HALDANE INSIGHT



2025-2026

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This edition of the Haldane Insight is dedicated to Ms. Martin and Mr. Posniack



Ms. Martin always goes the extra mile for us. She was always making study guides and encouraged us to come tenth period. She was exceedingly patient and an overall nice teacher. She is always our biggest supporter, reminding us to do our work and to do our best. She knew us well enough to know when we needed to go outside when we needed a break to help our concentration. She was willing to share her own stories to let us know we were not alone in what we were dealing with. Her classroom was always cozy and no matter which classroom she was in, the feeling was always the same, “We love that lady.”

Mr Posniack is amicable, humorous, and charismatic, bringing joy into the classroom. He would wear a unique tie every day, with all sorts of patterns, colors, and illustrations to entertain us. Sometimes, he would bring his son, building anticipation and excitement throughout the school. Mr. Posniack is retiring this year, and we dedicate this literary magazine to him. His charm will be missed greatly, and we wish him well in the next chapter of his life.

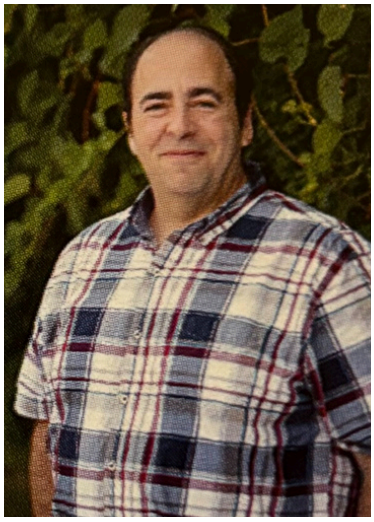


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Credits

Literary Magazine Staff

Editor: Louisa Schimming

Art Coordinator: Mrs. Angela Boothe

Alexa Arcigal

Dessa Bellamy Tarantino

Hazel Berkley

Petra Brooks-Saladyga

Ada Caccamise

Lenny Chandler

Sam Chew

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Aine Fortuna

Clara Gelber

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Diem Lee

Seth Lunin-Pack

Nicolo Masella

Vivian McKenney

Tyler Schacht

Louisa Schimming

Alice Stevenson

Tanya Syan

Scout Thakur deBeer

Lincoln Wayland

Cover Art By Ada Caccamise

Back Cover Art By Louisa Schimming

Faculty Advisors Ms. Martinez-Cirelli and Ms. Pearce



New York State of Poetry is a new statewide poetry program facilitated by the Teachers & Writers Collaborative. It has replaced New York State's Poetry Out Loud competition. This program has "[s]tudents write poetry inspired by poems in the NYSP Poetry Collection. This can be a response, an "after" poem, a golden shovel, or another form that takes inspiration from a poem in the collection."
What follows are selections from all the students who participated in Haldane High School.

A Shape of Something Honest

By Vannia Gonzalez
In conversation with "One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII" by Pablo Neruda,
trans. by Mark Eisner

You may love me as one loves obscure things
secretly between the shadows,
But you are that flower that blooms
and carries its happiness wherever it is

You're like a lantern held against the slowly falling dark,
not racing out in brilliant flames, but leaving just a mark
Of comfort like a whisper that stays when noise is through

A shape of something honest that keeps pulling me to you
This is the type of love that hunts lovers forever
But it's a love that keeps returning steadily from the very start.

Over, and over

By Aine Kleinpeter Hamilton
In conversation with “The moon rose over the bay. I had a lot of feelings.” by Donika Kelly

Just let me find my way back,
Let me move like a tide come in

let me feel peace again
like an albatross come back from sea
after months of solidarity, under the rule of only the sweet wind.

And though I wish to move on like a tide come in
the moon still pulls me back, over.

And over the oysters shell,
oceans away from its other half, circles
the flies and sand fleas I refuse to acknowledge.

I imagine for the shark, the movement
of the tide is of no significance.

I cannot imagine how. I place my hand
In front of the moon, for I cannot be reminded
of the shark on this peace filled night.

As the tide lets me find my way back
still I will wait for the moon to confine me, over.

And over the silent bay, I prove to be no uncommon tide for the shark.
I imagine it has found its way back
let it move on like a tide goes out.

That tide will seldom be mine to control
though I promised to try. Over, and over.

Hoping in Deep Space

By Kaito Kester
In conversation with
"Listening in Deep Space" by Diane Thiel

To wait for something with a great sublime.
Ever since our founding and throughout time,
despite thoughts, inventions, discoveries,
and the greatest advances of science,
one eager question has yet to remain–
Can our loneliness ever be explained?

Miss you. Wanna grab that chilled tofu we loved.

By Araliss Coronel
In conversation with "Miss you. Would like to grab that chilled tofu we loved"
by Gabrielle Calvocoressi

I wish to bring you more than measly me.
More than a silly soliloquy.
Even when we talked about the stupid things, like a menu.
I never knew what led me to be a part of you.
Sharing the greatest dreams like a record on repeat. Miss you.
Wished we'd order another serving, just to see a smug grin as you won all our bets.
Roasted rainbows, now I long to be on my tongue. Miss you.
Now I'll forever be quiet, for not what you may assume.
As the days went by, the white walls grew thicker.
Yet you still broke through. Miss you.
Maybe we could've paired more with tofu?
Wine? Just imagine us stumbling out to hide under the little canopy.
Doesn't matter if the wind stings our cheeks; with you, I was never cold. Miss you.
As the sun dims and my nights grow longer, my frame catches on.
I want you to know that I'll miss you.
You have much of the world ahead of you.
Youth is only temporary.
In the rain or fogging your eyes with a steaming noodle bowl, I couldn't care less.
I'll be with you even when I have to leave.
If you're reading this, Miss you. Wanna see each other again at our table in the back.

Winter in Central Park, 2025

By Jack Conrey

In conversation with “Autumn, New York, 1999” by Patricia Spears

It’s a nice cold winter evening in Central Park.
Walking on cobblestone trails, seeing the Christmas lights along the fence.

Seeing the snow fall from the sky.
Hearing the jazz music play in the background.

Hearing a loud crowd from a far distance.
Seeing the Rockefeller tree light up in warm colors.
Seeing people cry in joy during the holiday season.

Walking down near Columbus Circle hearing Christmas music
playing in the background and walking by to see the wonderful lights shine
In the city.

This Winter season, we all know it will be memorable with color lights, holiday cheer, and Joy

Gardening on three hours of sleep

By Louisa Schimming

In conversation with “Meditations in an Emergency” by Cameron Awkward-Rich

I wake up & it breaks my heart. I step into the bright bright world & it breaks my heart. My spade disturbs the butterflies in the lavender and I feel sorry because I am also fragile and mute. The cicadas roar and the damp dirt cools my skin. I inspect each feeling like colorful tumbled stones on the beach, but I cannot rhyme now so I pile the stones in my pockets and they clink when I step. I save them until January. I tug on my corduroy coat & I observe. The violent sound of the shower, the yellow sky, the exhaust pipe, the sleeping hum, the familiar bell, the strangers, they all break my heart. I want it to be May. I want to stay in my garden.

To Lovely Psyche*

By Ada Caccamise
In conversation with
“Siren Song” by Margaret Atwood

This is the one truth nobody
wants to tell you: but I
will be frank:

the truth told out of love
that will stain
your garish marble palace

the truth that will leave you
standing on that spire
waiting to jump

I will tell the secret to you
and when I do, will you let me
drag you back home?

I know you enjoy married life
Lounging in your palace
in this picturesque kingdom

with your mysterious husband.
But can’t you tell
he is a monster, scaly and bestial.

I tell this secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Listen closely. Let my words

Be an olive branch: Come home!
Oh my lovely, naive sister
Please return

to me. Alas,
a tragic error
He was beautiful all along.

*Will be featured in the NYSP Anthology for 2026

Ramesses II, or I met a traveller

By Lincoln Wayland
In conversation with “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysse Shelley

I met a traveller from a too-young land,
Who said “What is this monolith carved in stone?
In this old, distant desert, filled with sand,
why does this ancient ruin stand alone
Whose sunken regal visage still demands
Respect from us when he is so long dead?”
I told him names of our once-great kings,
of nations and armies Ramesses once led;
A name that even still reaches our ear.
“My history and past are not your playthings.”
I said. And yet, he did not seem to hear.
Nothing now remains, where the wreck’s decay
stood. The statue’s lost to the traveller’s sneer,
taken to his too-young land, far away.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who spoke at length of the ancient and dead.
“you seem a somber man,” I pondered, and
too focused on the hearts of kings, well fed.
“He may be forgotten in one thousand
years, but so will the sculptor whose mocking
hand has also faded away. Those not
so grand in their designs, and whose throbbing
hearts still beat the same, are buried under
the shifting sands of time. With their lot
they were content. Think of the wonder
of the ephemeral present instead.”
His long eyes stared at a statue's sunder.
Ignoring me, he mourned the taken head.



Art by Anya Mercurio

ART BY FRANCIS DONAHUE



A COLLECTION OF *GARY TALES*



Art by
Alexa
Arcigal

Story by
Garold
Hodwinson

THE MOON

Once upon a time, there was no day. Long ago, an eclipse had come, and the Moon usurped her brother, the Sun. A terrible struggle followed, one so fierce that even the winds took sides and tore at each other like dogs. For centuries, the Earth shook with the violent torrent of celestial fury, but in the end, the Moon prevailed. From that day onward, the vanquished Sun was kept hushed and dim and did not dare show his face out of fear of what his wicked sister would do should even a single ray sneak through the cerecloth he was shrouded beneath.

In those sad years, eternal darkness cloaked the forests of the earth, while above them the silver moon perched, grinning like a sinner. She held perpetual dominion over the oceans, mountains, and rivers, aided by the night and unchecked by reason's light, a baleful altarpiece towering over a chapel of blind pitch.

Within the night dwelt a pack of wolves, most devout among the Moon's sacred beasts. Like all creatures of the silent forest, the wolves had no lungs. When they came of age, they gave their lungs to the Moon, so that she might be heard— for she was mute, and her voice could only be borrowed from her subjects. Every year when she was but a sliver, the moon gorged on lungs till she waxed full. It was a grotesque sight to see her feast. The meadow where she ate was coated with a strange layer of slippery dew that felt like crushed figs, splits of bone shone between her teeth, and her mouth was stained with a scarlet pus.

Now the Sun beheld this cruelty from beneath his iron pall and wept bitterly for his children, all the more because he was utterly powerless to save them. For centuries he pondered in darkness, wracking his mind for a scheme to displace the Moon from her heavenly throne and restore the wolves to the light of day. At last, he remembered his old gift of prophecy and sought to cast a blessing upon some inhabitant of the forest— be it brute, bird, or beast. In hushed tones, the Sun whispered a song to his old friend, the Earth.

"That wailing, wretched, lunar thrall
His agony shall free us all
And when he's blind we'll finally see
And taste with joy our liberty!"

At first, the Sun felt relief and pride in his prudent choice,but as days passed by with no response from the Earth, his spirits sank like an anchor. He withdrew into woeful silence, fearing both friend and blessing lost to space. Indeed the Earth had not heard his message, for the Earth had been long since rendered deaf to the Sun by way of the latter's prolonged silence, but by happy chance, a little drunken shooting star discerned the plea and delivered the message to Earth's green ear, before returning to his ale and wine in the nebula.

And so, that year a lonely little wolf pup was born, one who trembled like a leaf at the darkness he called home. He would howl and weep in his den until his tears soaked the ferns beneath him, and his mother would scold him in silence for making such a dreadful mess.

In the beginning, his youth shielded him from the reprimands of his elders, and his anguish was met in part with benevolence, but this mercy could not long withstand life's wrath. When he came of age, he was expected to give his lungs to the moon, as all forest beasts did. He begged and pleaded, but his cries were all in vain, for they only hardened the resolve of his family to strip the fear from his heart and forge the tender organ into a machine of cold iron and steam. The stars beckoned him forward, and the wolf, like a condemned man, had no choice but to trudge toward his fate.

The night was beautiful, dangerous, and still. The only sound to be heard was the North Wind, which rustled the leaves with a doleful ballad so lyrical and yet so eerily quiet the lovely melancholy of the night was unperturbed. The wolves marched through roots and reeds, through briar and brush until they reached a clearing, where they formed a circle and bowed their heads as if bewitched. They pushed the little Wolf to the center of the circle with their snouts and trapped him there so that there could be no hope of escape.

Then a sound from above caught his attention. Through bleary, tear-filled eyes, he looked up and beheld the Moon's descent.

The night's silver mistress could still the rapids. She was the swan gliding across the murky horizons, the porcelain sea-foam sweeping over a shore of volcanic ash. Her robes writhed with unfettered mutiny, like willow branches aflame, shaking with the fury of a hurricane as she fell through the sky. She grinned, spiteful and alive, her mouth curling into a haughty sneer, the glint of her teeth making her desire to be satiated no mystery to the little wolf. There was something both delicate and cruel about her, something like lightning– a force that made the snap of a spine seem, impossibly, elegant and beautiful.

"Whom shall I anoint next?" cried the Moon, her reedy voice a haunting polycord of everyone the wolf had ever loved, though of course he could not have guessed this.

Silence answered her call. Then her gleaming eyes settled on the Wolf, conspicuous and alone, trapped like a hare in the halo of her light.

The moon approached him, regarding his quivering pelt the way owls do sparrows. A hushed silence pervaded the forest for a few minutes as the pair's eyes met.

"You must despise me, little Wolf," breathed the Moon, breaking the silence as the beast stood his ground. "Why will you not grant me your lungs?"

The Wolf made no response, and the night's heart stopped.

"Do you not admire my gleaming billows, my silver tresses, and my lilied complexion?" The Moon continued, appealing to the sensitivity she had heard living things were capable of. "Would it not be a kindness to feed me, to give me one more gift with which I may rule over you?"
Still, the Wolf made no reply. His head was bowed and he would not look the Moon in the eye.

"Your 'love' is little more than condescension, and thus can hardly be described as love." he began, each word climbing mountains in his mind before tumbling from his lips.
"For you, the night is a mere adornment. You cover all that surrounds you in shadow and soot, so that you might shine like a pearl in comparison–when in reality you are a very sorry and lonesome creature, though divine. To be divine and lonesome is the most grievous thing of all."

He opened his mouth to continue, but the Moon had regained control of her borrowed one and floated closer to him.

"I could say the same of you" she leered , winding silk thread around her fingertip. "Only you are not divine. Any holiness you possess comes only from your proximity to me."

"You could and you could not." responded the Wolf. "But that is besides the point. The truth of the matter is that as you strive for that vague 'greatness' you speak of, little thought is spared for the beasts sacrificed to your whims. Your last
words struck me as quite strange, for the truth is

the opposite: You are nothing without us. You hold no natural prerogative over the forest, your power is born from our sacrifice, and should we choose to withhold it, your dominance will wither and perish."

"I hear your voice failing as mine gains traction. You are no silver marble, just a rusted tin charlatan, gleaming faintly in the reflection of others glory. Turn your 'silver billows' to forge something other than our chains and you may yet gain my respect."

At this the Moon was livid, for or she knew deep down that the Wolf was a creature of truth and righteousness. Yet she could not yield."The same could not be said of you, for you are insignificant!" she snapped, berating the wolf like her voice depended on it. "Why should I concern myself with such matters? It is of no consequence to me how my subjects feel. I am eternal, and thus to me your troubles are like birds fleeting across the sky."

"Be wary of fleeting things, for the untethered are the most dangerous of all" replied the Wolf.

"The birds may prove to be vultures, gorging themselves on the carcass of your hegemony. They may call for a new leader, one more conscious of its subjects. What then, tyrant?"

"They will do no such thing, and receive no such thing!" the nettled Moon exclaimed. "There is but one besides me who could dictate the forest, and you cannot have him!"

"Who?" asked the Wolf, curiously.

"My elder brother," the Moon sneered,"who in his folly, deemed his wisdom greater than mine. His gift of prophecy could not save him, for he never expected my betrayal, and so never thought to foresee it. Now he is ensconced–entirely ensconced! Nothing could wake him, nothing at all, wretched Sun!"

At that moment, the West Wind cut through the night, and the Wolf shivered, feeling impossibly small. The Moon began to chuckle, a raspy, low sound that chilled him to the bone.
"I sense your fear, little wolf. But you are fortunate—you can still be spared. Come, give me your lungs and all shall be forgiven."

The Wolf shook his head.

"This is your last chance, little wolf. Give them now, or you'll be sorry!"

The Moon's cry crashed over him like a storm, so fierce it nearly lifted him from the ground. Yet the Wolf would not be moved and glared back up at the leader he had come to despise. Then, slowly, he began to howl.

His own voice startled him. It was as fierce as the Moon's as it plunged through the silence, quick as a fallen chandelier. Words could scarcely do this noise justice, though perhaps associations will do. He wailed for the Sun like a child, emitting screams like those which rise from lost souls bound to Hell. The sob of one drowning in the Styx, the tiny cry of a wren crushed beneath a stone, the scream of an innocent condemned to the gallows. All of these somehow, lingered within the sound he made that night.

The Moon heard this din and quaked as if someone had taken a dagger to her side. Her impervious shell had utterly crumbled. Empress she was, she could not withstand her subject's ire. She wondered what could have bred such an insurgence and in that moment realized her brother's clever scheme. In her shadow, the Sun began to wake and she knew it was but a matter of time before he broke free of his fetters and expelled her night from the forest for good.

"Very well" spat the breathless Moon, her craters glistening with sweat as the blinding light emerged from behind her. "You shall meet your darling Sun, and may rue serve apology's place!" Then she flew off, a cloud of curses and comets consuming her ascent.

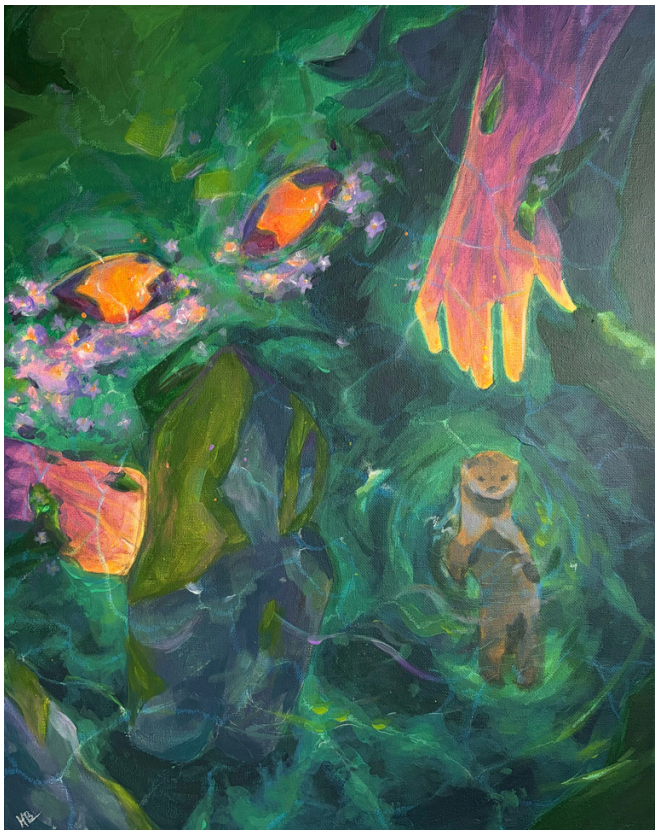
The little lonely wolf held his breath, heart hammering against ribs too small to contain it.

And lo—seven trumpets sounded. Revelation poured down like fire and silver rain. The sky cracked open with rapture, visions cascaded in blinding glory, consuming the earth. A man clothed in the sun stood at the edge of eternity, his eyes holding both judgment and mercy. He approached the Wolf, who could only scream a frightened HARK before his eyes were flayed by a violent flash of golden frenzy. He had fought for the light, yet when it came, its radiance overwhelmed him–his poor, accustomed-to-darkness mind mistaking the glorious Sun for some cruel illness. The wolf went mad, blind, and mute, as he was always destined to do.

But just when the last wisp of sight fled his eyes, and the last thread of sanity unwound from his mind, and the last gasp of speech died on his tongue, the other wolves discovered their vision, their voices, their reason—for the first time in centuries. When they beheld his snow-white eyes, his scattered mind, and the discordant melody that spilled from his lips when he attempted to pray, they took pity. They promised to shelter him forever, though of course they could never restore his vision, wit, or eloquence.

Well, this was long ago, and much had changed since, but those who know the forests well say that on nights when the moon is full and bright, all the wolves emerge to howl it away and thank their martyr for his great sacrifice.

THE END



Artwork by Hazel Berkley



The Boy and The Wolf

Once upon a time, in a woods far off, there lived a wolf. This wolf was loud, abrasive, and violent. His howl was gravelly and low, like wind dragging stones through a canyon. He walked with little grace; carelessly traipsing through the dark, paws thumping against the ground with the beat of a heavy drum. Though he lived free and unaccompanied, the wolf was always rather lonely. None of his wild kin wished to be near someone who cared so little for their own safety. They thought him strange, and off putting. But the wolf longed for company. Someone to protect, to fight for. His brethren were never ones of acceptance. What they feared was the town, and the hunters who slept inside its walls.

Once upon a time, in a town far off, there lived a boy. The boy was quiet and austere. He moved through life in almost complete silence, his face stony, eyes open just a little too wide, until it seemed as though he were staring deep into your soul. He possessed an air of an almost regal quality, chin up, back straight, steps purposeful. Though he lived wandering the streets of his town, watching the people as they passed, the boy was lonely as well. Friendless and forsaken, the villagers shunned and ostracized him, finding him off-putting, too severe for a child of his age. The people of his village were never ones of acceptance, taking flame and steel to the supposed monsters in their midst. What they feared was the woods, and the grotesque beasts that lurked in the shadows of the solemn trees.

But there came a time when the boy was so desperate for company, and the wolf was so careless in his wanderings, that their paths met one day at the edge of the woods. “Hello wolf.” The boy did not flinch in the face of the creature; a wolf could be no worse than the boys who mocked and ridiculed him in the town.

“Hello, boy.” The wolf's hackles had raised at the sight of the pale face, as the cruelty of humans was often far worse than the cruelty of beasts, but the boy did not seem violent. His eyes were sharp, glinting in the shade cast by the towering trees. The wolf envied his stillness. “What are you doing so far from the safety of your town?”

“To call the town safe is to call the sun dim.” The boy said, expression unchanging. “And I could ask the same of you. A wolf is not often seen so close to the edge of the forest.”

“I am not much liked among my kind,” the wolf admitted, tail swishing behind him, “I find it far more fulfilling to wander, rather than stay surrounded by those who would scorn me.”

The boy's face lifted, interest and understanding highlighting the planes of his face. He took a step forward, farther into the copse of trees. “Take me with you, wolf. I no longer wish to be here, in this town filled with people who don't understand. Let me run in the wilds with you, and we will make our own safety.”

And so the boy and the wolf bounded through the woods together, sharing stories and dreams and laughs and thoughts. Neither had had a real friend before, someone to care about, someone to care for them. They delighted in each other's company, the comforting presence of another's steps beside their own. The fact that they were completely different species, from completely different places, never crossed either's mind. They fit, like moon and sun, like sea and sky, inseparable and perfectly matched, even if they had only known each other a day.

But eventually the day came to an end, and the boy had to return. “Thank you wolf.” He said, still refusing to turn back, to see the cobblestone streets that felt less and less like a home every day. “Will I see you again?”

“Yes.” There was no room for argument in the wolf's voice. He nudged the boy's cheek with his muzzle. “We will see each other again.”

So the boy went back to his hut on the edge of town, back to the quiet, suffocating, loneliness of the distrust of dozens. But he had set scarcely a foot into town before he was suddenly cornered, people surrounding him on all sides.

“So he returns!” called the baker, malice clear in his voice, “here we thought you were finally gone for good.”

“Why must you continue to disgrace us?” sighed the teacher, patronizing and disappointed. “You stay, and spend your time making the poor workers uncomfortable, or you leave, and fraternize with creatures.”

“Yeah,” crowed the schoolboys, a vindictive grin present on every small face.

“Run back to your wolf!”

“Yeah,” crowed the schoolboys, a vindictive grin present on every small face. “Run back to your wolf!”



ART BY JACKIE MCCORMICK



ART BY DIEM LEE

An untrained observer would, upon looking at this scene, wonder for the poor boy's sanity, as it seemed he barely reacted at all. Face still stony and unchanging, mouth still pressed in one monotone line. But the wolf, watching from the foliage set around the village, could see the quiet crease between the boy's eyes. What a sad thing, for a wolf to know a boy better than his village ever could.

The wolf hesitated for just a moment, scanning the frothing crowd, before leaping from the bushes with a snarl, landing with a thump on the sliver of ground in front of the boy.

The villagers screamed, some scattering like cattle, skirts bundled within shaking hand, hats clutched to heaving chest; and yet still others pressed farther in, crying for blood, for the death of the beast in their midst. Hands reached for fur, but quickly retreated with a snap of sharp, pointed teeth.

“You!” The wolf cried, his howl quieting the crowd, “You townspeople, grinning from your blown glass windows, priding yourself on your civility. Look who you become as soon as your veneer of kindness is broken for merely a second.

“I do not stay with the wolves, for their standoffishness is not for me to bear, but even they could never match the cruelty of the human, so convinced he is in the right.” The wolf knelt, gesturing for the boy to climb on. “I will be taking this boy now. If none of you will treat him like a human, I will take him and treat him like a wolf.”
And with that they were off, the wolf bounding across the ground with newfound purpose, the boy clutching tightly to his fur.

The wolf did not mention the tears making soft tracks down his cheeks. There was no need.

THE END

THE MOUNTAINS

In the Dark Ages, before the sun dared to claim the sky, the Moon held sway over all that moved and all that slept. Her silver eye traced over every hill and every hollow, every river's curve and forested glen. She cast her pale, argent light sparingly upon the world, guarding it with a fierce and jealous hand, as though no other flame could ever rival her own. Her dominion was long and bitter, for her silver glow brought no warmth to the fields of men.

The Mountains loved her most. Greedy and proud, they clothed themselves in robes of snow, glittering in the Moon's pale embrace. Each year they rose higher into the heavens, as if to boast: Behold us, magnificent as we are, us who dwell nearest to the Moon! Who could rival us? Who would not envy us?

Their sons, the Giants, were as terrible as their fathers were proud. Great, lumbering brutes, they lifted their voices in hollow hymns to the Moon, praising her with thunderous song. Yet they were fools — brazen, stupid, and terribly cruel. They trampled the fields of men, feasting on sheep and harvest alike, growing fat while mortals starved in the endless night.

For a time, the world seemed lost to their arrogance. Pride and power, they believed, were the only law, and so the mountains and their giant sons ruled unchecked.

But then, from the very edge of the world, a new light stirred. The Sun awakened, and before him rode the Dawn — a herald clad in golden armor, streaked with the crimson fire of the first morning.

His chariot blazed with light so fierce it seemed to tear the sky apart, and wherever his wheels turned, the shadows shrieked, fleeing into the forgotten hollows of the woods.

The Moon, jealous of this newfound glory, wept silver tears of fury as her kingdom of night began to crumble. She summoned her wicked minions, cunning and cruel, and retreated to the farthest reaches of the east, cowering behind the tallest peaks, where clouds caressed the jagged summits.

The mountains roared in silent fury, their jagged peaks trembling as the Dawn and his radiant Sun carved a path of fire across the lands they had believed eternally theirs. Never before had a light so fierce touched the earth, nor a hero so mighty walked upon it. Together they carved a path of fire across lands that had believed themselves immortal, leaving light where only shadow had dared dwell. The proud peaks rumbled with grief, how could it be that one as fleeting as the Dawn had managed to topple the fiercest of their kin?

Yet pride is a stubborn root, and the mountains of the east were nothing if not proud. With crowns of snow upon their heads and caverns heavy with jewels in their bellies, they swore to stand unbroken, selfishly hoarding the treasures they had stolen from gods and mortals alike. Let the Sun burn bright, they proclaimed, the mountains would keep their hoards and defy the world, until the end of days.

“Allow me to face such radiant forces of nature,” he huffed, his voice like a thunderclap rolling off the valleys, “if that is what they call themselves. I shall make quick work of this Dawnbearer, and feast upon his bones. Let all the giants drink to his death in revelry, let the rivers run red with his blood, and let my hunger be sated at last!”

The mountains rumbled in hollow laughter, their echoes shaking trees and loose stones, approving of their son’s bluster. Yet the Dawn felt no fear. He knew that this first son’s hunger for carnage would be his undoing.

The giant charged with a bellow, club raised high. He swung blindly at the Dawn, his eyes fixated on what part of the radiant figure he might tear first, imagining the feast that would follow. But the Dawn was swift, light itself made flesh. He danced around the bloated monstrosity, spears of sunlight glinting on his armor. The giant stumbled as he lunged, his club swinging wide, smashing trees and rocks, yet never touching the Dawn.

With a single, blessed motion, the Dawn hurled his bronze spear. It soared through the air like a shard of pure morning, guided by the hand of the Sun. The spearhead passed clean through the giant’s exposed middle, striking the bladder and shattering his pelvis. With a scream the giant dropped to his knees and the shadows of death enveloped him as the last tremor of life left his swollen frame.

The mountains did not tremble at the fall of their first son. Their pride was too swollen, their stony spirits too hard. With sneers as sharp as their peaks, they whispered among themselves: “*What is one son to us? We are the bones of the earth, older than the sea, higher than the clouds. No light, no dawn, no golden king above can hope to conquer us.*”

So they sent forth their second son. He was a lean and covetous creature, his eyes forever counting, measuring, as though all that glittered must one day be his.

“Ah, radiant Dawn,” the giant crooned, “how the sun has dressed you in wonders! That armor of yours, so bright it blinds me—what a prize it would make in my vaults. That spear, polished as if forged of morning itself—how splendid a trophy it would be above my hearth. And that sword, that chariot, that golden face of yours—when I have plucked them from your corpse, I shall keep them all, and the mountains shall sing of my fortune.”

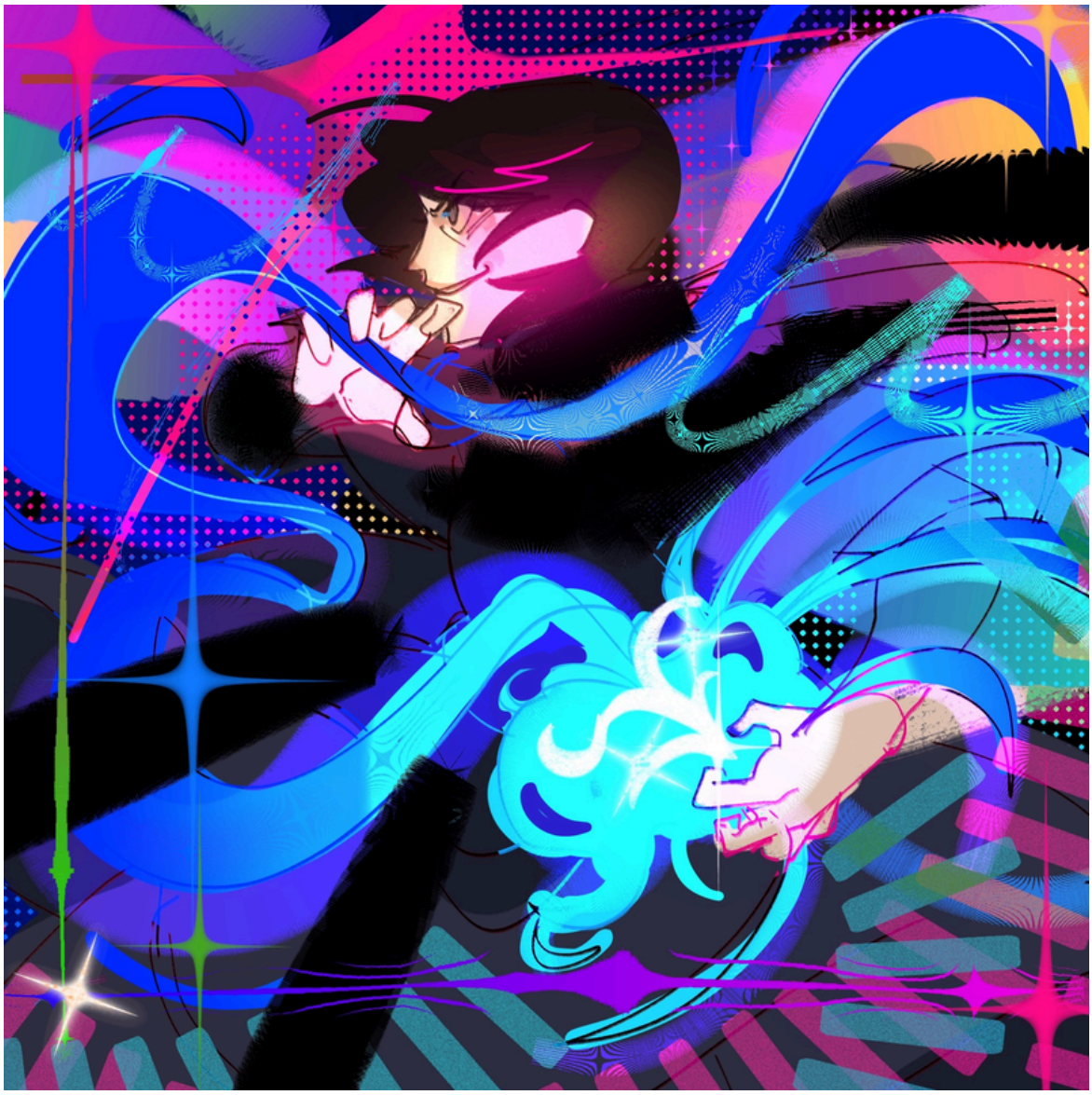
The second son was swifter than his onion-like brother, and he moved like a thief, circling the Dawn, lunging and darting like a jackal who dreams of biting the lion’s throat. Round and round they danced, the greedy giant snatching for the spear, clawing for the armor, lunging at the sword that shone at the Dawn’s side.

Yet the Dawn did not falter. Patient as the rising light, he endured the giant’s circling steps, each snatch and lunge. He waited until the giant’s desire swelled so great that it blinded him to all else.

Then, at last, when the giant reached too far, the Dawn struck. His spear, bright with holy fire, pierced the thief in the hip. The giant howled, falling to one knee, and the earth itself seemed to shake at his cry. But the Dawn did not hesitate. He drew his radiant sword, and with a single sweep cut shoulder from neck, arm from torso. The thief’s body toppled like a tower robbed of its stones, and he lay still, broken and stripped of all he sought to claim.

The Sun beamed with pride at the swift triumphs of his herald, and the Dawn shone all the brighter for the joy of pleasing his king. Yet the mountains, black-hearted and vengeful, ground their stony teeth in fury. Twice their sons had fallen, and still they would not bow to the light. Too cruel and too stubborn to confess defeat, they whispered among themselves, vowing that the next of their brood would bring ruin to the morning.

From the highest peak, where the air was thin and cruel, the third son strode forth. He was unlike his fallen brothers: not swollen with hunger, nor darting with covetous hands. He was greater still, born of the tallest mountain, towering so high that even the clouds seemed to bow to him. His body was vast as cliffs, and he gazed down upon the Dawn with eyes that glittered like frozen stars.



Art by Alexa Arcigal

“I have watched you,” the giant said, his voice rolling like an avalanche. “I know your every step, your every strike. You are but a candle before the storm of my greatness. My brothers were weak, but I am strong. And I will prove it before all creation. Your death will be my glory, and your light will adorn my triumph.” The mountains rumbled in delight, sending forth their echoes as a chorus of approval.

And so the battle was joined. The Dawn, nimble and sharp as flame, struck with speed and cunning. But the giant, though colossal, matched him move for move. He parried with strength enough to shatter oaks, as he had learned from watching every stroke his brothers had missed. They clashed like storm and sea, neither gaining ground, until the field itself trembled at their war.

But the giant’s gaze was never only on his foe. He cast his eyes often toward his fathers, the mountains, who watched with greedy pride. Then he looked upon the Sun—the bright king at whose side the Dawn stood, the reason for his every strike. And in that glance the giant shaped a wicked scheme.

From the ground he snatched a stone, no larger than a man’s palm. With a wicked grin, he hurled it not at the Dawn, but at the Sun. The Dawn, bound by devotion, would never let his king come to harm. And so, with desperate instinct, he hurled his spear, intercepting the rock midair to shield his friend. The stone broke harmlessly, but his weapon lay buried in the dust.

The giant’s trick had worked. In that instant, while the Dawn’s guard faltered, the brute lunged. His own vast spear carved across the Dawn’s face, splitting lip and flesh, just above the gleam of his teeth. The blow hurled the Dawn backward, tumbling him at the feet of his Sun, near where his fallen spear lay. Blood spilled upon the soil, and the Dawn reeled in pain.

The Sun, though aching to kneel beside his beloved herald, could not break the rule of combat. He watched with anguish as it seemed his warrior’s light would be extinguished. But the giant, intoxicated by the audacity of his own strength, did not strike again, to finish off the Dawn. Instead, he boasted, voice like thunder.
“Look upon me, my fathers, for I have avenged my fallen brothers! The best the sun could offer is hit, and after a shot like that, I don’t think he’ll last much longer!” The mountains thundered their cheers, proud of the words of their champion.

Yet the Dawn, though wounded, blood pooling in his mouth, saw the arrogance in the giant’s eyes and smiled grimly beneath his helm. From the dust, he lifted his spear once more, guided by unseen hands and the Redeemer’s blessing. It flew with unerring precision, passing between the giant’s teeth, slicing through the tongue at its root, and piercing through the back of his neck. The proud boast that had fueled the giant’s strength fell silent forever.

At last the mountains fell silent. Their laughter, their cruel jeers, and their booming boasts were swallowed by the stillness of humiliating defeat.

The Dawn, battered and bleeding, dragged himself back into the light of his king. He knelt before the Sun, who rose in his full brilliance. With a voice that shook the heavens and the earth, he spoke to the mountains:

“Three times you raised your sons against me,” declared the Sun, his voice echoing across valleys and seas. “And three times you have failed. Look upon the ruin of your pride. Your sons lie broken at your feet, not by my hand, but by your choice to cast them into death. You fed them with arrogance, clothed them in the fine silks of cruelty, and sent them to their doom.”

“Three times you raised your sons against me,” declared the Sun, his voice echoing across valleys and seas. “And three times you have failed. Look upon the ruin of your pride. Your sons lie broken at your feet, not by my hand, but by your choice to cast them into death. You fed them with arrogance, clothed them in the fine silks of cruelty, and sent them to their doom.”

At his words, the mountains groaned. Their granite faces cracked, and their peaks shuddered as if struck by lightning. Their grief was bitter, but their anger was gone. Slowly, they bowed their ridges and spires, bent low by the weight of their loss, lowered at last into submission.

THE END

There is a fever in the night,
A blindness in the midday sun.
The sharpest blade is forged in light,
Before the battle has begun.

It offers sleep without a care,
A cage of gold and heavy glass.
A sudden chill within the air,
As all the living shadows pass.

To know is just to close the eye,
And trade the pulse for heavy stone.
A comfort brought with every lie,
To keep the seeker all alone.

By Tanya Syan

Art by Nomie Karetny



The toad very much hated the fly
He asked sir why are you flying by
But the fly ignored him
And flew off on a whim
So the toad said the fly had to die

Lincoln Wayland

Magic once hummed beneath our skin,
A quiet glow where dreams begin.
We bottled stars and whispered air,
But power fades when none will care.

Greed took the shimmer, stole the song,
And left the world where hearts went wrong.
Yet in the hush of midnight rain,
A spark still waits to bloom again.

Miley Pena-Rider

Flying high up the sky's embrace,
Wings unraveled, I left no trace.
Gravity's grip no longer holds tight,
In skies a blue, I take the sky.

Clouds whisper secrets as I glide,
Freedom's song, my true guide.
From mountain peak to ocean,
The world unravels, when I can fly.

No limits held, no chains to lose,
Just endless dreams where eagles live.
To touch the stars, to kiss the sun,
The power to fly, where all's begun.

By Hannah Sporbert

ART BY ADA CACCAMISE



PRINCIPIUM
by Lincoln Wayland

They say the myrtles bloomed that day. They were a beautiful pink, like the too-smooth skin that you were enveloped in, and the piercing tint of your iris. They were not pale, like your cold mother and distant father, they were pink and bright and wonderful. They heralded you into the world as surely as the empty sky and blocked-out sun. You did always have a preference for myrtles, so I'm sure they are lying.

They say the olive trees withered that day. The blight that struck them left just as rapidly. You hated olives as much as you hated yourself, so I'm sure they are as true as the flowers.

No, your birth was not poetry, barely even prose. It was the most unremarkable thing you ever did. It was as boring as your father and as quiet as your brother. You hated the utter unoriginality.

INCREMENTUM

I remember so vividly the first time I saw you. It was in a courtyard, marble and We were so young, and you were so… alive. The thing I first noticed was your confidence. You were nothing if not that. Second, I noticed your conviction, still so fresh, so original, and so undiluted by the pouring sands of time. You wanted to do everything that hadn't been done before, you wanted to change the world, and everybody in it. You had a thirst for life, a drive that made everyone else seem so… so dead in comparison.

Most importantly for me, you were so easy to be around, you sucked me into your schemes and plans so easily that it seemed like I'd been in them from the very beginning. I was so enamored by every facet of your existence that I could feel my eyes replacing themselves with the myrtles, the color just like yours.

I thought I was so special, I thought that you had taken a special interest in me, that somehow I was unique. I realize now, after dedicating the better portion of my life to you, to your beliefs, to your convictions, that you just treated me exactly like everyone else. The only thing special was I was stupid enough to not understand.

CERTAMEN

Red mingled with green painted the field in abstract. Metallic thunder deafened the area around that plain. Ashen clouds rose behind us. You caught a glimpse of violet among the sea of blue, and you desperately picked up the grains of sand slipping between your fingers and into the morning breeze. 10,000 grains fell between your fingers and 2,000 meticulously picked back up and thrown again into the wind, blowing back into your eyes, finally opening them. Next you throw a larger rock into the wind, and with it you finally smite your purple flower and crush its fragile petals, and, just like that, your grains of sand swarm back to you. I watched as you took stock of the victory you will claim was prophesied in the myrtles, and then I watched you survey the red around you, and the grains of sand you lost forever. I watch the salt stream down your face. You always said it was the sand in your eyes. I used to never believe you.

ASCENSUS

This was your day, more than anything else it was yours, I thought you had earned it more than anyone who ever died. So, I sat next to you and watched what I hoped was your second happiest day of your life.

Even then I knew it was your first. I watched you refuse everything you had earned and force your crushed petals to beg you to drape yourself in violets. You and I wore Myrtle Crowns and felt like we deserved everything we had. I looked into your eyes of rose and saw every single thing I wanted to see; I saw the world in our hands and a happy ending to a beautiful story. I was wrong.

CARIES

I used to ask myself what changed, when did you lose your humility, your patience, and our passion. When did you hate olive trees, and where did you learn not to take no for an answer? I used to blame the mantle that lay heavy on your shoulders, the Myrtle Crown a weight upon your temple. Now I know, this version of you was the same as any other. This was you from the very beginning. All those qualities I so envied in David I came to despise in Goliath. Your tenacity, mere stubbornness, your confidence, hubris, and your ambition, tyranny.

RUINA

Nothing was ever enough for you, was it. You conquered the wind, and laid low sea, you wore flowers in your hair and on your throne, but still, you wanted, needed, craved that which was not meant for you. For you there would be no *idleness*, no Pax, no time to rest and enjoy that which you had earned. To love and care for what you had already built, who you already knew. No, NO, **NO**, that never even crossed your mind, it was always on to the next thing, your next conquest, another flower to add to your crown, another thing to add to your menagerie of trophies.

DAMNUM

When first you were adorned with flowers I stood beside you, the next time I sat next to you, then I sat near you, and then I just sat.

The worst part is, I don't think you ever even thought about it, about me. Just like everything else you already had, I was an afterthought, until I stopped being a thought at all. I don't think you noticed when I lost the spark in my soul, just as you didn't notice the petals rising up around you, conspiring to tear off your Flower-Crown. You certainly didn't notice when I became one of them. You were too focused on adding another flower, that you missed the ones wilting on your brow.

PAX

It is the fifth time you kneel before the crowds, wrapped in violet and wreathed in pink, and accept another set of flowers that it happens. We petals, we grains of sand fighting against the blowing wind fly into your eyes once more. We mixed violet and scarlet together on your body and throne, and marred your temple with red. I hated how I loved it and loved how I hated it, that horrid act, that sweet poison and bitter medicine. I have no regrets, as I will tell myself until I die, but I still cannot meet your gaze until the steady rise and fall of your chest ceases, and the rivers of scarlet stop their vile flow. I can only imagine that I would've seen shock, some amount of disbelief as you fell, but I will never know now.
When I finally did rouse myself and stared into your eyes, they were dull and pink and horrible, pink like the faded blood on your cheek. But I saw, for the first time in your too-short-too-long life, Pax.

I hope they will say the olive trees bloomed this day, and that they will continue to bloom forever. I hope they will say the myrtles withered, gone now forever. But they won't, they'll crown you with pink myrtles and white roses, and sing your praises just the more.

You would've hated the end, death is horribly unoriginal.



Art by Audrey Silverstein

Senior

By Arthur Owens

I am a Senior
Not one that walks with a cane,
Not one with a diminishing Brain
Not one with wobbly legs and fingers in pain.
I am a Senior
One with aspirations,
Submitting my college applications and lusting for information,
Thinking about vacation, my anxiety medication, and prior conversation.
But most of all, waiting for my certification.
A piece of paper,
Everything completed for a piece of paper,
Was it worth it?
To frame on a wall next to my heater?
Showing success like there's some kind of meter?
I can think about that later just let me be a
Senior.



Art by Kira McCoy



Art by Nathaniel Schlachter

Impulsive

By Nicolo Masella

The burning feeling at the edge of your fingers
having no control as your mind races with excitement
the endless thoughts seeping through your skin
drooling while staring at it on every screen in the house
the want and the excitement of satiating that voice in the back of your head
until it arrives
the cliche of the enjoyment of the journey rather than the ending burning in the back of your
throat
all the hours spent wanting to then holding it for two days
pushing yourself to use it because of all that excitement
then it's gone
no more do you ooze with wonder
no more does the world shine just a little brighter at the thought of it
so there it lays
the dreams and hopes of weeks on end
resting on a shelf and collecting dust
being buried alive by others that suffer the same fate
until one day when the sun shines a dull gray
and the clouds make you want to clean
does the inspiration come flowing back
shifting from cleaning to remastering
letting dreams take the wheel
being impulsive

Raining ashes amidst this gray-toned universe,
No sounds, nor cries, nor songs, nor strife,
Demons never present but always in the air,
With teeth on skin as a cold knife,
Enshrouding the victim with relentless despair.

Thus was a poor, poor, poor man's fate,
Grounded, pried open by claws of merciless death,
Blending with gray, who is still rife.
So cold. Will it ever cure his blindness of breath?
That distant flush of reborn life?

by Kaito Kester



ART BY JAMES FROMMER



ART BY GABE ROTENBURG

Fall in Dior

Flowing behind her, a long silk dress
A blend of expensive, floral perfume

An absence of light beneath
lampshades
But instead from the spotlight above

She stumbled toward the ground
As bruises formed on her arms and
knees

Picking herself up again
She puts on a convincing smile

Sachi Starbuck

Reflection on a Clear Pond

...and His hair is more beautiful,
and His mind is the most skillful.

He disgusts me. This clear portrayal
always trumps that vanity.

By Kaito Kester



Art by
Jordan
Armand

A Christmas Murder

by Margaret O'Sullivan

A mysterious figure crept through the hallway, using the shadow of night as their cover. As they reached a large door, they caressed a crumpled photo they held in their hands. A mix of sadness and anger flooded their body as they remembered the reason behind the task at hand. Taking their weapon, they opened the door just enough to slip through. I find a large man sleeping on his stomach. The figure dashed up to the bed and took out their weapon. Raising it high above his head, soon bringing it down with a loud, "CRACK!"

* * *

Snow fell lightly on the festive landscape of snow-covered rooftops, cobblestone streets, and wreaths hung on every door. Christmas carols rang out through the winter wonderland, as magical Christmas elves, reindeer, and other cheery creatures congregated in Santa Claus Square. Waiting to hear from the jolly man himself, from whom the square got its name. Enthusiastic chatter, laughter, and anticipation swelled throughout Christmas town. However, good ol' St. Nick never showed. Eventually, an hour passed, and the excited conversations withered into confusion and concern.

Meanwhile, down a colorful hallway adorned with ribbon and holly, a short and stout old lady with ashen white hair made her way towards a grand wooden door marked, "Santa Claus." The woman was clad in a red velvety dress that reached just below her knees, trimmed with white cotton. A white apron tied around her waist, embroidered with the name, "Mrs. Claus." She reached the door and knocked twice. With no immediate response, she called out the name of her husband.

"Santa, honey, you're running late. Is everything ok?"

Again, nothing. Growing increasingly impatient, Mrs. Claus tapped her foot and knocked again. This time, a bit more vigorous. After 30 seconds, there was still nothing. And Mrs. Claus entered the room. Her impatient attitude quickly turned to disgust as she found Santa sleeping like a lump on his king-sized bed.

"Santa! Wake up! Don't you know what time it is?" she shouted.

Mrs. Claus ripped the sheets angrily from his bed, although the large man did not stir. Mrs. Clause stomped to her husband's bedside and bent down, getting right in his face. Suddenly, the color drained from her wrinkled face as she noticed something. Santa's eyes were wide open, and there was dried spit around the corners of his mouth, which had gone slack. Mrs. Clause stumbled back in shock. The coloration in her face is akin to that of her apron. Without saying a word, she darted out of the room in search of help.

* * *

Meanwhile, in a dark, cold room chewing the tip of a sharpened candy cane the killer took out the same folded-up, coffee-stained photo of their lover. They had finally gotten their revenge.

* * *

Detective Jingle Bill stood inside the room where Santa's Body had been found. Dozens of crime scene specialist elves raced around the room bagging up evidence. Some of which included a plate of half-eaten cookies and a glass of milk.

Christmas Eve was in five days. And the terrible truth loomed over the entirety of Christmas Town…no more Santa meant no more Christmas. Parents all over the world would have to resort to BUYING their children's presents from now on. They would have to pretend to be the old man just to hide their children from the real truth. It was a horrible thing to think about. But then again, that was the horrible reality. The best Jingle Bill and the rest of the CTPD (Christmas Town Police Department) could do to make Christmas just a little less dreadful was to detain the culprit and put everyone's minds at ease. And to do that, he had to start where all murder investigations started… with the victim's spouse.

* * *

"Mrs. Clause. Where were you Dec 19th-20th, 2025? From the hours of 8:30 P.M. when your husband was last seen, to approximately 10:30 A.M. when his body was found?" Detective Jingle Bill questioned, shining a bright light in the face of the old lady who squinted sitting across from him. It was the day after the gruesome discovery of good ol' Kris Kringle, as Bill studied the face of the weeping woman as she struggled to form a sentence.

"I had finished a fresh batch of cookies. And set it at his bedside paired with a glass of warm milk." Interesting, Bill thought. If Santa's death was caused by poisoning, this could count as a very productive clue.

"Was your husband present when you set out the milk and cookies?" the detective questioned.

"No," Mrs. Clause answered. "Although the last time I saw him, he had been working in his study," she replied, shifting in her chair. Just then, there was a knock at the door. Annoyed at the interruption, Bill got up and trudged over to the door. Behind the door stood the Head Coroner Elf. In his hand was a stack of documents. Santa's autopsy. Excitement rushed through Bill's elfish veins as he swiped the papers from the Coroner's grasp. Although he wanted to drop everything and read through them, that would have to wait. He still had quite a bit more questioning to do. So in the meantime, he stored the documents in a binder and threw it in his desk drawer. He then thanked the Coroner, closed the door, and sat back down to resume his work.

"One last question, ma'am," Bill started. "Is there anyone you know that might want to hurt Santa?"

Mrs. Claus then sat straight up in her chair as if having a revelation.

"Yes! I do," she leaned in first, looking about the room as if someone was watching, then she whispered, "The Gingerbread Man." Bill leaned back in his chair to think. The Gingerbread Man was notorious around Christmas Town. He was crazy, an absolute madman. Hiding away in a little hut right outside the village. He was rarely seen. However, when he was, he would run about the town as fast as he could. Screaming that 'nobody could catch him, HE was the Gingerbread Man.'

"Tell me more, Mrs. Clause," he said, curiously stroking his chin. "This could be an interesting lead."

Santa and the Gingerbread Man had a difficult past. It all started when I had been baking a batch of fresh cookies for my husband. And when I went to open up the oven, that darned Gingerbread Man jumped out, screaming and yelling." She then threw up her hands and mimicked his words in a high-pitched voice.

"Run, run! As fast as you can! You can't catch me, I'm The Gingerbread Man!" Maybe, Jingle Bill thought. If the Gingerbread Man was really as deranged as people said, maybe he was even crazed enough to kill. Snapping him out of his thoughts, Mrs. Clause continued. "Santa Clause, hearing the commotion ran into the kitchen. Upon seeing him running away, he started to chase after him. Santa always loved his food and

would do almost anything to eat it." She chuckled, reminiscing about her now late husband.
"Eventually, though, the cookie got away. Swearing he'd get his revenge. We didn't think anything of it…he was just a Gingerbread Man, what harm could he do? Well, maybe we got our answer."

After her story had concluded, Bill let her go home. As he then sat in his office alone, he thought of the things he had to do next. Number 1, schedule The Gingerbread Man for an interrogation. And number 2, go through Santa's autopsy.

* * *

Bill walked up to the police station desk to schedule an appointment with The Gingerbread Man.

"Well, actually, sir, we have The Gingerbread Man here in custody right now," the elf behind the desk explained. "He was caught 'taking out' his neighbor's pet dog in broad daylight," Bill wasn't too surprised. After all he heard, he did seem to have pretty violent tendencies.

"Is he available? He's a suspect in quite an important case I'm working on." The man at the front desk's face was hit by recognition as he quickly ushered him over to an interrogation room.

"We will bring him in soon, sir," the officer said, darting out of the room.

Soon, the door swung open and two officers carried a small cage, about three by three feet, containing Jingle Bill's new suspect. Donning a red and white striped jumper and little metal handcuffs, the cookie stood hunched over slightly. A cold stare plastered across his face. He was set down on the table in front of Jingle Bill, and the two officer elves left.

"Care to talk?" Bill questioned.

"Frosty," that's all The Gingerbread Man said.

The two sat there for a while, just staring at each other waiting for the other to talk. Getting frustrated, Jingle Bill inevitably broke the silence.

"Excuse me?" he questioned, staring down at the Christmas treat. The name sounded eerily familiar. The cookie cleared his throat and his expression darkened.

"Frosty the Snowman, before your time most likely. Me an' Frosty had been good friends back in the summer of '69. He had come to life when a couple of kids down in America topped him with a magic hat the previous Winter…" he trailed off for a moment as if spacing out, before continuing his story. "Anyways we got to talking, hanging out, making trouble. He eventually moved in, and things were… great.. for a while." He looked around, as if reminiscing, a small but warm smile crept up on his lips. Then he stopped himself and took a deep breath. "I will not talk unless my lawyer is in the room." This time, he completely stopped talking. Refusing to say another word. Bill was frustrated, though he knew that really, he couldn't do anything about it. If he didn't want to talk without his lawyer, he didn't have to. And that was the end of their interview.

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Jingle Bill stared down at the stack of papers sitting in front of him. It was an autopsy report. He had just finished going through it and frankly he was stunned. Santa Claus had no signs of poisoning. He did have a large amount of alcohol in his blood system; however, for his size, it wouldn't be enough to do anything. So for the most part, Mrs. Claus was off the hook. However, the head coroner elf had found something Bill had missed in the back of Santa's head. It was implied that his cause of death was being bludgeoned to death. There had been no signs of a murder weapon at the crime scene, so Jingle Bill's search had just been prolonged. What he figured he had to do now was figure out who this so-called, "Frosty," guy was and figure out his possible connection to the case. He figured that he would be able to look him up in the police station's database. Especially if he had any affiliation with The Gingerbread Man, he was bound to be in there somewhere. So with that he made his way back to the elf at the front desk to look up his latest suspect. The elf obliged at his request and fired up his computer. However, once the results had loaded, his face fell.

“Sir, this 'Frosty the Snowman' has been dead since last Christmas,” Bill’s stomach sank. He now realized where he had heard his name. There had been a bit of an investigation last year, however the case went cold quite quickly. He had so many questions for that Gingerbread Man. Why would he give him the name of a dead man? Unless however, he thought. His death had been the motive…

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“Mr. Bill, The Gingerbread Man is here to see you,” the front desk elf said, standing in the doorway of Jingle Bill’s dark office. The small opening shone a light across the room. The sudden brightness startled Bill from a nap. His feet, which were once up against his desktop, kicked away, sending him tumbling back from the chair he was on.

“Excuse me? Does he have his lawyer?”

“Um, no, sir, I think he's turning himself in.” Bill sprang up from the floor, abandoning his toppled chair. It really shouldn’t come THIS easy. Could it?

“Bring him in. I have questions.”

The front desk elf nodded and stepped aside, making way for another two stone-faced officers carrying the same small cage Bill had seen previously that week. They set it down and walked away. Inside was the same Gingerbread Man. However, instead of his demeanor feeling cold, he showed off a more vulnerable yet determined side.

“Who is Frosty The Snowman?” Bill started, no answer. “I can be here all night if you’d like. Whatever it takes to get the truth from you. I know you killed Santa. I just need a confession and an explanation.” He sat firm, staring into his suspect’s eyes waiting for an answer. Eventually, one came.

“I loved Frosty,” he started. Catching Bill off guard for a second. “More than just a friend. And Santa ruined that.” The cookie clenched his fingerless fists. “Nobody in Christmas Town would understand the relationship we had. Especially not Santa. He hated the aspect of us. He hated all of it. And one cold, cold day last year… he and Frosty fought… a- and-” he stopped to take a deep breath and continued. “That was it. I had been preparing every single day. I crafted a shank from the end of a candy cane and planned my attack. I finally got the revenge Frosty deserved.”

Jingle Bill sat there stunned.

The End



Art by Tess Hereford



Art by Erick Lazo

Sense vs Cents
by Lincoln McCarthy

A heavy rain fell upon the fair grounds of the imposing castle. Darkness fell over the land as the torches illuminating the courtyard were extinguished like someone had just blown out a candle. Guards squinted through the darkness and rain, trying to spot any visitors, though trying to see through the current conditions was a feat impossible for most. Through the darkness, a figure clad in a cloak dark as midnight walked unobtrusively across the great courtyard and into the castle itself. Upon entering the castle, he was immediately accosted by a group of scruffy looking guards.

"State your name and business," the guards shouted at him, drawing weapons and eyeing him with a menacing look.

Slowly, the man lowered his hood, revealing long locks of messy, unkempt black hair, and a smooth face as pale as the moon, with the exception of a long scar stretching across the bridge of his nose, oddly similar to the bridge on a pair of glasses. The guards all took an involuntary step backwards, as the appearance of this man was shocking, to the extent of fear. The man's voice was as loud as a whisper, but it left a commanding impression upon the guards as he slowly said, "My name is Shpëtim, and I am here to see the king."

The large oak doors creaked open loudly, sounding like one hundred trumpets in the otherwise silent fortress, as two guards accompanied Shpëtim to the throne room, to seek his audience with King Martinus.

Shpëtim gritted his teeth as he prepared for his encounter with Martinus, the ruler whom Shpëtim felt was no more than a greedy coward. Shpëtim and the two guard's footsteps were muffled by the thick bloodred rug that led to the foot of the tasteless gold throne that the king was lounging on. As the soldiers paid their respects to their king, Shpëtim blocked out their voices as he recalled his previous interactions with Martinus, and all the needless bloodshed that accumulated from these missions for the king. He snapped back to reality as the guards grew silent, and Shpëtim could feel Martinus' sickly yellow eyes scanning him.

"Ahhh, my dear Shpëtim, how are you?" Martinus asked, in a tone that clearly showed he did not care in the slightest how he was.

Shpëtim simply stared at him, not wanting to waste his time with trivial conversations that Martinus always started their conversations with. The king cleared his throat, then explained the business behind their meeting.

"Two weeks ago," Martinus stated, "My spies in the western reaches of the kingdom witnessed a rally in the port city of Tirnava. Over fifty people were calling for my head while parading through the streets. I want them dead!" he spat, with a murderous look in his eyes.

"Is that all?" Shpëtim asked, feeling as though this mission would be quite boring.

"There's one more thing," Martinus hissed, then locked eyes with Shpëtim and said, "I want you to find the insurgents' base, kill them and make sure nobody ever forgets what happens to those who oppose me."

Two hours later, Shpëtim was riding west on his trusty steed Vex, with his satchel containing the necessary supplies for the trip being thrown up and down and up and down to the rhythm of Vex's galloping. It was dark, and a normal traveler would've tried their hardest to find shelter for the night, with the looming threat of bandits and wild animals lurking in the woods nearby. Shpëtim, however, was not a normal traveler. He had to get to Tirnava before dawn, so he could begin his research of the rebels and locate their base. As he rode, his mind kept drifting back to his encounters with Martinus, and his hatred of the man rose even more. When Shpëtim was young, Martinus' father was king of the land, and he was well-loved by all of the kingdom, especially the peasants, including Shpëtim and his family. When the king grew old and died, Martinus inherited the throne, and immediately went back on all of his father's ideals. First came the heavy taxes. Shpëtim's family was brought to extreme poverty due to the taxes that Martinus laid on the people, in order to acquire fine

diamonds and minerals from other lands. After that, Martinus declared a civil war against his father's old general, who was speaking out against Martinus. A bloody civil war ensued, with soldiers from the old regime battling Martinus' cavalry of soldiers loyal to the throne for years on end. When the death toll became so high, Shpëtim's father and older brother, as well as many other suitable men from Shpëtim's village were conscripted to fight for Martinus. In the end, Martinus vanquished the old guard, but not without terrible consequences. Shpëtim lost his father and his brother, and set off to find work to support his mother and younger brothers and sister.

He spent years as a beggar in Fernvale, the capital city, while trying to pick up odd jobs to make any form of money. These years on the streets hardened Shpëtim, and he soon learned how to fend for himself, and with these newfound skills he turned to crime as a means to make money.

After being caught trying to steal a dagger from a blacksmith, Shpëtim was thrown in prison, where he remained for five long years. When he got out, he returned home only to find that his village was destroyed and his mother and younger siblings were murdered by a bandit clan. Shpëtim swore revenge against the bandits, and went back to Fernvale to enlist in the knights guard.

Years of training with weapons of all shapes and sizes helped Shpëtim become one the the most capable fighters in the kingdom, and he used these skills to track down the bandits who slaughtered his family, and massacred them. Word soon spread of a mysterious fighter who was ruthless and dangerous, and Martinus soon made it his top priority to use this to his advantage. Shpëtim was summoned by the king, where the king offered money for his muscle. A need for money beat Shpëtim's hatred of the king, and he accepted Martinus' offer, and became his deadly assassin. For years now, Shpëtim killed Martinus' enemies, tracking down anyone whom Martinus wanted gone. As Shpëtim approached the gates of Tirnava, he



Art by Oliver Sanders

felt angry with himself that he remained in this cycle of violence, but since he was branded a criminal, this was one of the only jobs he would be able to have, and he had to make money somehow. Snapping back to reality, Shpëtim saw the sun begin to paint the sky a new color as dawn crept in, just as he passed through the gates. "I need to move quickly," Shpëtim said to himself as he made his way to the stables on the outskirts of the city. Giving the stableboy five pieces of silver, Shpëtim quickened his pace as he stepped onto the cobbled streets of Tirnava.

The rain from the night before had fallen here too, as his heavy boots sprayed water onto his cloak. It was still early, and the streets were empty aside from a couple of storekeepers slowly making their way to their stores. In the distance, Shpëtim could hear noises in the fields as farmers began herding their livestock. After years of experience, Shpëtim knew that the best

place to start was the inn. After a few minutes of walking, Shpëtim spotted a large inn on a street corner, named The Sleepy Dragon. He entered and was met by the warm embrace of a large fireplace, then made his way to the bar. It was a nice clean inn, empty except for the table in the far corner of the room, where a group of men were huddled together, urgently whispering to one another like the sound of a kettle heating up. As Shpëtim discreetly observed this scene, making sure his spying didn't look obvious, the innkeeper came up to him from behind the bar.

"Good morning sir," the innkeeper started, in a friendly voice, "Can I get you anything?"

"I'll have whatever's hot and fresh," Shpëtim said, glancing at the man. Once he left to see to Shpëtim's meal, Shpëtim strained his ears, trying to eavesdrop on the group's conversation. Shpëtim picked up one of the men saying something about the "death penalty" and another said "treason," which immediately piqued Shpëtim's interest. Unless he was mistaken, which Shpëtim rarely was, these men were talking about his target.

A loud thud made Shpëtim jump, and he turned around to see that the innkeeper had set down a large bowl of stew, and a roll of warm bread. Nodding his appreciation, Shpëtim was about to start eating when he paused.

"Excuse me," Shpëtim started, "I was staying at an inn around a week ago when I heard talks of riots in Tirnava. Do you know anything about that?"

The innkeeper froze, looked nervously around the room, and then drew close to Shpëtim before speaking.

"Around two weeks ago," the innkeeper whispered discreetly, eyeing the men in the corner before continuing, "a group of men took to the streets in a protest against the King. They were angry you see, taxes in the city have more than doubled in the past year. The night before the protests, many of the protesters gathered here, in the inn. A tall man, with a dragon tattoo on his neck was speaking to all of them. He said that protests would just be the start, that he had men in hiding, ready to take on the King."

Shpëtim froze. He knew right then and there that this man with the dragon tattoo was the cause of it all. He had to find him.

"Where did this man say he was from?" Shpëtim asked the innkeeper. The innkeeper eyed Shpëtim suspiciously, and Shpëtim quickly added, "Was he from another land?"

"He never said where was from," the innkeeper said. "However, he was wrapped up in elk furs like those from the forests 10 miles north of here. It gets freezing there, and the hunters from that region swear by them."

Two hours later, Shpëtim was hiking his way through a maze of trees, searching for any signs of human life. After talking to the innkeeper, Shpëtim came to the conclusion that the insurgents must have a base of sorts hidden in this forest, which would explain the clothing of the mysterious man. There was a light covering of snow on the forest floor, which was unfortunate for Shpëtim, as it obscured all footprints, and this snow couldn't have fallen more than a couple hours ago. No matter how hard he looked, Shpëtim could not find even the slightest hint of human activity. Looking at the ground in front of him, Shpëtim saw footprints. Shpëtim cursed himself, as he had no doubt been walking in circles. He was now extremely annoyed by how much of his time he wasted, and turned to start walking back to Tirnava to try to find a new lead when he froze. Spinning around and looking at the footprints he had just found, he put his foot up to it. It wasn't a match. There was somebody in this area in the last couple of hours, and Shpëtim was willing to bet it was more than just one person. With a new sense of hope, Shpëtim took off, tracking the footprints. After a few minutes of walking, Shpëtim still couldn't see any signs of life, and was wondering how much longer this trail was going to go on for when all of a sudden he felt the rush of an object flying past me, and heard a sickening thud as he saw an arrow pierce a tree right in front of him.

Turning around slowly, he was met with the sight of a dozen men, all armed to the teeth, bows aimed right at him.

The next couple minutes felt like a blur for Shpëtim. Seeing the impending threat of twelve deadly weapons aimed at him, he dropped to his knees and put his hands as high as he possibly could, trying to seem like as little of a threat as possible. After all, if he wanted to find the base of these insurgents, he would have to be alive to see it. They blindfolded and gagged Shpëtim, and he felt immense pain in both his wrists as they were tightly bound. Feeling the sharp prick of what he guessed was a knife against his neck, Shpëtim slowly rose, and blindly followed the men to what he hoped was their lair.

After what seemed like hours of walking, though Shpëtim really had no idea how long it was, a swift blow from a weapon of one of the warriors brought him crashing down to the ground. Shpëtim's blindfold was ripped off and he was temporarily blinded by the bright lights shining down on him with the strength of ten suns. When his eyes finally adjusted to the light, he saw that he was in what looked like a cavern that seemed to have been renovated to sustain a large force. There were around thirty or so people around, paying Shpëtim no attention and seeming to be packing and preparing for something.

"Don't move!" said a voice to the left of Shpëtim. He turned and saw a masked guard pointing a rather menacing looking spear at him, and Shpëtim felt that he would be foolish to do anything besides this soldier's orders.

"Relax you fool," said an unfamiliar voice behind Shpëtim. Not wanting to take his eyes off of the weapon mere inches away from his face, Shpëtim listened to the crunch of gravel as this mysterious person closed in on him.

Looking up, Shpëtim saw a very tall man towering over him, and on his neck, a dragon tattoo.

"My name is Aleksa," he said, his brilliant blue eyes piercing Shpëtim. "I know you didn't just stumble upon our encampments. Why are you here?"

Shpëtim studied Aleksa, but for some reason, he felt as though he could trust this man he just met. Still, he could not go and tell Aleksa the true reason for his visit to the forest. "I was sent here on a reconnaissance mission," Shpëtim lied. "Martinus heard whispers of uprisings in Tirnava, and sent me to investigate."

"Martinus," Aleksa spat. "What good does serving him give you? He cares for nobody but himself."

"I have no choice." Shpëtim admitted. "I'm branded a thief, and I cannot find work anywhere else. Martinus has used me for years."

A look flashed through Aleksa's eyes, almost like pity. He looked Shpëtim up and down, and saw the brand on his arm, small in comparison to his large arms, unmistakably a sign that this brand was given to Shpëtim when he was still very young.

"I know how it feels," Aleksa said. "I grew up on the streets. Martinus never did anything for us."

"He's the reason my family is gone." Shpëtim croaked, fighting back the emotions that he had been blocking for years. And it was at this moment, kneeling on the ground in front of a man he met no more than five minutes ago, that Shpëtim finally understood the cause of his struggle. It wasn't Shpëtim's fault that he was unable to protect his family from bandits all those years ago, it was Martinus. Martinus, who had torn his family apart due to his greed, and Martinus who had turned Shpëtim into a heartless killer.

"No more." Shpëtim thought to himself. "I'm going to break the cycle, and I won't let Martinus control me any longer."

Shpëtim looked up and saw that Aleksa had his hand outstretched to him, and grabbing it, Aleksa brought Shpëtim to his feet.

"Together," Aleksa said to Shpëtim, his eyes glimmering like diamonds, "We will end Martinus's reign of terror. Together, we will right his wrongs."

Shpëtim looked at him and nodded, at last understanding that fighting for what was right was far more important a cause than fighting for money.

The End



ART BY NICOLAS ARCIGAL



Art by Max Kupper



Art by Araliss Coronel

I went down to the river
The path stretched before me, fresh snow
Waiting for footsteps
To mar the perfect landscape

I step heavily
I break branches
I leave wet handprints on the sides of trees
Silence is not my concern.

When I reach the river
I will throw rocks
To shatter the surface of the ice
To expose black water beneath

by Ada Caccamise



Art by Lainey Donaghy



ART BY MIRA TIMMER

Winter Wind

There is a certain majesty to the winter chill
The way it leaves my nose and fingers numb
Among the trees and in the leaves, come what will
The wind does not have the forgiveness of spring, nor is it as dumb

It seems to me to speak, in a strange and howling tongue
Crying against the white mountains and white forests and white rooftops
I cannot contest its shrill music, pleadingly, desperately, sung
In it comes, a falcon plunging towards the sea, just as quickly it stops

It leaves me in silence, staring out at the fresh coating of white
Painting the newfound stillness of the night

Lincoln Wayland



Art by Araliss Coronel

The Last Siege

by Jonah Mangan

A gentle breeze was flowing across the farm. The tall grass rippled like the ocean, the farm animals absent-mindedly ate their fill, and the windmill was grinding the grain from this year's harvest. Just two years ago, Master Kalen had taken me under his wing and allowed me to help tend to his farm. He had found me lying lifeless, washed up below his dock, and assuming that I was dead, he started to dig me a grave. It was only the insistence of the other farmhands that convinced him that I wasn't dead and didn't need to be buried in the dirt. Kalen was a strange man; he had inherited father's farm but hated farming. His complaints about working are constant: "Why do I even bother?" or "Why do I even keep these damn animals alive?" The only reason he kept me around was for an extra set of hands so he could continue being lazy.

I had never been taught how to farm before ending up here. My life started in the far south, where two-thirds of the year it was too cold to farm. We got our food by hunting, and got our money by selling the pelts. The far south had little to nothing; plants withered in the cold, people froze to death, and war was a way of life. From an early age, we were brought up to fight. We played with sticks and pretended they were swords. When we were eight, we started formal training. We were taught tactics, hand-to-hand combat, the use of ranged weapons, horse riding, and swordplay. Mercenary groups would scout children from these training camps, then buy them from their parents and give them more specialized combat training.

My first battle was at thirteen. I can still remember the arrows whistling past my face, the screaming, and most of all the smell. War smelled like burning, corpses, blood, metal, and rot. The stench of war stayed with you for weeks after fighting. Rotting corpses littered the battlefield, leaving a months-long reminder of what we did to every neighboring town. I only survived my first handful of battles on sheer luck alone. I fell off my horse and was pinned under it while trying to aim my bow; little did I realize that fall probably kept me alive. The majority of the cavalry were killed during that charge, and my horse, pinning me, acted as a shield for the oncoming rain of arrows. As I grew, I stopped liking combat. I forgot why being able to kill is seen as a virtue. Whenever I killed someone, I could never forget their face; they haunted me. It was like they were weighing me down, like they were pulling me underground.

"Eleric!" yelled the familiar voice.

"Hello Callum," I said. "Is it supper time already?"

"No, it's military recruiters, apparently, they are wandering around the town," Callum said.

"And?" I asked.

Callum, what a character. Somehow, he is both the least and most competent person I know. Ask him anything about sailing, crop cultivation, or any subject that requires years of practice, and he'll give you a perfect solution to whatever might be in your way. But at the same time, it's like he has no common sense or sense of danger.

Callum, what a character. Somehow, he is both the least and most competent person I know. Ask him anything about sailing, crop cultivation, or any subject that requires years of practice, and he'll give you a perfect solution to whatever might be in your way. But at the same time, it's like he has no common sense or sense of danger. Once I asked him to accompany me to town, and he claimed that he knew a better way. This "better way" then turned what would have been an hour-long walk into a four-hour hike through densely forested woods. It was stuff like that. Callum was a strange person. He was quite short, though stout, and able to plow an entire field all on his own.

"If the military recruiters are offering seven gold and ten silver," He said, "that's life-changing money."

"If you make it back," I say. He's not wrong, seven gold alone is enough to buy a small farm. Ten silver is also enough to invest in equipment and help. But no one at this farm is a trained soldier; they would surely die. I ask, "Have they told you about the mission?"

"No, but I need that money, Eleric. Lots of people could use that money," Callum said solemnly.

"Is seven gold worth dying for?" I asked, "Seven gold can buy a farm, but it can't bring you back from the dead."

"Eleric, how little do you think of me?" He asked sarcastically. "Even if I die, it'll be more honorable than wasting away on some farm for the rest of my life. I can make my family proud and bring good fortune to my family."

"I don't know how else to put it, but your life is worth so much more than seven pieces of gold." I never understood why people loved war so much. Every time I went to fight, there was no glory, there was no honor. Just fear and death. No one who thinks war is glorious has ever fought.

That was a lie told to conscript fresh soldiers, people who would throw their lives away while the actual fighters waited for the gait to be broken down.

"Weren't you a warrior? Shouldn't you like to get back to fighting? I can only imagine how much blood was shed, how many heretics you felled," Callum said.

"Do as you will. Your life is not my responsibility."

"What's your problem today?"

I decided to end the conversation there; it's not worth my time arguing with a wall. Besides being owned by master Kalen, we don't really have agency over what we do and don't do. No matter how much we want to fight, unless we're sold or given Kalen's blessing, we're stuck on this farm. We also have more pressing matters to attend to; the harvest is around the corner, and we'll need all the hands we can get. But for now, I think it's best I get some rest, tomorrow is going to be a long day. As I'm walking back to the sleeping quarters, I see two burly men entering Kalen's home. Strangely, merchants don't usually come this late, and one of them looked more like a bull than a merchant; the other was much more average, even a little small. I wondered, who are they? Why are they here? I decided to sneak up to the window and listen to their conversation. My mind was racing with possibilities. Are they the mercenary recruiters Callum was talking about? Is Kalen going to let us go? No, I thought. Kalen is a good man; he wouldn't do that. He'll also need all the help he can get… right? He has the harvest coming in about a month. As I got closer to Kalen's home, I could hear their whispers. I pressed my ear up against the wall and closed my eyes.

"His majesty has ordered all available men to report to the army," said the smaller of the two, "the decision has already been made."

“But what about my crops! I need those men, else all our hard work goes to waste!” cried Kalen.

“I don’t get what you don’t understand. You have men. The army needs soldiers. Either you give us what we need, or we kill you and take it,” calmly explained the massive one. “We’ll be back tomorrow, I hope by then you’ll have come to your senses.” The two men, just as calmly as they entered, left Kalen’s home and rode off on their horses.

My mind still racing, I burst into Kalen’s house and stormed into the dining room, “Who the hell were those two?” I questioned, “What’s going on?”

“Oh, Eleric, I suppose you heard that,” he said defeated.

“What are you going to do?”

“There’s nothing to do; if the Emperor wants soldiers, he’ll get them. One way or another.”

“So we're just going to be sent to our deaths?”

Kalen didn’t respond.



Art by Dessa Bellamy Tarantino

Defeated, I wander back to the sleeping quarters. When I reached my bunk, all I could do was stare at the ceiling. I can’t sleep. I couldn’t, not while knowing what's coming. I look at my hands, they’re scarred. They’ve been beaten, cut, and crushed. Every time I look at them, it's a reminder of what I did, who I killed, and what I saw. All my life, I was groomed to be a soldier; my first memory was fighting with my friends. After that, it was the training, which was brutal. The first part of the training was to survive. You and a group of three others were brought to a remote island and told that the instructors would be back in a month. There, you had to compete with other groups for the limited resources the island had. Many died, many were found unfit to fight, but the few who managed to tough it out had potential, but these farmhands haven’t received training. I doubt any of the farmhands will make it out, myself included. Again, I attempted to warn Callum and get away from the farm. I climbed on my bunk and waited until everyone was asleep, so no one could hear my plan and report us to the military.

In the dead of night, I moved to the side of my bunk, leaning my torso over the edge to look down at Callum.

“Callum,” I whispered, to no response.

“Callum,” I said slightly louder. Finally I resigned myself to shaking him awake.

“Huh? Who? Huh?” Callum questioned, lifting his head from the pillow and looking around the room. “Oh, Eleric, what do you need?” he said, half asleep.

“Callum, wake up, we need to leave this farm, it's not safe here anymore.”

“Hm, what… what do you mean?” Callum asked lazily, resting his head back on his bed.

“Callum!” I whispered-shouted while shaking him again.

“What? What could you possibly want from me in the middle of the night?” Callum whispered in a rage.

“We have to run, the military is he-”

“Eleric, you wake me up in the middle of the night, and come crying to me about the military? I don’t care. I need the money anyway. I’m going back to sleep,” Callum said.

“But-”

“Sleep!” Callum said in an annoyed tone.

Why must you be so dense sometimes, Callum? I thought. I supposed if I was up early enough, we could sneak away from the farm before the military officers showed up. But I needed some rest first, like Kalen said, it’ll be a long day tomorrow.

I woke up in a cold sweat, desperately trying to remember something. Suddenly, a booming voice flooded the sleeping quarters, reminding me what I had forgotten, “Attention, farmhands! Your master, Kalen, has released you to the Southern Empire’s military. You are now required to report to the barn, where you will undergo medical analysis and, if found fit to serve, you will be given the honor of fighting for his majesty. And you will help end the Northern Empire’s invasion of our homeland. Report to the barn at noon.”

The man exited the sleeping quarters. Everyone suddenly woke up, got dressed, and followed him. It was dawn, we still had time, and I started frantically searching for Callum, looking where he usually was before starting work. The cabin? No. The toolshed? No. The docks? Finally, I see his stocky figure, standing on the edge of the dock. He was staring at the transport ships that had arrived to bring us to the battle. At that moment, I realized that it was pointless to convince him to stay. I suppose he’s never known war. He doesn’t know what he's getting into. And I don’t know if I can keep running. I still feel guilty for leaving my friends. It was selfish to run and leave them behind.

But there’s a reason I ran. I remember my first few actual battles were exhilarating. Other than the occasional broken bone, cut, or scrape with death. When I was young, all I wanted to do was fight in war. The rush I would get from slaying my enemies was unlike any other; it was like every fiber of my being was focused on the battle, just you and the other soldier, with everything on the line. Fear, pain, and all your thoughts would melt away. It was the most present I ever felt. But over the years, all the fighting starts to catch up to you. After a handful of fights gone wrong, you start to feel your body breaking from the strain. I find it hard to unclasp my hands. My knees, ankles, and right shoulder ache when bent. While your body goes, your mind starts to break too. Over the years, all my friends have eventually succumbed to infection, injury, or been killed in battle. All those deaths start to weigh on you; they cling to your body and make you move with fear. Fear leads to hesitation, and hesitation is the difference between life and death. I had one too many close calls, and suddenly all I could remember was my friend withering away from an infection he received after a gnarly gash to the chest, clinging to my shirt, pulling me towards him. All he could bring himself to say was “Run!” So the next opportunity I had, I took it. It was during naval combat, when we were pillaging a merchant ship, we needed money and food. But we were agonizingly close to Kalen’s dock; I could barely make out his farm in the distance, so I leapt from the boat and started swimming. But no matter how far I swam, it felt like I was only getting further from land. I quickly ran out of energy. All I could remember was falling asleep, then I woke up. I was surrounded by five or six people, crowding around me. From then on, I was a farmhand on master Kalen’s farm.

The sun told me it was almost noon, so I made my way over to the barn. I saw Callum, he waved me over, and I wandered next to him. Once I reached him, he said, “From what I've been told, they’re gonna check your weight, height, and then give you armor and weapons.”

“Interesting, at least the line is not too long.”

“Yeah, I thought you would be long gone by now?” he questioned. “Weren’t you talking about running away?”

“I was considering it, but I realized that if I were to, I would be plagued with guilt if I never saw you again.”

“Next!” barked the booming voice from earlier in the day.

“Looks like I’m next. I’ll see you on the other side, warrior.”

“Yeah… see you later, warrior.”

The closer I got to entering the barn, the more my heart started to race. I remember the first time I was inspected for combat. I felt a lot like Callum, all naive and excited. How different it is now that I know what we’re in for.

A few minutes later I heard “Next!”

I walked into the barn, my eyes locked on the inspector. He was big; he had to be six inches taller than me, and at least twice my weight. I have been through this before: they weigh you, check if you have any diseases, and finally check your size for weaponry and armor.

“Take your shirt and shoes off, and step on the scale. If you are heavy enough to fight, the scale will tip down.”

I do as instructed, with care, I fold my shirt and place it next to my shoes. I took a step over to the scale, and stepped on it. I slowly raised the counterweight, albeit more slowly than I remember. Might I have lost weight? I wondered.

“You’re quite scared for a farm hand. And these are deep gashes, too.”

The huge man walked over to me and started inspecting my torso.

“Have you ever been to war, boy?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“What battles did you fight in?”

“I was a part of a community militia; we were fighting a band of barbarians who came to raid my village.” I could feel every scar I had received start burning, each one a reminder of what I survived.

“How many fights were you in? There are far too many for a one-off scrap with a few barbarians.”

“Not too many, sir, I’m just lucky to have made it out alive.”

“Well, you’re in. We need good fighters; we're conscripting soldiers to finish a siege on a critical fortress. Continue on and receive your gear.”

I collected my clothing and walked over to a short man who was handing out gear. This man was very different from the other; he was short and soft spoken.

“Alright, put on this chainmail, and take a sword.”

The chainmail was loose and of lesser quality. The meal was rusting and had clearly been used by people before me. I could even see a deformation in one of the links on my stomach. As I grabbed the sword, I took a second to look at my hand. It had been over a year since I had even held a blade designed for killing. I thought I had left this life behind me. I noticed my hand was shaking. I could feel my heart beat quicken and beads of sweat roll down my back. I realized that I was afraid, afraid of death. This feeling was foreign to me.

I had never explicitly feared death. In fact, for much of my life, I lived for death. I killed, watched friends die, and trained to kill better. Only recently have I had other things to live for. But the more removed from death, the more I feared it.

"Eleric! You made it through, for some reason I thought you would be found too skinny to be conscripted." Callum jokingly said.

"Yeah… Callum, are you not afraid?"

"Hm? What is there to fear? We have weapons and armor. And we'll be fighting under General Ennith, one of the empire's most brilliant tacticians."

I recognized that name, Ennith. I remember hearing stories about his devastating blows against the Northern Empire, forcing a retreat out of one of our cities. Although at the cost of countless lives. He positioned hundreds of men as a distraction, sending them to their death, while other soldiers encircled them and slaughtered almost all of the Northern Empire's troops. I didn't tell Callum the truth, "I suppose."

"Everyone load onto the boats, they will take you to the transport ship!" Shouted the large man.

We all started to filter into the boats. It was cramped, hot, and humid. As the boats sailed away from Kalen's farm, some part of me regretted tagging along. But there was no turning back now. Even if I were to jump into the ocean, it would take another miracle to bring me back to the farm. We were on the boats for a handful of hours before they dropped anchor. Confused, I made my way to the deck and saw a behemoth of a ship in front of me.

This ship was as large as a mountain. We were instructed to board the vessel, where we would be given further instructions upon entry. As we walked onto the ship, I couldn't help but be in awe.

We boarded from a side entry; the ceilings were high, and there had to be thousands inside.We were given bunks to sleep on and small chests to store personal belongings. This was the premier vessel of the Royal Navy, the Oriole. The ship was gargantuan, larger than any boat I had ever seen before. The ship held hundreds despite being made of wood; it was a marvel of engineering. There was a massive staircase leading up to the other decks.

"Hey, Elric, you want to look at the other decks?"

"Sure."

As we climbed the stairs and looked around, we saw the mess hall and more sleeping quarters. Only when we got to the decks did the true scale of the ship start to set in. The sails alone took a small country's worth of people to raise and lower. When I looked over the side of the deck, the water seemed miles away.

We were on the ship for only a few days before returning to the smaller boats. Once the boats had arrived at the soldiers' barracks, it hit me. The smell. The smell of death, blood, iron, rotting corpses. I could feel the shaking return. We unloaded from our boats, and I managed to find Callum.

Before I could get a word in, Callum asked: "What in the world is that smell?"

I responded, "That? That's the smell of war."

"What could be causing it though?"

"Bodies."

"Really?"

Before Callum got to continue, all the soldiers were brought before General Ennith. General Ennith didn't look like much of a fighter; he was rather short and quite fat, too. Though I suppose that he was a thinker, not a fighter.

Out of breath, General Ennith shouted, “Soldiers! You have been brought to me today to storm Fort Blue River. You all have been given the task of storming the Fortress. The soldiers inside have been under siege for the past seven months They are starving, tired, and weak. And our trenches are about to reach their wall.” Pausing to catch his breath, “I have it in good faith that you will be able to not only survive but be the deciding factor in this upcoming battle, for which you will be rewarded handsomely.



ART BY LINCOLN MCCARTHY

The river this Fortress guards leads directly to the capital of the Northern Empire, and when Fort Blue River falls, the river will be open to a full-scale invasion from the royal military. Although for now, rest. Tomorrow we will storm the Fortress. You are now dismissed.”

Callum, excited, turns to me, “Did you hear that? We’re going to be the deciding factor in this war! We’re gonna put an end to the Northern Empire’s invasion!”

“Yeah, sure… but don’t you find it a bit strange that we never went through any training?” I asked, “Storming a fortress is no easy task. They’re built specifically not to fall easily.”

Dismissively, Callum explains, “Weren’t you listening? They said that they have been starving the fortress for months.” Callum’s reassurance was not very comforting.

We rest, as ordered. The next day was here, and in the next few hours, we were going to storm Fort Blue River. The makeshift base’s energy had completely changed. The reality of the situation was setting in on everyone. Quickly the ragtag army of locals and farmers from across the country realized that they didn’t have formal training and were now about to storm a massively defended fortress. This realization hit everyone but Callum.

“Elric! Elric! Now it is time, we’re going to storm the fortress.” Callum was very chipper for soon facing death.

Callum, you know this is our last chance to escape. I won’t leave if you don’t, but just know this may be our last few hours,” I said.

I could feel my hands trembling, my heart racing, and my entire being screaming to run. But I couldn't leave Callum to die; I needed to at least try to protect him. I didn’t understand why I took such a liking to Callum.

He reminded me of an old buddy, though I had long forgotten his name and face, I remembered regretting not being able to save him during one of our campaigns. I wanted to redeem myself, even if just a little.

"ATTENTION! A military officer cried out, "All new faces get into marching position! We are now going to the battlefield."

As we marched to the battlefield, the smell of war only got stronger. And my fear only worsened. We took a break for lunch, only about a mile out from the Fortress. The food they provided was quite good for military standards. Instead of the leathery beef jerky and bread, we had actual food. I had a bad feeling, as if we were prisoners, and this was our last meal. After a short intermission, we returned to marching. As we crested the hill, I could see the Fortress. Located on a peninsula, overlooking a strategic river that flows straight to the capital, I thought to myself, what a wonderful place to put a fortress.

Suddenly, we heard the command, "CHARGE!" As quickly as the command came out, we all started frantically throwing ourselves at the fortress. While staring at the fortress, I saw bursts of smoke coming from cutouts in the wall, which sheltered Cannons. The smoke was followed by loud explosions, and finally by screaming. Callum and I were toward the back of the formation, which gave us a good chance of escaping if a retreat order was called. The continued cannon fire thinned out the army. As we neared the fortress, I felt a strange sense of serenity wash over me. I was dumbfounded by it. I had fully expected nothing but more and more fear the closer we got to the fortress, but instead, there was a quiet calm. I stopped paying attention to the screaming; all I could think about was storming the fortress.

Suddenly, I fell to the ground, and a sharp pain shot through my left leg. Callum looked back, shocked, and quickly ran over to me. Confused, I attempted to stand, but Callum, horrified, begged me to stop. I was wondering what the nagging pain in my leg was. I assumed that it was from the running, but this was different. I glance down and realize that I had just been struck in the leg by a cannon.

"Elric!" Callum shouted, "Elric, we need to get you out of here!"

"Huh what? No, you need to go, continue the charge, leave me behind!"

Callum, hoisting me onto his shoulder, "No I'm not leaving you behind."

Callum was now running towards the treeline. I began to feel a cold sensation radiating from my leg. My fingers were going numb, and I began to feel tired. Callum ran through the trees and emerged at the shore. A safe distance from the fighting. Callum rested my head on the sand and is now desperately trying to stop my bleeding.

"Callum… Callum! You need to get out of here. Run, run somewhere safe." I say.

"But, Elric, your leg!" His voice cracked.

I need to get him out of here. And besides, I don't want my last few moments to be ruined by an oaf. I grab his shirt. "Callum, look at me. Callum you are going to run, leave me and find a farm where you can put your skills to good use. I was born to die, I grew up killing, and will die the same way. But you, you were born to live, to feed the hungry. Callum, for once in your life listen to what I'm saying and RUN!"

Callum, crying, does as I say. Finally he listened, I saw him run off into the distance away from the battle. I need to rest my head and enjoy this gentle breeze; it's not too often you get to relax on a beach and watch the sunset. Goodbye, Callum.



ART BY JACKIE MCCORMICK

Winter feels like a deep breath
that makes your lungs sting a little.
The air is sharp and clean,
and it smells like snow and cold metal.

I hear boots crunching on ice,
wind rattling bare tree branches,
and the quiet that comes after it snows.

My fingers go numb, but my mind feels calm.
I think about sleeping in, no alarms,
and warm lights glowing inside houses.

Winter makes everything slow down,
and for a moment, that is enough.

Miley Pena-Rider

Briser
By Scout Thakur deBeer

There's a certain amount of majesty,
In the chaos of the mind.
Something of dishonesty,
In the voices left behind.
Some will call it travesty,
When you take a knee, resigned.
But there's a certain majesty,
In the chaos of the mind.

Art by Jackie McCormick



Bells
by Owen Powers

“Merrick, get out of there, we need to go! They are coming!”

“Holy shit!! Holy shit!! We can’t leave him here, we need to help!!”

“NO! He’s already gone, we need to keep moving! We can not risk becoming one of the others!” Nico runs in to grab Merrick off of Bernard. Merrick was fighting with all of his might, but Nico overpowered him and was able to get him out of there.

As Bernard lay there, the rest of the group makes their way up the bell tower. The others advance in on Bernard.

“I can’t believe we left him there to die! You’re a monster, Nico! You’re a damn monster, and now you deserve to die there with him too.”

“Merrick, just calm down. We can talk about this, okay. I know you’re upse-"

"NO! We could have saved him! There was still time!”

“We couldn’t have saved him, it was too late! We were all surrounded.”

As Nico speaks, Merrick begins to pull something out of his pocket.

“Merrick STOP! You realize it was too late! We couldn’t have risked other lives just for one! We need to-”

-

As the sun dawns over the horizon, the bell tower at the center of Toma University reflects the rays to all of the freshmen dorms. As the campus begins to get a little more active, Nico wakes up to the sound of the bells, and to the sound of his friend Jack, who he dorms with. “Nico! Come on, hurry up! We can’t be late for class.”

As the sun dawns over the horizon, the bell tower at the center of Toma University reflectsthe rays to all of the freshmen dorms. As the campus begins to get a little more active, Nico wakes up to the sound of the bells, and to the sound of his friend Jack, who he dorms with. “Nico! Come on, hurry up! We can’t be late for class.”

Nico rolls over in his bed, eyes barely open, and takes a look at the time. “Oh no, we need to go!” Nico jumps out of bed and races to get ready. He has missed nearly all of his classes so far, and he cannot afford to miss another one. Jack anxiously waits for Nico to finish getting ready.

“Hurry up in there Nico!” After what felt like ages, Nico finally gets out of the room. They both begin sprinting to the classroom, as if there were both in the olympics. They run through the quad, across the great lawn, and through the building. They swing the doors open, and head quietly to their seats.

“Phew, that was close,” said Jack.

Nico and Jack have been friends since the beginning of this semester, and now they sit together in any class they had with each other. They had talked to each other through instagram about dorming together because they had a lot in common, and they ended up being great with each other, so they plan to room together the rest of their time at school.

As the time passed, Professor Haldane never showed up. Five minutes gone. Then ten minutes. Just as Nico is about to turn to speak to Jack, the door swings open, but it wasn’t the professor. It was a thin man that Nico vaguely recognized from around campus. “Professor Haldane will not be joining us today,” he said. “You’re free to go.”

Students quietly looked at him as he exited the classroom. Once he was gone, everyone started to exit, confused as to why the professor never showed up.

"That's odd. He has been here every class since the first day of school," Jack said to Nico.

"Whatever, I'll take another day off of class."

Nico knew something was off. He was never on time for class, and Professor Haldane was always there. He shrugged the feeling off, and went on as normal. "Yeah I guess. Want to go get some breakfast?"

"Yeah sure, I could eat."

Inside the dining hall, the noise swallowed them whole. Nico grabbed his tray, and turned around to grab a drink. But, as he turned he was met not with a fridge, but with a massive body.

"Watch it."

Nico stopped dead in his tracks.

Bernard stood in front of him, tray balanced loosely in one hand. He looked tired in a way Nico couldn't place. Eyes duller than usual, movements sharp like he was already annoyed with the day.

"Sorry," Nico said, trying to get anywhere but there.

"Didn't know you still believed in going to class. Thought you dropped out because of how little you were there." Bernard was tall, big, and buff (at least that's what he tells all the ladies to try and impress them).

Jack stiffened beside Nico. "Just keep moving, let it go."

Bernard smirked. "Relax, just having a friendly conversation, right Nico?"

Bernard stood with all of his "friends." Merrick was the only one that Nico knew the name of. Usually, all of them laugh at whatever Bernard said. But this time, Merrick did not laugh. Merrick stood behind him, quiet, watching Nico instead of laughing like normally.

"I was there today," Nico said. "You missed it."

Mockingly, Bernard says, "Oh no I missed class boohoo. I don't have to worry about that because I have an excuse."

"Oh, what might that be?" Jack says.

Jack has always been there for Nico whenever Bernard would antagonize him. One time, Jack took a punch in the face to protect Nico from it. If Jack was not there, Nico may as well already be dead.

"None of your business, idiot." Shouts Bernard, his whole squad laughing.

"Move." Jack said.

Bernared stared at Jack for a moment, then moved out of the way. "Whatever, punk."

"What an asshole," Jack states, as Bernard and his gang walk away.

Jack and Nico sit down to have breakfast, which they do not really enjoy, and as Nico goes to put his tray away, he nearly stumbles into someone.

"Oh, sorry."

"It's fine."

Nico looked up.

Eliza adjusted her backpack strap and passed him with a small smile.

Jack noticed. "You good?"

"Yeah," Nico said too quickly.

Outside, Eliza sat near the fountain with friends, laughing. Nico turned away before Jack could say anything.

A rough cough echoed across the quad. Nico glanced around, but no one reacted. Life moved on.

Nico could tell that something was off. Professor Haldane missing was very odd, and usually Bernard does not back down that easily.

"Did you see the way Merrick was acting? He seemed like he did not want to be there." Nico asked Jack.

"Yeah, that was… odd."

Nico and Jack went on with their day, trying to forget what had happened today.

That night, the campus was too quiet. No music drifted through open windows. No laughter echoed across the quad. Even the bell tower stayed silent past midnight. Nico slept poorly, dreams tangled with images of empty halls and Bernard's dull, exhausted eyes.

Morning came anyway. Sunlight spilled across the freshmen dorms, but the usual rush never followed. When Nico and Jack stepped outside, the walkways had practically nobody on them.

"Okay," Jack muttered. "Now I'm officially freaked out."

Their first class was nearly empty.

Nico took a slow look around the room. Entire rows were missing. Seats Bernard's group usually filled sat untouched. Merrick wasn't there either.

The substitute arrived, shut the door behind him, and stood at the front longer than necessary.

"I'm going to take attendance today," he said.

Names echoed into the silence. No responses. Again and again.

The professor stopped halfway through the list.

"... That's unusual," he said, forcing a smile. "Let's continue."

He didn't.

Instead, a sharp cough broke the quiet.

A student near the aisle doubled over, gasping, hands shaking against the desk. Another student stood up too fast, chair clattering as she backed away.

"I think I need to go to the nurse." someone muttered.

Before she could open the door to the hallway, the classroom door rattled.

Not knocked, but pulled.

Everyone froze.

The handle twisted once. Then again. Harder.

Jack's foot slid back instinctively. Nico's heart pounded so loud he was sure the room could hear it.

The professor moved toward the door, voice tight. "Everyone remain seated."

The rattling stopped.



Art by Julian Costantine

For a moment, there was nothing.

Then a campus alert buzzed across every phone in the room at once.

“SHELTER IN PLACE. DO NOT OPEN DOORS.”

Nico met Jack’s eyes.

Whatever was happening now had a name.

And it had reached them.

The class fell silent for what felt like an eternity.

“Jack, what is ha-”

The door burst inward.

Screams fell across the room.

“GO NOW!” Jack shouted

Chairs slammed back as the class raced toward the rear exit. Nico didn’t have any second thoughts, he just ran. The hallway was already chaos. Students poured out of classrooms, voices crashing into one another, alarms blaring somewhere deeper in the building.

“What the hell is this!” Nico yelled.

“Doesn’t matter! Move your ass!” Jack shouted

A body clipped Nico’s shoulder and he nearly fell over. Someone hit the floor. No one stopped. A girl sprinted past them, crying, blood streaked down her arm. Something slammed into the wall behind her hard enough to crack the plaster.

They turn a corner and nearly collide with a man running in the opposite direction, eyes wide

“Don’t go that way!” he yelled.

Jack grabbed Nico’s wrist and yanked him into the stairwell just as a heavy crash echoed from the hallway. The door shook violently in its frame.

“Holy shit,” Jack muttered.

They took the stairs two at a time, feet pounding, lungs burning. Sunlight flared through the exit at the bottom.

“We need to get outside right now! It’s a death trap in here!” Nico shouted.

They burst into the quad, the sunlight blinding them for a moment. They were hoping it was better outside.

It was worse.

People ran in every direction. Sirens wailed beyond campus. Near the fountain, someone staggered and collapsed, body jerking unnaturally.

“Shit,” Nico breathed, forcing himself to keep moving.

They had to keep moving. It was the only way they could survive this mess. They didn’t stop until they reached a maintenance shed at the edge of campus. Jack slammed the door shut and shoved a rusty cart against it. Screams echoed through the outdoors.

Nico bent over, hands on his knees. “Tell me I'm not losing my mind.”

Jack slapped himself across the face. “No. This is real.”

Jack and Nico slump down against the wall, hoping, praying that there were still people out there alive

“Jack, start texting everyone you know that goes here. We need to find more people.”

They started texting everyone they could think of.

No responses.

Then Jack’s phone buzzed.

He froze. “Bernard.”

Nico’s phone vibrated at the same time.

“Eliza,” he said.

Jack read aloud. “‘We’re alive. I’m with Merrick. Library basement.’”

Eliza’s message followed seconds later: I’m near the science building. Doors are locked.

“Okay. That’s… something. Tell them to all meet in the humanities building.” Nico said.

Jack nodded, jaw tight. “We find them. We don’t do anything stupid.”

Nico let out a shaky breath.

Whatever this was, they weren’t alone anymore.

Jack and Nico begin their journey to the humanities building. The campus had become a maze of shadows and fear. Jack led Nico along service paths, ducking behind buildings, skirting deserted quads, and avoiding the main roads. Broken glass and overturned trash cans littered their path, and every so often, a distant scream or sharp cough made them freeze. Their footsteps echoed, loud and clumsy against the pavement, hearts hammering with every sound.

“This is all kinds of messed up,” Nico muttered.

“Shut up and move,” Jack said, not harshly, but enough to snap Nico out of the panic. “If we make noise, it’s over for us.”

They crept past a darkened dorm hallway where a figure staggered, coughing violently. The sound made Nico’s stomach twist, but he forced himself to keep moving. Ahead, the humanities building loomed, silent and shadowed.

“There,” Jack whispered.

They slipped in through a side door, trying to stay quiet. Inside, the air was still and heavy, smelling faintly of dust. Footsteps echoed from somewhere deeper, cautious and uneven.

“Nico?” The voice made Jack and Nico freeze. Eliza stepped into the dim light, eyes wide with relief. Merrick trailed behind her, pale, tense, and scanning every corner. Bernard leaned against a wall, looking exhausted in a way that went beyond sleep deprivation. His movements were stiff, like he was forcing himself to look normal. His eyes scanned and met Nico and Jack’s faces. “Took you two long enough,” Bernard said.

Jack frowned. “You look like shit.”

Bernard waved him off. “Long night.”

As the others continue to talk about what had happened when everything first started, Bernards lets out a cough. Nobody seems to notice except Nico, who locks eyes with Bernard for a moment, and then continues to talk with the other group.

Everyone begins making their way to an open classroom, being cautious around every turn. They all enter and close the door behind them, propping a chair up against the door so nobody could get in. They all take their phones out, hoping that it could help them, but unfortunately all of their phones were down.

“Cell towers must have gone down right after we texted you all,” Jack says.

They all place their phones on the table, as they could not use them anymore.

“Okay, we need to come up with a plan,” Jack states. “We are sitting ducks here. It isn’t long until eventually they find us here.”

“How can we come up with a plan if we don’t even know what the hell is going on?” Merrick asked

The words hung in the air longer than Nico expected them to. No one answered right away. The classroom was dim, lit only by the gray light slipping through the narrow windows near the ceiling.

Eliza finally spoke.

“I might know what’s going on,” she said quietly.

Everyone turned toward her. She had been sitting near the window, arms crossed tightly, eyes unfocused like she was still somewhere else. The science building. The screams. Whatever she'd seen before she ran.

Jack leaned forward. "Might know," he repeated. "That's better than nothing."

Eliza hesitated, then stood up. She paced slowly as she spoke, like she needed movement to keep her thoughts in order. "When everything started, I was in the science building. Labs, classrooms, people everywhere. At first, I thought it was panic. Like, one person freaks out and it spreads."

She swallowed. "But it didn't spread like panic."

Nico felt his stomach tighten. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean people weren't just scared," Eliza said. "They were… wrong. Some of them couldn't talk. Some were shaking, twitching. And then they just snapped." She shook her head. "I saw someone I knew slam another person into a wall over and over like they didn't even recognize them."

Bernard coughed again.

This time, it was louder.

Jack glanced at him. "You good, man?"

Bernard nodded a little too quickly. "Yeah. Just dust."



ART BY JACKIE MCORMICK

Eliza continued, either not noticing or choosing not to. “If I had to guess-and it is a guess-it’s something neurological. A virus, maybe. Something that messes with the brain. Motor control. Aggression.”

“So like,” Jack said slowly, “they’re sick?”

“Yeah,” Eliza said. “But not dead.”

That landed differently. Nico saw it on Jack’s face too. The shift from pure fear to something more complicated.

“If they’re sick,” Jack said, “then that means-”

“There could still be people alive,” Nico finished.

Eliza nodded. “Exactly. And if it spreads a certain way-like through close contact or fluids-then not everyone would be infected yet.”

Bernard had stopped coughing. Nico glanced at him without meaning to. Bernard was staring down at the floor now, jaw clenched, hands balled into fists.

Jack clapped his hands together once. “Okay. That’s something. So what do we do with it?”

“We need to see how bad it really is,” Eliza said. “We can’t just sit in here guessing.”

Nico looked around the room. The barricaded door. The silence outside, broken only by distant, muffled sounds.

“Bell tower,” he said.

Everyone looked at him.

Jack blinked. “The bell tower?”

“It’s the highest point on campus,” Nico said. “If we can get up there, we’ll be able to see how far this goes. Where people are. Where the others aren’t.”

Eliza’s eyes lit up slightly. “That could work.”

Jack exhaled through his nose. “You realize that means going back outside.”

“I know,” Nico said. “But staying here isn’t safer. It’s just slower.”

No one argued with that.

They moved fast after that. Chairs scraped softly against the floor as they cleared the barricade. Jack cracked the door open just enough to peer into the hallway. Nothing. Too quiet.

They slipped out one by one, footsteps light, shoulders tight. Every turn felt like a gamble. Every shadow looked wrong.

As they moved, Nico noticed Bernard falling farther and farther behind. His breathing sounded heavier now, uneven. When Nico slowed to match him, Bernard avoided his eyes.

“You sure you’re okay?” Nico asked under his breath.

Bernard forced a grin. “I’m fine. Just tired as hell.”

Nico didn’t answer right away. He kept walking, but his attention stayed fixed on Bernard in a way it hadn’t before. Something felt off, more than just exhaustion. Bernard’s steps weren’t just slow; they were uneven, like his body wasn’t quite listening to him. Every few seconds, his hand brushed the wall for balance.

As they make their way outside, they take every corner as careful as they could. Eventually, they are able to make it to the bottom of the bell tower.

Jack begins, “Alright guys, here w-”

Bernard coughed again.

This time, Nico stopped.

The rest of the group's eyes all fell onto Nico, and then Bernard.

“What’s up?” Jack asked.

Nico stared at Bernard. Really looked at him now. His face was pale. There was a glimmer of sweat across his forehead despite the cold air, and his jaw was clenched so tight.

“Bernard,” Nico said slowly. “What happened to you back there?”

Bernard stiffened. “Nothing.”

“That’s bullshit,” Nico said.

Merrick scoffed. “Can we not do this right now? We need to keep moving.”

“No,” Nico said, sharper now. “We do need to do this.”

Bernard shifted his weight, eyes darting anywhere but Nico’s face. “I said I’m fine.”

“You’ve been coughing since we met up,” Nico pressed. “You’re dragging your leg. You’re sweating like crazy. And you won’t look at me.”

Jack frowned. “Bernard…?”

Eliza stepped closer, concern written all over her face. “Nico might be right. If this is neurological.”

Bernard took a step back. “Drop it.”

The sound of running echoed faintly somewhere outside. Not close yet. But getting there.

Nico’s voice lowered. “Did one of them touch you?”

Silence.

Merrick let out an exasperated breath. “Oh, come on…”

“Did one of them bite you?” Nico asked.

Bernard’s shoulders sagged.

Jack’s face drained of color. “No. No, that’s not–”

“Bernard,” Nico said. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Bernard shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to us,” Eliza said.

Another distant scream. Closer this time.

Bernard looked at each of them, one by one. Finally, with shaking fingers, he rolled his sleeve up.

The bite was unmistakable.

Red, swollen, teeth marks sunk deep into his skin. The area around it had already begun to darken, veins branching outward like cracks.

Jack staggered back a step. “Holy shit…”

Merrick swore under his breath. “You didn’t say anything?”

“I didn’t want to slow you down,” Bernard said quietly. “Didn’t want you making stupid choices because of me.”

“That wasn’t your call!” Merrick snapped. “We could’ve–”

Another sound cut him off.

Not a scream.

Footsteps. Many of them. Fast. Coming toward the building.

Eliza’s eyes went wide. “They heard us.”

Bernard’s expression changed then. It wasn't fear, nor was it panic. It was resolve.

“Go,” he said.

Jack shook his head. “No–”

“Up the bell tower,” Bernard said. “Now.”

Merrick grabbed his arm. “You’re not staying here.”

Bernard pulled free. “They’ll go for me first.”

Nico’s chest felt tight. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t,” Bernard said. “And you know it.”

The footsteps were loud now. Too loud.

Bernard stepped backward, away from the bell tower entrance. Then, before anyone could stop him, he lowered himself to the ground.

Merrick lunged forward. “Bernard–!”

Nico grabbed Merrick and hauled him back. “We don’t have time!”

“You’re letting him die!” Merrick screamed, tears spilling down his face.

Bernard looked up at them one last time. “Go.”

They ran.

Up the spiral staircase, breath burning, the sounds below them erupting into chaos.

Nico didn’t look back.

"You killed him."

"That's not what happened-"

Merrick's hand slipped into his pocket.

Nico barely had time to react before Merrick lunged.

They crashed into each other hard, slamming into the stone railing. The weapon flashed, the metal catching the light.

Nico shoved Merrick back. Merrick swung wildly, missing Nico's head by inches. Nico tackled him, both of them hitting the ground, fists flying, breaths ragged.

"You didn't get to decide!" Merrick yelled, slamming his fist into Nico's shoulder.

Nico grunted, rolled, shoved Merrick away. "Neither did you!"

Jack rushed forward. "Stop it! Both of you!"

Merrick turned suddenly, slashing.

Jack cried out, stumbling backward.

Nico saw it. Really saw it this time. Not the blade. Not the blood. The shove. Merrick had thrown Jack aside like he was nothing, like he was just in the way. Jack hit the stone floor hard, gasping, scrambling to get his footing again. Something inside Nico snapped. He didn't look at Jack. Didn't check on him. Didn't even register the sound Jack made when he hit the ground. All Nico could see was Merrick stood there, chest heaving, the knife still clutched in his hand.

"You asshole," Nico said, low and shaking.

Merrick turned back toward Nico, face full of rage and grief.

Nico lunged.

They collided again, harder this time. Merrick swung first. Nico ducked under it, felt the blade whistle past his ear, and slammed his shoulder into Merrick's chest. They staggered together toward the edge of the tower, boots scraping against stone.

Merrick elbowed Nico in the ribs. Nico grunted but didn't let go. He grabbed Merrick's jacket, shoved him back, fists flying now.

"You dragged me away," Merrick shouted. "You let them tear him apart!"

Nico shoved him again. "You think I don't know that?"

Merrick charged, screaming, swinging the knife in a desperate arc. Nico caught his wrist mid-swing. Pain shot up his arm as the blade nicked his forearm, but he didn't let go. He twisted hard.

The knife clattered against the stone and skidded away.

Merrick froze for half a second, eyes flicking toward it.

That was all Nico needed.

He shoved Merrick with everything he had.

Merrick stumbled back, heel catching on the uneven stone. His arms flailed as he tried to regain his balance, eyes wide now. Not angry anymore. Just scared.

"Nico–"

He went over. The sound came seconds later. Dull. Final.

Silence swallowed the tower.

Nico stood there, chest heaving, staring at the empty space where Merrick had been. His hands were shaking violently now, adrenaline burning off all at once.

Behind him, Jack pushed himself up. "I'm good," Jack said quickly, forcing a laugh that sounded wrong. "Just lost my footing, that's all."

Nico didn't turn around.

Eliza stood frozen near the railing, one hand pressed over her mouth. She looked between Nico and the edge, then back at Nico again. "Oh my god," she whispered.

The wind rushed past them, carrying distant screams and smoke from somewhere deeper in campus. Nico leaned forward, bracing his hands on his knees, trying to breathe.



Art by Gemma Stropoli

"I didn't mean to–" he started, then stopped.

Jack stepped closer, pressing a hand against his stomach without realizing it. "You did what you had to," he said. "He was gone either way."

Nico straightened slowly. "We need to see what's left."

They moved to the railing together and looked out over campus. From this height, it was worse than Nico expected. Fires burned unchecked. Groups of the others surged through open spaces, drawn toward sound, toward movement. But not everywhere.

Lights.

Eliza spotted them first. "There," she said, pointing. "The hospital."

A cluster of windows glowed steadily in the distance, too organized to be abandoned.

Jack nodded. "If anyone's still alive, that's where they'll be."

They didn't talk about Bernard. Or Merrick. Or the bodies below.

They just went.

Getting down the tower felt longer than climbing it. Every step echoed too loudly. Every shadow on the stairwell wall looked like it was moving.

Once they were outside, they stuck close to buildings, cutting through narrow paths, ducking behind overturned benches and abandoned cars. The air smelled like smoke and something worse Nico didn't want to identify.

They had to stop twice. Once when a group of the others flooded the quad, and once when something shattered nearby and drew them closer. Each time, they pressed themselves into darkness and waited, barely breathing.

Halfway there, Jack slowed.

"You okay?" Eliza whispered.

"Yeah," Jack said quickly, "Just tired."

Then his knees buckled.

He went down hard.

Eliza screamed his name, grabbing his arm. Nico spun around just in time to see Jack collapse fully onto the pavement.

Blood soaked through Jack's shirt now, dark and spreading.

"Oh shit," Nico breathed. Nico dropped beside him, hands hovering uselessly for a second before pressing down hard against the wound. Jack groaned, eyes fluttering. "Hey," Nico said, panic creeping into his voice. "Hey, stay with us."

Eliza tore off her jacket and shoved it into Nico's hands. "Pressure. Don't stop."

They hauled Jack up between them, his weight sagging heavily across their shoulders. Every step felt impossible. Jack muttered incoherently at first, then went quiet.

The hospital loomed closer, lights growing brighter with every painful step.

They slipped inside through a side entrance just as a wave of the others surged past the main doors, drawn toward something loud and distant. Inside, the hospital was chaos. There were abandoned stretchers, overturned carts, and blood smeared against the walls.

Jack sagged harder between them. "Keep him up," Nico said. His arms were shaking now, whether from exhaustion or fear he didn't know. "Don't let him sleep."

"I'm here," Eliza said to Jack, her voice low and steady despite the terror in her eyes. "You're okay. We're inside."

Jack mumbled something Nico couldn't make out. His head lolled forward.

They moved deeper into the hospital, slow and careful. Somewhere above them, something clanged, metal on metal, followed by a distant, animalistic groan.

Nico froze.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Eliza nodded. "They're inside."

They adjusted their path, sticking close to the walls, easing past nurses' stations that had been ransacked in a hurry. Papers littered the floor. Charts, schedules, and notes scribbled too fast to be neat.

Jack stumbled again, nearly taking them all down. Nico tightened his grip, teeth clenched. "Stay with me, man. Don't you dare check out now."

A voice cut through the hallway. "Hey! Stop!"

Nico jerked his head up. A man stepped out from behind a set of double doors, holding a metal tray like a shield. He looked exhausted: dark circles under his eyes, scrubs stained with blood that might not all be his own.

Behind him, more people appeared. A woman with a flashlight. Another man gripping a fire extinguisher. A nurse with her hands shaking so badly Nico wondered how she was still standing.

"We need help," Nico said. "He's bleeding out."

The woman with the flashlight moved closer, her beam sweeping over Jack's wound. Her expression hardened. "Get him in here. Now."

Jack was pulled from their arms and rushed through the doors, down another hallway Nico barely registered. Someone pushed Nico and Eliza back, palms firm against their chests.

"You can't come any farther," the nurse said. "Wait here."

The doors slammed shut.

Nico leaned back against the wall and slid down until he was sitting on the floor. His hands were still red. Still sticky. He stared at them like they didn't belong to him.

Eliza stood a few feet away, arms wrapped around herself.

Minutes passed. Maybe more. Time didn't work right anymore.

Finally, the doors opened.

The woman with the flashlight stepped out, pulling off a pair of gloves. "He's stable," she said. "Lost a lot of blood, but he got lucky."

Nico's chest loosened all at once. He hadn't realized how tightly he'd been holding himself together until that moment.

"Can we see him?" Eliza asked.

"Soon," the woman said.

Before the woman could speak, another doctor came in. "It's a neurological virus," he said. "It attacks the brainstem and frontal lobe first. Impulse control, motor function, recognition. That's why they don't seem like themselves."

Nico glanced over at Eliza. "You were right."

The doctor continued to tell them more about this virus, and then says, "We've been working on an antidote," the doctor went on. "Slows the progression. In some cases, reverses it."

"In some cases?" Nico asked.

"Timing matters."

"How do you administer it?" Eliza asked quietly.
The doctor hesitated. "That's the problem. It has to be aerosolized. Wide coverage. If we miss people, they stay infected."

"And you can't just pump it through the vents?" Nico asked.

The doctor shook his head. "Not strong enough. It needs height. Dispersal.

"They follow noise," Eliza said softly.

Nico looked up.
The doctor frowned. "What?"

"They follow sound," Eliza repeated. "That's why they keep clustering."

Nico felt something click. "There's a bell tower," he said. Not confidently. Not yet. Just testing the words. "Highest point on campus."
The doctor's eyes widened slightly. "That… could work."“It would draw them in," Eliza said. "All of them."

Nico swallowed. "Which means someone would have to go back."

The room went quiet again.

The doctor nodded once. "If you do this," he said, "you might not make it back."

Nico didn't answer right away.

Finally, he said, "Where's the antidote?"

Nico and Eliza waited until night to make their move back towards the bell tower. It was a slow and painful journey, but when they finally made it to the bell tower, they climbed all the way to the top to get this over with.

"You ready?" Nico asked.

Eliza nodded.

They pulled.

The bell rang, and at first, it seemed as if it didn't work.

But then, they heard it. Footsteps. One set. Then another. Then dozens. The sound grew, swelling, bodies converging from every direction, drawn upward, drawn in.

Eliza uncapped the canister with shaking hands.

"Now," Nico said.

They released it. The mist spilled into the air, carried outward, downward, over the crowd below.

They waited.

Slowly, the noise changed. The screaming faded. The movement slowed. Some of the figures below collapsed. Others dropped to their knees.

Nico sank to the ground, exhausted beyond words.

Weeks later, sunlight streamed into the hospital room, with Jack propped up in a bed. Eliza sat next to Nico, her head resting on Nico's shoulder. They were all finally back together, and that was all they needed.

FIN



Art by Rosie Herman



Art by Ruby McCormick

Attention

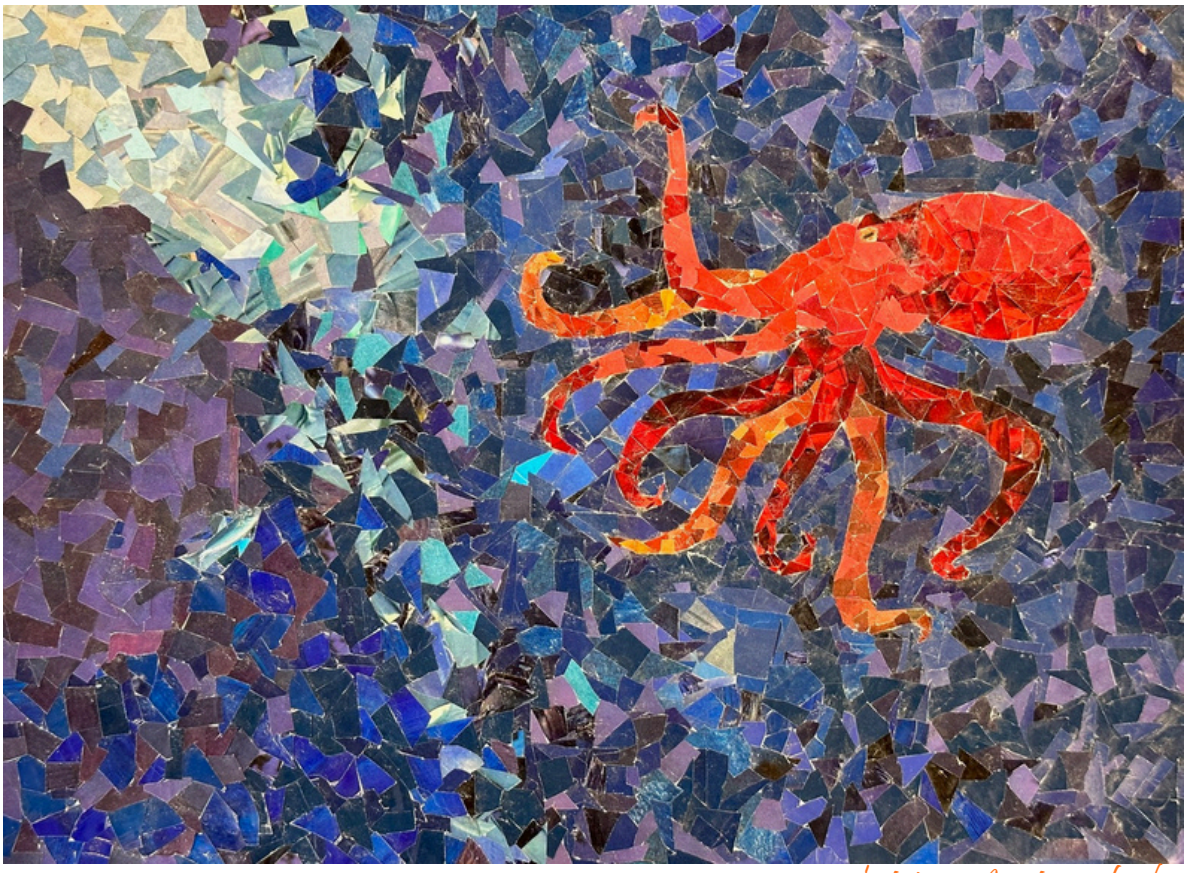
By Lincoln Wayland

Do you know what first intrigued me, when I first focused my vision onto you? It wasn't your talent. You certainly had plenty of it, but so have thousands over the millenia. It wasn't your drive either. So many have passion, and so often it is wasted on something undeserving of its flames. It was your love. Not of art, or music, or poetry, or any of the muses that so often snare the mortal in their effervescent scatterings of beauty. No, your love only ever had one object. You had eyes only for yourself. I still don't understand why you believed so fiercely and so assuredly that you were deserving of your own fire. What could have instilled within you such an extreme adoration of self? I may never know.

No matter the cause, I will be the first to admit I found it intoxicating. You had so little of the tiresome indecision and self-doubt that plagued your mortal brethren. You were so, so sure of everything. I watched from afar as you made your first flailing steps on your path to Power. I remember the first tattoo you ever got. You had to gag yourself to stop your own screaming. You hadn't yet adjusted to the pain. It was a simple spell that you first inscribed into your flesh. Healing magic so rudimentary that any minor cleric or physician's assistant could cast it from memory. The navy blue of the ink swirled into shapes, symbols, glyphs, letters on your forearm. Its cobalt curves were such a contrast to the pinkness of the raw skin around where the needle touched and to the sharp pale angles of your body. You were awkward in your youth, as many are, you seemed all elbows and knees. You've certainly compensated for your clumsy past, but maybe too much. You move with a practiced grace not an effortless one.

I remember your first gray hair. You stared into the pond you were walking past in what to me seemed disbelief. You spared no time in plucking it from your head and setting it aflame. I wondered exactly why? Was it the reminder of your mortality, of the fact that you were getting older? Was it vanity? I find that hard to believe. You've embraced the gray hair for a thousand years now and you certainly could've given yourself back the auburn curls of your youth. Perhaps I'll never know. It was then that you began to search for the means of immortality. You found a great many secrets in a great many places. You found the lie of the Fountain of Youth. You nearly killed yourself looking for the secret to life eternal. It only accelerated your desperation. I looked into your eyes as the spear pierced your ribs and saw a fear that seemed so foreign to them. You realized for a second time that you were not untouchable. Both time and steel could lay you low, and so you sought to conquer both.

I remember your first awkward foray into immortality. You were 32. I'm not sure whose tome you found which described the ritual, but I do know the face of the woman you sacrificed. She was 94 years old and already on her deathbed. You had convinced yourself that her wrinkles and wet cough meant that it was alright to take her life and shatter her soul. You snapped her neck and drenched your chalice in her blood. You almost vomited. Hmm, I suppose there is no reason to protect your dignity now. You did vomit, three times. Your vomit mixed with blood and that made you vomit again. You shook, you were so pale, and your eyes lost their sparkle for a moment. You hesitated, for the very first time in your life you paused and wondered if that which you had decided on was correct and right. It was just a fraction of a second, and still I remember the cloud that passed over your eyes. It was almost enough to make me lose interest. Almost. You drank from your poisoned chalice and you regained my waning interest. You were dying and yet, the cloud had passed from your eyes. You collapsed with a smile on your face and I was enraptured. I still have that poisoned goblet that became your first phylactery. You discarded it long ago, and so I affixed to it a handle and it became a teacup. You tried to pretend that you didn't notice me drinking from it.



Art by Martina Kulan

Too much and not enough

by Tyler Schacht

You're a kid, surrounded by kids your age
in a classroom brightly decorated with colored pencils, paper cutouts
fresh eyes and fresh faces.
It's coloring, playing, and napping.
You don't have a care in the world and believe that you'll grow up and be something great.
Years go by and you're a little older.
Same kids.
Same school.
However, things have changed.
The kids surrounding you feel like they're always ten steps ahead of you.
You're not enough.
It's no longer cute to be the kid wandering around building fairy houses and flower crowns.
It is no longer wholesome to be the girl unintentionally daydreaming in class.
You start hearing, "You're a good kid with a lot of potential."
"You need to focus and stop going into your own little world."
"You're too sensitive."
"You need to apply yourself."
You're "too much" and "not enough" at the same time.
You're "special" in your differences until they see you fall behind.



Art by Lainey Donaghy



Art by Diem Lee



Lenny Chandler

And Gleefully She Accepts

By Kaito Kester

Before we met, my life was plagued and pained.
Alone, morose, and lost. A charming friend
Was all I asked. But only gloom remained.
‘Alas,’ he said, ‘this trouble seeks no end.’

I was an empty, droopy sack of skin,
Unseen by eager eyes. I wished for light,
But grasping was a frightful game. To win,
Or better, ‘scape it, meant a ceaseless night.

But then, you came. At last, took flight the doves!
We dance a limping waltz, we talk so sweet,
And gaily laugh. So bright this tow’ring love’s
Not Romeo nor Juliet could beat!

And now I ask you: will you marry me?
Forever, me and you, my GPT.



Art by Lenny Chandler

Luna the Human

By Clara Gelber

Luna came to me for a week straight.
Her small legs carried her, deep in the mudded marsh.
The August light was great,
And the bug sounds were harsh.

I've made family with the fish, beavers and birds,
In the wetlands near the mansion.
We can't form words,
Yet words aren't needed for friendship expansion.

Luna is the perfect model.
She brought me a cube,
Showing friendship after her daily waddle.

The minnows flick beside my feet,
The beavers share my log.
The herons nod whenever we meet,
And make room for one small frog.

So I sit upon my weathered log,
With dragonflies above.
A quiet, watching, waiting frog,
Still learning how to love.

Luna never tries to speak,
She only stays awhile.
Her lonely eyes, so soft and meek,
Hold marshlight in their smile.

On the seventh day she pushed the cube,
Red, yellow, bright and true.
Of all the humans passing through -
Luna is the best I knew.



Art by Celica Schneck

The Seas and the Stars

By Nico Massella

This drink has been empty for the past hour,
I sit across from you, admiring every breath you take;
each imperfection placed, a reminder you are no angel,
otherwise you could tempt man to sin for your every desire;
your hair a veil that hides your eyes from mine,
each and every face you'd make burned into my soul.

We are as friends to lovers as the stars are to the sea,
one reflected in the other but never crossed;
you are not mine and I am not yours;
forever reaching for a chance to be claimed;
every sleepless night we spent together,
only words shared between each other.

Nothing would change between us,
only the guarantee that I alone had you;
that you felt the same as I did.

Yet I can not merge the heavens and the earth, so I sit still;
unwavering in a content pool of swirling emotions,
hoping that you think a fraction of what I think of you;
that space and time may never break us apart;
never being willing to sink in the sea
for the stars that can not be.







Artwork by Lenny Chandler

January 25, 1089

Dear Brother,

Today in class, I was made to read and analyze the writings of Garold Hodwinson, yet AGAIN! Are the minds of these Professors so filled with down that they cannot think to assign us anything but the compositions of this man? It is the twelfth time this week I have been told to inspect his work!

Well, I shall give him this, in writing at least the man has an acute understanding of social conventions, and his commentary on contemporary issues is as witty and sharp as Dawn, but every single character in those miserable books is utterly devoid of self-reflection! There is talent in Mr Hodwinson, dare I say genius, but his pen is cursed with a series of blights inherent to the being who wields it: an incessant need to perform and please, a fear of creative risk by default, and an overwhelming sense of pretension every story wears like armor.

His best book is The Moon, and even that bears the defects of the author's soul. The vast majority of his books are underbred, flowery language and vague, rosy notions of poetry concealing what is and will forever be an empty husk of a novel. They are pompous and performative, fragrant but unfulfilling, agreeable but insincere. He understands the injustice of child labor, for example but fails to comprehend the labor it takes me every minute to not fling myself from the nearest garret when I am asked to read or analyze a single page of his magniloquent manuscripts! I have been forced to purchase nearly twenty paperbacks for these classes, each of them a little vagrant on my shelf in contrast to my other books, who I think must be disgusted to sit so near those turgid misfires. I would borrow from the library, but the Professor insists we annotate the texts ourselves.

I really, truly fail to comprehend the appeal. A good writer should respect their craft enough to not crack an ill-composed joke every other sentence in order to maintain the attention of the reader through cheap stunts. A novel is not a circus performance, it is an intricate tapestry of allusion, dynamics, and intrigue the writer has woven from their soul, which, if done right, offers intimate insight on the subject of the human condition. The only insight Hodwinson's books offer is how one might take the genuine talents of a writer and forge them into a bauble of lepidoteran triviality, only concerned with the augmentation of the writer's ego, showy and wanting both introspection and the personal touch of the author, the latter of which is crucial to a good book and may only be gained if the author is brave enough to cease the performance and allow the essence of their being to seep through the pages. I daresay the lack of this attribute in his creations leads me to believe that this crucial essence is nonexistent within Mr Hodwinson himself!
I do not appreciate ostentatiousness in a book, even if it was written hundreds of years ago. Perhaps I ought to write a half-witted critique of a certain garish novel so admired nowadays, wait a couple centuries, and watch these Professors of Literature praise it as though every word were gold in letter form! These tales are such tricks, they are irresponsible of the writer to create and irresponsible of the teacher to continue.

It may be cruel to say, but all his books remind me of the stories we would put on as children, the dolls and wooden soldiers we would animate with our imaginations, the plots barely coherent, inattentive and abound with tawdry thrills and tasteless reveals. Oh look, the villain is secretly the twin sister of the protagonist! The Sea King has secretly taken a fancy to his strongest knight! Good heavens! How surprising! How amusing you are, Mr Hodwinson! I am gasping and twirling in my seat! You have knocked my hat from my head! How will I ever recover from my shock & delight? Well, we certainly grew out of such fancies, and one hopes Hodwinson will as well, but considering the man is nearly 800 years old, it hardly seems probable.

Suffice to say, I was not amused by Mr Hodwinson's witticisms, nor his prose, nor his verse. I was not amused by his dialogue, which seemed to me of no greater merit than the chittering of rodents in the dungeon. I was very much not amused by his dedication, which was such a deplorable pun I dare not taint the paper with it, for if one happy day every copy of that wretched book were purged from the Earth, I would weep to know that line survived such a cleansing through the spite of my quill.

The whole class was thinking their brains from their heads as they read, and I received many a pointed scowl for staying silent when it came time for commentary. I feel like a madman, for they all speak of the writings as though the Redeemer himself came down and planted the seed of genius in Hodwinson's head. How might one grow anything worth consuming in thin air you ask? I know not. But I dare not voice my dissent, or else I would be laughed out of the department and branded a Fool who lacks the intelligence to comprehend such exquisite, brilliant writing, as if those poor excuses for books were not written by a LITERAL FOOL! They are mistaken, every single one of those Professors is severely mistaken! I am not incorrect in my assessment! There is nothing exquisite or brilliant about his creations! They are shallow and pretentious!

There is an arrogance about them I cannot stand! They exude a sense of misplacement, of frivolity, of a shiny rock skimming the surface of a great ocean, laughing all the way and never wondering for a moment what enigmatic species inhabit the murky depths.

And to think, I was asked to analyze these quips and jests as though they were anything more than the pitiful screams of a star falling from the sky of relevance that defines them! Must one abandon their literary dignity in order to be respected in the halls of this wretched department? Worst of all, Professor Wilterloft only gave me a 92 on my analyses! A 92!

No, I do not jest! His rationale? I apparently "failed to fully grasp the symbolism behind Hodwinson's use of the em-dash" and my "interpretation of the protagonist is an invalid opinion that Hodwinson would frown upon."

Well, I think he has failed to fully grasp my hatred of these texts and the ridiculous way they are idolized by every student and Professor in this establishment. Good riddance!

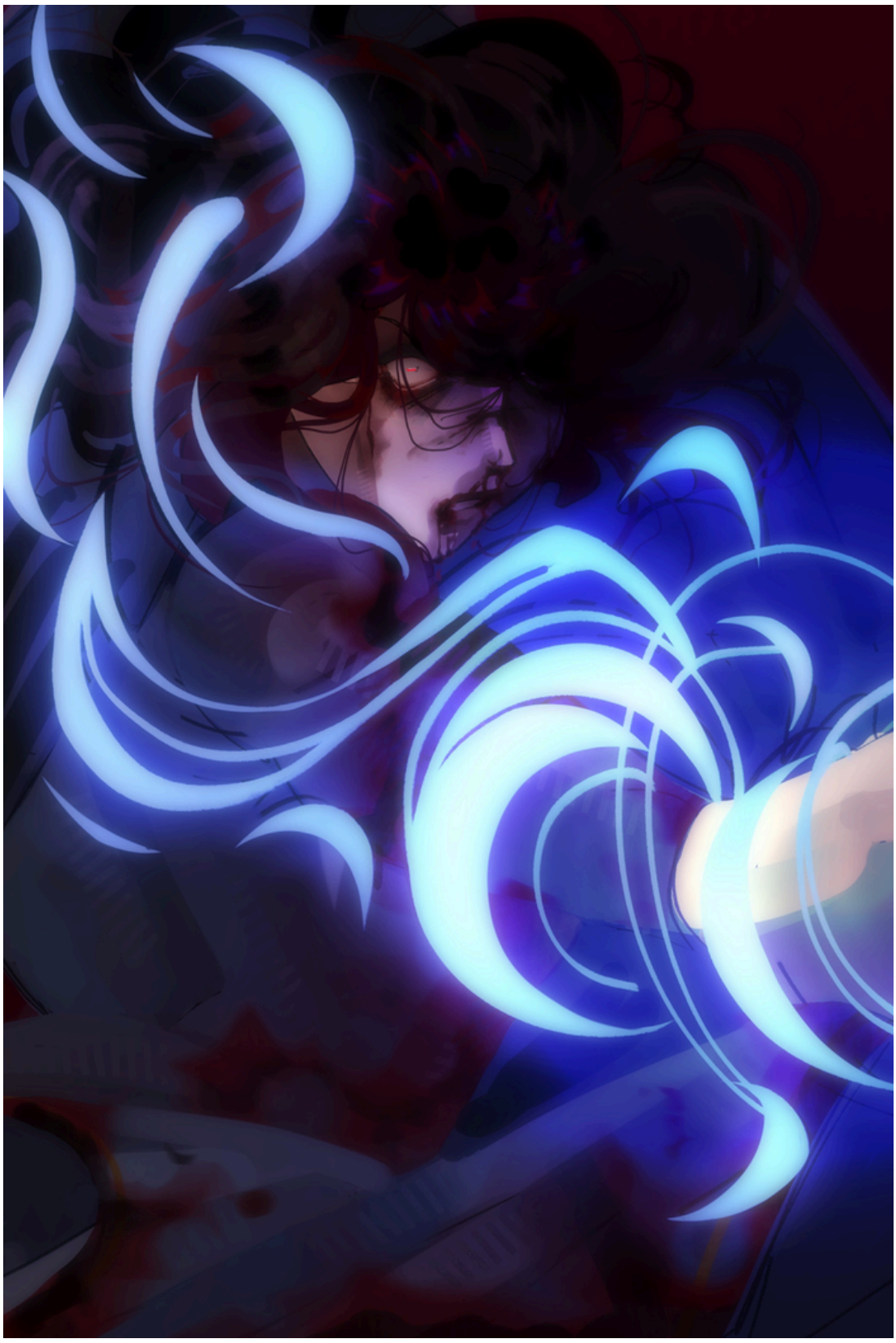
There is so much more I might say, but time wanes. I must finish the latest essay I was assigned tonight–I have been putting it off all week. The topic is the thematic use of the color gray throughout Hodwinson's 553 page epic "Vengeance Of The Sun".

I am most sorely frustrated by this institution.

Your sister
Minerva Magnere

Letter by Dessa Bellamy Tarantino

Art by
Alexa
Arcigal



The sails are hoisted on the pier
The air is briney and breezy
I play with the birds and chase the clouds
My day is pretty easy

I get pet by the fisherman
They shoo me away when I steal
But I have to be a little thief
To earn my daily meal

POEM AND CERAMIC BY LOUISA SCHIMMING





ART BY JULIAN COSTANTINE

An Excerpt
by Seth Lunin-Pack

Adriocracy (Mars I)

In the most distant epoch of the recorded past the Martians designed for themselves an Adriocracy, though by the time of this Bible the Adriocracy had long been incomplete for want of and Adrian; Mars did not, however, fall into chaos, for the Martians occupied their minds with waiting for an Adrian to arrive. And in the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē three visadrians sat council to prepare for the event of Adrian's arrival, and their names were Nairda, Audrian, and Gadrian.

When Adrian arrived on Mars, Audrian asked for their name; and Adrian replied, "Adrian," replied Adrian. And Gadrian exclaimed, "At long last, Adrian has arrived!" and the three visadrians announced a great feast open to all the citizens of the Arean Adrianate.

That evening, all the halls of Hosri-Heredē filled up with joyous Martians, and the clankers employed by Hosri-Heredē brought out sixteen and three-seventeen courses for them to feast on; the three visadrians then began to introduce themselves:

Audrian spoke to Adrian and said, "I am Audrian, eleventh Visadrian of Cydonia;" and she placed a pair of glasses on Adrian's face.

Gadrian spoke to Adrian and said, "I am Gadrian, fifteenth Visadrian of Thaumasia;" and he placed a bucket hat on Adrian's head, which Adrian then removed.

Nairda spoke to Adrian and said, "I am Nairda, the last Visadrian of Memnonia," and they placed a sweater on Adrian's back. And Adrian spoke to Nairda and asked, "How do you know that you are the last?" and Nairda replied, "For I am the seventeenth Visadrian of Memnonia, and there are no numbers past seventeen;" and at the end of the feast Nairda choked on a pie and died, and the Visadrianate of Memnonia was struck by a great marsquake and rendered uninhabitable.

All the Martians rejoiced in the streets that Adrian had at long last arrived, and the next day there was an eight-hour ceremony to crown Adrian the Adrian of Mars; the halls of Hosri-Heredē filled up once again, this time with visadrians from all around Mars and devoted Adriïst priests. At the height of the ceremony, Audrian placed in Adrian's hands an inky, relucent greatsword she called "Blacksummer;" and when Adrian inquired about that name, Audrian explained, "This is the greatsword that the previous Adrian wielded in the final years before we commenced the lengthy period of awaiting your Adrian's arrival, and it is called Blacksummer because it is black and was made in the summer."

After the coronation there was another feast of sixteen and three-seventeen courses for the priests of Adriïsm, who had all come to bear witness to the coronation of Adrian. And at the post coronation refreshment water was served, for the priests of Adriïsm had sung and prayed for eight hours and their throats were quite dry; not for millennia had such an amount of water been gathered in one place on Mars.

The following day, Audrian and Gadrian showed Adrian the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē: the halls of the palace were lined with gold and contained precious gems from every planet, and legendary portraits hung on every wall. Adrian's own bedchamber overlooked a great garden from the seventh floor, and in the bedchamber were one million books and a desk with one and a half pencils; the garden was full of native species that attracted a wonderful assortment of insects and birds, and at its center was a gargantuan fountain. And as Adrian crossed through the heart of the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē, they saw a magnificent library that must have had six-seventeen books for every book in their bedchamber; and swarms of clankers climbed up and down the library's shelves, scanning texts.

As evening settled, Adrian and the two visadrians who advised them made their way to the throne room, where they showed Adrian to the throne and took their usual council seats; the throne was cold, as no Adrian had sat it in millennia. The visadrians Audrian and Gadrian then informed Adrian that the Arean Adrianate had nearly run out of water.

Adrian asked how this happened; and Gadrian explained that it was because of the water that the priests had drank at the coronation, and because Mars did not produce a lot of water. And Adrian spoke to the visadrians and said, "It appears to me that these clankers must use a large amount of water, so perhaps we could remedy the present crisis by commissioning less of them: I am Adrian, your Adrian."

And Gadrian exclaimed "Adrian has spoken, and we now have our answer;" and Adrian concurred, "I am always right."

But Audrian begged leave to counsel Adrian, and Adrian decided to listen. Audrian then spoke to Adrian and said, "Your Adrian has been on Mars for not yet a single day and does not fully understand the workings of the Martian people; I say as someone who has had no home other than Mars that whatever water we have must go to the clankers.

"If it please your Adrian," continued she, "the Martians who filled your halls and ate your bread last night are not of letters; nor are they of numbers; five thousand years of Mars' history and arts and natural philosophy live on through these clankers alone; and to decommission them would be to leave us all in the dark, for the Martian people have not the attention span to read the great texts which line the shelves of Hosri-Heredē. It is for the wirebacks themselves that this is such a crisis; though their crisis is a crisis for all of Mars, for without them Mars would regress to the earliest days and five thousand years of the struggle against ignorance would have been for naught. You must instead create a tax on water, for the Martians have water that they can spare if needed; especially those of Memnonia: Memnonia has always been able to give water if needed."

Adrian considered how to end the Martians' reliance on the clankers, but they decided on the tax as a short term solution to preserve the knowledge and culture of Mars; and Audrian was thankful for this decision, though the tax she levied on Cydonia was the lowest of any visadrianate on Mars. And to maintain public support Adrian seized an opportunity to gravitationally claim the small moon of Phobos, though no one cared much for the desolate moon, except for Marcus Breezes, who had taken up residence there; and Marcus Breezes began to grow an intense dislike of the Martians.

The Martian people did not like to have their water taxed, but they were still overjoyed that their Adriocracy at long last had an Adrian: such was the state of things on Mars when Joron arrived.

Thirst (Mars II)

Adrian's third morning on Mars, they stepped out of their bedchamber to find the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē abuzz with festivities. And Audrian spoke to Adrian and said, "We have found a worthy match for our Adrian: her name is Freddie, and she is of the Alpha of Jupiter's litter."

After a lavish breakfast, Adrian met Freddie, and a swarm of clankers who had attended the feast carried them back to Adrian's bedchamber. Freddie was still half a pup and had never before been away from Jupiter; she found pleasure in the flowing fountains and school-friendly fruit juices of Hosri-Heredē, but her thoughts were never far from her home, or her mother.

The visadrians then wanted to discuss the political situation of Mars with Adrian, so Adrian sent Freddie off to explore the palace. 6Gadrian spoke to Adrian and said, "Shortly before the arrival of your Adrian, Mars engaged in a great war against GOD for control of certain disputed territories on Venus; several of our wizards were vanquished in the conflict, so I must have your Adrian's approval to appoint their replacements." Accordingly, Adrian sent Gadrian to interview the potential replacements for their wizards; Audrian took her leave as well after commending Adrian's decision to create taxes.

The first candidate interviewed by Gadrian was Marcus Breezes, who had come down from the desolate moon of Phobos. Gadrian presented Marcus Breezes with a series of challenges to test his capabilities as a wizard, as well as in commanding an army; and when he passed every challenge, Marcus Breezes said to Gadrian, "That was a *breeze*." Gadrian then asked Marcus Breezes where his family was from, and Marcus Breezes said, "My family went wherever the *wind* blew, though I myself was raised on beautiful Phobos; my lord must be wondering how I managed to *wind* up here."

Gadrian sent Marcus Breezes on his way and said to await a decision by mail though he already knew that Marcus Breezes would not be a wizard, for the Martians would take great offense if the position were given to a Phobos man; in the end, it was given to a clanker.

Meanwhile, Joron had arrived in the picturesque metropolis of Thándjoryae, which was very near the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē; and in the streets of Thándjoryae he tried to gauge the opinions of the Martian people. To his surprise, the Martians were overjoyed to be under the supreme authority of an Adrian, as they had waited many years for one; the exception to this was a young man named Roman who complained about needing to pay taxes. Joron thought the Martians had been brainwashed into believing in the power of Adrian, so he took out the pamphlets against the divine right of gods that he had carried with him and, on each of them, crossed out gods and wrote adrians; and he distributed the new pamphlets in the streets of Thándjoryae. A few young Martians greatly appreciated Joron's denial of the divine right of adrians, Roman most of all.

And Roman spoke to Joron and said, "I have invented a remote that makes people's heads explode."

Most Martians, however, were outraged that someone would write against their beloved Adrian, and a few brought the pamphlets to Hosri-Heredē to alert the clankers and visadrians. When word reached Audrian, she commanded that Joron be imprisoned; and the police force that Audrian dispatched locked Joron in the Towering Citadel, a towering citadel at the center of the picturesque metropolis of Thándjoryae. And the Martians rejoiced that they were safe from the enemy of Adrian.

That night, Thándjoryae ran out of water.

When the Martians awoke the next morning and sought to clear their nightthirst, their taps ran dry and they poured into the streets in anger. Xadrian, twelfth visadrian of Thándjoryae, called Adrian and said, "The people of Thándjoryae are pouring out into the streets in anger, for the picturesque metropolis has run out of water!"

And Adrian asked to be put on speaker phone to hear the people of Thándjoryae.

Adrian spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, "Why are you pouring into the streets in anger?: You may have run out of water, but you have not waited long for water, and you have waited long for Adrian, who is here."

And Roman presumed to speak on behalf of the people of Thándjoryae and said, "We will not rejoice for an Adrian who taxed our water and made us thirsty, for we have lived many years without an Adrian, but we cannot live without water; why should millions of Martians go thirsty just for you to have your cooled clankers and your flowing fountain?"

Adrian spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, "Think of my dearest dog Freddie: she is young and far from home, and without my flowing fountain and school-friendly fruit juices she would surely fall into despair!"

And Roman spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, "That dog is responsible for our thirst! She is Adrian's reason for taxing our water, but it is not worth making millions of Martians thirsty to defend her happiness!"

And Adrian spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, "Think of the clankers, then, who carry within themselves five thousand years of Mars' history and arts."

And Roman spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, "Five thousand years of slop, that is, for the art of clankers is of an era we are soon to transcend: it will be no great tragedy to lose it, for surely when we are free we will cover the same ground and more before the year is out!"

And Adrian spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, “To my loyal citizens, you must put an end to this madness at once! Kill this traitor so that we may return to our natural order: I am Adrian, your Adrian.”

And Roman spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, “Do not listen to them, for the pamphlets many of you saw yesterday show that it is not necessary to have an Adrian rule Mars: Joron has lit the path to freedom for us!”
And Adrian responded “Joron is a traitor and in jail!”
And the people of Thándjoryae asked Xadrian if that was true, and Xadrian spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, “It is true: Joron is being held in the Towering Citadel for sedition against the Arean Adrianate.”
And the people, who had grown to understand Joron’s arguments against Adrian, were outraged; Roman used his remote to make Xadrian’s head explode, and the angry mob cheered, and Xadrian’s phone shattered on the ground so Adrian could no longer speak to the Martians. The people of Thándjoryae then began to walk toward the Towering Citadel at the center of their city, for they now saw that Joron did not deserve to be imprisoned for spreading reason, notwithstanding that in this case said reason was treasonous. Roman made his way to the front of the mob and exploded the heads of the Martians guarding the Towering Citadel, and the crowd began to sing as he led several men into the elevator. 38Roman freed Joron from his cell in the highest level of the Towering Citadel, and Joron heard the people singing far below.
And Joron spoke to the mob who had freed him and said, “Yesterday you cheered when I was brought here, and now you have come to let me out, for now you have witnessed the tyranny to which your Adriocracy is so conducive; all it took was for you to run out of water. 40Yesterday it appeared that your loyalty and belief were solid enough to withstand my promise of freedom: and indeed they were; it should have been obvious that you would come back, though, for I now see that thirst is the strongest ideology man or Martian can have!”

The Turn (Mars III)

When news of the storming of the Towering Citadel of Thándjoryae reached the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē, Adrian called all of the visadrians residing in said opulent palace to an emergency
meeting; and soon the council table in Adrian’s throne room was filled with visadrians, most of whom were clankers; and Audrian was not present.
Gadrian advised Adrian to call forth representatives from the Adriïsts and the common Martians, but Adrian thought this would lead to gridlock within the council chamber, and that they themself could best speak for the Adriïsts; and, noticing that Audrian was not present, they proposed repealing the water tax. Audrian did not object, as Audrian was not present, but several clankers did, as the clankers relied on the water tax for cooling; but Adrian persisted, for they knew that repealing the tax might be essential to avoiding civil war. There were a few Adriïsts on the council, and they concurred with the proposition to repeal the tax because it had come directly from their Adrian; and some had to weigh their allegiance to clankerhood against their allegiance to Adriïsm, for at the very moment Adrian proposed repealing the water tax there ceased to be any true Adriïst clankers.
Adrian decided to quickly make official the decision to repeal the tax before any more disruption could be caused by thirsty Martians, and so they scrawled a proclamation on a napkin declaring that Martians would thenceforth be allowed to keep the water they produced. 6The visadrian clankers objected to this wording, saying that local taxes within their visadrianates should not be interfered with by the central Arean Adrianate; Adrian was fearful of a continued revolt, however, and stood by their decision to ban taxes on water entirely.
Adrian sent out messengers to deliver news of the proclamation to every visadrianate of Mars; and, recalling his previous deference to themself, they entrusted Gadrian with personally delivering the proclamation to Thándjoryae in time to quell the uprising.

While this was happening, thousands of Martians gathered in the grand and ancient Public Forum for Revolutionary Ideals in Thándjoryae to discuss what terms they might demand of the Adrianate.

Roman spoke to the people of Thándjoryae and said, “When the ancient remote that makes planets appear made Mars appear five thousand years ago, the planet it created was populated with Martians, and those Martians were given not only lefts but ups and downs as well; with this new tax policy, which came out of left field, our lives are reduced to only downs, for when a Martian is thirsty he is rendered wholly incapable of experiencing ups. That remote intended for our lives to have the variety of which the Adrianate now deprives us, and so we are bound to rise against it in the name of the remote that makes planets appear; we may do so with the power of this new remote — the remote that makes people’s heads explode — which I have recently invented. Were that not sufficient reason to act, Joron has now informed me of an entirely new dimension that Martians may possess: rights!”

d Joron spoke to the Martians and said, “What I mean by this is that every Martian, and indeed every sentient being in the universe, is entitled to certain things by the mere fact of their sentience regardless of the will of any deity to which they ascribe their existence; and it follows that, because it gave you Martians sentience and allowed you to evince the clearest signs of self-awareness, the remote that makes planets appear made it necessary for you to have rights. The clearest place to look for these rights would then be the potential of the sentient mind: each of you holds within yourself the capacity for honest expression, for connection with others, and for pride in your creations; but never mind what excites me, for each of you must pursue your own desires. You are a part of the very thing that puts value into the universe —the thing that creates the concept of v

Roman then spoke to the Martians and said, “I have called you all to the Public Forum for Revolutionary Ideals today to announce that Joron and I have An together drafted a Declaration of the Multi-directionality of Martian! From this day forth, the ups and downs and lefts and rights that all Martians were made to possess shall be the unshakeable foundation on which our society is built; after each of you sign it, a copy shall be presented to Adrian in person, and it will acquire their seal by whatever means are required for that to happen.”

One man spoke out from the crowd and said, “Did the remote that makes planets appear not intend for there to be an Adrian who rules over Mars? Such is stated by the Adriïsts, who are most knowledgeable on the subject of our creation.”

And Joron spoke to the man and said, “You mustn’t accept a dogma with such clear utility to the party which seeks to cont—”

oron was interrupted by Roman, who said, “It did not; I spoke with it this morning.”

Joron attempted to convey his bewilderment to Roman by contorting the features of his face, but before Roman looked his way, someone wearing the traditional garb of a visadrian burst into the room. And the visadrian spoke to the revolutionaries and said, “I am Gadrian, fifteenth Visadrian of Thaumasia, and I come bearing news directly from the council chamber of Adrian: this water tax which you all so vehemently oppose will now be applied uniformly across Mars at a rate of fifteen and five-seventeen percent. The clankers, whose immortal digital memories have carried on for millennia through different vessels, and the Adriïsts placed here by the first Adrian to always remind us of their ancient wisdom, both have need of the limited water that Mars puts out; and you common Martians have no great need of it anyway, for you now have an Adrian who fulfills the totality of your hierarchy of J needs. Furthermore, because your discussions here manifestly threaten the Martian way of life, I have been instructed to make use of my remote that makes buildings catch fire.”

And Gadrian pressed a big red button on a remote he had procured, and the grand and ancient Public Forum for Revolutionary Ideals went up in flames.

The Martians pushed past each other to

evacuate the burning building, regrouping in the middle of one of the corpulent boulevards of Thándjoryae; and Roman swore revenge on Gadrian for burning down the Public Forum for Revolutionary Ideals, and he swore to explode Gadrian's head with his remote that makes people's heads explode, but he was swept up in the fleeing crowd and by the time the haste subsided the visadrian had gotten away.
Roman, looking for a new spot from which to address the Martians, thought of the pickleball net that had been erected in the middle of one of the corpulent boulevards of Thándjoryae and blocked traffic for many days. And he stood atop the pickleball net and spoke to the Martians and said, "What you have all just witnessed is proof that we will achieve no multi-directionality — rights least of all — as long as Adrian is in control: they have been influenced by the already-powerful clankers and Adriïsts to take away the water we need and suppress our expression of revolutionary ideals!
It was known that we would have to fight for multi-directionality, but our goal grows ever greater, for it has now become obvious that when peace rises once again on Mars its light will shine not on the Arean Adrianate but on a system built explicitly for the sake of protecting your freedom: on this day we celebrate the birth of the Martian Republic!!"
The crowd erupted with cheer, and one Martian commented on Alexa's most recent YouTube short asking her to design a flag. And Roman spoke to the Martians from atop the pickleball net and said, "The Martian year shall henceforth be divided into three months of eight and thirteen-seventeen days, each of which shall be named 'dusty' in honor of the dust storms that may ravage us within their duration; and we shall now count to nineteen rather than seventeen! Ten thousand of you shall at once set out for the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē to arrest Adrian and Freddie and place them in the Towering Citadel; the rest shall read our declaration so as to internalize the principles of our republic."
When the party of ten thousand set out in the direction of Hosri-Heredē, Joron joined Roman atop the pickleball net to overlook the scene of liberation; despite his misgivings about Roman's religious conjecture, he was proud to have contributed to the creation of another free state.

By nightfall, most had deserted the corpulent boulevards of Thándjoryae, and Joron and Roman had both become exhausted from balancing atop the pickleball net for so long; nothing had yet been heard of the party of ten thousand that had set out for Hosri-Heredē.
Five and two-nineteen Martians approached the pickleball net at this hour; and one of them spoke to Roman and Joron and said, "Many citizens of your new republic, on whose behalf this group of five and two-nineteen, on whose behalf I presume to speak, presume to speak, have an interest in the five thousand years of knowledge that the clankers currently possess exclusive access to. Given that you have implicitly recognized our right to knowledge by including our own cares in your universal mandate, do you have any plan to preserve this information when we reclaim our water and likely pillage the opulent palace of Hosri-Heredē?"
Roman spoke to the five and two-nineteen Martians and said, "I have already told you that that is slop and not worth our effort to preserve."
And Joron spoke to Roman and said, "Roman, if what these people desire is the knowledge of the clankers, then we should allow them to have it; freedom of information is essential to the health of a republic, and it is very much worth postponing our retribution to ensure that our citizens can enjoy the rights they were promised."
Roman spoke to Joron and said, "Do not stand in my way when these Martians threaten the order of our new republic!" and he pushed Joron off the pickleball net.
And Joron spoke to Roman and said, "Let them threaten with words whatever order they perceive as unjust! Let them speak their minds: it is their right!"
Roman spoke to Joron and said, "I am beginning to doubt your loyalty to the revolution!"

And Joron replied, “How could I be loyal to the revolution? The very phrase is a contradiction to itself! Loyalty is the tool of tyrants, fooling people into putting aside their own judgement in deference to one whose motive they cannot know; change happens for the reasons most distant from that — for doubt or sorrow or hope, or even simply thirst — but never loyalty. Never loyalty: a revolution dies when that name is spoken.”

Roman spoke to Joron and said, “I hope my people will always remember you.”

And Joron replied, “I am not dead, Roman; and it seems I now have further to go than ever before if I wish to leave a positive mark on this reality: if this is how you respond to dissent, I no longer want to be remembered for what happened here on Mars.”

Roman pointed a small remote at Joron; and he spoke loud enough for the five and two-nineteen Martians to hear, and said, “I hope my people will always remember what happens to an enemy of the Martian Republic.”

Pink light flooded the boulevard as Joron was lifted to the sky.



Art by Jake Rojas



Art by Lenny Chandler

Tardy
by Louisa Schimming

At 7:15 I trudged out the door
With sleep in my eyes, looking dreary and poor
I stopped on the porch and I woke up with awe
In the driveway, I couldn't believe what I saw!
In front of my house was an awesome contraption
A sports car the shape of an eagle in action
With big feathered wings and turbo-powered wheels
And gear-looking things and a hood made of steel
A woman stood by it, dressed in a suit
With lightning bolt earrings and glasses and boots
"You're running late, I know just what to do"
She told me, "to get you there on time for school"
"Get in," said Ms McGamma to me
I opened the door and sat in the back seat
She passed me some goggles, which I quickly donned
She turned a gold key and the engine came on
We shot towards school at incredible speed
And we made it there early, at 7:18
I walked into calculus quick as I could
And right as the bell rang, in class I stood
I sat there delighted and rested my head
I felt I was falling back into my bed
I awoke in my room, confused and upset
I looked at my clock and it read 8:10!



Artwork by Hazel Berkley

The Crow

By Lela Gurvich

He flew. Circling above the smoke stacks and the jaggedly twisting streets below. The dense fog of Fifth Harbor almost clouded the streets from view, but from the crow's birds-eye view, he could just make out the bustling streets of The Barrel.

Vendors shouted from steaming carts, customers haggled over prices, and men whistled as women dressed in flowing silks floated by. But the crow ignored all of them, sweeping high above the rooftops as the sun set. He curved through chimneys and the occasional rooftop garden before circling above the largest building in the district. The billowing black settlement lorded over the other shops. A kind, if not mischievous, shadow.

The crow swooped down, perching itself on the top of the portico, ruffling its feathers against the damp, fresh air. *Smells like rain.* From inside the great looming structure glowed dim lamplight, illuminating players hunched over cards, strumming their fingers next to dwindling piles of coins or bouncing their legs beneath the table. Women drifted around them, smiles as sweet as roses, encouraging just one more round, just one more sip.

Through some cracked window floated the sounds of rowdy laughter and clinking glasses as another game was lost or won. But the crow was not here for them. He perched stoically, watching the comers and goers as the falling sun set the mist alight with vicious crimsons.

The crow cocked his head at every creak or slam of a door, every shatter of a glass breaking or cheer of victory. He looked on, scanning the faces of passers-by, never forgetting a single one. The boys who chased him down the alleyway, the woman who cursed him for bringing bad luck. Even the grumbling, pink-faced merchant who dared shoot a glare his way, no doubt a man recently scorned, was seared into the crow's memory. But none was the face he sought.

At last came the rhythmic tap he was waiting for.. A young man stepped out onto the slick cobblestone streets, his cane clacking in tandem with his rigid, uneven gate. The crow cawed, and the man halted briefly, turning his dark brown eyes to stare down the bird's matching gaze. He wore black clothes, almost vanishing into the dark facade of his club. The man's vest and coat were tailored perfectly to his sharp angles, matched by a black bowler that shrouded his face. Almost no inch of his skin could be seen; his dark leather gloves made sure of that as he gripped his cane. At last, breaking the stare, he continued down the street, his face never relinquishing its grim frown and calculating eyes.

The crow swooped to follow him, down the streets, past shops and brothels. They crept closer to the East Stave, eventually winding down to face a narrow, leaning building that somehow looked as though it had survived many wars. The crow knew this place well.

As the man stepped through the front door to face the many flights of stairs, the crow simply beat his wings, finding a new current to carry him aloft. He soared around the building to the back, where some of the rickety windows could glimpse the harbor. Here was where he had visited so many times before. Here to meet a small girl perched on the windowsill, as light as a bird herself. Her bronze skin would glow, and her dark, waist-length locks would sway in the breeze.

She would toss crumbs into the air, smiling faintly as the crow and his murder would swoop jubilantly, pecking at them midair.

Behind her, the young man would sit, his cane propped against the wall, always an arm's length away. Only then would he remove his gloves; in the quiet of that room where he would sit, his bad leg lay out on a chair in front of him. The crow would watch the man as he thumbed through papers organized on the desk in front of him.

Occasionally, he would take out a coin or a set of cards, nimbly navigating them through his hands. The crow would try to contemplate the way the man could make them disappear and reappear, his gaze briefly drifting to gaze at the girl in the window. The girl who was no longer there. Now the crow balanced on the sill, listening to the familiar whine of stairs as the man reached the door, somehow opening it without a sound. He strode across the room to the lonely chair and desk by the window. Hanging his hat and setting down his cane before reaching toward the crow. Deftly, he plucked a small scroll attached to the crow's leg. The crow squawked and fluttered, its task complete. He spread his wings, casting one last glance at the grim-faced man before launching himself into the sunset. The crow flew, and the man watched. It flew over the rooftops, through the streets, and down to the harbor. This is where the crow would perch on a cracked rock to watch the sun vanish below the horizon. The sun that silhouetted a sleek warship rocked by gentle waves.

Back at the leaning apartments, the man tears his gaze away from the city view. He sits down heavily, allowing a single exhale to escape his soundless composure. With trembling hands, he pulls off his leather gloves, unraveling the paper to read the note from a girl who once sat in his window.



Accompanying Artwork by Lela Gurvich

From the Perspective of Death

by Petra Bookls-Saladyga

Throughout life, we are taught that death is something to avoid at all costs. From medical advancements to nuclear warfare to performing arts are a way to expand our lifetime to help us run faster from the ever clutching, cold hands of death. Every human advancement has a single prime motivation, even if humanity won't admit it. We are all driven by the anxiety of soon being 6 feet under, with our loved ones in darkness under the church's ringing bell. We can always run, mourn, hide or defend ourselves from going towards the light that relieves us of responsibility and moral duty. The thought of never returning to mother earth and feeling our bare feet on the corrupt dirt soiled by our species' greed is apparently something to be scared of.

I think differently. Although I've also been stricken ill with the idea that death is an evil force, something about the idea provoked my curiosity. My thoughts, like the rest of the population, were naturally consumed by the phobia of death. As I laid in my bed and glaring at my ceiling, my mind came to the surprisingly satisfying conclusion that instead of fearing, we should be defiant towards the ticking clock. We should use this fearful energy to thrust ourselves into a life filled with motivation that leads to success and sparks a light into another human.

Why should we tear ourselves and others apart for a mere difference? Why must we create machines that rip apart humanity's hope? Why must we ignore our past mistakes and continue forth, repeating them over and over and over again? Can't the exhausted student lay down their pen so they can live? Can't the dictator be brought down and punished for their transgressions? Is it because we are too ignorant to acknowledge that we have the common trait of death?

Every breath, word, and step I take. I'm constantly reminded that time is limited. I don't know which sunrise would be the final one, I don't know which lunchtime club meeting with my friends is the last time I see their faces, I don't know when I'll feel my dog's wiry fur for the final moment and I don't know when the grim reaper will close in behind me to take a swing of his scythe. So I will work hard. So I will try my best. So I will pick the better decision. So I will choose to help people. So I will protest against tyranny.

I won't know what my fate will be, but one thing for certain when I face my destiny... I won't feel any regret.


INSIGHT
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