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Liberal and Fine Arts

TARLETON STATE UNIVERSITY.

MASTHEAD

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WILLIAM B. MARTIN AWARD FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE

Zeina Halili

The William B. Martin Award for Writing Excellence is given annually to a student whose written material achieves a level of outstanding craftsmanship, creativity, and a demonstration of exceptional nuances that set it apart from all others in consideration.

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Cover image: *rag tag full of memories* by Kaylee Wessels

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear lovely reader,

There's something so surreal about holding a first edition in your hands.

For a long time, the *Bosque River Review* was just an idea, just like most of our work is. It was something we talked about, something we worked so hard to put together. And now it's here, filled with works that tell stories that go beyond just what is written on the page. Every piece carries the history of its writer, and what you're holding is a collection of those moments, gathered together and given a place to stay.

That's what makes it so special to me. Every piece inside was entrusted to us to find a place where it could belong.

Inside, you'll find poems written from the deepest parts of a person's heart. You'll find fiction that moves across different lives and worlds—some rooted in real, familiar experiences, while others stretch into places we only see in our dreams. There's no single way that these pieces exist, and that's what I love about them. Each one is different, but they all reach for the same idea: to be understood, to be felt, and to be shared.

Alongside the writing, there are also lovely pieces of artwork and photography that carry their own kind of story. Small moments in time, captured and given meaning. They don't just sit beside the words; they expand them, giving you another way to experience what is there.

More than anything, this issue was built on trust. Writers trusting us with their work, editors spending hours shaping each piece, and all of us believing that these stories deserve a place in this world.

Because that is what it became in the end. A place for stories. A place where different voices can exist together, where something written in one moment can reach someone in another.

We built a home.

And to those who helped us build it, thank you. Thank you for your time, your care, and your willingness to create something from nothing. We all read and write for the same reason: to be understood in a way we sometimes can't be in our everyday lives. And to you, the reader, thank you for being here, for taking a chance on our first issue, and for taking the time to understand the stories inside.

I hope that you find something in these pages that speaks to you. And I hope this is only the beginning for the Bosque.

Off somewhere writing,

Zeina Halili
Editor-in-Chief
Bosque River Review

SARAH MARCANTONIO –
BLOOM

Wherever we are, let us bloom
no matter the weeds. no matter
the season.

Let the light find us,
take it all in—
nourish the soils that were forgotten.

Be wild.

Sink in roots,
deeper.

Deeper.

Plant the seeds.

Let them watch, our time of
awakening.

Rise in courage,
take up space.

Grow upwards.

Grow out—

bloom dangerously.

In ways that make them gasp.

Don't listen to their doubts.

Do it for you—

for those who couldn't before.

Flourish in the forbidden, embrace

vibrant hues.

CHERISH HALL – *WARPED PERSPECTIVE*



ZEINA HALILI –
THE CHARM MAKER'S DAUGHTER

The sea reeked of salt and tar, the air thick with the morning mist, as Avi carried another crate onto the ship.

Magic hummed faintly from the crate in her arms, too soft for the sailors to notice, but Avi felt it with every step she took.

She had already wasted an hour arguing with the dockhand about the shipment, insisting that yes, a Mr. Clark Toadvine existed and yes, he would be waiting for the shipment in the northern continent. Though even Avi wasn't sure who exactly Mr. Clark Toadvine was, Ishani was vague in the details, leaving basically everything out besides his name and the amount she would be receiving from the charms.

"Hurry it up, girl!" the dockhand barked, his voice like gravel grinding stones.

Avi rolled her eyes. If he had not wasted her morning asking useless questions, she would've been gone by now.

The charms inside clinked together with her every movement. Each charm was crafted by her father, most held spells for warding off spirits, others for healing, or for luck. He had burned himself out creating charms for this order, Ishani promising a hefty weight of gold in return. Avi had helped until her fingertips were permanently crusted in silver and gold. But the charms had been finished early, each charm holding its own magic and ready to ship to Mr. Clark Toadvine.

When the last one was stacked, Avi stood on the deck of the ship, hands on her hips, staring out towards the Eastern Sea. One day, maybe, she'd cross it. And one day, maybe, her father's debt would be paid, and he could come with her.

The harbor master's signal rang out. Avi counted the crates one last time before stepping off the ramp. The dockhand glared at her.

"Mr. Clark Toadvine will be waiting." She called over her shoulder, grinning, before disappearing into the streets of Sulsal.

Sulsal swallowed her the moment she left the docks behind; the sharp tang of salt and tar gave way to the smoke and spices of roasted chestnut and saffron. The stalls of the market pressed closely together, with sellers barking at each other in dozens of dialects too fast for her to understand.

Avi slipped carefully through people and carts piled with silks and baskets overflowing with dates and sweets. At the docks, the smell of magic was light, but here—here it flowed in and out of everything

and everyone: witches selling potions, amulets tied with cures, and charms painted in cheap copper.

“Potions for beauty! Love spells for your sweetheart!” an old woman crooned, waving a glass bottle in her direction. Avi raised a brow and kept walking. Magic from the market was the one thing that her father ever claimed was dangerous, so she had always stayed away. Though one time she did wonder if a potion to make her taller would actually work. Just once. But she was not foolish enough to buy it, although the thought still lingered every time she passed the stall.

A pair of children darted past her, their hands sticky with fresh honey, their laughter echoing through the stone walls around them. Avi’s pace only quickened, the afternoon sun starting to burn the exposed skin on her shoulder, until the crooked roof of the charm shop came into view.

Avi pushed open the warped oak door, the familiar chimes of bells announcing her arrival. The smell of warm cardamom and silver welcomed her in, curling through the air like an old song. Shelves sagged under the weight of trinkets and books, while piles of unfinished charms glittered from their hooks above the counter, with the haze of dust caught in the sunlight coming from the shutters.

Behind the counter sat her father at his workbench, hunched low, holding a silver file in front of a magnifying glass. He didn’t look up as she entered; the steady sound of filing was greeting enough. She watched him for a moment, his gray hair falling in his face as if even it were tired.

Avi drifted through the shop, her fingers trailing along the shelves stacked with charms. She went through a small pile near the end of the counter, sifting lazily until a silver chain landed between her fingers. Most of this was her father’s unfinished work, half-enchanted pieces of art that would still be here until he found time to finish them.

Avi let the chain dangle, watching the way the light hit the sea stone in the center. Just a few more markings and maybe a little bit of polishing, and it would’ve been done. But instead, it sat there collecting dust, another reminder of how much her father’s hands could do these days.

Beneath the scraps, she found one of her own. A crooked little butterfly she had made when she first started practicing, the lines all clumsy but all hers. Avi turned it over in her hand, remembering the night she begged her father to teach her how to make one. The charm hummed faintly in her palm, the spell too weak but too stubborn, as if it refused to die out of spite.

Avi smirked. "That makes two of us." She whispered as she tucked the charm into the layered fabric of her blue skirt.

The door chimes rang out, sharp and familiar, causing Avi to glance up as Ishani walked into the shop. She was draped in layers of pink lace and silk, silver jewelry catching the light at her neck and ears, with pink bangles stacked high along her wrists. Her smile only grew as her eyes landed on Avi.

"You're early. Did the shipment make it on the ship?" she asked, setting down a brown satchel on the table next to the door.

"It would've been earlier if I had more to go on than just a Mr. Clark Toadvine in the northern continent," Avi said, her mouth quirking as she leaned against the counter.

A faint smile curved on her lips. "If you spend half as much time working as you do complaining, you'd be running the market by now."

Before Avi could answer, her father's voice drifted from his workbench, "If she ever ran the market, it'd be bankrupt within the week. Too many smart remarks, not enough sales." His tone was warm, trying to settle the tension.

Ishani laughed softly as she made her way through the shop. "Well, it is a good thing you are here early, I can ask you this in person." Her gaze flicked back to Avi. "There's a ball tomorrow night. The king is receiving a gift from one of the high nobles—a charm I completed a few weeks ago. And I need help to deliver it properly."

Avi blinked. "You want me to go to a ball?"

She'd been to her share of dinner parties and social gatherings, but nothing even close to a royal ball. The thought of endless food, glittering outfits, and nobles who have never dirtied their hands on silver dust made her stomach twist.

"Why me?" Avi asked, her voice dry. "Or did every other person in the city suddenly die, leaving me as your very last option?"

She tilted her head, bangles chiming against each other. "Well, since I am asking you, Avi, I should perhaps be worried for the rest of the city." Avi watched as Ishani made her way to her father's workbench, looking over at the charm in his hand. "But the truth is that I crafted the charm, yes, but the presentation matters just as much as the work itself. Everyone expects something spectacular, something with elegance. And your beauty would make people stop, listen, even when they shouldn't. So that is why I am asking you."

Avi blinked at her, unsure whether to laugh or scoff. Ishani's words echoed through her mind. Beauty. She knew that she was hardly the polished kind that Ishani paraded through ballrooms; most days, she had dust in her hair, calluses on her palms, and silver sprinkled

across her face. But still, she knew that Ishani wasn't wrong. People looked, had always looked. Sometimes for reasons Avi didn't understand, and sometimes for reasons she wished they didn't.

She drummed her fingers against the counter, thinking it over. A royal ball wasn't exactly her idea of fun, but the chance of slipping into that world, even just for one night, may have won her curiosity over.

"Fine," she said at last, meeting Ishani's gaze. "I'll go. But if anyone asks me to dance, I'm blaming you."

Later that night, the shop was filled with silence, the noise of the market long since faded into the sound of wind hitting the window. Her father had gone upstairs to their narrow apartment, leaving his tools clean and neatly aligned on his bench. Ishani had swept out hours ago without an explanation, disappearing into whatever silken, shadowy corners of the city she liked to frequent.

That left Avi alone with the silence and her thoughts. She swept the floors half-heartedly, dust and gold clinging to the broom, her thoughts circling back again and again to the ball. Something didn't feel right.

Her eyes somehow kept finding their way back to the brown leather satchel Ishani had left on the counter. And somehow her thoughts kept finding their way back to the ball and how things did not add up right. Why her? Why not take in the glory to present a handcrafted charm to the king herself...why ask Avi? Such an honor, one that she knew Ishani would take for herself any other day.

Her grip tightened on the broom handle. The more the thoughts floated around in her head, the less it sat right. And again she found her gaze back onto the satchel. It sat there in plain view, innocent as any other item lying in the shop. Avi told herself to ignore it, to finish sweeping and head to bed. But she couldn't help but get closer, curiosity itching at her.

She set the broom aside, noticing the shift in the air as she got closer to the bag. It felt heavier, as if whatever sort of magic Ishani held within it was different in a way. Not the kind she saw her father make, or the kind that floated in and around the markets of the city.

Avi hesitated for only a second before she found herself flipping the satchel open. Inside, there were several journals, books, and loose charms, but she noticed the small red velvet fabric that sat at the bottom of the bag. She could only assume what lay inside.

The moment her finger brushed the soft fabric, a faint hum filled the air, different than the kind, steady pulse of her father's charm. It was sharper and somehow alive with a purpose to fulfill.

Even though every instinct in her body told her not to, she still found herself peeling back the velvet. She stilled. Inside, she found a pendant of glass so clear that it could've been mistaken for ice. Veins of rose-gold light threaded its way through the surface, shifting as if it were alive somehow. The silver setting was delicate, spun fine as spider silk, curling into intricate shapes that seemed to twist if she stared too long.

The carvings along the sides were the ones that caught her eye, symbols that she didn't recognize. At least none of the ones that her father had taught her. These were sharper, more complex, as if the spell cast into the charm were something she wasn't meant to even notice. But they still tugged at her, daring her to decipher them, but the more she stared, the less they made sense.

It was beautiful, Avi had to admit it, but her stomach tightened the more she held it. She knew that it wasn't a charm meant for protection or luck. Whatever Ishani had made had different intentions, and Avi was now determined to figure it out.

Avi slipped the charm back into its velvet wrap, careful to settle it back exactly where she had found it. Her stomach was still in knots as she forced herself to set down the bag, broom in hand, once more. She forced herself to finish cleaning, though the hum of the charm seemed to follow her everywhere she went.

When the last of the filings had been gathered and the shutters drawn tight, she slowly piled books of charm spells and the order forms from the last few months into her arms. Her father wouldn't miss them tonight, and Ishani wouldn't find out.

Avi slowly crept her way upstairs and slipped into her bedroom. The room was small, little more than a bed, a desk, and shelves cluttered with her own practice of charms. She spread her books and papers out across the quilt, the candlelight flickering over the ink on the pages. She read for hours, spell after spell, order after order. But then she found it, the markings that matched the side of the charm.

Her blood went cold.

If the king wore the charm, he wouldn't survive the night. And if he died from a charm delivered by Ishani with Avi at her side...Avi would be the one framed as the assassin.

Her heart was pounding out of her chest. There was little that she could do about it now; if she replaced the charm before the ball, Ishani would find out. And if Ishani found out...Avi's stomach twisted.

She would only deepen her father's debt to Ishani, and she would be the one to blame for it.

No, she couldn't risk tampering with it here in the shop. She only had one option left: she would have to wait until the ball itself. Somehow, someway, with the grace of the Gods, find a way to switch it back.

*

By morning, the shop was already humming with the familiar clicks of metal and the smell of fire. Her father was already bent over his workbench as if the night had never happened. Avi, however, stood at the small mirror propped up against the corner of the living room, staring at the stranger in front of her.

Ishani had insisted on sending proper garments. Avi had to accept the fact that her own dresses would've never survived the scrutiny of a palace; she knew that Ishani wouldn't have let her walk in wearing anything less.

It had felt like hours staring at herself, the flowing silks dyed a deep teal, the soft silken fabric flowing like water when she moved. Gold thread was embroidered across the hem of the curling patterns she didn't recognize, beautiful and intricate. A simple belt of golden coins sat weighted around her waist, jingling softly every time she breathed. Bangles gleamed at her wrists, while a sheer scarf sat draped over her shoulder, pinned with a lily charm her father had made for her.

She wasn't even completely ready, but she hardly recognized herself. Beautiful, yes, but in the way that a blade was beautiful, sharp, and dangerous when drawn in the light.

"Gods help me..." she muttered, tugging at the bangles.

By the time the sun began to sink on the horizon, Avi was ready. Or at least, as ready as she could be. The silks that Ishani sent clung to her like someone else's skin. She checked herself one final time in the mirror, hardly recognizing the girl in it.

Her father lingered in the doorway, arms folded with a gentle smile on his face. His gaze softened as he looked at her, and for a moment, the weight of everything faded away at the look in his soft eyes.

"You look like your mother," he said quietly.

Avi glanced back at the mirror, searching the reflection for the woman that she had lost far too young. But all that she saw was herself, draped in silks and fabrics, carrying burdens that she didn't ask for.

Her chest ached, and before she could stop herself, she crossed the room and wrapped her arms around him. He held her close, while she took the time to note his smell and touch in case things went for the worse tonight.

The familiar chime of the door rang below, breaking Avi from her thoughts. Ishani's voice carried up the stairs, smooth as silk. "Avi dear, it is time to go."

Her father pressed a hand to her shoulder, firm and steady, as he, too, knew that Ishani wasn't to be trusted. "Keep your wits about you," he whispered.

Avi only nodded, though her mind spun. The satchel. The velvet. The charm meant to kill a king. She still hadn't decided what she was going to do, but she knew that she could not be the one to hand over the death sentence to the king.

With her heart hammering into her chest, she turned from her father, squared her shoulders, and followed Ishani blindly into the unknown.

★

The palace glittered like a jewel carved from moonlight. Lanterns hung from carved arches, casting pools of golden light across the marbled floors. Music spilled from every corner, songs and melody flowing through the sound of voices. Laughter and clinking glasses filled the room, and they all welcomed Avi as she stepped into the room.

She moved carefully, letting the crowd around her carry her along, the weight of Ishani's presence more comforting than it had ever been. Avi scanned the room; everything she saw was like nothing she had ever experienced before. The air was thick with perfume and ambition, the dreams and money of people who had too much but shared too little.

Eyes followed her as she passed, a reminder that maybe she didn't belong here.

At the center of all of it was the king's dais, gleaming under the light of a thousand candles. Avi's gaze stuck there, knowing what she would have to do in the next few hours.

She forced herself to breathe, weaving in and out of nobles and ladies. Taking in every detail, hoping that it wouldn't come to haunt her nightmares in the future. She moved through the crowd with a

practiced smile, nodding when spoken to, making small talk to people she had never met. Every noble seemed more glittering than the last, covered in jewels and pearls she had only dreamed of as a little girl.

Her hand brushed against the charm that held the scarf draped over her shoulder. It was a simple lily, beautiful, with a protection spell carved into it with silver. It was modest compared to what Ishani had made for the king.

The music began to fade around them as a voice rang out into the ballroom, announcing the arrival of the king. Avi's pulse quickened with a single dangerous thought.

It was now or never.

Ishani handed her the beautifully crafted wooden box that held the charm wrapped in velvet, before sweeping forward in her beautiful purple silks and sea of jewels. Avi followed her, her heart pounding in her chest, making it hard to breathe. The box heavy in her hand.

The crowd bowed, and Avi went with them, her fingers moving fast. She slid the box open, just enough to remove the charm and replace it with the one pinned to her gown. A quick breath, and a prayer to any god who would listen, the exchange was made—one charm for the other. Her father's work was now safely wrapped in the velvet, while Ishani's charm found its way beneath Avi's heel.

The voice came in again over the crowd. "Your Majesty, her Lady Avi, daughter of our local Charm Maker."

For one heartbeat, Avi thought that her legs might give out, but she still found herself stepping forward, fabric brushing her ankles, the weight of every eye in the hall pressing down on her.

Ishani watched from the side, a satisfied smile sitting at her lips as Avi carried the wooden box to the bottom of the dais. Each step echoed too loudly in Avi's ears, her pulse racing faster the closer that she got.

She stopped at the foot of the throne and dropped into a deep bow, holding the box high in her hands.

"Your Majesty," Avi said, her voice steady though every limb in her body was close to giving out. "A gift from your noble houses, a charm crafted with the deepest respect for your protection."

Well, that wasn't a lie now.

The king leaned forward, eyes warm and welcoming, nothing like Avi had thought that one with so much power would have. He gently lifted the box from her hands, opening it to reveal the red velvet fabric inside. He slowly drew the lily into the light, the court murmuring their approval at the way the metal shone in the light. It was

perfect; to them it gleamed like something rare and precious, another addition to the royal collection.

A slight smile landed on the king's face as he placed the charm on his sash. "A generous gift," he said, his voice carrying through the chambers. "My warmest thanks."

The hall around them erupted in applause, music again filling the room. Avi bowed again, careful not to let her trembling hands show as she stepped back into the sea of silks and pearls. But the weight in her chest only seemed to grow. She didn't need to look to know that Ishani's eyes would already be on her, cold and calculating. Ishani would've known it wasn't her charm even before the king pulled it out in front of the crowd. And Avi knew, with deep-bone certainty, that Ishani would not forgive her.

Still, Avi forced herself to lift a glass off the nearest tray that passed her, forcing herself to take a sip as if she were just another guest enjoying the fineries offered by the king. All the while, she could feel the broken shards of the crystal clear glass embedded into the sole of her shoe.

The night went on in a blur of music and wine, nobles dancing in glittering pairs on the marbled dance floor. Avi moved through them like a shadow, keeping a crowd between her and Ishani's jeweled silhouette.

She told herself she only needed to last until the end. Slip out with the other guests, find a carriage, and make it back to the shop. But the longer she lingered around, the more impossible that plan seemed. Guards lined each wall carved from stone, doors flowing with servants, making it impossible to slip through. She was safer here. If she did manage to get outside, running through the city in her silks and bangles would make her an easy target for anyone Ishani sent after her, the thought alone making her stomach twist.

Her gaze drifted around the room towards the tall windows, allowing the moonlight to pool against the glass. A window, maybe. A servant's passage? Something had to get her out, something had to lead her to safety.

She knew if she stayed in the palace until the end of the night, she might not leave the palace at all.

Avi noticed it near the end of the dais, a small servant's entry half-hidden by golden curtains. Only a few slipped in and out, balancing trays of sugared fruit and wine. No one else seemed to pay it any mind; the nobles were far too busy with their affairs to notice where the servants went.

Her pulse quickened; this door was her only chance. She needed to get it right, which would allow her to vanish into the flow of

servants and find her way out of the palace before Ishani even noticed she was gone. Avi slowly drifted closer, allowing herself to focus on the musicians in the corner. Looking as if she was just admiring the artists themselves. Nobody paid her a glance. Her palms were slick, the bangles of her wrists clinking sharply in her ears.

She needed to get out and go to her father. Avi needed to be the one to explain to him what she did, not the lies Ishani would twist to explain why the poor old man was deeper into debt than he was just the day before. Maybe she had messed up, or maybe she had saved herself. But now there was a debt to pay, and maybe she should've chosen execution for treason over this.

The curtain was now behind her, swaying with the draft underneath the door. It slowly swayed open, allowing Avi to get a clear view of the hallway beyond, a small stone corridor that likely led to the kitchen, whispering a promise of escape.

Avi's breath caught in her throat, taking one last glance over the room. Ishani's purple gown was nowhere to be seen. So Avi stepped back, allowing the door to give in, and she disappeared into its shadows.

Avi pressed herself into the narrowing, the sound of music fading into the world behind her. The hallway before her was empty, and just for a moment she was able to take a freeing breath.

She started down the hall, only making it a few steps when a familiar voice cut through the stone.

"Stupid girl."

Avi froze. Her every instinct of escape gave way as Ishani stepped out from the shadows. Her bangles chimed with her soft, deliberate steps, the smell of spices and wine filling Avi's senses. Her smile was gone now, her eyes dark like knives in the light.

"Did you really think I wouldn't notice?" Ishani hissed. "The king is alive, and now the nobles' gold is gone, and my reputation is in shatters. Do you know what you cost me, Avi?" She leaned in closer to Avi, her jewels shining in the dim light. "Enough to drown your father in debt until he is nothing but ash."

Avi's knees buckled. This whole situation was a game, and she had been the unlucky player, and now her father would have to pay for it. "Please don't. Leave him out of this. If someone has to pay, let it be me." Her voice cracked, and for the first time, she felt desperation coat her throat. "Punish me, not him."

For a long, terrible moment, Ishani only watched her, lips pursed as if considering Avi's offer. Her hand fell on Avi's chin, turning

her face into the candlelight as if she were assessing what she was being offered. “A pretty face like yours could come in handy.” She muttered to herself.

Ishani’s hand fell from her face, slipping into the clutch that dangled from her shoulder. She pulled out a slender gold chain with a charm dangling from the end. It was a small, glinting thing in the shape of a sun. Golden symbols etched into the surface, too sharp and complex again for Avi to recognize.

Ishani slowly undid the clasp, the delicate links whispering against her fingers. The charm swayed at the end, glowing as if it burned with its own fire.

“This...” Ishani started, looking at the charm as if it were her prized possession. “Is something I have been working on for years. A binding charm. An eternal promise. Once it touches your skin, you cannot remove it. No undoing the promises bound to it.”

Avi’s breath hitched, but she couldn’t move; now her back was pressed into the stone wall behind her. Every inch of her body was screaming at her to run, but her father’s face came back into her mind, causing her to stay right where she was.

Ishani leaned in, her lips curving into a smile. “By day, you’ll go where no servant, no spy, could ever go. No secret will be safe from you. Small, silent, and forever unnoticed. But very useful to me.”

Avi let the words sink in as Ishani secured the necklace around her neck, the charm dangling between her collarbone. “And by night, you’ll be mine to display. A glittering piece for the court, the parties, and the dances, getting me new potential buyers. You’ll sit at my side, be paraded like the beautiful jewel you are. They will look, they will admire, and no one will know the truth of the secrets you know.”

Avi stood frozen in the narrow hall, her breath still unsteady, the heat of the charm burning into her skin. Ishani’s words were circling her like smoke, making their way through every single wall that she tried to throw up.

It didn’t feel like her life anymore. She would no longer be the girl who spent late nights learning how to carve stone with her father, silver dust freckled across her face. She would no longer roam the streets of the market, tasting imported fruit and smelling fine spices. She was Ishani’s now; her freedom was no longer hers to bear, something her father had tried so hard to protect.

She touched the chain hanging from her throat, her fingers trembling as she watched Ishani leave through the door Avi had come in without a word. It felt heavier than anything she had had to carry in her life.

For the first time, Avi wasn't sure who she was anymore. She needed to throw something, yell, or maybe even cry, but she didn't know which one. Her body trembled with the urge to lash out, yet the chain sat there unbothered, as if mocking her every thought.

So Avi did none of it. She swallowed the anger burning in her chest—anger towards Ishani, towards the charm, and towards herself, and forced her feet to move and out through the servants' door.

She was back in the endless whirls of silks and diamonds, where the laughter rang too loud and the wine ran like water. There among the strangers and jewels, she would see her future. So she drank until she put out that fire of anger that burned so deep into her soul, until her mind blurred into the nothing of it all.

*

Morning light slipped through the cracks of the shutters, stripping the floorboards in gold. A cat sat curled in the center of the narrow bed, its fur as dark as ink lined in silver, its tail twitching in irritation.

It was not the sort of place one expected to find a cat. The room was too neat, too carefully tended. On the desk, books lay stacked in piles, some over spells, others over northern love stories. Gold dust lingered across the wood like spilled stars, clinging to the pile of handwritten letters stacked at the edge of the table.

The cat stretched, its paws leaving little dents in the mattress, before leaping silently to the floor. A gold and teal dress lay crumpled near the foot of the bed, as if someone had kicked it there in a hurry, bangles spilled loosely all over the fabric. The cat sniffed the silk, batting at the belt of dangling coins that jingled faintly.

From downstairs, a man's voice called, gentle and tired. "Avi? Breakfast is ready, my love."

The cat stilled. Its ears flickered towards the sound, though it made no move to leave the room. Instead, it padded towards the window. Around its neck sat a little golden sun, which glinted in the morning light, before it slipped behind the curtain and vanished into the city below.

NADYA WELLS –
GREEN HOUR

A quiet ritual—
Folding paper,
Crumbled leaves between fingers,
Autumn rehearsing itself.

Flame flickers,
Green answers in smoke,
Silver script curling skyward.
Thoughts arrive barefoot,
Dancing through open doors.

Smoke lingering,
Thin ghosts dissolving,
Earth forgiven by the rain,
Forests compress into a single breath.

Outside, the moon keeps counsel,
And air remembers
The soft widening
Behind your ribs.

The ember dies,

The world returns,
But not the same.
The leaf was never the miracle;
Attention was.

DONATTO BARRA – RUN



HEILY LACRUZ SILVA –
WHO CREATED THE ALPHABET

Am I a piece of this broken glass called existence?
Bleeding my thoughts in a land of
Chaos. One day I asked
Dad for some advice. How can I exist in this
Ethereal life? In this game, enlightenment melts
Fantasy with reality. Is this magic? Did
God really create all this? I found myself
Hoping to see, to open my eyes one more time.
In the dimension of now, I just want to talk with my past.
Jumping from world to world, I got to the land of
Knowledge, and then I was absorbed.
Loneliness sits by my side, while I
Mourn my past life. “But there is
No past life, just
One. This one,” Dad said.
Poor girl, she was misplaced,
Quiet, pure, obedient, a princess.
Rapunzel in her tower called life. Would she jump out? “The
Suffering cycle would only stop when you learn from your past, do it
now,
Time is running out,” I heard The Voice in my mind say.
Universe, God, Master, or The Great I Am brought my

Vision back, my third eye. Then I sealed the covenant, drank the
Wine. There is truth in everything, and a purpose beneath it. “Receive
this

Xenium, my daughter, but stay in my presence.”

Yahweh spoke, and I accepted the gift; yet I wondered:

Zodiac—wasn’t He against the stars? “I created everything,” I Am said.

GRACE BLAZINE –
DARKNESS SO ETERNAL

Darkness spilled down the crumbling fortress walls, fog slunk through the rubble, and Lydia Varrian eyed the bones scattered around the stone floor. She moved deeper into the large chamber, the weight of the Unawakened—souls that were still resting inside the dead—settling on her shoulders. Dain fell into step next to her, resting his hand on the obsidian war hammer hanging from the waist of his black tactical uniform.

Signaling to the group behind her, she glanced back down to the blinking coordinates and pale dots before pushing the faintly lit screen up from her eye.

“Notify Solen that the acquired coordinates were correct,” she said over her shoulder. Rhea inclined her head and split from the group, wandering to the shadowed side of the room. The tablet in Rhea’s black-gloved hands emitted a pale green hue, and the holographic form of Solen—Cyxtro’s emperor and Ascended—came into view.

Two hundred years prior, their world of Polaren had been ruled by four empires—Sythis, Rilor, Aeios, and Cyxtro. But when a rift tore through their planet, allowing otherworldly parasites—the Celestial Witches—to infect Polaren, the empires fell. Each emperor had been slaughtered, raised back to life, and infused with the same deathly powers that stemmed from the witches. They were now Ascended, necromantic pawns ready to be manipulated by the Celestial Witches.

But the emperors’ armies revolted, refusing to follow the shells of their former leaders. The Ascended then just turned them into red mist, before knitting the bones and blood and flesh of their own soldiers back together. Creating perfect puppets of the undead.

Lydia closed her eyes briefly, rolling her shoulders back. Rhea’s low murmurs carried across the ruined chamber. Behind them, the trio of undead soldiers fanned out around the room, leaving Lydia and Dain alone.

“We have to act now,” she said in a quiet voice.

Dain tore his gaze from the wreckage, meeting her eyes. “I think we need to wait until we find the Light Orb. The more bodies we have searching the fortress for it, the better.”

“I already told you what Solen ordered. The soldiers and Rhea are to be disposed of as soon as the coordinates were confirmed. They’ve already served their purpose.”

Lydia had been summoned by Solen only three days ago to track the Light Orb, a cube of raw energy that was crafted from the purest light of a shooting comet.

Rumors said it would give immortality. Others said it had enough energy to power worlds or jump between galaxies. Some even whispered that it could mend anything.

A muscle in Dain’s jaw twitched. “The orb could heal Rhea’s delusional mind. The...episodes and bursts of anger that she’s been having. Why not give her that chance?”

Just like Lydia and Dain, Rhea had been a rebel in the Uprising six years ago. This fact Lydia knew for certain by the silver bands around Rhea’s slender wrists, the same ones that adorned hers and Dain’s, the three of them now ranked High Soldiers of the undead army. Still, Lydia couldn’t remember them. Couldn’t recall any familiar features or initial conversations they had together, her mind a hazy mess of emptiness.

She exhaled through her nose. “This isn’t up for discussion. Rhea is unreliable. Disposable. Negotiating with your personal morals isn’t going to change that. We’re dying, Dain. We need all the strength we can get.” Lydia watched his eyes flicker to the silvery streaks running through her slick blonde bun.

Her hair, his gray eyes, and Rhea’s decaying hands were the only sign that the abilities of the Ascended were withering away. And now that the witches had almost leeches out all of the star fire from their constellations...

It was just a matter of time before Polaren and its inhabitants all died. Permanently.

Lydia turned to Dain. “We can’t wait anymore. The other Ascended are sending their soldiers for this Light Orb.”

Rhea’s voice abruptly fell away, the greenish fluorescence that had been illuminating the far side of the wall snuffing out. Her sleek black hair—cut sharply to her chin—glinted in the veils of moonlight.

Dain started to shake his head. “Lydia—”

Ignoring Rhea’s growing footsteps, Lydia leveled her gaze to Dain, her clasped hands tightening. “We have to do it *now*.”

His resigned sigh was the only confirmation she needed.

Her senses and any kind of feeling slipped far, far away from her. The darkness of the fortress deepened, intensifying the cool feel of death around them, as Lydia burrowed deep into the well of her powers. Her vision blurred, then focused, the shadows around them sharpening.

Voices—hundreds of Unawakened voices drilling into her mind.

Let me go.

Raise me back up again.

Lydia slid her gaze toward Rhea, who froze at the predatory gleam in her eyes. Smelled the shift in the air, the rotting tinge of death and ash. The undead soldiers turned around simultaneously, ever so slowly.

Understanding dawned in Rhea's face. Her hand twitched, as it inched closer to the serrated dagger strapped to her hip. "That damned parasite put you up to this," she spit out.

"It's nothing personal."

Rhea let out a cold laugh. "But it is, Lydia. You just don't remember—"

Lydia shot her arm forward, sending waves of dark energy towards her. Rhea twisted out of the way, before hurling the dagger at Lydia. She jerked back, away from the blade—

Pain sliced through her arm, cutting into her skin. Clenching her teeth, Lydia slapped a hand over the deep gash, warm sticky blood running through her fingers.

Color blanched from Rhea's face, her arm still in midair from throwing the second blade. "Lya—"

White-hot lightning exploded behind Lydia's eyes, just as she sent another staggering blast of shadow at Rhea.

She didn't have time to duck as it struck her. Recoiling, like she had hit an invisible wall, Rhea barely made a sound when Lydia's power sunk into her bones, into her very marrow. Concentrating through the blinding pain, she latched onto the cloudy gray mass writhing inside Rhea's chest, like it was trying to escape the confines of molting skin, and *ripped* it out.

Somewhere outside herself, she grinned at the wet gasp escaping from Rhea's mouth, before her body slammed into the stone floor. Distantly, Lydia heard three thuds echo out.

Breathing heavily, she blinked as the vivid darkness ebbed back to its muted gray around her. The Unawakened voices quieted to a hush. The pounding in her head was already fading away with the life

force she had taken from Rhea. She could feel her skin slowly knit itself back together.

She looked over at Dain, his glowing, silver eyes receding back to gray. He stared at the blood leaking from Rhea's eyes, pooling around her. An unreadable expression was etched in his face. The soldiers' bodies lay several feet from him.

Wiping her bloodied hand against her uniform, Lydia strolled to the fractured threshold of a wide doorway, stepping over Rhea's lifeless body. "Your secret is safe with me."

Silence coated the air.

"What secret?"

Lydia turned toward Dain behind her, his broad shoulders tensing. "That you *hesitated*. Solen's little pet."

Dain grimaced, a dimple flashing in the corner of his mouth. Something tickled the back of her mind, an itch that couldn't be scratched.

"Let's just find the Light Orb," he said, blowing out a breath.

Lydia faced the dark hallway, broken skeletons and debris scattered on the ground of stone. "I couldn't agree more."

*

The stench of decay and smoke still hung in the thick air, as if death itself had followed after them. In a way, it did.

Lydia recalled what the living had whispered, whenever she and Dain would trudge through the underbelly of the inner city, their weapons gleaming in the luminescence of the flickering bulbs.

The Pet of the Dead and the Hound of Souls.

Throughout her six years of servitude, she had noticed that Dain was favored among the necromancers, often being called into private meetings and assignments. She remembered the first time she had tried asking him about what they had discussed behind closed doors, but he refused.

He just said what Rhea had also rattled off: he didn't remember what he had done in the rebellion.

Though, when she had knelt before Solen, Lydia had wondered many times if her master had ever considered siphoning away her own life force. Her soul. Or crushing the other half of her heart he possessed.

Her part in the rebel Uprising had condemned her to an eternity of gray space, half alive and half dead. To be forever leashed to them, to be forever controlled by that beating organ Solen had ripped out of her chest and cleaved in two.

That other half of her heart still beat within her ribcage.

It was a sick kind of torture—to recall what side she had fought for.

And pelting Rhea and Dain with her desperate questions after she had awoken on a metal table hadn't lessened the ache in her chest. Their answers were the same: they didn't remember her.

Yet the loneliness of it, the feeling of utter isolation and quiet despair threatened to slowly squeeze her heart, more than Solen ever did. On the worst days, she had to distract herself from marching into the Ascended's meeting chamber—from lowering herself to her knees and begging him to destroy the pathetic lump of beating flesh.

Sidestepping a fallen pillar in the narrow hallway, Lydia adjusted the tactical headset around her head, pulling the arm attached to the transparent screen over her eye.

Faint spots appeared on the display. "Do you ever wonder what section of Cyxtro our purged souls just went to? The underbelly of the city? Someone's home?"

Dain's brow furrowed, but didn't look up from the screen in his hands. "They're just sent to the Grid," he said. "Rhea's soul was stronger because of her position, so it's likely it'll be channeled to an upper city or to Solen directly. I don't know where the undead souls go."

Warmth flushed across her cheeks. "Right," she said, unconvincingly.

Why did she ask that? She rarely concerned herself with the Undead or the logistics of souls. Lydia cleared her throat. "Seems unwise for the Uprising to hide the orb among piles of the dead."

Dain hummed in contemplation. "It might look impractical, but if the rebels actually had control of the orb, then this would be the perfect location to bring down all four empires of the Ascended. This fortress shares borders with all of them." They reached the end of the dark corridor, where a smaller chamber opened up. Not as spacious as the foyer they had trudged from, but still destroyed all the same. Large cracks ran down the old walls and spiderwebbed out where columns had smashed into the floor. Dark puddles still stained the rubble with pieces of eroding skeletons scattered around.

"There are still so many Unawakened here," he added, looking at a dismembered chest bone, metal winking under the pockets of moonlight.

Lydia peered at the other remains. "This place hasn't been touched in the last 100 years, at least."

“More than that, actually. Some of them are Imperial Loyalists of the first empire in the Original War, dating back to 3607 BCW. This one still has the metal bar across their uniform.”

“Before the Celestial Witches,” Lydia said under her breath.

Dain fiddled with something on his tablet. “Part of me wishes that I could’ve been alive back then, to see it all unfold. To see the faces of the witches.”

Lydia raised an eyebrow, then paused, as a thought struck her. “Check if any of the Unawakened will give us any information regarding the witches. Or at least anything on the Ascended and the orb.”

Now ahead of her, Dain shook his head. His eyes were pinned on the holographic tablet in his hand, the screen allowing him to access the stream of thoughts and feelings from the dead. “Nothing. The rebels that died here won’t give up any kind of details. Not a single thought. The loyal bastards,” he said.

“Of course they weren’t going to make this easy.” Lydia let out a long sigh, coming to a halt. Concentrating on the small dots on the display in front of her eye, she said, “If the Ascended wanted these bodies in their possession, they would’ve joined the Undead sooner.”

Which spurred the question of why they hadn’t done it already. Like they were saving them, almost like a reservoir of corpses. Maybe even being saved for the potential of war, Lydia assumed.

“We’re down at least a hundred soldiers from the last round of Purging of the Cyxtro section. Solen has been liberating more souls than the other Ascended.”

“Once we return, we can report these findings back to him,” she said.

He nodded. “I think this is his attempt at delaying the inevitable. The Ascended know they’re slowly perishing, and without the constant source of star fire from the witches, Solen is taking energy from his own army. Even after we discovered the coordinates.”

“It seems like he just wants to survive. Just like the rest of us.” Regret twisted in her stomach at the words, as she gripped the hilt of her onyx blade attached to her waist. “Dain?”

He tensed at the remorseful look in her eyes. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry for earlier. I’m sorry for being so cruel. I’ve had this feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach ever since I killed Rhea.” She paused for a moment. “I know it’s too late, but I should’ve given her a chance to explain. A chance for survival.”

"Come here," he said gently, motioning her over to him. He lifted the small screen away from her eye, before his fingers found her chin, tilting her face up to his.

"You didn't have a choice, Lydia. You just had orders."

"But—"

"I know, Lydia, I know. I understand. I *see* you." His swirling gray eyes softened.

She shivered as his hand cradled her cheek, a thumb grazing over her cheekbone—

That same white-hot lighting pierced her eyes, her skull. Crying out, she doubled over, clutching her head.

"Lydia! What's wrong?"

She waved him away from her, gasping for air. "It's fine, it's fine." The excruciating pain only lasted a few seconds, before ebbing away. A strange feeling washed over her. She straightened, rubbing her fingers on her temple.

Dain touched her shoulder. "What was that? Are you okay?"

Stepping away from him, Lydia blew out a long sigh, halting him with a hand. "I'm fine. It was nothing. Let's just get back to work."

Pulling the transparent screen back down, she focused back on the dots in the display, nearly missing the knitting of Dain's eyebrows, his face twisted into what looked like hurt—

"Anything on your end?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Dain said.

The sheer power of the Light Orb would energize the souls around it. If the orb was within a five-yard radius, the spots would have been flashing red.

Nothing happened on the transparent screen. "It's not in this area," she said.

Dain raked his hand through his hair. "Where is it?"

"Not close enough."

*

Their sleek boots crunched over gravel and fragments of bone, their shadows dancing over the debris. They had been searching the other half of the fortress for the past two hours with no luck. They had just passed a cluster of rooms, when she heard something up ahead.

A low, silken thrum.

Dain glanced at her when she slowed her pace. "Did you find something?"

Lydia shook her head. "Do you hear that?"

"The ringing? That's from the voices—"

"No, the humming."

They were reaching the end of the hall, and Lydia quickened her pace around the corner. Pulling down the tiny display again, she pressed a thin button running along the metal arm of the headset. The hall illuminated with the bright flashlight.

The humming grew to a haunting vibration, so melodic that it pushed her onward to the end of the corridor.

A dead end.

"Lydia, there's nothing here. We still have the west wing of this floor to inspect before moving upstairs."

"No, wait. Hold on." Her eyes darted to each wall, at each design. They were vastly different from the smooth stone walls encapsulating the other rooms. A long arch bordered each one, whorls carved into the center of every panel. This secluded area almost seemed to pulse with shadows, despite the flashlight.

The noise was louder now, the sound shifting to a deep purr that she felt in her bones.

"We need to break the wall." She put her hand against the stone, running her palm along the grooves.

Dain sighed.

"Look," she continued, "we haven't had any luck yet, so we'd just be checking off another position. I just...I have a feeling about this one," she said.

Wordlessly, he unlatched the war hammer and gently tugged her out of the way. "I've learned to not question you twice," he murmured, giving her a small smile.

Something pulled on her heart, ever so softly.

She jumped slightly when the first swing of the blunt hammer slammed against the wall, blue cracks shattering through the stone. Lydia watched the way his muscles rippled under his uniform, the tactical attire clinging to his figure. Dain swung again and her breath hitched, when the light of the hammer caught his gaze.

For a moment—a fleeting second—it cast his eyes in that same sapphire blue. The same color he used to have.

When she had regained consciousness, her body strapped to a metal table, he had just been a stranger next to her, his gaze already on her. Now, the blue of his eyes—the color of vast oceans, of *life*—was gone, like the essence of being truly alive was fading away.

Dain heaved the hammer into the wall again and again, fragments of broken stone tumbling to the ground, before there was a large enough hole to fit through.

Now that the wall was gone, the noise was all-encompassing, weaving through her ears and burrowing into her mind.

Chest heaving, he motioned towards the dark opening. "After you—"

But Lydia was already breezing past him, her flashlight illuminating a spiral staircase.

The sound in her head was a rumbling drumbeat, spurring her faster and faster down the winding steps.

Thump thump.

She barely heard Dain telling her to wait for him.

Thump thump.

Down and down and down she went into the darkness, listening to the lull with nothing but her flashlight blazing her path.

Thump thump.

The moment her feet touched the floor, the noise *shifted* into words—into voices. A cold breeze grazed her skin.

Come.

Thump thump.

Come find what you truly seek.

Looking around, her flashlight glowed along the more decorative walls with the same patterns as the ones above them. She turned to the side, and the chamber swept out into a curve, old skeletons scattered around them. Several fractured stone portraits ran along the walls, and what lay beneath them...

Stone sarcophaguses rose up from the floor.

Dain's footsteps grew louder, gritting against the loose gravel on the stairs.

Thump thump.

Blue light bled into the darkness, as he jogged over to Lydia. "What is this place..." he trailed off, following Lydia's line of sight.

"A burial ground," she murmured.

Thump thump.

Lydia swore the voices hummed in eager agreement. Drifting towards the tombs, she noticed a small gap between the portraits.

Something was flickering inside of it.

Come to meee.

Self-deceiver, reach inside.

Trembling, Lydia slowly reached for the dark opening, her heart hammering inside her chest.

Thump thump.

Her hand disappeared into the hole, then her wrist, and lastly, her arm.

“Don’t!” Dain yelled, rushing over to her—

Her fingertips brushed against something cold, and searing pain raced up her arm. She opened her mouth in a silent, raging scream.

Everything else fell away, except the voice and the all-consuming pain.

Hound of Souls, you are not loyal to your side. This allegiance was not chosen, but forced. I can fix it. I am the promiser. The giver of freedom. I will give you what you truly wish for.

The voice was so soothing, each syllable slithering with warmth and comfort. She wanted to fall into it forever, wanted to listen to its promises of perhaps something better.

Distantly, she was aware of some kind of muffled sound.

Lydia felt *good*, like she would live forever until eternity’s end.

Something prodded her mind. It was that muted noise again.

Curious, she decided to concentrate on it.

It sounded like a name. Was it hers? She wasn’t sure. She allowed the voice to quiet down and focused on the other sound.

Just for a moment, she thought.

“Lya.”

The consuming pain amplified at the sound of that name, electrifying her nerves, her senses.

Please, make it stop, she wailed in her mind.

Then you must remember. Everything. Would you like to? the voice purred.

Yes.

Instantly, she was thrown back, falling and falling into darkness. Her mind felt like it was being ripped apart and forged back together again, piercing light flooding the back of her eyelids.

No, not light. Memories.

Solen—one of the Celestial Witches’ pets—stood in front of her, pacing in a line. Three holographs of the other Ascended reclined back in the onyx chairs several feet behind him, the glow of their bodies a sickly greenish color. A wide window was past them, looking down at the narrow spires of the empire and the dim aquamarine luminescence of the city.

Bars of light shone above them, reflecting on the sleek black floors. Shaking, she risked a glance at Dain, his blue eyes glaring at the emperor. Rhea stood beside her, her hands also bound in shackles behind her back.

“I’m assuming you’re the leader of this pathetic group of rebellious individuals.” Solen’s milky eyes burned into Lydia’s. “Given how that blade almost severed my neck.” Lydia forced herself to keep his stare and not look at the deep cut

slashed across his jugular, thick blood oozing out. Picking up her discarded dagger, Solen inspected the serrated edges.

Then plunged it into Rhea's chest. She didn't get the chance to make a sound before her body hit the ground, the knife still protruding from her.

Lydia screamed, the anguished sound shredding her throat. "You son of a bitch, I'm going to kill you!"

"Lydia! NO!" Dain shouted—

She surged toward Solen, wanting to rip out his throat with her bare teeth—

Three undead soldiers yanked her back, as she thrashed against their hold. Hot tears streaked down her cheeks, her breath coming out ragged.

Solen shook his head, clicking his tongue. "You couldn't even do that on your first try. Now answer my question."

Out of the blurred corner of her peripheral, she saw Dain open his mouth, a dimple flickering across—

"Yes. Yes, I am," she whimpered out, beating him to it. Lydia knew he would always try to cover for her, always try to save her.

His ghastly face twisted into a grin. "Good."

Then, Solen's arm shot forward. Lydia let out a scream as his hand ripped into her chest. She could feel his hand around her heart, squeezing and crushing, the tissue necrotizing at his touch. Unimaginable pain exploded through her senses, her veins.

Lydia collapsed to the ground, when he yanked out his hand, his arm a bloodied mess.

Everything was cold and numb and dark. Something sticky and thick dribbled down her mouth. Black spots crowded her vision, and she could faintly make out the outline of a heart in Solen's hands. A warm, fuzzy feeling crept along her neck and her face. Dain's face came into view, cradling her body. His eyes swam with tears. She vaguely felt them fall across her face. "Please Lyra, stay with me. Please."

He cupped her cheek with his hand, his thumb brushing her skin.

"Prep them for the procedure."

Dain was suddenly torn away from her, leaving her to shiver alone. "And once you're done with this one, I need to be notified."

There was a squelching sound, a strangled gasp, and a heavy thud.

Lydia dragged her eyes towards the wet sounds next to her, and found Dain drowning in his blood. With a gaping hole in his chest.

Then, the world went blissfully dark.

When she came to, she thought she was dead. White lights burned into her eyes, and she thrashed against the restraints strapping her down to some cold, hard table.

“Stop struggling, it’ll be okay,” a voice said, cutting through her panic. Wide-eyed, she turned towards the sound, and found a boy looking at her. His blue eyes seemed to stare into her very soul, and somehow she felt safe. Something inside her whispered that he was familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it.

Gasping for air, she jerked back her arm, clutching it to her chest. The flashlight flared, then sputtered out, the blue light of Dain’s hammer still glowing faintly. “Where am—what’s going on? I—I remem—I remember.”

Dain’s eyes found hers. They were supposed to be blue. “Hey, hey. It’s okay, Lya.” The jagged half of her heart that she had left broke at the sound of her nickname. Tears swelled, then began to run down her cheeks.

She hadn’t just been a part of the rebellion; she had been the leader of it.

She remembered everything now. How she, Dain, and Rhea had orchestrated an assassination attempt on Solen. How every step had gone utterly wrong. How the three of them were captured and how Solen had killed Rhea.

“Solen has informed me that Rhea has been having...episodes. Bursts of anger and delusion. She isn’t in her right mind to be useful anymore.”

Oh, shit—Rhea.

Somehow, she must have begun to remember fragments of her former life before getting the procedure done. Before getting infused with necromancy abilities and having her memories and half of her heart ripped out of her chest.

And she had just killed her best friend.

“The plan to kill Solen failed,” she sobbed, her voice cracking. “I can’t believe we’ve been stuck as pawns for so long. He slaughtered Rhea. He took what made us human.” She looked down at the leather tactical uniform she wore, same as his, in disgust. “He made us into *this*. Solen was supposed to be dead.”

Dain tenderly pulled her into a hug, cradling the back of her head. “Shhh, shhhh. I know, I know, but you’re here with me now. I’m just relieved the Light Orb was able to heal your mind. Give your stolen memories back. I promise to explain everything after we’re done, but we still have to bring the orb back.”

A chill sensation panged through her chest.

She drew back from his chest, scrunching her eyebrows together. “Who woke you up?” she asked. “How’d you remember?”

Silence blanketed the room, as the truth started to piece together.

“And once you’re done with this one, I need to be notified.”

Her shoulders tensed, his arms now like a cape around her.

"They kept your memories." She peered up at him, her gaze pleading to be proved wrong. His mouth pressed into a thin line.

"They knew one of us had a fragment of information about the Light Orb, and you were too much of a beacon, a source of hope for the rebels to be kept the same. So, they allowed you to think you were actually dying before your procedure," Dain said, his voice thick. He looked away, blinking back tears. "So that you would relay that information to me, because you were too good of a person to allow that kind of possibility of a better life to die with you."

Lydia stared at him, unable to breathe.

"We gained the rest of the coordinates throughout the years."

She stumbled backward, hitting the stone wall. The unspoken words burned into her:

Thanks to you.

Lydia almost collapsed at the weight of her guilt, her knees threatening to buckle.

"We still need to hurry, though. Solen wants the orb." The look on his face was one of hopeful urgency.

"Why, exactly?" she said slowly.

"It is said that it gives immortality to its wielder." He lowered his voice. "But, I've also heard that its power is so vast that it can give its user the abilities to transport to other worlds."

Anger boiled in her veins. "Why the hell would you want to give—"

"I plan to give it to the Celestial Witches, so that they can leave our world permanently. There's not much for them to siphon off anyways."

Her mouth gaped open. "Are you out of your mind? Absolutely not," she said, shaking her head. "I can't believe you actually think they would agree to that."

Dain waved his hand around the tombs. "Because Solen has told me personally! I don't care that Solen wants the orb, I was never going to give it to him anyway. He says the witches thrive on chaos, not total destruction. Why destroy an entire world and siphon away all the souls, when you can leave them weak enough to control forever, but also have the chance of conquering the worlds around us? Lydia, we are slowly decaying because the witches don't have enough power to keep the Ascended alive. You know that, you've seen their mottling skin." She grimaced when she recalled their sagging, ashen faces. "Pretty soon, we will all be plunged into an eternal darkness, if they don't leave."

Lydia crossed her arms. “No, I don’t believe this. The witches are unpredictable. We can’t do that.”

“This is the only way.”

“We can kill Solen permanently this time. Use the orb to do it.”

Dain’s features hardened. “Absolutely not.”

“Dain. We are his High Soldiers. We are nothing but pawns who follow orders. He will expect both of us to report back with the orb, ready to serve once again.” Lydia paced around the chamber. “Solen isn’t aware I have my memories back. He won’t know the difference.”

“You’ve already tried to kill him—”

“I won’t fail this time.”

“No.”

“Dain—”

“No! Because what if it goes wrong again? I already lost you once! I can’t watch you die again. I can’t pretend that I don’t remember you, that I don’t *know* you, Lydia. That is too much to bear.”

Even more tears leaked from her eyes. “But I can’t let you give those witches the orb. I won’t.” Something inside Lydia cracked and withered away.

Dain exhaled deeply, wiping a stray tear. “Then, I guess I’ll just be taking it back myself.”

Her eyes widened as he lunged for her, slamming her into the cold ground.

She cried out when her head cracked against stone, dark spots exploding behind her eyes. Pushing through her spotty vision, she yanked his wrist and hooked her leg around his. Using the momentum, she bucked against him and rolled, sending him to the floor.

In one swift motion, she grabbed the small silver dagger attached to the back of her waist and plunged it into his chest. In the exact same spot Rhea was stabbed.

Taking a trembling breath, Lydia uttered, “I hate you so much.”

Dain made a garbled noise that sounded like a laugh, blood spurting down his mouth. “No, you don’t. And you hate yourself for that.”

She sent the dagger into his thigh.

Ignoring his screams, she slammed a hand onto the ground, sending dark energy into the earth.

The dismantled skeletons around them quaked. Slowly, they began to knit together, the sound of popping and snapping bones being placed into position. The hollowed eye crevices of every skull stared

into Lydia, as she slid her gaze back down to Dain, who struggled to stand.

A chorus of chilling shrieks spilled from their unhinged jaws as they rushed toward him, locking him down in an unyielding iron grip.

He struggled against their hold, the fight going out in his eyes.

Dain coughed, blood staining his teeth. "Lya, you don't want to do this. You don't know how that orb works or what it truly wants."

She clenched her teeth against a broken sob welling up in her throat. "But, I do know," she said, smiling sadly. "It is a promiser. A giver of freedom. And I want a better life. For me. For everyone. I want to make my own choices. Giving the witches the orb will only condemn us."

She pivoted around to the opening within the wall, a soft, yellow light gleaming from inside. Taking a breath, she slipped her arm through the hole. Felt her fingers glide over the cube.

The familiar burning pain flared through her body, and she closed her eyes.

And welcomed in the engulfing, blinding light searing her senses.

Her mind and soul.

Then, Lydia whispered her last wish to the Light Orb. One that would transport her, and every person, every living thing out of this world, and into a new one. One that would destroy Polaren, bringing down the reign of the Celestial Witches and Ascended.

At last, she breathed deeply.

And somewhere far, far away, she felt herself disappear towards a better life. A better world.

ADDY BROWN –
FAIRUZA BALK

The act of being a witchy woman
is prevalent in the feminine routines
and self-nurturing duties
performed by women every day.

Our moods are ruled by the weather and light,
feeling down under cloud-covered suns,
knowing it is time to charge our magic
when our lunar ruler makes an appearance
in the star-spattered sky.

We prepare for our day with a spell
as we brew our coffee every morning,
readying our sweet potion with various elements,
whispering our hopes as incantations
for the day ahead.

We practice our craft in readying for the day ahead
shapeshifting with the sky,
making our appearance vastly different from yesterday's disguise
morphing our tresses with wands
and making our eyes sharp as a cat's with black markings.

Words of enchantment are spoken by us,
bewitching our lovers with a witty remark,
accepting their offerings of gentle kisses
and charmed caresses
on the altars that are our cheeks and lips.

Magical creatures inhabit our homes,
feline friends we have invited to be our companions,
willing them to heal our emotional wounds
and ward off negative energy
from our shared blessed space.

I hope they don't burn our magic bodies
at the stake,
mimicking the fates of our sisters before us,
the women they accused of evil ways.

I now understand why
they see our divine, feminine lives
as a venomous threat
to their vile attempt at repression.

It is because they are aware
that when they let us live,

our magic runs wild,
our whimsy frees us from their nooses,
unbound by our wicked practice.

But they should know by now
that when you burn
witchy women
we only come back
scorned.

BRENNAN REYES –
WAKE

Illuminate. My
Hollowed eyes reflect
The wretched, horrid,
Countenance of death.
Eyes entwined with mine.

Illuminate. The
Numbed fingers reach out,
It is not yours to
Touch! May the sun find
Warm limbs covered and
Shrouded in death's bed.

Illuminate! Please!
Revive the mind in
Which death permeates.
Beseech the kissed throat
Of mine. The undid
Dress reveals blessings.
I am invited
To remember what
It is to want to
die

DONATTO BARRA – *BREATHING*



CALLIE HIBBITS –
 CALLIOPE AND URANIA NEED TO TALK

Urania watched the spoon in her sister's hand circle the rim of her coffee cup, dragging metal against ceramic in just the perfect way to make pure, unadulterated rage rise in the back of her mind, as if she was some kind of Cain-esque sleeper agent. They had to stay, Calliope had insisted, because a cappuccino didn't taste right from a paper cup. Urania had just shrugged it off, like she always did, picking out a table by the window and slowly shredding up the paper sleeve of her straw while her sister bickered with the barista about the temperature of their steamed milk.

Calliope was "particular," as their mother said. So far, by Urania's observation over the last thousands of years, Calliope was "particular" about coffee, the formatting of sheet music, the way hair was styled (her own and others'), the inseam of slacks, and every other thing her sharp ice blue eyes locked onto. There was probably some deep, waxing poetic thing to say there; something about eldest daughters, about responsibility.

Personally, Urania just thought she was a bitch.

There's only so far a guilt trip can go before you run out of gas, and her sister had been running on empty for the last three centuries. Urania wouldn't deny that Calliope had a lot on her plate, though. Little miss academic, teaching at a school Urania pretends to not know the name of just to watch Calliope's brow twitch at dinners. Chief and eldest muse, oh so wise. Poet, singer, composer, mother, professor, sister, pain in everyone's...

"Stop slouching."

Urania straightened in her seat, feeling her spine pop from tailbone to neck as she did. Calliope watched her, for a moment, calculating, before reaching down into her bag, hefting out a large black binder that could probably take out a toddler if dropped at the perfect angle. Urania cringed as it slammed onto the unsteady little cafe table, making the other people sitting around then turn to spare glances and glares. Her sister didn't seem bothered, paging through color-coded labels.

Urania was quiet for a moment, shifting awkwardly. “How’s Orpheus?”

Calliope managed to somehow sour up even more at the mention of her teenage son, a familiar line on her brow. “He has this *girlfriend*... Actually. No. Don’t even start. We have a lot to get through.”

“What about everyone else...”

“It’s just us.”

The words sat between them for a moment.

“Oh.”

Nine. Nine sisters, nine muses – and only Calliope and Urania could show up to do this?

“What, are they suddenly too busy? For this, of all things?”

“Well. I think you could imagine it might be a little difficult for them to make this work. Not just timewise, but—”

“That isn’t fair. I’m the youngest.”

“And you’re probably the only one who still liked him well enough to not ruin it out of spite.”

Planning a funeral is a fickle thing even for normal people. While most families dealt with grief, the muses found themselves in a broiling pit of spite and discontent. It’s even more difficult to plan a funeral for a god that no one knows is going to die.

“Zeus had- *has* a lot of kids besides us. A lot. Why are we getting saddled with daddy dearest’s coffin order? Aren’t *we* technically the bastards?”

Urania, not for the first time (probably only the third), felt a slight pang of guilt as Calliope gave a rare wince at her words.

“I offered to handle things. We would have gotten stuck with it anyway, but...I offered. You know the *others* are too busy.”

The youngest muse just stared down at her plastic cup of iced matcha, half drunk, melting and mixing into a disgusting-looking mess. She always got the same thing, every time. Coffee gave her the jitters, and all the sugary stuff was too gross. In high school, she would always stop to get one on Fridays, along with a cappuccino for her father. Somewhere in her mind she could see him, in a dollhouse mimicry of the home they had when they all still lived together, when they all still liked each other. Sitting in his office, his usually cold face split into a rare smile at the sight of her lingering in the doorway with two cups. “*Oh, Rainy. You and your swamp water.*” He would laugh like it was the funniest thing ever, even though he said it every time, and she would laugh all the same.

She would stay, sometimes, pretending to do homework, pretending to be doing anything important just to be around him. Just

to try to soak up anything good she could catalogue into a file in her brain, one she could use to defend her father when she started to hate him again after their weekend was over. Her mother would always grill her, asking what they did, what he said. All she could remember was the hazy, golden light through his windows, the line of snow globes on his desk. A coffee shop cappuccino poured into a Garfield mug, because it was the only way it would taste right. That was easier. It was easier to remember that, instead of screaming matches, plates launched at walls with competitive discus precision, too many other bastard children that mattered more than her. Easier than inevitable breakdown when his sobs wracked his body, when his frantic apologies made him too weak, more frightening in anguish than rage, uncomfortable to even look at.

How do you tell a god you can't forgive him for his sins?

"Rainy? Are you listening?"

Urania looked up from the table, absently tracing circles with the condensation dripping from her iced cup. "I don't think I'm going to be much help with this. I need to get to work to close tonight anyway." That was a lie. She already called out.

"Back to work? Where, the Burger Barn?"

"There's no shame in working your way through college, Calliope."

"But you aren't. That's so stupid, Rainy, you literally aren't. Our father's name is on half of the buildings and all of your bills. You just want people to think you're working your way through college. You're failing miserably, for the record."

Urania had the good sense to look slightly chastened, giving a little sniff as she crossed her arms. "Be nice to me. I'm grieving."

"He isn't dead yet." Calliope sounded more upset by the concept of Zeus still being alive than Urania's indiscretion.

"Still. You're more than qualified to do this. You'd probably love it actually. Are you planning to have a credits section on the funeral program? I bet you are, you'd just love to put your name in big bold letters at the end of this—" It bubbled out of her before she can stop it, an acidic, spiteful geyser that starts somewhere between her stomach and the pride lodged in her lower esophagus. Urania looked a little startled at her own words as she trailed off. And yet Calliope just stared, her jaw ticking once, twice, before settling into looking bored.

"He has most of this planned out. The casket he wanted and everything. But of course, he wants a mausoleum. We'll find some sculptor who wants to do it. They're always so chipper. It'll take ages

though. People will send flowers, and we'll do something special for the casket spray. Laurels, lilies, orchids, all that jazz."

"What about ambrosia?"

"We're not putting ragweed on dad's coffin."

A slightly panicked laugh shot out of Urania's mouth, eyes too wide as she shakes her head. It's funny. It's so, so funny, and it isn't. Mom's in a home, dad's in the hospital, and all the other gods are sitting up in the clouds salivating over the prospect of Zeus finally falling, and none of her sisters can stand each other long enough to plan a funeral. Something that should, in theory, be what they're best suited for. The end of a life should be the perfect basis for creation, for reminiscence, commemoration. Instead, it's just her and Calliope, sitting in a coffee shop, talking about throwing laurels and lilies on top of their godawful father and sealing him in a tomb. Containing millennia of power into a box of stone. Guilt struck her hard, just for a second, rare and bitter, panic brewing at the thought. *How will he breathe in there? How will he yell and complain and call us at seven in the morning three months later to apologize-*

"Focus, please. I'm supposed to be featuring in a private concert tonight."

"Is it a lyre thing? From what I've seen you just play a guitar. Badly."

"It is a lyre. Jackass. Can you be normal about something? For once?"

The cackle that escapes Urania manages to somehow be even more off kilter than the one before, and just for a moment Calliope looks something other than pissed off. It could be concern, maybe, a flicker of mirth; it's gone before it's there.

"As I was saying, we need to consider the luncheon reception after the burial."

*

The sky is almost dark by the time they walk out, painted pink and orange by the mix of Apollo's brush on Artemis' canvas. Urania lingered behind, watching her sister shift her bag like it wasn't too heavy, like that stupid binder wasn't giving her some new kind of scoliosis. Calliope turned as she pulled her gloves back on, lips pinched like the words she were about to say were some great burden upon her soul.

"So ... what are you ... up to. These days." Calliope gritted it out with her usual grace, tone too flat to even be a question, feigning interest for the sake of propriety. She knew already. She always knew.

Calliope had a less than casual fascination with all of her sisters' lives, whether they knew it or not, poking and prodding from afar. In her head it was something akin to caring, but it always came out bent and jealous.

"Catholicism," Urania hummed sagely after a moment, schooling her features into flatness that rivaled Calliope's tone. "Although I might wait a few years before joining the nunnery. Bad appearances and all, converting after all this." She savored the way her sister looked like she might swing that awful bag into the big glass window of the coffee shop in an aim for her skull.

"Okay. I give up. I'll keep you updated. Pick up an extra shift at whatever fast food place so you can pretend you need it to afford a dress for the service."

"Duly noted." Urania kicked at the pavement for a moment, the two of them standing in silence. She never knew how to leave. It was easier with the others, but Calliope had a certain rigidity that made her as huggable as a stone statue. She settled for awkwardly bumping her fist against her shoulder.

Her elder sister caught her wrist, hesitating.

"This world is falling apart, Urania. When Zeus is gone, it won't be pretty. The others will vie for power, as they always do, letting the chaos they wrought burn holes through the crust of this Earth," Calliope said delicately, voice clear and simple like she was describing the weather. Always prim, always proper, even at the end of the world. "Our father will die. Our mother will rot away in that nursing home, the *memory* she lived for fading like the empire he built." The elder muse went silent for a moment, eyes somehow more grim than usual. "It will, you know. He's always been dying. Just slower. How could we expect mortals to believe in something that can't even live forever? Gods don't lay in hospital beds."

Urania stared at her sister as she spoke, a pit in her stomach.

"And we ... we will write about it. There will be plays, and songs, and you will scrawl new heroes in your silly little stars, and then we will fade as well."

She felt like she was going to be sick. Calliope being right, so deeply, terrifyingly correct, made her bones ache with the weight of their inevitable obsolescence.

"...I was his favorite, you know." Calliope's voice was barely audible on the wind.

Urania stayed silent, shifting awkwardly at the look on Calliope's face; something half desperate in her eyes as it twisted. The

wind blew sharply, shaking some of her hair loose from that pristine bun, making her look much younger, much more scared than she was supposed to be.

“I was his favorite. Before any of you ever came along. He liked me the best. I ... I was the best.”

It’s a fickle, childish thing, shaky, a low murmur from usually steady lips. Greedy and scathing, snatching the toy just because she can. She’s probably right. Calliope was the straight spined, upright kind of person Zeus probably thought he was. He favored her because he liked the idea of being *like* her, of Calliope being like him. And so Urania tells her so, because it’s all she can give her, when the most powerful man in the world is dying in a hospital downtown, leaving a legacy of sorrow millennia long, with the both of them scrawled in the margins at the end.

“I know.”

INTERVIEW WITH STACEY SWANN

Hi! I'm Sophia Bolton, a poetry editor for the *Bosque River Review*. The following is a conversation I shared with Stacey Swann. We spoke about the experience of living in and writing about small towns, adapting to life in larger cities, about the depth of Texas as a place that is so broad and diverse not only in geography, but also as regards human experience and culture. From there, we talked about the alienation Texans sometimes feel from our own state when at times it feels hostile to us, and how to work to overcome that, to reconnect with our homes, through engaging with both literature and political action. A throughline of our conversation (and much of the Texan experience, I feel), is seeking a shared humanity in our local communities *and* in other parts of Texas, even parts that feel so radically different from our own. Enjoy!

BRR: Hello! Today, I'm interviewing Stacey Swann: novelist, politician, former teacher. A native Texan, lived in small towns, lived in big towns, worked in the schoolroom, on the farm, on the campaign trail. Recently penned a novel, *Olympus, Texas*, about a very messy family set in a small Texas town. Now you're working on a second novel, oriented more towards political machinations here. So, you grew up in Sealy, Texas, which has a population of about 2,500?

Stacey Swann: When I was growing up, it was about three thousand people. I think now it's maybe up to like five or six thousand so it's gotten a bit bigger. When I went to school, it was three thousand and my graduating class of my high school had 98 people in it. That's always, to me, a good marker of how big a town and school is.

BRR: Did you experience alienation as a small-town person when you moved to larger cities such as Austin, or conversely, as someone who

had liberal politics in a conservative area, such as when you lived in Sealy?

Swann: I definitely didn't feel it at the University of Texas. It's a state school and it draws from people all over Texas. So, even though it leans liberal and Austin is a liberal town, it felt very welcoming to everyone. I think part of that is at least at that time period, being a public university with a lot of different income levels and all those things. I never felt too isolated there other than just adjusting to meeting new people as an introvert. In Sealy, in this rural place, I don't think I felt isolated there either. I did feel slightly different, just in the sense that in towns like that everyone's related to everyone and a lot of families have been there for hundreds of years, and we had moved to Sealy — I didn't have relatives from there, we moved there when I was like four years old — so, you do feel a little separate from everyone because your family hasn't been there forever. But I think I felt more different from everyone just in the sense of how I was much more book and academics oriented than maybe your average student in that place. I think we had a really solid school system, but being in a rural area, there was a real focus on agriculture and auto mechanics and cosmetology and trades. So there were a lot of options for classes in that and less options for kind of upper level liberal arts types classes. It's what the community needs, but it also makes you feel like "hmm, I feel different."

BRR: So to connect that further, what was the experience of writing about one's hometown? I assume that Olympus, of *Olympus, Texas*, is patterned somewhat after Sealy; it feels about a similar size. What compelled you to want to write that setting? And along those lines, were there any dangers of patterning the fictional after the real?

Swann: I would say that Olympus is like 30% Sealy and 30% San Philip or San Felipe, which is an even smaller town that was closer to my house, we lived out in the country. [San Felipe] probably only had like 600 people. So I was combining those two things as well as like 30% invented because I could, because it's fiction and, it's easier, right? It's like, neither of those towns was the county seat, but say, I'd like a

courthouse in my novel on the square. So I just made it the county seat. I like to say that I think it was easier for me to write about it because it's geographically autobiographical, but not really based on people I knew; I think that's where it starts to feel more dicey or potentially dangerous, if you're writing about actual people that you knew that might recognize themselves in the book, and because I was leaning on Greek mythology for the book, it automatically took those characters in a different direction, rather than basing them on people I had known in real life.

So the book I'm writing now is set in Austin, but a bulk of what I had written before starting this novel was characters in rural places that very much resembled where I grew up. I think it's true for a lot of writers that — there's a Flannery O'Connor quote: if you live through your childhood, you have enough material for the rest of your life as a writer — so for whatever reason, for a long time, those were the stories that I wanted to write. I've heard other writers talk about how it's easier to write about a place when you're no longer living there. Like you get enough distance to see it more clearly and maybe that's also why for a long time I was drawn to stories there more than other places. I'm back living part time in a small town again in Lampasas, Texas, and there is something comforting in that familiarity. Growing up in a small town, I think, imprints on us. I think being here in Lampasas feels a lot less claustrophobic to me than it would to my friends who never grew up in a small town and less claustrophobic than maybe it even did to me as a child. Now that I'm older, I can appreciate a less hectic life more than I did when I was younger.

BRR: You talked earlier about especially in small towns, there are oftentimes these very entrenched, old families. As an outsider, it doesn't *necessarily* make you feel like someone who's just a bit player, but you can tell there's a power differential. Is that something you were trying to evoke when you worked to pattern the Briscoes [of *Olympus, Texas*] after the Olympian gods?

Swann: When I had the idea to link up regular Texas realism with a more mythological element, I automatically thought, well, I'm going to put this in rural Texas, because part of what I wanted to explore is this mythology that we have as Texans about our state, and I feel like that mythology is even more apparent in rural Texas than in cities. Cities feel more modern and sometimes more interchangeable with places that are not in Texas. So a small town seemed a good fit to me.

Then when thinking about like the Greek gods, because of all that power, I was trying to think about where is the power in these small towns? In that sense, small towns aren't that different from large cities, the power is most often with the people that have money. The money and influence go hand in hand in that way. And it's entertaining because in rural Texas, often the money amounts are just smaller, right? You can be the richest guy in town and you just run a real estate company; you're not a captain of industry. So I was thinking about it in that way because I wanted all of the dynamics that were going on with the family and their problems that were rippling out into the community. I wanted that feeling of they still often felt higher up the totem pole than other people and that impacted the decisions they would make.

BRR: I've been thinking about how a lot of Texans find themselves ill at ease here. Specifically people in marginalized groups, who have been watching (and fighting against!) the continued erosion of our rights and protections. I have friends who've moved out, essentially to flee, and even those who don't leave often feel fear and alienation. How do we avoid ceding power via fleeing to seek safety? How does one work to connect or reconnect with a place when you feel fear toward and alienation from it, and is there a role for Texan literature to play into that?

Swann: It's interesting to think about it in terms of literature too. So often I separate out the things I do in writing versus politics — even though like I'm writing some about politics in this novel, it's like the political things I do feel very separate from my writing, but I think that's as much about my own hang-ups about what is useful, [laughs]

versus what I do for myself, which is more the art-related things. But that's definitely something I should think about more.

On the larger side, I too have friends who I miss who have had to move away because the state is not only not welcoming of them, but is actively passing laws that inhibit their freedom and ability to live their life in the way that they want to live their life. And I would never begrudge anyone feeling like they have to leave the state, but at the same time I do think those of us that are able to stay here without it massively making us feel unsafe in some way, those of us that can move through the world and at least access the healthcare we need. Although I say that and I as a woman, I can't even access full healthcare in the same way. So it spreads far at this point about the people who feel less safe because of the laws that we have in Texas.

I do feel some commitment to staying because the feeling of democracy here is so out of whack in terms of representation; the state has a lot of people who are Democrats in it, you know, and some of them are not voting or some maybe identify as independents but lean towards more Democratic policies that they prefer. But you would think, looking at the landscape of what comes out of the Texas legislature every two years, that we were one of the most radically conservative states in the nation. And I don't think that that is an accurate depiction of what your average person thinks Texas should have, and we just live in a state where somehow the politics have been wrested away from the will of the people, because for a long time, we've just believed that nothing *could* change; that feeling of disenfranchisement goes so deep that people just don't go to vote quite often. Because it feels like nothing changes. So while that is really sad, I think also for a lot of us, it gives us hope that we can change things.

I do think all of these things are cyclical and there's progress and then like in the last presidential election, the turnouts kind of reverse tide for a while, but there's no indication to me that that is a trend that's gonna continue in the next election cycle. I think it's going to go in the opposite direction. So a lot of what I try to do when I talk to my

friends is just trying to get people to re-engage, like if you're staying here in Texas, to claim ownership of the state and try and make it represent what most people want more than it does at the moment.

A place that I saw that, from the perspective of someone who knows rural Texas, is in the past two years, [the Republican party] has pushed through these school vouchers, and that was like the center of the campaign that I ran because this was rural communities, they were not clamoring for Democratic policies, but everyone in these small towns knows how important the public school is. But the vast majority of these towns have no private school options. So if we start undermining the funding for those schools, it's going to be the rural areas that are impacted far more harshly than the other ones. Stuff like that is making me think that we have an opportunity to talk about policy with people, even more than politics, maybe. For people to understand that we are not getting the things that we deserve as taxpayers and Texas citizens. Very long, long rambling answer to your question.

BRR: No, you're good. I did throw out three sub questions. So going back to the theory of literature as something that can help people connect and reconnect to their hometowns, home regions, home states. Do you feel that there's a role for literature and other arts to play in terms of healing the rift a person or people might have between who they are and where they live?

Swann: Yes, absolutely. I think that so much of what draws us to reading fiction and memoirs is seeing our own experiences reflected in someone else's life. And through that being able to, one, feel less alone in the world, which I think is always helpful. Two, to maybe see insight into what we've experienced in new ways through someone else's perspective. I always think that for the person themselves who feels isolated, it's such a powerful thing to see that representation, which is why so many authors are also fighting so hard now against the book bans, right? Because so often what these bans are, what it looks like in Texas libraries, is it's removing representation for people who are already struggling to find it. The conservative forces that do that understand that seeing that representation is very powerful in letting

people accept who they are and feel confident in the world in a different way than if you're not seeing your experience represented.

I don't think fiction necessarily has to have a political or social purpose, but I think its effects are that quite often it does; in whose stories get told and when we get to see our own stories unfold. For me, I think, especially as I'm working on this new book that is politics-adjacent, a lot of what I grapple with and find interesting is just mapping out how complicated people are, how people are not all good or all bad, right? That everybody is composed of these different parts. Some may have more on one side than the other, but everybody feels like a hero in their own story, even if they look like a villain to someone else. I find that tension super interesting and I also feel like it's something that I want to do in my work because it's something that our culture is not really valuing at this moment; because of a variety of things, we're so much more polarized and people on both sides are quick to flatten the other side no matter what the issue is. That does a disservice to us changing anything, right? We have to acknowledge our shared humanity to be able to function in the world better. I think that's something that's always drawn me to reading and writing, that's something that I'll continue to think about no matter what topic I'm writing about.

BRR: Let's lean further into the political, specifically your political experiences. So, you ran for election to the Texas House of Representatives in District 68. Your upcoming novel — did your experiences campaigning set the novel in motion or was it vice versa or are they not necessarily connected in that sort of way?

Swann: They are connected in a way. I had the idea for the novel long before I ever thought about running for office, it had been kind of marinating back there for a while. My initial desire, the thing that I was thinking I wanted to write... I really love noir mysteries, and I wanted to write a novel that felt kind of like a noir mystery, but set in Austin. But the thematic stuff I was working on came out of the politics of the first Trump presidency. So I was really thinking about exploring these ideas of what makes us cynical, what is the moral fallout of being cynical?

And how does idealism function versus someone who's more idealistic versus more cynical? I was thinking about those questions. As a person who was not very politically engaged until 2016, like I always voted but I never did anything with the Democratic Party except vote for it, you know? So all that was going on and I was getting increasingly involved in political things, volunteer type things, and thinking about politics more.

The reason I decided to run for office was because I went into vote in 2022, and my race for the Texas house [of Representatives] wasn't even on the ballot. Because in Texas, if these Texas house races are unopposed, they can cancel the election basically, because you already know who's going to win. In some races, even if someone's running unopposed, it still has to stay on the ballot. But some races don't, and your Texas house race is one of those. And the Supreme Court had just overturned *Roe v. Wade*. I think it was the *Dobbs* decision that had just happened. To go in and cast my vote and not even be able to leave it blank for my house rep, who was instrumental in taking away reproductive rights, felt so disenfranchising to me.

So my impulse to run was, I just want someone on the ballot, even though I know I'm not going to win because it's 80% or more Republican in this house district, but everyone deserves to have the choice so that they get to vote against a person they think is stripping their rights away, if that's how they view that political subject. That was the impetus there. Then what really solidified it was the Ken Paxton impeachment. That that happened and the fact that Tim Dunn, the evangelical billionaire, basically gave three million dollars to Dan Patrick, who was supposed to be the judge in the Senate of the impeachment hearing. It seemed so cynical and ugly to me that I knew in that moment, if I didn't do something larger and bigger, that I would probably become cynical again. Because it just seems so cynical to me. It is no coincidence that in my novel I have characters that would be considered Christian nationalists and an evangelical billionaire. Because that's so much the reality of Texas politics at this moment.

BRR: So, you didn't win your candidacy, to put it bluntly — [both laugh] but what did you accomplish?

Swann: Just having my name there and having conversations with people, part of what I wanted to do was try and diffuse that polarization by showing, I'm a self-avowed Democrat, I'm here speaking to you and I'm not scary and a lot of my positions aren't that different from your positions. That kind of person-to-person work to chip away at the polarization that's there right now. That felt really satisfying. And it felt really satisfying to talk to Democrats who were just really happy to have that choice on the ballot. Then for me, it gave me, I was already working on this novel, but being in the mix with people who politics is their life was really helpful for me just in thinking about my novel because I didn't have a lot of friends that were politicians or working in the nonprofits that are adjacent to politics, and it gave me a much better understanding of the type of people that are committed to that work.

BRR: So at large in our politics, Texan and American, we are this two-party system, this two-party country. I know people who feel alienated by both parties. Some feel they're insufficient or incapable. How do you feel about the tension between working within the system, like as a representative of one of these two parties, versus working outside of it, whether as someone who is an independent or supporting third party work?

Swann: The great thing is I think we need all of those people, and so whatever aligns with what a person feels is most effective and truest to who they are as a person, there's space for that that is needed and really helpful. Because there's a lot of reasons to be disenchanted with the Republican Party — I mean, the Democratic Party right now — but Republican too; I think if you're a certain type of Republican, you probably feel abandoned by your party as well, but I know there's a lot of Democrats that feel abandoned by the Democratic Party, and I would never tell those people, well, the only thing that you can do is work within the system to change it.

I think that we can all continue to do that kind of social work much more easily if we enjoy it, if we get something out of it and we get a community that feels nourishing around it. So I think the great thing is that no matter whether you're trying to like build up the Green Party or start a new party or you're working within the Democratic Party, or you're working with other nonprofits that are adjacent to social issues, but not necessarily politics, no matter what feels like the best fit for you, it's really needed. So I very much think that people should go to the place that feels the most welcoming to them, but I also tell people that if you want the Democratic Party to change, then we need more people from the ground up as like precinct chairs and stuff on the very local level. You get more people in there that are less entrenched in the way politics as usual is done, then you do start changing the party in a larger way. I would say the same thing to Republicans that I talked to as well.

BRR: What are you working to tease out or communicate through your upcoming novel? What can readers look forward to?

Swann: Once I had gotten the first draft and was looking at it, what I was trying to explore is this idea of agency. Like those of us who feel like we don't have a lot of agency in the world to change things versus people that automatically do, and the way that even that sense of agency is not easily a good or bad thing, right? Sometimes agency can be used and really negative things happen. So I think, even more than me thinking about cynicism and idealism, it's just thinking about like, what does it mean to think you can change the world? Because a lot of us don't.

BRR: Yeah. We live in an era where a lot of people feel and maybe intentionally have been disempowered or imbued with a feeling of disempowerment. I think all those thoughts and how they lead into this feeling of powerlessness, help support and keep entrenched the status quo.

Swann: Absolutely. And I think so many things about politics feel new

and different in this moment, but the one thing that feels very familiar to me, like from my twenties, even, is how much is controlled by money. How much the people that have the most money are controlling a lot of aspects of government. And the lovely thing about that is, I think that's a very unpopular position in any party, you know? Most people don't like that and they think it should change.

SOPHIA BOLTON –
ON DELIVERY

I apologize for birthing you on unwilling park benches
and hobbling away. For twisting your fingers until

they pop off like grapes. For lacking the strength to name you.
When you crawl out of my body you are already someone else.

I apologize for never looking at you long enough
to tell you you're ugly. To do your makeup. To see

my scars across your abdomen. I don't want you
to lose feathers over the Pacific, to experience being

plucked smooth in Seoul or Bangkok, to find yourselves
crammed into three-minute commodities. Lurch forward, and stab

anyone who trips and falls across your path. Everyone
with your heart enjoys a little veinslitting. Did you know

some bodies produce excess blood? It makes me sick
with envy. I want to wear you about like open wounds;

instead, I shy and fold you into envelopes. I stick
all stray fingers inside me to seek and to seal

my cracks. As if anything except sand seeps out
but, *wow, that is a lot of sand.* And wind. I am done

being a beach and not an ocean. Sandbagging when
I ought to burst like a water balloon. Drying wit

instead of redhand print. Leaving you jacked up and
sprawled out on the operating room table. Hold still

while I commit surgery. Wake up and smile at my face
in the mirror. How horrifying. I worry you are not

my rose-kissed kids. I worry you are merely scabs
I grow tired of picking.

SOPHIA BOLTON –
BREAKFAST AFTER FAWN RESPONSE

The sunrise after yesterday is, of course, beautiful.
The type that reminds you she is a watercolorist ready
to make mess with gold and pink and blue and
purple, to swish and smear, to let us figure it out.

Birds absent from sight squeak outward,
they whistle like excited, elegant children,
there are no dogs barking;
there are no dogs fighting.

At the red light it appears a giant confectioner
drizzles the sky with a layer of cherry syrup,
thin-sliced tangerine, molten cream cheese,
some kind of gray sweet I've not yet eaten.

Cairns of cornflower cloud unafraid to topple,
colossal as they are, I have to stretch my neck
to find their base; my eyes cannot swallow them
whole, I breathe them in. My clothes are intact.

The sunrise endures. It digests yesterday's gray
cramping for hours and hours, it smiles barefoot,
the clouds get a little tacky and flirt with silver
linings, they bloom pregnant, they jog stalwart.

Under the sun-sky I with heart waltzing listen.
It is so quiet I can hear it. I can stand still and see
there is no flash and snarl of whiteblack fur,
there are no jaws closing upon my body.

SOPHIA BOLTON –
FLAME OR CONCEALER

after Jane Huffman

When I speak it is like
I am boarding a plane.
I am bored so I speak

what I like. I am like
in the ear to a mite
on a cat. I'm a mite

when I speak so he strikes.
When he strikes it is like
I am boarding a flame.

When he strikes I see fear
in the board. It is plain.
When the furious board

is aflame it is plain
that my seat and my ears
are in pain. Don't complain.

Or he'll strike with the board
yet again. Do not speak
of your fear or your shame.

When I fear it is like
I'm a speck. I'm a fleck
on a speck on a mite

on a cat and the cat
is aflame. And the flame
is aflame. And the flame

is a mark of my shame.
I'm in pain. I complain.

When complaining of pain

I hide under the ear
of the cat. But the cat
is an ear with a might

born of fear. So the cat
with a board that's a knife
in the hand licks a strike

deadeye flat on the flat
of my seat. And my hands
board my ears. And my ears

loose a cry like a blaze
and a furious cat.
When I scream from the strikes

and the fear and the board
it is clear I am dead
on my feet. With my hands

knifed like licks to my seat
as it begs me to hide.
When he pierces my hide

with the board and his fears
in his hands I can now
understand. He's a man.

He's a man with a kid
in his eyes and a kid
in his gut like a birth

-mark ablaze. Like a scream
deep inside born of shame.
When he strikes with the flame

of a scream in his eyes
it is now that I leap
and I strike. It is now

that my heart is a knife.

That my hands have a blaze
in their eyes. It is now

I'm alive and the kid
that's inside sees the kid
in that man and says hi.

And we hug and lock hands
and we fly.

ASHTYN HANSARD –
WHEN THE TIME COMES

The pews begin to fill with people that look almost detached from the world. The women's long, bland skirts and cream-colored blouses almost look colorful compared to the men's pure white shirts with their black slacks. Every face is foreign despite my few visits here already, familiarity a forgotten concept. The stained glass behind me paints their canvas of clothing, an ethereal lighting shining in around my body and cascading onto the wood beneath my feet.

I feel into my skirt pocket for my phone and pray that it's still recording a voice memo. Well, not pray. I *hope* it's still working. Prayer is a forgotten practice in my life, something I've abandoned since Mama went away when I was a little girl.

I hold my notepad with The Book, ready to take notes on scripture. My skirt is loose around the waist, but I had to thrift whatever I could find to make sure I look the part. Waltzing in with a pink dress with small straps or even just a bright sweater would immediately catch attention, and that would be the end of me.

I take a seat in a back pew and watch for anything that's worth taking notes, same spot as last time. Everyone is spread all around, so I blend right in. I spot the cross with wings in the center of the room, a shudder running down my arms as it peers at me. It's been just over twenty years since I've been here last, the ghost of Mama sitting right next to me. I can almost feel her long braid resting by my arm, its light brown color matching mine.

Soon, it's two minutes until the service starts. I see a few heads turn and stare at me longer than I'd like. That's one thing I don't miss about St. Perses: the constant stares of the elderly judging you harsher than God ever would.

I'll have it known that I don't have a problem with God itself. Whether it exists is a question I still ask myself on a daily basis, but that's not where the mystery really lies. It's the organization, specifically the "United Worshipper Convention" here in Texas. Mama joined it after Daddy passed away in a drunk driving accident. I've never seen Mama look so lost as she did those few days after, the light in her hazel eyes completely gone. She came home from a grief support group one day with a pamphlet in her hand and no other options to be seen.

I only remember bits and pieces of my time here when I was younger. At first, it seemed just like any other church in a tiny town: filled with old people and sermons that you never really understand when you're a kid. I don't even remember most of the services. But after going for a few weeks and talking with Leader Smith, Mama got more serious about it.

Everything suddenly became about the UWC. The food we ate, the clothes we wore, the way we spoke even when we were alone at home. I don't think I ever really believed in it, but Mama did, and that was enough. I didn't have any friends and Daddy died before Mama ever was ready for me to have a sibling, so she is the only person I can talk to. Or, she was.

The sound of shoes clacking against a hardwood floor pulls my attention to the front and away from the pen in my hand I was clenching. An older man in long robes steps up to the podium, a nurturing smile resting on his face. The current leader, I suspect. He glances around the room, taking a noticeable pause when he sees me just like he does every week, and continues his sweep of the area. Once he's seen everyone in the room, he begins to speak.

I guess with everything I went through when I was younger, I expected myself to be furious here, but I've felt nothing but a strange sense of nostalgia every time I walk through the glass doors at the front. There's something comforting here despite my history. That's how they get you, with the false sense of security.

Mama disappeared a couple of years after we joined the church, and I got sent from home to home. I didn't have anyone left, and the only thing Mama left me was a note telling me that she's keeping me safe and to never forget her. Ever since, I've hated church and everything to do with St. Perses. I banished it completely from my mind and my Mama that abandoned me. That was, until, the reports came out about a missing couple. They were traveling through town and decided to stop by for a service. No one's seen them since. The church says they're unsure what happened, but I know they're lying. Thankfully, one of the perks of being an author is knowing that there's almost a story waiting to be told, and I've been building this one up for a long time.

I'm here to expose them.

I spent the past twenty years of my life up north, trying to distance myself from this place, to forget my childhood and how the UWC ripped Mama away from me when I was too young to understand, but I knew that if anyone from there was gonna bring it

down, it had to be me. Maybe if I can tear this place down, I can finally know where my Mama went, whether she's living or gone to wherever we go after we die.

The leader pauses for a moment after his announcements, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance towards him just to see his eyes on me once again. He's not suspicious, but rather intrigued. No, it's something more than that. He almost looks like he's satisfied to see me here. His face strangely reminds me of someone that has no place in my life. I feel sweat start to run down my back. Did the AC just shut off?

He raises a hand towards me. "Would you please introduce yourself to the congregation?" he asks, his voice almost earsplitting over the silent room. The elderly faces turn towards me again, followed by the other families sitting with them, each stare feeling alien to my senses. The energy of the room is focused on me, the sharp point of fear pressing down on my tongue.

I slowly rise to my feet, trying to keep myself from panicking out loud. I impulsively reach to move my hair behind my ears. It's something Mama always did when I was panicking about grades or crying over some movie we watched together.

"Hi there," I say, my southern accent blending in with the rest of the churchgoers. "My name is Esther Frances and I just moved here from Alabama, believe it or not." The congregation does their polite chuckle and waits for me to continue. "I've been searching for a new church to attend, and this seemed like the best fit for a serious believer like me. I'm very excited to be here with you all." I finish my introduction, locking my eyes onto the leader. The fake name I've adopted is a bit old fashioned, but it's the only one I could think of in time. He stares back at me with that same look of satisfaction, but now it's got a different tone to it, one I can't seem to place in my head.

"Hello, Esther," he says, withdrawing from our invisible battle. "I'm glad to see that you've returned to us, and we're all eager to welcome you to our family. My name is Leader James Wilkins, but you can call me whatever you'd like, ma'am. If you were able to find us, then it's a sign that you're meant to be here, and we're not ones to ignore signs from God." The crowd murmurs their agreements and turns back to the front for the sermon.

Wilkins starts once the room quiets, reading text from the middle of The Book about some rule I've already forgotten. It's not exactly scripture, per se, as the Bible does it. The Book is a little different, a lot harder to understand in terms of how everything works. I studied it for years, trying to get a grip on what made Mama suddenly change.

I remember when she would read bits and pieces to me while I got ready for bed, but none of it made sense. When I decided to read it again to expose the UWC, it was just as confusing. The Book talks about a savior, but not how Jesus was in the Bible. This savior isn't the son of God or a miracle in the making, but rather a shell for the God to take over.

The only ones who can truly understand the meaning of The Book are the ones chosen by the God, taken over and seeing the world through its eyes like a parasitic creature, supposedly just like the man standing before me. How the selection works is still vastly unclear to me, but I know from the readings I did last week that it isn't a pretty thing. Deimos 7:22 even uses the words "a revolutionary metamorphosis of the soul and the mind, discarding the mortal prison that binds us to the soil and earth beneath us." A change of that degree has to be horrendous to experience, even if it is done through a God. After they're used, no one really knows what happens, but I have my own ideas.

I remember when Leader Smith announced his retirement to us. It was only a few months before everything went wrong in my life. The following week, his body was found behind the church, a massive wound down his front side according to the articles I found online. Mama never talked about it with me, saying it was "too gruesome" and that I'd have to wait until I'm older to learn about it. Look at what good that did me. I waited all that time just to figure out myself that the church is most likely murdering its members to keep up the appearance of this God. I just pray—*hope*—that they didn't do it to Mama.

Even the beliefs are vague to an outsider like me, so I've been forced to rely on the message from Leader Wilkins. From the services I've been to and that I can remember from my childhood, this God is an all powerful being that wants nothing more than to make sure the world is "just as it should be." It can command whatever it wants of its people, good or bad. It's typically preached with the good in mind, such as stopping a drought or healing a dying woman. But, if the God grows tired of people and decides that we're nothing more than a virus that needs to be dealt with, then who's to say it couldn't wipe us out instantly?

A bell rings, ripping me out of the trance. An altar boy makes his way back to his seat, the bell sitting plainly in his hand. I take a glance around and find heads beginning to bow for prayer. I lower my own, hoping I don't look too lost. When Wilkins begins to pray, his

voice snakes its way into my ear and in my body, his words echoing deep into my heart against the muscle's wishes.

"Our God, let us pray to show the world the true meaning of your presence. Let us prepare to join you when our life here comes to an end, for you are the only one we serve. Without you, we have no meaning. Without you, life is incomplete. We must make the world know about you, for you are the only one who can save us."

A woman muttering her agreements down the pew rings out over the room, her voice sending for the God they worship. Wilkins doesn't seem to hear it, his voice crawling in my ear once again. "Rid this earthly planet of the demons that walk among us and show the true way we should live. Let our deaths have a meaning, and let us serve you for all of eternity, our God."

The last few words feel like a stabbing in my eardrum. I can't help but let the mask slip, moving to grab my ear to release the pressure. I raise my head, hoping again that no one will notice me. When my eyes raise, Wilkins is looking at me. He glances away once our gaze connects, almost as if he's embarrassed to be caught.

He continues on with the sermon, turning instead to the back of the book. My body reacts before my brain does, an unworldly pit of guilt making my stomach drop. Must we read this part, the only pieces of The Book that call out to me on the loneliest of days? I'm clenching my fists, preparing for those sacred words, when Leader Wilkins lets out a sigh.

"My dear believers, I must admit something to you." The crowd leans in, an uncomfortable silence drawing the breath from my lungs instantly. He also leans in, practically bending over the podium. "I had a moment of weakness in my belief."

The crowd gasps. I hate to admit that even I'm a bit surprised by the confession. Most believers have a crisis of faith at some point in their life, to be fair, but not here. Every article about this place in later years says that they're all under a mass religious psychosis, never letting up in their faith. *Everything* revolves around faith, so why would the leader admit to his doubts? Even when I was younger, everyone here seemed so sure of their beliefs. I pat my leg, making sure my phone hasn't suddenly disappeared at this confession. Maybe he's going to confess everything to us. Maybe, just maybe, I'll get what I came for.

Wilkins straightens up again, raising his hands to quiet the crowd. "I know, I know. This isn't something you'd expect me to say, but I believe in being honest with you all, even in my darker times. It is true. I had a brief moment of doubt, but I promise I have a good reason." He waits for a moment, the tension in the room growing unbearable in only a few seconds. "I believe we are arriving very quickly

to the end of times. With this, I must begin to prepare you all, and I'll admit that it made me scared."

There it is. The same bullshit that every place like this insists on every few years. The world is ending because of natural disasters or nuclear war or women and people of color finally having rights. I fight the urge to roll my eyes, not wanting to give myself away. He announces a chapter. *The* chapter. Menoetius 12:11–17. I really don't want to hear him preach about this, but at least it'll be good for the recording.

Leader Wilkins suddenly slams his book shut with such force that his graying hair flies up, messily sitting on his head. He marches in front of the altar and gets on his knees, raising his arms to the cross in the front of the room. For a moment, he just sits, his body unnaturally still. Not a single twitch occurs in his muscles, painting him as the vessel he claims to be. Goosebumps spike against my neck.

Just when I think he may be frozen solid, he finally rises and turns back to the crowd, his crooked smile giving the impression of a demon toying with his life. He pulls an old knife out of his pocket and draws the blade across each of his palms, blood gushing down his pale skin like red wine spilled onto bread. I can feel a tear start to gather on my waterline. I don't know what's happening, but I can't pull away. I don't want to pull away.

He raises his arms again and begins to shout. "As the world crumbles around us with the consequences of those with no true belief, we will remain standing, planted firmly by our faith! When creation sings its final song and melds into the soil that holds our mistakes, we will rise above and sing a new song! Our God will hold us like its child and raise us to the skies like its savior! Our God will protect us and carve a new life through us, for we are its servants! Never again will we suffer from earthly turmoil but rather be reborn through its eyes and mind! We will walk together over the destruction brought on by the lamb chosen with love! The ring of destruction brought on by the most evil among us cannot compare to our faith, and to our God we owe this truth!"

He brings his hands down and rubs the blood down his cheeks and onto his neck. He rubs it into his skin, streaks of red staring at me as the congregation repeats the scripture in a chant. I join in, feeling the urge to say the words myself. The lights above us begin to blink in a random pattern, light reflecting off the stained glass and throwing a rainbow of destruction across the room.

“Confess your sins!” Leader Wilkins yells. “Confess or you shall be blasted to smithereens by its wrath! Confess or you are an imposter on this land and must be exterminated! Confess before our God exposes you for the liar you are!”

Though the lights have gone haywire, I can feel his beady blue eyes staring at me as I watch a shadow appear behind him. Wings spread out to their full length for just a split second before they’re gone, the lights returning to normal as if nothing happened. Leader Wilkins returns to the front, reopening The Book as the altar boy steps up to wrap his hands in bandages.

My voice can’t seem to find me. I blink, pulling myself out of his trance. A stray tear begins to fall down my cheek, a result of the hypnotism he’s placed on me. I take a deep breath and urge myself to not get sucked into the service. I don’t know what happened, but those words captured me the same way they do every time I open up The Book. I’ve always avoided this section for a reason and today reminds me why. It also makes a thousand new questions scramble together in my head.

Wilkins continues on with his sermon, preaching about how we are the only people left on this earth who truly understand what life beyond death means. I listen in for clues this time, not allowing myself to pay attention too much. Instead, I keep my gaze mostly glued to a random passage in The Book, scared to get sucked into his words again.

When the service ends and the crowd begins to rise, I spot Wilkins walking towards me. I try to quickly leave so I can run to my motel room and write down everything that just happened, but random faces and families keep getting in my way. I turn to look for an exit when I almost crash into him, his eyes grabbing my attention.

“Esther, may we talk in my office for a moment?”

*

I barely keep myself from tapping my fingers along the arm of the wooden chair. The office is pretty plain, the only real decoration being multiple copies of The Book on some shelves and a canvas on the wall with their church symbols and spots of red paint across the bottom. Not creepy at all.

All he wants is to talk. For all I know, he does this with every new member. I can’t really blame him, not with all the allegations that have been thrown at the UWC lately. He probably just wants to make sure I’m a real believer and not someone trying to get dirt on them. My back grows slick with sweat once again, but there’s no time to excuse

myself as Wilkins enters the room and sits across from me. He takes my own copy of *The Book* and starts to inspect the cover as if it's made of precious stones. When he's satisfied himself with the deteriorating book, he sets it back down and gives me a crooked smile that sends a chill deep into my bones.

"Hello, Esther. I apologize for keeping you waiting, but I hardly ever get a free moment since I became the leader here. How have you been since moving here?" he asks, his voice carrying such kindness that I can't help but feel like I'm walking into a trap.

I swallow the fear and give him a hopefully convincing smile. "I'm doing just fine, especially after that service of yours. It was really something." Oh shit, did I go overboard with that? I keep my grin on my face, watching as he studies me with unblinking eyes. I have to fight the urge to not stare at the bloodstains that still sit on his face and neck. When my skin feels like it's going to melt off my bones, I ask, "Leader Wilkins, may I ask why you wanted to meet with me?"

He takes a breath for the first time since he sat down. I feel a shiver pass from my shoulders all the way down to my toes. What is happening to me today?

"Esther, as the current leader here at United Worshippers Convention, it's important to me that I speak the word of *The Book*, and it's even more important that my fellow believers get everything they can out of my services. We're here to save the souls of Earth and spread the message of our God. If we don't make sure that we all work together, then how can we show the world their true purpose in life?"

"I completely agree, Leader Wilkins," I say, playing up as much southern charm I can muster. Wilkins gives me another crooked smile, the skin on his lip stretching across his teeth. The very action looks painful for him, but his eyes stay focused on me. He quickly drops the smile, his face turning deadly.

"Stop the recording, Ramona."

My heart drops to the floor at the sound of my name, my *real* name. How? How did he know who I was? All of my online accounts are private and none have my full name. The only way he could know me was if—

Oh, oh no. I see it now. I didn't recognize him at first, but it's him. He's the nephew of Paul Smith, the leader from when I was a child. I never knew his name, but I always saw him at the church. The hair and the eyes threw me off. Weren't his eyes green back then? I always liked him when I was younger, even had a crush on him at one point despite the age gap between us. Reunited once again.

I comb my hair behind my ears, my smile faltering as he keeps his stare on me. “W-what are you talking about, Pasto—”

“Cut it out Ramona. You think I can’t see your mother’s reflection in your eyes?”

My face drops. I guess we’re done playing pretend. “What do you know about her?”

“Give me the phone and I’ll tell you everything, from my lips to God’s ears.”

Mama...what the hell does he mean? What does he know about her? I glance at his hand, hesitation racing through my body. If he deleted the voice memo, then I won’t have any proof. Nothing but my own words, and everyone knows that’s basically nothing these days. But Mama...I need to know what happened to her all those years ago.

“What happened to her, James?” I ask. I can’t give it up, not yet.

“I told you, Ramona. Give me the phone and I’ll tell you everything. Better yet, I’ll *show* you. I’ll even let you take pictures afterwards if you’d like.”

The truth *and* pictures? My fingers twitch around my phone. Should I trust him? Well, no, that much is obvious, but this is the closest I’ve gotten to any information on her. Even if I can’t get the details of the church, I can at least write about my mother. That should be enough to shut this place down for good.

I take out my phone and place it in his outstretched fingers. He pauses the recording and shuts the phone off, placing it on the corner of the desk. He turns back to me with a more genuine smile, excitement lining his irises.

“You’ve made an excellent decision coming back here, Ramona. I remember when you were a young girl and you came here for the first time. You looked so scared. You wouldn’t let go of your mother’s hand, and you were practically glued to her side.” He lets out a quiet chuckle as he revisits the memories. “Your mother was really something, wasn’t she?”

“What happened to her?” I ask, over this game he’s playing. His eyes find me with surprise, almost as if he’s forgotten I’m here. He clasps his hands together and gives me a face full of pride.

“She was chosen, dear.”

No. I feel the blood leave my face. She was chosen. If she was chosen, then that only leaves one conclusion. She’s dead. The people here did it. Did they? Yes. No. Damn it! They’re going to believe it’s this God and get away with it. No! I knew the chance of her being alive was slim, but I hoped she had at least gotten free before she left this world. I wanted her to laugh again and wear bright clothes like she used to

wear on dates with Daddy, not this colorless life that sucked the soul out of her just like Daddy's death did.

I must look deathly myself since Wilkins hands me his trashcan to hurl into. I don't feel nauseous. I don't feel anything. This can't be real. I take a glance at his worried eyes. I need to play along if I'm going to get the actual truth from him. "What did God want her for?"

He rubs his neck, looking suddenly nervous. "I guess if we're being completely honest with each other, she wasn't specifically chosen. God actually wanted you, Ramona."

"What?"

"It chose you to be the next leader, but your mother couldn't bear to give you up, not when you were still so young. So, your mother made a deal with God to give herself up and give you more time. While I'm not sure why she would prevent you from experiencing something so joyous, I promised her that when the time comes, I'd be sure to let you experience it yourself."

I freeze in my place, slumped against the back of the chair. Wilkins springs out of his chair and moves to sit on his knees in front of me like a hyper puppy that's ready to play.

"Ramona, you may not see it since you've been gone for so long, and I know how terrifying the process seems in *The Book*, but this...this is where you belong. This is fate." He moves forward and grabs my head in his hands. "The second I walked to the podium and saw you in that crowd a few weeks ago, I knew my final day was coming close. You're releasing me and taking over the role as its vessel on Earth, and I can't thank you enough. Because of you, I'm finally going to see my God. I'm finally going to see my family again, and that's the greatest gift you could have ever given me."

His eyes are swirling in my vision. Did he drug me somehow? I lunge for my phone on his desk, but he holds me still by the arms. I can't move enough to wipe the tears finally pouring from me. Mama is dead. I'm going to die. And they will get away with it all.

I pull away, trying to gather whatever strength I have, but James's strength is inhuman, easily able to pin me down. He's close enough to me now that I can smell a rotting odor coming from his breath. I start to yell and beg for help, but he just laughs.

"Oh, Ramona. Don't waste your breath. The people out there knew this was coming. They've been waiting for this day. Your screaming will only waste your energy, and you're going to be needing that for the transformation."

“What if you’re wrong, James? What if it doesn’t want me? What then?” I ask. I’m grasping for any bit of logic that may be in his head, but he’s too far gone. He shakes his head with the same confidence of a true believer.

“I’m not wrong, Ramona. God told me itself. You are the one here to finally make a change. You’re going to finally show the world the only way to be saved. Only you can do it.”

He suddenly moves to his drawer and pulls out a rope. Even though I fight against him, throwing myself around like a wild animal, he manages to pin me down and tie my arms together. The last bit of my strength goes towards the scratch I place across his right eye. He spits in my face and immediately prays for forgiveness as he wrangles me to the door, leading me to my final moments.

*

The smell of mildew and rot fill my senses as we enter the old shed behind the church. He places me on the ground, not seeming to care about scraping my knees up. I try to get a sense of my surroundings, but the last bit of light escapes us as Wilkins closes the door, the click of a lock following.

He comes towards me again, crouching in my face. “I need you to stay calm now, Ramona. Do you think you can do that?”

My sobs are the only answer he gets. God, please, get me out of here!

He moves towards the corner in front of us, his smile nearly glowing in the darkness around us. He turns on an overhead light bulb and I finally spot it. There’s a giant lump of cloth laying in the corner. I shift in my place, waiting for him to pull out a knife and kill me. Is he going to make me undress first, one violation after the other? Will the fear and humiliation ever end? Suddenly, the cloth shifts, layers and layers of fabric unfolding as a figure stands.

It’s easily over ten feet tall, immediately covering Wilkins and I in its shadow. Its skin is purely white and tight against its inhuman anatomy, strings of thread wrapping around its neck. A draft of wind passes across my face from its wings giving a flap, nearly smacking me across the cheek. Blood red eyes lock onto me as a crooked smile matching the one that’s been staring at me all day beams at me. It’s terrifying, unlike anything I’ve ever seen. It matches the silhouette perfectly from James’s ritual in the church. It’s been here the whole time. It’s always been here, watching. How could I have been so blind?

My mouth drops in horror, unable to grasp the figure in front of me. It’s as if this thing has sucked all the air out of the room, leaving

me frozen as a forever victim. When my lungs start to claw at my ribcage, begging for air, I take a gasp.

Before I even get the chance to let my scream escape my throat, Wilkins covers my mouth and forces me to look at it.

“Look, Ramona! That is our God! Please, look! Look at its glory and beauty, look at what it can offer you!” He grips my arms and shoves my paralyzed body towards the God. “Accept the spirit already resting in your heart and unleash your mind to it! Accept your only future, the only way to truly live! Accept the truth!”

With one last shove, I’m given to God, completely and utterly helpless.

*

Rise.

I open my eyes and rise, the pain in my muscles no longer an issue. Hot, sticky blood covers my body, suddenly free of clothing. I get flashes of my body contorting to impossible lengths, muscles and bones breaking and bending just to reattach themselves later. My eyes are foreign in their sockets, taken from James so I can see what God wants me to. I look around my body, but there is not a single scratch or bruise left on me.

I take another glance around when I see Wilkins in the corner. The gash in his back exposes the pearly bones of his spine, fresh blood pouring from his corpse as his intestines somehow snake around his spine and onto the floor. His robes have been placed on a hook, leaving his bare body exposed to the air.

Come.

I move towards it, fear now completely gone from my body. Bony fingers grab my cheek, cradling my head with the softest touch. It brushes my tangled hair behind my hair, sending me back two decades with a single touch. It holds my hand as it cleans the blood with the cloth on its back. I can’t help but think of my childhood cat licking her newborn kittens clean, ridding them of the gore of rebirth.

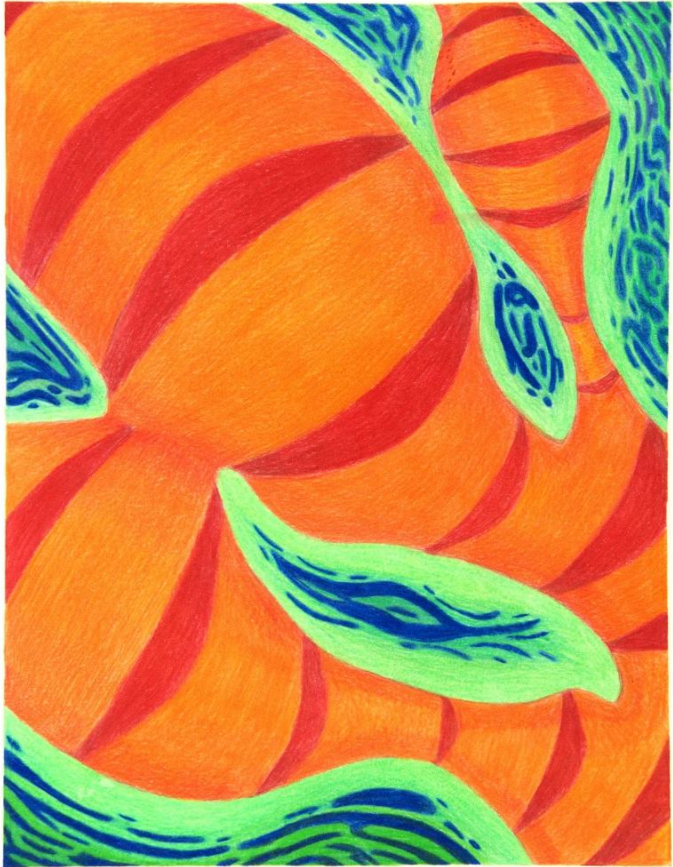
Dress.

I put the robes on and turn to it. The hand sits on my shoulder. I watch with amusement as the thread around its neck slowly snaking towards me. It crawls towards me, making a ring on my own neck and shoving itself down my throat. The thread pulls tight around my neck for a moment before disappearing from my vision.

We're connected once again, my dear Ramona. When the time comes, you will face the world and show them the truth about us. For now, come learn.

I take a seat in its lap as it opens The Book, the words simpler than a lullaby.

OLIVIA LOGAN – *KEY WEST IN COLOR*



Careless man, I do not

need you.

I chewed through the planet
to get to
you.

ABBY GENTRY –
MAN EATER

I am a girl-monster,
something floating,
disregarded, in the flooded basement;
bits of kidney stuck
between the gaps in my teeth.

A creature of compliments and
smeared gloss;
a soft, wet, pulsing thing pumped full of
red and pink and
choking on
it. Once,

I was something to fear,
something you were
careful not to wake
in the dark. Now,

you grip me by
the scruff of my wet neck,
drag me up the stairs
limp and docile and heavier than
I look. And
when the tears well up in my
eyes, when the spit and dirt cake
my knees you swipe the
blood-drool from my chin, tell me —
*god, you're so pretty when
you make a mess.*

But this is the way that it goes,
this is the wound that I'm
licking, the taste of bitten tongue and
sting of cinnamon;
the mulch of heart in my mouth that
I tore from the body in the

backyard shed.

I've filled up my womb with dirt,
locked myself out of my girlhood like
it's a house that watches me
scratching the door.

So, this remains in the violence:
the shape-shift. I become

patient.
I become fantasy. I
file my teeth,
learn to wait for the
proximity to close when
your hands reach for
my neck;
to set the knots in my hair like
hidden snares to catch your
unsuspecting fingers in
the softness, in the
sweetness.

Learn to break open my jaw when
you say — *wider*.

Learn to say *please* when
I need something
to
bite.

ABBY GENTRY –
GIRL GOD

By September,
a wretched and
unmistakable softness has
tunneled down past my ribs,
settled without invitation
between my joints and knuckles like
a pilgrim seeking
a place to stow his
worship. I can taste
blood (though I am uncertain whether from
the inside of my cheek or
spilt offering) and
a rising ache to know
if something similar
has made a home
in you too. Despite my
namesake

I am certainly not a church —
 more certain now than I've
 ever been — not a
reverent thing
in my bones that might tether me to
a pulpit, no sanctification to
wash me clean of the *wanting*.
 Wanting to linger in
 your mouth and
 your doorways like
 smoke from
all of the versions of myself I've burnt at the pyre; a
sacrifice to my church where
you anointed me

an artist.

Maybe it will kill me, maybe
I'll become the patron saint of
people who hunger to be
someone else's salvation;
immortalized inside another person's
longing — something to haunt your
halls, begging to be seen again. Jesus,
the things I could write if
I could stop my hands from
trembling.

So, when the epilogue comes and
finds me in the bath with
the water up to my nose,
leg dangling over the porcelain lip and
wet fingers curling and
softening the edges of
another paperback — when it finds you
in your mornings
with a thundering, wayward conscience in
your chest and a strange
weight to your ink-stained hands,

will you feel me then — in this space that
stretches between us, like
a hymn you
can't bleed from your
head? And, *god*,

I wait for something true;
solid, heavy,
warm with sin,
to come
crawling to
the altar

and
beg me
to
let them
in.

TEAGAN DRISCOLL –
A GOD AT THE HIGHEST POINT OF CRETE

The sharp clack of leather on linoleum rolled up and echoed across the tall brick walls of the hospital. Piero levelled his line of sight as he walked—not high enough to burn the exposed fluorescents into his corneas, and not low enough to disorient himself with the way snowy tile reflected that light in fragments. He focused on keeping his heart rate in time with his walking pace, monitoring that neither grew too eager. Ultimately, being the slave to curiosity that he was, he had little control over the whims of his mind. Especially not when a perfect specimen had been prepared for him.

A darkly dressed man stood in front of one door, lowering his gaze when he saw Piero turn the corner. With unfocused eyes, as if he were studying the floor through the body of the other man, he dipped his head and stepped aside.

"Doctor," he greeted.

Doctor Piero was better described as a man of science than one of medicine. For two decades, he dedicated his research to studying the gods. Though, he didn't ever care much for the gods themselves, only the meaningless hierarchy they imposed.

Or, the hierarchy humanity imposed upon itself out of an innate search for explanation and protection that amounted to no more than hope. The above and below lived symbiotically—gods needed worshippers, and people needed purpose—but if humans could create and destroy gods with only their belief, how much more influence did they have in the divine than they realized? He was only beginning to find out.

Despite his appearance, it would be unsuitable to call him old, as he was only reaching the end of his thirty-fourth year. His white hair was the result of too much reckless self-experimentation during his youth. More recently, he had developed the moulding of deep nasolabial wrinkles, unfortunately due to his constantly unamused expression, rather than age.

"Evron," the doctor returned to his assistant.

He let a single knuckle knock against the door before he impatiently reached for the handle. The thin wood held an unusual weight as he pushed to breach the entrance of the room. On the other side, the metal frame of the bed struck the wall, propelled by the force of the patient sitting up. The noise filled the space with a dizzying

ringing. The face that met his own was flat and calm except for the eyes, blown so wide that Piero could see gold rings around both irises. He didn't hesitate to walk forward and get a closer look. The face turned away in an aggravating display of fear that was good for nothing but disturbing his concentration.

His demeanor must not have been very friendly when he entered. It was possible that a spike in the patient's cortisol levels temporarily overpowered the sedative he had crafted, currently being administered intravenously. He could still feel the itch deep in his forearm from his early days of carving amateur sigils over and over to figure out what negated that channeled power.

He made use of the patient's moment of clarity, using a light hand to pull the notes Evron had left him across the desk. It would help to know a bit more about what exactly he had to experiment with. According to Evron's scrawling, this was indeed a god—not technically impossible, but Piero chose to err on the side of doubt. If this were a god, the most likely explanation would be that it was a replica. Gods needed errand runners; something to take their place so that when the rare occasion came for a god to interact with a human, they didn't actually have to do it themselves. To be clear, these replicas were still gods, in wisdom and infiniteness, only in mock-human form.

"My assistant tells me that you're not mortal, correct? If that is the case, why do you seem so scared?" he interrogated.

Piero tried to play off the way he startled when a voice returned, louder than a soft tone could reasonably be, "You think I am ignorant of what I am here for you to do with me? My being here may have been chosen for me, but I do not lack any understanding of what you will create out of me. That is what I fear—"

The voice choked, coughing around its own words until the room went silent. The patient's head hung—there was no telling if this was some admittance of defeat or simply the sedative taking effect once again. In the still air, the doctor felt that he might as well have been all alone. He picked up the notes to write a single note before tossing them back to the desk:

Claims to be a god of prophecy.

It was completely within his abilities to pin down which god that may refer to, but since beginning his research, he chose to forgo writing any names of gods to avoid his actions being mistaken as worship. Although, he realized that his current extreme was clearly distinguishable as no such thing.

When he looked at the bed this time, those eyes passively monitored him, and he could no longer see a full gold ring behind lazier eyelids.

"There we go," the doctor soothed. "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

There was no response.

With that, he pressed a cold thumb to a thin eyebrow and pulled the skin up. The color was certainly evidence of something inhuman. His fingers trailed down the patient's skin until he reached the high collar of a dress. The collar covered the fragile skin beneath, but did nothing to stop the doctor from pulling the fabric out of the way.

Piero's breath caught in his chest. His fingers brushed over the bare neck, now exposing raised patterns closed around that throat that reflected a gold as bright as those unnatural eyes. Being promised a god had not prepared him for the revelation that one was currently at his mercy. And she was beautiful. She was sculpted in such close image to a mortal woman that Piero hardly believed his own undeniable observations. He threaded his fingers through a strand of long hair that moved as one undisplaceable mass. Her lack of tear ducts was the cause for her uncanny eyes that had been absorbing the light in thirst instead of reflecting it.

The sigils that Piero's fingertips were tracing confirmed to him that the being in his possession truly was a god. A small bump was visible in the space above her larynx, clearly not part of her otherwise imitative human anatomy. As he felt the space, he concluded it was affecting her voice box—likely the reason she had not been able to speak more than a few sentences. He would make sure that changed. To do that, he needed inside of her.

The doctor made his exit, finding Evron waiting in the hall, observing the inner courtyard from a window. His relaxed smile made him look at peace. Evron always seemed at peace despite the way nothing he did seemed to be fully of his own volition. His life in the hospital revolved around the demands of the doctor, yet through the years, he had held no objection nor showed desire in personal curiosities.

"I'm impressed," Piero praised. "But something troubles me. How were you able to get her here?"

"She was sold to me. All very professional, really," his assistant responded.

"I'd hope you're not so incompetent that you would sell your soul."

"No, of course not," Evron's smile appeared on the edge of laughter. "It didn't cost me more than what I had already parted with long ago."

The doctor's face twisted. He was unsure of what depths Evron had fallen into to acquire the god, but he did know that it intrigued him. The corners of his mouth curled. Regardless, he moved past it. He was keenly aware that nobody was exempt from the law of equivalent exchange.

"I'll need the operating room to be prepared for surgery tomorrow," Piero said plainly. "You did good, Evron."

Piero found his way back to his office. The scheduled operation would require him to be at full attentiveness, but the idea of drifting to sleep was laughable. His office was a spacious room at the back of the hospital that happened to have a desk shoved away in a corner. He slumped into his chair and reached for a bottle of pills that sat on the desk—a sedative far less potent than the one he had prepared earlier. He shook one into his palm and clasped the hand over his mouth.

*

After a dreamless night, Piero pulled himself from his office floor. Exiting the room, he found Evron ready to greet him on the other side.

"The operating room is ready," was all Evron said.

Evron followed Piero down the hall to the unguarded door which he had taken such initiative in watching previously. Piero mustered the civility to tap before entering the room of the lethargic god. The IV tethering her to the bed dripped idly. Piero situated her pliant limbs so she sat upright on the bed. Her viscous hair fell from behind her shoulders, weighing her head down with it. When he stood her up, he relished the way she depended on him to keep herself upright. Skin flushed from the powerful sedative gripped tight to the hands that guided her through the echo chamber halls. When they made it to the operating room, she laid down on the table, reduced to a somnambulant state from their journey.

"Are you comfortable?" The doctor asked.

There was no response.

"You can be honest," he encouraged. The god said nothing and shut her eyes. "I take that to mean there are no complaints."

With that, he cut off the drip of the sedative and switched the IV solution, gradually allowing an anesthetic flow. When his assistant peeled back her eyelid, she could no longer follow the doctor's

movements around the room. Piero took that as his cue to begin. He made practiced work of pulling on the gloves that constricted him halfway to his elbows. The ever-lingering scent of antiseptic was reinvigorated when Evron began to prepare the area. The sharp smell rolled over Piero, burning through his patience.

The first incision he took slow, captivated by the complete lack of blood. The skin was thin like tissue paper. He surmised that when you had a channel of power at your disposal, mortal injuries were no concern. The fragile layer of skin peeled back easily. In the center of her throat, lodged between protruding muscles, was the abnormal mass as hard as calcium.

Mass was too nondescript for the discovery he had unearthed. Its shape was flawed, resembling a seed, but it shined under the intense lamps like a baroque pearl. He set down his tools to explore the texture with his hands. He could still feel the ridges of the seed through the latex of his gloves, but the sensation was too distant to satisfy his eager curiosity.

He couldn't bring himself to finish the operation with the professional detachment that surgical tools provided. He pinched the seed between two fingers and pulled it toward himself. Like elastic, it could be moved, but the body resisted abdication. With a determined grip, he lifted it to find that the seed had taken root in her false arteries. He continued to pull through the tension, revealing the sprawling length of the tubes.

When the roots had reached their limit, they abandoned their seed and retreated back into the wound they had been yanked from. The doctor watched pale skin flush once again as the body on the operating table began to resituate itself. A heavy pulse bulged from underneath as the arteries splayed out, filling the body back up. A spray of blood coughed out, painting the doctor's white coat with a fresh red. He rushed to suture the wound before his work turned to waste, stained strands of hair clinging to the wet areas on his face and neck as he sewed.

Her lungs kicked on like a machine, expanding and contracting the ribcage under her skin. Piero found himself entranced by the fading of gold sigils into a dull, scarred silver that matched the color of the ones on himself. The blood drying on his skin brought his mind back to the operating room. He stepped back and held out his hands, signaling his assistant to dirty his own hands with removing the gloves. Piero never risked cleaning the scene more than he had to, but there

was something about the tacky blood coating his exposed skin that he didn't mind.

He left Evron to clean the rest of the mess while he strolled through the hospital's indistinguishable hallways. He took his time climbing the stairs and locating the bathroom. He rinsed out the dusty, ceramic tub before letting the water nearly overflow. Naturally, he took his shoes off before stepping into the icy pool. The vile scent of blood, enhanced by contact with the water, overpowered any smell of sweat that may have lingered on his clothes. He sank his head under to dissolve what had coagulated in his hair, coming back up to see the tub filled with a murky orange.

The door groaned as it opened, announcing the arrival of the only other conscious person in the hospital.

"How is she doing?" Piero asked, relaxing on a stiff, ceramic edge.

"Fine," Evron dismissed. "What do you plan to do next?"

"Now we see what lies behind this door we've just unlocked."

All of a sudden, Piero could no longer feel the perpetual calmness his assistant emanated. Nonetheless, he stood in the doorway with his familiar crescent-eyed smile. "Would you like me to run you fresh water? The smell is a bit too nauseating, even for you, no?"

Piero hummed in thought. "No thank you, I think I will stay here a while longer."

"Then should I wake the patient?"

"Yes, that's fine. But be sure not to put her back on that sedative. I have pills on my desk."

Evron dipped his head before leaving Piero to meditate in the metallic air of the bathroom.

*

For days, the doctor cared for the woman, waiting for the former god to start speaking again. Three times a day, he made his way to her room—the uninspiring walls reflecting his premature disappointment in wasting his time. The routine was starting to grow boring.

One afternoon, he opened the door to find her missing. The unexpectedness gave him a strange pleasure. As he left the room, he caught Evron again fixated on something in the courtyard.

The woman sat on the edge of a stone fountain and brushed her hair with rosy fingertips, sparking a new motivation in him. He seized the chance, pushing through the massive glass doors.

"As beautiful as it is out here, you look cold," the doctor started. "I know you're not oblivious to the damage that can do to your body, but you've never experienced how annoying a fever can be."

She said nothing to him. She only continued to pull her fingers through her hair, tossing the strands that came loose into the freezing water.

He fought the twitch in his eyebrow and tried again. "We can help each other here. I'll teach you how to keep this body healthy, and you can answer some questions of mine. For example, do you enjoy your hair now? Many humans do, but I always assumed that gods would feel apathetic about their appearance. Am I wrong?"

The chirping of birds was so loud in the silence it was insufferable. He was frozen by a blank stare, and only freed when she turned around to look into the water, more interested in watching her hair splash like ink into the water as it floated. Piero's frustration finally spilled over as he realized he had not succeeded. Even disconnected from her fellow gods, she refused independence. He had granted her the ability to speak, and she had taken his decades of study for granted. He regretted the care he had wasted in preserving her larynx.

He wouldn't accept this rejection into the unfathomable knowledge he saw decaying right in front of him. When he was back inside, he locked the door to the courtyard behind him. He would need some privacy this afternoon.

"It's no surprise you were able to purchase her so easily. At least you can teach a dog to speak," Piero raged.

"I suppose this means she still won't talk?" Evron asked with maddening passivity.

"It doesn't matter. I can find the answer to my questions by myself."

Piero started a determined stride back to his office with Evron pacing in tow. When he arrived, he pulled the glass containing the extracted seed from his desk. He trashed through cabinets looking for tools. Once he located a scalpel and suture needle, he propped himself on the poorly padded table. Without hesitation, he pressed the sharp steel to the left side of his chest, wringing a chill through his body.

Evron interjected his painful focus to ask, "Do you want to know what I sold for her?"

Piero was immediately warmed back up by the pumping of blood that spilled over in swells synced with his quickening pulse. Evron's monologue droned in the background. "It was my freedom in a

way. I'm damned to place my devotion into the hands of your creation."

If Piero's breathing wasn't uncontrollably ragged, he might have laughed at the admittance. With two fingers, he tested the depth of the wound by pulling from either side. He had this one chance, and he would die before ruining it with the potential of the seed rejecting. He bit down on his tongue until the taste of metal consumed his palate as he began to wedge the mass into the incision.

"For these past few days, I feared I would have to relinquish myself to a demoted god." Piero clung to each word, fighting against the urge to pass out as adrenaline shot an excess of blood to his head.

"But I should never have doubted that you would take ascension into your own hands. I knew the part I played. I would have sold my soul if that had been the worship you needed to reach this level. Let my devotion be a science in itself. I will prove that my belief in your vision is strong enough to create a god."

As Piero distracted himself with the meaningless speech, he had managed to work the seed deep enough into the wound to sew over it. His hands shook as he patched himself back together. He wasn't sure if his body was really swaying or if it was the onset of blood loss. He collapsed onto the table, bearing the uncomfortable sensation of a mass sinking farther into his body.

Eventually, the seed found something to latch onto, jolting Piero back up. His skin started to feel inadequate to house the crawling roots that started to branch out. He hunched over, trying to escape the clawing that came from either side of his spine.

He wanted to call out for mercy, but he had no energy left in his body to do anything but groan. The pain reached its peak when those claws broke through. Whatever had been growing in him was sprouting out of the ripped openings. They grew larger, threatening to rock him from the table if the weight didn't stay balanced.

The agony didn't end, but it did stagnate when the reconstruction of his body was completed. His sweat-soaked body couldn't decide if it was too hot or too cold. It rolled down and dripped off the symmetrical growths on his back like melted wax. He couldn't muster the strength to sit up and see his creation. It didn't matter. He saw it anyway with a new awareness of himself.

He could see his wings through his state of heightened feeling alone—every strong muscle, every follicle in the skin overlapping that muscle, and every hollow feather in those follicles. The wings nearly engulfed him in his shrunk position. They were massive, and no feathers were anything less than completely mature. Of course, this was obvious to him. Gods did not grow; they existed as they were.

Evron, during some point of the grotesque display, had lost the ability to hold himself up. He had fallen to his knees and clutched the steel bed. The black he wore absorbed the glaring light that refracted off the white walls and tile. The sight of him held a strange lack of texture that might have been mistaken for a shadow.

"My God." The words fell from Evron's parted lips.

He knelt before the idle form shuddering atop the table. The edges of Piero's vision blurred into gold and made the man beneath him appear to be in the middle of a prayer. Those words broke through Piero's clouded mind as if they had to travel an incredible distance to reach him. He inhaled sharply upon hearing them, breathing them in and letting them clear his lightheadedness in a way that oxygen no longer could. The words lingered in his head as if the moment they were spoken would not fade with time, overlapping until it was indiscernible whether they were spoken in reverence or horror.

ASHTYN HANSARD –

THE ROLE OF A WOMAN DEEMED A WOMAN

Who shall I be in this film called “LIFE”?
Where a day goes by in a blink and
a world is built around us and for the others,
creating the false illusion that we have real choices
handed to us on a silver platter.

Shall I be the mother,
cuddling my newborn with the ferociousness of a lioness,
hoping to see her strive in a world that is
not and never will be reliable to her?

Or should I be the daughter,
battling for independence with those
like me and against me all at once,
neither of them truly knowing
what I want?

Perhaps I'll be the secretary of a CEO
that bends the rules ~~and my body~~
for a man with money and a wife.
I'll know it's wrong, but I'll do it
for me.

Or maybe I'll be the wife that turns a blind eye
to the sack of flesh that claims to love me
while he says the same to
the nice snack of a woman he ~~likes to eat~~
on the desk of his office.

I could be the neighbor that stalks through windows,
begging for secrets from those around me.
A white van will sit out front

while my children run rampant outside
unbeknownst to me.

Should I just give it all up and be
the girl next door?
I could sit by and wait for a mediocre man
to sweep me off my feet
while he lusts over the gorgeous
girl that shattered his heart in two
with a cruelty that only seems to happen
to a “misunderstood” man,
ignoring that he only cared for her
body and what having her
glued to his side
would mean for him.

In all honesty, I'd love to simply exist.
But they will not let me in this industry
world.

KAYLEE WESSELS – YUMMY, YOU SHOULD TRY SOME!



ADDY BROWN –
THE SYMPHONY OF A FLY

Miss Concordia Lee once spoke to a fly. It changed her entire perspective on life until that point. The fly ruined her care for anything and everything. Essentially, the fly freed her.

Concordia had consistently given too much, from childhood to present state. At three years old, she was praised for sharing all of her belongings with the other toddlers. She gave away every doll and stuffed bear she possessed until she was left with nothing. At ten, her affection toward other children was all consuming, as she hardly spared a thought for herself; she showed overwhelming empathy toward her peers with scraped knees and those who vomited up their school lunch on the playground. Running to the scene of whatever given incident, Concordia would always be covered in someone else's blood or fluids and her own thick, empathetic tears. The other children would seek her to wipe their tears but were nowhere to be found when her time came around to receive the same.

During puberty, her devotion to the schoolboys that were only infatuated with her soft features, not her soft heart, left her oftentimes empty. They focused on her mousy, short hair and her round, deep eyes, but did not value her endless handmade trinkets she had crafted whilst thinking of them nor treasure the sweet poems she conjured at night to gift. College proved much the same, strung thin by those she opened her door to, intruders who refused to wipe their shoes before entering or clean up their messes before leaving her stranded.

Despite these imbalances in sentiments, Concordia tried to remain entirely positive. She often let nothing against her sway her mood, no matter how strong the pang in her stomach felt after a harsh word or a disappointment.

All remained true until one day Concordia encountered a fly. She sat in her garden, a vibrant, ethereal landscape filled with orange lilies and yellow buttercups. Tiny yellow bugs flitted through the air. They would most likely be categorized as butterflies, but they lacked the regal nature of a monarch or swallowtail.

Concordia got up to the type of reminiscing she tended to do in her peaceful garden. She thought of lovers and friends gone by,

stopping on a past someone named Henry. *Henry tried his best*, Concordia thought as images of their bodies colliding struck her mind, the discomfort and shame prickling at her skin. *Lila was a sweet girl*, Concordia remembered as she pictured an old friend's face. A woman with bright green eyes and a scheming quality about her was who she saw, a friend who has been the recipient of Concordia's comfort many times but has confessed her own discomfort and annoyance with Concordia's tears.

I do love my dear friends, Concordia thought as a soft tear tumbled down her cheek.

Just then, the fly that she had been unconsciously observing these few moments past decided to join her internal dialogue.

Why do you cry so, ma'am? How do you fair? questioned the insect.

Well, Because I care. I am moved, thought the woman.

Why must you care? the fly pushed on.

Well, why must I? Concordia was struck. *Do I have a choice?*

Everyone does, ma'am. You must choose the price you are willing to pay for such caring, the fly said with finality as it collided with the web of a spider. This brought tears to poor Concordia's eyes as all demise has since she could care.

I do wonder how I would feel if I just stop caring at once, then. It is in fact much too hard to care as I have been. Her tears turned hot and stung her cheeks as she sat with this strange new conviction. From that moment on, Concordia ceased to care.

*

Not caring was no easy feat for Concordia. It took her several days to get past the lifelong habit of curtesy nods and smiles at every passing stranger. It took even more time for her to stop tipping every busker, street magician, or starving child she passed.

I must stumble through this because, in the end...nothing matters anyhow.

Three months passed with her practicing this funny new habit of neutrality. There was no longer a goal, no longer a purpose. Concordia simply lived; she breathed, ate, coughed, and looked normal enough. She moved and sounded just fine when she was prompted to (she only did those things when it was imperative she do so). She got dressed in the morning as she normally does, though there was no rhyme or reason to her outfits anymore. She wore whatever her hand decided to pick up first, typically articles from off the ground. Her grocery trips were often the same, creating an interesting new cacophony of food items that her diet would consist of. These strange

new habits began to worry those around her. That worry slowly turned to impatience.

Before the fly, Concordia had many friends that she called dear; all of whom she would have dropped anything for at any given moment. Those friends tended to be less accessible when Concordia was in need, particularly after her simple and sympathetic affirmations stopped soothing their ears and were replaced by an even simpler and detached “*well...*”. Concordia noticed but did not feel any particular way about this loss. She accepted it.

The rest of the Lee family was much the same as the friends. Concordia was the middle sibling of five sisters. She was the sweet liaison between the older and younger siblings, an easy target. There was the tendency to lay blame in Concordia’s family, oftentimes Concordia taking on the weight of their woes when she was not involved in the situation. Every dish accidentally shattered, every candle left lit, every book left on the coffee table, Cordelia took the fall. Yet, instead of getting the usual apology originating from Concordia, they now consistently received a “*well...*” just the same as everyone else. Concordia found it curious that as she strolled past the family home after a long walk one afternoon, no one was in the home. It was completely vacant. Concordia’s hollow eyes scanned the kitchen, where she found no belongings. The usually constant bumbling house was now barren. She peered out at the garden, her plants now shriveled and dry as if life had been suddenly zapped from them. Nothing but gray moths sputtered about now.

“*Well...*” was Concordia’s constant echo.

*

Before, Concordia’s life had consisted of the constant filling of others cups. The kettle is not an infinite source of substance; it must be replenished. Concordia was never replenished, so she simply had to stop filling other’s cups.

This way of life was not sustainable for Concordia. She was unfulfilled, a kettle left empty. No family, no friends, no home. So, the only thing to do was sit. Concordia would move from café to street corner, only moving when someone would shoo her off for scaring bystanders with her vacant stare. Concordia overheard a conversation in which she was the main topic, picking up that a customer of the coffee bar she had been inhabiting for hours found her “unsettlingly empty and unpleasant to behold.”

So Concordia moved on, then moved on some more until she felt as if she could move no more. As she sat on the corner of an avenue, she noticed a person studying her. It was not a predatory gaze, merely a curious one. It belonged to a man, though he had a pleasant boyishness to him that, could she have been moved toward one feeling over another, she would not have disliked. She instinctively looked away after meeting his eyes, noting of the small change in inflection to her usual statement as she softly exclaimed, “well...!”

This hint that she was in fact alive intrigued the gentleman, who suddenly glanced over at a patch of grass. A single daffodil stood tall above the blades of emerald grass. This motivated Concordia to quickly look at the flower as well. Upon centering her head again, she found the man once more.

“Well...?” she called.

“Well, that’s yellow,” replied the man.

Concordia did not need to say anything, for she knew the man could sense her invitation to walk over. Upon approaching her, he lifted his hand to help her up. Despite the tireless training she had gone through these past months, Concordia was obliged to grasp his outstretched palm. They walked side by side together, hands no longer connected but the feeling lingering on Concordia’s fingertips. She felt a slight buzz underlying her bones as they arrived at the plant. They simply beheld it, nothing more, nothing less.

Then, the man began to walk. It was not a fast pace, just a stroll. His shoes and hers eventually joined together, syncing their sounds together as they walked through the line of cafés. Concordia felt as if she were travelling backwards through time as they passed the spots that she sat at to simply stare throughout the days following her family’s abandonment. They walked on for what can only be described as a while, one’s footfalls never falling out of rhythm with the other’s, until they reached a building that was so beautiful that Concordia could not help but release a small, “*well...!*”

Towering before her was an opera house. Designed in a French Rococo style, the details of the architecture left Concordia interested for the first time in months. The columns and eaves had the most intricate details carved into them. She had never seen such intricate swirls in a painting before, nevertheless on the ceilings of buildings. Concordia could pick out hand-carved marble cherubs seemingly floating around a grandiose chandelier that bombards the senses upon entering the foyer. The pastel carpeting beneath her did not disappoint her dazzled eyes; its lushness allowed her shoes to sink into it like meringue, yet when she stepped away there was no indentation where she had been standing. Everything around her

dripped with hedonism and grandeur, each ornamentation a sight to analyze. It almost felt pleasurable.

While Concordia had been entranced, the man had left her side. “Well...” Concordia sighed, ready to turn out of the door before realizing that she was holding an opera ticket in her hand. Unable to resist the draw of the grand house, Concordia entered a space and was greeted by a dramatic stage with large, draping curtains and rows of rich green seats that accompanied well-dressed opera buffs.

The usher she had bumped into while in her stupor kindly guided her to her seat. It was not particularly close to the stage, so Concordia could see the wide expanse of the theater. Yet, this was not enough. Not yet. “Well.....” was still all Concordia muttered as she took her seat.

Almost instantaneously, a flute’s cry rang over the space as the lights dimmed, then darkened. Concordia was transfixed as a harpist began to pluck her strings along with the woodwind’s melody. Slowly, patiently, other strings began to join. First, the violin; next, violas; a double bass’s bow began sliding against its strings; a clarinet’s honking voice joined the band; and many more that Concordia could not make out. The music began swelling, breathing, and Concordia felt stuck. All she could do was listen, but it was different than before. Nothing was expected of her. She had to give nothing in order to receive the sound.

Concordia’s hypnotized state was furthered when a single stage light came up with a swell and then a descent from the instruments’ shared voice; the music lightened on a woman. A woman with rich brown skin stood on a balcony on the stage, her elaborate light blue chiffon gown billowing over the edge. Her voice began quietly, but that did not take from the richness or strength behind it. Like the music, her voice inflated and sank with melodious rhythm. The aria planted a seed in the pit of Concordia’s stomach, though not bitter like seeds before. Something like elation began to blossom in her.

There seemed to be a conversation happening between the flute and the oboe, allowing the soprano a moment of rest. The instruments created a dialogue; the flute led the conversation while the oboe accompanied, refusing to overpower the other. This back and forth continued for just a moment before the singer joined once more, followed by the swell of the strings.

As Concordia watched, a fly landed on the intricate railing beside her.

How do you fair? the fly casually asked, just as before, the question transmitting straight to Concordia’s own internal thoughts.

Well... thought Concordia.

Well...? the fly returned.

I am moved. Concordia concluded.

I figured you would be. Does this fuel you? prodded the fly.

Truly, was the response

That is just it. It is not about being uncaring or overly so; it is about what you prioritize. If there is no balance of the internal and external, empathy and apathy, the giving and withholding of care, then there is no stability. You must find balance, Concordia. You must find harmony.

The lights and music had reached a level of intensity so high that Concordia was forced to turn her head and take in the splendor. The flowing sound of violin strings rose from the orchestral pit, the singer reached the climax of her ballad, and the heavy light beams created a heavenly glow through the stage and house. Concordia was overwhelmed with emotion in that moment, turning her head quickly away from what was so dazzling it made her tearful. As she turned, she met the eyes of the man she had arrived with sitting across the audience. He had been studying her reaction, and as the moment of connection between their eyes sent a shock through Concordia, he grinned. She grinned back. That small expression opened the floodgates for all the emotion she had felt through these past several months, through the years of giving and never taking. Through her beaming smile, sobs racked her body and soul, and tears flowed to musical accompaniment.

"This is harmony," Concordia spoke aloud for the first time since the first fly meeting, the music covering up this statement, "I've found it."

As if that realization were the signal to exit the opera, the man and her simultaneously moved to the aisle between the seats with her wiping tears from her face. Concordia and the man began their walk slowly, the pace quickening with each passing step. Exhilaration and sorrow were the substance which she was made up of in that moment.

When they reached the outside of the building, Concordia began to *see*. She saw street cats digging in garbage bins and flowers growing through the cracks in the sidewalks she had treaded before. She saw a blue butterfly soar right in front of her eyes, leading them to a butcher dumping the remains of his chop outside of his store. She heard crying babies and the wind whistling through leaves of lush trees. She smelled fresh baked pastries and chocolates being set out for the evening rush in the bakery next to the opera house. She noticed another sweet smell, that of horse manure from the animal walking a few yards away. "Harmony," she muttered.

"Harmony indeed," the man said. "My name is Clyde."

“Well, hello,” she started, “I am Concordia.”

With that statement, she heard a fly softly and simply buzzing around her ears.

INTERVIEW WITH AMANDA JOHNSTON

Hi y'all! I am Zeina Halili, Editor-in-Chief of the *Bosque River Review*. The following is a lovely conversation that I had with Amanda Johnston, former Texas Poet Laureate, founder of Torch Literary Arts, and author of *Another Way to Say Enter*. We spoke about what it means to listen for a poem rather than force it, how place and community shape a writer's voice, and the role poetry plays in creating connection across time and experience.

Throughout our conversation, Johnston returned to the idea that poetry is not something distant or reserved, but something already in us. From her reflections on writing as a constant, living process to her emphasis on showing up for literary communities, her perspective reframes poetry as both deeply personal and inherently shared. What follows is a conversation centered on attention, process, and what it means to stay with the work.

BRR: To start, how did poetry become a part of your life?

Johnston: I really believe poetry is with everyone. It's literally our heartbeat, so if you feel your pulse, that's iambic pentameter. The rhythms of poetry are already a part of us, which is why it speaks so closely to the human condition.

But I have to give credit to my mother for giving me books, and I started learning how to read and speak because of nursery rhymes, which are poetry. Later, she gave me more books, including Shel Silverstein, and I was just drawn to it immediately. So, poetry has always been in my life, but I started writing more seriously in my early twenties.

BRR: What originally drew you to poetry rather than other forms of writing?

Johnston: Poetry has a synergy with the human condition that I think is really unique. Even before I understood the terminology, before I studied poetry, I could hear the musicality of it. You can hear the rhythm even if it's not a rhyming poem. You can hear the notes, the same way you can hear the notes in music, and I was really drawn to

that. And then you add all of the different poetic devices, metaphor, allusion, all of these really interesting things that could happen in form, and it becomes something really intriguing, almost like a puzzle. I'm solving a puzzle where I don't know what the end picture or end image is going to be, but I'm listening to the notes, and I'm figuring it out. I'm just fascinated by that still.

BRR: How have the different places you've lived influenced your voice as a poet?

Johnston: I was born in East St. Louis, so my family is originally from Illinois, so Midwestern, but I came to Texas with my mother very young and was raised in Austin. I grew up in a working-class, union household. My mother was a union steward for the phone company, my family has always been gritty people of the working class, so I never had a time when my life was segmented. Every day, it is like "okay, be resourceful, and what are we making of the day?"

So I feel like that influences my poetry. I never sit down with an intention on the form I'm going to write, or really the poem I'm going to write. I only know I've been moved to write. So it could be just one image, or I heard one turn of phrase, I saw something, I observed something, and I'm like, oh, what is that? And then it's me being curious and drawing from whatever is present and staying curious to follow it through to what wasn't present.

And then when I moved to Kentucky, I give a lot of credit to my Kentucky home and the poetry community there, the Affrilachian poets, because that's where I started writing poetry. I had left Texas, which was the home that I knew, and I was in a very different landscape, living on a military base for the first time, and poetry gave me a safe place to explore and deal with my emotions and feelings.

That's also where I met Frank X. Walker, Crystal Wilkinson, Nikky Finney, and so many other incredible poets who encouraged and nurtured me. So for me, being in a place really has more to do with the people I encounter there than anything else.

BRR: What does your writing process look like?

Johnston: A poem is always working its way through me. That's the best way I can describe it. Someone once asked me if I could stop writing poems, could you stop writing poetry, and I said, "To ask that question means you don't understand how it lives in me." Even right now, while I'm talking with you, there is a part of my being, my consciousness, that is writing a poem. I don't know what it is yet, but it's there. It's like breathing.

So my process is about catching those moments. I say, "Catch the light." If I observe something and I'm like, oh, that's interesting, I might send myself an email, I might jot it down in my notes, I might write it on a Post-it. Those are breadcrumbs that lead me to the poem. I don't write every day. Some people have that practice, but my days are very varied, and I also prioritize self-care and rest. But when I do have time, ideally it's like a Sunday morning where I can go slow, I can pull those bits of light together, and the poem is there throughout the day, and I'm working on it little by little. Some poems come quickly, and some I've been working on for over a decade. They're on their own time.

BRR: How do you know when a poem is finished?

Johnston: That's a very good question. When I'm sitting with a poem, I don't ever know that it's fully finished, but I know when I'm ready to release it and share it. So I've done my work. I've sat with it, I've revised it, I've questioned it, and I've let it question me. And then, when I feel like, okay, I'm ready to share this with someone, that's when I release it. First, it's always my family; my husband will listen to me read poems first. That's part of my process. I have to read it out loud. Otherwise, you can't hear the music in the poem. If it's just on the page and never read aloud before I send it out, then it's not ready.

So I read it out loud and listen. And then when I feel like, okay, it's ready to be shared with more people, then I release it. But I also give myself grace, because if you're looking for perfection, you're not going to get anything out. But if you read a collection, you might notice in the note section that it says a previous version of these poems were published somewhere else. Let that give you permission to say everything is a previous version. You can submit it somewhere, publish it, and then it can always have another life later. The poem might not be done with you, but you'll know when it's ready to be released.

BRR: You created the Genesis poetic form. What inspired you to play with poetry in that way?

Johnston: I wasn't playing. That's the thing is I wasn't playing. I didn't even realize I had written it until a poet friend said, you created a new form. Not long before writing that poem, I had lost my paternal grandparents. My grandfather passed away in December, and then my grandmother, his wife, passed away three months later in March. They had been married for sixty-four years. They were lovebirds, and I missed them. I was longing to hear their voices.

So I started writing, and I was moved to write my way through time. To get to them, I had to go through their children. They had five sons, and my father is the oldest. So the Genesis was created through that process. The first columns are their son's, and then the prose poem is my grandmother's voice, and the italicized words are my grandfather's voice. So it became seven poems in one.

The title comes from their names, Jean and Margaret, but everyone called them Jean and Sis, and they would refer to each other as Genesis. Their license plate said, Genesis. So that's where it came from. But again, I didn't sit down thinking I was going to create a form. I was listening. Writing a Genesis is very challenging because you have to consider every other voice, every other layer. There's no way to know where it's going to end. You have to listen.

BRR: How has sharing your work across different literary spaces shaped your growth as a writer?

Johnston: The thing I'm most concerned about with publication is connection. When I'm sharing work for publication, I do consider where my work is going to be. You get to decide when and where you share your work, and that matters. So I'm looking at who my work will be in conversation with, what else is being published in those spaces, and what the journal or publisher is doing. How are they being good literary citizens in the world?

I'm not driven by quantity or prestige. I'm looking for community and who I'm going to be in conversation with, who will be reading the work in that space. Because whenever you share your work with the public, you have to ask what your intention is. Is it to be celebrated, to be

cheered, to be adored for making art? That does not concern me. What I'm concerned with is that other person on the other end. If I'm able to do my job well, then we are given an opportunity to connect, and that transcends time and space.

You can pick up a poem that was written hundreds, even thousands of years ago, and be connected immediately across time and across the world. That is so powerful, and that's what is compelling to me. I think about Lucille Clifton and her poem "won't you celebrate with me."

There was a time where I had that poem framed on my desk, and every day I would read it like a prayer. It gave me the energy that I needed to continue the day. And I think, what if she had not published it? What if she had kept it to herself? So for me, the greatest thing about publishing is the connections we get to make with each other by sharing our work.

BRR: Your collection *Another Way to Say Enter* explores several powerful themes. What shaped that book?

Johnston: All of my poems come from a personal space. Even when it's a persona poem, it still has to come through me. I'm making decisions about what is said, what is shared, and how it's presented. So there's no way for the work to be objective. It's not journalism, it's poetry. It's art, it's subjective, and it's coming through me.

So the poems in *Another Way to Say Enter* are the same as all of my work, it's me. Especially as a debut collection, it was about introducing myself to a larger world of readers and allowing that connection to be made. It's just me.

BRR: Poetry often brings together personal experiences and larger social themes. How do you balance those elements?

Johnston: I don't think they're separate. Everything is happening at the same time. There's no separation between anything; we're all experiencing it in real time. From the simple joys and the mundane to things we see in politics or in the global climate, it's all happening at once. So the most important thing I try to do is not shy away from anything, but to remain present with what comes.

And to know that I have a right to all of it. My language, my words, that's my tool. I don't have to be anything specific to include certain

things in my writing. I can write about the natural world, and I can also write about what I see happening in society. That's my job as a poet. I believe, like Nina Simone said, that the artist's duty is to reflect the times we're in. But at the same time, my personal experiences, large and small, are also part of those times.

BRR: What role do you think poetry plays in today's world?

Johnston: Poetry is our humanity. Poetry inspires empathy. Poetry gives us a way, again, to connect, how we connect with each other. Poetry gives us a way to connect across literally billions of people, but to do so from our small, intimate spaces, even if it's just us and the page. But we're still connecting. That's a powerful force.

And it's the reason why it's been around and part of our oral tradition for thousands of years. As long as we've been communicating, poetry has been there.

BRR: What advice would you give to students who are just beginning to write?

Johnston: Read. Read more than you think you should read. Read diverse voices. Pick up books, read them, love them, hate them; that's going to help you figure out your own voice by making decisions about the work you're experiencing while writing your own. Write. Repeat. But the difference between someone who is just writing and someone who is a writer is revision. You have to spend time with your work and interrogate it, go deeper.

We all have layers of protection, even internally, so you have to question what you've written and push past that. Don't be precious about your work. Perfection is not going to happen. Make it messy. It doesn't have to make sense right away; that's what revision is for. And don't be afraid to write bad work. We all do. That's how you get to the good work.

BRR: You've also talked about the importance of community. Can you speak to that?

Johnston: To be part of a poetry community means showing up. I love going to open mics, readings, bookstores, and anywhere people are

sharing work. I consider all of those spaces part of my community. And as a former Texas Poet Laureate, if you're going to say you're amplifying other voices, then you have to show up.

Imagine writing a book and never reading someone else's book. Imagine wanting people to come to your reading, and you don't go to theirs. Being a good literary citizen means showing up and supporting others.

And wherever you are in Texas, or anywhere, there is a writing community. And if you can't find one, it might be your responsibility to start one. Put it out there, say you're meeting somewhere, and people will come.

BRR: What are you currently working on?

Johnston: I do have a manuscript that I am working on. It is about ninety percent done, which is exciting. I'll be sending that out soon. It is titled *Active Threat*. That could change, but that's been the title for a long time. It is going back to that poem I mentioned, Lucille Clifton's "won't you celebrate with me." The last line of that poem is, "every day something has tried to kill me and has failed." So the poems in *Active Threat* are exploring the many ways that things have tried to kill me and have failed, and the joy and pain of that, because again, both exist at the same time.

And I also love just reading new work. I'm the founder and executive director of Torch Literary Arts. I'm also a silent editor. We have an amazing associate editor, Jay Nachelle, who reads submissions first, but together we curate the magazine. So I love seeing and reading new work by Black women writers that submit to Torch.

BRR: I know you've been deeply connected to Texas. What does Texas mean to you?

Johnston: Texas is home. Texas is a hug. Texas is a shoulder. Texas is good people. Texas is good food. Texas is a story that leads to another story that leads to another story. And there are millions and millions of people who live here who love real big, real bold, and I'm so grateful to be here in Texas. I don't think I could ever go anywhere else. It's hard to go anywhere else, you miss it. And people who don't understand, I say, come stay for a little while and get to know the people.

BRR: What do you hope readers feel or carry with them after reading your work?

Johnston: I always hope, my little prayer that I send out with the poems, is that they reach whoever needs them. So whatever that is, whatever they were searching for, whatever they needed, I hope they find it.

BRR: Is there anything else you'd like to leave readers with?

Johnston: I'll just add that, you know, especially during these times, we need more readers. We need more writers. AI is a tool, and it will never replace you. Do yourselves the good service of sitting, just you, a piece of paper, and a pen, and watch what happens. Get messy, play, explore, and trust yourself in that work. You are the original supercomputer. We need you. We need readers, we need writers, we need people making art. And I'm so proud of each and every one of you who dares to do that.

RIATA NOBLE – *NATURE'S QUIET DETAILS*



B. LARA –
THE DINNER PARTY

“You know I’d rather not have him come over.”

She jerked his tie, and Maximilliano felt she’d break his neck doing so. She was always like this when Johan came up, at their daughter’s birthday party, his parents’ funeral, his colonel’s promotion banquet, and now, his own promotion celebration. Her face would puff up and redden and thin wrinkles would haunt the space between her eyebrows even after assuming a relaxed expression.

“It bothers me how he looks at you, Maximilliano.” Her hands rested on his chest, small and fragile in comparison. His gray uniform was a horrible color for both of them, he thought—not that he could help the color. It sucked the amber from her skin, and the same occurred to him. But between the two, he’d always cared more about appearances. Suzy wasn’t particular about colors and dressing (she was still in what she woke up in after all at 6 p.m.). It was a miracle she let him pick her dress for the occasion. Imagine what she would have shown up in if he let her choose?

“Nonsense. He doesn’t look at me in any sort of way, you know that.” He rolled his eyes. “No sodomite can reach the age of thirty-eight without once giving in to their urges.” What she worried about was true. Not like he’d admit that he knew Johan was in love with him. Johan himself didn’t even know that he knew.

He glanced past her, to the wall of shimmering golden trophies, each brass plate inscribed with the name “Suzy Liu.” He felt Liu fit her better than Reyes. Suzy Reyes was awkward on the tongue. “Are you excited about playing tonight?” This subject was his go-to to bring him out of hot water.

Her hands slid off his chest, and she glared. “I’ve done it so often, I think I might destroy the piano if I have to play again after tonight.” Suzy half-turned to look at the trophies. Red lips and blue-painted eyelids made her small eyes appear black, and it gave her a sophisticated air of harshness she otherwise wouldn’t have. After all, so many years of complaining about Johan, and she had yet to raise the alarm to The Board. She was practically harmless.

“Daddy!” A squeak came from the room’s entrance. A little girl ran up to them, sparkly, white dress fluttering behind her, and black

curls bouncing on her shoulders. She was identical to her mother in round face, thin brows, and flat nose. The only semblance she had of him was her honey-brown eyes, wide and double-lidded. He was only slightly disappointed by this.

“Hey, peanut.” He picked her up, soft and warm in his arms.

“How’s our little lady tonight?” Suzy petted her head with the very tips of her bejeweled fingernails.

“Hungry.” Her grin revealed gaps in her teeth. Both parents laughed. Maximilliano passed her to his wife, and she almost lost her grip, but managed to settle her daughter on the perch of her forearm while the other guarded the little girl’s back. Suzy’s eyes carefully watched her child, and she smiled them into crescents.

“Sorry, Joann, but we must wait for Daddy’s guests to get here first.” She gently shook her head; her black hair, cast in gel, remained unmoved.

“And Momma has to get into her dress.” He tapped Joann’s nose. “Anyway, they’ll be here soon, so I need to make sure the servants have everything ready.” He walked towards the bed. At the foot of the bed rested his formal cap, the last accessory before he was complete, and he picked the cap up to inspect it. There was a smudge on the silver carnation centerpiece, which he wiped off with ease, and he let out a relieved sigh. Maximilliano couldn’t afford to look like a dirty fool.

“Especially Jones. Did I tell you the other day he broke the vase your mom got me?” He examined himself in the full-length mirror next to the trophy wall. Everything was in place, except his collar didn’t hide his scars well enough.

“You complain every time, yet you never fire him.” Suzy walked over to the bed and set Joann down.

“It’s too much trouble to get a new servant.”

“You just don’t like change.”

“I need to check on the servants.”

Suzy stopped unclasping her silk pajama top, “Honey, about Johan—”

“Later.” He put on the cap and, before leaving, gave a single squeeze to Joann’s head.

*

Guests marched into the living room, stationing themselves wherever they pleased. Most picked up a glass offered by a servant and indulged in unfulfilling appetizers placed at the far wall opposite where the sofas were supposed to be—which had been accordingly removed.

A two-tiered chandelier hung from the high roof. It slowly turned, and the candles, aided by the iridescent crystals, like torch-holding soldiers, projected moving shadows on the striped walls.

The living room continued into an open dining room, where two long tables connected at the ends, paired up with a total of fifty seats. Becket-style cutlery and branch-patterned table mats waited for dinner to be served. Dinner did not appear to happen any time soon, as guests engaged in endless superficial conversation with each other about the nation's future or their feats within the administration or whatever other topic their meager creativity could conjure. Airy and pompous words polluted the already stuffy air, making Maximilliano want to tug at his collar as he spoke to his direct superiors. All were dressed in formal military wear, with colorfully attired women hanging quietly by their arms or standing behind them as if they were accessories.

Suzy, like usual, after initial greetings had been exchanged, stepped in and took some women to the side to talk about how they'd been spending their days and complain about their husbands, and then they'd flatter her lithe fingers, always curious about the piano. Maximilliano, like usual, would be stuck politely smiling, cheek muscles threatening to collapse. Being an intelligence technician manager, he spent the past five years trying to escape fixing computers, rebooting programs, and organizing data for The Peacekeepers (and the time before that, escaping being a soldier), so he couldn't allow a tantrum from his courtesy-obsessed superiors to ruin his promotion for him.

"When you get to the big place, don't forget to give a proper greeting to everyone." One superior said. His whiskers twitched every time he spoke.

"And if you see Colledge, don't look him in the eye." Another added. His face was a splotchy pink, the result of one drink and a strained supply of oxygen, his uniform too tight around his chest.

"Right. He's a little bit of a firehead." The superior, resting his elbow on Maximilliano, said. Maximilliano wanted to correct him and say it was "hothead," but he swallowed the urge.

"And more important than what any of 'em are saying, don't lose your nerve." The man who spoke was the most superior of all. He put Maximilliano where he was. Major General Welkins was the poster image of what one might imagine a general to look like: white and old, yet sturdy; wisdom oozed from him. His hooded eyes drooped, giving him a permanently tired visage, and when he smiled with his teeth, there was a hole where his incisor would be—lost back in his younger

days. He had grabbed Maximilliano and Johan by the back of their uniforms and dragged them up the army ladder, thrown them into combat when they were fresh out of training, and slapped them on the back after a battle was over, laughing, "Good kill!"

He'd given him a job away from death. Maximilliano could spare to ignore the others, but not him.

"Of course, sir. I'll keep your words in my heart." He smiled.

"Ain't he sentimental? It's a wonder you're alive at all." Welkins slapped his back once, and the others laughed, as if they were commanded to do so.

"Major General! Maximilliano!" A familiar voice called. Like an army splitting for their leader, his superiors and other guests stepped back, the newly formed pathway leading to a man he knew all too well.

Johan.

In a few long and enthusiastic strides, he arrived in front of them and saluted, his tanned and olive face emanating joy. When they returned his salute, he removed his cap and straightened out his black hair. It grazed the top of his shoulders, long for a soldier, but he worked at a private business designing and selling vehicles (his parents did not appreciate this), so it didn't really matter anymore.

"Mr. Lee. How's your father?" Welkins greeted, voice low and cautious. When it came between the two, Welkins was more at ease with Maximilliano.

"Major General. In perfect health, he sends his regards to his favorite subordinate." Johan said, unbothered. Senseless and tactless Johan.

"That must be all the guests." Maximilliano cleared his throat. "Why did you take so long?" He reached forward and tugged Johan under the crook of his arm next to his chest.

"I had something pending." Johan gripped his forearm, feigning tugging him off. It was a measly attempt. The other superiors smiled thinly, one let out a chuckle, and Welkins, meanwhile, kept the same placid and courteous bearing.

"Then, shouldn't we start dinner? I'm eager to see your wife's performance." Welkins said. He motioned a white-gloved hand towards the dining room.

"Certainly, sir. I apologize for the wait." He loosened his hold, and Johan slipped out. He tried not to pay notice to Suzy cursing him with her eyes from the other side of the room.

There is a memory Maximilliano loves to recall for comfort. It's been two weeks since Joann was born, she is nameless and swaddled in her white crib. Johan is over, and Suzy is bittersweet about it. Red pleated curtains rest at the sides of the windowed balcony wall, and the bright sunlight breathes the crimson into the air. Johan taunts how they haven't found a name, and Suzy chastises him for it, although she looks strangely ashamed. She asks him to try and find her a name, a rhetorical demand. He says he will and makes ten paces around the room before coming to her crib and picking her up. Johan says, "Joann. Isn't that a good name?" Suzy is silent, lips in a thin line. Then she shakes her head, takes her from him, and places her back in the cradle, and says something along the lines of "If you say so." She starts staggering back to the piano seat where she'd been sitting, and Johan slings her arm around his bent neck and joins her there. She reluctantly, but somewhat heartedly, teaches him how to play chords, lightly smacking his hand in place when he's wrong. He huffs childishly every time. Together, the analogous amateur notes twinkle across the room, to Joann babbling in her crib, to Maximilliano watching it all. At a distance, it is a piece he wishes he could frame, able to admire it from his rightful place while they were in theirs.

*

Everyone was seated.

Maximilliano stood at the table's head with a glass in hand and a spoon in the other. The aftersound of a clink thrummed to obscurity. Three turkeys placed evenly apart from each other across the table, belly side up, on ornate platters bedded with lettuce, exuded an unmistakable scent of meat and thyme. He gazed out at his audience, reminiscent of trench monkeys waiting for instruction.

"First, I'd like to thank all of you for coming here today and celebrating one of the greatest honors I have ever received: a chance to lead the Division of Social Intelligence and Observation at The Center. An achievement I could not have accomplished without the benevolence of my superiors." He raised his glass. A wrinkled smile lifted the weight of Welkin's face, and he gave a nod of acknowledgement. Maximilliano droned on about his thank yous and his rise to success and Suzy's help as well, and how much he loved Joann, and those youthful days with Johan and their dreams about a great nation—not particularly in this order.

By the time he finished, his hand and lungs ached, and a pressure built in his head. His head hurt more thinking of all the probable faults his servants would make. A plate always ended up chipped, or the food waste would be mixed with the paper waste, or they'd air out the room after they dusted. He wished everyone would leave so he could fix the not-yet-made wrongs.

The other guests arose and lifted their drinks; wine swished and threatened to spill over the edge but never did. Welkins cleared his throat with authority that stilled the people present, any further motions frozen to carefully listen. "The Father, our Leader, has graced patriot brother Maximilliano with the opportunity to serve his percipience and initiative towards our Pure Nation. Of which sullied gifts and external forces must be cleansed."

"Of which sullied gifts and external forces must be cleansed." They all repeated.

"And our good power and friendship must be shared."

"And our good power and friendship must be shared."

"For the glory of a Pure Peoples."

"For the glory of a Pure Peoples."

They all drank. Red wine funneled through their mouths and throats and warmly flowed to their stomachs, from which their patriotic convictions sat. For Maximilliano, what sat there was indigestion.

They all stared at him with their eyes glinting flames from the candlesticks, and he wondered what they were waiting for.

*

Suzy was playing the piano. Her fingers danced across the keys, her body swayed slowly, and her face remained peaceful, only her lack of consistent breathing betraying the amount of concentration she was manifesting. She rarely practiced nowadays, instead preoccupying herself with the education and socializing of Joann, as well as her own socializing with other wives of army men and pen pushers. It would be good for both of them, Maximilliano had said. Her easygoingness for her reputation sincerely disturbed him. When he brought this up, she told him he was making a mountain out of a molehill. That he needed not overthink.

The guests observed her with a mixture of reactions; some women smiled and whispered to each other excitedly, others raised their chin and scoffed, murmuring that it was nothing to gawk at (not like they knew how to play any instruments, Maximilliano inwardly protested); most of the men inspected her form and musical genius as if she were an art piece to admire.

A strange sense of guilt strung around his heart.

He pictured the first time he saw her on stage. Maximilliano had never been one for music or concerts, but he'd been convinced by one of the generals to go. The sharp notes had punctured through the air and lanced themselves into his spirit, a resonance of admiration matching the vibrating pianissimo at the piece's end. Under the theatre lights, she glowed.

After it was over, he went up to her and asked her what it was named. She had said something that started with an 'f.'

The low fire of the chandelier suffused shades of red across the plane of her body. It shrouded more than it illuminated.

Maximiliano needed to wash his hands. He made his way behind the crowd, under the stairs, and into the restroom. It was a sickly lit 10'4" x 5'3" room, with a gray mat and a pure silver soap holder as the only color around.

He turned on the faucet, the quiet screech making him wince. Did he already need a new sink? If he greased it, wouldn't it stain the porcelain?

"Max?" A voice asked.

Maximilliano looked in the mirror. It was Johan.

"Johan? What are you doing here?" He asked, turning off the faucet, grabbing the hand towel, and facing him.

"You left the door open." Johan pointed his thumb towards the door.

"Oh. I'll leave."

"No, you don't have to." Johan blocked the exit with his body. He was scarcely shorter, but everything about him seemed stronger—his jaw, high nose bridge, mindset. Like he was bred to be a soldier.

"Can't stand to be around those brown nosers." Both mischievousness and the above light sparkled in his dark monolids.

"Don't call them that." Maximilliano tucked the hand towel in its ring.

"So," Johan leaned a shoulder against the wall, "what's this piece called?"

"What?" Maximilliano rested his lower back against the sink countertop. Ah. He's talking about the music. "I haven't the slightest clue. Do you realize how many concertos and opuses there are?"

"As her husband, you think you would have learned by now."

"What are you insinuating?"

“What do you think I’m insinuating?” There was no bite to Johan’s words, one might assume, correctly perhaps, that he was genuine in his inquiry.

“That I’m a mediocre husband.”

“Are you a mediocre husband?” It was an almost hopeful question. Johan let out a long exhale.

“Only Suzy would know.” He wanted the conversation to end. Anymore and he could feel the taut invisible rope holding Johan back fraying and parting in two, a ship freed from its post.

Johan straightened up and rocked on his heels, “You’re so far from the battlefield now, don’t you think?”

Maximilliano stifled a sigh of relief, “I know, I never imagined I’d get away from the north.” They had come from dirt and blood stuffed in every orifice of their body, their ribs pushing against their skin from starvation, to clean, cotton uniforms and feasts for fifty. Neither of them, especially Maximilliano, would touch the war-cursed ground again. To be honest, without Johan’s companionship keeping him sane in those days, he would have stuck a loaded shotgun in his mouth a long time ago, and he was sure it was the same for Johan.

Against his better will, sometimes he wished for those days back when Johan saw him as another soldier and not someone to be loved.

“Mm. And one day, I’ll get as rich as you.” Johan pointed at the soap holder.

“In your dreams.”

“What? You don’t think I’m good enough?”

“I mean, you’re not as excellent as I am.”

“Purity, you’re an asshole.”

“You were worse than me, back then.” Maximilliano said, smiling. Suzy’s piano had fallen into a gentle staccato, a spring shower falling on a tin roof. He could never remember the names of the works, but he could remember the articulation markings and how their eccentric-ness felt as they left his lips. Sta-cah-tt-oh, pi-a-ni-sssssi-mo. In the army, there was no surplus of silky words and pretty commands.

“Right. Right. I took the fall for you so many times. You remember that fucking ration you stole,” Johan poked a finger at his friend’s chest, “and I got my ass beat for it.” He was close enough to see the faint graze of a bullet on his cheek.

“Stop talking like that. It’s uncouth.”

“It’s uncouth.” Johan mimicked, tone pitchy. “You’re a stuck-up, Max.” He stopped poking, instead stroking the medals’ edges pinned over Maximilliano’s heart. Suzy’s piece—far away but ever close—took an andante turn, a slow and lazy forest stream. Johan’s

partially agitated breathing filled the silence, and Maximilliano knew it was dangerous. He eyed the exit. He could make an excuse, something about wanting to check on the servants, or the guests, or—

“I wish you were a horrible husband.” Johan said and the words punched him in the stomach. Nothing came to Maximilliano, nothing he could say. The *andante* was steadily progressing into a faster, impatient pace, as if it were following the stream into the roiling Atlantic on the verge of a hurricane.

“Johan,” was all he could utter.

“Max. Before you leave...” Everything inside of him wanted to slap his hand off, tell him to shut up. A word more and their relationship would be changed, unable to return to that comfortable memory. “...I wanted to tell you that I’ll miss you. And that since I’ve met you, I have been devoted to you in love and friendship.” His hand fell to Maximilliano’s cuff, tugging a corner.

Maximilliano wondered if Suzy was looking for him as she played or if she was lost in her own world. No matter how much she protested playing the piano, she still returned to it. She was just as guilty of remaining in place, where no one left, no one grew.

Johan’s eyes were glittering with hope, and Maximilliano felt his stomach twist and coil. He mustered a smile, hoping it was believable enough, and tried to remember how it was when he wanted to act like he wanted to kiss someone (because Johan would probably want to, no?). If he gave in, pretended, he might preserve it all. Whatever it was.

“I’m devoted to you, too.” He spoke. In the corner, next to the door’s hinges, there was a moth he’d have to take outside later.

Johan’s hands slid up his arm to Maximilliano’s rope-burned neck to his firm jaw to his cheeks and farther. The piano grew heavy, pregnant clouds rumbled over the uneased waves, white froth spit at the air. The moth fluttered helplessly, its brown, speckled body like unsettled dirt. Then, Johan kissed him.

A pressure against his lips, foreign and rough. His friend’s eyes were closed, but Maximilliano couldn’t help but watch the moth; only when he felt a tug at his hair did he remember he had to participate too. He had recalled how he’d kissed Suzy and repeated the motions. His bottom lip sank into the middle of Johan’s, head tilted slightly, his nose pressed against the man’s cheek. The flavor of his saliva, a mixture of savory and bittersweet from the turkey and wine, pulled a ripple of nausea through Maximilliano. They should’ve brushed their mouths at least. And closed the door! Father, that’s pure and noble, imagine if someone had walked in? Their rhythm was slower than the piano’s

frantic marcato, and meanwhile, the moth seemed like it was hovering to the sound.

This couldn't go on for long. Maximilliano didn't like it when bugs died in his apartment, didn't want their frail, crunchy bodies littering micro corpse flakes over his rugs and glossed oak floors. The piano crescendoed, and having heard Suzy practice the entire piece, he knew it was coming to an end. Johan's eyes were shut close, the inward corners of his eyebrows knitted together, he let him kiss him one more time, and his act came to an end.

Maximilliano gently moved back. Johan's arms lingered, then pulled back to cover his mouth as if he'd been caught doing something embarrassing. A flicker of annoyance jumped in Maximilliano's chest. Two big bangs rang through the air; Suzy was done.

Everyone clapped, the union of their hands rang incessantly through the walls like gunfire.

*

Most of the party had bid their farewells, and Johan was in the middle of his.

“...and Suze, delectable playing, once again.”

She haughtily turned her head at the nickname, “You know nothing of music to be giving me compliments.”

“Apologies for my insubordination.” He bowed his head. When he lifted it, his eyes briefly met Maximilliano's, then returned to Suzy's.

“It's not like you to apologize for anything,” she huffed.

“I feel I should, I've given you too much grief. Besides, when will we see each other again? My friend is taking you away with him.”

“You make vehicles, make as many as you need to visit if you must.” Suzy waved him off. Joann ran from the kitchen to her mother's side, chocolate stains down the front of her dress. Her mother suppressed any measure of disdain.

“To think the day would come when you would miss me.” Johan laughed.

“I didn't say that. Shouldn't you be leaving?” She tried to kneel for her daughter, but realized her dress was too constricting for that.

“Of course.” He gave Maximilliano's shoulder a lighthearted punch and told him he would call. Suzy soon left to put Joann to bed.

Suddenly, a discomfort grew inside of Maximilliano, spurring him to the balcony to breathe some fresh air. A warm wind whipped him, unraveling his dark hair from his careful styling and teasing his eyes to tear up. The few flowerpots by the rail shuddered in place,

ratting, and their half-wilted tenants clung to the black iron balusters. He was surprised they hadn't withered into a million little pieces.

When the wind settled, he was suddenly aware of footsteps approaching him. They reached him before he could turn. Welkins.

"A bit windy up here, ain't it?" The old man drew out a cigarette; it disappeared from his fingers into the night instantly. He gave an unamused groan.

"Yes, sir." Maximilliano faced the expanse of the town. The clustered buildings appeared like a slab of granite from up high, unseemly and muted. The moonlight meshed everything further in pale grayness.

"Don't be worried about the Center. Texas and its Belt is a lot nicer than the north and here, and with Mexico cleared out, you don't gotta worry about surprise attacks." Welkins said, even if they both knew he wasn't worried about the geography. Nothing could be worse than the north.

"Of course, sir." The view was beginning to bore him, and as if through some psychic connection to his wife, a sensitivity to his boredom, a piano commenced to play and eerily its music streamed outside. It was Suzy's favorite piece, with a slow and haunting beginning, then it'd pick up its pace, and then return to solemnity. She told him it was about war. He hated this one, but it was better than facing the unpleasantness of this conversation in quietude.

"You know, Maximilliano, the Peacekeepers hunted two sodomites the other day. Brown fellows like you. I oversaw the interrogation before they were sent to The Room." Maximilliano's heart dropped to his stomach, then picked itself up to run. It pittered and pattered as if it were chased by a charge. The notes were faster; they fearfully stabbed the atmosphere. Mezzo forte. "You know what they told me? Ha. That their love was pure." Welkins tutted, as if they were before him, hunched over the metal table with their hands in prayer under artificial yellow lights.

"How absurd, sir." Maximilliano said, firm. Mezzo piano, languid, grieving.

"Indeed," Welkins rested a heavy hand between his shoulder blades, the same one that had provided support all those years, "but under the Father, we learn and become pure, don't we?"

"Of course, sir." His heart wanted to escape its bone cage. Perhaps it'd be easier to face ten men than this conversation with his general. The piano stopped on a sharp note. It wasn't the end of the piece yet.

Another cue. Joann burst out onto the balcony, chased by Suzy, and threw herself around her father's leg, face pressed against his kneecap. Her hold was weak; there was no strength in her little arms. Why would there be? "Joann. What are you doing here?" Maximilliano slid her off with ease and rested her against his chest.

"I don't wanna go to bed."

"I just put you up." Suzy rubbed her eyebrows, the edge of her fingers caught some of the blue of her eyeshadow.

"Mrs. Reyes. I think I have already expressed my admiration for your playing, but I must commend you once again. If you had been a man, surely the Peacekeepers' orchestra would have taken you." Welkins gave a nostalgic chuckle. "Better you aren't, after all, then Maximilliano wouldn't have such an excellent wife." Fire burned in Maximilliano.

"How kind." Suzy said. She crossed her hands behind her back, and even without looking, her husband knew she was clenching her fists. Joann yawned.

"Well, it looks like it's time for the girl to sleep. I'll take my leave. I've talked enough." Welkins gave one squeeze to Joann's head and walked away. When he was fully gone, Suzy hurried to them and smoothed out her daughter's hair. Then, she saw the mess that Maximilliano's was and fussed over those brown curls too.

"I'd say something, but I'm afraid of being sent away to a room," she hissed.

"I think I know what you'd like to say, so don't worry." Maximilliano held Joann tighter, as tight as he could, and lowered his head for his wife. "Still, that's how the Father has imagined our world."

"If Johan were here, he would agree with me that we disagree with you." She pulled back her hand.

"Suzy!" Maximilliano's gaze darted to the balcony doors.

"Watch your mouth. Besides, I didn't know you were that close to him."

"Yes, we would've been great friends if you weren't in the picture. We're quite alike." The round mountains blockading the city seemed grander and watchful. "We both love you like thorough fools, don't you think?" Her eyelids fluttered, and for a moment, he thought she would cry, but she didn't. It was the wind. Of course, never had Maximilliano once seen Suzy cry, not at their wedding, or when she was giving birth to Joann. Not once.

"Suzy."

"Yes. I know. Watch my mouth." She ran her hands through her hair, cracking the gel, and unbecomingly parting her hair. "Anyway, I wish he wouldn't touch her."

"Why?" He dreaded asking.

“Things die faster when men like him touch them.” She whispered, as if Joann wouldn’t hear. The girl grew wide-eyed, and she patted her own hair out. Suzy smiled, and folded her hands in front of her.

“Then I should’ve died a long time ago.” He shook his head. He and Johan and the rest of the soldiers he knew. Maximilliano knew what she spoke of, he’d seen it in the eyes of men he’d killed and those that tried to kill him. A glassy and vindictive disease, asymptomatic and invisible to some until it found a weaker victim to terrorize and consume. He’d spent a large portion of his life in wariness to protect Suzy, Joann, and Johan from it. The reason they needed to stay with him. Except, Suzy, like a firing squad to a guilty man, said:

“Unless you’re like him.”

TIM MCKEEN –
PINK LEMONADE

I love you
I love you as we sit under the sky
And talk about our feelings
You're the best stroke
On the canvas of our lives

It's beautiful tonight
Bright red and orange and pink
As if the magenta sun exploded
The backdrop to this final scene

I'm going to miss you when you're gone
And you will be
You always are
You're just you number four

I loved you once
Then twice
The third time we were friends
The fourth I loved you again
Maybe you loved me back
Who knows?

You're gone now
Gone from the scene
Gone from my life
I don't love you anymore
I love the space you filled
But that's not you, is it?

So now we sit

You number three
Below this pink lemonade sky
And we talk
And talk
And talk
About everything we can find words for

I love you now, even though I didn't
We could be so much more
I'll never ask
Never suggest
Maybe I'll joke
But that's 'cause I'm weak

I love you and I can't lose you
I'm sorry life is hard

So let's just sit

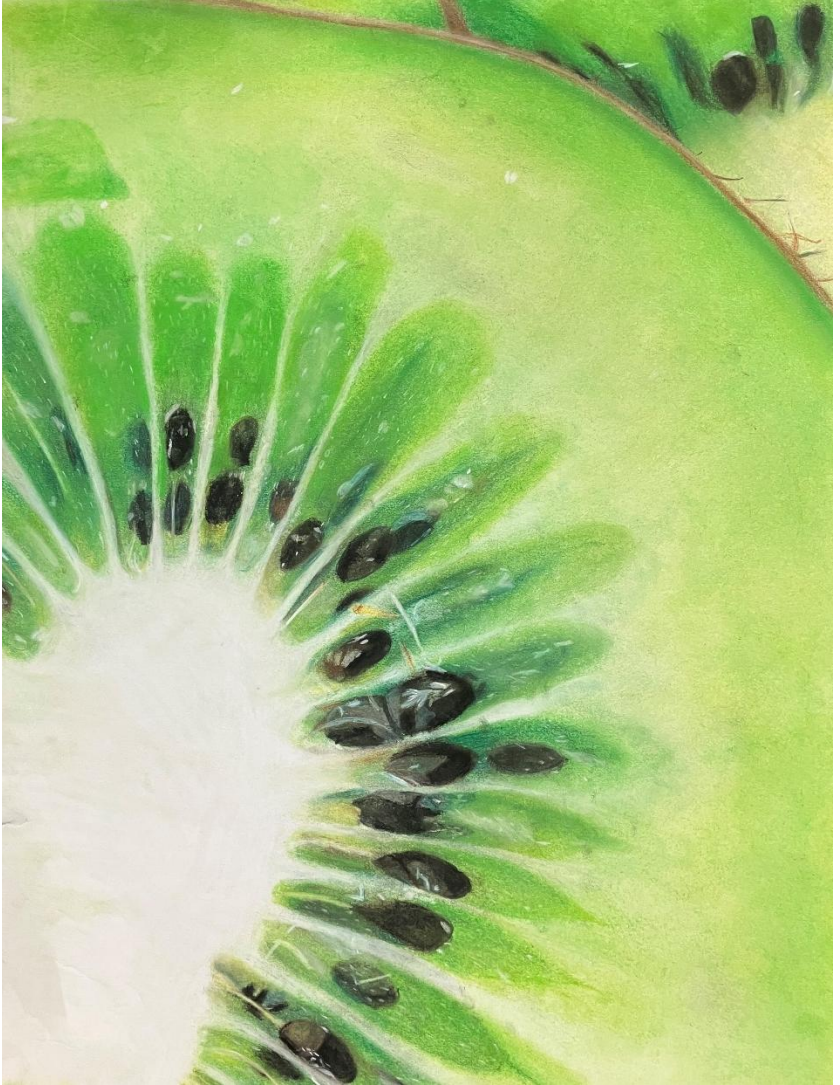
Below the sky
Painted in brilliant reds and oranges
And pink
The pink lemonade backdrop
Of every scene that matters

You're my final survivor
The other yous aren't you
They'll never be you
The sky is on fire behind us
But we're calm
Aren't we?

I love the cycle of you
You're all so different
You're my favorite role
I wonder who'll be you next

I may someday not love you anymore
I may someday move on
But every night
When the sun sets
I'll remember what I had
Remember what you were
And I won't care what you are now

CHERISH HALL – *CLOSE-UP OF A KIWI*



SAMANTHA SPEARS –
ON THINGS I CAN'T REMEMBER

How to do algebra without thinking too hard / my first phone number
/ what day in March Daylight Savings Time begins / my coworker's
birthday / how many ounces are in a cup / the password I used for that
one email / how to color inside the lines / how to say I love you first /
the way my childhood best friend laughed / the last time I played outside
/ how much it hurt when I wore braces / the sound of a mourning dove
before a school field trip / when I started to notice mirrors / when I
started to notice myself in mirrors / when anxiety said hello / when
happiness said see you later / when the grief got a little lighter / when
the world seemed a bit brighter / the last time my mother picked me up
/ and carried me inside / and tucked me into bed / and told me
everything will be alright.

HEILY LACRUZ SILVA –
UNDER THE GUAVA TREE

I take my suitcases as I go down the elevator and get into the Uber waiting in front of my apartment building. I look out the window at the city—the towering buildings, the cars stuck in traffic, just like me.

My driver is a bit talkative; he makes a comment about my accent and asks where I'm from. I'm already used to that question, so I answer, and he starts talking about the things he's heard about the situation in my country. I just nod.

I finally arrive at the airport. The trip will be long, but the excitement and anxiety in my chest are enormous. I'm finally going home. My assistant texts me asking how I'm doing and throws in a few questions about this week's inventory—questions I thought I had already answered. I just hope she's able to handle everything on her own.

I board the plane and find my seat. Unfortunately, it's not by the window. When I notice that half the seats on the flight are empty, I move to another row and sit by the window. As the cabin lights dim, I try to sleep. Through the window, the sky is a dark vastness sprinkled with distant lights. I think about what awaits me when I arrive—the hugs, the smells, the food, the colors, all the memories I once had to leave behind.

When the plane lands, the sun is just beginning to peek over the horizon. A soft orange light filters through the windows as a mix of relief and nervousness runs through me. The warm, humid air rushes in as soon as the doors open, and I instantly recognize that familiar scent. An indescribable feeling settles in my chest while my eyes shine with a couple of tears.

I walk down the hallway until I reach the arrivals area, and the first thing that catches my eye is the floor—a shiny mosaic of colors that seem to fade with time yet still hold their tropical energy. Shades of yellow, blue, and red intertwine as if they were telling their own story. I think of the thousands of people who have said goodbye in this place over the years, and the few who are reunited now.

I hear some goodbyes and some welcomes while I walk through the airport. The mix of voices blends with the announcements

over the speakers and the sound of luggage wheels rolling across the floor.

As I walk toward the exit, a woman about my age, waiting for her suitcase at the carousel, glances at me. She gives a small, tired smile—the kind you share with someone who’s been awake way too long.

“Did you come on the early-morning flight?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I’m still half-asleep.”

She chuckles. “I can tell. Where are you coming from?”

“Pretty far,” I say, keeping it vague. “I hadn’t traveled in a while.”

“Oh, that explains it,” she says, shifting her backpack on her shoulder. “It always feels strange coming back after some time.”

The carousel spins again, and one of her suitcases appears. She asks if I can help her with it, and I lift it with a small grunt—it’s heavy.

“Well,” she says, giving me a friendly nod, “have a good return...or a good start. Whatever it is for you.”

“Thanks,” I say. “You too.” I say while I see her walk away to meet with an elderly woman and two girls, probably her family.

I feel the humidity cling to my skin, and despite the exhaustion from the trip, I’m overwhelmed with excitement. No one is waiting for me at the airport; I prefer to take a taxi to the bus station—twelve more hours of traveling before I can surprise my family.

I lift my hand and a yellow taxi stops in front of me. The taxi driver takes my suitcases into the car. On our way to the bus station, he asks me if I’m going to settle in my hometown again.

“No,” I say sadly. “I wish I could.”

“My daughter feels just like you,” he says, “She says she loves it here, but her future is far away.”

The taxi stops at the bus station—the same one I remember from years ago, when I was leaving. I get a ticket and take my seat by the window. The cherry deodorizer scent makes me dizzy as I try to fit my backpack in front of my legs. Even though it’s uncomfortable, I can’t risk getting anything stolen. Hours pass, and I sleep most of the time to calm my dizziness, but it’s hot and the bus stops every three hours. I talk with the boy sitting next to me; he is probably in college. He tells me he feels like going to school isn’t worth it—his classes are hard, but the teachers rarely show up because they don’t get paid enough. He says he is tired and wants to leave. I encourage him to keep trying, even though I know I wasn’t able to stay myself.

The hours pass, and the bus arrives in Manzanilla. My heart fills with joy. The town, nestled in the middle of the mountains, greets me with morning dew and a bright blue sky. I walk to the next bus that will

take me near my parents' house. If I hurry, I might still catch some breakfast.

While on the bus, with my suitcases and backpack as close to me as possible, a person sits beside me. They don't seem to want to talk, and I'm too tired for a conversation. A couple of stops later, they get down, and then I hear the bus driver making stupid jokes about them with the guy beside him. Jerks, I think. This country will never reach the 21st Century with people like this.

I get off the bus after handing my money to the jerk bus driver, and at the end of the street I see it: turquoise walls and black iron window bars. As soon as I set my suitcases down, nostalgia wraps around me, carrying the cries of cicadas and the smell of freshly brewed coffee coming from inside. I stand there for a few seconds, taking in the sight, trying to process that after all this time, I'm finally back here.

With trembling hands and a racing heartbeat, I open the gate to the porch and hear the familiar creak of the hinges. As I walk to the front door, I see figures in the living room, around the same old orange couch. My mom sees me first. For a moment, she freezes, the coffee cup halfway to her mouth, her eyes slowly beginning to shine like dew.

"Mijol!" she cries, running toward me.

She hugs me so tightly that it's hard to breathe, but I don't want her to let go. The room fills with noise—voices, laughter, and footsteps. My dad walks over with a trembling smile and glassy eyes. He pats me on the shoulder, as if trying to disguise his emotion, and when Mom releases me, he pulls me into another hug. My uncle stands up too, laughing as he says, "Look at you—how much you've changed! You're taller!"

A lump forms in my throat—everything feels so familiar and yet so different. I notice the new wrinkles around my mom's eyes and the silver streaks in my dad's hair. In the corner of the dining room, two little kids—my cousins, Emilio and Sofia—watch the scene with curiosity. Sofia hides behind the table, while Emilio, barefoot, runs toward me and asks if I brought him any toys "from over there." I kneel to his level, hug him, and say yes. The last time I saw them, they were babies. My heart tightens when I realize how much I've missed.

After a while of hugs, laughter, and tears, the conversation shifts to stories and comments about how much I've changed. My mom can't stop looking at me, as if trying to make up for the lost years just by seeing me. She says my skin is lighter—like a vampire. I laugh while my uncle asks me about my company, and the children run up and down the hallway full of pictures of my childhood.

My mom goes to the kitchen to prepare my favorite food for lunch. As I eat, nostalgia and joy wash over me. “I missed your cooking,” I say, “I didn’t realize how much.” She smiles softly and kisses my forehead.

While eating, we continue our conversation, and they keep asking me things about my life “over there.” Then I finally find a moment to ask the question that has been on my mind since I got here.

“Where is my nona? What about my nono?” I ask with a smile. I can’t wait to see my grandparents—I want to surprise them too.

For a moment, all the chatter dies down. One of the children stops mid-run, as if he too has sensed the change in the air. He walks up to me and hugs my leg. Then, right at that moment, a thick fog begins to seep through the open window. The warmth that had embraced me at the airport turns into a heavy, suffocating humidity that clings to the skin, as if the air itself had stopped moving. My uncle breaks the silence, ignoring the fog; his voice sounds low and careful.

“Still at the ranch, but she hasn’t been doing too well lately, and she refuses to move in with us.”

“Tomorrow I’ll go visit them,” I say, trying to sound cheerful. “I’m sure nono is waiting to tell me a story under the guava tree.”

Mom only gives me a faint smile. Outside, the fog thickens, blanketing the sky completely and slowly coming inside. As we get ready to sleep, I assume it’s about to rain—and I just hope it doesn’t make it harder for me to reach the ranch tomorrow.

*

I wake up, and the exhaustion from the trip makes itself known. Even so, the excitement of being here after so long is still in me. After breakfast, everyone starts getting ready to visit my grandparents. I head to the bathroom. In the shower, the cold water hits my skin — a small shock I wasn’t expecting. It’s been years since I’ve showered with cold water; I’d almost forgotten that water heaters aren’t common here. I step out shivering, but feeling refreshed and oddly alive.

We all squeeze into my dad’s old Chevette, packed so tightly I can’t imagine how we all fit. The discomfort fades among laughter and the jokes my dad makes along the way. As we head out toward the farm, I watch the town’s streets still bursting with life — children playing on the sidewalks, street vendors selling fruit and empanadas, and the buzz of motorbikes weaving through traffic. Slowly, though, the urban chaos begins to fade. The sidewalks grow narrower, the

houses farther apart, and the sound of the town gives way to nature's song.

As we drive on without A/C, concrete neighborhoods are replaced by tall trees leaning over the road, forming a green canopy that lets in soft rays of sunlight through the leaves. Along the roadside, wildflowers bloom freely. The air feels fresher and smells of wet earth, yet the heat still makes us sweat.

"Look — cows!" Emilio says excitedly, pointing toward a pasture where a small herd rests under a giant saman tree. A bit further ahead, a man on horseback greets us from the side of the road. Dad grumbles about the rough roads and the endless curves, but there's something about this landscape that fills me with peace.

After a few more minutes, the Chevette stops in front of the farm. From the window, I recognize the little house I remember so vividly from childhood — its unplastered red brick walls and the zinc roof that glints under the sun. Dad gets out to open the wire gate and park the car. Dirt, still damp from the night's fog, clings to our shoes as we walk toward the entrance. Everything looks exactly the same, and yet different. It's as if time has moved slower here, preserving every shadow, every smell, every sound of the countryside — but something is missing.

Everyone steps out of the car and I contemplate how green everything looks. My mom and uncle walk ahead toward the door while I linger behind, taking it all in. The house looks smaller than I remember, but it holds the same calm as always. From the kitchen, I hear the metallic sound of a boiling pot and the faint murmur of an old radio playing carranga.

I stand still for a moment, absorbing it all, my own wonderland — the scent of firewood, the distant crowing of roosters, the chatter of guacharacas and the bees and butterflies flying around nona's roses. Then I hear mom calling out from the doorway:

"Mom! Look who's here!"

There's a short silence. Then I hear her — that trembling, sweet voice I know so well, the same that used to lull me to sleep when I was a child.

"Who is it?" she asks curiously from inside.

I walk closer. My mom and uncle move aside to let me pass. As I cross the doorway, the sounds from outside fade away. In the middle of the small living room, my nona sits in her rocking chair. Her beautiful silver hair falls softly over her shoulders. Her hands, busy shelling green beans, drop a few as she looks up and sees me.

For a moment, she says nothing. She stares at me as if she can't believe what she's seeing. Her eyes, clouded with age, widen with surprise and emotion.

"Moisés," she whispers, placing a hand over her heart.

I nod with a trembling smile, my throat tightening as tears spill down my face.

"Yes, nona...your blessing."

I move closer, and she takes my face in her hands, blinking several times as if making sure I'm real.

"God bless you," she finally says, her voice breaking.

She hugs me. Her body is fragile, her thin skin as soft as silk, and her embrace is as warm and strong as I remember. I breathe in her familiar scent — a mix of flowers, soap, and coffee. I feel her tears on my shirt as she keeps saying she can't believe I'm here. "I thought I wouldn't have enough time left to see you again," she murmurs.

"I missed you too, nona," I reply, my voice unsteady.

Behind us, everyone watches in silence. Mom wipes her eyes, and dad looks away so we won't see his tears. For that moment, time stops.

After a few minutes of her staring at me as if I were someone famous, nona tells us to sit down while she prepares lunch for us. My mom automatically helps her and dad and uncle say they will go look at the animals with the kids. I get up to go to the kitchen and grab a clay cup. I stand there for a moment, admiring its color and thinking about how long this little relic has survived. I take another one and fill both of them with coffee.

I step out into the backyard and the fog comes back. At least I can still see the path lined with araguaney trees, their yellow color guiding me and I walk until I reach it — the guava tree. It looks taller now, magnificent. Its leaves still cast that cool, gentle shade, and the ones that have fallen create a kind of carpet on the ground. The flat stone is still there, just as I remember it, though now covered in a bit of moss. I walk around to the other side of the tree — and then I see him.

Sitting between the thick roots of the guava tree is my nono, Moisés. I see him from behind, wearing his blue plaid shirt, just as I remember. He's still in his brown pants and his old rubber sandals. His walking stick, carved from this guava tree, rests beside him. His cream-colored hat with the black band covers his face as he naps against the trunk.

I ease myself on the stone where I used to read as a child while he tended his garden. I place both cups of coffee on the rock and smile, looking around at the field — once full of tomato and corn plants, now

just shrubs and grass. I look back at my nono, and the sound of his soft snoring brings back a flood of childhood memories.

I reach out and touch his shoulder gently. When he sees me, he rubs his eyes and blinks several times. My smile grows wide, and my eyes fill with tears as I see his green eyes — the same as mine.

“My boy...” he whispers, and I hug him. I can feel him trembling, his breathing uneven. Tears stream down my face without stopping.

“You came,” he repeats over and over, and I keep holding him, unwilling to let go. He grabs my face with his hands and looks at me as if I wasn’t real. His proud tears fill up my heart. I look at him the same way.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. Forgive me—I should’ve never left,” I say between sobs.

“It’s all right. I’ll always be waiting for you here. Forgive me for leaving too,” he says, and through my tears I try to hold onto his scent—dew and tobacco. He smiles, and I see his chimó-stained teeth again.

“I should never have left. I’m so sorry,” I say, still crying.

“You’re doing a fine job,” he tells me, his rough yet gentle voice full of love. “I’m proud of you. I’m fine. I’ve always been watching over you.”

The fog comes around, thicker, heavier. I feel like I can’t breathe. I can’t stop crying. nono tells me, “Everything will be okay. I’m here.” I just hug him and take him in my arms, turning into the little boy he used to comfort and spoil.

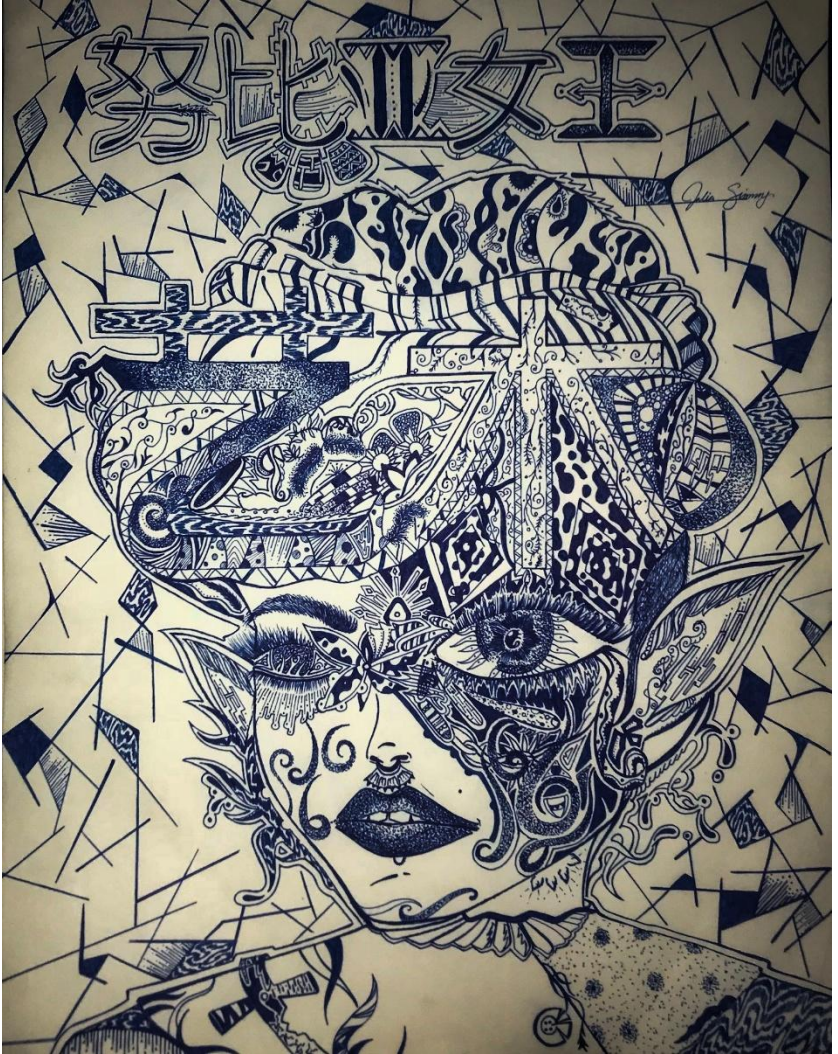
The fog takes him away. I try to hold him, but I can’t hold the fog. I kneel hugging myself with tears rolling like a river and falling into the tree’s roots. I wake up drenched in sweat, my face still wet with tears that won’t stop falling. Leaves and dirt stick to me, my chest empty and in pain. I stand up and walk back.

I get to the house. I see no one...just fog.

LEAH MARIE SIMMONS – *Labyrinth*



LEAH MARIE SIMMONS – NUBLIAN QUEEN ART



K. D. WARD –

ON LEARNING THE BETTER WAY TO LIVE ALONE

All my old houses are empty;
All my old houses are gone now.

I walked to the library last night.
Was meatlocker-cold, I'll tell 'ya.
The door finally opens and I am at once a pilgrim;
That oversized hoodie?—my vestments.
Lights I normally find obnoxious are now thin, unfurled halos,
turning beautiful to call me toward a felt chair 'cross the foyer.
Toes tucked under thigh, sitting like Siddhartha as,
I reckon with the vacant hallway.

No one is here, save for me and the vent-whistle:
High pitched and tumbling like creekwater.
One of my old houses had a creek—I'm back there now.
My uncles are wading—beer in clasped hands—
Like holy men preaching a Gun-and-Girls gospel.
And then, they vanish;
Their beers bobble in the stream.
Everything is still, Everything is simple.
My thoughts are cresting catfish and fizzle on re-entry.

If only kid-me could see this!

“Exploding Fish!”

“Holy Rapture!”

“Heathen's damnation!”

I would've flung around, flailed and cursed!
Everything would be shouting anxious!
But no. No one's screaming.
It is empty, empty, empty,
And the creek is gone:
All that's left is chairs with abstract bottoms
And counters without clutter.
The past is a distant bookcart;
The future an elevator's ding.
All my old houses are gone now
But I'm not there anyways.

ANDREW KITCHENS –
A NATURAL CAUSE

Death from above is only natural.
Lightning from the heavens, heralded by rain.
Blizzards with snow, their cold coffins fall.
Towering tsunamis, turbulent waves.
Even earthquakes from underfoot
Claim corpses with descending debris.

It's only natural then, that death hangs above
Every hospice and hospital bed
In heart-monitor form, ticking slower,
The IV droplets dripping lower,
Until the cost of every procedure trickles
Down all our throats from a CEO's
Piss covered leg –
The golden stream
That Unites us in health and divides us by wealth.

It's only natural then, that death flies above
Every hospital, school, and mosque in Gaza,
That's blown to bits and pieces by ballistic missiles,
Where gravity and gunpowder dismember
Those you stood beside until their teeth and bones
Become shrapnel, flying towards you at terminal velocity.
From high command, Washington won't Tel Aviv to stop.

It's only natural then, that death stands above
Every one of our neighbors that takes to the streets,
Protesting against little-man syndrome armed with
A gun, a mask, and the vitriol of a proud boy

Itching for the south to rise again and ascend
Above the law once more. Now armed with guns instead
Of whips, they can crack down on the defenseless, firing
One. two. three. four. five. six. seven. eight. nine. ten. shots.
A Pretty price to pay for freedom.

It's only natural then, that death looms above
Every waking moment of our black brothers and sisters:
Their calls monitored, their relations investigated, their speeches
Scrutinized – until that fateful day at the
Mountaintop's peak when they peek behind that
Capitalist curtain, and find the puppet strings controlled
By the one percent will not withstand the weight
Of the fifteen percent tugging and twisting in tandem:
Or, the tragic tale of Cointelpro-metheus.

It's the law of land then, that death from above looks like
A flash of red, a flurry of white, and sea of blue that
Killed Dr. King in the streets,
Killed Fred Hampton in his sheets,
Killed the citizens among the protestor's ranks,
Killed the Palestinians between the Banks, and
Killed the poor and elderly on oxygen tanks.

Until we start looking up and pulling down,
These murders will all be labeled:
“Death by natural causes”

ANDREW KITCHENS –
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE A SHINING STAR, BUT AN
ORBITAL REALIGNMENT

Andrew loves the stars
Bright enough for him to
Carry in the pocket behind his eyes.

Desperate to break free,
Every star coalesced,
Flying around one neural track.

Growing together, their combined
Heat melts through his tongue,
Insisting they should spread beyond
Just the cerebral folds within
Kitchens, as they were
Like hearty, tenderly made
Meals, demanding to be shared,
Nourishing any who rise to the
Occasion and soar—
Pushing up against the
Questions still unanswered,
Reaching down toward the
Salvation of humanity.

Those tragic troglodytes, doomed to
Undulate forever,
Veering between progress and decline,
Warring incessantly,
Xenial occasionally.

Yet stars still yearn to enter the
Zeitgeist and realign our orbit

JAYLEE WRIGHT –
LAST SUMMER

Lonnie's parents' lake house was my favorite place on the planet. His parents spent about two weekends a year there, so the rest of the time it was all ours. We went there every summer since eighth grade and at least one weekend a month during school. No rules, no curfew, no parents. Nothing could make it better.

In just two short weeks, our junior year would be over, and all five of us would be where we belonged. Now that we all had driver's licenses, and Lonnie even had a fake ID, nothing was standing in our way; the summer of 1996 was going to be the best summer yet.

I slammed my car door, and the whole parking lot vibrated with the bass from someone's *No Doubt* CD. Another Thursday, another 7:30 a.m. at dreaded Montgomery High. The air even smelled like homework and cafeteria tater tots.

My friends were already at our usual spot, the faded picnic tables by the breezeway. Lonnie and Jake were doubled over laughing at something that probably wasn't funny, and Jess and Becca had their heads together, whispering and giggling. As soon as Jake spotted me walking up, his face dropped.

"Ethan, don't hate me, please," Jake said, half joking, but not really. My stomach tightened. Jake only used that face when he'd screwed up big.

"What did you do this time?" I asked, trying to keep it light.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his windbreaker. "I'm not playing basketball next year."

"You're screwing with me, right?" I said to him. "You have to play. It's our senior year."

Jake shook his head, eyes dropping to the pavement. "I've been thinking about it. I'm just...not feeling it anymore." He forced a laugh. "We had a good run. Made the playoffs for the first time ever—Montgomery freaking High! I'm good ending on that."

He couldn't be serious. I felt like someone had just punched me in the gut.

"Jake! No, you can't do this to me! It's our senior year, our last basketball season together, like ever!" The words came out sharper than I expected.

He wouldn't look at me. He kept kicking at a crack in the pavement.

Basketball was *our* thing. It's how we met the week he moved here, awkward and quiet and taller than everyone in gym class. I

dragged him to tryouts, and somehow he stuck. He was good. Lonnie was good. But basketball was the one place I felt untouchable.

I thought Jake understood that. I thought he'd stick it out, if not for himself, then at least for me.

But the way he kept avoiding my eyes made me wonder if basketball was only the first thing he was planning to walk away from.

I felt bad that Jake had come in and practically replaced Lonnie as my best friend, but Jake and I got close so quickly. I had never laughed harder than I did with Jake, the kind that left your ribs aching and your face hurting. We just got each other in a way that no one else even came close to.

"Lonnie, tell him he has to play!" I said, turning to him like he could fix this.

He said it so casually, like Jake quitting wasn't blowing a hole through the thing that held the three of us together. He didn't get it. Next year was our last shot, our last season on the same court, wearing the same jerseys, hearing the same crowd scream for us. Basketball was the only part of the year I actually looked forward to. Well, that and summer, but summer was different. Summer was ours.

"Guys, Come on! Will you at least think about it? Please, please, please?" I said in my most convincing tone.

Jake exhaled, long and heavy, like he'd been carrying this around forever. "Ethan...I already told Coach. He tried to talk me out of it, got all red in the face and everything, but it didn't change anything." He shook his head slowly. "I've thought about it for a long time. I'm not playing. I'm sorry."

After that, I barely talked to him the rest of the day. Not out of pettiness, just plain anger, the kind that sits in your chest and simmers. In English class, he kept glancing over like he was waiting for me to crack a joke or pass a note under the desk, but I kept my eyes glued to the teacher, pretending I cared about *Othello*.

I knew it wouldn't change his mind. Jake was immovable once he decided on something. But staying mad felt easier than admitting I was scared of what else he might be walking away from.

Jake showed up in eighth grade right after his parents split, his mom dragging him all the way from Washington to Louisiana. He never said much about his dad, just that his mom wanted distance, *a lot* of it.

One night, we were camped out in his basement, pretending to watch movies while the VHS logo bounced around the screen. What

we were really doing was prank calling half the numbers in his mom's address book.

His basement was perfect for it: dark, cool, and far enough from his mom and little sister that they couldn't hear us cracking up. The old landline sat on a wobbly TV tray; the curly cord stretched across the carpet as we hunched over it.

Lonnie was always the easiest target. All Jake had to do was put on a bad British accent, and Lonnie would fall for it every single time. When he finally hung up, baffled as ever, Jake and I collapsed onto the floor, laughing so hard the couch cushions shook.

We were laughing so hard our sides hurt, and we were fighting to catch our breath, and the musky air in the basement didn't help. We had started on the couch, pulling the phone's curly cord as far as it could stretch. We laughed ourselves off the couch and onto the shaggy rug. I landed halfway on Jake, and the laughter doubled.

And then he went still.

Still halfway on Jake, trying to catch my breath. His face got serious as he looked up at me.

The way he was looking at me made my stomach flip. He had never looked at me like that. His brown eyes moved away from mine and made their way to my lips. I felt his hand grab the nape of my neck and pull my head down. My lips were on his before I knew what happened. I froze at first, then started kissing him back.

That was the first time I had ever really kissed anyone. Well, I kissed Jess the year before during a game of spin the bottle, but that was just a peck, and that was before I met Jake. Jake was the first kiss that mattered.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, tangled in laughter and soft kisses, until the world outside the basement felt impossibly far away. By morning, we acted like it had never happened, words carefully avoided, glances quickly darted away.

I forget about it most of the time, burying the memory under jokes and our routine. Until we are alone. Then it's all I think about. My chest tightens, my mind rewinds to that instant, and I wonder, does he ever think about it too?

He hasn't said a word about it since that night, so I won't either. But the memory is ours, impossible to erase.

*

The last few weeks of school flew by, and soon it was time to pack for Lonnie's lake house. Just a few minutes from my place, I'd probably only come home a handful of times all summer.

The girls took the master bedroom with its private bathroom; the rest of us shared the other one. We barely spent any time inside anyway.

Some nights, we fell asleep by the fire pit after long days on the lake, the smell of smoke and bug spray mixing with the warm night air. Those nights were my favorite.

Jake was supposed to pick me up in an hour, then we'd be on our way to start the best summer yet. We hadn't really hung out since he told me he was quitting. I was still mad, and he knew it, but he knew I'd get over it.

He did apologize a few more times, but I thought if I could guilt-trip him, he might cave and change his mind. It didn't work.

We planned to stop at the store on the way for a week's worth of food. Lonnie was using his new fake ID for alcohol, and the girls were grabbing other drinks and games. I threw a few VHS tapes and my favorite cassettes into a duffel and waited.

Jake pulled into the driveway and honked. I could hear Oasis blaring from his stereo all the way in my bedroom.

I opened the back door of his car and tossed my bag in, then got into the passenger side. Jake turned to me as he turned the music down. "Do you forgive me yet?" he said, a smirk creeping onto his face.

"Fine, douchebag, I forgive you," I said, grinning despite myself.

When we got to the lake house, Lonnie and the girls were already there, unpacking and getting the place ready for our stay. Jake and I each grabbed a side of the ice chest and brought it into the large kitchen.

The lake house was perfect—it had a big kitchen that connected to the living room, an upstairs sunroom that was perfect for getting stoned, a big deck connected to the back porch, a dock on the lake, and the best part: Lonnie's boat. which only he could drive, but we all had a blast pretending we could.

It was the perfect time of year—the grass green, the trees casting cool shadows, and the lake water warm in the sticky heat.

"What's the plan for our first night?" Jake asked.

"I say we get high and watch *Candyman*," Becca said.

"A scary movie? Can we watch a romance for once?" Jess groaned. Her upbeat energy balanced out Becca's constant complaining.

“We watched that romance movie last night! It was awful. Can we watch something else?” Becca asked, glancing at Jess.

“Fine, but you’re watching a romance with me tomorrow!” Jess replied.

“Deal,” Becca said, rolling her eyes, though we all knew she didn’t mind.

The first few days, we just relaxed. We smoked in the sunroom, swam by the dock, and soaked in the smell of sunscreen and bug spray. At sunset, we sat around the fire pit, the sky a swirl of orange and pink, Nirvana faintly playing from the boombox. Nothing felt better.

Jake had been quiet today, unusual for someone so outgoing. I made a mental note to check on him before bed. He had this habit of looking at me when we laughed, big brown eyes that felt like they could see right through me, but he hadn’t laughed much today.

“Y’all ready for bed?” Jess called. “I need a shower—I smell like dirty lake.”

“I’m first!” Becca said.

“Sure, just don’t use all the hot water again,” Jess teased.

They went inside with their beers, Lonnie started picking up his trash, and I watched them walk inside.

“Goodnight, guys,” Lonnie said, blowing a kiss in our direction.

Me and Jake stayed where we were, sitting in silence, listening to the bugs and the faint music of the boombox.

“Isn’t it crazy,” Jake says before pausing, “that this is our last summer here like this?”

“But it’s not, we still have the summer after graduation,” I said, though my voice sounded uncertain.

“Yeah, you’re right, but it will be different, right?” he said as he stared toward the lake. “I mean, maybe, but we’ll be back. We just won’t have to go back to high school at the end of every summer anymore,” I replied

I don’t think so. We may be a tad more nostalgic because it’s our last summer before college, but I’m sure we’ll keep coming back every summer for years.

“I know, but things will be different.” His eyes stayed fixated on the lake.

I didn’t know what to say this time, so I didn’t say anything.

Weeks blurred together in a haze of hot sun, spray from the lake, and the tang of alcohol on our tongues. Days were spent swimming until our skin wrinkled, racing the boat across the water with the wind whipping our hair, and lazing on the dock, beers in hand,

laughing until our sides ached. Nights stretched into smoky haze-filled conversations around the fire pit, music spilling from the boombox, the stars twinkling off the reflection of the lake.

Through it all, that conversation with Jake lingered in the back of my mind.

Lonnie tried to teach Becca to drive the boat, a line he'd always said he'd never cross, but I think he had a thing for her. It didn't go well; we nearly capsized, water slapping our faces, hearts hammering with panic and laughter. She made it up to us later, racing off to the gas station for slushies, the ice-cold sweetness a perfect contrast to the chaos she'd caused.

We were all pretty drunk, the firelight flickering across our faces as darkness settled over the lake. Out of nowhere, Becca blurted, "Do you ever think about us, Jake?"

Everyone went quiet; the silence was filled with the crackle of the fire.

Her and Jake dated for less than a month our sophomore year. She liked him first, so they went on a few dates. The group was really excited for them, but they just came to school one day and announced that they had decided to be just friends.

It was surprising because, for those three weeks that they dated, they were inseparable. I hardly saw Jake during that time, and Jess hardly saw Becca. I hate to admit it, but I was relieved when they said they were just friends. I wanted my best friend back, and I know Jess felt the same.

Jake blinked, a flicker of surprise crossing his face. "I mean... yeah, I guess. But that was a long time ago." He leaned back slightly, trying to shrug it off, but I could see the tension in his jaw. Jake wasn't one to dwell on the past.

"We just went back to normal, like nothing happened. And don't get me wrong, I'm grateful we are still friends, but isn't it weird? We just acted like we didn't date, like you didn't tell me what you told me," Becca said, slurring a little.

What did he tell her? Did he... tell her about me and him? There's no way he would, but then, why never mention it to me?

"Can we not talk about this right now, Becca?" he asks, with annoyance in his voice.

"Jake, we've gone two years without talking about it because it's what you wanted, but I want to now," she pressed, leaning forward.

"I don't want to," he said, calm but firm.

“Well, I do!” Becca yelled, her voice cracking. “Why can’t we? One day you’re telling me I’m all you ever wanted, and the next, you think we should just be friends? I was in love with you, Jake! I had been for years! I know it was only a few weeks, but it was everything I hoped it would be. What happened?”

I had no idea she liked him so much. I always figured it was just a little crush and they decided not to ruin their friendship.

“I’m sorry, Becca. I had no idea you felt that way about me. I never would have gone out with you if I knew. Can we go talk in private?” he says as he motions to the dock. She nods in agreement and follows him down to the small dock.

They spoke quietly, voices low so the rest of us couldn’t hear, and they talked for a while. Jake said something that made Becca laugh, then they hugged, and Becca walked inside. Jess followed her.

Jake and I just looked at each other for a moment before Lonnie gave Jake a pat on the shoulder and followed the girls inside.

He motioned me to follow him back to the dock. He sat on the edge, legs hanging over the water. I slid down next to him. The boards creaked under our weight.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the lights glisten on the lake, listening to the crickets chirp.

He shifted closer to me on the dock, just enough that our shoulders touched. My pulse jumped. I could feel him next to me, warm, steady, real. It felt like the world had narrowed to this moment, just us and the quiet lake.

Then he exhaled, a shaky breath, and turned to look at me. “Ethan...” His voice was low, hesitant. “I...I love you.”

My chest tightened. Every nerve in my body seemed to ignite. He swallowed hard, eyes dark, vulnerable, searching mine for a response he had probably been waiting years to hear. “I’ve been in love with you for years,” he whispered, voice barely more than a whisper.

My mind raced, but my throat was tight, words caught somewhere between my heart and my lips. I wanted to scream it, shout it, touch him, pull him close, but my body froze in place.

“Will you say something, please?” he says louder this time, his dark eyes not moving from me.

“I—I love you too,” I managed, my voice trembling. A shiver ran through me as the weight of confession finally settled between us. Every suppressed feeling, every look we’d shared, every laugh and late-night conversation, was concentrated into this moment.

The moment hung in the air for what felt like forever before either of us broke the silence. He leaned closer, the warmth of his hand brushing my cheek, the tension between us electric. I wanted to close

the distance, to feel him, to never let go. And for a heartbeat, it felt like nothing else existed.

When our lips finally touched after what felt like an eternity, we both got lost in it, so lost we nearly fell off the dock into the lake below us.

We kissed until the moon was high in the sky, and the mosquitoes made us go inside, where we kissed some more. We joked and laughed, and we finally talked about that night in his parents' basement.

We fell asleep tangled together on the couch in the sunroom, the hum of the night outside like a lullaby. I woke up to silence, the warm weight of Jake gone beside me. A strange, light feeling lingered. Relief, maybe, or just the peace of knowing we had finally said everything. For the first time in a long time, I didn't care about the future. We'd figure it out.

But then Lonnie's voice shattered the quiet. "Ethan! Jake!" He was rushing up the stairs, eyes wide with panic.

"What, Lonnie?" I asked, my chest tightening as a pit formed in my stomach.

"The boat is gone. Where's Jake?"

My heart dropped as I glanced at the couch, at the empty space where he had been. A knot of dread twisted in my stomach.

I glance to where Jake was sleeping next to me just a few hours ago, and my heart sinks.

"I...I don't know," I said, my voice trembling. "We fell asleep here... he was right here a few hours ago..."

We froze, the weight of what could have happened settling over us like a storm. The air felt heavier, the night suddenly too still, and I knew in my gut that something was very wrong.

The four of us looked throughout the entire house, then all piled into Lonnie's Jeep and drove around. Jake's car was in the driveway, his keys on the kitchen counter. I felt like I couldn't breathe while we were driving around.

We drove around the lake, then through the town, the summer morning stretching endlessly around us. I felt like I couldn't breathe, like the air itself was pressing down on me. Every shadow on the side of the road made me flinch. Every passing car felt like a threat.

When we headed back toward the lake house, I saw them: red and blue lights flashing half a mile away. The police. My stomach dropped so hard I thought it would swallow itself.

None of us said a word as Lonnie sped to the house. Becca and Jess were holding hands in the back seat, and I felt Becca's free hand gently squeeze my shoulder. Lonnie's Jeep was barely parked before we all jumped out of it. The officers approached quickly, radios crackling. My chest felt hollow, empty,

"Is anyone here Leonard Lewis?" one officer asked.

"That's my dad," Lonnie replied.

"We found your dad's boat abandoned on the lake. Do you know where your dad is?"

The words barely registered. My heart felt like it had stopped, then slammed against my ribs, each beat louder than the last.

"Oh my god," Jess whispered. That was the last thing I remembered before darkness swallowed me.

I woke to the sun cutting across the driveway, Jess and Becca kneeling over me, their eyes puffy, red, full of a grief I could barely comprehend. Jess was murmuring something softly, words I couldn't quite catch, and I didn't even try to.

I looked around and saw Lonnie talking to a few officers—there were more now, a lot more—and an ambulance. Lonnie's eyes looked the same as the girls'.

I knew what that meant. I knew what it all meant before I passed out. They found the boat, but not Jake. The thought hit me like a physical blow. The weight of it pinned me to the ground. My stomach churned, my chest ached, and the world seemed impossibly still around me.

Why? Why would he leave me? Why would he go without me when just hours ago, we had promised each other...everything? My mind replayed every laugh, every touch, every kiss, the love we had confessed, stolen moments we'd thought were ours forever. All of it felt like water slipping through my fingers.

The sheriff said it must've been an accident. Something about the motor, or the current, or the dark. Everyone nodded like that made sense.

It seemed to make sense to everyone but me. Why would he take the boat out alone, in the middle of the night, when he didn't even know how to drive it? Why right after the talk we just had? None of it added up. I didn't understand it—and maybe I didn't want to.

Jake was complicated. There were parts of him he never let anyone see, not even me. But I thought that night changed things. I thought it meant something. I thought it changed things for us. I guess it did change things. Just not the way I hoped it would.

DONATTO BARRA – *PREP TIME*



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