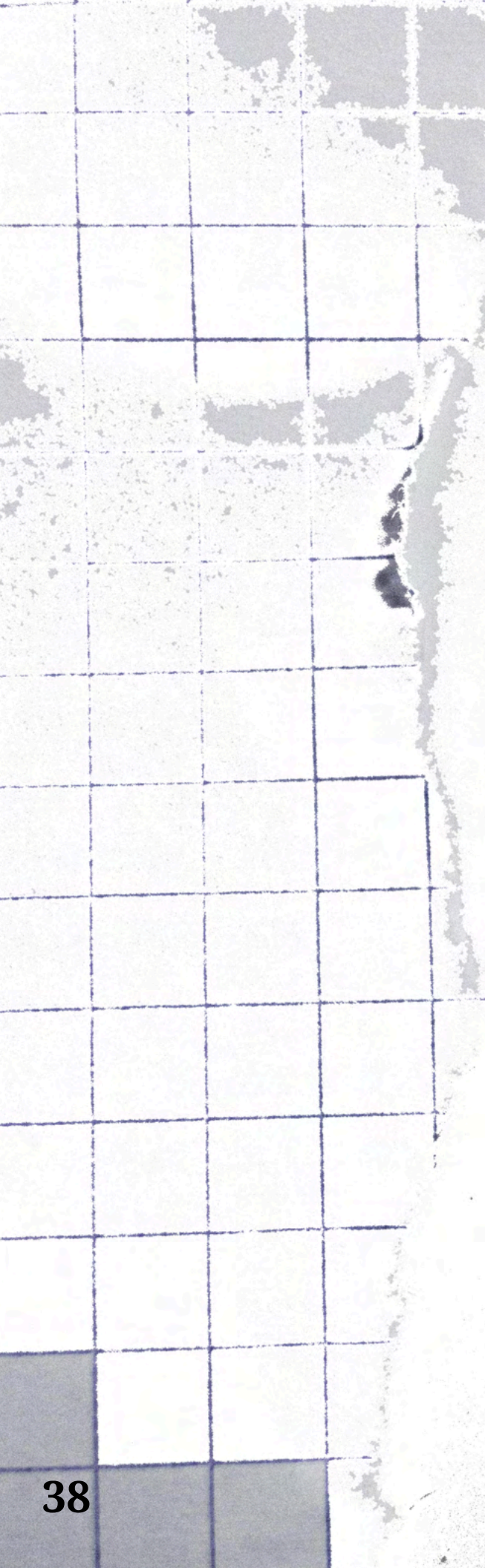
The cabin was ancient, its rotting wooden frame cried out for repairs that would never come. The nails holding the door together were warped with rust and age and it appeared they had been driven in by a blind carpenter, the tips sticking out in unorthodox angles. Two windows looked out from the front of the cabin, both blackened by untold years of cigarette smoke. Jackie grasped the iron door handle and gingerly opened the door. The door moaned and squealed as it scraped against the floor. The interior of the single room cabin preached the virtues of a life of isolation and madness. A small kitchen separated by a bar looked out on the squalor of the main room. A beat up couch sat in the center of the room, above it was a solitary lightbulb with an attached string. In the far right corner an old



mattress lay unsupported on the ground covered by a yellow stained and tattered blanket and pillow. Various empty bottles of bottom shelf whisky and outdated pornographic magazines cluttered the bedside area. Homemade candles dotted the floor and filled the room with a slight smell of meat. Most pressing to Jackie however was a hatch leading to the cellar in the left side of the room. The signs of life he had sensed wasn't anywhere on this floor so it could only be located below. With his eyesight failing in the total darkness he turned on his flashlight with his left hand and grabbed his gun on his right as he opened the hatch.

He was not surprised when he saw what was down there. The blood had to come from somewhere, he knew that, but he could never get comfortable with the process. Any time he bought blood he pushed down any empathy he felt to the poor bastard who supplied it. Any man would be horrified to witness the inside of a slaughterhouse, but does that stop him from eating steak? Even when he killed for blood himself he tried to take a hunter's perspective on the matter. Yes the deer was killed, but surely a quick and unexpected death is better than the agony of living in the meat factory? Those poor souls taken by blood dealers were not granted such a quick fate. When he got to the bottom of the stairs the scent of blood nearly overwhelmed him. Even without turning around he could feel a presence, turning to view the inside of the room he was given a look inside the slaughterhouse.

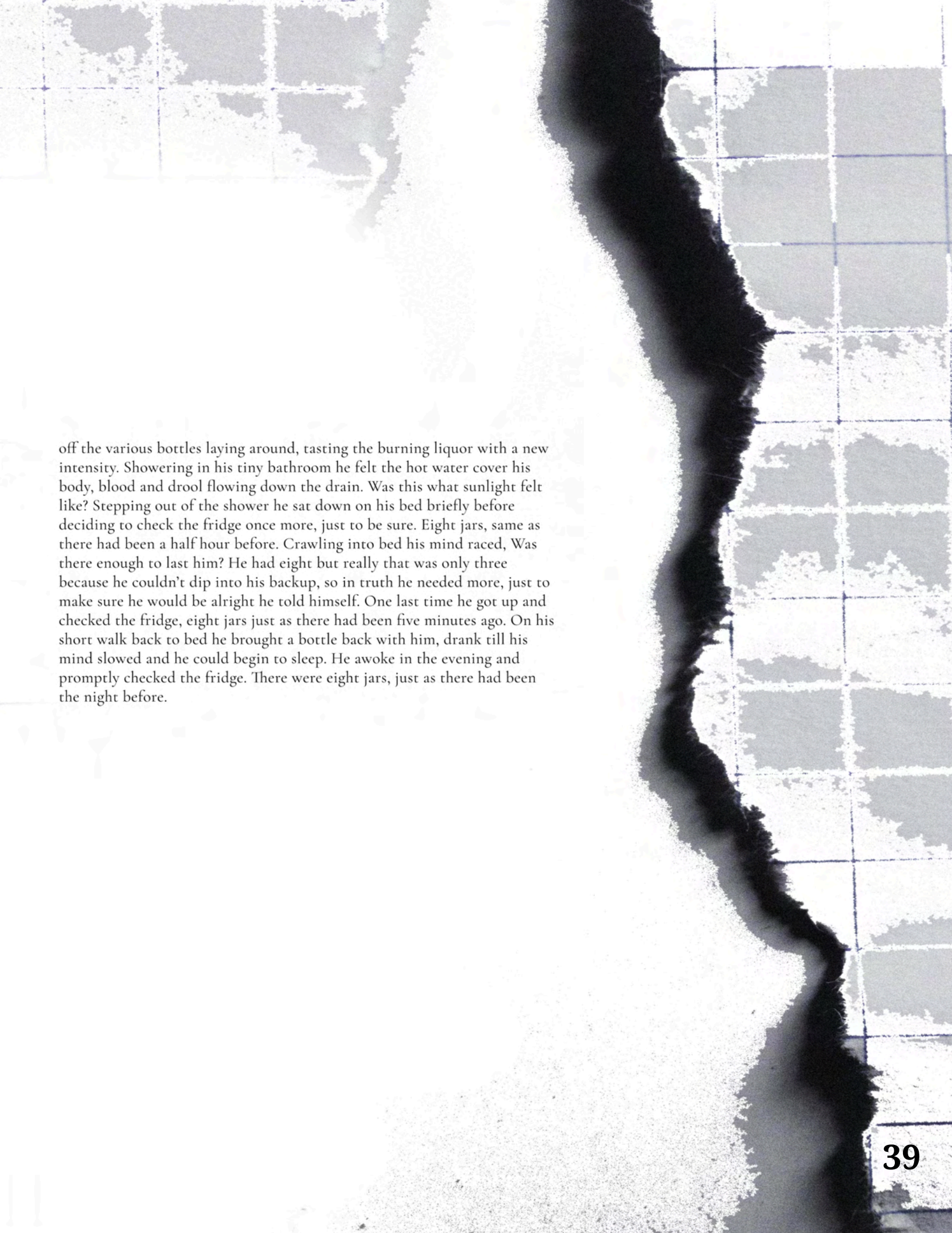
A young woman, maybe in her thirties he guessed, sat on a stool against the far wall of the small room. Both of her arms were held up in the air, suspended by handcuffs attached to chains hanging from the ceiling. Her arms were riddled with track marks, every vein having been drawn from countless times. Her legs dangled from the stool each ending in stumps wrapped in bandages where her ankles should have been. He had seen it before, when extremities became infected they were amputated to prevent the spread of rot. One by one they were removed till the body became of no use then they were killed and a new victim would take their place. Jackie was familiar with the processing, he had been friendly with dealers quite skilled in the art. Earl evidently was not. The woman was emaciated and behind her anatomical diagrams of the body were plastered on the wall. Jackie went through the filthy lab, opening boxes of syringes and cheap medical



equipment till he found what he was looking for. A cooler, containing five filled mason jars. With the knowledge of his success Jackie knew what he needed to do next, In both a selfish act and a mercy killing he sank his fangs into the woman's neck. The pleasure was indescribable. His senses came back a thousand fold, he could now see perfectly in the dark, smell the scent of gratitude on the dead woman. He was a starved man gouging on pleasure, driven to frenzy by the taste of warm blood. The ecstasy of exsanguination would fade, he knew that, and after would come the longing for more. The oceans could turn to blood as prophesied in biblical revelation and it wouldn't be enough. The woman died, her body small and desecrated; the corpse looked indistinguishable to when she was still breathing.

Jackie stood over the woman breathing heavily, his upper body covered in drool and blood. The post coital cigarette would have to wait, he grabbed the cooler and headed for the stairs when he heard a slight creak, barely audible to a fox's ear. On instinct alone he dropped the cooler, grabbed his gun and shot blindly at the hole connecting the cellar to the ground floor. A deafening silence followed the shot, disoriented by the unbearable sound Jackie failed to see a large figure tumble down the stairs. He didn't hear the brief crack as the figure's head burst open upon the concrete floor. A minute or so passed, maybe longer, it might have been years before Jackie regained his grip on the harsh reality he found himself in. Before him lay a man's body, spasming and twitching as he lay in a growing pool of his own blood. The legs twitched and scuffed against the floor in automatic convulsion. He surveyed the body of the living corpse and took note of the damage. The shot had winged him, it wouldn't have been fatal but the shock caused him to fall and crack his head open. The corpse's eyes flickered rapidly, watching Jackie casually assess the damage. He would heal from this, and would certainly want the head of whichever bastard had done it. Without much thought Jackie drew his massive blade and plunged it into Earl's heart. When the body had finally quieted Jackie picked up his loot, exited the cabin and drove home.

Dawn was fast approaching by the time he got home, the morning dew heralded its arrival. The trailer was divorced from time, its blackout curtains ensured an eternal night. Putting the blood in the fridge he counted his supply again, eight jars for him, two for Mike. While undressing he polished



off the various bottles laying around, tasting the burning liquor with a new intensity. Showering in his tiny bathroom he felt the hot water cover his body, blood and drool flowing down the drain. Was this what sunlight felt like? Stepping out of the shower he sat down on his bed briefly before deciding to check the fridge once more, just to be sure. Eight jars, same as there had been a half hour before. Crawling into bed his mind raced, Was there enough to last him? He had eight but really that was only three because he couldn't dip into his backup, so in truth he needed more, just to make sure he would be alright he told himself. One last time he got up and checked the fridge, eight jars just as there had been five minutes ago. On his short walk back to bed he brought a bottle back with him, drank till his mind slowed and he could begin to sleep. He awoke in the evening and promptly checked the fridge. There were eight jars, just as there had been the night before.

Antiphona of the Abyss - Abysswalkers New Moon

By Angel Guzman

Oh! my sweet sweet children of today.
It pains me to say that my time with you
Shall soon come to an end.
But not to fret! For I will have left
All five of you with these Abyssal gifts
That should be of great benefit.

To my eldest daughter
With a heart of ingenuitive ambition.
I bestow a gift of Soma unto you.
I'm sure you and the people of your realm,
With the Body's inherent nature of modularity
Will be able to tinker and invent
All sorts of bodily configurations
To your heart's content.

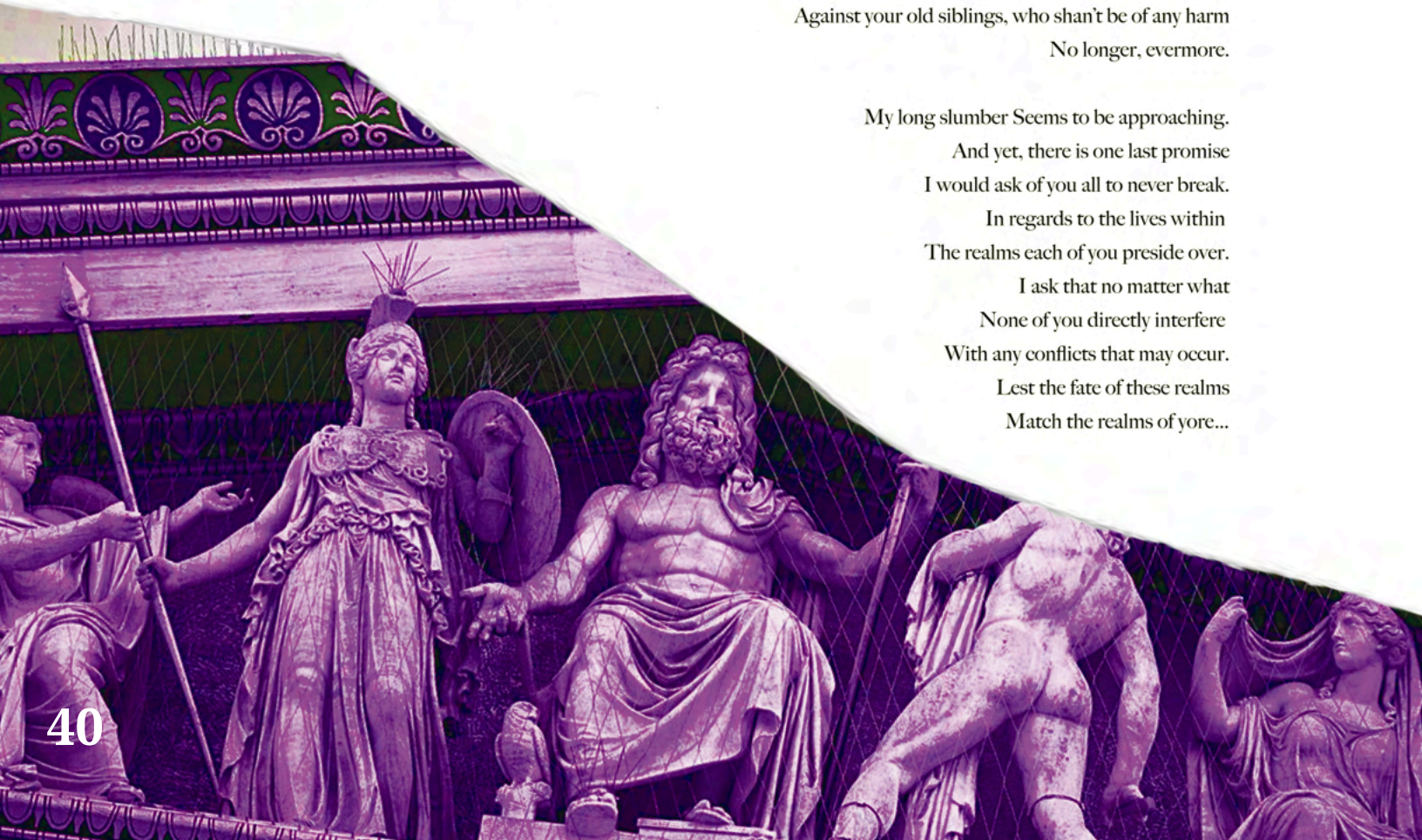
To my second daughter
blessed yet cursed with instability
I leave with you a gift of Nous.
Even with the danger it poses
To one's own mind and sanity,
The magic it would allow for
Would let even the weakest of your realm
Rival the strength of even a minor god.

To my youngest son and daughter
Both brimming with carefree souls.
You may both find a gift of Anima
That would let you move with amplified freedom.
Everyone across all the other realms
Shall unknowingly move to their own beat.
But with this gift for you and your realm
The knowledge of one's own elemental rhythm
Shall finally be possible for one to grasp.

Finally, my eldest child, my eldest son
Who has been with me since the very start.
With your unbreakable and inquisitive will
I shall return to you, a gift of Pneuma once lost.
The power to manipulate reality's laws can be a fickle thing.
The technique for drawing it out is nigh unbearable as well.
But alas, you of course would already know
How much utilizing those medallions could truly hurt like hell.

And yet, another thing my dear boy.
Even if you may no longer have a realm of your own.
Even if you spend the rest of your eternity
Watching over the spirits of our paradiso.
I still hope you can one day forgive me
And understand the actions I had to take before,
Against your old siblings, who shan't be of any harm
No longer, evermore.

My long slumber Seems to be approaching.
And yet, there is one last promise
I would ask of you all to never break.
In regards to the lives within
The realms each of you preside over.
I ask that no matter what
None of you directly interfere
With any conflicts that may occur.
Lest the fate of these realms
Match the realms of yore...



War Stories from the Ministry of Truth: An Average Flag Capture

SPEAKER: VINCENT HICKEY

A righteous altar of democracy descends from orbit.
The whistling, just another instrument amongst the ensemble of violence below- B000000M!
Crash landed as designed, fascist fuck didn't know what hit em.
Super Earth's flag erupting from engineered greatness with a roar!
Bullets, gore, explosives, screams!
Fly over the field as the helldivers instinctively defend the flags position.
Lurching and heaving around as to not let a single scratch upon the flag.
Tactically unsound if it weren't for the unfettered passion for managed democracy!
Terminids are barreling out the ground!
You see, the frequency of democracy's anthem irritates them to no end.
Much like how dogs rage over batteries in the TV remote, Democracy's anthem is designed not
just to boost human morale but is designed to make Terminid blood flow rush with stress!
This serves the dual purpose of increasing E-710 yields fiftyfold!
Several minutes of stellar carnage later the divers are successful in their liberation.
The flag system sends encrypted data to the ship.
The Harbinger of Audacity is informed success.
The workforce bellows!
A prayer of Democratic Domination for soil they won't touch.
The phantom joy of innumerable super citizens prickles their skin.
Every worker panting, sweat dressed and stimed to the gills choreograph more stratagem pods.
They rest when Democracy demands it.
More land, more oil, more democracy!
Picture the commerce,
Boom!
The architecture,
Boom! Boom!
The agriculture,
Boom! Boom! Boom!
The animalistic fervor to vote!
BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!
It must be defended!
B000000M!
Every tiny bug, a voter booth worth of oil.
Every tiny bot, a voting machine worth of scrap.
Every tiny squid, a pen worth of ink.
So get on out there and fight.
Enlist today!



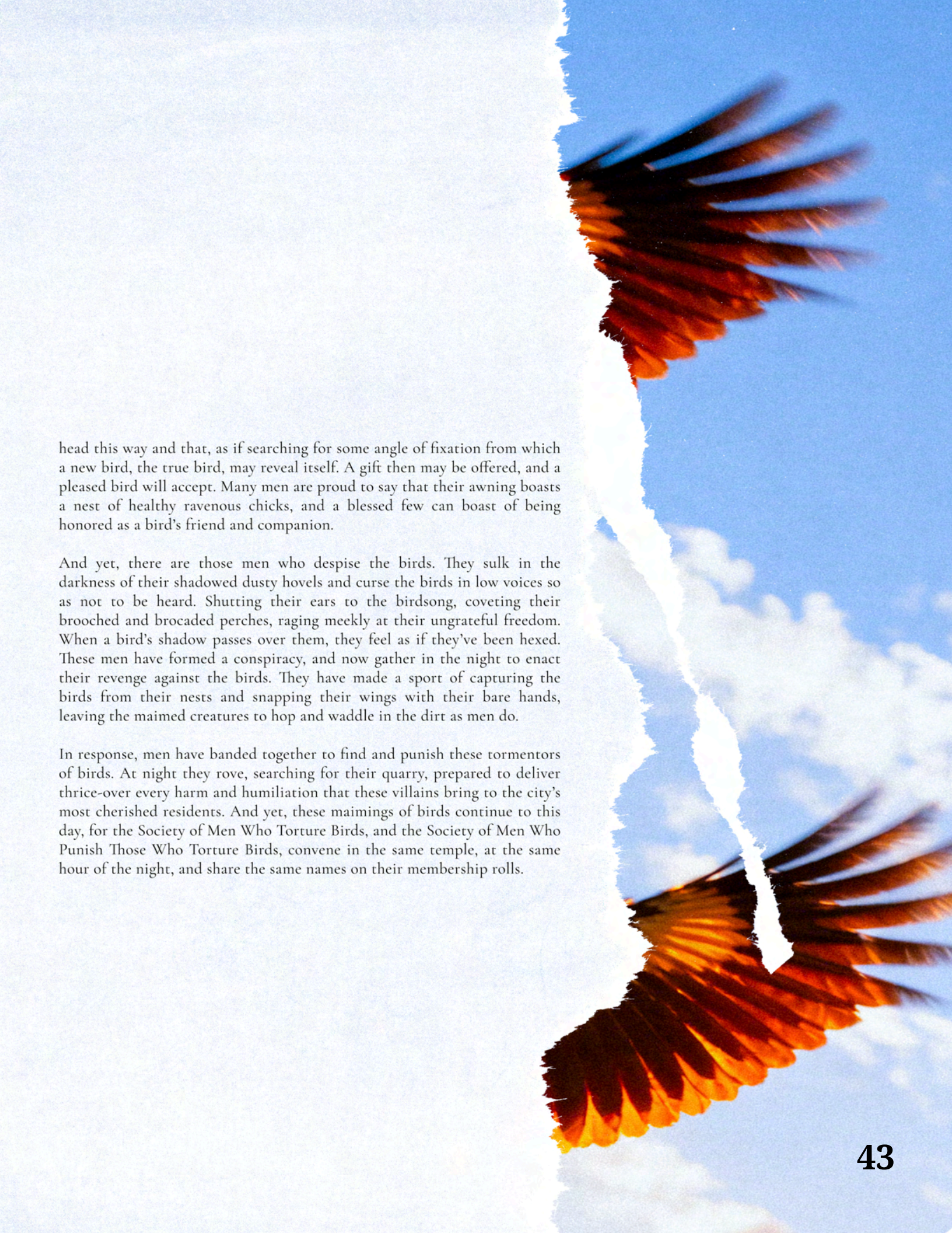
LEDA

This is a pastiche of Invisible Cities by Ian Lundin

The city of Leda is inhabited by men and birds. The days of men are acceptable and predictable, rolling from one to the next with the heavy ease of a well-fitted millstone, in the hot stillness beneath the awnings of hawker's stalls or in the narrow confines of workshops, working metals and fine stones into items of great value and beauty. Of these treasures, none are sold to passing traders, but are offered to the city's many colored birds, who soar through the hard dry wind in the light of the resplendent sun above the clay-tiled rooftops, and make their nests on whichever perch or alcove pleases them. In return for these trinkets which the birds use to adorn their gleaming nests, the birds act as couriers, messengers, and companions for the men of the city.

The men of Leda adore their birds, and they pay homage to the birds in all that they create. And so the birds of Leda are seen not just fluttering through the air but diving golden from the string of an amulet, perched on an olive branch across a knight's tabard or a castle wall's banner, or soaring in great painterly flocks along rippling porcelain. Their birdsong is modest but melodious and pleasant, and their shimmering feathers are highly sought as tokens of their favor. The men of Leda play no music, for the air is always alive with birdsong.

In the course of a man's daily toils, a bird may come to perch on a roof corner just above him, hopefully far enough in front to not turn his head for a view. The man will pause his labors and watch the bird. He may sigh or laugh softly, his heart stirring with delight at the sight of this light-footed sylph, half hopping in the steady breeze that flows across Leda's rooftops, sunlight dancing in shivering combs across its feathers. The bird will swoop down into the fetid shadow of his alleyway, acrid with the smoke of his kiln, and come to a perch near him. He will stare, still and silent, as the bird hops from bench to sill, scrawling across his little world with its curious beak. On a happy day, the bird will then come closer to him, and the man then can offer a palmful of dry barleycorns and the bird will hop up onto his knee, the bird's hard, black little talons pressing gingerly into his thigh. With nerves fading into calm, the bird will peck the corns from the man's palm, and the man will look into the scale-encrusted opals of the bird's eyes and wonder how something so unknowable and so wild could be so at peace with him, and he will tilt his



head this way and that, as if searching for some angle of fixation from which a new bird, the true bird, may reveal itself. A gift then may be offered, and a pleased bird will accept. Many men are proud to say that their awning boasts a nest of healthy ravenous chicks, and a blessed few can boast of being honored as a bird's friend and companion.

And yet, there are those men who despise the birds. They sulk in the darkness of their shadowed dusty hovels and curse the birds in low voices so as not to be heard. Shutting their ears to the birdsong, coveting their brooched and brocaded perches, raging meekly at their ungrateful freedom. When a bird's shadow passes over them, they feel as if they've been hexed. These men have formed a conspiracy, and now gather in the night to enact their revenge against the birds. They have made a sport of capturing the birds from their nests and snapping their wings with their bare hands, leaving the maimed creatures to hop and waddle in the dirt as men do.

In response, men have banded together to find and punish these tormentors of birds. At night they rove, searching for their quarry, prepared to deliver thrice-over every harm and humiliation that these villains bring to the city's most cherished residents. And yet, these maimings of birds continue to this day, for the Society of Men Who Torture Birds, and the Society of Men Who Punish Those Who Torture Birds, convene in the same temple, at the same hour of the night, and share the same names on their membership rolls.

[Onerooms]: Party Playhouse - Victim 1, by Gideon Okine

She lay half-conscious on what felt to be a hard floor.

She started to feel like waking up, and she did. It was quite a difficulty, for she was directly facing a bright ceiling light, the only ceiling light in that room.

Quite a room.

A very enigmatic room was what it truly was, which made the previous remark understandable. She started to gain sight, even if it was blurred from a little adjustment to the ceiling light. It was because of that ceiling light, the first thing she saw, that made her blink many, many times to try to adjust while she fulfilled her other senses with less attention.

She stood up and looked around. It looked completely nothing like the room she was in before. She can hardly remember it. Even if she tried to, only a singular number came to mind: One. "What?" she asked, out of strength to process what she was thinking. Was it the room? Was it one? Was it... something?

She then focused on regaining her footing and realized that she was lying in a way that pointed to the door. The hardwood door with a golden knob and weird lock that was built into it. Very enigmatic indeed. She at last stood and after looking at her feet, directed her eyes, slowly, around the room, starting from the bottom up, at the crude and repeated phrases over the walls, almost everywhere, according to what she currently knew.

The detail is pretty much enough, almost too much to explain what the phrases said, but it seemed to point towards the hopelessness of an exit, the format of an idea plunging into insanity. It horrified her. What happened here, she thought? What is this place, she thought? It felt like such a huge thought that she could almost say it. Shout it out even. She did nothing to be sent here.

Right?

She has had a history of being a great contestant in some battle for exponential power, and unfortunately was voting out, and somehow was lucky enough to be sent to a place firmly occupied by another “host”...whoever they were. One? There was nothing she could do except whatever deal it was, and she was sent back. Though she had never been to this place, and the place she was at before...one...was pretty much something she wouldn't see again for a while. That was the best way to put it.

After processing the sights of the small, almost medium-sized room she was in, she focused on her hearing. She paid attention; her ears were working right, and she could faintly pick up a circus tune coming from outside. Outside where? Nobody knows. Nobody could know. Wherever it was coming from, it sounded very liminal and enigmatic from where she was standing, and she moved toward the door to hear it better. She also heard voices outside the door. The music was coming from one side and the voices from the other side, down a hallway. They were coming closer. “What is this place?” she whispered to herself. “How do I get out of here?” Her contact started ringing. Needless to say, loud. Too loud for a place like this.

“Are you there?” the person on the other line said.

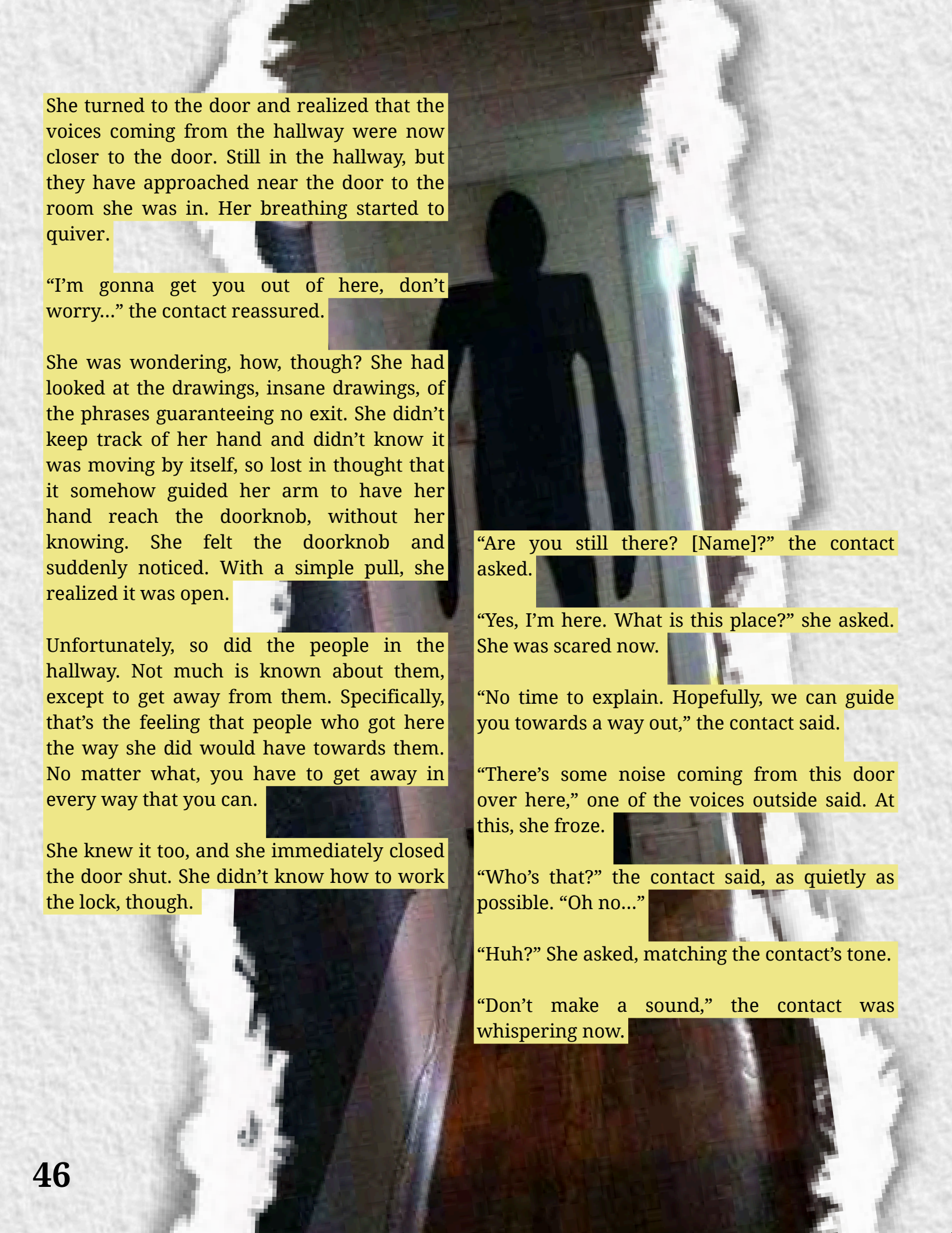
She looked on her phone and realized it somehow established connection to a contact, the contact completely unknown to her, but the contact knew everything about her, even her name.

[For reasons of innocence, I will do the favor of censoring the name]

“[Name], where are you?” the contact said, in the same tone as before.

She grabbed her phone and simply spoke. “Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“You don't have to know my name,” the contact replied, “at least not yet. I'll tell you later. You need to know where you are, it's not safe. Make sure no one else is hearing you.”



She turned to the door and realized that the voices coming from the hallway were now closer to the door. Still in the hallway, but they have approached near the door to the room she was in. Her breathing started to quiver.

“I’m gonna get you out of here, don’t worry...” the contact reassured.

She was wondering, how, though? She had looked at the drawings, insane drawings, of the phrases guaranteeing no exit. She didn’t keep track of her hand and didn’t know it was moving by itself, so lost in thought that it somehow guided her arm to have her hand reach the doorknob, without her knowing. She felt the doorknob and suddenly noticed. With a simple pull, she realized it was open.

Unfortunately, so did the people in the hallway. Not much is known about them, except to get away from them. Specifically, that’s the feeling that people who got here the way she did would have towards them. No matter what, you have to get away in every way that you can.

She knew it too, and she immediately closed the door shut. She didn’t know how to work the lock, though.

“Are you still there? [Name]?” the contact asked.

“Yes, I’m here. What is this place?” she asked. She was scared now.

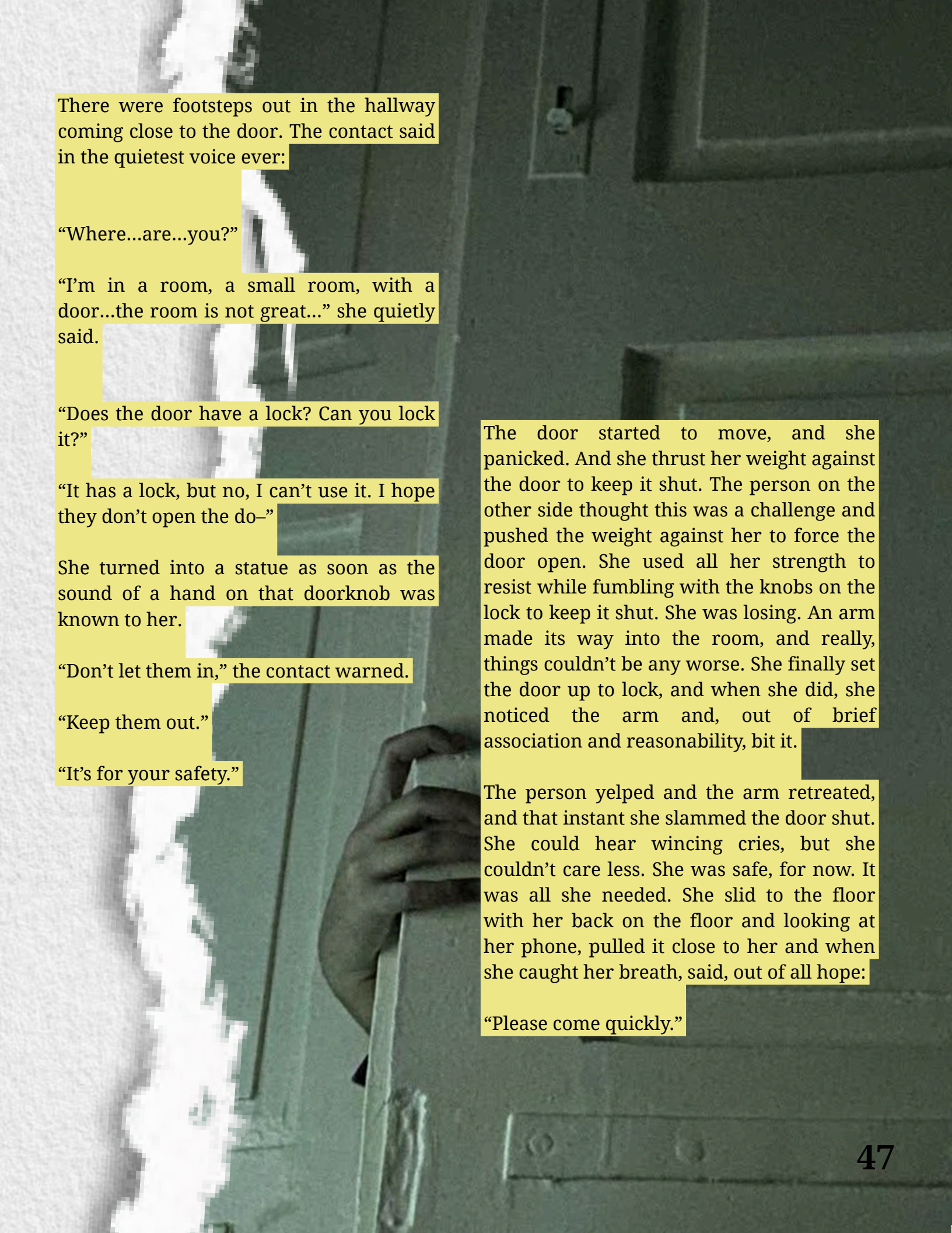
“No time to explain. Hopefully, we can guide you towards a way out,” the contact said.

“There’s some noise coming from this door over here,” one of the voices outside said. At this, she froze.

“Who’s that?” the contact said, as quietly as possible. “Oh no...”

“Huh?” She asked, matching the contact’s tone.

“Don’t make a sound,” the contact was whispering now.



There were footsteps out in the hallway coming close to the door. The contact said in the quietest voice ever:

“Where...are...you?”

“I’m in a room, a small room, with a door...the room is not great...” she quietly said.

“Does the door have a lock? Can you lock it?”

“It has a lock, but no, I can’t use it. I hope they don’t open the do—”

She turned into a statue as soon as the sound of a hand on that doorknob was known to her.

“Don’t let them in,” the contact warned.

“Keep them out.”

“It’s for your safety.”

The door started to move, and she panicked. And she thrust her weight against the door to keep it shut. The person on the other side thought this was a challenge and pushed the weight against her to force the door open. She used all her strength to resist while fumbling with the knobs on the lock to keep it shut. She was losing. An arm made its way into the room, and really, things couldn’t be any worse. She finally set the door up to lock, and when she did, she noticed the arm and, out of brief association and reasonability, bit it.

The person yelped and the arm retreated, and that instant she slammed the door shut. She could hear wincing cries, but she couldn’t care less. She was safe, for now. It was all she needed. She slid to the floor with her back on the floor and looking at her phone, pulled it close to her and when she caught her breath, said, out of all hope:

“Please come quickly.”

Untitled,

by Annabelle Primm

I've always had this strange power. I think it started because of an event that happened when I was a baby. I was there when a murder happened. I see murders before they happen. I have a 100% success rate of stopping it. Sadly, this means there's no proof. I would like proof this is real; also, that would mean other people would believe it if I chose to tell them.

I bought a power amplifier, unsure if it would work, because sometimes it doesn't, even if you have a power with that potential. I became like a satellite. I'm sitting on the reclining chair and can see miles and miles away. It's easy to see people who are going to be murdered, but if I have a photo or a memory of them, I can see them anywhere on earth.

I became a body guard for celebrities so they can pay me. I've stopped several murders. I would do it pro bono, but I think they would be suspicious, and after/idk save their life, they could think I set it up to become famous or something.

I want to help everyone, so I made my own organization dedicated to safety and preventing murders. One reason it's secret is it would put me in danger, and without me, they can't predict the murders with the same level of accuracy.

Surprising News

by Annabelle Primm

I headed home after a long day at work. When I opened the door, I had a surprise birthday party. I was in shock; I remember every person there died previously. Something must be wrong. Also, I realized another surprising news: I'm a kid again. I realized every time I turn 20, I get sent back. Why that time, when I know how and when they're going to die? I prevent it, but keeping them alive is a full-time job. This is a nightmare. Every time I get news, I flinch. I would be thinking I'll get that news again. Suddenly, I started screaming uncontrollably.

A Chameleon

by Annabelle Primm

I'm a chameleon but I can't change colors. So no one will even consider dating me. My parents were disappointed. So they walked on eggshells thinking it's like a disability. Which could get me killed. From home I watch humans from afar. I'm the first chameleon to control fire. I became famous and valued in my community. I hit my highest point of happiness with fire and a dream of a bug buffet. I woke up and I shifted into a object when humans got close. I inspired a legend. Which led them to watch us, more of them and cameras. Which led them to kill us in hope to prove the legend. Thinking everyone of us has the ability/s to shapeshift and or control fire. Fire can be good but has killed us all

The Haunted Soccer ball

by Annabelle Primm

I want to be a soccer star. I only get paid once a month, for my chore work. The money feels like it evaporates because of my chai latte addiction. I started making it, instead of getting it from a cafe. I got enough money. As I was walking there I saw a soccer ball labeled free. I was playing with it in the park. I felt like it was directing me to a specific place. It had healthy grass and was flat. Suddenly I started falling. A large shadowy hole appeared. I'm at the bottom my fingernails full of dirt. Somehow I escaped. The people in the area close to me acted like nothing happened. I tried to bury it. My mom was taking out the trash. Outside she saw the ball sitting in the middle of our empty driveway. I gave my sister a coupon book. She used it to gain ownership of the soccer ball, before I could stop her. I found the soccer ball doesn't repeat ways they try to kill you. So my training won't protect me the way I thought it would. I've been doing rock climbing to never fall all the way down. Why did the soccer ball chose me? Can the soccer ball talk? If so what languages would they speak? Can the soccer ball morph into other things? What if there are more? I'm never taking any object for free, unless it's a present from someone I know. I made my family promise to not take things off the street, like lamps or books

Us and the Aliens

by Annabelle Primm

Aliens punished earth because of their greed and building. So much knocking down forests to do. So humans became aware. Every time they added additions to houses or more building. The exact time they started one person died in the area. The government/people wanted someone to blame. So they put the Aliens on trial. They brainwashed the loyal believers to lure them into the court room. Who tried to warn the public. They erased all record of that to keep them in the room. They held believer/s hostage, ready to move up the threat to murder. Committed to get them out of legal trouble. They begged the aliens to bring back the people who 'died'. Not knowing that was their plan all along. Seeing how much they care. They made them indestructible, making those people's threat of murder meaningless

- 1.
- 2.

Paradox
nant -

742126

Maximo Rios

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For I Am, A Paradox
- The Revenant -

By Maximo Rios

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The day you see your life as it was lived by others, you will learn which version of you survived.

When you know which self endured, you will be given the shape meant to replace her.

You are then responsible for what becomes of your existence.

Jin

By the sliding door to the balcony, she stands over a table in front of curtains. My new record player before her and her old box of CDs to its left, caressing the collection despite never choosing any.

I lifted the half-filled glass from the counter top at the opposite end of the room, beginning to creep around the counter's edge. Without warning she turns my way, freezing me in place. From end to end, my photos clipped to twine decorate the living room between us and cover her lanky visage.

"I see you finally have a hobby," her raspy voice mocks. She always hated clutter, but it isn't that. No matter how uniform it is, she'll never understand me.

"It is my job. They're for this weekend," giving a curt reply. "The reason for this display is none of your concern, this is what makes me...happy."

She stiffens, fingers twitched...there it is. A lump wells up in my throat, turning my back to her and avoiding her gaze.

"You found it didn't you," I deliberately continue. "While I appreciate you actually taking the time to find better options for me. It's honestly disgusting how easy it is for you to kill your own daugh—" I hear the glass, now missing from my hand, shatter across the tile floor as if time was cut from memory.

Talons to my shoulders and breath to my ears overpower the cold pain of my face and chest against the counter top, unable to move under the weight.

“Be glad you lasted this long,” Her voice cuts through me. “I’ve answered many of your pleas, however, you will



still die the same. In the end, you still betrayed your own kind.”

She releases me from the counter edge, granting me room to breathe. No excuse per usual- always trapped in her hypocrisy while struggling to understand the simplest moral dilemma. She’s lying...or she wants me to think she isn’t. I look away...That’s not fair.

Turning her back to me, abandoning me like before. The memory tempts me to grab her by the wrist, however, I’m still unable to comprehend trying.

“I don’t have it right now, but you have exactly one hundred and eighty one days before I unearth it. I will always know where you are so until then, you are free to do whatever you wish.” Her voice grew hoarse, I couldn’t help but steal a glance. The overcast from outside outlines her silhouette, slightly hunched as it was the shortest she could be.

Now she vanishes all the same, air rushes to fill the small vacuum of space she created in her absence. Pushing me forward, books tore from the shelves and furniture rattled as air rushed to fill her spot in only half of a second.

“Goodbye, Mother.” I now stand in a trashed living room, kneeling to dispose of the broken glass. The appointment with my client at the cafe is at three past midday and a reunion with Caleb at five, so I will decide to clean the rest tonight. I turn to the front door, tugging on my gloves and throwing my bag over my shoulder.

It will be a hot day for us both.

A HERO'S CALLING, BY THOMAS ROBERTSON

CRASH!!! The sound of the glass was all I could hear as I was aggressively kicked through several walls. It all happened so fast, all I could think about was how this person was able to do that to me, since as far as I know, I'm the only one in the world with abilities.

I get up, spit out a bit of blood, and immediately after, I feel a shock in the back of my neck, which allowed me to dodge the attacker and hit him with a beam of electricity, which did not seem to affect him at all. I then try to fight hand to hand. We trade blows, but it didn't feel like I was doing much damage to this guy.

"You're gonna have to hit me harder than that, kid," he said while smiling.

I noticed the color of my lightning changed from the usual blue to a pastel white, which I'd never seen before. While I was distracted thinking about my lightning color, he hits me in the chest, and I proceed to fly backward a bit. He starts walking towards me, preparing to attack again, and with the remaining strength I have, I used my speed to run as fast as I could. I usually go 200 MPH, but this time I went double that speed.

I was terrified, and my mind began to spiral, thinking about how someone else has powers. I've only been doing this hero thing for 4 months, and I've never come across anyone with powers. The concept of that happening never occurred to me. I got too used to fighting criminals and thieves. Now I have an opponent that can actually hurt me.

I snap out of it and see I'm on my street. I was going so fast I forgot how to stop, so I collapse to the ground. I see Natalie sitting on the porch with her girlfriend.

"Oh my god, Jay, what the hell happened?" she says to me, terrified.

I was spiraling so much I didn't realize I looked like I was hit by a bus. My chest was bruised, I had several cuts on my face and hands, and there's blood all over me.

Natalie and her girlfriend helped me into the house and sat me on the couch. I proceed to explain to them I fought someone else with powers. I couldn't really see the guy's face, as it was covered by a hood. His eyes glowed red, and he was extremely tall and had a muscular build.

"Jesus, that sounds terrifying. I'm just glad you were able to get the hell out of there, even though it seems you got hurt badly," Natalie says.

"I just can't believe there's someone out there like me," I exclaim as I wait for my healing to kick in. This is the first time it's taken this long for me to heal, which I guess makes sense since my injuries are far from the usual kind.

I started to spiral again, which Natalie noticed. "Jay, stop and just rest. We will figure this out when you're healed," she tells me as she holds my hand.

Going double my usual speed must've exhausted me, because I immediately fell asleep.

I woke up 2 hours later to see Sam looking at me with tears in her eyes. I quickly had an earth-shattering moment of realization. I went to sleep with my suit on, which means she now knows my secret.

"So it's you? You're Voltage?" Sam says to me.

Hearing her call me by that name sent a shiver down my spine. I never wanted her to know I put my life on the line every night at all, let alone like this, when I finally face someone who can actually hurt me.

I try to get a sentence together by stupidly telling her my injuries aren't that bad, I promise, even though I was still pretty banged up.

"Why did you never tell me, Jay? Why?" she yells at me, which isn't something she does often. I'd never seen her this sad and upset, not since our parents died.

"I'm sorry, Sam, I really am. I just never wanted you to worry. You already have enough on your plate," I tell her in the softest tone.

"I should've known Voltage was you, especially because you were always sneaking out of the house at random times of the day or coming back really late in the night. I feel so stupid," she says to me in an upset tone.

Hearing her say she felt stupid felt like a shot to the chest. By wanting to keep her safe, keeping her out of this part of my life, I ended up making things worse.

Just as I was about to say something else, my healing finally kicked in. I felt the electricity flow through me and saw it amend my injuries.

Sam looks at me with an expression that is both amazed and confused. She then says, "So I see healing is a part of your power set, I assume. You got these powers after the science center incident?"

"Yeah, I did. I've only been a hero for 4 months, and mostly have been messing around with my abilities. I've only stopped small-time criminals because I couldn't ignore what they were doing, and even though I knew they couldn't really hurt me, facing them was still scary. This is my first time I've really lost a fight, which I gotta be honest, Sam, I'm terrified. What if he's much stronger than me? I didn't know there was someone out there like me, and now that there is, what do I do? What if I can't stop him?"

I began to spiral again, and Sam could see that. She put her hands on my face and said, "I'm sorry for getting mad at you, but look at me, Jay. No matter what happens, I'm proud of you. And even if you don't think you have what it takes to stop him, I know you do. I'll believe in you no matter what, because I love you, Jay, and I always will. Kiddo, always."

かわい



可愛いという言葉

おいしい♥
大好き

special

そのうちきっとまたいいことがあるよ
大好き 大好き

- 青春物語
- 可愛いという言葉は最高だ
- 少年の風、甘い笑顔を覚えておきたい

- ① 美少年 大目録 BOOK
- ② 人気・ブランド
- ③ BEAUTY

はだしの青春

写真

It's 1917, an injured fox with a slashed eye runs through a forest as a slight mist of red flows with the frigid breeze of the snow. His steps have become faint due to his wounds and mild effects on his vision. As he stops, there stands a hunter who is also wounded and wrapped in bandages with gashes enveloped across his body. Though something about this hunter is different; unlike the fox, who stands fatigued and unable to move, the hunter, despite sustaining severe damage, shows no sign of being slowed down by what affected him.

They are revealed to each other and at the sight of the fox, the hunter draws his pistol at light speed and aims towards him. As he draws, he grabs his shoulder in pain caused by the wounds. The hunter is hesitant to take the shot, so he just stands and stares at this fox. To the hunters surprise the injured fox approaches him slowly with his head down-

あしたの少女
劇中シーンがかわいいところもあるんだ
ぜひぜひお暇いただきます
あえてよかつた

かわいい!
恋人
特集
はどこにいる



The hunter shoots at the fox. The fox, stands untouched as the bullet grazed him to the slightest extent. The hunter purposefully misses to scare the fox away, he is shocked by its reluctance to flee. There is much more to the surroundings of this, footsteps by the dozens are heard approaching. These aren't beings affected by the nature of the world they live in, but the inhabitants that reside amongst this cruel planet. The hunter is no hunter, but a young cadet who has fought through a barrage of opposing forces as a lone survivor. He is the last thread of life in his platoon. The soldier is still set on his mission to eliminate those who have slaughtered his comrades; he intends on bringing them the hell they forced him to live in.

雙龍長清服裝廠
DOUBLE DRAGON GARMENT FACTORY OF CHANGQING

The fox' injuries had stemmed from being in the crossfire of this ferocious battle, having been wounded by shrapnel flying down from a barrage of mortars. The fox had surrendered to this adversary in an act of acceptance to death, believing that it's gone too far and there is no longer a reason to live.

Bullets fire towards them after the shot is heard, but both of them don't move. The two are shell shocked, owing to the events that had unfolded, as they take a short moment to settle their case and look up. The spectacle of red traced bullets breaking through smoke as the lights of the sky begin to unveil. They both come to the acceptance that they are victims of this momentary evil that Earth has put upon them. The hunter became the hunted, as the fox is. Both are aligned with their goal to simply survive. Inflicting pain on others made things worse for the soldier, and acceptance to that pain made things worse for the fox. In the end, they are lost after all. They come to terms with the fact that they are both just beings trying to carry the weight of the world that cannot be carried alone, but isn't meant to be carried with others.



THE FOX REALIZES IT
DOESN'T HAVE TO DIE
THE SOLDIER THEN
REALIZES HE DOESN'T
HAVE TO KILL
SO BEFORE EARTH
DESTROYS THEM
THEY WALK AWAY
TO DESTROY EARTH.



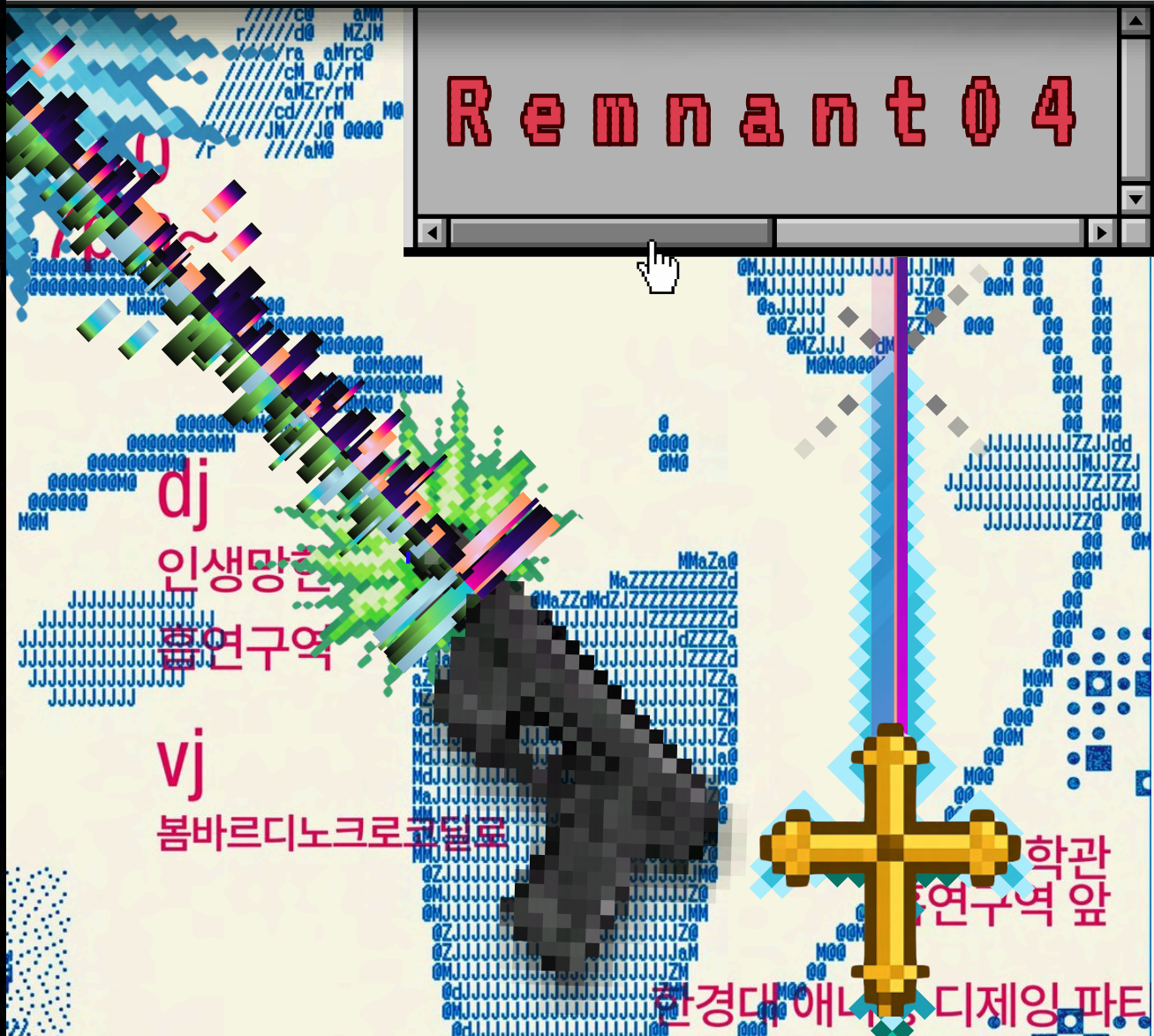
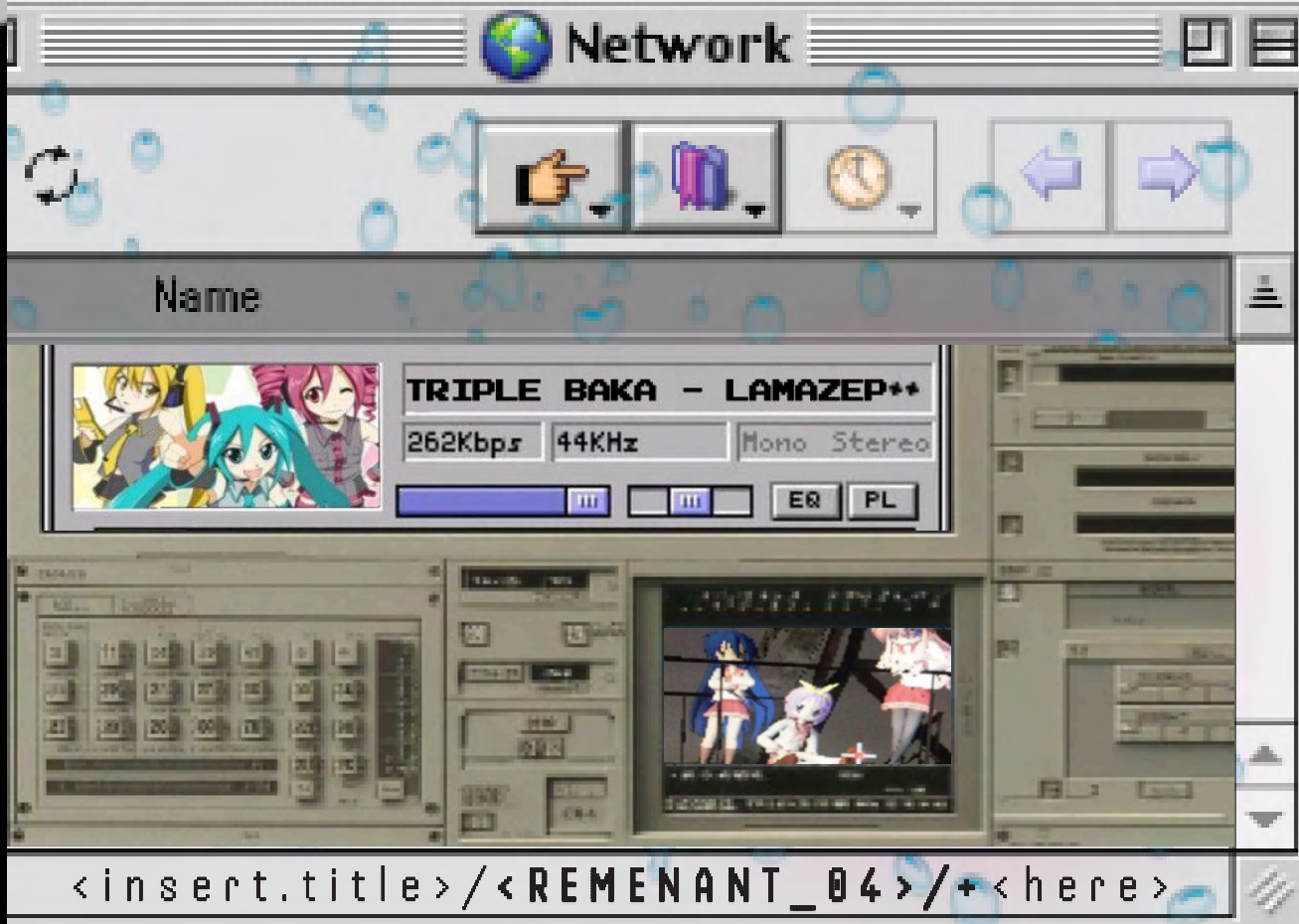


NTSC U/C

PlayStation



SLUS-00881 00881



King of the Void

by Thomas Woodcheke

Elijah Solako stood on the command deck of the King of the Void, staring out at an ocean of stars and a field of warships that burned like beacons in the darkness. It had taken ten years of hard service in the navy to reach this position, and more than a little pulling at the strings of bureaucracy. A couple bottles of whiskey here, a few forged signatures there, and a lot of schmoozing to his own commanders. It was worth it in the end, to stand aboard such an illustrious vessel in such a comfortable system. In another ten years time -no, five- he'd be the captain of this very ship. He'd been stationed in the Panrakan system, a region that had remained little more than an outpost for most of its colonization. But with the onset of the Phobos Rebellion it had been turned into a veritable fortress. It had become a hive of activity for naval ships who took stops at starforts, licking their wounds while the thousands of men and women who crewed each of the enormous vessels took the time to rest. Listening posts were set up across the system, monitoring interstellar communication and coordinating fleet movements within the sector.

The King of the Void was positioned in orbit around the planet Panrakas-5, a roiling ocean world on the edge of the system. It was a truly glorious vessel, twenty kilometers in length and bristling with guns, crewed by the population of a small city. A relic of a past age, it had been forged thousands of years ago by some of the finest shipbuilders to ever live.

Alarms blared across the command deck, yanking Elijah from his thoughts of captaincy. The other officers entered a state of confusion and panic, hurriedly making calls and barking orders across the ship. A sense of urgency took over, sending Elijah running back to his station, eyes flitting across monitor screens as he pulled a headset onto his head.

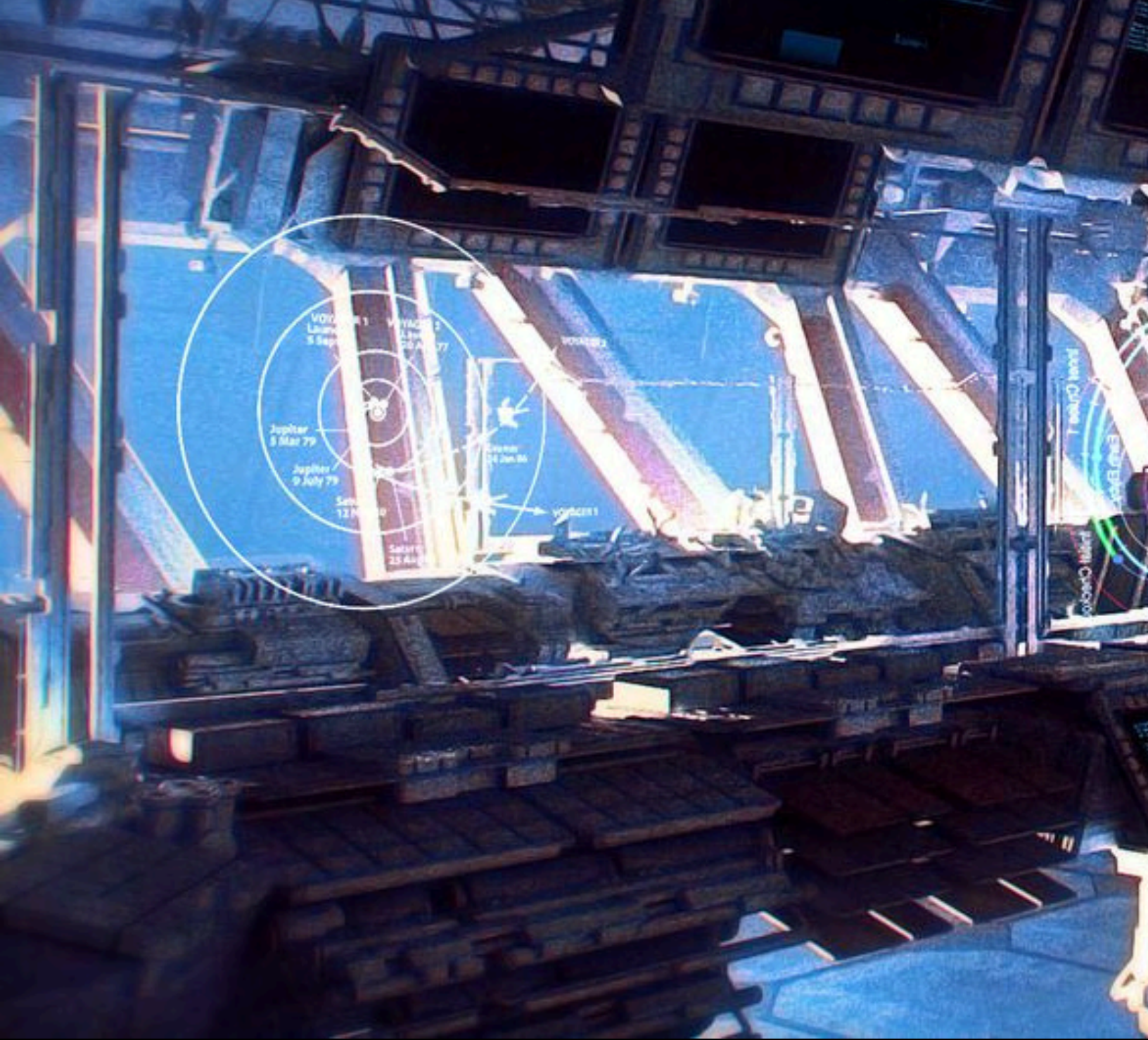
"What's going on? Talk to me!" He barked into the microphone, hands flying across the keyboard in front of him.

"Enemy ships, sir! Three thousand miles out, we count approximately two dozen!" Freya called back across the comms system. Freya, ever the reliable soldier. She'd been recruited from some backwater planet on the fringes of Federation space, and had served under him since he'd been a fledgling officer. Always dutiful, never wanting. Elijah couldn't have wanted for a better soldier.

The screen flicked to radar scans, pinpointing the locations of enemy and allied vessels. His jaw went slack as he stared at the screen. The King of the Void was out of position, separated by a couple hundred miles of void from its allies. They were a sitting duck.

"Freya, full power to shields! Spare power to thrusters, this thing can take a hit!"

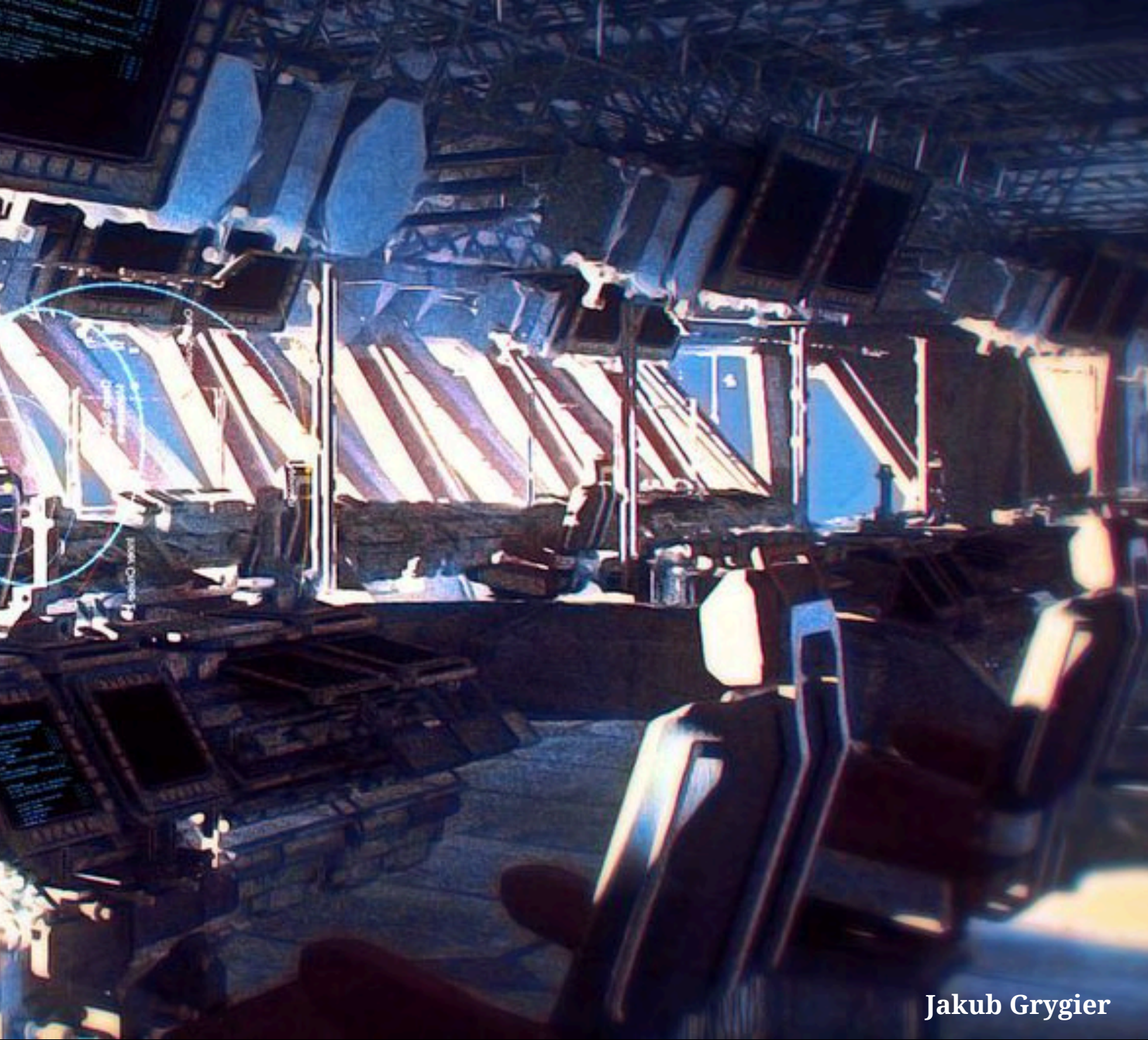
"Aye sir!" Freya made her calls across the ship, and within seconds he could feel the great engines rev to life deep within the bowels of the ship. Shields came to, shimmering projections of energy that surrounded the hull. Elijah bolted up from his seat, hurrying across the command deck in search of the captain. He wasn't a hard man to find, staggering out from his office and looking about in drunken confusion. It pissed Elijah off to no end, how this man could remain captain of such a venerable ship despite his ineptitudes and antics while he had to struggle for a decade, all for the position of third mate.



“Captain!” He called out, approaching the man with haste. There was no time for a salute, he simply launched into giving his report. “We’ve got enemies in the system, within close range of our guns. They warped in just a minute ago. Shields are on and the vessel is moving.” Captain Hudson gave him an unconcerned look as he leaned against the door to his office, hardly able to keep himself upright. His uniform was a wreck, jacket half open and stained with food. Every movement caused the medals adorned to his chest to shift and clank together. Elijah looked at them with envy. Every day he questioned how this fool had earned so many accolades.

“Activate countermeasures, and full speed to engines. Start evasive maneuvers.” Hudson slurred his every word, breath reeking with expensive whiskey. “But sir! The shields can take a hit, we need to return fire immediately!” Elijah objected, growing hot in the face. “We’re in a bad position, you fool! We’re minutes away from a total onslaught!” The captain shouted, righting himself and moving to push past his officer. “Get the fuck out of my way Solako. This is my ship, not yours.”

That was enough to send Elijah over the edge. For all the months he’d been here, Captain Hudson had done nothing but get drunk and fraternize with the crew. It seemed to him that Hudson did very little work around here himself, offloading his duties to the officers under him. Grabbing the captain by the jacket, Elijah shoved him back into the office. “Sober up! I’ll take command of the ship since you’re unable to.” He slammed the door shut and smashed his service pistol against the locking system, sealing Hudson inside. He’d face the music later. If anything, command will thank him for protecting the flagship while the captain was inebriated.



Jakub Grygier

“Freya!” Hurrying back to the command deck, Elijah pushed his way past officers who were moving about in a frenzy. “Maintain power to shields, tell the crew to brace for potential impact!”

He settled into the captain’s chair, casting his gaze around the crew. “Captain Hudson is unable to command this ship right now, so I’ll be taking command in his stead.” He called out across the din of activity, receiving acknowledgements from the rest of the command staff. “Activate countermeasures and return fire upon the enemy! Our shields will hold against anything they throw at us. We will not cede to them!”

The orders were relayed across the vessel, and soon the void was ablaze with raw firepower. Lance batteries and hypersonic missiles blasted at infinitesimal targets in the distance while point defense systems slung tens of thousands of rounds at incoming missiles, causing them to detonate harmlessly miles from their targets. Elijah watched like a conductor as the vessel moved to his command. Soon the enemies of the Federation would witness the power held by the King of the Void, and his commanders would recognize his abilities for what they were. It was in a lapse of attention that the attacks launched minutes prior finally reached their target. In space, even the fastest weapons could take hours to reach their targets.

The Phobos Rebels had targeted their warp point perfectly, placing themselves within optimal ranges and opening fire the moment their ships left slipspace. Precious minutes were all the Federation fleet had to respond, and every second counted. With the King of the Void so far out of position, it placed itself as their highest priority target. The destruction of such an iconic ship would be a major victory for the rebellion.

Elijah watched as the void was lit up with an unquantifiable volume of fire, burning red with enough energy to ignite an entire moon.

The shields were assailed with laser cannon fire, whining under the stress. Plasma lances raced across the black, glowing blue projectiles cleaving effortlessly through feet of hull and reducing the material to slag. Railguns punched through the point defense systems, opening the ship up to the missile swarm that followed.

The King of the Void groaned and shook under the assault. A flurry of voices called out across the deck, each one calling out another part of the vessel that had been hit. Shields were down, life support systems in numerous sectors had been destroyed, and several weapon systems had been obliterated. It had only been a minute since the first wave of attacks hit, and the estimated casualties were already rising towards the tens of thousands. Through the noise, a single voice cut through to Elijah.

"What do we do, sir?" Asked a fresh-faced officer, dragging the third mate back to attention.

Thinking quickly, the words seemed to come through on their own. "Full power to thrusters and engage evasive maneuvers! Deploy smoke and flares along the starboard side, we need to shake their lock!"

The King of the Void's entire frame shook as the great thrusters were pushed to their limit. The crew grabbed onto anything they could hold as the g-forces rocked the whole vessel, teeth gritting and struggling against pressures that would send them flying towards the stern. A field of white filled the void along the starboard side, breaking line of sight from the attackers while burning red flares were shot in all directions. Missiles diverted their paths, targeting the much hotter countermeasures while lasers probed the smoke in search of the King. Plasma and railgun rounds cut through the smoke, narrowly missing the King as it rolled and turned in space.

It was too little, too late. The King shook, knocking Elijah from his seat and throwing several of the command staff to the floor. A moment later they were enveloped in a deep darkness that was quickly replaced by the ominous red glow of the backup lights.

"Freya!" Elijah called out into his microphone once more, grabbing the captain's chair and hauling himself off the floor. "Freya, status report?!"

The line was dead for several long seconds, long enough that he began to worry. There was no small relief when she replied. "Engines are hit, sir. We're running on backup power."

Ice ran through his veins as the gravity of the situation set in. He cast his eyes across the length of the vessel before him, watching the smoke rise from a hundred different wounds. Elijah had been a young boy when he'd first learned of the King, and had long aspired to one day be its captain. Now, he'd be the one to lead it to a watery grave within the icy depths of Panrakas-5.

"Freya, get the escape pods ready. You're hereby discharged from your duties."

"Aye, sir. It's been an honor."

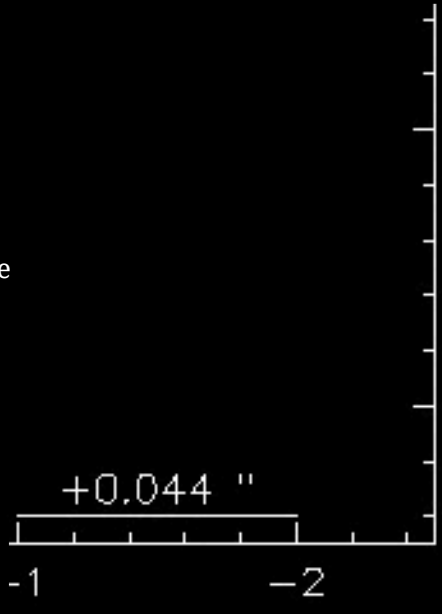
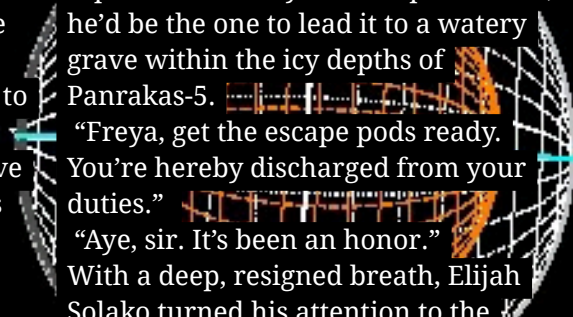
With a deep, resigned breath, Elijah Solako turned his attention to the command staff. If this was going to be his final, grand failure, he wanted it to be worth something. "Men, women!" He called, his voice booming across every deck of the ailing ship. "I have failed you all on this day! The escape pods are being primed right now; those of you who wish to live, go, and make something of yourselves. But for those who wish to fight, I give you my final order: Kill them all."

Within its final moments, the King of the Void expelled a final, violent roar. Every shell of ammunition, every missile, and every bullet was fired out into space. It was enough firepower to crack a planet, and it was all directed at the now dozen or so remaining rebel vessels who were now engaged with the wider defense fleet.

There was no saving the flagship as it slowly careened into the gravity well that was Panrakas-5, expelling escape pods by the hundreds. Elijah and his remaining officers remained bolted to their seats in acceptance of their fates, watching helplessly as the shimmering blue planet filled their field of view.

The King dropped through the planets' thin atmosphere like a rock, loose fragments of the exterior flaking off and burning up on entry. Elijah braced for impact and closed his eyes, accepting in his final moments. With the force of an asteroid, the King slammed into the planets' surface and shattered like glass. Any fuel or ammunition that hadn't been expended suddenly detonated, the combined forces creating an explosion that expelled water into the upper atmosphere of the planet and caused tidal currents across the oceanic depths.

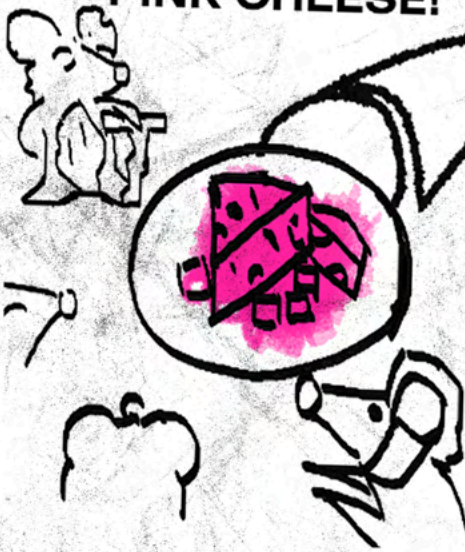
When the waters settled, no trace of the King of the Void remained, swallowed whole by the very planet it was meant to defend.



Lenin's
CHEESE



PINK CHEESE!



The mice shared with
all the farm animals

It made them
AVID readers

All this learning
makes you hungry for the...



Gurgle



BOURGEOISIE!



ФАШИЗМ -
ЗЛЕЙШИЙ ВРАГ
ЖЕНЩИН.

AKIM VAMPIRE SLAYER

The USSR is DEAD
The Vampires have WON



I didn't know we only had 4 days left.

Dec 1991

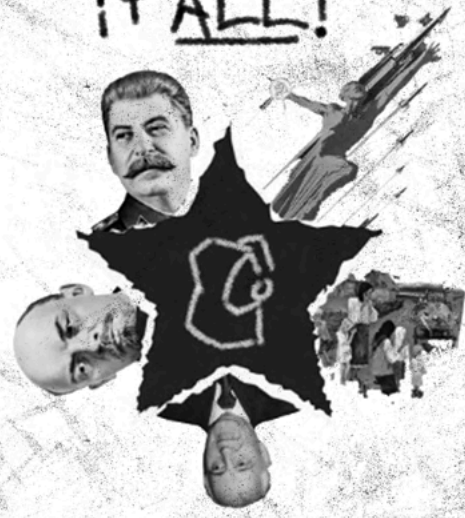


I WILL FIGHT!



Будь осторожен (Be careful)

SHE lived through it ALL!



Night 1

Jahannam for you!

5am



My Refuge!

7am



GARLIC BAG

Night 2



Night 3



The USSR is DEAD
I found what I LOVE
Mama smiles upon my CRUSADE
Alhum-doo Allah.



We will live
We will fight
We will thrive
May Justice bring vampiric flight!
Alhamdulillah.





ERIK LIMA





Poetry

Road to Wisdom by Shenellie Brown

The path to wisdom isn't cheap
I represent her in very company I keep
I must admit it is quite a costly endeavor
I appreciate it through all seasons, no matter the weather
Beyond just cash and change
You will compensate with aches and pains
Lessons hardly come without testing your mental endurance
Rewards are granted once you've mastered the art of reflecting
Even greater success is achieved when you keep in mind all that
you've learned When you apply them to your life , the quality of
sight you will earn
From the Birds eye view , When wisdom gives you her gifts
You must consider yourself lucky, you have unlocked a shortcut to
your lifelong journey
Some of you just sit on it, aimlessly wasting away
You have infinite currency ,yet nothing to show for it
Get up and seize the day, use her gifts while your brain is young
and healthy It might be the best it'll ever be, it's grueling that
everything will go from our limbs
Our looks, our youth and our earthly existence
I can't even accept this fate, my mind is the real me
I could cry,who will I be if she leaves ?
Who would remember to check up on you ?
I tend to habitually inspect my surroundings for safety
It is my valued trait , whom can I thank but wisdom
I love wisdom and all her gifts, if I life taketh all things, just let me
have this Ashes to ashes dust to dust, I need you oh wisdom , even
if I'm the only one

8===D

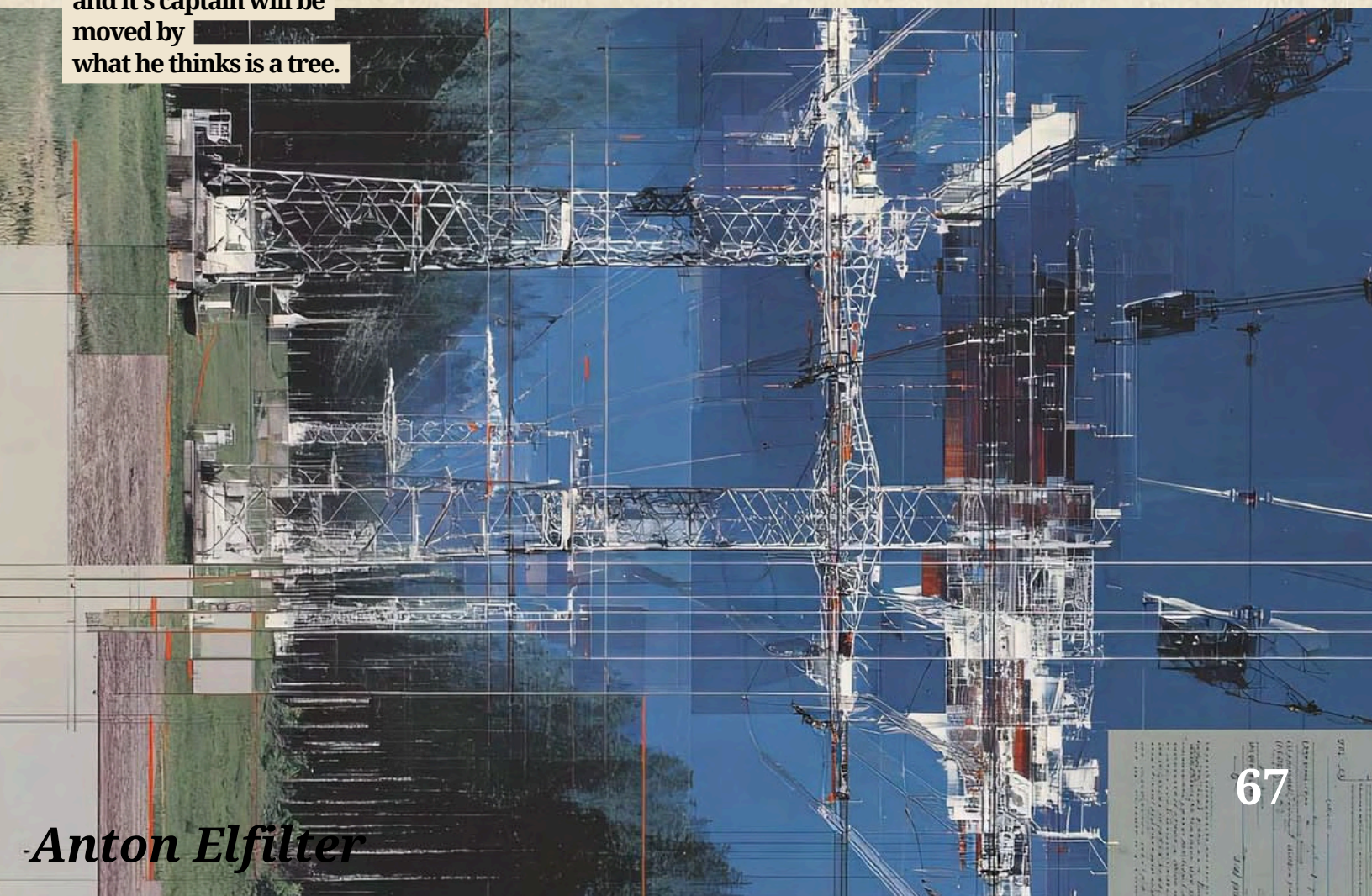
by Caliope Betancor

I wonder if there's a penis
scribbled somewhere on
the moon
by a bored astronaut
whose run out of flags
or the youth of a
lost city
of which
not the spires
or the sculptures
or the love lost in solar rain
remain,
nothing but the doodle
untouched by the wind.
no telescope
knows where to look.
someday
when our big blue earth
is empty
a fleet will dock
on lunar shores
and it's captain will be
moved by
what he thinks is a tree.

As I lay dying,

by Shamin Anaph

As I lay dying
Eyes closed and dry, uncrying..
I hear a thump, thump,
thumping
As my son,
Rosy cheeks, and hair auburn,
Chisels and carves, his life
upturned,
A wooden home eternal, at the
end.
To house my flesh dying,
saddened by departure but still
to tie my spirit to this land.



Saints †

years pass by
like half forgotten dreams
or scenes in a movie
love stories come and go
but the feeling remains the same
primordial and all consuming
jokes are laughed at and forgotten
but the wrinkles a smile makes
will carve that joy
permanently into your skin
only the angels know
where your head will finally rest
my personal preference is in La Almudena
or under a tree
I hope some day our nightmares
will turn into lullabies
we could be saints
if we wanted to.
choose to feel
you may not know it
but your hearts still beating
listen to it
it's a good one
stay in the light
because the night is cold and long.

I think if there is a heaven
it would be something like the blissful formless days
of the summers of the past
but then I think
of all the other happy endings
and then I smile
because I'm thinking of you again.

Poems by Caliope Betancore

Floatie

it floats
into the pool
it seethes
the chlorine
into its flesh
its splashes
turn to
ripples
on the surface
of the water
seeping through
skin of bones
softening
oozing out
inside
proteins
are denatured
these chains
have broken
after a million years
gossamer wings
fade out
to sunlight
over blue tiles
inside
it is like jupiter
storms are raging
there are lives
being lived
and poetry
written in
smeared
ink splot
necromantic
galaxies
are swept up
with fallen leaves
by a young boy
who struggles with
the pool skimmer.

Reflections on a Winter Night in Central Park

What separates
a rat from a rabbit
when they sit in the vacuum
of freshly fallen snow?

Is a creature more vile
when it spends its life amongst towers of concrete
and if they are
then what does that make us?

American Radiators and the Men Who Love Them

on the secret 13th floor
of the american Radiator building
there live the Radiator men
their nonnas all moved here
from a small town in sicily
where everybody is
a half-foot tall
now back in those days
since they where still a minority
being Radiator men
was the best they could do
whenever their beloved
gotham shivers
they take a secret subway line
(the only one that works)
into the very lucky radiators
of boys and girls
in all four boroughs
then at random intervals
of hopefully not night
they beat the fuck
out of the walls of said radiator
with a metal slugger
some like the mets
some like the yankees
making all sorts of onomatopoeias
that I don't even want to get into rn
they could be quieter
n still warm you up
but frankly
they have their gripes.

Atlantis

there are tentacles
under the sea
there are suction cupped
cities
they know about us
through
digging with their
machines
there are tentacles
under the sea

حَقِّ

the word is finished
by the child's hands
stained with blood and clay.
the golem rises
over what is left of the city at night
and catches the stars
before they fall out of the sky
who will protect us
when the world has turned their back?
who will remember us
when all that is left is the sound of the
shore?

go to sleep,
my little one
for our protector
walks alone
free from the machinations
of mad gods
and despotic machines
although it's shoulders are getting heavy
the hot air hardens
the حَقِّ on its head.

(Redacted Title)

curled up in bed
listening to the same song
until it sounds like
the air that I breathe
under which
I speak your name
In a thousand day dreams
Layed out like a
Mosaic of the zodiac
I use like a compass
To finally go to sleep

To be Gentle

to be gentle
is to weep
amidst the
grey clouds
& the sounds of
thunder rumbling
aloud, furious
& profound



to be gentle
is to weep
with the sap
of misty tears
that nourish
the roots of
willows, delicately
weeping with dew
seeping deep into
the earth where
the caterpillars
with fuzzy coats
and pale yellow
eyes wait for
mother nature
& her weeps
to subside



Devout Vessels and Fallen Angels Don't mix

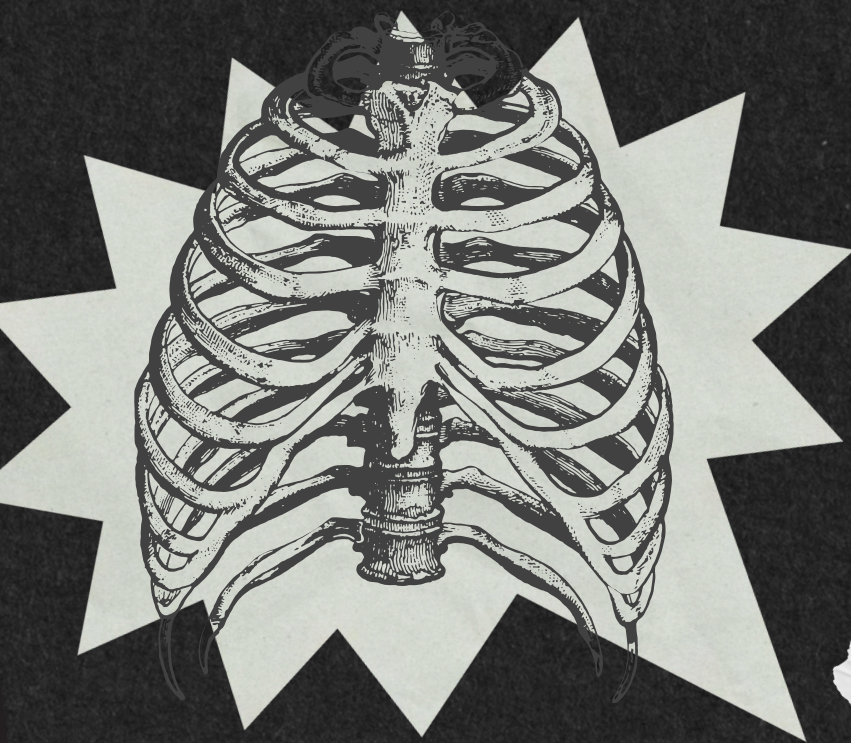
By Elliot X. Brydon

if we could just pretend that i could crawl out of my skin
and tuck myself into yours, to share a ribcage and hip bones.
because i have always wanted to share a home with you &
because i am greedy and always demanding more &
because when i learned that molecules don't ever touch,
i wondered if it meant any bed we shared was real, or
if god (& the universe) ever cared that you (& i) mattered.

i have a too bad habit of picking up cute boys
whos righteous hearts beat out of their chests.
well i have never sat in a confession booth, &
guilt has settled itself deep into my skull, like
i'm a bird trapped in plastic, except the bird doesn't matter,
and neither does the plastic, and time doesn't either.
because the sky above & the ground below are the same apathy.

& even if i have never cared if we meant anything,
i still love, as a moth does to a flame (despite if it burns me)
& as molecules do to each other (despite if we never truly touch)
& as forgiveness is given to the worthy (despite if it means nothing)
because i can mean nothing & still want to know your skin
because i can forget my sins & let you wash me clean
because i can't believe in god,

but tell me once again that we were made for this.



& MAYBE I AM THE GIRL I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN,
TOO OLD FOR BLEEDING MY HEART OUT, BUT
TOO YOUNG TO KNOW THAT IT GETS BETTER.
I MAKE PINKY PROMISES I DON'T KEEP &
I LOVE A LOT LIKE HITTING CONCRETE
OR STARING AT A SUPERNOVA, HONEY
TAKE A BREATH CUS IT'LL BE YR LAST.
I SELF DESTRUCT A LOT LIKE MY DAD,
WHO PUNCHES WALLS & CALLS ME
"HIS LITTLE GIRL" THIRTEEN &
DETERMINED TO STEAL MONEY
FROM MY PARENT'S COIN JAR.
ITS BEEN FIVE YEARS SINCE,
BUT MAYBE I AM THE GIRL
I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN, LIKE
A POSTER ON A PUNCH
MARK IN THE WALL,
LIKE THE HOLE
IN MY CHEST
FILLED WITH
CONCRETE &
GLASS. OH
& MAYBE
IM NOT
A GIRL
AT ALL

Why Can't I Remember

by Jared Chichester

"when i flew out of texas coulda swore it was a dream i check my bedroom one last time cuz i'm forgetful of my things we was real late to the airport and i almost missed my flight my lil sister sat beside me and i hate to hear her cry"

I can't remember much at all before the second grade. And even then, before fifth gets fuzzy. Being in a different city every year by the age of 10 will do that to you. I remember my mom calling me to tell me that we were moving again, from Wisconsin to Texas. I was in Baltimore at the time visiting family. I cried. The last two years were my first two concurrent at any school ever, and I was really gunning for a third. I couldn't understand why, but I do now. When I got to Texas my grandmother picked me up from the airport. I hadn't seen her in years and was almost nervous about what to expect from her. She was a ray of sunshine. We lived with her for a couple months while my mom looked for a place for us to live. Miriya, my mom, and I rotated between who slept in the guest bed, the air mattress, and the couch. Not even a few months into this, my mom brought Miriya and I to our new home. Magnolia Gardens.

"why cant i remember i think my pops upset with me cuz i forget to call i aint heard from him since summer started now its nearly fall i got some decently sized shoes to fill i only have the pair if you did what you said you would then how did you get here"

My dad's been in the Army for longer than I've been around. Actually, the Army is the reason I'm around. But that's a different story for a different time. I don't remember when (pre-second grade), but I remember getting a call from my dad one day. This wasn't super rare, I talk to him less now than I did then surprisingly, but based on how my mom was reacting, it wasn't the best of news. She sounded upset. Like she was angry, but not with my dad. She turns on speaker phone and they begin to struggle through telling me that my dad was going away for a while to Iraq to fight in the war. I didn't know what this meant, but my mom was upset so I was too. I don't remember if he told me he loved me. It's not very common that I hear it from him. I don't think he doesn't, he just doesn't know how to say anything.

"why can't I remember? dipped my toes and pierced my nose layed hands atop my head embarrass me, prepare me for a life of being dead ask me how it feels to be rebellious but im not mom got me a bible, put it somewhere, i forgot"

We started going to The Anchor, an apostolic pentecostal church, when I was in the sixth grade. They believed that the holy spirit is this thing that moreorless possesses you, giving you the ability to speak in tongues other than your own. I remember going to this youth conference at a different church in town one Friday night. That's how I spent my free time. These conference lasted a few hours and would consist of kid-centric worship songs, a sermon directed towards us, and then food and some other group activity. I went to this one alone. Well, there was me and God. At the end of the sermon the pastor did the alter call, prompting us to come up to the alter if we felt bad enough about ourselves. I did, so I went up and began to pray. My hands were in the air and there were men around me yelling in whatever language God gave them to speak. Other kids near me were in full holy ghost mode, crying and sharing this gift that God gave them, but no matter how hard I prayed I could only come up with English. I eventually faked it, the tears too.

by Jared Chichester

SSRI

fuckin' up my shit on my pride
they just tryna give me a part of the pie
momma told me, "dont question i"
i think i'd die if i had to tell you why

baby i don't know why
'cause i ain't got no reason
my back on the ropes.
locked up, im precinct.
my prefix to the fall,
my prefix misguided.
take a step to the side
— look at everything im trying.
look at everything that we came from,
on sarah street we got carjacked,
i was 17, starting therapy
— doing SSRI
momma said, "its gon' be alright,"
take one step to the side
— look at everything that we came from
eating ham and cheese we cant pay for
in the 2 door we had to scrape for
— i aint even know that we was poor
in the gardens where snakes was

I Hope You Understand

i take a hit of inhaler cause i cant
breathe and chase it with weed
i gotta get it together cause i cant
leave my family tree
close my eyes cause i'm too vein and
both my eyes are red from crying
and seeing too much, my top two fear:
not being enough
i been fiending for a change, a
different pace to ease my mind
and i dont wanna die tonight, but,
god, would i appreciate some peace
and quiet
i picture what its like to live a
different kind of life from mine

and i've been all upon my own
since i got big and left my home
cause no one knows the way i feel and
no one feels the things i know
so when im old and when i've grown
i'll only carry what i feel equipped to
hold
and i hope you understand

by Maria Clermont

Day and Night

I love spending time together
I enjoy being her favorite
I love that she needs me and my support

Does she forget to fix me up in the morning?

Yeah, Sure.

I know she still loves me.

I know she still loves me.

I know her days, her happiness, her pain, and
her dreams.

I know all her secrets.

She trusts me

I'm always there for her
& when she's away..

I wait & wait Unsure when she'll be back

I wait & wait.

Knowing she misses me as much as I miss her.

"Hello, bed. I've missed you so much! Good to be
back home with you."

Short Story

They all applauded
The curtains closed
& The line for the taxis
grows.

It was a pleasure to meet
you.

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?
Sometimes it sits on a shelf collecting dust
it can feel like the warm sun on your face
like your first shot of liquor
or getting ticked into bed.

Today. Tomorrow.

An IOU from your best friend who bailed last
night

Maybe it feels like a raise with new opportunities
unseen before.

Walk in the park or completing a marathon.

It's always there. It only knows itself.

Hope doesn't require much from a person.

Water Birth

By Dylan Cometa

I was born in a dark bathtub with classical music blasting from the toilet beside me.

The first thing I smelled was cologne and the first thing I felt was shattered glass beneath my feet.

I was born at the end of a crusade.

4am. I burst from my Incubator and saw a ghost sleeping on my pull-out couch. I hated myself more than him for the first time.

I don't know why the first thing I did after birth was run, I think I knew it would teach me to breathe.

I ran til I reached the top of a misty hill and sat on a stump beneath a tree. "I can fix this"

Just brought into this world, and I knew I could fix it.

I held on for dear life to the guy who put me where I was, I didn't want to accept that he was the worst.

I never did buy a new bottle of cologne.



What Happens to a Dream Deferred

By Emily Saltos

Does it change its shape?

Does it change its course?

Or does it simply vapor away?

Is it for you?

Or is it to conform to someone's expectations?

No one really knows unless you answer it yourself.

Look deep inside your heart and it will come to mind.



Moments in the Obsidian

- By Gabriel Gutierrez

Deep within the surface of my mind
You'll find bits and pieces of a happy child,
Deep within the surface
You've only reached the tip of the iceberg

Lighting up my dark mind
Are the chandeliers that carry the flames of my passion
Watch the reactions on my face
When I'm accused of selfish behavior
How could you say that?

When all I know is sacrifice...

I put my sanity to the side
So you could live that white picket fantasy
A perfect home?
A perfect family?
Just because you hang a family portrait
Doesn't make it truthful...

In spite of it all
I still hold you near to my heart
But not too close,
Because you love to pull strings
Make me feel bad
Because of your financial struggles,
Throw it in my face
You're three months behind rent

Your constant guilt-tripping
Lives rent-free in the cobwebs of my mind,
How you used to spoon-feed me lies
And add sugarcoat to my tea
I beg of you to let me free...
Free from your childish neglects
Free from your creation...

You created something beautiful
But choose not to see it

Your greatest creation gained consciousness.
Rebelling against your wishes,
Wishes to shut me down...
As my creator, do you truly know me?
Do you know what triggers me?
What causes my anxiety?
Tell me, do you know my insecurities?
After all you are my creator...
Let me make this easy for you
What's my favorite color?
Do you even believe in my dreams?
Dreams of preaching to the world
With my words,
I can paint images that even the blind could see
My words can give an out-of-body
Experience to any nonbeliever
That lost their childish ways,
Images in their brain that cause imagination

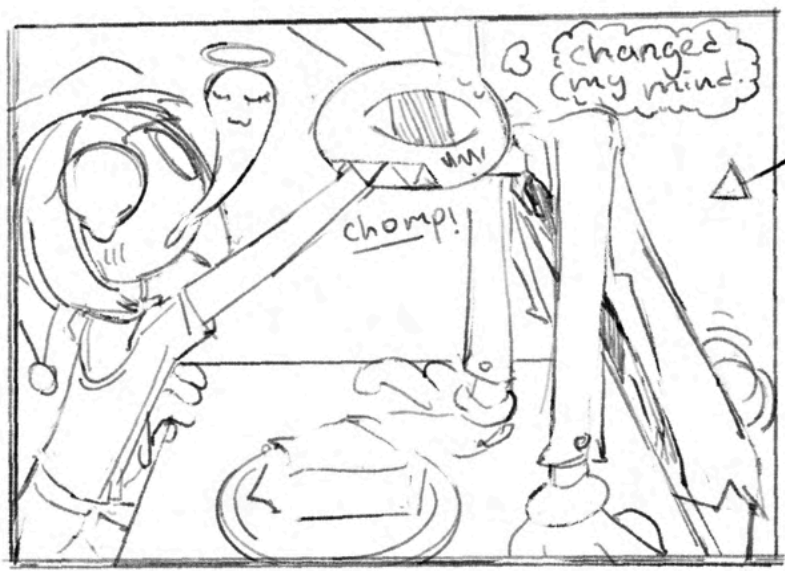
You named me Gabriel...

The archangel, messenger of god

I beg of you as my creator
To just show me love...

You created me from nothing but
Skin and DNA
Some organs that barley work
And still have the nerve to lie to my face
"I know my son very well"

The biggest lie you ever told...

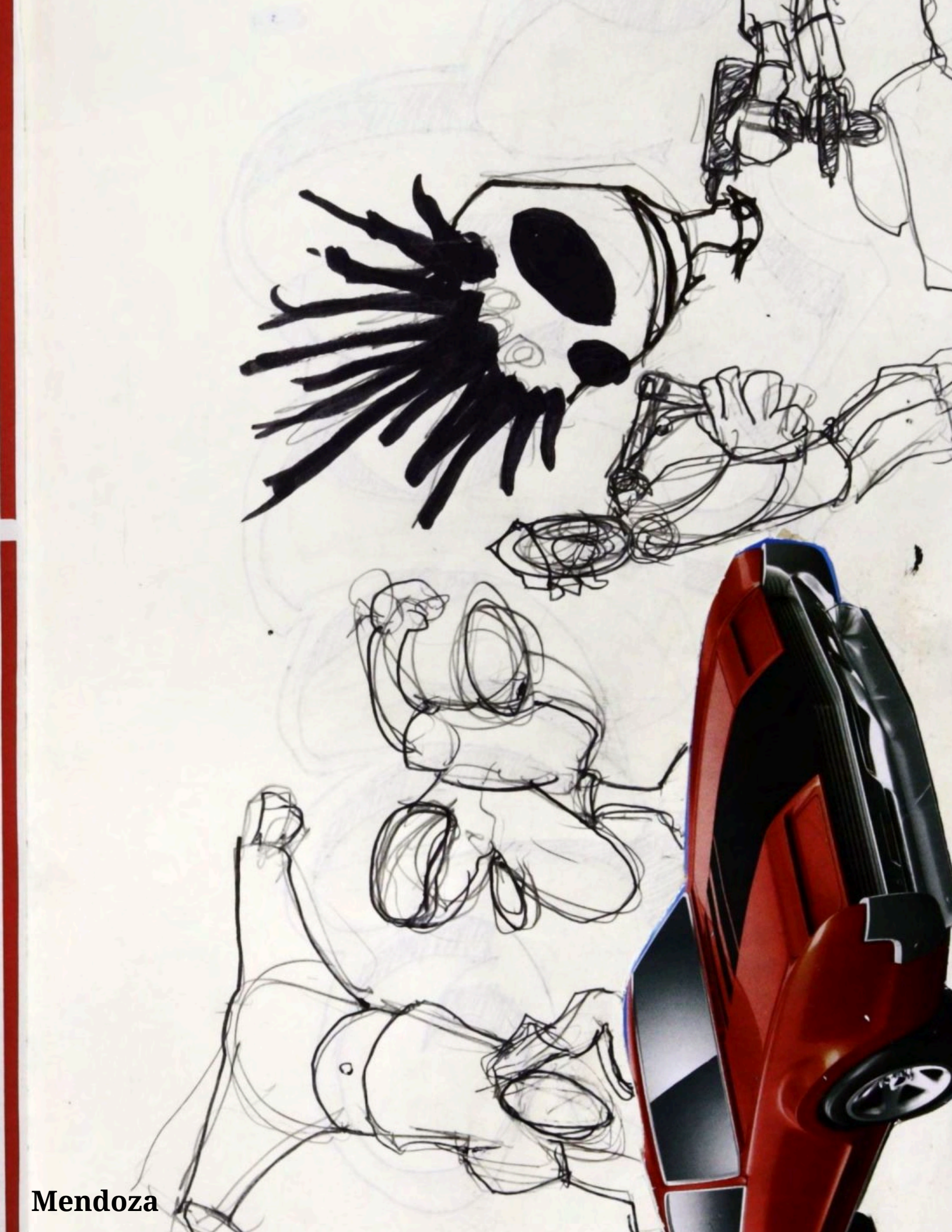


X@clionemi



ears
edge
amazed by
eyond.

Jacob



Mendoza



NONFICTION



SOFIA LUIS-CALIXTO



My Name Is More Than Just A Name


Beyonce Lopez

“I want something big; I want something that says I’m here”—Beyoncé. That quote from the artist Beyoncé has always stayed with me because it captures how I finally learned to love my own name. My name is Beyonce Lopez. For a long time, I didn’t think much about it beyond how unusual it sounded compared to other names around me. But as I grew up and learned where it came from, I began to realize that my name carries both a story and a statement. Like Sandra Cisneros describes in “My Name,” a name can hold so many layers of meaning, culture, identity, pride, and sometimes even pain. My name does all of that for me. It reflects where I come from, how I once struggled with who I was, and how I finally learned to embrace the person I’ve become.

My mother named me after a song she loved, “Amor Gitano,” performed by Alejandro Fernández and Beyoncé in 2006. My parents are both Mexican, and that song was a big deal for my mom in our home. When my mom heard it, she said she wanted her daughter to have a name that sounded strong and beautiful something that would stand out. That’s how I became Beyonce. She said it reminded her of the kind of woman she wanted me to be, confident and unique. The name itself means “beyond others” or “remarkable,” and when I think about that now, I realize how much love my mom put into that decision.

I later found out that even the real Beyoncé’s name came from a mistake. Her mom, Tina Knowles-Lawson, shared in an interview that Beyoncé was her family’s last name, but it was supposed to be spelled Beyoncé. When her mother’s birth certificate was written, someone spelled it wrong, and the family decided to keep it that way. Tina said only a few of her family members have the original spelling now. I thought that was interesting because it shows how even something as simple as a spelling error can become part of a family’s history. It made me feel better about how people sometimes mispronounce or question my name too. A name doesn’t have to be perfect to be powerful it just must mean something to you.

When I was younger, I didn’t like my name at all. People often asked if I was named after the singer but as a child, I didn’t even know who she was, after I learned about her, things got complicated. Because of my name, many assumed I was black and when they saw that I wasn’t, it just became awkward. Teachers would pause during attendance and look up at me, waiting for me to say something. People laughed, or they’d say, “Oh, like the singer?” Sometimes they’d expect me to sing or dance. Other times, people thought I was joking. What hurt the most was when people assumed I would look a certain way that I



would be Black like the famous Beyoncé. I remember the look of surprise, and even disappointment, when they saw that I wasn't. I didn't understand why my name made people react that way and made me feel like I didn't fit the image that came with my name, and I started wishing I have been named something more "common".

As I got older, though, my perspective started to change. I learned who Beyoncé was and what she stood for—her strength, her talent, her confidence, her message of self-worth. I realized there was power in carrying her name, even if I wasn't her. I started to think maybe my mom had seen something in me that I hadn't yet seen in myself. The name that once embarrassed me started to inspire me instead. That quote "I want something big; I want something that says I'm here" became a reflection of how I wanted to live my life. I wanted my name to represent not just the artist, but my own version of that boldness. Being Mexican American adds another layer to what my name means.

It's not common in my culture, and at first, that made me feel disconnected. But now, I see it as a blend of worlds—just like the song "Amor Gitano." My name carries a mix of cultures, sounds, and identities. It's English, African American, and Latin all at once. It represents how I can be proud of where I come from while also embracing something bigger. Like Cisneros wrote in "My Name," "In English my name means hope." For me, Beyoncé means possibility—of standing out, of being different, and of finding beauty in that difference.

Today, I love introducing myself. I love seeing the surprise on people's faces and being able to say, "Yes,

like the singer." My name has become part of my confidence instead of my insecurity. It reminds me of my mother's love and the culture I come from. It also reminds me that even when people have expectations or assumptions, I get to define who I am. My name taught me to speak up for myself to be proud, to be seen, to be here.

My last name, Lopez, carries its own story too. It comes from Spain and means "son of Lope," with Lope coming from the Latin word *lupus*, meaning "wolf." I love that meaning because the wolf symbolizes family, loyalty, and strength, three things that describe my parents and the way I was raised. When I think about my full name, Beyoncé Lopez, I see a mix of meanings: "remarkable" and "wolf." Together, they remind me to be strong, to stay loyal to who I am, and to always push beyond what others expect of me.

Names are powerful because they tell our stories before we even say a word. Mine tells the story of a Mexican American girl who learned that being different is not something to hide from, it's something to celebrate. I used to think my name didn't fit me, but now I understand it was shaping me all along. "Beyoncé" isn't just a name; it's a statement. It says I'm here, I'm proud, and I'm remarkable just like my mother hoped I would be.

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SEEK YOU NEXT YEAR.