

A close-up photograph of a leopard lying down in a natural, brushy environment. The leopard's body is covered in its characteristic spotted pattern, and its eyes are a striking yellow. The background is filled with tall, dry grasses and some brown leaves, suggesting an autumn or late summer setting. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the texture of the leopard's fur and the surrounding vegetation.

the Lit

Fall Issue 2024

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**Front Cover** LOULOU POLITI

**Back Cover** BEN LEE

## Letter from the Editors

We're thrilled to present The Lit's fall 2024 edition! Dive in and enjoy the creativity and dedication of our wonderful Choate community.

This term has been a journey filled with energy and excitement. With the start of the school year came a mix of new challenges and, of course, plenty of homework. Yet as the air turns colder, the campus is buzzing with traditions like Deerfield Day and Pep-Rally that bring us all together.

We're immensely grateful to our contributors—all the writers, artists, and thinkers who fill our pages with their work. Your submissions, enthusiasm, and attendance at our Thursday meetings are what give The Lit its vibrancy. Thank you for your dedication and creativity!

This year, The Lit has welcomed many familiar faces back to the team, along with several new ones. We had a blast working on an array of creative endeavors during meetings with blind portraits, one-liners, and even blackout poetry on the US Constitution.

Finally, a big thank-you to our advisor, Dr. Sip, for his guidance throughout the Fall 2024 publication process. We also deeply appreciate the Copy Center's help in bringing this edition to life. And to our subscribers, benefactors, and patrons, your support is what keeps The Lit thriving. Thank you for believing in us!

Enjoy the Fall 2024 edition of The Lit—happy reading!



## Untitled

Fire burns into old age

And passion kindles your heart

That flame that once burned bright as day

Dwindles into nothing but an afterthought

The loss of passion is the loss of a life

A hypothetical world, for better or worse no longer exists

All because the struggle have great accomplishments halted

Empires resulted in nothing more than a movement

And you sitting there only just a student

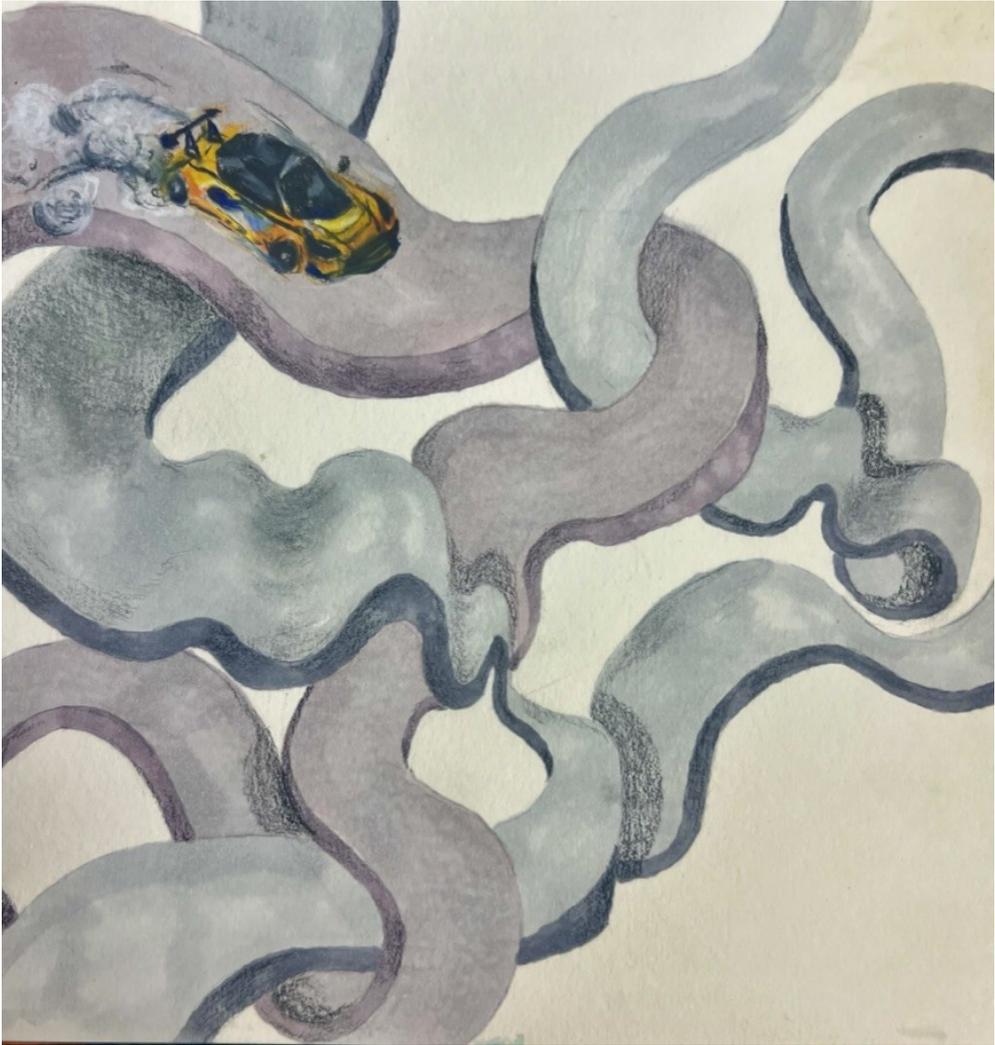
Do not let destiny fall into what if

Do not settle for good enough

Find a world where you can be

The difference that settles the dust

And the hypothetical made of sterling stuff



## Scooter Heist

I must have used an aggravating detergent at the legally suspicious laundromat I had cleaned my clothes in– undoubtedly the cause of an unbearable rash that made me feel as if ants were crawling under my skin. On top of that, I wasn't built for humidity, and the heat combined with the soupiness of the summer was giving me fits.

I took a deep breath, lungs filling with the sweat of the city. A beautiful collage of people surrounded me, and I was filled with apprehension and comfort. The city and all its sounds was a thriving concrete organism– I was a harmless parasite.

I loosened my necktie. This relaxed me, and quieted the ants chipping away at my neck. I was playing the part of an exhausted intern, and playing it well. All around me, people playing other parts were going about their theatrics. All had headphones of some sort in, and it gave an “I don't have time for anything, especially you” vibe.

The odd parent passed, child in tow. A child blissfully ignorant as to their future role they will have to practice and perform every day. A child almost as naive as I.

I loosened my tie. I tried to seem busy by checking my phone. Then, a disruption. A man began to hack and slash at the lock to an electric scooter, not 10 feet away from where I stood on the crowded pavement. My jaw hit the floor. I envisioned myself heroically apprehending the suspect and receiving the adoration of the city. This was my opportunity to make a difference! I had to act fast...

I did nothing, except stare. At least I noticed the event. Most sidewalkers just steered clear of the man like he was a fire hydrant. He eventually disappeared around the corner, scooter in tow.

I picked up my jaw. The flow resumed as usual. Was that a crime? Certainly didn't seem like one. I was lucky enough to be raised only in fear of trash-can rummaging black bears, and learned that leaving my car unlocked probably wasn't a big deal. But that was a crime, and no one seemed to care.

I'm not making any comments on crime in our country. I'm not saying I would have done anything or will do something in the future. Just a neat story, I suppose.



## What do you believe in?

Both fear and faith ask us to believe in things we  
cannot see

But what do you believe?

Do you believe in the dreams of tomorrow or the  
nightmares of tonight?

Do you believe in the opinions of others or the  
confidence of yourself?

Do you believe in the security of your home or  
the harm of the intruders?

We choose to believe in the things that don't  
appear through our eyes

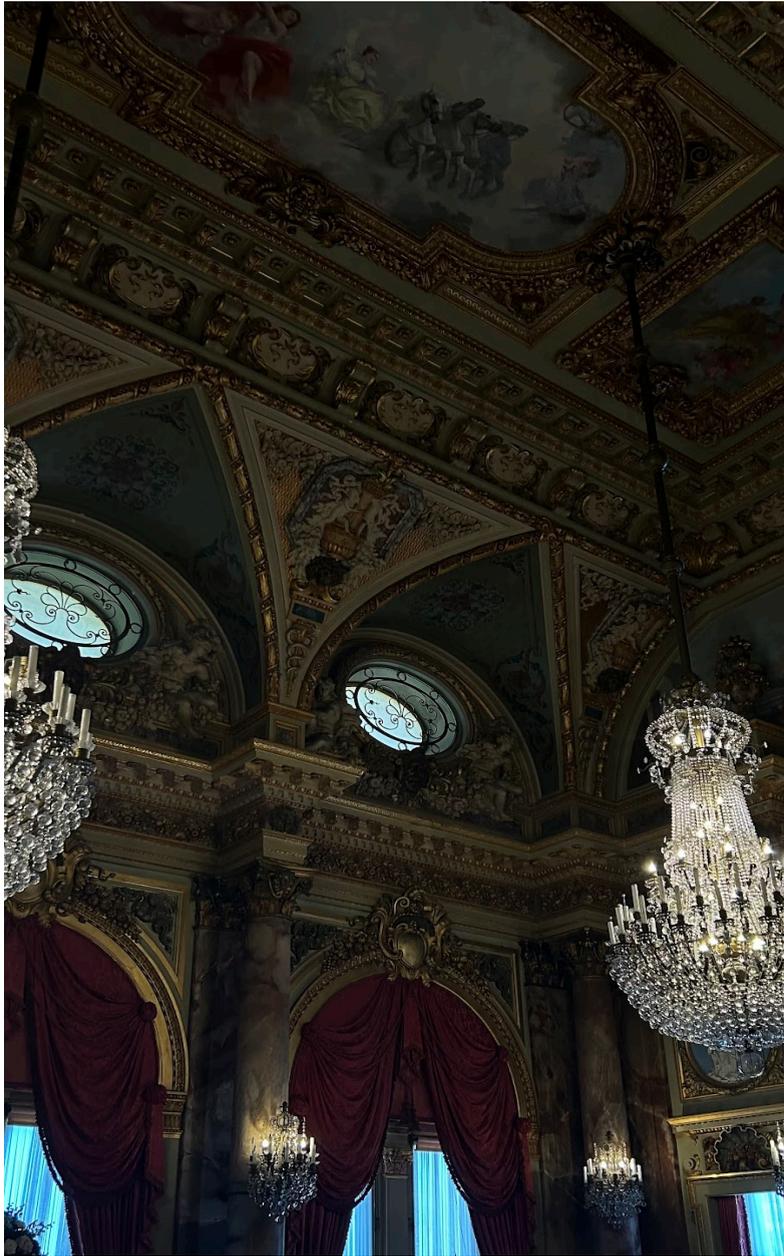
But rather through our minds

With the vivid and the obscure our minds create  
our minds are.

Never will there be a time near or far that we  
don't create.

Creating the best or the worst is for us to decide.

But I'll tell you what I believe



## Dear Ex-Boss

Dear Ex-Boss,

I just wanted to say I'm sorry for stepping on the back of your shoe yesterday. I shouldn't have done that, and the guilt has been eating at me ever since. Also, I took all the cash from your wallet while you weren't looking. And maybe following you to your house could be considered stalking, but I was just scoping it out.

I do apologize for breaking down your front door at midnight. But it was in my way, and it was an ugly door, anyway. I mean, who paints their front door pink? Next time, keep it white, and maybe I'll break a window instead. I am also very sorry for kicking your dog out. His loud barking made him seem ill-mannered, and obviously you want a presentable dog, right? On the bright side, his broken leg should heal quickly.

If I had more time in your house, I would want to cover up those hedges that you trimmed. They looked like a lobotomized dalmatian had trimmed them. Alas, I only had a limited amount of time. Oh, I suppose you're upset that I kidnapped your entire family. Look, I don't like to leave behind witnesses, and technically I saved them from that house fire I set.

Finally, I'm sorry for pushing you out your bedroom window. Your suit was an unflattering shade of dark green, and I wanted to spare you the shame. Plus, the hedges on the other side of the house looked even worse.

I'm really sorry for all of this. I just got mad when you took a jelly bean from my candy bowl.

-Your Ex-Employee



**the loitering sun eats my silhouette**

first summer rain & i cannot begin a line like this again  
without remembering you were here this time last year & i  
dont know if gold rusts but its definitely dimming, & i  
still narrowly escaping...

*surely  
if i can smile today,  
it must mean im not truly sad.*

are you with me still?

i can feel

the moist *tanghulu* nectar that dripped  
down your mouth & down your fingers  
still lingering with me as the ebb of leftover sunrays  
dances on the river in a broken limbo;

*remember that time  
the tanghulu man gave us two  
since we carried the cart for him?  
because i remember...*

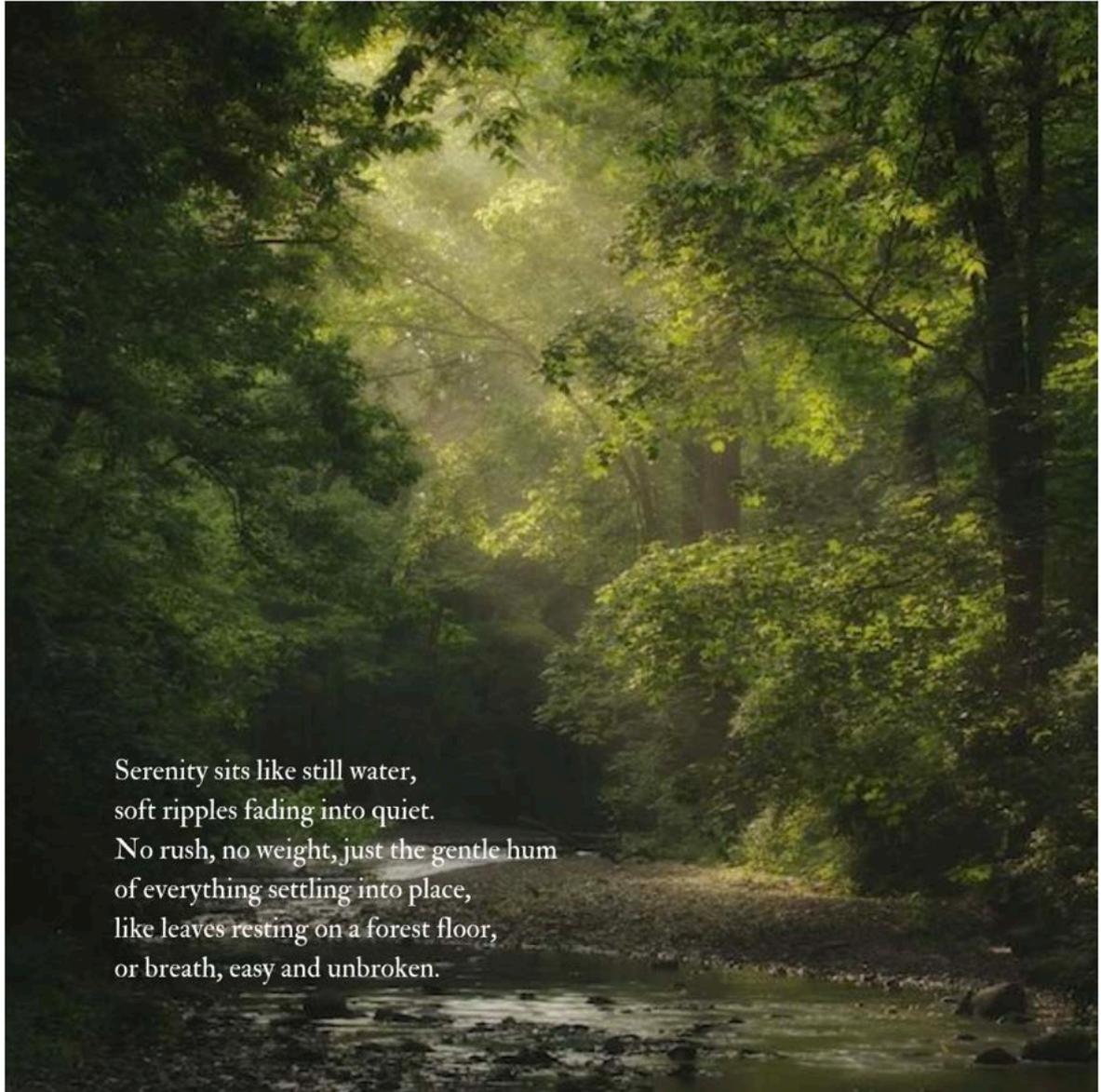
will i also end drifting belly up?

the ivory scales of silent fish afloat in water  
resemble your toothy smile a little too much,  
ebullient stream cradling bodies in this deafening  
july: im so sorry i couldnt write much in this damn short  
novella.

*end of summer  
& the photos still stare back at me  
& i can almost hear the voices beyond that damned lake*

but if you wade too far even the cicadas go  
silent, the lights beyond the trees flicker out  
one by one & the midnight wind guides my  
hair towards them





Serenity sits like still water,  
soft ripples fading into quiet.  
No rush, no weight, just the gentle hum  
of everything settling into place,  
like leaves resting on a forest floor,  
or breath, easy and unbroken.

# Prologue

By Anne Bradstreet

Wars [redacted]  
founded [redacted]  
superior [redacted]  
Poets and Historians [redacted]  
My obscure [redacted]

[redacted] eyes and envious heart  
do [redacted]  
Fool [redacted]  
him [redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]

[redacted]  
sweet [redacted] broken [redacted]  
perfect [redacted]  
foolish, broken, blemished [redacted]  
[redacted]  
irreparable.

I [redacted]  
[redacted] speak [redacted]  
gladly [redacted]  
of [redacted] pain.  
Art can [redacted]  
[redacted] cure.

I am [redacted]  
[redacted]  
A Poet [redacted] all [redacted] wrong,  
[redacted] despite [redacted]  
[redacted] what I do [redacted]  
[redacted]

But sure [redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted] they placed the Arts divine,  
But [redacted] they [redacted]  
[redacted] play the fools and lie.

[redacted]  
Men [redacted]  
[redacted] unjustly [redacted] wage war.  
Men [redacted] and Women [redacted]  
[redacted] all and each [redacted]  
[redacted] grant some small acknowledgement [redacted]

[redacted] soar the skies,  
[redacted] ever [redacted] prey [redacted]  
[redacted] your eyes,  
[redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted] shine.

## **The Beginning of The Lit**

At Choate in nineteen fourteen, the Lit magazine,  
A treasure of words, where creativity gleamed.  
Students penned stories, poems, and more,  
Capturing activity through each open door.

With ink on their fingers and ideas that soared,  
They'd share all their passions, their dreams, and their chords.  
Thoughts were thrown around and ideas skied,  
The editors cried to submit your best pieces with pride

So here's to the Lit, where young voices thrived,  
In a world full of chaos, their spirits survived.  
Through laughter and words, they crafted their art,  
A snapshot of joy, straight from the heart!



## The Cold Scarecrow

A lone scarecrow sits in the middle of a desolate field,  
In the middle of the summer, the sun high in the sky,  
Yet it is cold.  
The scarecrow becalmed in a sea of weeds, unable to keel,  
It does not bear any hope of seeing a pair of black wings fly,  
Because it is cold.  
Why does a farmer go and take all the crows with him?  
Burning his crop and hoping I burn down with glee,  
But it is cold,  
And it had rained before he set this blazing trim,  
The water stuck in that old coat that he gave me,  
Still, it is cold.  
The lone scarecrow's head leans over, dislodged  
From the spike it sat on, casting his gaze at the ground  
Where it is cold.  
Hanging its head, as a widow with grief stodged  
Wishing a veil hung, over its face and around,  
Not just because it is cold.  
From this vantage of mourning and sorrow,  
The scarecrow notices a green, creeping vine,  
Seeing that it is cold.  
Its growing, determined, towards the scarecrow,  
Its life, its leaves, seem almost divine.

Though it is cold,  
It grows and grows, wrapping itself around tight,  
Like a giant hug in this day to day night,  
When it is cold.  
It sprouts big fruit that weigh the scarecrow down,  
Pulling it gently down into the ground,  
Where it knows it is cold.  
But what do you do when your bed is cold?  
You lie in it with a person who's told  
You that it is ok to be cold.  
And so does the scarecrow lie with the creeper, In  
the barren field where the ground is cold. And as  
blankets do as you lay for a while,  
The desolate field bloomed with warmth,  
as the straw of the scarecrow took,  
And grew into a magnificent crop.



## Loafing

A change of scenery is refreshing.

A change in companions is exciting.

Even the natural revolution of the seasons is terrifyingly familiar while energetically unique.

*Loaf: to idle one's time away, typically by aimless wandering or loitering.*

*Alternatively: to make daily decisions guided by the heart and mind.*

Impromptu, yet sophisticated. Spontaneous and occasionally productive. To loaf is to spit on predictability and expectation, and successful loafers– an appealing crowd featuring the likes of The Dude and Larry Darrell– live in the constant eustress of a Jimmy Buffet song.

An attractive lifestyle.

A selfish and insignificant existence.



## **The Brother of the Kid**

The Brother of the Kid was always a step ahead

Always one step too far but close enough to feel the presence.

The presence of protection

The presence of comfort

The Brother pioneered for the Kid.

The Brother paved a path through the garden of eve,

The Brother who had no net to catch him took the most risks

Where the Brother went the Kid followed

With eyes bigger than the ocean blue but a body half the size

The Kid never thought the Brother would leave

Why would he?

But right as the Kid was in reach the brother stepped away for good,

The Kid was lost

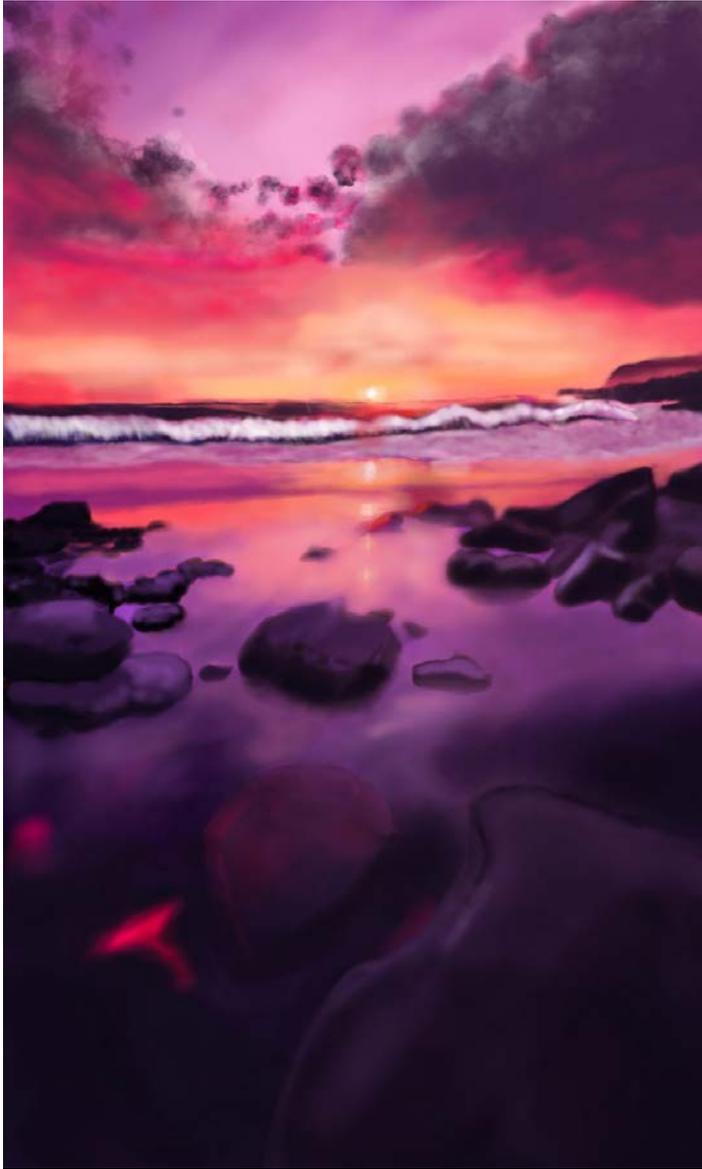
Lost in a shadow

With nothing but behind him

The Kid was found

The Kid was found by a path long and twisted but a path nonetheless

And then the Kid finally understood...



## Untitled

In these moments of silence and pain

I find my soul motivated yet untamed

From the ashes of sorrow arises a new day

Another dawn to live up to the expectations of those who came before

And when that moment comes

He who wants, will find himself of the highest regard

what is expectations if not food for greatness

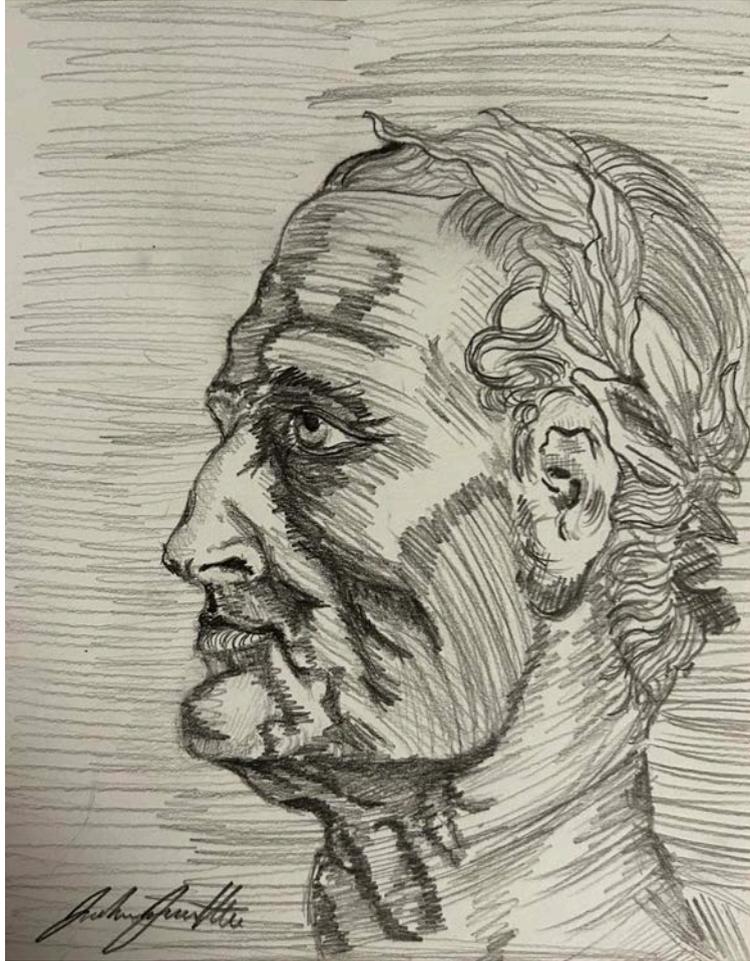
I am nothing yet I must be everything

So from the ruins I seize the new opportunity that is presented in my

mind

And announce to the world that the bar has been raised

And that mark is mine



### **Birds of a feather**

Birds of a feather,  
From the instant we met and exchanged smiles  
I thought we'd grow old together.

Every day I got to know you better  
Walmart walks, silly snaps, and late-night laughs.  
Birds of a feather.

But two just isn't enough for this life, after  
Trial and error, rejections, cries—all lies,  
I thought we'd grow old together.

Drifting from childhood friends is bittersweet, but drifting from your other  
Half feels like somebody pierced a gaping hole through your butterfly wings.  
Birds of a feather

Can't last forever.  
The hardest thing I ever did was accept you, scrap those future plans  
I thought we'd grow old together.

It wasn't what we lost but how we lost it. Faster,  
I wish time would fly by faster. Minutes turn to hours turn to days turn to years.  
Birds of a feather,  
I thought we'd grow old together.



## The Mirror

The mirror is the only thing that sees you for you  
It doesn't diminish you it does not raise your spirit  
It is what the you are  
Sometimes that mirror might fog up  
And when it does you will lose sight of who you are  
You will see blurs, improper reflection, false images  
Everything that scares you everything that you love will be lost in that time  
But time comes and goes and it will continue to come and go just like everything else  
And in that time you will find a door  
A door with hate passion love and blood sweat and tears  
A door with the unknown behind it  
A door that you must have the courage to open  
And when you find and open that door in time you will start to see you self again  
See your self constructed perfections and imperfections  
See the freckles on your face the blue eyes that tell your story  
See the hair that you wish so dearly wasnt red  
And once that reflection comes right back at you just the way you produced it you can go through  
that door  
You can go through that door with a sense of self and pride in who you are  
Knowing that you don't need the mirror to see yourself  
Because you are yourself



## Five Five-Sided Dice

So, I got five five sided dice,  
And I'll talk a bit about each of them right now:  
One is a deep deeeep deeeeeep opal  
With little cracks that run through its murk,  
Such that you can see the cracks no matter what direction you are looking at it from,  
As if the cracks were somehow immune to being obscured by the opal fog;  
The next one is just copper, pink and raw, like shiny scar tissue if it was metal,  
No scratch that, it's more like a penny if the penny was pristine and had purple gem flowers  
popping up next to the black numbers carved into its sides  
And there is a golden die, this one isn't actually real gold and you can tell  
Because of the slight dirty hue, and the texture, which is harder than real gold should be;  
The next one is sort of invisible,  
It doesn't really have a body that you can see,  
Because its so perfect, just numbers floating there  
on a frame of complete translucence,  
Which is confusing but not worth explaining anyway next is the  
Dark die, which looks as though a vile withered root sickness was  
Captured by a shell of amethyst and the vines of ichor tried to escape, rushing out  
To the edges of their cage but ended up sealing their fate as the numbers  
on their prison, Which I think is really cool, but not as cool as the last one  
Which blows the rest of them away  
It's not even close  
It's a dollar store blue plastic die  
That my friend gave me when I  
First started playing,  
so it's my favorite, and  
I don't really use any of the other ones.



## Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis: a biological shift from one stage to the next—as from the caterpillar to the pupa, from the pupa to the butterfly.

In the quiet, hidden corners of nature, metamorphosis unfolds as a silent miracle. A caterpillar, inching through its brief existence, ensconces itself within an icy chrysalis, where time fractures into shards of frozen moments. Each shard marks an inexorable stride towards transformation—a journey towards something it could scarcely comprehend. It was January, the dawn of a journey where each frost-laden whisper bore the weight of change and the promise of something unknown. As I sat in the sterile embrace of my NYU Langone hospital room, my gaze couldn't help but drift to the bustling cityscape below. New York pulsed with relentless energy, each street a vein of life surging forward, while my own pulse froze in place.

"I'm sorry."

The doctor's voice cut through the ambient hum of the corridor  
The doctor was sitting down. Why had he sat down? The room was filling with more doctors. Why?

Two words, eight letters, and the world as I knew it cast into a bleak winter's night. Those words, crystalline and brittle, hung in the air like plastic Christmas ornaments, shimmering and breakable. The city outside continued its ceaseless dance, oblivious to the time-stop I'd found myself in. My mind retreated, seeking refuge in the familiar cadence of urban life, tuning out the doctor's voice, each word a snowflake settling into the drifts of an ever-deepening blizzard of despair.

Dissociation, according to Freud, is a defense mechanism. The ego defending itself against the unacceptable. I sat in my chair, and I stared into space, and I didn't cry. By tuning out the present trauma, my mind is seeking to protect itself from the overwhelming reality, chanted in my mind. You're creating a buffer zone where you can temporarily exist in the rhythm of the world outside, shielded from the storm raging within, I instructed myself. Next to me, my mom was crying, a wail that I couldn't relate to. I was floating above my chair, bodiless. A phantom has no tear ducts.

Chrysalis: the hard-shelled pupa of a moth or butterfly; an enclosing case or covering.

The doctor was rattling off symptoms and treatments to the empty shell of my body. It wasn't until the words "You will lose your hair" cut through the numbing silence that the world reassembled itself in cruel clarity. Suddenly, the icy reality I had barely begun to comprehend expanded, encapsulating not just my body but my very essence. My diagnosis had been a distant thunder, but the certainty of losing my hair was a lightning strike, immediate and piercing. My hair, those strands woven with memories and identity, felt as fragile as frost on a morning window, destined to melt away. I spent my days making coffee videos on TikTok, talking about school, friends, "normal people problems." I was going to film a TV show that February. The character was supposed to get cancer and I would have had to shave my head anyway, so maybe this wasn't really all that bad, huh? Then the director got in a car crash and became paralyzed and the TV show was called off anyway – suffice it to say – I never played that part! But as my head was spinning and I tried to let the doctor's words travel through my eustachian tubes and to the auditory processing center of my brain, all I could think was that if I had to shave my head, I would've rathered it be my choice.

*But just because frost melts away doesn't mean my sense of self must vanish with it.*

In the silence that followed, the nurse entered with a peculiar device. She explained it was a cold cap, a helmet-like contraption designed to chill my scalp to icy temperatures. Its purpose was simple—to constrict each and every blood vessel, reducing the chemotherapy that sought to seep through my hair follicles and, hopefully, preserving my hair. Every shiver under the cold cap was a reminder of my journey, each icy touch a step towards my metamorphosis. The cap, snug and frigid, stood as a sentinel, a guardian of my fragile ego, protecting the delicate filaments of my identity. This cold cap is your guardian, preserving who you are. With every shiver, it holds tight to your personhood, protecting it from the onslaught. I murmured to myself, again and again, clutching to this sliver of normalcy amid the circulate chaos. Even though my world had been turned upside down, this icy crown was preserving the heart of who I am, wasn't it?

Yet, as the icy caps numbed my scalp and the toxins coursed through my veins, doubts began to creep in. Should my resilience be so tightly bound to these frozen sentinels? Am I not more than the strands of hair preserved by a temporary shield? No, said the petulant part of me, but it was small, a fly's buzz. Every chill is a step towards becoming, I reminded myself—though my mantra felt increasingly hollow. Around 99.99% of patients being treated for Burkitt's Lymphoma lose their hair. But it was the hope in that elusive 0.01% that kept me going, even if only for a fleeting moment. Besides, it was just six months of chemo.

That moment stretched into twelve days of relentless treatment—doxorubicin, methotrexate, cyclophosphamide, and rituximab. X-Rays and CT Scans painted a stark portrait of my internal battle ground, while a constellation of cuts and punctures marked the harsh terrain of chemotherapy's unforgiving path. Yet, as the frozen strands on my scalp remained untouched, so too did the core of my identity endure—or so I thought. One medicine I failed to mention was cytarabine, and for good reason. In the hazy blues of chemo-brain and morphine-induced wooziness, my perception of normalcy ballooned and shrank by turns. Seizures, like stealthy intruders, arrived unbidden and without warning, shattering my illusions of stability I desperately tried to maintain. Awkward! All the while, the cold caps arrived like clockwork, two hours before and after chemo, delivered by techs to my hospital room, packed in liquid nitrogen like ice cream. Despite the low chance of it working—and I cannot make this up—I had insisted on watching my favorite show, *Dead to Me*, in the hospital room, manifestation and *The Secret* and the law of attraction be damned, and the protagonist, who was also diagnosed with cancer, had a cold cap. It worked for her, so surely, some secret part of my brain whispered, it would for me.

This brings us to the one day the cold and pain became something more. As the cold caps numbed my scalp, an icy, creeping sensation began to spread from my hairline to the nape of my neck. It was as if a thousand tiny needles were pricking my skin, each one sending a sharp, biting shiver through my skull. Their icy grip seemed to deepen, merging with a pain that transcended the physical. The chill that had once been a guardian against hair loss now became a harbinger of a deeper, more insidious struggle. It started as a whisper, a gentle fading at the edges of my vision. The world began to blur, sounds turned muffled, like whispers through thick glass. I felt a heaviness, one that grounds me. My mom's voice cut through the haze, urgent and fear-filled, "Is everything okay?" I tried to respond, but my body refused to obey. It's not the first time.

"I'm here! I'm here!" I screamed inside my mind, but no sound escaped my lips. Panic gripped me as I realized I was trapped within my own body, my consciousness a prisoner. Nurses rushed in, their movements frantic—well, from what I've heard. They called for Ativan, four doses, a desperate attempt to control the rhythm in my chest, or rather, catch up. My heart pounded erratically, then slowed to a fighting crawl. Darkness swallowed me like a mouth.

When I awoke, I was confined in the narrow tube of an MRI machine, only further fossilizing the rigidity my life had seemingly become. The cold cap, once a beacon of hope, had now become an icy crown of thorns. To safeguard my hair, these frozen sentinels had to be worn with unwavering discipline—two hours before, two hours after, and during each chemotherapy session. This rigid schedule was my lifeline, a ritualistic rhythm designed to preserve a piece of my identity. Yet, the seizures, like uninvited specters, shattered this delicate cycle, disrupting the fragile harmony that held my defenses together. My body became a seesaw: dose with Ativan to slow my jackrabbiting heart. Heart now too slow, get out the defibrillators, shock my body like a horse tranquilizer, back bending like a diver's bow. Return to life.

Days dissolved into nights and back into days, a blur of time punctuated by the regimented routine of treatments, now absent my frosty protectors. “Ben, we are sorry, but we won’t allow you to continue on with the cold caps. We don’t want to risk another seizure, now do we?” My oncologist said it humorously, like it was a given. Not in my eyes. Certainly not when three hours before this conversation I awoke to the first delicate strands of hair on my pillow. I didn’t think much of it, clinging onto the 0.01% that remained my lifeline. We all lose a little bit of hair, right? Each morning the strands on my pillow multiplied, a silent testament to the relentless march of time and treatment.

The once elusive 0.01% chance of retaining my hair grew increasingly distant, just as the fallen strands grew more numerous. Eventually, the weight of denial became too heavy to bare. One morning, clutching my IV pole, I teetered my chemo-brittled legs to the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, shutting out the world and the anxious eyes of my parents.

My heart pounded as I faced the mirror, my reflection a shadow of its former self. With trembling hands, I gently tugged at the back of my head. To my horror, an entire clump of hair came away effortlessly. Autumn leaves falling from a tree—seasonal, but inevitable. Disbelief washed over me as I sank to the edge of my hospital bed, clutching the clump of hair in my hand, tears daring to spill over my fragile lashes. There’s a silence that follows, the kind that speaks volumes. The once hopeful 0.01% chance had dissolved like mist in the morning sun, leaving me to confront a new reality—one where the strands of my identity were scarcely slipping away, one by one, clump by clump. The months to follow were nothing short of grueling—13 surgeries, 6 rounds of chemo, and a myriad of tubes and devices invasively placed in me. My hair vanished, as if it was never there to begin with, leaving me bare and exposed. In its absence, I adopted a hat, a makeshift crown to hide my vulnerability and a small shield against the world as I navigated this relentless battle.

Emergence: the final stage where the adult butterfly breaks free from the chrysalis, transforming from a pupa into a fully formed butterfly ready to spread its wings and begin its new life.

One month post-chemo, I had my scan—the cancer had retreated into the shadows, or lack thereof. As the days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, birthdays passed, and life moved on. The world outside my window was no longer a blur of hospital visits and sterile rooms, but a vivid tapestry of color and life. My hair, once lost, began to sprout like the first green shoots after a long winter’s frost. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, I began to discover the parts of myself that had been hidden away during my treatment. The hair I was so afraid to lose turned out to be the thing I needed to let go of, teaching me a profound lesson: that my worth was never tied to my appearance, but anchored in the resilience and spirit within. Each new strand of hair was like the delicate yet unyielding wings of a butterfly, unfurling with quiet strength, ready to embark on its next journey.

*The butterfly does not mourn the cocoon but revels in the freedom of its wings. My hair, once my identity, was merely the cocoon I had to shed. Each new strand now whispers the promise of something new. Emerging from the chrysalis of my illness, I’ve learned that true strength comes from within. The journey, with all its pain, was my metamorphosis. As I spread my wings, I am no longer bound by fear or appearance. I am the butterfly embracing life’s fleeting beauty with grace and newfound courage. This transformation, though arduous, has made me whole.*



## Christmas Morning

How often had he woken up—not before or after the alarm, but during—during the determined beeping, heartbeat and mechanical click-sound compounding? Rhythms once led him, one foot in front of the other, one step, two steps, three steps per measure; but he never needed to keep count, he was always thinking. He's always thinking about something else. Usually he's thinking about breakfast. Usually he's thinking about crumbly, rubbery scrambled eggs and sausages' surfaces taut with tension and coffee that'll bite into his tongue like a bundle of fine-point sewing needles. He knows it's trivial. The thought disappears. He's both here and there, in this moment, and already ruminating on the one previously past. He lives and relives, then observes the reliving, rewinding the reliving of events he's just experienced—he finds it all very repetitive, very redundant.

Usually he does. Usually he can't let anything go, every twisted morning ankle, every gritty, grimy tooth he finds he missed after brushing, every hair he can't pat down furiously into place. Everything means something. His curtains aren't blue; they're a bony, sulfuric white, hell, they're not even curtains. A fickle roll-up blind. All he's good enough for? Sometimes he reads into that, while he has one shoe tied and one undone, backed against his bookshelf, beat-up black backpack half-full of knickknacks he knows he'll need today. His to-do list is a living document in that it exhales gruffly and snaps up his free hours like hors d'oeuvres, licking its fingers as he stares, stupefied, at everything that's still half-thought-through, half-done, half-written-down to begin with. Mornings are not a good way to start the day.

Usually he mourns the change of state, from sleep to sober, the hypnic jerk back to waking and walking, but today the air smells good. He's not breathing in too deeply, trying to parse out the perfect descriptors for its scent, he's not revising his thoughts until he likes them enough to think them. He's beaming at the ease of movement. He dreamt he couldn't play the guitar. He dreamt his fingers were shafts of pencil lead, centimeters in diameter, too delicate even to use as slides. He dreamt every note rang out in a wildly modulating wah, every string *al dente*. He tasted iron (and nickel) in his mouth when he'd bitten his tongue (the strings) to keep from wincing.

This morning he'll get out of bed. He'll silence the alarm. He'll pluck the dust-caked guitar from its time-out corner behind the desk. No dunce. He'll play it this morning. He'll play it well.



## A collection of regrets

### Item 1: Nail Clipper on the Bathroom Counter

*I like the color red. It reminds me of everything that passes through my fingertips. Have you ever tasted the blood?*

*The sound of nails on chalk is soul-cracking and the screeches are unbearably irritating, but nails on anything else are too, aren't they?*

She liked to cut her nails until they bled or at least until the little snub of her finger was left aching and raw from the lack of protection. Her mother would scold her for not being careful enough or for making her fingers appear too short. But it didn't matter to her because they were her hands, her crimes, her suffering. Her hands were beautiful, her mother said, until it was time to cut the nails again. Because they were never short enough, not for her, because she didn't like the sound of them across the table as she drummed her fingers. So the silent trickling of blood replaced the tiny clacking rhythms. And maybe her hands could have been gorgeous instead of being a dreadful reminder of red. Red and silence.

### Item 2: Socks in the Closet

*They're supposed to reach my knees (aren't they?), and it's just a habit now. It started so early. No biggie.*

She enjoyed it. She smiled and felt comforted by the socks being pulled up to more than halfway up her calves. It was part of her four-year-old self's daily routine to stretch them until the thin, pale pink fabric loosened and until the heel of the sock rode up inches higher than the norm. But it squished her big toe into the rest of her feet and created that pointy, high-heel shoe shape that her mother reprimanded her for creating. Sometimes, it pained her to look at her deformed feet, her right foot more seriously twisted than her left, because she knew that she's the one who perpetrated this crime. She wished to tell her younger self to push the socks back down. Maybe then her feet wouldn't make her cry whenever she looked down at them. An early regret.

### Item 3: Lip Balm on the Bathroom Counter

*They're dry and chapped and flaking. Pull one way too hard, and the piece rips. It tastes metallic.*

She never used lip balm, whether it was the vanilla or citrus one. She either forgot to bring it with her or began to lose interest in repairing her broken lips. Biting down at her upper lip in the middle of calculus class or ripping away the bottom agonizingly slowly in the middle of writing an essay made her acquainted with the taste of metallic blood and thin sheets of dry skin. Often, she came home with the center part of her top lip red and a thick layer of skin missing from its place. She would complain that the soy sauce on the dumplings hurt too much to eat by that point, that it stung her lips. And the worst part was that she never left it at that. From top to bottom, from bottom to top, she wasn't finished with the dead skin. The open wound was too tempting, her teeth returning to those spots and relishing in the pain. And the lip balm lay forgotten in the cabinet by the sink, and her lips were now unnaturally bright and rosy. It would have been a beautiful color if not for the stinging feel of rawness.

### Item 4: Bag of Candy Bites on the Desk

*Sugar deceives me, but it's too late to take my hand out of the bag now. Why not indulge? A handful more or a handful less won't stop the anger anyway. Chewing noises become constant.*

It sat there. She didn't particularly like the texture of the lumpy bite of artificially flavored sweetness, but the reflective, blue bag didn't move away from her. And her hand only kept reaching into the depths of the sweet substances. The balloon icon smiled back along with the two-inch tall bubble-text, dragging her into the mess of stress-eating. When she wrote, the weight of the bag diminished quickly. One sentence, one bite. Another sentence, another bite. It moved her thoughts enough away from the task at hand, just enough to lessen the tension in her mind. Even though she would feel awful about it later, staring down her glucose levels and observing her weight only to reprimand herself too late. The sugar piled up, just like the work that was still yet to be done. The chewing continued.

### Item 5: Sticky Notes and Random Scraps Everywhere

*Everywhere, anywhere. There are two scraps by the keyboard, a clipboard with scrunched-up sheets of paper on the nightstand, and a bazillion other pieces that kill time and lie around. When did it grow to become this? I want to keep them; no one can throw them out. They're my thoughts, my ideas, my checklists, no matter how recklessly tossed around the house they are. I can't let go yet.*

They were only reminders of how desperately clinging to sanity she remained. It was hopeless, and the piles slowly flooded the premises, stacked upon each other. Tissues with ink, pink and purple sticky notes folded together, and old office papers from her parents that no longer played their original roles. If you looked into her brain, it would resemble this dump of white and black and blue and red with hints of purple and other colors. So beautifully bright but disorganized and in shambles. Too late to start a cleanup. Too deep in the engulfing scraps. If she could have told her younger self one thing, it would have been to let it all go.

But regrets stuck longer than anything, including time, memories, even hatred, and certainly longer than happiness or cheerfulness. Regrets killed, usually slowly, with its victim unaware. And this girl held on for too long.

Another regret.  
A final regret.

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