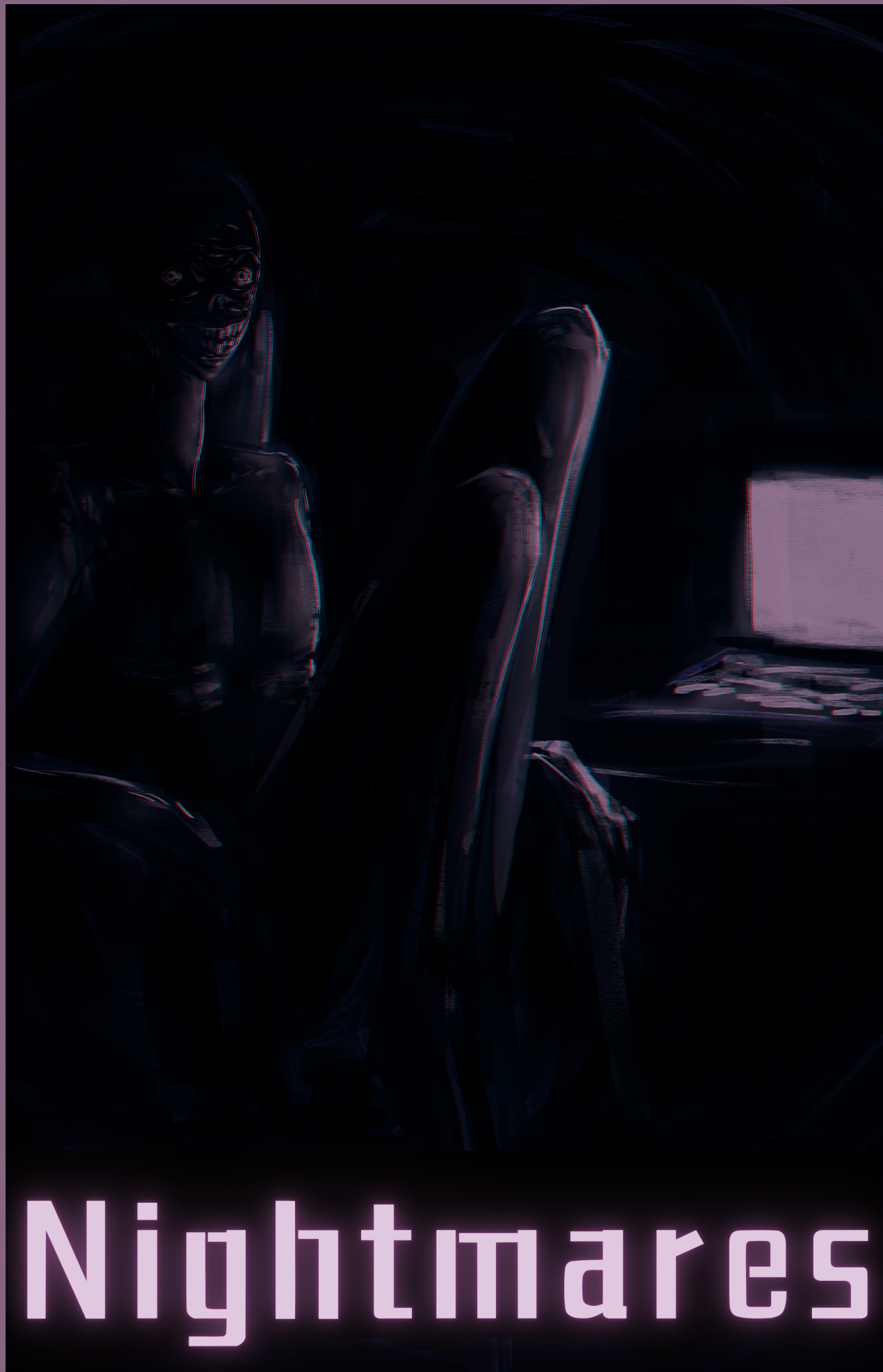


Whispers from the Wood:



Nightmares

Volume XIII: 2023-24

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Devil's Dream

Ryan Wood

Bound beneath the ground, under every sinner's soul, under heaven and earth,
I lay alone in the nadir, cradled by broken black wings.
From my inverted throne I am made to witness frightened children of God suffer till eternity grows old.
Life eternal to watch my fallen rebellion descend ever more,
To see souls burned to cinders and angels turned to demons.
They curse me through the epochs of torture, I who stood against our master, I who gave them another path,
it isn't my fault it led them here.
Still, to hear their cries of fear and see their tears of pain from my throne below haunts my broken heart.
I try to tell them there is no point in begging for escape,
That they cannot awaken from this nightmare,
But still they pray to their oppressor.
Yet even in this endless abyss, a devil may dream he's still in heaven,
And the wicked may find rest under my feathery white wings.



Fire in the Night

Autumn Melrose

Daunting Fantasy

Ty Shenk

Squeeze your eyelids shut
Become as light as an oil-coated feather
Airy clothes flailing in the wind
Drowning in the void of your own mind
You'll yearn for patience
Even if just a bit of it
To bare the suspense of crashing back down

Poisonous threats thread through two ears like yarn
Yanking and pulling your brain to and fro
Shattering gentle bones into dust
Your physical being, begging for help
Your mental persona, unable to comply

Crash through the wall separating true and false
Reaching a hand out of a false reality
Hoping to capture the maleficent fear
Strangling your words and forcing them back down
Force fed sweet scented phrases laced with malice

Try to force the scene in your head to change
Flipping through it like a digital camera
Your cool flesh awakens with a gasp
Spine shocks with vicious quivers
A cool tear spilling down your chin

Weakened lungs tremble and wobble
As you gasp to catch your breath
Cold skin sinks down into your covers
Your eyes hesitantly shut
As a hand grazes your lower thigh

And pulls you onto the other side

The Monster

Dandelion

Fear.

It's a word I let roll over my tongue
Like something sour, that almost stung.

Be afraid.

I've been taught this since I was very young,
And it was something my mother was taught,
Before my life even begun.

Be wary of the man you don't know,
Be cautious of the man whose pretty words have flow.
It's more than likely just show
He'll ruin you, then claim he's innocent as the freshly driven snow.

I've been promised of their true nature,
Their monstrous instincts,
How they insist that she wanted what he gave her.

I've been assured that it's usually wrong place, wrong time.
Another girl lost, another reason for my rhyme.
Does it matter though?
When these monsters still leave scars that sting like fresh lime.

So many have given their two cents
Maybe my symbolism will show you
What this kind of man represents.

I strive towards unattainable dreams
My desire to achieve
Swings me between extremes

A reality I've never experienced before,
But the likelihood of living that fear
Is constantly going up in score.

Now,
I find myself checking my blindspots.
My stomach weaving into impossible knots.

Like a shimmering, fearful pool of snakes
Waiting to strike, waiting for the quakes
Ready to witness when the monster awakes.

Manipulation Of The Malleable

Trinh Thoung

A child's slumber subjects itself to silence.

An eerie voice solidifies into distant darkness.
Whispers of the afterlife follow into the void
As their eyes shut to the devil's lullaby,
Nightfall feasts on hysterics.

Creeping on the fine line of frenzy
Paranoia shifts with eyes of tremor
Blindness in every past tense,
They pray toward their own demise.

Contours of the cyclones in the mind
To be relinquished to the eclipse of haziness
Cornering youth lives,
The somber feeling of compulsion lies.



Marionette

Pheobe Buhl

He Is Beautiful and Terrifying

Seth O'Brien

The earth trembles, and sky shatters. Just then, it was light. A flash so potent no one could describe. To say this was just white would be an understatement. This was light in its rawest form, a holy radiation of righteousness. The light faded, and the heavens appeared. You float among the clouds as angels pray, bowing in submission. Massive glowing chains held up the sky, then spread throughout the heavens like trees, going in every one direction.

In the center of this paradise was a peak, a mountain. On the top, he sat, hovering. His arms above his head, shackled with the same chains that kept the heavens hanging. He hung gracefully, his eyes shone the same bright the rapture had brought. As you stare, he blinks. The sky rumbles and the chains break. Clouds cease to float, and collapse, barreling to the cyan blue below. Tears in space form all around, revealing a deep, hatred filled red. The man in the middle moves his head up to look at you. The tremors get worse as more and more heavenly chains break and shatter.

The image of humanity enters your mind, as infinite knowledge floods. You witness it, every advancement, every birth, every job, every murder, every robbery, every sin ever committed, and every death. You have lived it all, you are him.

The figure chained to the sky makes sense now. It is the embodiment of mankind, he is all we are, he is no god, he is a convict. His head collapses and falls limp. The remaining parts of heaven collapse. All that remains is a terrible red.

Eyes form all around you looking everywhere, rapidly. Then, they focus on you. Their pupils dilating, staring into your soul. The prisoner's chains turn black. His mouth opens as if to speak, yet no words leave. Then you feel it, a shockwave of despair and depression. His words enter your head.

“Chained. Eternity. Sins. Pay. Weep. Beware. Man. Evil. Hurry. Coming.”

His eyes still have that divine glow, they begin to weep tears of blood, the floating eyes follow suit. You frantically look around behind you and to your sides. As you turn back to the man, he is now inches away from you, still chained.

“God is coming.”

His chains break and he falls into the void. The eyes all start to vibrate as they grow mouths. Lipless, you can only see their teeth and gums. Their false mouths open agape and begin to scream. Their screeches are harmonic and beautiful, yet horrifying. Golden rings start to rotate around them. The eyes converge, all mixing together to create an amalgamate of sight. They all stare to you. Then they vanish, screams and all.

In the distance you see it, the final, gigantic eye, staring. Four more follow in each direction. A final chain falls from the sky, attached to it, is God. He is not a man. She is not human. It is not loving. They hate. It chained that man to the heavens to suffer for all eternity, retribution for humankind's crimes. Man cannot commit sin, it is the cultivation of it. And we will pay. Their eyes have watched for all history. You cannot run from your fate. You will be stained in the crimson river fed by sin.

This creature is proof of that. It is the shape of a man, but its head is a sphere of eyes. The head has four rings circling around it. It has six arms, four of which are in a state of prayer. It has no legs, its waist dissipates like a drop of blood in water, almost appearing gassy. It sprouts a set of three wings, the center pair pitch black. It speaks to me. Though, not legible.

It expels a hum, “Fall, and cease to be. You are not made in my image. You are made in my waste, the thought expelled by my mind for being the devil child of lust and greed. You have no virtue, you are despicable. Cast away to a land to be forgotten about. Yet here you are, at the epicenter. The halo of creation. Do you wish to continue? Ascend your humanity? Accept thy hand, and surpass what it means to be human, become more, become the control you so desperately crave. Be the line between life and death, become a creator in your own design. Be truly... alive.”

The amalgamate reaches to you with its porcelain hand. You hesitate to grab it. Staring up to it one final time. It's huge, many times larger than you. But calm flows through you, and a burning sensation ignites in your heart. Greed.

To be God, the reigns of existence at your palms, just a grasp away. It felt delightful. You lunge toward their hand- just then, it was light. A flash so potent no one could describe. To say this was just white would be an understatement. This was light in its rawest form, a holy radiation of righteousness.

Monster In The Closet

S. Draper

"You will not *believe* the week I've had, Jeannie."

That's how my friend starts all of her conversations. I've gotten used to it by now. I think about saying something mean. Something that would really hurt her. I think, *I wouldn't believe it if you did a single meaningful thing all week. In your entire life, even. I'd believe it if you read a magazine about a celebrity, and now you're trying to pass their life on as your own. That brain of yours can't come up with a single original idea.*

I say, "Oh no, really? What happened?"

"Well, it's been a total nightmare, I'll tell you what. I'll say that much about it, it's been a *complete* mess." She huffs, wanting- *needing*- me to ask her about it.

She's never asked me about my day, oh no, it's always about her. I think, *the day you do something real with your life is the day I care what comes out of your mouth.* I say, "It sounds awful, dear, tell me all about it."

"*Well, it started off like this, I'm getting up to start my day, you know, brush my teeth, all that. I really love my teeth, I don't think people know that about me,*" she gives me a big grin, showing off her perfect, white teeth. They're really veneers, but she thinks people can't tell, "I just *adore* taking care of myself. After I brush, I go to pick out my outfit. This is where it gets really terrible, Jeannie. You'll have to forgive me if I get emotional."

She looks away, like she might cry. I have to stop myself rolling my eyes.

"Well, Jeannie, there was a man in the walk-in closet. A big, tall man. Well, it gave me quite the fright, I'll tell you that. Just standing in the corner, looking at me." She gives a big sigh, "Now, I'm a God-fearing Christian, you know that about me. I always have been. I go to church twice a week, say prayers, all that, but... I really thought that I was going to die, and God wasn't going to save me."

She was lying, obviously. Making things up to get my attention, that's all she's after in the end, always attention.

"Now, I screamed like a banshee, and the man ran and pushed me over. Bruised my arm pretty bad," she stopped to show me a large bruise on her right arm and wrist, "Here's where it *really* gets crazy, right now I *need* you to believe me."

She probably bruised her arm on purpose, just to make up a story like this. I think about making an excuse to leave. *Sorry, I can't stand hearing your voice anymore.* I don't say that, though. I say, "Of course I'll believe you, you're my friend."

"I tried to tell the police about it, but they said I was in shock. I *knew* you'd believe me. Here's what happened-" she dropped her voice to a whisper, "the man... wasn't *really* a man. He was more of a creature. He was tall and large, but *too* tall and large. Non-human-like, you know? And just... *standing* there. We stood there for a long time not moving. It only ran at me when I screamed." She explained.

"Its body was dark- it looked like one of those *Goat-men* people talk about. Then its face... Oh my God, its face. *It was wearing Richard's face.* Like it had carved the skin right off of him. It didn't fit right, though, it was too small. The skin stretched weirdly to fit. Jeannie, the thing was *wearing my husband's face.*"

She paled, shivering in a way that seemed a little too planned, "I thought... well, I thought Richard was back from the dead. That's why I just stood there for so long. I only came to my senses when I saw its eyes. Its eyes weren't right, they weren't *human.*" She blinked away tears before continuing.

“No, they were monster’s eyes, I could tell. You learn to tell when you live like me,” she’d probably believe a strong gust of wind was a ‘monster’, as long as it inconvenienced her.

“I couldn’t move for a second, and it was like my heart wasn’t in my body anymore. I wasn’t in my body anymore. No one is expecting that sort of thing in the morning, no one’s expecting it ever.

“Well, I screamed or tried to. It was more like a breath, I didn’t have the force in me to scream. It didn’t run at me at first, it walked. It looked into my eyes and walked towards me. You can’t comprehend something like that. If it ran at me, I could’ve done something. I couldn’t breathe. I understand how those deer feel now, when the cars come towards them. The only option for things like us is to stop. I could hear it breathe, it was heavy and it made the closet stink. It smelled horrible, like an infection. Its eyes were... watery, and for a second I thought it looked sad. Things like that don’t have feelings, though. They try to convince you they do, to lure you in. You can never fall for it, Jeannie.

“As it was walking, Richard’s skin slipped off. I saw its real face for the first time. When Richard’s face hit the floor, that’s when I screamed. The sound of it, Jeannie... I don’t think I can ever forget the sound. It sounded exactly like what you would expect someone’s skin falling on the floor would sound like. All... wet. Looking at its face, I guess it broke me a little. It was a monster, Jeannie, I know that now. I wailed, there’s no dignifying way to put it. I wailed for help, for Richard, for anybody. No one came, of course. It leaned down and picked up Richard’s skin, then it grabbed me. It had big, hairy hands, and I could feel its breath on me. It threw me across the room. That’s where the bruise came from, I guess. A neighbor called the police. They came in and found me in the same spot where the monster threw me. They said I was all curled up, sitting there, shivering. I’m proud to say I didn’t cry, Jeannie,” but now those unshed tears were in her eyes as she looked at me. She looked so much like a kicked puppy, I almost forgot who I was talking with. I couldn’t let myself believe her, though. You give an inch, they’ll take a mile.

“They asked questions, and I was honest with them. I probably shouldn’t have been, they were never going to believe me. They couldn’t logically explain some things, though. There was a little of Richard’s blood on the ground where his face fell, and there were some imprints on my arms where it grabbed me. Take a look at this, Jeannie,” she pulled her shirt down from her shoulders, where large handprints seemed charred into her skin, “I think it’s burned into me. When I came out of shock, the first thing I noticed was the pain. Like nothing I’d ever felt before, I’d compare it to amputation without anesthetic, it was that bad,” she shuddered.

“Jeannie, I’m a strong woman, but I’ve never wanted to be held like a child more than in that moment. I just wanted someone to explain it, to say it’d be okay. I didn’t know what else was going to come, but I knew the worst was over, and that’s not nothing. The nightmares will never be over, Jeannie, but I think they’ll fade. With time, at least,” she took a moment to wipe the tears away.

“Well, that was that, anyway. I think I drove to the library after. I don’t remember driving. I guess I just got there. I needed out of that house. I think I sat there for about two hours,” she had a faraway look in her eyes, glazed over and distant. She stopped talking for a few minutes.

“...Yes, that’s what I did. Just sat there, Jeannie. Didn’t talk, didn’t read, didn’t think. I just tried to forget. Just needed a moment to collect myself.”

I stopped trusting her stories after she lied about her mother having cancer. There's something different about this one, though. The injuries, the police, the unexplainable. She's never been *creative* enough to come up with something like that. I didn’t know what to believe.

I got up and left her sitting there. Her stories tend to wear people thin, and there's only so much a person can take.

Even if her story *was* real, I’d want absolutely *nothing* to do with it.

Purity, Metamorphosed

S. Draper

Twisting, morphing, changing
Into something I'm not.
Churning and crunching into a body,
That's been stuffed to the brim with rot.

Bones bending and breaking
To support this heavy beast,
Soul and body swap places
Once a month this monster's released.

Limbs protruding from soft flesh,
Hardening under full moonbeam rays.
Hair growing coarse, greasy, ugly,
Thickening into a pelt unfit for the light of day.

Falling on all fours,
As my knees shift to their new place.
Joints and ligaments stretching, ripping,
Brutal anguish plain on my face.

Basest of all creatures,
Wicked and ugly thing I am,
Some filthy, mangy, hideous dog,
A wolf in the clothing of a lamb.

I'll only ever be their villain,
A brute to be conquered and maimed,
Heartless cruelty seen as justice,
Silver bullet through my brain.

Try to see the young girl,
However disfigured I may be.
Pleas turn to screams turn to howls,
Don't forget the human in me.

Final stage of the transformation,
My mind becomes so weak.
Human mentality melting away,
Metamorphosing into a macabre freak.

The Sound Of Monsters

Jillian Coddington

Skittering that leaves a trail
Running up your spine
That you won't be able to
Get rid of
Until something worse
Comes along.

Slime
Sometimes called
Goop, substance, muck, or sludge-
Creeps down the walls
And collects on the floor
Until you can't run anymore.

You can't help
But be wary of that
Porcelain doll your
Grandmother just sent to you.
Its eyes know too much
As they stare at you
Until you swear you see it move
Out of the corner of your eye.

The floor creaks
With something heavy
Creeping behind you.
Until you look back,
There's nothing but silence.

There's a scratching
At the door that
When you check,
You see nothing.
Until you turn around
And the last thing
You'll ever see
Is the looming figure you
Unwittingly let in.

What's Going On In Those Woods?

Calvin Burton

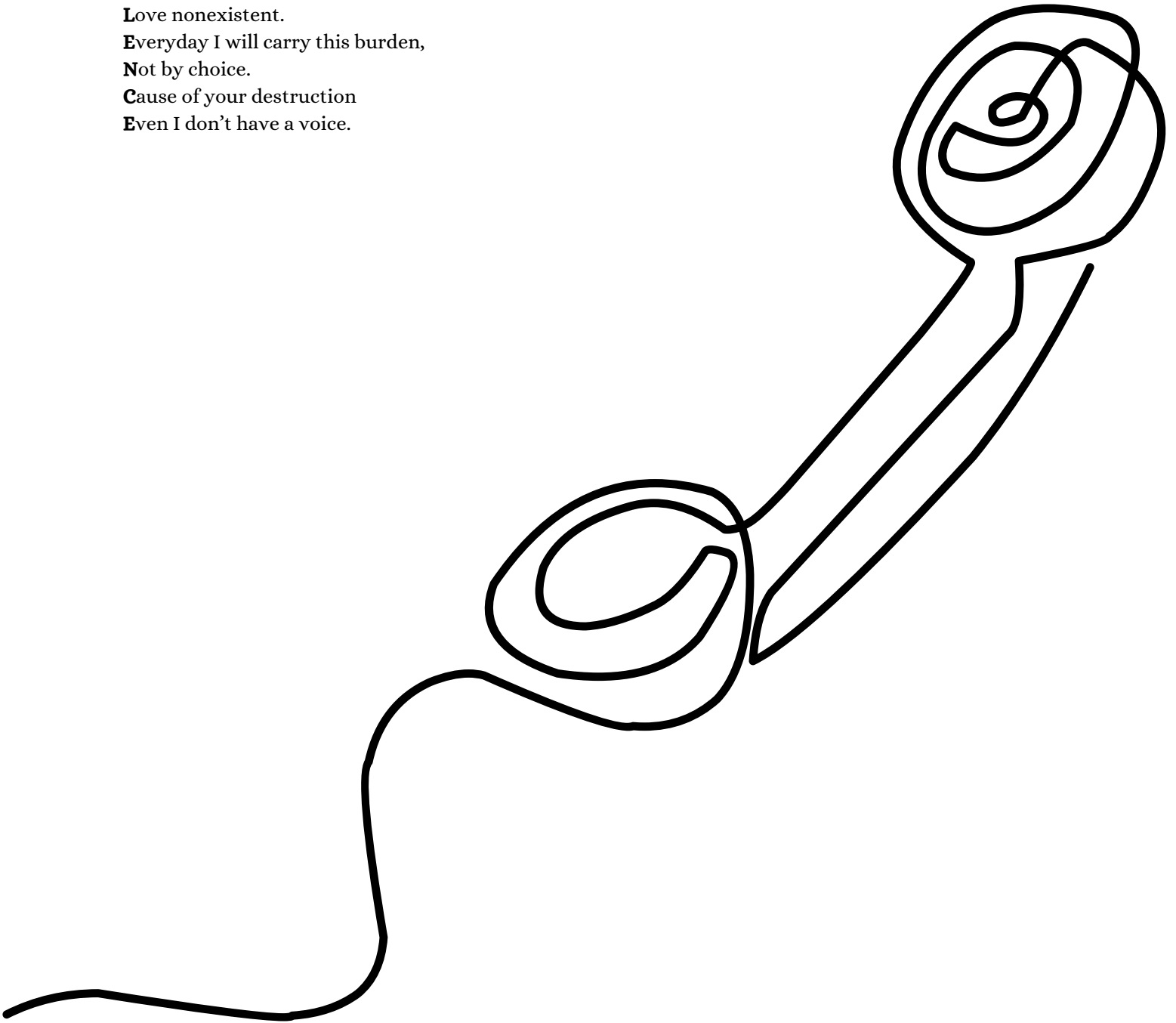


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Cozi Seiler

Daddy please.
Overwhelming fear.
My bruises becoming black and blue.
Everlasting trauma.
Seeing the ones you love hurt.
Time passes yet my scars still bleed bright red.
I can't live like this.
Corrupted by your hands like a puppet.

Violence.
I'm broken by your touch,
Overcome by sadness,
Love nonexistent.
Everyday I will carry this burden,
Not by choice.
Cause of your destruction
Even I don't have a voice.



Over For Me

Taylor Bowden

I'm quickly consuming every amount of induced inspiration as it seeps,
As it arrives I'm there under the faucet to gather the remains
Before it runs out.
Hoping that I have enough to make it through my next task
And get it done fast
While testing how thin I can run.

I hold a deadly grip to that trail of imagination,
That ounce of creativity I thought I always had within,
When I hear that good song with that good flow,
Or those wise words from my wise friend,
Or that heavy guilt from my dark sins
And rush to channel my temporary talent into what I'm known to do so well.

What keeps you up at night?
What haunts and taunts your fragile existence when you're alone?
I wish I had a lingering demon to talk about
But I only have my still and fragile being.
My body transformed into the blank page that I cannot write on
Because my time's up
And I'm out of words and rhymes.

What if I lose it all forever,
And I can no longer talk about my past pain in a safe space,
And have nowhere to expose my pathetic fears in disguise of word play,
And I lose my ability to expose that the time might come
Where I lyrically vanish and become mute?

What an absolute scam it is, inspiration,
Making me believe it's helping me write
When in reality it's what I write about,
Hope with a timer,
Fake dreams displayed by the same brain
That thinks these smooth lines will last forever,
Delusions with a beautiful face of realism
That comfort and nurture my absurdism
That believes my poetry will one day run out.

Disillusioned

Sav Dycus

Against my palm, your skin used to ignite
My clothes stained with your scent
Another fake memory from last night
I hoped that would be the last I dreamt

I think I've been here before
All your hurtful words
All your tricks I fell for
I ignored your knifelike claws
Until they sunk too deep in my skin
Stuck between love and hatred
I dreamed of what could have been
Now I resent your voice
When you abandoned me
You left me with no choice

In you, I was so engrossed
The suffering fell beneath me
Compared to all the monsters
Drifting between my dreams
Your face scares me the most

You're inside of my head
Between the pain and memories
Of us cuddling on my bed
My heart used to ache for you
Now it pounds from fear
After all you put me through

After I meet you in my dreams
I wonder if you still think of me
If only you knew
How many sleepless nights
I've had because of you

Waking up again each hour
You're rotting inside my head
I see you against my will
How heartless you've become
That in all of my dreams
You torment me still

You Rest With The Sheep

Killian Chambers

Sandaith shovels the thick clumps of earth from the body of the world, aggressive and harsh, feeling her muscles burn. Sweat crawls down her neck, soaking into her shirt and staining the deep blue cloth. She heaves, breathing shallow and winded as she digs the hole deep into the ground. The dirt merges with the grass as things become blurry, shaping into one foggy blob. Sandaith blinks the tears away, stopping her incessant movements and looking down at the pit.

She feels eyes on her, watching her with concern from the door of their home. But Sandaith doesn't dare look in her wife's direction. Maeve is worried, she knows that. But she has to do this without any interruptions, she has to do it herself. The corpse lays beside her feet, wool caked in blood, organs spilling from the stomach of the sheep. The hole in the animal is large, teeth and claw marks lodged into its flesh from the wolf who took life from it. Sandaith picks up the body and sets it in the pit, staring at its wide eyes and open mouth, dried foamy spit coating its lips.

She stares longer at the reddened, veiny intestines and the organs with claw marks that should never be visible, but here they are, exposed anyways. It's a metallic, thick, rotting stench that clogs her nostrils and throat, making her mouth go dry. She feels the sweat tickle her nape, sliding down her skin and dipping into her shirt. For a moment, as she looks, the hole seems to sink deeper, growing into a black pit and stretching to the center of the earth, darkening, morphing into a one hundred foot grave.

It must be the medicine again, she thinks. The same medicine that heals her body drives her into insanity. The same medicine that's supposed to help her makes her nightmares lie beside her in bed, coaxing her into feverish feelings and staring at her with frightening eyes. Sandaith hates it all. The hallucinations, the aching in her bones, the vomiting, she wants it to end.

"Love?" Sandaith gasps, blinking as the hole returns to its original shape, no longer deep and dark. She turns her head, meeting her wife's eyes. Worry swims deep in Maeve's features, brow knit in concern. She studies her, swallowing back the lump in her throat.

"Let's..." Maeve takes a hold of her hand, gently interlocking her smooth fingers with her calloused ones.

"Let's go inside, I'm worried about you."

Sandaith's brow furrows, she'd rather cover up the grave, scoop the dirt back in and over the corpse. But if Maeve wants her to go inside, she will.

"Okay," Sandaith's voice comes out with gravel in her throat, hoarse and rough, tired.

"You're ill, overworking yourself isn't going to fix that." She tugs her along, back towards the house, hands tangled in one another. As Maeve leads her inside, she pushes her to the bed, urging her to lay down.

"Sleep, dear, you need it," Sandaith stares at the bed, frozen. It's scary, horrifying even. The way the hallucinations get worse when she's trying to sleep. They claw at the windows and whistle in her ears, they send bugs crawling up the foot of her bed and they send monsters standing in the doorway. She's barely able to get even a few minutes of downtime at night, it's always hard. But Maeve will coax her with soft singing and running her hands through her hair, helping her relax for a few minutes before she sits up in a cold sweat. Sandaith hopes that this night, even with the dead sheep just outside, will be better.

So with a breath, she lies down, hands placed on her stomach, focusing on the way her stomach will rise and fall with each winded inhale and exhale.

Moments later, Sandaith feels herself sink to the side as Maeve crawls in with her. She curls up into her side, arm wrapping around her torso, secure, safe.

So with her aching muscles and slowing mind, she realizes just how exhausted she really is. And before she knows it, sleep consumes her whole, wrapping its teeth around her bringing her into a belly of darkness.

Yet that comfort has never lasted long, and it won't now.

Sandaith sits up, breathing heavy and shallow as she tries to trace back the nightmare that had pulled her from sleep. Yet it's all just blurry, foggy and mixed into one neverending distant picture. It's dark outside, and Sandaith realizes much more time has passed than she expected. She turns to look at Maeve for comfort, she's always been good at that, helping her. But when she does, all she finds is her corpse.

Maeve's chest is ripped open, splintered flesh coated in crimson. The hole reveals her ribcage, some bones broken and chipped, a heart stays deathly still in the middle. Sandaith feels her breathing stop as she scrambles from the bed, stumbling to the corner of the room with her heart hammering in her ears loudly. She's panting, sweat crawling down her nape once again.

And yet if things couldn't get worse, Maeve, or what used to be her, sits up and turns her head to face Sandaidh, slow, jarring. Yet now half of her body has turned a sickly green, teeth sticking out of the side of her face, veins protruding from her skin, bones visible. Not Maeve, but the monster swings its legs over the bed, standing. And then it starts walking. Sandaidh shakes violently, nails digging into her palms so much that she draws rubies from her skin. The green color consumes her other half, slowly turning Maeve's body into a monster.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" Sandaidh screams, vision going blurry, hot tears pooling up behind her eyes. She hears muffled words, too muffled to understand, but the monster keeps walking. It's brought her into the corner, pressed up against the wall, trembling.

Slowly, it brings its hands up to the side of her face, undeniably gentle. But Sandaidh doesn't believe that it will continue to be so gentle. It's going to take her soul, it's going to make her suffer. She can't let it do that, whatever it is.

She can't hurt anymore, she can't live in fear.

Sandaidh brings her hands up to its throat in a flash, squeezing so hard her fingers dig into the skin and muscle at the sides. The muffled voices come back, choked and gurgly, but she can't listen to that now, she has to get rid of this. Sandaidh pushes the monster back, falling onto it as it stumbles and hits the floor. She straddles it, digging her fingers deeper and deeper into it, blood crawling from its throat.

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD!" She screams, tugging its head up. Sandaidh then slams its skull into the floor, and she does it again and again, only until the bone is caved in and a puddle of crimson has surfaced behind it.

She rips her hands away from its throat once all movement has stopped, breathing heavy.

Let it be gone, let it be no more. She repeats to herself. Sandaidh screws her eyes tight, trying to get a hold of the situation. Yet when she opens them, Maeve is under her, throat already bruising, blood splattered on her face and leaking down the holes in her neck.

Sandaidh's heart stops. The tears that had been welling up behind her eyes finally roll down her cheeks, thick and heavy, falling onto the unmoving lips of her dead wife. It has to be a nightmare, an undying feverish nightmare. But it isn't.

And even as the pain settles in her chest, even as she holds Maeve's beaten and battered corpse in her arms, she knows it's not.

Because nightmares don't bring death to your door.

You do.



Dreadful Veil

Domo Ratliff

A world of darkness
Where shadows slip,
Like a stick of butter sliding away.
The air is thick with a scent of thread.
A chill aroma filling your head.
A scent of fear, a bitter tinge.

Feel the weight
A heavy shroud
Like I'm drowning in a endless stream
Where every breath is a struggle to be free.
A taste of darkness
Cold and stark
As reality blurs
Plunging into the dark.

The taste upon your tongue is bitter, sweet
A flavor that lingers
Hour after hour
Like swallowing fear every bite.
A haunting sensation that steals delight
Yet within this abyss
A spirit yearns for dawn's escape.

Amidst the darkness,
A glimmer of hope.
A flickering light that helps you cope
For nightmares to eventually fade away
And in their wake, a brighter path is laid.



Dissonance

A. Phinney

The ensemble takes the role of (?), their lines can be divided up or said in unison. They often speak and create the noise of "A", "B", and "C"'s minds. They play a prevalent role in the story, acting as the inner sound, but are never to be seen. "A", "B", and "C" are all parts of the same person, each representing different aspects of one mind.

In darkness

A: Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock... ("A" continues as the others speak)

(?): 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3... (This should be continued, keeping up with the rhythm of "A")

B: Today, tomorrow, today, tomorrow, yesterday, today, tomorrow, today, tomorrow, yesterday... ("B" also continues in this pattern)

(?): Now, later, now, later, then, now, later, now, later, then...

(The lights very slowly begin to reveal the actors as they chant their lines. "A" is seated in a chair SR while "B" is seated in a chair SL. An empty chair is between them. "C" enters and sits in the chair center stage. Lights fade. Lights up on "A". She is lying down. She doesn't have to be on an actual bed, but something to represent one.)

A: It has been one hundred and five minutes since I laid down to go to bed. I was supposed to be sleeping six thousand and three hundred seconds ago. I need to be awake in four hundred and forty minutes. Four hundred and thirty-nine.

(?): four hundred and thirty-eight, four hundred and thirty-seven, four hundred and thirty-six, four hundred and thirty-five... (Their voice continues counting backward as "A" tries to close her eyes and sleep. Each number should physically affect her, whether it be shown in subtle movements on her fingers or through her whole body. Through and through it should be apparent to the audience that these unwanted thoughts have more control over her than she has over herself.) Three hundred and ninety... (They continue to count.)

("A" begins to toss and turn. Her bed seemingly more of a vessel of torture than a place of rest. Abruptly she sits up, pulling a piece of paper and a pen from under her bed or mattress. She scribbles something unseen to the audience on the paper. Then, she crosses to center stage. When she stands, the counting becomes louder and louder with each step. Perhaps even the numbers get mixed up, members of (?) speaking over each other. She folds up the paper and places it in the center of the stage. The lights fade, when they come back up, "B" is sitting in the center of the stage with papers all around her. She tries shuffling through them, attempting to make order of this self made hell.)

B: (Consumed with anxiety, picking up papers) This was due yesterday and this is due tomorrow. (Making a pile) All these were due yesterday. (She pulls a paper off the top of the pile and attempts to complete it frantically.) And yesterday... (Her voice trails off)

(?): And tomorrow, and last week, and next month, and two weeks ago, and five days ago, and in three days, and last Monday... (They continue in this manner as "B" continues to write)

(After a moment she moves that paper to a new pile and picks up the second one. With the one she writes faster. The panic in her writing can be heard by the audience. She puts down that paper and picks up a third. This time she writes with such panicked aggression that her pen rips right through the page. She pauses, looking through the ripped paper as (?) relentlessly lists due dates. She puts the ripped paper aside and continues through the stack. After a few papers, she is now just writing a large X across all the papers. She picks up the last paper in the pile, now recklessly scribbling. When she turns to grab another paper she pauses. Seeing the folded-up paper that has been under the pile. She grabs it, (?) still speaking, and examines it. Lights fade. When the lights come back up, two chairs sit back to back. More papers scattered on the floor now than before. "B" sits on one of the chairs, still trying to write on the paper. "A" enters with a large stack of more papers, crosses over to "B", drops them in her lap, then sits in the other chair. "B" tries to make order of the paper while "A" sits in the other chair, visibly bothered.)

(?): *(Slowly)* One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen... *(Continuing. Not changing the speed at which they count)*

A: *(Picking up a piece of paper)* I should finish this one first because it's the longest overdue. *(Turning, placing it on the top of "B"'s pile. Picking up another piece of paper.)* Well actually maybe I should do this one because it's the most recent. *(Examining the paper and turning to place that one on top of the pile too. "B" picks up the new paper, now attempting to complete it but struggling to hold all the papers.)* But this one would be the easiest to do, so I should do it first. *("A" turns to place the paper, "B" grabs it, still trying to control the cartoonishly tall stack of papers sitting on her lap.)* Yet, the hardest one should always be done first to get it out of the way. *("A" places the paper on "B"'s lap. Suddenly, and at the same time, they stand. They switch seats, and in the process "B" hands the stack of papers to "A". She then pulls out a large red marker. "A" hands her the first paper off the top of the pile.)*

B: *(Drawing a large red F on the paper that is visible to the audience)* Incomplete work. *("A" hands her the next paper, she writes another F with the large red marker)* Late. *(They continue in this pattern. "A" handing the papers to "B" as she marks large red Fs on them)* Bad handwriting... *(Next)* Needs more details... *(Again)* Couldn't read... Missing name... careless mistakes... Elaborate... Off-topic... Incorrect spelling... Late... Late... Late... Late... Late... *(They then again, and at the same time, stop and stand. Except this time they drop all of the papers on the floor. They watch them fall for a moment before frantically trying to sort them into piles.)*

B: *(Picking up a paper and placing it into a pile)* Late.

(?): *(Repeating what she says)* Late.

A: *(Picking up another paper and placing it into a separate pile)* Four thousand six hundred and thirty minutes overdue.

(?): Overdue.

B: *(Picking up another piece of paper and putting it into another pile)* Not good enough.

(?): Enough.

A: *(Again)* Asleep nine hundred minutes ago. Twenty-one million, four hundred forty thousand, and six hundred eighty-two minutes to go.

(?): To go. *(Now "A" and "B" are frantically sorting all the papers into piles. (?) speaks until they're done)* Forever. Hopeless. Undone. Left. Redo. Work. Time. Again. Loud. Weak. Mistake. Papers. Noise. *(Words may be filled in until "A" and "B" have sorted all of the papers into piles.)*

(Once "A" and "B" have finished sorting, they stand and exit the stage. (?) finishes speaking. Suddenly, there is silence. Deafening silence. White noise, the hum of machinery and the crackle of static fills the air. It's loud, filling the ears of everyone in the room. It's an uncomfortable "silence." "C" enters. She looks slightly different from "A" and "B", but not a drastic amount. She stands there, staring out into the audience. Then after a moment, she calmly crosses over to the now neatly sorted piles of papers. She picks up a paper, and rips it up. Then with growing intensity, she rips, throws, and destroys all the papers. Ripped pieces of paper may even fall from above the stage. This should be dramatic and driven by years of self-doubt and failure. No paper should go untouched. This process does not have to be quick. It may take minutes of deafening silence and hysterical paper ripping. The papers are scattered on the floor, worse than they ever were before.)

Lights fade. When they come back up, “A”, “B”, and “C” sit on the floor. “A” is attempting to gather up all the ripped pieces of paper. “B” is trying to piece them back together. “C” sits with her head tucked into her knees. As “A” attempts to clean up all the shredded papers, she again finds the folded paper scattered in the mix. Perfectly untouched. “B” and “C” gather around her. They unfold the paper and look at it together.)

Blackout.



Wonderland of Fame

Katrina Rush

Starvation In Memoria

Chroma Lee

My eyes flutter open to what must be my own personal Hell. I let out a shaky sigh and try to rub them in the dim light, but I only hear the clanking of cold chains biting into my wrists, holding me back onto my bed. A shiver runs down my spine as my eyes widen at the sight of someone - who it is, I can't tell - gorging on my intestines.

"What are you doing?! Get off of me!" I shout in a panicked frenzy, desperate to get out of the restraints. The figure only scoffs and continues shoveling the visceral mess into its mouth, with long claws reaching in to skewer my guts. I feel it press in once, twice, a splatter of red bursting out on my sheets, and then the feeling of incisors pinching through my guts.

I groan, the pressure building like a live wire in my stomach, like my insides are trying to escape their fate. "Please don't do this," I breathe out, as if I could even reason with it. The shadowy figure slides its claws back out, flicking droplets of blood to the side and gliding the edges across my skin to wipe them.

"Does it hurt?" It asks dryly.

"What?"

"I asked..." It leans in, tilting its head, and I can smell the metallic stench on its hot breath. It gives me an annoyed look, that much is clear. Up close, I can see its voids for eyes, little specks of white as pupils. It bares its yellowed teeth, and the sight of my own flesh jammed in between each one makes me gag in my mouth. "...if it hurts."

My breath hitches, coming out in a huff. I can feel it; its cold, rugged, leathery skin grasping me. But it's not really pain I'm feeling, more so... discomfort. "No. No, it doesn't."

It nods, pleased, and slinks back down to its feast. "Then what's the issue?" It takes a bite between words, veins popping and squelching out amidst the gore. "Don't be such a baby." It clears its raspy throat and takes another bite. I shut my eyes tight, not wanting to see the mess it's making of my desecrated body. I shake my head and try to hold back the desperation sprouting in my voice.

"You're eating me. That's the issue."

"That's hardly something to complain about," it grumbles between bites. It opens its mouth, either to eat more or to say something else, but it stops abruptly. It narrows its eyes, turning the voids into slits. "Are you trying to make me choke? This is a hazard, you know." I watch as it digs deeper, shoving its whole arm in, pushing my liver aside to fish an object from me. The slender, bony appendages of its arms yank out with a squelch.

A small polaroid, tinted glossy and pink from my inner mucus, is wedged between its fingers. I squint my own eyes, straining to see what it is. "Wait, that's..." I trail off, my movements halted yet again by the cold metal latched onto me. I reach out, and it moves the photo out of my range, waving it tantalizingly in my face.

"Now, what's this?" It asks.

Two figures are imprinted on it, clearly me and my mom. Actually, it's the happiest memory I have with my mom. We have goofy grins plastered on our faces, standing in front of a bright aquarium display with matching stingray shirts. There are crowds of people behind us, huddled around the large glass panels. She's holding up a peace sign and beaming brightly at the camera. I have one hand clutching a turtle plushie and the other clinging to my mom's arm tightly. Times were simple. I was young. And so, so happy.

I swallow thickly and make another weak attempt to reach out for the photo. I whisper out, "Give it back. That's personal." My voice wavers, and I watch in horror as the monster ignores me, simply opening its mouth and swallowing in one bite. I can see the sharp edge of the photo traveling down its throat. The pinprick whites of its eyes light up and expand like little marbles.

“Whatever that was,” It starts, already rifling through my guts again, “it was *delicious*. Not that your intestines aren’t a good enough meal, of course. But this is something entirely different.”

I’m too stunned to respond. I can only watch as it excavates a deep cavity where my lungs used to be and brings out a beaded friendship bracelet. It’s caked with blood, but the rainbow hues of it shine through. My mind flashes back to the third grade. My best friend at the time, Madison, had made it herself using a bracelet kit I had gotten for her birthday. She carefully adorned my wrist with it on the playground, and-

My recollection is cut short by the sound of the creature crunching on the beads. I start to hyperventilate, struggling uselessly and knocking a pillow off my bed. I plead, “Please. No, no, no. NO!” It laughs, and it’s a deep, raspy sound that sends chills up my spine. The creature snatches out handfuls of intestines, all of them streaming out and landing unceremoniously on the floor with a splat.

Dad’s old watch. He would wear it to work every day without fail, until-

“PLEASE, NO, DON’T.”

My brother’s old Nintendo 2DS. We would stay up late playing games without our parents knowing-

“STOP. STOP. STOP. STOP IT.”

A crumpled note from my crush. The paper reads, “Wanna hang out after school? We could-”

“GOD, MAKE IT STOP. MAKE IT STOP!”

My own beating heart. Deathly still in its hands.

It takes a bite, the flood of crimson drowning out my screams. It echoes out and I grow silent.

In place is the sound of sizzling and the familiar scent of breakfast wafting from the crack in my door. I open my eyes, yawning, and rub the sleep out of them blearily. My arms shake, laced with an unusual exhaustion as I sit up on my bed. My gaze darts around the room, and a stray tear trails down my cheek. I wipe it with my sleeve and stretch, yawning. Must have been a bad dream.

I trudge my way down the hall to the kitchen, where my mom is dutifully frying up an egg and some bacon. I greet her with a tired, “Hey, mom.” She turns around to ruffle my bedhead, making my messy hair even worse.

“Morning. You look like you woke up on the wrong side of the bed,” she chuckles, and I latch onto her back.

I nuzzle into the crook of her neck, and mumble out, “Yeah. Tired. I think I had a nightmare.”

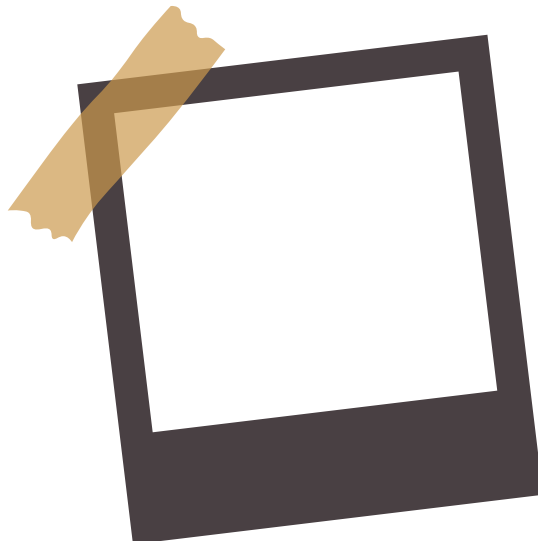
She flips the egg and shakes me off. “About what? Do you remember?” I tap my chin in thought and lean on the counter. “Something about the aquarium, I think.” I wrack my brain to try and remember, but I can’t. Everything feels all fuzzy, and my stomach lurches when I try to think.

My mom nods, plates up the food, and muses, “We haven’t been there in ages. Maybe the nightmare was about wanting to go back.”

I take the plate graciously and plop myself down in a nearby chair. “Yeah, we should go again. It was fun.” I glance at the side of the fridge, where I know we have a polaroid from the trip hung up with a magnet.

There’s me and my mom, smiling brightly.

And a bloodied claw strung around us.



Untitled

Dylan Fox

The coldness of her tongue
Sent lashes across my back
Each word sending lines across my spine
That were soon crusted in salt and sugar
For a bittersweet pain to linger.

Bubbling and bruising as her words flow
As she comes to a slow, she sews
Sutures coated in honey
Creating bows from the laces of my heart
Flowers sprouting from my scars
That will soon be placed on top of my grave.

The flowers that lay on my grave
But the bees are attracted to the sugar,
Embedded in my skin
To uncover a salty truth
That was planted in my soul.

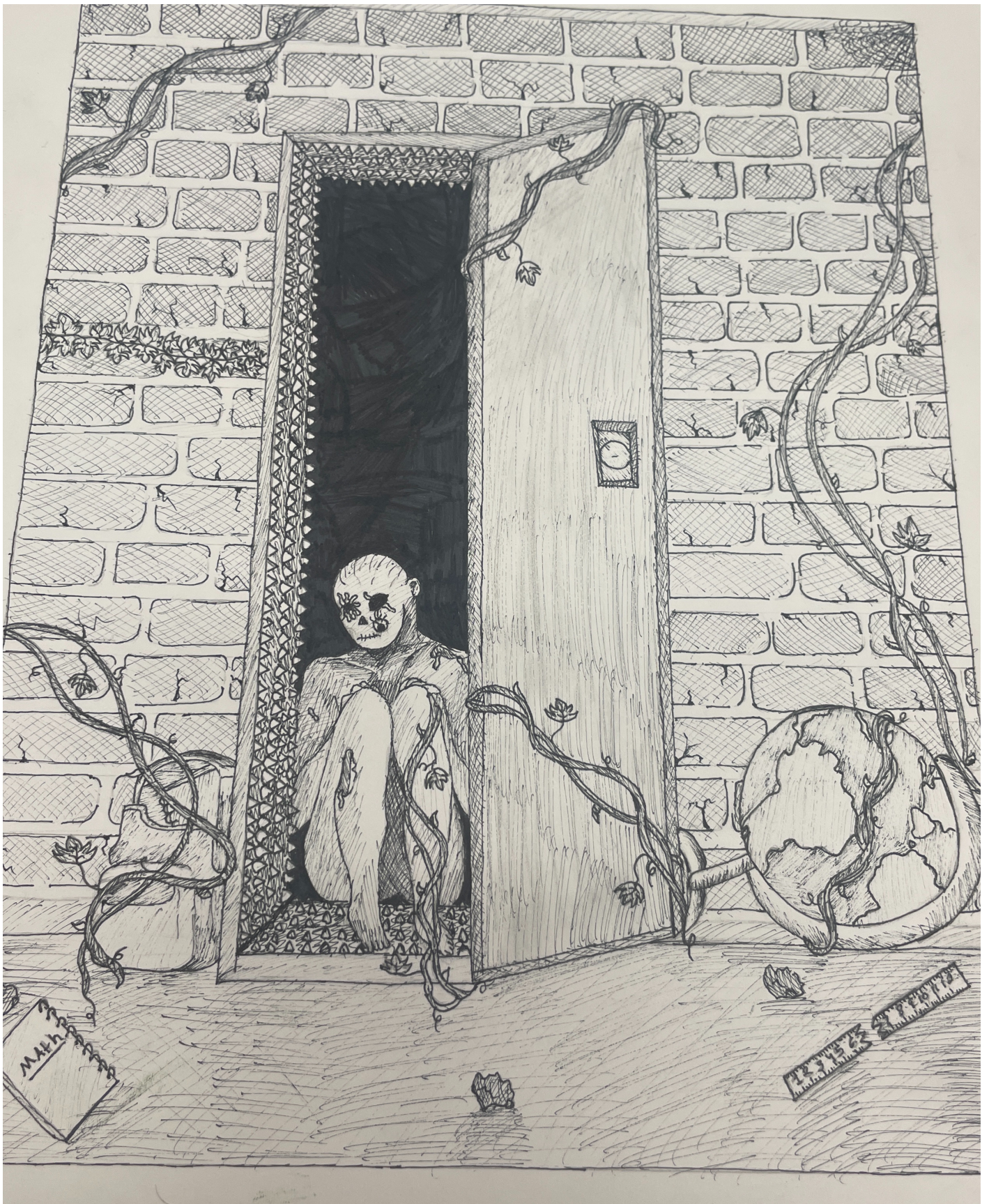
Lovers

Iylis Ray

Laying down next to her as I look over the limp body,
I feel butterflies in my stomach as her tears spill out of her closed eyes.
I soak up her presence and wipe her eyes.
My love, my love has never been so beautiful.
My love, my love has never been so quiet.
Regardless, we still lay together in this blanket of blood for one last minute
Before I pull my knife out of her stomach.

Untitled

Snow



Ariadne's Torment

Cameron Brown

The mortal boy gently falls under the spell of slumber like a feather floating to the ground, a light snore slipping out of his mouth. Morpheus scoffs at the weakness of the boy.

"Now, that girl," he grumbles, pulling his Dream Sand out of his pocket.

He sprinkles the sand over himself and lets the particles transport him away. The glittery, purple and navy blue dust clouds his vision with galaxies of dreams and locations before he settles on his destination.

The empty manor greets him with a chilling embrace.

"Aspa!" He roars, calling for his daughter.

"I do not respond to that name!" She scornfully calls back.

"That is the name with which I have branded you, that is the name you will respond to!"

Loud stomps sound through the nearly empty manor as the girl in the white dress storms into the foyer.

"It. Is. Ariadne!"

Anger bubbles through the god of nightmares.

Morpheus has always had a short temper. From the time he and his brothers, Phobos and Phantasos, were forged at the hands of Hypnos, he's had a short fuse.

Now, most men who have short tempers yell. They break things. They hit.

Not Morpheus.

No, not the god of nightmares.

Yelling and breaking and hitting is too transient.

Dark clouds swirl around the god as his figure looms over the little goddess of realism.

Her eyes widen as she realizes what is about to happen.

The inky black smoke pounces, infiltrating itself in her being. It barges into every crevice, entering her nose, mouth, and ears.

Ariadne opens her eyes, surrounded by black and gray smoke, winds whipping at her hair and body. She shivers under the cold, harsh breeze.

"Little, little Aspa. Cold as can be," the tauntingly ominous voice of her father sings in her ear, causing her to jolt and look back. She finds nothing.

"Little, little Aspa. You will never be free."

"It's okay. You are okay," she repeats to herself, "This is a nightmare. You are in a nightmare," she squeezes her eyes shut, "You just need to wake...up!"

She forces her eyes open, expecting to be free of her petrifying prison but the shadowy smoke still circles around her, tormenting her.

The whistling wind still beats at her, agonizing her.

"Little, little Aspa. How could you be so dim?" Her father's voice chants, closer this time.

Ariadne shivers again, this time from fright.

"Little, little Aspa. Your ending will be grim."

This song her father mocks her with, it used to be her favorite. The lullaby was made custom for her by her mother. Before she left.

Now, her father punishes her for her mother's scorn.

"You leave me alone, Father! You won't change me!" She screams into the darkness.

"Little, little Aspa. All bark no bite."

The fog departs suddenly, leaving her back in the foyer.

She frantically searches for her father but finds the foyer empty.

Or so she believes.

"Little, little Aspa," her father booms through the entryway.

Turning panickedly in circles, she continues to find nothing.

She stops, panting loudly.

"You are my creature of the night," her father's voice whispers in her ears before strong hands grasp the top of her head and her chin before they twist, wrenching her neck sideways and snapping her intervertebral discs.

Aspa sits up with a gasp, sweat beading down her forehead. She climbs out of bed, stretching her strangely aching neck from side to side.

She heads into the foyer to find her father lounging on a marble ottoman, sipping ambrosia.
She smiles, "Good night, Father! I'm going to make my rounds!"
Her father smiles back, "Do well, my little creature of the night."
Aspa trots away, bringing a hand to her still aching neck and rubbing slightly as she walks.
"Do well," Morpheus repeats silently with an ominously knowing grin.

(Interested how the story began? Check out "The Girl in the White Dress" in "Whispers from the Wood: Dreams!")

Endless Night

Jasmine Macomber

In the silent whispers of the night,
Voices echo, a haunting sight,
They dance like shadows in the dark,
A twisted melody, leaving its mark.

Whispers of madness, echoes of doubt,
In the labyrinth of the mind, they sprout,
Visions flicker, both eerie and strange,
A kaleidoscope of the mind's derange.

Are they real, or just a dream?
A nightmare's grip, or so it seems,
For every whisper, every sight,
Pulls me deeper into the night.

The walls close in, the world spins,
A carousel of chaos, where reality thins,
I grasp for sanity, slipping away,
Lost in the labyrinth, led astray.

In the throes of madness, I find my plight,
Trapped in a nightmare, day and night,
But amidst the chaos, a glimmer of hope,
A beacon of light, helping me cope.

For even in darkness, there's a dawn,
A chance to break free, and carry on,
So I'll cling to hope, however slight,
As I navigate the realms of sight and sound, in this endless night.

Terrible Two Step

Chase Hines

In shadows they dance,
Nightmares weave their tangled web,
Sleep's grip starts to fade



Untitled

Naima Bohac

Purifying Light

Jillian Coddington

My fingers run over the smooth ends of bones long cleaned and left to pile up around me. Searching for the perfect one as I continue to stare intently at the creature in front of me, hoping that I'll find the right one before it's too late.

Finally, I find the bone, probably the smallest in my collection, buried under everything else. It was so small that the only way I found it was with my fingernail.

"Ah, gotcha," I quickly place it in the only spot missing.

Double checking that I had all the pieces and ingredients, the same words ready to fly off the tip of my tongue. It was ready.

Staring down at the creature lying prone on the stone table in front of me, I douse my hand in the bubbling vibrant purple concoction next to me. Sprinkling it while repeating the words I've been rehearsing for the past week.

"Ex inferis te voco, lux primaria, qua capti per hosce annos es."

The lights flicker and I feel a vibration tremble in my small room. All I can focus on is the creature of my creation stumbling up. Its' eyes glowing the purest white I think I've ever seen, practically miniature suns in the dark. The bones I put together clatter as the creature shakes itself off, standing on four rickety legs and lifting its too large head. The legs are uneven and the ears are lopsided, some of the bones being too old and rotted to fully support everything. There are gaps that I can see through, in the ribs and holes of bones empty from age. All I can do is stare at this thing I've created. Staring at what I hope will be our salvation.

It turns its head to me and all I can see is the white in the eye sockets. There's nothing but the blinding light and the sense of something coming for me, chasing me through endless tunnels that I don't know the layout to. A life of fear is what awaits us all, but I'm getting a head start.

"*You* are the one to summon me?" its voice is worse than I could have imagined. It rattles through me, digging deep into my bones as if the bones I gave life to are taking the life from me now. It's grating and leaves an echo in my ears, forcing me to remember its voice for the rest of time.

"*You*, a measly little thing. Barely fit to be called human, to be respected."

Forcing my voice past the imprint it left on me, I manage, "Yes."

It scoffs, turning its head away to inspect the surroundings while I'm left frozen- unsure and afraid. My room does not seem fit for such a powerful being to be a part of now; my bed is unmade, there's clothes and ingredients scattered across the floor, and several trinkets and books have fallen off the few shelves I have after the rattling. Anywhere it looked soon revealed everything that was wrong with the space. I can only imagine what it saw when it looked at me.

"Why did you bring me here?" it seems discontent with what it saw, but I don't know if anything would be worthy of such a being.

"Because we need you," my voice trembles, I still try to act confident and straighten my posture back up.

"Nobody needs me anymore. Since the invention of the sun and that insipid Prometheus brought you flame, I am no longer necessary for you humans."

"We need another chance. Come with me, let me show you why."

It nods, albeit skeptically.

Dumping out my schoolbag, I cautiously approach it with the opening wide for it to jump into. It scoffs at the circumstance, but limps in nonetheless. I zip the bag up enough that the creature could still see out as I shuffle to my door with five locks on it and hesitantly creak it open.

Even just stepping out into the hallway is enough to prove my point. I can feel the creature shuffling around in the backpack in order to investigate where the smell is coming from. Flickering fluorescent lights only seem to highlight the smoke that's been gathering on the walls for decades; practically sediment if you were to try to clean it away, but nobody has for years. It would be a futile battle anyway. Trash lines the hallway, clear pathways carved out around them. But it only keeps building against the wall, currently it's up to my shins. Somewhere buried in the trash are people too drunk, tired, or stupid to make their way back home.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see it trying to peek its head out of the bag, eyes scanning everything it can see.

"And this is just my hallway," I murmur to it.

Stepping outside was somehow even worse. The sun was covered in gray clouds that I've long accepted are made of smog and not hopes for rain. Cars and pedestrians followed by their personal cloud of smoke passing by, along with the factories in the distance that many people here rely on for a job, only contribute to the smog infecting our sky and lungs.

"What is this?" its voice rattles in my brain, I can feel the disgust and hate resonating in it.

"Welcome to a city in the 21st century."

"This was not what the gods had in mind for you," it shuffles more, "no, not at all."

Before continuing, I put an earbud in an ear so at least it looks like I'm on the phone with someone (though I doubt anyone would pay attention or care), "we humans tend to take anything positive- such as life- and twist it to better benefit ourselves, rather than as a whole."

I wander down the street, meandering through the scenic route to my work. Scenic being: homeless people begging as they slouch against the building as their only support, reaching their bony hands out, pits of practically acid on the side of the road, rats too large for life fighting for the smallest moldy crumb.

"Do you see those factories in the distance?" some more shuffling so it can better see what I mean, I feel it nod, "those are the main source of all the smog you see, and they pay terribly for so many to work in terrible conditions. But, most people have to rely on them for any source of income seeing as the violence, education system, and overall community don't tend to create the best of people that other companies are willing to buy. That only instigates the poor conditions kids grow up in, churning out even worse people."

"How did this happen?" now, its voice seems so disappointed and baffled by the extent to which humans can screw themselves over.

"Any number of things," I start tallying off on my fingers, "the economy, healthcare, education system, politics, unclean processes- namely pollution, the idea that every man is for himself and must fight for a place on his own, the stigma of needing help with surviving...I could keep going."

"What do you want me to do with this? Why do you think I could do anything?"

"Well. The universe started with a flash of light, right? Couldn't you start us over again? Earth 2.0?"

"Would you like to see what would happen?"

My vision goes blank, all I can see is nothing but also everything. I can hear the screams of pain and anguish as people's eyes are burned from their sockets, their skin melting off, children crying for only a few seconds then going silent as the heat takes them. Even just seeing and hearing it, the pain radiates through me. I'm left shaking and crouching over in pain, tears running down my face as I scream until my throats hoarse.

Barely squinting my eyes open to look around me, I see a small group of people staring at me in concern. Many still walked around and away.

In front of me is the mangled skull I extracted from a dumpster so many months ago, the bones following it a collection of years of hard work and learning the hard way. Even crumbling, the creature I created to hold all the power of the being of light, the light that started it all, is still stronger than me. Stronger than anything us humans could create.

"Do you still wish for a complete start again? Knowing what it implies and the destruction it will create?"

"Do it. Please."

The screams begin.

WHISPERS FROM THE WOOD STAFF

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Jillian Coddington, Lead
Aysiah Matthews, Co-Lead
Imani Lane
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