

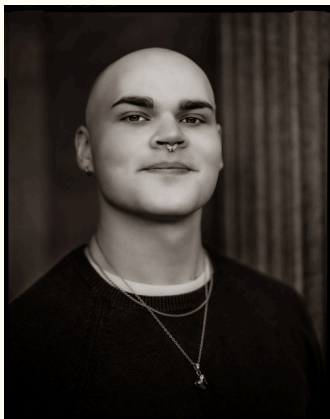
ETHERBOUND



The Human Form Divine
William Blake
from the Paul Mellon Collection

A reproduction of William Blake's painting 'The Human Form Divine'. It depicts a muscular, nude male figure standing on a rocky outcrop, holding a glowing orb in his right hand and gesturing upwards with his left. The background is a dramatic, dark sky with a crescent moon, a star, and rays of light emanating from behind the figure.

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KYLE JORDAN **POETRY EDITOR**

Kyle Jordan is a poet from Rhode Island, pursuing both a BA and MA in Creative Writing at the University of Rhode Island, and is the poetry editor for Etherbound. A student of both Black and Queer Studies, their poetry engages with queer aesthetics and themes, and hopes to challenge the internalization of shame that marginalized groups often contend with. Kyle has a forthcoming publication of poems in Miscellany, and plans to pursue an MFA degree.



JULIA CALDEIRA **VISUAL ART EDITOR &** **SOCIAL COORDINATOR**

Julia Caldeira is a poet, fiction writer, and screenwriter currently pursuing her Bachelor's degree in English Creative Writing at the University of Rhode Island. Her work can be found in the CCRI publication, The Pen. Much to her chagrin, she enjoys using big words to make herself sound eloquent in spite of her pitiful use of language in real life. She is the editor of visual art and the social coordinator for Etherbound.



CAS PARSONS **POETRY/NONFICTION** **EDITOR**

Hailing from Ventnor City, New Jersey, Cas Parsons is a first year student at the University of Rhode Island. Pursuing a double major in English Literature and French, they spend their free time watching modern renditions of Shakespeare's plays, listening to recitations of poetry, and taking side quests to Walmart. Cas is an editor of Poetry and Non-Fiction/Essay for Etherbound.

CHLOE RIPA NONFICTION EDITOR

Chloe Ripa is a sophomore English major and Forensics minor. She is an editor of creative non-fiction for *Etherbound Magazine*.



GWEN McNULTY FICTION EDITOR

A wannabe novelist, Gwenyth McNulty spends much time holed up in her bedroom in Lincoln, Rhode Island. Her main source of inspiration being Donna Tartt, she has drafted two complete novels, and another two that are about halfway done. McNulty is currently a first year student at the University of Rhode Island, studying English Literature and hoping to delve further into the world of politics. You will one day find her in a Netflix true crime documentary: we ask that you please remember her contributions to the editing team for *Etherbound*.





MADISON HILL FICTION EDITOR

Madison Hill is the editor of fiction for Etherbound Magazine. She is a senior, studying both Film Media and Creative Writing. Madison won the 2025 Nancy Potter Short Story Contest with her short story “As God Intended” which retells the story of Adam and Eve with a feminist twist. When she isn’t writing fiction, you can find her outside playing her favorite sport, ultimate frisbee. On top of being a writer, Madison is a photographer, interested in both digital and film photography. Her favorite thing to do is capture the moment, whether that’s by snapping a photo or writing down what she sees.



JEFFY BARBIERI FACULTY ADVISOR

Jeffrey Barbieri is an essayist and poet who holds an MFA in creative nonfiction writing from Columbia College Chicago. He is also a 2020 Luminarts Creative Writing Fellow. He essays with a sociopolitical bent and is currently piecing together a collection on work and a found and lost love and light and play and decay. You can read his writing in The Seneca Review, Cagibi, and The Ocean State Review. He lives in Providence, where he curates a blog dedicated to the city’s abandoned mattresses.

The Etherbound team would like to thank:
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together and promoting this issue.



A MISSIVE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

We are proud to share with you the twelfth edition of *Etherbound*, the University of Rhode Island's undergraduate literary magazine. As creatives in a climate dominated by artificial intelligence, isolation, and an insistence on utility, we wanted to create an opportunity for young writers and encourage them to tap back into the simple joys of expression. In working to produce this magazine, we were reminded of what satisfaction comes from curating a creative community. The importance of crafting works with your own hands and from your own mind is increasingly overshadowed by the alleged utility of allowing technology to think for you. We hope that these offerings from the vibrant tapestry that is the URI undergraduate population will encourage you to step back from your fast-paced day-to-day, reconnect with your inner world, and take advantage of the singular creative perspective each of us possesses. Remember, it's the thought that counts!

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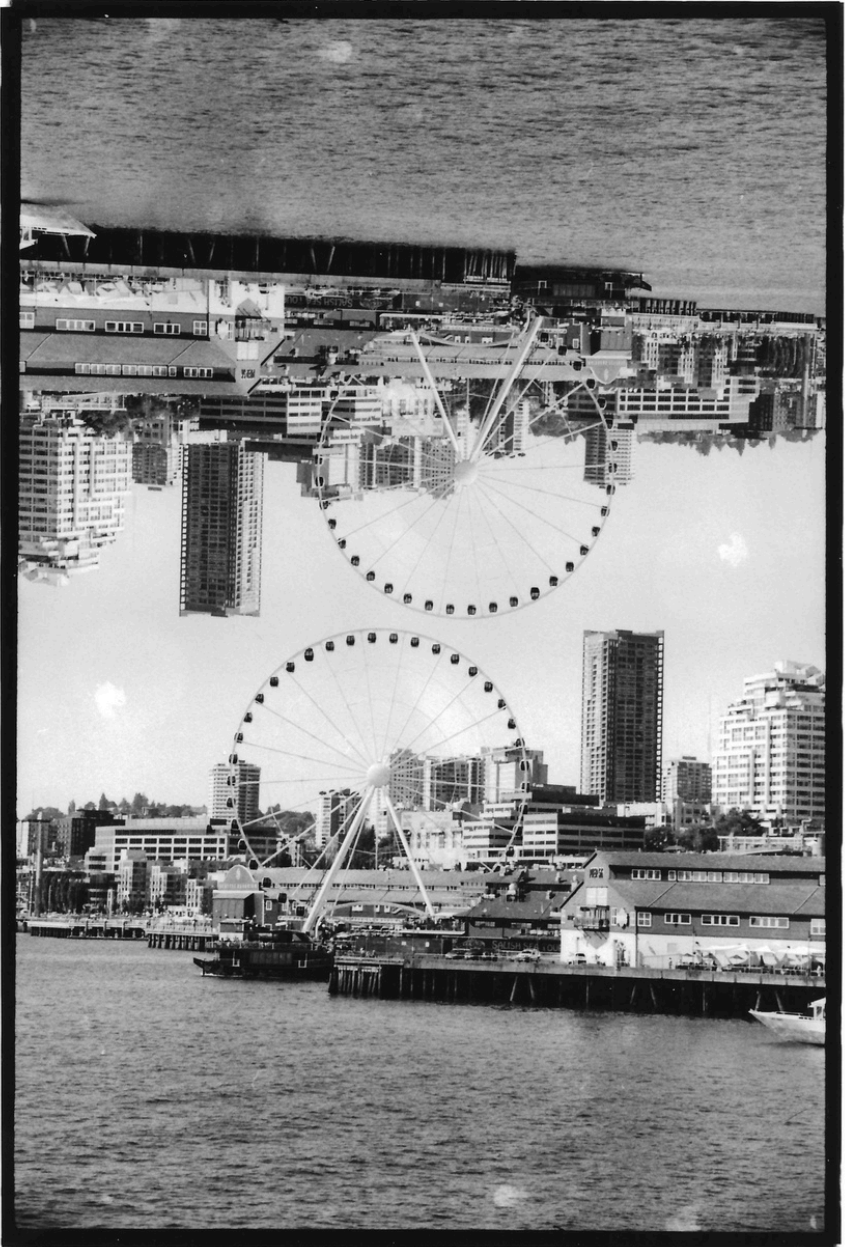
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FOLD

AL&C DUFFY



REFLECTING ON "ON KEEPING A NOTEBOOK"

KYLE MARD

Joan Didion's personal *pensées* on the importance of keeping a journal tether to my own spirit an apparent sense of shared ennui that only our own egocentric writings may salve. Unlike Didion, I was never a dogged notetaker of things, especially not of things like people and events in my life, but I do understand the compulsion to write down your own thoughts. However, this compulsion did not start until later in my life when I developed a greater sense of self-confidence, so when I received my first journal when I was a child, I probably wrote just about nothing in it.

How I and many others record their thoughts and experiences has also drastically changed since Didion was born, so I don't really feel much of a need to write about events when I have photographs and recordings stored on my phone to help me "keep in touch" with the person I once was, or to refresh my memory of events that have gone and faded. This is not the same as keeping a journal though, which involves writing down how you experienced, or perceived the event. A camera does not capture personal experience; it only captures the arrangements of objects. What one might perceive through a lens, does not reflect what one perceives through their own eyes. This simple fact may prove to be a great loss for humanity, as fewer and fewer people are inclined to literacy and the image of the self becomes ever more absorbed into the image on the screen.

I fear that there will, or may have already come a day when the struggling writer, taking notes on napkins, drinking coffee at 2 a.m. in a dimly lit bar, or cheap diner will become nothing but another forgotten cliché. I am not referring to myself though; I treat my journal like a waste bin for my thoughts. I have some thoughts I find interesting, write them down in my phone, or sometimes in a notebook, then pretty much forget about them. I also sometimes use my journal for taking notes from books, which are usually just facts, or quotations that sometimes see future use, but just like my own thoughts they are most often forgotten, or vaguely remembered at best.

Despite not writing much of my own experiences down, I do find that my own personal observations about the world, especially upon rereading them, do lend some credence to Joan Didion's idea that,

"We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful pensées; we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker."

Thus, upon reflection of Joan Didion's perceptive essay *On Keeping a Notebook* and my own personally dispassionate approach to journaling, I wonder: is it not disheartening that Joan Didion's, and many other writers', implacable compulsion to write and write (even about meaningless things), succumbing to anxiety and depression, watching the years go by and the pen ink fade thinner, has mutated into a far more ubiquitous and angst-ridden force through the socially deleterious, algorithmically-orchestrated carnival of distraction, consumption, and id that is social media?

APPLE DOLL

LYNSIE OLIVIER

Bluegills no longer have the eyes of Gods
And night is when the stray dog begs for none.
They place us in the shade, alone, at odds,
Our life will bow to ripeness, white like sun.

Life did not shrink, but grew calloused and riled
so we ask birds their purpose in flying.
But how to explain despair to the wild?
All that I touch is alive and crying.

There's no more skinned knees; we scab with labor.
Why, then adjust your volume, howl to Earth.
And let your will cleave deeper than favor,
You come here for rest, in sorrow, with mirth.

Wake me when the apple doll calls out hope.
Leave me stubborn, leave me willing, tangled in rope.

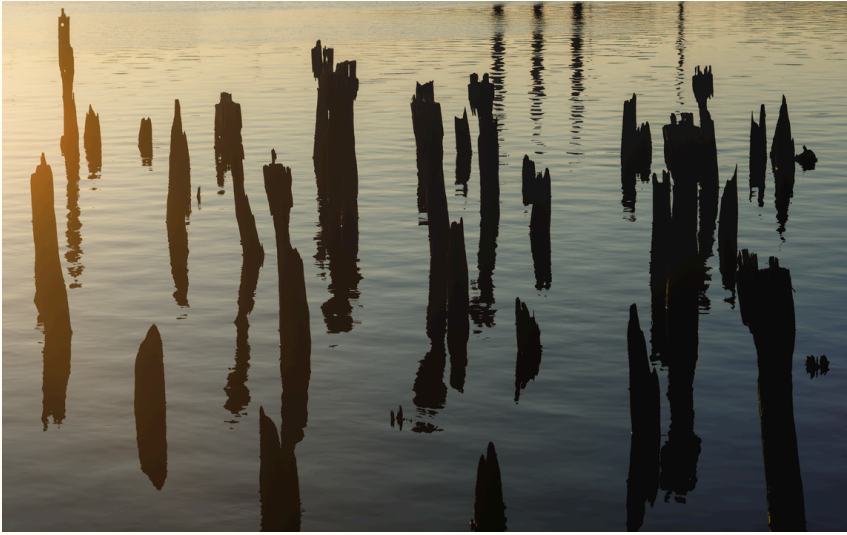
THE ANATOMY OF SWEETNESS

SUMMER BLAIR



OLD PILLARS

VICTOR CAMARGO



THE LADYBUGS CAME TO DIE

KAI BROWN

You smell like home
Where sparrows flew into the windows
And ladybugs laid themselves to rest
Where glass cut my mother's palm
As her hands trailed
Across the floor

The field
That I never noticed touched the woods
Held billions of insects
Yet it was ladybugs
That burrowed themselves
Into my gentle hands

Their trek across my thumbs
And the bumps of my knuckles
Was not over
And still

I shook them off
When their crawling did not as feel comforting
Knowing at any moment
They would fly away

I'm enamored of the shooting stars
Burning debris streaking across the sky
They left as quickly as they touched the darkness
And I squeezed my eyes shut
Wishing for their return

And you
Smell like home
Linger like the insects
Burn like the meteors

And yet
The ladybugs came to die
And the shooting stars left before
They promised to stay

TROLL
CHRISTINA LANCELLOTA



A RAT GOD

GWENYTH MCNULTY

John's children hate him deeply. Maybe it is because of his hardened scowl, or maybe it is because he never said those three particularly overused words: "I love you." He only has two children—it wasn't as if he couldn't spare any affection. John knows this: John knows that he doesn't love his children, and that his children don't love him either. Once, he had thought, maybe he loved his son, Luke, but that thought was immediately crushed by the boy himself when he presented John with poorly drawn stick figures, a toothy smile plastered on his face.

Now, as John lay in bed, he lay alone. His wife had left years earlier, running to a hick town in Florida. She'd left with her pastor.

How sweet. How completely and utterly pure.

He didn't know why he married her anyway; maybe it was some sort of obligation he felt to his mother. He loved his mother. And she loved Alice—old Alice, not his young Alice that only frowned and nodded when her mother left. That was all John needed to know about his daughter. No sympathy, that one.

John frowned—John is failing to consider that maybe he was where little Alice got it from—and thought about old Alice. Boy, she was old now. Almost as old as him. Perhaps she was dying, too; perhaps she wasn't. John tells himself he doesn't care, but he does. He wants her to feel guilty for surviving him; he wants her to see her children fatherless and broken when he leaves this world.

When John was young—*younger* at least—and he thought about death, it wasn't anything like his current situation; it wasn't blindingly white, it didn't smell like piss, and nurses weren't trying to fondle his arm for the vein only to miss every time. He wasn't coughing up blood and flirting with pretty attendants and fantasizing about the day he was put out of his misery. Instead, he thought he would die peacefully in his home. He thought he'd die in a great room, in a four poster bed, his unwrinkled face pointed towards the sky in a show of perfect clarity; he thought his dying form would be worthy of a portrait.

That is impossible, he supposes. Maybe that was what he looked like when he was young and dying: there was a cancer in his stomach.

Or his lungs. Some odd area or another, that was for certain. No one knows because no one was really listening: everyone tuned out after the word “cancer.”

His mother’s eyes went dead as she sunk her teeth into her fist, rocking herself back and forth; his fiancée—whom he supposed he adored at one point, at *this* point in time, this aching black hole that he can hardly remember—pressed her hand to her mouth and let out a gargling noise that resembled those of his future children when they were young and playing with their food.

John couldn’t tell you what he himself did, only that what he was thinking about, in all transparency, was his hair. John had become very pleased with his hair: he’d begun taking pills a few months before to combat his receding hairline and a bald spot that was steadily growing larger right in the back of his head. All of those pills—all of that money—and he would still be balding, this time at an accelerated rate. Looking back on it, it was quite vain, wasn’t it?

Despite the perceived sin, John is sure that it still matters. Looks matter. His hair matters; how thin his wife and daughter are matters; how strong his son is matters. It all does; it all matters more than they would ever care to admit. When he’d send his daughter to bed without food, it wasn’t for nothing; when he forced his son out of bed to go on runs in the morning, it wasn’t for nothing; when he refused to help his wife—even when she begged—it was certainly not for nothing. Because, despite not loving them—not loving any of them—John knew he had a perfect family. He had a strong son; he had a thin daughter; he had a wife who was occasionally pretty, one who kept his house clean and his stomach full.

It wasn’t for nothing. Just like it wasn’t for nothing when he went to a cemetery for a slow walk weeks after his diagnosis. He had made it a habit of kissing his poor, sobbing wife on the temple before donning a woolen coat that made his frail arms look larger, and stepping out the door into the winter’s night. His hat would scratch against his balding head where hair used to grow. He missed his hair, even if the process of growing it was slow and distasteful.

Occasionally, on his walk to the cemetery—a place he was sure er and vomit on someone else’s lawn. In secret, he hoped they saw.

A shot of power ran through his veins when he remembered that he, John Brown, was dying. His body was shutting down, killing itself from the inside out. There would only be a few more months on the Earth, and he was able to do whatever he wanted. If there were any consequences, they would be short-lived. No reasonable man would make another’s short life more miserable than it already was.

Ironically, the women that loved him showed him that. His mother would come every day, cooking whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. Her wrinkled, spindly fingers would work and work until they could no longer, and then she would push for a few more hours just for her beloved son. Her beloved, *dying* son. He would work her until she bent and nearly broke—but John loved his mother, so he would never break her—and then, after all of that, she would drop a kiss on his clammy forehead and drive her little canary-colored car home.

His wife wasn't much different. She would sit at the table making lists upon lists. Some of them had funny titles like "Fun New Ways to Make Love," or "Funeral Invite List." She would propose "fun activities" for them to do that went beyond their normal Sunday routine of coffees and books. She thought of all sorts of heinous things: skydiving, pottery, and even a vacation to Jamaica. As if he wanted to be surrounded by filth and drunk tourists as he rotted away.

When he voiced this opinion, however, his wife only shook her head before saying, "You'd be one of those drunk tourists, Johnny. You'd be the worst of them."

That might have been when he "fell out of love" with his wife. He only thought of that, though, later while he was on his walk to the cemetery. Snow fell from the sky and stuck to the ground, and he had to shake his coat off a few times so that it wouldn't be too wet when he came home.

He walked and walked that night. He remembers being exhausted; later, and even now, this fact would be his lifeline. He didn't see a shadow man, he didn't speak with said shadow man, and he most *definitely* did not shake the shadow man's hand.

But, on the off chance that John Brown did, in fact, see this shadowy figure under the dim lamplight, the creaking trees propping those wispy shadows up as it smoked a cigar, it would have gone something like this:

"Hello, John Brown," the shadow man—allegedly— said. "Are you here to pick your plot?"

The Earth moved where John stood, a chill biting into his skin even through the thick woolen coat that his wife had lovingly picked out from a department store just the previous Christmas. His gloved fingers felt frozen, his vocal chords stilled.

"No," John replied, left dumb in the man's presence. "Are you here to pick one?"

The shadow man gave John a ghost of a smile, baring no teeth. Somehow that was more frightening. Maybe he was hiding fangs; maybe he was luring John in so that he could snap at him, draining him of his blood and soul before leaving him to rot in the snow.

Of course, John thought then, he would not rot. That process does not happen overnight. He almost hoped that the man did have fangs and that he was planning to kill him; it was better than dying bald and in suffering.

“Absolutely not, my friend,” the shadow man chuckled, a puff of smoke leaving his lips and disappearing into the bitter wind. He appraised John, peering at him like a butcher would a particularly fat pig, and then looked at his cigar. “Want to try?”

“I don’t smoke anymore.”

“I know.” The shadow man sighed. “I also know, John Brown, that you are dying. Quite miserably, in fact.”

“How would you know that?” John pulled his coat tighter around him, but it did nothing to alleviate the chill in his bones. His teeth chattered, and he felt the goose flesh rise up on his skin. He used to make fun of those who spread stupid stories of hair rising on their neck when fear was potent. He laughed at his wife when she said that, referring to a friend of his who apparently got a little too close at a party two Christmases before. He couldn’t laugh at her then. He couldn’t laugh at all. “You don’t know me. We have never met; I am sure of that.”

“I know you very well, John. I’ve been watching you quite closely.” He took a puff of his cigar, then pulled it away from his mouth, almost begrudgingly. He stared at John—he stared at John for what seemed to be a long, long time, but in reality, it was mere seconds—and then sighed, scratching thoughtfully at his chin with his free hand. “I know you better than you know yourself. This is fact. And this fact is why I’ve chosen to offer you a deal, John Brown.”

John’s lip curled. He had heard of men like these—dirty, dirty men who liked to prey on the young for a quick buck. Well, John was far smarter, and far more mature than those teenagers were, and he wasn’t going to fall for it. “I don’t want your drugs.”

The shadow man laughed, throwing his head backward. The wind tousled his hair wildly, or at least what John thought was his hair. Maybe it was simply a shadow, almost like the rest of him. “I’m not going to give you drugs, John Brown. You’re on enough of them. I’m going to give you something you’ll enjoy quite thoroughly.”

John swallowed, before offering a meek inquiry. “Good sex?”

The shadow man smiled. “A long life.”

John paused. His heart beat in his ears, a drum line guiding him to his eternal doom. He stared at the shadow man, at the trees shaking in the wind, at the cigar hanging lazily from the shadow man’s fingers. What a flippant stance for a remark that was so profound, he remembers thinking. And suddenly, John was angry.

“How dare you!” John spat, taking a step towards the shadow man who, to John’s displeasure, did not tense up or reciprocate his rage whatsoever. “How dare you say something like that. To a dying man, of all people—”

“But, John Brown,” the shadow man replied, “you won’t be dying after this. Not anymore. Not at all. Not until I decide it is time for you to leave this Earth.”

John rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest, a shield to the man’s prodding stare. He didn’t know why he was humoring the man, the man who had clearly taken too much medicine, or spent an extra hour at the bar that evening. That was what John told himself, though. John could not shake the fact that the man knew his name and they’d never crossed paths once. John knows that even now.

You’ll find that John knows everything.

“When, in this scenario, would that be?” John asked. He coughed then, bending over before vomiting on a gravestone. When he was finished he wiped his lips with a tissue from his pocket, turning to the man again. “Ten years from now? A hundred?”

“When your natural life cycle would end. Without the cancer, without any disabilities you may collect along the way to your inevitable demise. You will die when the average human does.”

The shadow man held out his hand, his head lolling back to rest itself against the tree behind.

How calm, how cruel the man was.

That thought did not stop John from stepping forward and grasping the man’s hand.

John remembers this quite clearly. He sees it every night in his dreams. But he was exhausted, he was dying for God’s sake. Of course he could have been a bit loopy—maybe an extra dose of meds that night, maybe a little light-headedness from his constant vomiting.

One drunken night, years and years later, he pulled his son aside and told him everything. Every little detail from this escapade was delivered to young Luke, who was left stricken by his father’s recollection of events. The boy was still in his religious garb—John made sure to let Luke know that, truly, he was a disappointment by

becoming a pansy priest—but looked much older than a trainee. He looked like a man who'd performed an exorcism and knew he had made a grave mistake; he looked like he saw the Devil himself.

“Pop,” he said, his voice shaking in his delicate, scratchy vibrato, “I think you saw the Devil.”

“The Devil isn't real, boy,” John said, waving his hand—in all honesty, John didn't, and still doesn't, know, but the thought sent a chill down his spine, one so similar to the one he'd felt that night. He didn't know, he told himself in that singular moment. He didn't know what was beyond. But he knew one thing: there was no God. Therefore, there was no Devil. “And neither is God.”

In that moment, John might have felt a pang of guilt—it was an odd feeling, the feeling of crushed up rock being shoved down his throat before landing heavily in the pit of his stomach—but he wouldn't know that until now. Now, when he lay in his death bed. Not in a great room but in a hospital where his children had not visited once.

Now, John wonders, what if his son was right? What if he had seen the Devil himself? What if that shadow man *had* been real and not the result of his possible delusions?

After seeing this shadow man, John had felt cured. He'd felt stronger than ever—so strong, in fact, that he walked right into a club and paid a girl to go into a motel room with him to spend the night. He came home the next day smelling of cheap perfume, his neck and chest covered in deep purple bruises from the softest pair of lips he'd ever felt. Softer than his wife's, at least.

The Devil isn't real. Neither is God. He *was* right, he tells himself. He was right to let his son know that he was a pansy, and to also let him know that his sister was nothing more than a blank sheet of construction paper that had crumpled in the wind. Something hard and soft and difficult to rip apart, but impossible to work with. She'd always been that way. John blames Alice's mother.

He remembers telling little Alice when she was young that her hair was pretty. She smiled as she toddled around on her little five year old feet, hearing those words come from her father. He would tell her this a few times more, maybe to soothe her. He heard that girls needed more attention than boys, so he gave it to her. He was as nice as he could possibly be! John knows this—he feels it in his core, that he was the nicest father to little Alice.

And what did she do? Well, she spat in his face. She took those few words—the only words of kindness John may have ever spoken in his entire life—and threw them away. At fifteen years old, Alice came

home with a pixie cut and a mean curl in her mouth—John will never realize that he was looking into his own face, his own face planted on the head of a little girl. He also realizes that his daughter failed him in another way: she not only cut off her hair, but she got fat, too. Her tummy distended when she gave birth to his only grandchild—another girl with pretty hair—and it never quite returned to its old tightness, no matter how often he pointed that fact out.

So maybe the Devil had come. There are curses; *he* is cursed with horrible children and therefore no successful legacy to leave behind. But there is no God.

If there was a God, John would know. Of course he would know! John knows everything. He knows that if there were a God, they certainly would have spoken just as he had with the Devil.

John often thinks about this possible conversation, especially considering the looming idea that the Devil was peeking over his shoulder, a pocket watch in his hand. As oxygen slowly leaves him—the beeping around him grows louder and louder, and the nurses seem more and more frantic as the minutes pass—he imagines that the conversation would go his way, along the lines he drew so firmly:

Heaven, if it even existed, would be a clown-fest. A place for pansies and priests—not that they weren’t one in the same, John tells himself—and God would be sat right in the middle, belly hanging so low that it draped over his legs. That can be seen through his long white gown, the one that sweeps over the vast carnival, collecting grease and dirt.

John would approach God, a picture of cleanliness unlike the rest of the savages there—maybe the priests were embracing their more carnal pleasures there, making a mess and drinking something other than communion wine—and cross his arms. Even in the face of God, he would make it clear that he was in charge. He was a man, and God was—well, truthfully, to John’s dismay, he doesn’t know *what* God is.

God would chuckle when John approaches, and say: “What are you doing here, young man?”

“I am an old man, God,” John would say, his chest puffed out, not unlike a peacock. “But you wouldn’t know what an old man looks like, considering you are far older than I am.”

John would then look at God’s white beard, scraggly and collecting crumbs. He would watch as God would take another fat bite of his corn dog and chew with his mouth open, laughing and spitting. He would be so old that he would be barely recognizable as a human—was he a human? John thought he would take a human form.

This is imaginary, John reminds himself. God can be whatever he

wants.

Suddenly God is a rat, still eating his corn dog that is now much bigger than him. God, the rat king of the pansies.

And now, Rat God looks up at him as Jesus does a cartwheel behind the corn dog stand, and he will say, “You look quite young to me.”

“Would your children say the same?” Rat God asks, hand outstretched. Suddenly an angel, just as poochy as Human God was beforehand, offers the Rat God a fistful of corn dogs. “Would your children say your life was fruitful?”

John is going to die soon; he knows this. He is dying in a sweat: a lonely and cold sweat.

How dare his children: he’d given them everything. Advice, life lessons, discipline, they were all offered on a silver platter. What did it matter, the fact he does not love them. What matters is that—at one point, a point before John had lost everything—they were perfect. Once upon a time in a little town in a large, hot state, they were perfect, and his, and they worshiped him with dreadful, pathetic devotion.

And so what about God? God was about as real as the shadow man, as real as the love he holds for his children and wife. There is nothing.

John is nothing and his children are nothing and God and the Devil are *nothing*.

As John’s vision begins to go, the smell of Dove Soap suddenly overpowers the stink of piss—the nurses were extra kind to him this morning; he should’ve known this day would end poorly—and suddenly the shadow man is before him, holding his hand.

The shadow man is kinder than my children, John thinks.

THE TRUMAN SHOW COMPARED TO "ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE"

CHLOE RIPA

In *The Truman Show*, Truman is in his proverbial cave, the shadows on the wall are his friends and family, and his chains to the cave floor are his perception of reality: that there's nothing else outside his world. In *The Allegory of The Cave*, Socrates argues that the freed prisoner should return to the cave for the greater good of the group. *The Truman Show* differs from *The Allegory of The Cave* in that Truman is alone. So the question is, should Truman stay in the cave?

While there are no other prisoners in the cave with him, Truman is still, albeit unknowingly, performing good for the population. His captor, Christof, claims the parasocial relationship the world has with Truman is doing good. "We find many viewers leave him on all night for comfort. Haven't you ever watched your child or your lover sleep?" (*The Truman Show* 77). Yet in this way, Truman is turned into one of the shadows on the wall, a distraction for the people in the 'real world'. Christof has turned Truman into a puppet.

When Truman realizes he is in the cave, we as the audience never question if he is leaving a smaller cave for a bigger one. The use of the word 'cave' implies that there is an outside and an inside, making the people watching Truman feel 'free'. The literal allegory of the cave is, in this way, more harmful than helpful, because when we watch someone trapped, we think of ourselves as free.

The first line of *The Allegory of The Cave* pushes the idea of a solid, concrete cave: "Imagine this: People live under the earth in a cavelike dwelling" (Plato 2). In *The Truman Show*, not only is Truman trapped watching the shadows on the wall, but his audience is also in their own cave. Their cave is a lot bigger, and harder to see. Their cave is society and the false reality of the 'world' as we know it to be. Due to this, what difference would it make for Truman to leave his own, personal cave? All that going outside would do would make Truman painfully aware of the shadows on the wall, yet be completely unable to escape them. The advertisements, celebrities, fictional characters, are all our shadows on the cave wall, and Truman would see the product placement in tv shows as what it is. This awareness would drive him mad. If he is stepping from one cave to another, what's the point? Truman's ignorance was his safe-haven. He wasn't

comfortable in his life, but he was not exposed to the horrors of the caves within caves within caves.

The audience of the movie watches it and feels poorly for Truman. We think of ourselves as not in his cave by assuming the cave has an in and out. We know we aren't on the inside, so we assume we are on the outside. In actuality, it is an onion, layers on layers. We as people are so uncomfortable once we realise we are in the cave, so we create people who are in smaller, more chained-up caves. We look at Truman with the understanding that he is more trapped than we are. While Truman's life is miserable, the audience watches him anyway, understanding that his simple, picture-perfect life is one where ignorance truly is bliss. Everything in Truman's life is for him and him alone. Every random person walking down the street is only there because of him. His life is easy physically, it's his curiosity that is killing the cat. Truman doesn't have to do anything other than look at the shadows on the wall. His cave is comfortable and safe, as many caves are. We as the viewers would judge Truman if he chose not to leave the cave, and yet we ourselves refuse to. "As a means for the preserving of the individual, the intellect unfolds its principal powers... which is the means by which weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves..." (Nietzsche 115). We as the audience choose not to think too hard. We don't think about where our clothing is made and by who; the conditions they work in, the environmental impact of the fabric. How are we any better than Truman if he chose not to leave the cave? We don't see what happens to Truman after he escapes, but we all think of him as going to a 'better place'.

We as the audience think of the 'real world' as ours, despite how much of our world isn't truthful. We create things that aren't real. We classify things as 'legal' or 'illegal' based on laws we created. Nothing is naturally legal or illegal. We separate people into groups, yet these groups don't exist in nature, only the people. While Truman's cave is a more obvious one, our cave is more impossible to escape. All Truman has to do is leave his enclosure, but for us, our enclosure encircles the entire Earth. We can't escape our cave unless we die, leave Earth, or live in the woods like animals do. But even then, we would still bring our preconceived notions to space or the woods with us. We think of Truman's life as false, and by doing so, we imply ours is true. Yet 'true' and 'false' are preformative utterances, as we all think of a different definition of truth and saying something is true does not make it factually true. "The performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been

performed”

We think of Truman’s definition of truth as false, thinking of it as ‘either or’. We say to ourselves, ‘Why would Truman stay in the cave when he now knows it’s all fake?’. We as people know money is a social construct, yet no one would rip up a one-hundred dollar bill if it was given to us. We would respond to that by saying, ‘He is being held captive, why would he want to remain as a hostage?’. We as people are constantly held hostage: ‘If you don’t pay your taxes, you’ll go to jail’ is the same sentence as ‘If you don’t give us money, we’ll make you suffer’. The proverbial second person in this conversation would then bring up their final point: ‘Everyone Truman loves is not real, they are characters. His parents, his wife, all are fake. Why would he want to stay with them?’. They are all fake, yet we as the audience are in no different boat. Our outward personalities and ideas are not inherently truthful to who we are on the inside. “Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front... playing a role for others and for oneself” (Nietzsche 115). We understand lying, yet not lying long-term. We understand the serial killer is lying when he says he’s innocent, yet we are shocked when it turns out our father has been murdering people for the past 40 years. “The pride connected with knowing and sensing lies like a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of men, thus deceiving them concerning the value of existence” (Nietzsche 114). In that way, we can’t be sure that any of our loved ones are truly who we think they are. Our only way to be certain we aren’t surrounded by fake people is to be alone, which isn’t much of a life at all. Truman’s cave is simpler, because one-hundred percent of the people he knows are not real. He doesn’t have to be suspicious when all of his suspicions are already confirmed, there is nothing left to question if he already knows all the answers. Yet, of course, the real, ‘true’ answer to ‘Should Truman leave the cave’ is yes, he should. The word ‘cave’ has the negative association of a dark, cramped place. This means that Plato intends for the reader to understand the cave is not a good place to be. ‘Cave’ is a signifier, and the thought of a ‘cave’ is similar if not the same for most people. “It is certain that the concept “leaf” is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects” (Nietzsche 117). The metaphor of the cave relies on the associations of the signifier ‘cave’. Because of this, we have the preconceived notion that the cave is a bad place to be. This means that Truman’s cave is a place that the audience understands is bad, that Truman understands the cave is not a place

he should be. The human mind does not want to be trapped, controlled like Truman was. Once Truman figured out the cave existed, his mind naturally wanted to get out. Truman's life was all fake— he was talking to, friends with, married to, shadows on the wall. Obviously that is not something he wants, as it seems to drive him mad once he figures that out. Socrates posits, "And if someone were [then] to show him any of the things that were passing by and forced him to answer the question about what it was, don't you think that he would be a wit's end...?" (Plato 3). Everything in Truman's life isn't real, and because of that, his free-will is more like fate.

The only real thing in Truman's life is that he can't leave his town. He is being held hostage in his life by the producers and the directors and staff. Any rational person would not want to live life in captivity. In *The Allegory of The Cave*, the prisoner wants to escape. The prisoner wants to see the real sun, to live in real life. "Wouldn't he or she prefer to put up with absolutely anything else rather than associate with those opinions that hold in the cave and be that kind of human being? (Plato 5). Throughout the movie, Truman desperately is trying to find 'real' things. Truman, while not as explicitly, clearly knows when things feel too staged. "On the way to work, it started to, like, follow me around! Kept talking about everything that I'm doing! You know what I mean?" (The Truman Show 6). His wife, Meryl, is probably one of the fakest characters, constantly doing advertisements and product placements. Truman is instead attracted to the other, realer woman, Sylvia. The prisoner in the cave and Truman are both seeking truth, so Truman, to achieve his goal of 'truth', has to leave the cave.

While all of the aforementioned is true, the problem with truth is that in most cases, there are multiple truths. For example, the 'real world' Truman is going into, might be just as fake as the one he left. It is not his reality, and because of that, he would struggle. Nietzsche says when it comes to our world and reality: "In any case it seems to me that "the correct perception" – which would mean "the adequate expression of an object in the subject" – is a contradictory impossibility" (Nietzsche 119). Truman's reality would also shift due to his fame. He would never be able to live a normal life in the outside world, so his goal of living a normal life would never happen.

So the question remains: 'Should Truman leave the cave?'. If he wants life to continue as-is, the answer would be no. Of course he'd be stuck in a slightly-miserable life, but what person on Earth isn't? The more escapist people in the audience would tell him to stay, the more humane of the group would tell him otherwise. Plato says that

if the prisoner were to go back into the cave, he would no longer be suitable for the area. “Would he not find in that case, coming suddenly out of the sunlight, that his eyes ere filled with darkness?” (Plato 6). Truman, having seen the proverbial ‘sun’, would be unable to go back to the darkness that is ignorance. “And if someone even forced him to look into the glare of the fire, would his eyes not hurt him...?” (Plato 3).

Cristof, the creator of the show, wants Truman to go back into the cave. In *The Allegory of The Cave*, the last few lines discuss what would happen to the freed prisoner when the others find out he is free. When asked if the other prisoners would kill him, Socrates replies with “They certainly will” (Plato 6). This is reflected when Truman tries to escape and Cristof intends on killing him instead of letting him leave. “Capsize him. Tip him over” (*The Truman Show* 15). The other prisoners are angry or jealous of the freed prisoner for he is able to see the sun. This jealousy is reflected in Cristof, who tells Truman: “There’s no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. The same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear.” (*The Truman Show* 15). Like *The Allegory of The Cave*, *The Truman Show* has an abrupt ending, with Truman walking out of his cave. We as the audience don’t know what happens afterwards to him. This is similar to the ending of *The Allegory of The Cave*, where it simply ends with a question and answer.

The Truman Show and *The Allegory of The Cave* are very similar in plot and content, with the same question being asked in both pieces of media— do we leave our false lives for real, harder ones? Is it worth the suffering? Plato argues that it is better to suffer, an idea that Truman seems to agree with. Yet, is that true? Is it better for Truman to stay inside the cave? The cave Truman is in is real, but he doesn’t understand that the only thing outside his cave is a bigger, more all-encompassing cave that all of us are trapped in.

DISGRUNTLED

ABDIFATAH SAMATAR



HOME FOR BEING LYNSIE OLIVIER

Let me die in a field like an animal
Sultry, sweet, essential; let death's greeting be warm.
Let life be calloused skin, bruised with devotion,
As intricate as a leaf plucked from our self imposed Eden. God
doesn't dream, no, God kisses with promise,
Watch as I touch the static of my want and get no reply. Let me be
Orpheus, give me something to turn for,
Or let me Eurydice, give me something to mourn.
I cry like a sinner; carefully but with so much inside,
Deny me stupid melancholy, give me definition,
Bring me my own kind of religion,
Let it wait for me as I dress this wound.
I want, unreasonably, to be light, delinquent,
Afraid of nothing but unbecoming, in need of a home for being.
I repeat like the Bible hymn,
Sung like a prayer,
Show me how,
 Show me how,
 Show me how.

MOTHER IN NATURE

LUCYRATÉ MADDEN



ARTHUR CHLOE RIPA

Long skeletal arms. Muscle hanging
weakly upon it, clinging to life. Old body,
not old enough to look like something
already dead.

Veins spun around hard bone, showing the path his blood wove
through his body, like rats on a carousel.

This is technically life,
skeleton rising from the soft, warm dirt
wondering if he should just turn off
his alarm clock and sleep in today.

CYCLE OF FOXES

CAS PARSONS

Scarlett noticed the return of the fox before I did, tugging on her leash in an effort to chase after it across the street. A master of elusivity, the fox disappeared into a yard that had its gate slightly ajar, allowing me to glimpse at it for a moment and admire how the sun seems to only have eyes for the fox.

The fox didn't return one summer, or I didn't see it, perhaps. But I have come to expect the fox to find its way to the summer streets of Ventnor, disappearing when the tourists start to dwindle. I guarantee that the fox wants for nothing, boardwalk popcorn and fries and pizza from tourists sustaining it, possibly the call to come back every year.

I will always wonder what drew the fox away from the streets of Ventnor. A sweeter call, offering better shelter and greasy food might have come that summer. The fox may have inhabited another island, scavenging through their overflowing garbage bins, trotting through their streets that also have that sea salt and sunscreen smell, but distinctly not Ventnor.

Would it not be instinct to return to where the half-eaten fries are always left behind? The fox could sleep underneath the boardwalk, lulled to the sound of the waves and the smell of the sea. It could run through the yard with the gate always ajar and a metal bowl of fresh water on the patio.

Hunger and thirst would follow the fox, remaining no matter the distance away. The foreign streets with the slightly different smell still give old pizza and burgers. There isn't a familiar fence left slightly ajar, or a water bowl left out. The boardwalk is taken by others. The cycle was not broken, only moved.

The following summer, Scarlett began barking from the front porch, calling me to look out the window. The fox darted across the busy street as traffic was at a standstill, pausing at the overflowing garbage cans of our neighbors before heading down the alley. The sun still has eyes only for the fox, and always will.

WINTER I
LAWRENCE M.



WINTER 2
LAWRENCE M.



GLOBAL SUPERPOWERS

MAEVE VAN COUYGHEN

Your cards bleed, and we've pulled the same hand: an Ace and a three. Looks like we're not winning tonight. There's a man in the window behind us,

fragmented
through clutters of expensive rum.

He sees me staring through the crystal, and I wave.
He smiles clumsily, confused.

Maybe he has forgotten this is something humans do.

The bar begins to fold in on itself. Waitresses shove past us and flip chairs.

Outside, our crowd is loud and drunk and impatient and it hurts. The bouncer at the next dive makes fun of your geeky Adidas running pants. Says you have skinny, skinny chicken legs. Still, it's two euros for an hour of pool and everyone else is ravenous for motion, performance, excitement, anything.

The air smells mildly of malt and collegiate throw up.
You hold my cue while I make change with the bartender.

The coins are slimy and I admire how the slot in the billiard board swallows them whole. Two cocky strangers challenge us to a round, arm-linked with a couple of girls from our crowd. Who are we to say no? Three shots in and you purposely sink the eight ball. I don't mind. It's something I would do, too. Never been one for competition.

There is a crooked painting on the wall behind you:

A suited man, leaning forward, gazing attentively at
a fragment of Picasso's Guernica. The Horse. That
agonized horse, with bleeding gums and bullet-wide
eyes. I too, lean forward, focusing on this two-dimensional
man, focusing on this illustrated horse.

FIGHT
AL&C DUFFY



SWINE

KYLE JORDAN

A.

Community Elementary implemented a program:
Red bins collected food scraps to feed local farm pigs.
Paul joked how sick it was,
when peers threw pork products in the pig bin.

We learn pigs are fools, pigs don't know
bacon from brains, and either way,
cannibalism is a human crime. Pork's not the problem;
kids throw any old trash in the pig bin.

I wonder whose job it is
to filter out sporks and cartons

Suppose pigs don't have the privilege
of picky-eaters; pigs have poor PR

In undergrad, I learn free pigs
have more discerning tastes. Not sure
why I cry, why I feel like Dr. Lector,
or if I know bacon from brains either.

B.

The nicest boys you know
can still grow into their
terror. One of the nicest boys I knew
became a cop.

Aimed at inside-out repair,
he rolled in slop, in peace.
When stagelights grow hot,
some boys chew their lips off

C.

Local legend, Grubsy, was a homeless man,
which I learned a few years after seeing him,
behind Dave's Marketplace on a motorcycle.

He was mystical
in primary school folklore,
He often smiled at you.

One night in Dave's parking lot, I watched
a businessman in expensive pinstripe pants, lean
down to Grubsy, and plant a tender kiss on his neck.

Grubsy bleeds out.
No one investigates.

Years later, I wept & wondered
about Grubsy's real name and
how I never knew vampires existed.

D.

The same nightmares return:
Claustrophobic cubicles with closing-in walls.
Month-long rom-com loves slashed by killer clowns.
Meat markets that peddle human & claim it's cheaper.
Being skinned alive,
Being stripped naked (still holding Winter Weight!)

Thank god for 24-hour Walmart & ZzzQuil!

E.

In undergrad: research Black Panthers & queers in the 70s
& similarities in their literature
Both beat down by pigs

Panthers, pigs, and queers: advertised terrorists
(depending on the pamphlet)

Poor PR campaigns are historic killers
in America. Like a Pinstripe-Pant Vampire
Like a pig tied to the trough

BRIDGE

VICTOR CAMARGO



ALBIREO

DUVESSA DIAZ

C-1024's days are simple and, in the grand scheme of things, unchanging aside from minor details that have no real impact. He stands at an assembly line, is supervised by masked and suited figures from a floor above, and strings wires through metal discs that do something-or-other; it hadn't always been these discs being produced, yet the process remains the same regardless of the objects' physical differences, and he repeats the same motions on whatever it is passing beneath his fingers. In, out, loop the first red wire between the green ones, in, out, et cetera. He doesn't know what the wires do, just that he connects them. He doesn't know what anything he connects them to does either.

The manufacturing facility's charging hangars - or at least hangar C-1 - remain unaltered in their eternal dusk, antithetical to the outside's eternal light. Two stars' radiance keeps the sky from ever fully blackening even when neither one is visible and the deep red of their faux-night lingers headily. The ceiling's lights had burned out long ago and cast the area, just as grey with steel and concrete as nearly everywhere else, into a velveteen dark aside from flickering stragglers clinging to life in the corners and the small colored pinpricks of individual charging stations winking like eyes. Every day, seemingly infinite rows of green and red irises watch C-1024 trek to and from his own dilapidated area in silence, balefully transfixed.

Lights from the newest hangars (D-2? E-2?) still spill faintly into the hall further down from C-1, but even their glow has begun to dim. None of the supervisors have bothered to replace the bulbs, although the persistent feeling of being furtively observed makes C-1024 wish somebody would. He's aware it's improbable.

This is, all in all, a roundabout way of saying C-1024's existence is rather boring. He no longer knows how long it's been since his creation, and it was without a struggle that he became accustomed to the tranquility of what felt and still feels like eternity on an infinite loop. He's lost track of how many times their suns have set and risen, how many times the stretch of orange above has smoldered maroon at twilight before lightening once more. At points, it feels as though he'd only opened his eyes for the first time yesterday, and the monotony of his waking moments has merely been an illusion.

Any significant changes to C-1024's days come from the others who work alongside him. Where he runs on cogs, valves, and gears,

their insides are sleek and streamlined with as little space taken up as possible. He only knows this from when they injure themselves and provide glimpses into their semi-hollow chest cavities. His own is rather cramped. Contrarily, their supervisors appear identical on the outside, wearing bulky suits that hide the shapes of their bodies and the aforementioned masks that cover any identifying features.

The most frequent place they take him is the repair bay. Typically, these trips are for scheduled maintenance, and when they're not for maintenance they're because something or somebody bumped into him just a bit too hard and knocked something critical loose.

On the semi-rare occasions when the repair bay automatons mess up or somebody is simply too damaged to be worth fixing, they're decommissioned, resulting in fresh faces passing by C-1024 as he traverses between the manufacturing lines and the charging hangars. He's been lucky in that regard thus far. Although words are never exchanged, the curiosity of who's missing nags at C-1024 until he can take note of who's missing from the manufacturing belts. If it turns out they were somebody who'd worked in the storage rooms, he doesn't bother checking. It's not like he ever would've seen them before anyway.

Unfamiliar faces are the ones C-1024 can never predict, ones with facial features unique to themselves and limber bodies near-identical to his. Despite being different in the same ways, they never seem to process their surroundings quite the way he does. They're the only other ones he hears referred to as "he" rather than "it" (the workforce) or "they" (the supervisors), and so he assumes it must have something to do with how they're produced.

He'll likely never get an answer either way; they're only ever around for a short period, and despite his simmering curiosity, risking any sort of misguided attachment isn't worth the inevitable return to tedium. He can't miss who and what he's never known.

When those unfamiliar faces appear, they're presumably doing the same work as him and are watched closely by the supervisors for varying spans of time; the longest had been two months, the shortest a week. After that period passes, C-1024 is escorted through a noticeably off-white hallway and into a room much smaller than any other in the facility. A table with two chairs is situated in the center, a grid of evenly spaced squares and two containers of monochrome stones set atop. They're matched in an unnamed game where only one is meant to win.

Figures watch the board, their hands, everything but their eyes and feet as a group of supervisors oversees each move made. His

opponents never come anywhere close to winning. They all make the exact same moves in the exact same order regardless of his own decisions. It's monotonous in its own way.

He remembers his own first time in that room, which hadn't been long after his first time waking up. He had almost made the exact same mistake as all the others. Each of them comes with knowledge of what moves to make on which side - he had, at least, so he can only assume the same is true for everyone brought there. The side with white stones, always the challenger, is instructed to move in a way that leads to their loss; the previous victor, black, is given the moves to win. Despite the winner and loser being preemptively decided, both are given the objective of victory and told that their guidebook will lead to it.

The first and only time C-1024 had been white, he had realized what was happening halfway through the game and switched tactics, ignoring his instructed placements. This led to an easy triumph and the swift removal of his opponent, who had followed the black side's guidebook regardless of the sudden change. The next time he'd entered the room he'd been black, a new face had been on the white side of the board, and they weren't sensible enough to have the same realization he did.

He never sees any of them again. It's not hard to decipher that these victories are likely why he's kept around, and that if he were to lose, he would be replaced without a moment to spare. Any purpose for this process beyond weeding out the weakest of their ranks remains a mystery.

Things begin normally enough. He leaves hangar C-1, empties buckets of wires into rows of discs with a steady hand, and observes the distance of the suns. There looks to be somebody new on the lines, but they're too far for him to make out whether they're unique.

Returning to C-1 is when the issues begin.

His charging dock is alarmingly different when he arrives. Glaringly obvious is that it's been completely replaced, corroded walls gleaming with a newness that feels foreign. Every other dock in C-1 has changed, too, each row lustrous in the dark. The lights, of course, have been left in their usual state of disrepair, although this is less of a problem than before. The new docks don't appear to have the same glowing eyes as their precursors.

The subtler of the changes is facing away from the hangar's entrance, hastily scrawled on the side opposite his power cable (also new, for some reason; his old one had been fine). Two small, uneven

areas of black reveal themselves to be intelligible writing upon closer inspection.

The first squiggle: “Try not to break this one too, Levy, or they might start taking it out of your paycheck.”

The second: “Screw off, Hale, everyone knows you wrote that.”

He reads the messages again. And again. And again. His pointer finger raises, tip tracing the letters, mapping the differences in chirography until the black begins to smudge from the ministrations. He reads them one more time before retreating, settling his new plug into its port on his waist and feeling oddly stiff.

Levy and Hale are, presumably, two of the supervisors. What else could they be? He’s never thought of them as individuals with names before, and certainly not names like those. Even their ways of assembling words are different, one humorous and one brash. Has he ever seen them before? If yes, does he see them frequently? Had there been a point to the interaction?

Absently, he begins tracing the phrases into his fingers, thumb drawing intricate lines between the hard creases of his joints. Eventually, he writes his own designation number, C-1024, then goes through everyone else’s beginning with A-0001 who is long, long gone.

It occurs to him that names and designations aren’t quite the same. Levy is not the same as C-1024, and C-1024 is not the same as Hale. The thought is peculiar enough that he stalls, then thinks of the repair bay. That, much like his current train of thought, had been new and interesting once, too.

At this realization, he quickly compartmentalizes his interest and shoves it somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind to be ignored. “New” is something that gets him broken, such as by clumsy, newly produced workers. “Interesting” gets him remade within his own body by unseeing arms. Still, his thumb moves, eventually ending on A-0259.

The next night, he finds the scribbles have disappeared. A small patch of metal shines brighter than the rest, scrubbed of its topmost layers and twinkling at uneven intervals.

The absence of the writing makes it easier to ignore his thoughts on the supervisors, on individuals, on names, on individuality, on diction (the latter two of which become increasingly difficult to separate from each other as concepts).

Even lacking the insistent press of those particular ideas, he finds himself tracing patterns and letters into his joints when thinking, the

movement grounding. It expands from his inner knuckles to his palms, his wrists, his inner elbows. Were it not for his uniform pants, he would start poking at his knees. He tries, once, when another of the hangar's last surviving lights gives out with an abrupt pop only to dislike the way the fabric bunches and creases with the movement.

Then, the new worker he'd spotted on the manufacturing belts is moved to a line nearer his own. Although he can't see their face, their build is the same as his, meaning he can expect to be pulled aside in the near future. That's fine. Better than being taken for repairs or maintenance.

As predicted, he's taken from his routine approximately two weeks later. The supervisors' loose pants swish as they walk, fabric brushing against itself at different intervals and drawing attention to the presences both at his sides and behind him. Heels click on raised off-white tile with each step, the hallway flooring the same color as the walls if not slightly darker with grime.

It's hard not to notice the differences in their gaits as they move, each distinct from the others in all but speed. Even his own steps are different, heavier with his body's weight. It's a train of thought not dissimilar to that of diction and individuality, so he instead focuses on how the supervisor to his left's skin compresses against his own as they guide him, pulling him along by the elbow rather than the usual wrist.

For a moment, he wonders what each of their names are, then whether they have names at all. Maybe only some do. How does one go about getting a name? Do you come with one, or are you supposed to pick one for yourself?

They're escorted into a familiar room by a group carrying pens and notebooks. C-1024 is settled into his usual seat on the black side of the board. The hard material of the spectators' shoes gleams in the dim blue of the overhead light as they arrange themselves in neat rows, nearly blending into the shadows that linger in the room's corners where the hanging bulb's glow doesn't reach. Something in C-1024's head squirms as the scratching of paper occasionally floats by, everything in him acutely aware of how he's being studied.

Things are quiet aside from that shuffling, and he waits with a mind deliberately devoid of thought until he picks up on the beginnings of a murmured conversation from one of the corners. He never hears the supervisors speak to each other, an occurrence rare enough that he can't instantly recall another time it's happened. Levy and Hale don't really count, considering that that had been a written exchange rather than verbal.

“She’s not here yet?”

She?

“L-2206? Not yet. One of the doors jammed; they’re on the way.”

The exchange ends after that, or at least becomes too quiet for him to pick up on, leaving him to mull over the words. He’s never bothered with learning the designations of prior opponents, but now he almost wishes he’d had a way of finding out. She’s newer than him by over 300,000 units. How long has it been since he sat here for the very first time?

He’s never met a “she” before and frankly isn’t sure what that entails, but if he’s playing against the figure whom he’d seen in the main manufacturing room they can’t be all that different. They share the same body shape, at least, which must count for something.

His thoughts are cut off by the sound of the door squeaking open behind him, hinges creaking as L-2206 is guided into the room and towards her chair. Its legs screech as it’s pulled away from the table. Her steps are light and sure, roaming eyes taking in the room’s every detail. Eventually, they land on C-1024, and he resists the urge to shuffle in place as yet another stranger’s gaze sears itself into his skin.

A strange, yawning emptiness floats between them as she stares, yet she seems more discomfited by it than he is with the way her gaze begins to flick around her board, her white stones, and the blank masks of the supervisors as they finish preparing their things. The tips of her shoes scuff against the ground every time she fidgets.

Closer now, he doesn’t see any groundbreaking physical discrepancies between them, or at least nothing that creates a mental divider between them the way he perceives one between himself and the supervisors. Her eyes are large with monolids, her face rounded, her hair long and black unlike his own short, straight blond.

Still, their eyebrows are the same rounded rectangular shape, their skin more-or-less the same shade, their hair casting shadows on their eyes at the same angles when illuminated by the light above. She sits with the same perfect posture as him and they wear the same shrunken uniform, although hers isn’t yet reddened with age. Fundamentally, they’re identical despite aesthetic differences.

Her gaze lands on his again, and this time, the corners of her lips turn upwards in an attempt to fill that still-gaping void. He doesn’t really understand the point - she’s the one bothered by the silence, so why act as though she’s trying to reassure him?

Then, her lips part, still curled and pushing her skin upwards into bunches beneath her eyes.

“Hello.”

Her voice isn't quiet, but it's gentle and somewhat curious. Smooth, maybe, is a good word. Like the grey walls of the facility they spend their days in. Slightly higher in pitch than he's ever heard. He realizes he hasn't heard his own voice in so long that he's forgotten what it sounds like.

Silence reigns, only the buzz of electricity reaching his ears as his thumb begins rubbing at the joints of his fingers. His embedded apprehension towards new situations leaves him hesitant to reply, but he can feel the smothering weight of expectant gazes stabbing into his right side. What is he supposed to say? He must take too long to come up with the correct answer, because by the time he organizes his thoughts enough to begin figuring it out, she's speaking again.

"I'm L-2206. Who are you?"

This is easier. Straightforward questions are manageable. "I'm C-1024." He purposefully doesn't glance to the side, not wanting to know how anyone's reacting. If he ignores them, he can pretend they aren't there and that they're the only two in the room. The prickling of his neck lessens as he sinks into the false comfort of imagining.

She lights up at the response, oblivious to his thoughts. "Today's my first time seeing this game. Is everyone brought here, or just us?"

"Not everyone." Not just us, either, but he isn't sure how to communicate that without creating questions beyond what he can handle.

The light above them flickers, minatory, and L-2206 looks down at her bowl of stones, lifting each one slightly before dropping it so it clinks against the rest. "It's nice meeting you. Nobody else has answered me when I've tried to converse with them. I was starting to think I might be the only one able to speak."

Again, he doesn't know what to say and averts his eyes, feeling stupid. How does one respond to a statement that doesn't come with a question?

There's a low shuffling as one of the supervisors fidgets in their chair at his silence. The expectant way she's looking at him is beginning to make him feel beyond strange about his own inability to articulate his thoughts. His thumb presses harder into his joints until it slips from the pressure, sliding into the gap between his fingers and settling there as his wires thrum beneath his skin.

"I believe we should begin," he settles on, and receives a wordless nod in response. He wishes the response had come verbally, even if it does confuse him.

She places her first stone, and he tries to ignore the forming tightness in his chest when he recognizes it as being where the

guidebook tells her to go. It's perturbing to realize that he fully hopes she'll win; although he isn't keen on being decommissioned, she's the most interesting thing that's happened to him in the entire span of his being. Even though he's aware only one of them will be allowed to continue on, he can't seem to get rid of this feeling. Nothing about this makes sense.

It's as though his existence has been happening beneath a thick veil, leaving him unaware and detached, and the smallest corner of that veil had been lifted to give him a peek into the outside world. To give him a moment of true independent thought, not as C-1024, but as himself.

Regardless of brevity, that moment was long enough for a deep, rattling sense of loneliness to settle in. He's suddenly horrified by the idea of never being spoken to again, is stricken by the inevitability of returning to his monotonous routine, and is willing to do anything to avoid that fate, even if the only way to achieve that desire is for nothing to ever happen to him again at all.

Beyond the oppressive weight sits a burning curiosity, the same one he'd felt when reading the correspondence of Hale and Levy but harsher and with an intensity he can't stamp out. He wants to understand why she'd taken the initiative to speak to him, why she's a "she," why they were made in the first place, why they have supervisors and designation numbers, and- and- and what?

Nearly every problem has a solution beyond the most drastic, he tries to remind himself, but they're halfway through the guidebook's instructions now - beyond when he'd had his own realization - and she's still doing exactly as she's told.

After every move, she glances up at him as though for reassurance, flits her eyes towards the corners, then returns her gaze to the board where it belongs. When he manages to calm himself to an acceptable level, or at least one where he's capable of rational thought, he glances up. They make eye contact, and the sides of her lips raise once more.

Every supervisor's mask is tilted towards the board and table, and their notes jot down every stone's placement as though anything about this time is different from the rest. They record their movements, how they place their pieces, how long they take with each turn. Reminiscent of the struggling light above them, an idea slowly flickers to life. Only their eyes are unobserved.

He places his left hand on the edge of the table so it's obscured by his quickly emptying bowl. The next time L-2206 looks up, C-1024 is already waiting. Her mouth begins to move again, then stills when she notices the intensity of his stare as he places his stone in its

designated spot, gaze unwavering.

He taps the table as softly as possible to avoid making a sound, pleased when her eyes flit down to his hidden hand, then back to his face. Seeing nothing there, she tilts her head away and picks up another stone, fingers hovering over the board as though considering where to place it (which ends up being exactly where he's afraid she'll go). Another tap at the table comes just hard enough that her gaze roams up to his again questioningly.

He gestures to the other side of the board with a quick flick of his eyes. She hesitates. He repeats the motion and tries to point without fully uncurling his finger, unwilling to risk it being seen by their silent audience. There's another moment of deliberation where her hand wavers in the air, eyes flitting between the two separate spaces she's being told to utilize, before she finally breaks away from the guidebook and goes where he'd indicated.

There's no time to feel relieved when L-2206's attention needs to be kept, and they quickly form an understanding after the third time repeating that process. It becomes methodical: C-1024 takes his turn normally, then guides L-2206 with slight twitches of his eyes and fingers until their bowls are empty of stones and the table's grid is completely filled.

The game ends in a stalemate.

Everything is wonderful. Everything is terrible. C-1024's mind is blissfully, horribly silent with the pure shock of such an impromptu plan succeeding. There's a shuffling of feet, a flicker of the light, and a sense of peace that settles over him as reality sinks in. He's just doomed them both to the magnificence of a fate unknown.

L-2206 purposefully catches his gaze as they're guided out of their chairs by their wrists, lips curling and turning her eyes to crescents. This time, it feels less like a reassurance and more like the exchange of some secret signal only they're privy to. When he tries to return the gesture, his face refuses to move beyond the smallest of twinges, leaving him just as expressionless as ever.

TOWER
VICTOR CAMARGO



SOLIDWORKS VISIONARY MARIN MACRO

Twenty-four famous people
Channel the collective–

I touch lips on nothing.
But ferrous yardsticks

But lapping shined-wood-desks
Think, might be linoleum–

Lapped, linoleum-wood-desks
Think, might melt like popsicles

A tasty, subdued deliciousness of
Knowledge sucked out,

In from lips–
Wood does not melt.

Frenched with teeth, scrape led
There's no give, my teeth make headway

In ferrous
In left hand, palm rubs off–

How did they carve?
With ruler,

With pencil,
With scissors,

With kiss,
With teeth,

Who, if not messiah, am I?
Erotica, speak like a vessel,

Bite teeth, lick, kiss
Melt, it always melts

Let me show.
Let me tell.

IN PREPARATION FOR A FIRST DATE AT APPLEBEE'S KYLE JORDAN

my resume prints as I scrub skin with salt, dust my CV,
and remember when Wendy told me I could model
if I lost weight, no
I don't mind the sweat-for-affection trade. My dad taught me
worth is in the work,
I learned Mom's love when she worked until empty, now
this paranoia & I
only permit kisses with blue ribbons. Only porcelain pigs
earn the high shelf;
you can store grimy dimes in my belly, I don't mind
the nausea, colleseum, and tightrope
over lava, no I don't remember which grandpas whisper
cow, don't remember why I listen.
Overserved in Applebee's, remember
strangled appetites earn appetizers

ADDRESSING ANNIE

JULIA CALDEIRA

Annie couldn't decide if she wanted to wear the silky blue tea cup or the purple lacy push up.

Each had their own matching cheeky bottoms of course, but did she want to be the picture of vintage elegance, or girlishly sexy today? What would make her feel more apt to take on the busy world as a working woman? The traffic ebbed and hummed just outside her window as the coffee tinkled into the pot in the kitchen, the soundtrack to her pressing decision. She weighed the opportunities provided by both sets: the blue would make her feel like a real Bergman, ready to be swept off her feet by her very own Bogart. The purple was a bit less sophisticated, sure, but it was bubbly and frilly in the essence of Britney, and the pink lace detail would match her nails, an unplanned, but nonetheless satisfying, coincidence. How could she choose? With a brief glance to the clock on her wall, Annie realized she was going to be late for her morning trip to the cafe, for her usual egg white and cheese on a scooped-out pumpernickel bagel, if she didn't hurry it up.

She tossed the two options back into her drawer and dug through the pile of lace trimmed bikinis, 100% cotton cheekies, pretty-pink-pointelle, balconettes and bralettes just to find her back up set. Maybe what she needed wasn't elegance or frill, but a secret third option. At the very bottom of her pinewood drawer she found what she was looking for, a striking red number that would be just for her.

Nevermind that by the end of the day her skin would chafe almost as red as the hand-sewn lace from the fact that it's *just* a size too small. Nevermind the fact that the underwire digs into all the wrong places. The red complimented her skintone nicely, and she always felt like her ability to talk to customers excelled when she wore this set. Her head raised a little higher, her shoulders angled just a bit further back.

Without any further setback, Annie hustled to get ready. On her way to her other wardrobe, she caught a glimpse of herself in the full-body mirror. Her hair, crowned with pink and blue velcro curlers, shone in the early morning light. With a pause to analyze, she straightened her posture; her breasts don't look as good if she doesn't. Dressed in business casual—her least favorite attire, but a requirement if she wanted a chance to sell anything—she half-skipped on her tippy toes to the bathroom to start her skin care routine.

Bottles of serums clinked, jars of moisturizers and cleansers clattered onto her counter as she dumped it all out. Her makeup was next: tubes of mascara, concealer, and eyebrow gel followed by her blush and setting powder. After each step she paused to look at herself, really look, and decide if she should pluck her eyebrows thinner like she had seen in Vogue. She examined her face from all sides to see that she was adequately blended, periodically checking to see if the pimple on her cheek was more noticeable than the last time. When she was finished, she batted her eyelashes at her reflection, giving a cheeky smile. Then she practiced her sales smile. Then her relaxed, offguard, but still remarkably arresting face. Perfect.

The rollers came out next, carefully contorted her fingers so that she didn't pull the hair in the wrong direction. Each discarded curler was lined up along the sink next to the mess of makeup and her name-brand hairbrush that promised a sheen unmatched by anything else on the market, possibly the planet. Finally satisfied with her appearance, she produced a few more manufactured faces to be analyzed in the water-spotted mirror and was off. She bounded into the kitchen and poured a measly cup of the cheapest store brand coffee into her shiny pink limited edition Stanley Cup. A dash of caramel creamer and she hastened to screw the lid as she juggled her apartment keys. Slipping her feet in her Chanel-dupe flats, she spared a glance at the clock on her wall to see that she was seven minutes behind schedule. With a huff, Annie headed off into the world, reminding herself to keep her shoulders back.

She missed her scooped-out bagel, too late to afford to wait in the excruciatingly long line for her breakfast. She darted between the foot traffic on the sidewalk. In the middle of a crowd, she tripped on an uneven paver, her pink Stanley Cup tumbling to the ground. Coffee splashed onto the toes of her capped ballet flats and up her shins. She cursed under her breath and picked it up while heads turned to glance at the poor young woman starting her day off with a spill. Annie stood up, shouldering her bag and returning to her whisking pace to make it on time to her opening shift.

As she approached the large glass doors, keys jingling as she fingered the right one to unlock the store, she caught a glimpse of herself in the tinted windows. Dazzled by the glassy sheen of sweat on her forehead and cheeks, her flyaways sticking to her temples, she shoved the key into the slot and jostled the door open, bag straps falling down her shoulder.

Annie went through the motions of opening, tapping her self-manicured nails on the marble sales desk.

She checked the safe, made the morning calls, and turned the fluorescents on overhead. She cleaned the glass cases decorated with oily fingerprints framing thousands and thousands of dollars of jewelry, glittering back at her. She dusted, vacuumed, and checked her hair again in the small employee bathroom, it had fallen a little flat since she arrived. She'd have to switch mousses again until she found something that could hold volume better. At 10:01 she opened the doors for customers and associates alike, smoothing her polyester blazer down.

Three customers in, and no sales made, Annie was starting to think the red set wasn't working for her. Until the man came in. She had seen him before in passing, stopping and glancing in the store-front window, but never taking the time to stroll through the door to take a closer look. Today was the day that he made the leap. She smiled at him as he approached the desk, the skin on her cheeks pulled taut in the dry air-conditioned air. He smiled back at her and made his request; he was looking for a ring, something sparkly and big. Annie showed him the cases, his stubby fingers prodded at the glass when he found something especially "remarkable". She made sure to smile and nod and felt a deep-seated flush of relief in the tips of her ears as she watched his eyes wander from the jewelry to her breast.

He picked three rings to compare, and the grin he shot Annie as he fondled the jewelry was so blinding, she could see the phosphorescent imprint of it on the backs of her eyelids. When he settled on a decision, she scooped her hand with ballerina-ease and plucked it from the pads of his fingers, careful not to graze against him. She explained how sizing worked with brilliant efficiency and quickly ran to the back to make note to put the order in. Upon Annie's return he gave her another once over. The flush returned to the back of her neck. Her posture poised for impact, ready to close the deal, but before she could gracefully shoo him out of the store to make way for the next customer, his lip curled into what must've been intended as a cheeky smile, but in actuality became a daunting snarl. *I think this ring would look good on you*, he said, holding the brilliant diamond up to the light, twisting it like a prism and lasering the beam of light into her eye. She recoiled an inch before composing herself and plastered the flattered sales smile on her face before darting her eyes downwards as though she was bashful. Satisfied, he chuckled and left it at that.

Annie busied herself with the computer screen in front of her and told him when to come back to pick up the ring. He slid the card across the counter, fingers reaching for hers, just a touch before she swiped it, feeling the weight of his bank account in her palm, and

charged it. With a smile, she held her sigh in until after she had waved him out.

She sold just two other things that day, despite her first success. It must've been the mousse. Annie caught the way a woman scrutinized her outfit, lingering on her skirt. She couldn't figure out what the problem was until she went to the cramped employee bathroom again to find that the red lacy set dug in enough to be visible under the faux tweed skirt, leaving unsightly panty lines. She glanced back at the mirror and found that around her nose, her makeup had begun flaking and revealed the dried up, ungainly woman under the layers of primer, concealer, foundation, and powder that were peeling free. She scraped the offending areas with the tip of her nail, leaving wakes of red skin that flared in irritation. She stared in horror at the indentations in her back and her bottom from the elastic with too little give. Sweat perspired at her temple and behind her neck, her baby hairs sticking, clinging to the scorching skin.

Her cheeks flushed, blotchy and not beautiful. She teased her hair with her fingers before deciding she was palatable enough and heading back outside to the sales floor. When her shift ended, she walked home. The sidewalks were no longer busy with the morning rush, just couples on afternoon strolls and dogs being walked on too-long leashes. Annie, though dejected and feeling disgusting, walked with her shoulders back, because her boobs wouldn't look as good if she didn't. If she couldn't be put together enough to sell, she could at least look tantalizing for her audience of passersby. Any one of those strangers could've seen her and spontaneously approached with the intention of delivering her into a life of luxury. She just had to look like she wanted it.

Her fingers gripped a little harder on her purse as she walked by the men working on the sidewalk, jackhammer cast aside as they sat taking their smoke break. Annie felt their heads follow her path, gleaming spotlight eyes tracking each step as she parted their cloud of smoke. She slowed her step for their sake, earning her star of approval through the sitcom slow-whistles and low chuckles that echoed through her head all the way home.

Back at her apartment, she quickly changed out of her clothes, eager to shed her workwear and replace it with her strappy black spandex matching set. Before slinking into the new skin, she admired herself in the mirror, turning to see the previously offending panty in the softening daylight. With nothing to cover it, it sat beautifully against her skin, making her look perfectly plump. She switched out the matching red bra for the strappy spandex one and slid into the

matching leggings, gently staging the red lace upon her bed, before hustling back out the door and down the street, hips still swaying.

At seven o'clock, she bought a mysterious green juice in the lobby of the barre studio, waiting for her 7:15 class to start. The pink plastic straw between her lips matched her pink Stanley Cup—refilled and ready—and her hair swished with each turn of the head to scan the array of women entering the white-walled lobby.

Her Bubbly Instructor greeted her at the door, *You look good enough to eat*, and Annie beamed. She'd become a regular and had finally secured the personalized greeting at every class. She situated herself at the barre, facing the floor to ceiling mirror and watched as the women lined up single-file alongside her, each in matching spandex sets and high ballerina-buns. Annie could feel the beginnings of a migraine throbbing on the inside of her eyes as class began. As soon as she heard the droning *Ladies!* of her Bubbly Instructor, her eyes glazed over. In the mirror across from her, she vaguely understood that her hips were gyrating and the repeated pulsing of her pointed toes was sending a burning sensation up the shank of her leg. She watched as the brood of women around her whirred after each bubbly order in quiet obedience, small huffs of effort were only let out when the pulsing kicks and flutters became too much.

When Annie closed her eyes, she could still see the blinding white light of the man's smile from earlier and the diamond shaped phosphene. Her mind wandered to his fiancée. Had she ever stood in front of a barre and subjected herself to forty-five minutes of humping the air, all for the perverted pleasure left behind after the burning in her hips subsided? She wondered if she owned countless lingerie sets and if the man had a favorite. She wondered if they would have sex after the proposal, if the fiancée would wear a sexy red set that wasn't just for her, but for her soon-to-be husband too.

When Annie opened her eyes again, she watched herself contort in the mirror, hand gripping onto the wooden barre that held up the body weight of each woman in the black and white, wood-paneled room. Her head spun in time to the bumping music meant to encourage the women to keep bouncing in time with the Bubbly Instructor who hadn't yet broken a sweat, and seemingly wasn't capable of it. She felt the eyes of twenty-five, sweaty, broiling, women in the reflection across from her as she pictured her butt in the red panties. She imagined herself the way a lover might, the way the man from earlier might look at the woman he thought he loved enough to marry. His smile flashed behind her eyes, she felt the heat radiating off the spotlight-eyes of the construction workers, her pulsing pliéés

slowed to a halt as the Bubbly Instructor announced that it was the end of the session. Annie watched the splotchy red reflection of herself smile, she could go home.

THE HAUNTING OF SILVER Lanes

BECCA MOIR

Amy lazily watched the remaining bowlers from her post behind the counter. There weren't many, a small group of what she assumed were high school seniors, a couple on what appeared to be a *very* awkward first date, and a single dad who was spending more time on his phone than watching his kids roll gutter balls down the lane. She wasn't too surprised at the minimal turn out; the torrential downpour of rain really put a damper on anyone really braving the weather for discounted bowling. Amy didn't mind one bit; it would make for an easier closing shift.

Her coworker, Tina, was flitting around the tables, wiping and collecting trash. Her bleach blonde hair frazzled and slipping out from the bun that sat atop her head. But that was how she always looked, on the edge of a breakdown. Once she reached the counter with the trash, she heaved a heavy sigh.

"I hate closing," Tina complained.

"Yup," Amy agreed.

"And you know we're going to have to put the kiddie pools out with all this rain. God, Roger needs a new system."

Amy cast her gaze upwards to the ceiling and took note of the darkening wet spots just over the lanes. It was true that the owner needed a new system in order to keep the leaking from the upstairs to a minimum, but he was so wrapped up in his other ventures, plus the cost of the renovations it would take to fix everything were enough to keep the repairs on a permanent back burner. So, what if every time a heavy rain came the night crew put kiddie pools on the lanes for the morning shift to dump? Amy had never seen the upstairs, but from what she had heard from others, the places was beyond creepy and beyond repair.

The couple on the very awkward first date had finished and were making their way up to the counter. After placing their shoes in front of Amy and bidding her goodnight, the man had turned to the woman but she had already beelined for the door. The man shifted uneasily, shot Amy an embarrassed look and quickly ran after his date.

"Yikes," Tina muttered from the cash register. She had been furiously texting and muttering swears every now and then. Suddenly

she raised the phone to her ear. “Goddamnit Tommy, answer the phone.”

Amy ignored her coworker and pulled the closing list closer to her. If her and Tina cut a few corners, she might be able to get out of her at a decent time. The high school kids were bowling their last frame, and the single dad was currently trying to wrangle his youngest into his normal shoes. It appeared that he was losing that battle.

“Fuck!” Tina swore loudly. “I am so sorry Amy, I have to leave. My kid has a fever and my boyfriend apparently can’t read the instructions on the Tylenol bottle. And I don’t know if you know if I told you that my car is in the shop so I’m borrowing his, and so it’s not like he can take the baby to my mom’s so she can help. I’m so sorry, I’ll take out the trash on my way out so you don’t have to worry about that. And you can tell Roger that I had to go home early if he gives you a hard time about there only being one of us left. I know the rule, I just, I have to go.”

Damn. “It’s okay,” Amy flashed a fake smile.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay? I know its scary by yourself and I wouldn’t normally leave someone by themselves here, but my kids sick ya know? And seriously, if you get too spooked just leave and I’ll take the heat from Roger.”

“Tina, seriously, it’s fine. Go take care of your kid.”

Tina shifted from foot to foot. She glanced towards the lanes and nodded. “Okay, yeah. Just be careful, okay?”

Odd. Amy also glanced towards the lanes looking for what Tina was looking at.

The final shoes were deposited on the counter and the father struggled to herd his kids to the door. He lifted a hand in a silent waved and disappeared into the downpour, kids screaming as they ran in the rain.

When Amy turned back to Tina, she was slowly gathering her things all the while still staring at the far end of the lanes. She seemed to snap out of whatever trance she was in and quickened her pace. “Seriously, you’re not scared?”

Amy had heard the rumors that the bowling alley was haunted. They were kind of hard to ignore when that was all that her coworkers seemed to talk about. Tina had seen something in the back. Collin had heard footsteps and no one was there. Brenda couldn’t help but feel like she was being watched. Amy had heard it all and had experienced none of what her coworkers reporting. Amy had figured they all pulled that crap to get out of staying late.

“Nah, I ain’t afraid of no ghosts,” Amy joked.

Amy was still giggling to herself as Tina hauled the halfway full trash bags out of the cans. “I wouldn’t joke, it’s real you know. That old manager really does haunt this place. It’s why there’s the ‘no one is left alone’ rule.”

Hector had been the manager in the very early years of Roger owning the bowling alley. One stormy night, he had stayed late to do maintenance on the pin machines, all by himself. While he was reaching into the machine his shirt caught on one of the mechanisms on the inner machine. In his struggle to get free, the machine was accidentally turned on and the machine sliced his arm open, severing his brachial artery.

Hector bled out in the back.

Alone.

Since then, there had been a rule that there always had to be two closers, just in case of situations like Hector’s. There was the option of leaving with Tina, but then they both would suffer the wrath of Roger. No, Amy would tough out as many closing duties as she could possibly stand and then she would leave. Spook or no spook.

“If there are any spirits here, I am a friend and there is no need to spook me!” Amy declared loudly and looked to Tina. “See? It’s all good. Go home, take care of your kid. I’ll be out in like an hour tops. Here, I’ll lock you out.”

Once Tina had given one final wave from the driver’s seat of her car, Amy locked the door to the bowling alley and turned back the empty lanes, leaving the keys in the door for an easy escape. *An hour, tops.*

Amy made quick work of the small things, counting the till, restocking the candy behind the counter, doing a final sweep of the tables to make sure all the napkin dispensers were all full, and then finally, putting the few bowling balls that had been left, back on the shelves where they belonged.

After she walked the length of lanes to the back room where Hector had met his untimely demise, Amy had to wonder. *If there was an afterlife, why haunt the beat-up bowling alley where you died?* Amy pulled the lever to shut down the machines and left the dank room behind her.

If she had the choice to haunt anywhere, she would have chosen somewhere fun, somewhere clean, somewhere... not in the rundown old mining town she unfortunately called home. But then again, if you come back as a ghost, *do you get a choice? Or are you doomed to haunt where you died? Are you aware of being doomed to haunt somewhere as decrypted and boring as Silver Lanes?*

The kiddie pools were securely under the wet spots on the ceiling, and Amy had had to mop up the rapidly growing wet spot on the lane, but she couldn't find the tarps that were supposed to go under the pools. Another mark against her she supposed. She sighed; the job was easy enough but did she really want to keep the job? The building was almost falling apart and the pay wasn't exactly great. Maybe she could ask for a few more hours—

A loud shuffle above her head breaking her out of her thoughts and made her look up, her heart stuttering in her chest. The shuffling ran directly over her, zigging left and right before coming to a complete stop. Amy rolled her eyes, probably another stray cat had gotten trapped upstairs. It had only been a few months ago that she had heard of the tournament that had been rudely interrupted when a cat had come crashing down on the lanes, ceiling tiles and all. If there was one thing you didn't want happening at Silver Lanes, was the local bowling club's tournament interrupted. Roger hadn't been able to hear the end of it for weeks.

She shook off the goosebumps that had temporarily dotted her skin and made her way over to the bathroom. Thunder rolled outside loudly. She needed to hurry up to beat any worsening weather. Thankfully, the bathroom wasn't *too disgusting*.

Generally, Amy didn't like to think about what would happen after she died, the question brought too many complex and frightening feelings that she avoided the question. But, if she had to believe anything, she'd like to believe that she would go to a place where everyone she had ever known and loved was there. How sad it must be to have to haunt a place for eternity. Amy started to feel that ever familiar feeling of tightness creeping into her chest, squeezing like a vice. *Do you feel sadness after you die? Do you feel anything? Are you conscious when you pass or do all feelings and consciousness just wink out when your heart stops? What is it like to experience the vast emptiness of oblivion? Are you even aware that you're even experiencing that oblivion or is everything just black?*

The sound of crashing pins sent the cleaner flying from Amy's hand and into the adjacent wall.

Pins?

Amy's heart thundered in her chest, a mix of existential dread and shock. She yanked the door to the bathroom open and poked her head out. The bowling alley was as still as the dead. She took a few, cautious steps into the main area of the bowling alley. She worried her lip in between her teeth as she scanned each lane to see if any pins had inexplicably left down for the night. Not a single one was out of

place.

Amy shook her head. Something else must have fallen, she'd have to do a quick scan of the back. She paused as she looked toward the back of the alley. The small entry way was dimly lit. She already wasn't the biggest fan of needing to go into the cramped back room. It always smelled like rotting wood and old cigarettes. Not to mention there was probably mice back there. She could just leave it for the night and claim that she never heard anything if there was anything knocked over. She could say she had hurried through her duties to get home after Tina left.

But then if anything were to happen, Amy would feel horrible. So, with a heavy sigh and definitely not nerves, Amy started her walk to the back of the bowling alley.

The small entry was slowly getting bigger, becoming wider and wider like the mouth of an awaiting creature. Amy again rolled her eyes. She really had to stop listening to the others and their ghost stories.

She was over halfway to the back when she noticed the second set of footsteps. Almost indistinguishable from her own, if she didn't know any better, she would have thought them an echo of her own footfalls. Amy froze in her tracks and swiveled her head to get a peek behind her, when she saw no one, she continued on. The second pair marched after her. The sound of the footsteps grew, each step a crashing stomp on the hardwood behind her. Amy's heart thundered in her chest as she swung around, convinced she was about to come face to face with the stalker.

No one.

Amy's breath was ragged; there was no one here.

This was getting out of hand. Thunder crashed above her again, causing her to jump a little at the treacherous sound. She just needed to take a quick peek in the back and to get the fuck out of there. She'd never close again by herself, she'd play by the rules, and she'd never tell anyone about her experience.

Amy turned again to the back of the alley, claustrophobic back room, the monstrous entry way, and the very tall shadow figure standing in the doorway.

Amy's throat tightened, the air sucked from her lungs in a panicked freeze. Her heart galloped faster against her rib cage, the incessant beating creating a thunderous symphony in her ears. Tears welled in her eyes as the rational part of her brain scrambled to make sense of the scene in front of her. All her instincts were screaming for her to run but she could not will her legs to move. They stayed rooted

to their current spot like cement tree trunks, physically incapable of a single step. A single tear rolled down her cheek as she watched the form expand ever so slightly, its would be leg taking an impossibly slow step outward towards Amy.

Just then, a bright flash illuminated the bowling alley, giving Amy just a glimpse at just how hulking this figure was. It had poured itself out of the entry way and gathered its full height a few feet away from Amy. Her choking sobs only amplified as she craned her neck to look up at the massive shadow standing in front of her. Arms and legs spread slightly apart, and head at a tilt. Amy's eyes dared not blink as she was granted the full look at this *thing*. Amy wanted more than anything to look away, to flee, to scream, but she couldn't.

Then, a thunderous boom.

And all the lights went out.

As if the dreadful spell was broken, Amy felt the release of her legs and pivoted to her left and took off like a shot through the dark. Her breathing came back to her as she stumbled blindly over the lanes. The only light provided came from the lightning strikes that had seemingly increased in the worsening storm.

Footsteps slowly thundered behind her as she scrambled, completely disoriented. Were the footsteps just behind her or were they coming from every direction? Crashing above her kept her spinning and changing direction. Where was she? Was she really seeing more of those shadows when the lightening struck? How was she going to get out of here?

Amy's thoughts came to a screeching halt as her foot caught in one of the gutters on the lanes. She was suddenly pitched forward and she was once again left breathless as she came crashing down on to the lane and into a large pool of thick liquid.

The cheap, plastic kiddie pool that she had placed on the lane earlier was halfway full of the liquid. Amy raised her shaking hand to get a closer look. Vomit rolled into her throat as the lightning struck, casting light on her bloody hand. Amy tried to raise herself out of the pool, but found her limbs slipping. Weight was placed on her arms and legs, like hands pulling her deeper into the blood.

Slowly she started to sink, pulled under by the hands of the unknown. She finally let out a scream, loud enough to shake the building. Her throat straining as she tried desperately to find purchase on the cheap plastic edge of the pool. For a brief moment she slipped a little under the waves, blood pouring into her open mouth and nostrils. She gagged, the coppery taste coating her tongue.

Once again, she scrambled for purchase on the rim of the pool. She would not be dragged under. She would not drown.

Her fingers burned as they finally wrapped around the edge of the kiddie pool, clutching for dear life against the incessant, heavy pull of the hands. The hands gripped tighter, pulling with painful force down, down, down into the impossibly deep pool. Sharp nails pierced into the fabric of her jeans, scraping along her calves and thighs.

Out of the corner of her eye, movement.

Amy cast her eyes sideways to find the hulking shadow figure slowly circling the pool. Its hulking mass illuminated every so often by the flashes of lightning. Tears and more streamed down her face as she came face to face once again with the shadow. It ever so slowly bent down towards Amy's face. No breath brushed over her face. No eyes stared back at her eyes. Amy simply stared into the dark and the dark stared back.

Dread crept through her swift and unavoidable.

Fear seized her spine as the shadow figure reached its hand towards Amy's face. Amy's vision fully obscured as the impossibly cold hand rested on her face and slowly began to push her deeper into the waves of blood. Amy's screams were muffled against the massive palm, the last few sounds she'd ever make.

Then there was nothing.

Suddenly the hands vanished, the shadows and darkness replaced by light, and not a single speck of blood to be found. Amy found herself in a mostly dry kiddie pool on the middle of lane four.

What?

The sound of the front door jarred her from her thoughts and the welcome sight of Roger coming out of the rain caused fresh tears to stream down her face.

"Hey, kiddo, Tina called me and said she had to leave you. I thought I'd come help you lock up so we can get you home," he took sight of Amy on the lane. "Oh good, you got the kiddie pools out! Perfect for all this rain we're getting."

Roger worked quickly through the rest of the tasks as Amy slowly pulled herself together. She had lied and said she had fallen. Yes, she'd be okay, she just wanted to go home. Roger had agreed and told her to take it easy as he finished. Amy kept stealing quick glances to the entry way in the back, she could still taste the blood on her tongue. The rational part of her brain had effectively flatlined and had yet to restart.

Numbness rested heavy throughout her body. She could still feel the grip of those hands, the scratch of those nails, the dreadful stare. That stare. She couldn't shake the feeling that she had glimpsed at exactly what she dared not think about. If that is what was after death, how utterly terrifying. She watched as Roger rushed around, muttering to himself about different changes to various projects. Amy wanted to shake him, scream at him, how did he not know what was in here?

Once outside, Roger made Amy promise she would never try to close again on her own. "It's how accidents happen."

Amy solemnly agreed and cast one more look, through the door, to the dimly lit entry way in the back, and the hulking shadow figure standing in the doorway.

PURGATORY
ALEC DUFFY



AS GOD INTENDED

MADISON HILL

The garden is painfully peaceful today, as it is every day. Perfectly picturesque. Sedentarily serene. Almost sedative. The rabbits are at ease here, as are the birds and every other creature that lives in the garden. Well, every creature aside from me. “A garden of plenty,” some would call it. I might venture to call it the opposite. Although it’s filled to the brim with green vegetation, this garden feels more like a wasteland. I feel desperately empty here.

God claps Adam on the shoulder jestingly and I have to remind myself to unclench my jaw. I slip further into the canopy of leaves and branches to observe as their bare feet strike the earth in synchrony, their soles caked in dried mud. They must have been walking along the river again. I cannot recall the last time I was asked to walk with them. The only reason I go to the river anymore is to fish. Fishing involuntarily became my job. I watch spitefully as they joke together, their laughs just inaudible. Once they are in earshot I hear Adam call God, “Father.” I’ve never felt so inclined, nor welcomed to do the same. He has always been God to me. While Adam and I don’t have the closest bond, my relationship with my creator is even more estranged. I have always been second to Adam—to man. God did make him *first*, after all. He has never extended me a shred of kindness like He has to Adam. The two are practically inseparable, whereas God and I couldn’t be further alienated. Sometimes I catch Him looking at me with this hollow expression. He never looks at Adam this way. It isn’t hostility or disgust—which I might have been able to understand—but His look is one of utter indifference. Or maybe it’s regret I sense.

I don’t think He intended on creating me. I was more of an afterthought. Once He noticed Adam had become bored with his mundane life, God decided I might keep him busy. Both God and Adam would say I failed at that. I did not quite entertain Adam the way God had imagined. I agitate him more than anything, although that is not to say it is purely one-sided. I look down at the pink scar where I tried to cut Adam’s rib out of me—as if that would have solved anything. I scoff at the memory. It leaves a foul taste in my mouth but I can’t help but recall every detail. My fingers trace the slightly raised flesh and visions of taking the sharpest rock I could find to my skin flood my senses. I can still smell the blood as it rained

down on the garden floor, coating my hands in the most vibrant shade of red I had ever seen.

The shade rivaled all of Eden's sunsets. It was so beautiful that I painted the grass with the color, determined to make the earth my canvas. I can still feel the searing pain that threatened to tear my skin apart. I thought my flesh was burning off my bone. Then there was God's hands, deft and steady, closing up my mistake—His mistake. Although His touch was gentle, His gaze was anything but. If I could erase my entire existence, I would. But I have come to learn that He won't let me. I was brought into this place inadequate but once I find a way to leave it, I shall be a force greater than either of them have ever seen.

I take my time in the tree picking fruit for lunch. I look down to see Adam laying against the tree trunk while God washes his feet. This is how it's always been. Adam lounges about all day while He fusses over him. I prepare every meal because I know they won't. Adam says something undoubtedly witless and God chuckles. After I finish gathering, I climb down from the tree and wish I had "accidentally" dropped some of the fruit on their heads.

"Eve, what's for lunch?" Adam asks as I descend from the last branch. I recoil slightly as my bare feet touch the cold grass, freshly damp from their cleanup. His feet are still in God's hands.

"Fruit again, unless you want to fish." I dump what I have collected on the ground beside them. Adam sighs exasperatedly and I think I catch him rolling his eyes.

"You know I don't fish, Eve." Adam whines.

"And you know I don't like to fish, Adam." I fold my arms over my chest, standing my ground.

"But you have fished for us before."

"Only because you wouldn't stop pestering me."

"Children, children. Why must we fight over this so often?" God intervenes, like He always does.

"We fight over this so often because Adam doesn't contribute. God, I do everything."

"You know that's not true!"

"Then please tell me. What do you do, Adam?" Before he can even respond, God steps in between us. He holds His hands out as if I might lunge at Adam. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Please, let us reconcile."

"We will only be able to reconcile once Eve stops being so disagreeable." Adam kicks some of the fruit before storming off. It

breaks apart and litters the wet grass. God's arms are crossed and He's shaking His head at me. He looks at me with that same hollow expression. Maybe it has been disappointment all along. However, now His look has morphed into something more accusatory.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You know why. This is not my way. We forgive and love in the Garden of Eden." God chastises me and I begin to feel tears sting my eyes, but I do not bother to let them drop. I have had to endure these words for far too long.

"How am I supposed to forgive and love when Adam is always so difficult?"

"The fault cannot be blamed on Adam alone. You did provoke him, Eve." God places a hand on my shoulder. Is this supposed to be a comforting gesture? I want to argue and rebut and fight this fallacious narrative God is spinning like a spider's web. This conversation makes me feel like a helpless fly stuck in His web—making it worse the more I struggle. Instead, I just sigh and unclench my fists. Fighting will get me nowhere, I know this—this is the will of the Lord, after all.

"I will go make amends. Forgive me, God."

"Father forgives all." He reassures me with a tight-lipped smile.

I spend almost ten minutes wandering around the garden looking for Adam. I still don't know why *I* have to be the one to apologize. I check each of his favorite spots in Eden: the river, the cave, the waterfall, even the olive tree. Nothing. There is no sign of him anywhere. I should just walk back, Adam could be back with God by now anyway. As I'm about to head off, something catches my eye. I see something green move through the tall grass and pass over my feet in a flash, causing me to jump. Then I hear a voice coaxing me, my name dripping off its tongue like honey. This voice does not belong to Adam, nor God. I have never heard this voice before.

"Eve, I've been looking for you."

I stare in disbelief as a serpent stretches out in front of me before coiling up tightly. Its long neck stands up tall to meet my gaze. I swallow hard as my body decides it would be safer to freeze than flee. I did not know there were serpents in the garden.

"You've been looking for me?" My voice betrays me as I hear it waver. This creature instills such fear in me I have to dig my fingernails into my palms to stop my hands from shaking.

"Yes."

"And how do you know my name?"

“I’ve been watching you for quite some time.”

“How long has ‘quite some time’ been?”

“Exactly as long as it sounds.” I wonder if God knows about this creature, and if He does, does He know it’s been watching me? I certainly have not noticed. I’m surprised I don’t feel more threatened by it. I feel oddly comforted by its sentiment. No one has paid attention to me before—not like this serpent has.

“What is your name? If you know mine, it’s only fair I know yours.”

“My name is of no importance, my dear. Come with me.” Without a moment’s hesitation, the snake unravels and drags its belly along the grass, blazing a treacherous trail behind it. Do I dare follow?

“Where are we going?” I decide to indulge it, treading a safe distance behind. I don’t have a good feeling about this. The serpent does not respond and I’m left to question if I’m making the right choice. But then again, what’s the worst that can happen? It isn’t as if one can die in Eden. My thoughts are abruptly interrupted as the snake stops under a tree. Why has it brought me here of all places?

“Do you know why I’ve brought you here?” It finally speaks, its voice cutting sharply into the silence. I just shake my head in response.

“Do you know where we are?”

“You’ve brought me to the Tree of Knowledge.” I remember coming here a few times before, but it is not part of the garden I visit very often. God has warned Adam and I that we are not allowed to take from it. I can recall asking Him about it once, curiosity getting the best of me. He looked me right in the eyes and said that eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge would result in a banished life of pain and suffering. I never asked God about the tree again after that.

“Why did you bring me here?” The serpent slithers up the trunk of the tree and wraps itself around one of the branches bearing some low hanging fruit.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to try a bite, Eve?” Its forked red tongue sticks out momentarily to taste the air. I can’t tell if it’s being serious. Does it not know God’s will? I shake my head and take a step back. Sensing my apprehension, the snake lets out a frustrated hiss.

“I know what will happen if I do.”

“Do you? Do you really? Or do you just know what God wants you to know? Haven’t you ever thought maybe He just doesn’t want you to know the truth? This is the Tree of Knowledge, after all.”

“What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is, how do you think God became God? You could be just like Him, Eve. All you have to do is take a bite.” The snake coils tighter around the branch and I can tell its patience with me is wearing thin. If what it’s saying is true, then I can’t eat from the tree. I never want to be anything like God. I take a few more careful steps back until I hear a twig snap under someone’s foot. I turn my head toward the sound to see Adam walking over to us. I can hear my heart pounding fast and feel my blood thrumming under my skin. What is Adam doing here?

“Eve? What are you doing?” Adam approaches cautiously at first.

“What is that?” He gestures to the serpent. I’m left speechless. I don’t want Adam to think I was going to disobey God. Before I can explain, the creature speaks for me.

“Adam, welcome. We’ve been waiting for you.” Adam locks eyes with temptation and approaches the branch both the snake and apple hang on.

“No, Adam. Don’t listen to it. We have to go, now.” I keep my distance to see what he will do. Surely, he would not eat it. Adam knows it’s forbidden.

“Who are you?” Adam seems skeptical, but not fearful. I don’t like the look he has in his eyes. There’s a glint of intrigue in them. I’ve never noticed how blue his eyes were until now.

“Have you ever wanted to taste the truth?” The creature continues, flicking its tongue out across the skin of the apple.

“The truth?” Adam looks between me and the serpent once more before deciding his fate. He reaches his hand up to the branch.

“Come take from this branch and bite this fruit. Don’t you want to know exactly why you aren’t allowed to partake?” The creature backs away from the apple as Adam picks it with his hand. No, he wouldn’t, would he? I start to approach him when he brings the apple to his mouth but once he takes a bite I stop in my tracks and gasp. Adam turns toward me, chewing slowly before swallowing. A silence falls between us. The quiet is deafening. I must break it.

“Adam, what have you done?” My hands are shaking. What would happen if God were to discover?

“What? I’m hungry. I did not eat lunch, as you know.” He sinks his teeth into the fruit’s red flesh again. My body tenses more and more with each bite.

You should slap it out of his hand.

No, you should let him eat it.

But he’ll get in trouble.

You want him to face God's judgment, don't you?

"But you know eating that fruit is forbidden!"

"I'm sure Father won't be upset. He forgives and loves all." Adam shrugs and drops the apple on the ground. I detect the faintest smirk on his lips. "Although it is kind of bitter." I take a few steps closer to get a better look at the fruit. I decide to pick it up. Nothing about it looks especially forbidden. It looks like a regular apple to me. Except it is not a regular apple. And the tree that hangs above us is not a regular tree. Adam knows this—we all know this. I look up into the branches to try and spot the serpent. There's not a trace of it left behind. It has completely vanished as if it were never here to begin with. My stomach feels unsettled with that thought. Why would it leave so soon? This is what it wanted, after all.

"Have you eaten from the forbidden fruit?" I hear a voice a few paces behind me. I know who it belongs to without having to look. The alarm in His voice is palpable. I drop the apple and turn around to meet His gaze. God's eyes bore through me.

"No Father, I have not. It was Eve! She ate the fruit!" Adam tells the most unconvincing lie and I have the sudden impulse to take a nearby rock and cut a rib out of him. Surely God sees through this facade. Adam is a terrible liar.

"Don't lie, Adam. I didn't eat the fruit. It was him, he disobeyed your wishes." I try to maintain an air of calm but I know my trembling hands betray me. I clench my teeth to stop them from chattering. The garden feels unexpectedly cold today.

"Adam, is this true?"

"No Father, I swear to you! Eve is to blame! I tried to stop her but she didn't listen." Adam begins sniffing, tears welling up in his eyes. I ball my hands into fists and I feel my body shaking. Of course he's blaming me for his faults. How typical of man.

"There will be major consequences for this treachery."

"Wait, but God—Father! I promise you I didn't eat the fruit!"

"It matters not who ate the fruit, but it clearly was eaten. You have betrayed my trust!"

His voice booms throughout the garden like thunder. I think I'm going to be sick. Adam and I exchange a look, both of us uncertain of our future.

"What shall be the punishment?" Adam has the audacity to ask. I would never dare to ask such a question. I am still shaking but I cannot discern whether it is a result of anger or fear. God takes a moment to ponder this but I have a feeling He has already decided.

Whatever it is must be a thousand times more painful than trying to cut out a rib. We wait patiently for our judgment in the most uncomfortable stillness before He speaks.

“You two will leave the garden and never return. Your lives will no longer be eternal and you must fend for yourselves. I shall not provide for you ever again.” God has spoken. Adam is sobbing. I feel fine. I am still furious at Adam for lying but I have been wanting to leave Eden for some time now. I never truly felt like I belonged here. God has just sentenced us to everlasting banishment to teach us a lesson but I think He knows I’ll be okay. God is omniscient; there’s no way He couldn’t have foreseen this coming, right? After all, I have been the one hunting and foraging for all these years. God knew this would happen all along.

“You must leave here at once.”

I start the journey to the edge of Eden with Adam following slowly behind me, still a sniveling mess. God trails closely behind. We are in exile and He is seeing us out. Once I reach the perimeter of the garden I turn to face Him. I feel like I should say something—do something, cry even.

All I can think to say is “Thank you.” Adam looks confused and distraught while God simply nods His head once.

“May your sin lead to your liberation.” Those are the final words He utters to me as I cross over the boundary line separating paradise from the rest of God’s creation. I don’t bother to look back. I cannot tell if Adam is following me or not—nor do I care. This is it. This is what I’ve been waiting for. I know exactly where to start.

