

Into Another World

by

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Submitted to the Department of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2022

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Into Another World Cover Letter

My senior project, *Into Another World*, is a collection of fiction and poetry I have written and worked on throughout my years at Purchase. My fiction takes on many forms in this collection of work, much of which I would attribute to my ADD and constantly looking for new ways to stay engaged with whatever I am doing. Though I have a variety of approaches and attempt different things in each new piece I write, I have found that in my fiction I am endlessly intrigued by the human condition and trying to define the undefinable through story. My poetry on the other hand tends to be more reflective, confessionary, and indulgent.

Some of my biggest inspirations for my work are *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, and *Candide* by Voltaire to name a few. Each of these works have gripped me in a way that not only left lingering thoughts once I was finished reading but have changed how I write. As far as poetry goes, I have found inspiration from Sylvia Plath, T. S. Eliot, John Keats and Lana Del Rey. Their lyricism and ability to elicit unique and specific images has taught me the importance of these skills not just in my poetry, but my fiction as well. I also find that TV shows like *Twilight Zone* and *Black Mirror* draw me in. Again, this content feels aligned with my own style because of each episode's oddness.

Through these works I have begun to understand how to write about political, philosophical, and personal topics that I have a passion for while using a narrative to push these points forward. Beyond craft, these different forms I pull from have an atmosphere that envelopes and fascinates. I believe my writing to be a conglomeration of all of these styles. I find

myself being drawn to stories that step away from reality in order to reveal something about it. I aim for my writing to also achieve this.

My whole life I have been a dancer who also did a bit of acting. Thanks to my mother, I learned to love reading from an early age and grew up reading YA books such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins like so many of my peers, but I never wrote in a way that made me identify with being called a “writer.” I didn’t feel as if I had earned the title. Though I would come up with story ideas and jot them down or randomly write down a short poem or piece of a song, I never paid much attention to writing as anything more than a small hobby.

This changed in my senior year of high school when in February my AP Literature class had a guest teacher, Rachel Steeger, come in for six weeks. She introduced us to flash fiction and assigned us to write a feminist Southern Gothic flash fiction piece which after being workshopped in fiction classes at Purchase, will be included in this project. I still remember how much fun I had while originally writing this. When she handed these stories back out to everyone, she brought mine over to me and asked if I had ever studied creative writing. I was confused by her question and shocked her by replying no. Because of this, she encouraged me to consider applying to schools for creative writing. I now realize this instance of encouragement changed my life completely.

As someone at an arts high school for dance and having completed my auditions for dance programs, this was a strange thought to me: study creative writing. The recollection of joy I felt while writing the piece prompted me to research which colleges I had applied to that had not just dance but also creative writing programs. Purchase was my top school and coincidentally the only school that still had open admissions for the Creative Writing department. With the

assistance of Ms. Steeger, I touched up my original story, wrote another one, then also revised it all within less than a month to meet the deadline. Upon acceptance into the Creative Writing program, I decided to study both dance and creative writing during my college career. I look back on this time with immense gratitude for the funny way life works itself out. I cannot imagine who I would be if I had not been accepted into this program.

Developing the craft of writing has influenced the way I view my other art forms. While discovering my love of writing towards the end of my high school career, my mother told me, “Why are you surprised? You tell stories when you dance and act. You have *always* been a storyteller, that’s your gift.” Finding my ability to effectively tell stories on paper has taught me so much about the value I place in communicating with others and making whoever will listen feel less alone and more understood.

During my time at Purchase, Professor Okasi, Professor Hoffman, and Professor Narayan have been enormous influences to which I will always feel indebted to for their wisdom, time, and guidance. Professor Okasi has developed my ability to pinpoint where a story needs improvement and the importance of honest writing. With his help I found it is essential to trust my reader with words as honest as I can make them. Professor Hoffman has worked tirelessly with me this year to get “Into Another World” prepared for submission as my senior project. From recommending the particularly exciting work of George Saunders as a source to draw from and identify with to continually encouraging the development of my pieces, I can say that Professor Hoffman has made an incredible impact on this project and on how I view my own writing. Professor Narayan deepened my understanding of works from the British Romantic period and the underlying themes that arise from the society one lives in. The Romantic period

holds a special place in my heart for its emphasis on how othering plays a part in stories and what emotions reside in that place.

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë is the book that stuck with me the most from my time spent learning from Narayan due to how complex the suffering is. It is a masterful example of how strangeness allows for exploration of the human condition. I also have an admiration for Keats due to the time I spent studying with Narayan. The language and tone of his poetry nestled its way into my heart. The growth I attribute the most to these literature classes is how clear I am able to see a throughline in my work and others' now. It has given me the ability to anticipate where things need to be sacrificed in order for the piece to fulfill its objective effectively.

My relation to fiction has been shifted by my growing relationship to poetry during my time at Purchase. Though I have only taken Poetic Techniques, being in Literature courses like Narayan's and becoming friends with fellow writers has exposed me to poetry on a level beyond just that. As I looked back on older pieces to revise them for this project, the biggest spots of growth were my language and my evolution of stylistic precision. Both of these areas are tied to understanding poetry as a writer and reader and being able to actually analyze what is working and what is not on a line level. I have grown from a writer that can tell a story in a slightly clumsy way to a writer capable of eloquently stating what I mean with great intention. I will continue to evolve and further develop my individual voice while starting to understand what aspects of my style should be amplified.

The first story I ever wrote in my AP Literature class is titled *The Forbidden Chest*. It will be included in this collection and follows a mother daughter duo who possess magical powers and are beginning a fight for vengeance for their daughter and sister respectively. *A Mind*

of Its Own is about a future society where humans have evolved to the point of each of their limbs having its own sub-brain. The main character is a famous artist whose limb causes an accident in the hopes of being amputated and free to live a life without the human it was born attached to. It questions what artistic integrity looks like, what part of oneself is responsible for creation, and how these ideas become malleable when put under pressure. The current stand-in title *Arm POV* is a stream-of-consciousness exploration of the arm from *A Mind of its Own* and helps to give a deeper look into the mentality of this futuristic creature. *The Philosophical Artist* is a flash fiction piece written in second person. Again, futuristic technology and the inevitable age of machines is at the forefront of this story begging the question of what we are willing to lose in order to achieve a “utopian” society.

Exposition of Self-Destruction is a stream of consciousness piece where late night thoughts give a peek into the protagonist’s thought process and her relation to herself and her past. *Glass Houses* is something I have been working on specifically for my senior project. As I have been writing it, I have come to the conclusion that the work will most likely exceed short story form and could possibly be a novella or full length novel. The excerpt included introduces a family in a futuristic America where homes made of glass are being mandated for the lower class’s “safety.” This concept feels full of ideas that will need lots of space to be unpacked such as invasion of privacy, the importance of critical thinking, what can never be seen no matter how transparent a society seems or wants to be, and who is the villain in complex times.

For Sale is a short piece that was originally a poem that is based on my rumination of how a space or place is brought to life. It is told through the perspective of a house whose inhabitants are slowly packing up to move out and ponders the age-old question of *is it better to*

have loved and lost or never loved at all? My poem “sitting at the back of the church for your funeral was the worst mistake” is a villanelle that I wrote in poetic techniques that reflects on a friend’s funeral I attended and a regret that weighed heavily on me in my process of grieving. “tundra” is a sonnet reflecting on a romantic relationship in which I can’t help but look back on as a cold cage. Lastly, “beyond in and of” is an erasure poem with the themes of balancing productivity and joy. For me, it takes place in an imaginary liminal space where intangible ideas are made tangible.

My writing process is full of late nights when the world is quiet or solitary afternoons when there seems to be no distractions better than immersing myself in imagination. Deadlines are also super helpful to me because, again, ADD. I think my revision process is a bit less reliant on deadlines and I believe this kind of approach is what is necessary to take on as my writing process post-grad. When it comes to revisions, I typically make a couple of changes at a time and then come back to it within the next couple of days to continue. I find that leaving space between decision making helps me come up with more thought-out solutions.

In the next few years I plan on traveling to Antarctica for an adventure with my father and get inspiration for material while there. Beyond that I would love to attend grad school to continue growing as a writer and be able to workshop my stories in an intimate, small setting. Essentially, I want to have experiences that cultivate new ideas that inspire me to continue writing. I will continue to strive for my work to be honest, precise, thoughtful, strange, and communicative. My ultimate hope for “Into Another World” and my writing in general is for it to create room for conversations and spark curiosity that extends beyond the time it is read.

For Sale

I stood sturdy for each of you since I was born. I feel honored to have been your house. My insides provided structure and shelter and stability. My plywood like bones, my insulation like muscle and fat, and each moment I contained like nerve development. You all gave me life. Or at least taught me what a life could be. Your love gave me an energy not found in other houses near me. Your love brought me into being. I feel lucky to know you all. No other house near me gently releases a joyous hum of life when the wind hits its face or rain splats on its head.

My cookie dough drenched kitchen, pasta sauce stained stove top, dirty dishes, and dusty cupboards still buzz with the vibration of the blender and ring with the sound of the oven timer. Your feet tickled my feet and sometimes the top of my skull. You indulged my stomach as a means of storage to later indulge yours. I made sure to keep a good watch of the means by which you lived and preserved it as best as I could. One of your life sources was food. My only one was your love. Even now, I still feel full.

My wash-away-your-day bathrooms, quick morning hands of water woke you up, hot beams from my pipes relaxed your overworked muscles. Candles and sighs warmed my air, bubbles intertwined with my ceramic and your skin. The dirt you accumulated outside of me was scrubbed off with ease. I take pleasure in knowing I was responsible for carrying the grime far away from you.

My bedrooms are an invisible ink newspaper of your secrets, coziest of places during rainstorm or brisk morning, late night thoughts bounced off my ceiling, spilt paint and muddy

stomps add to my character. The messes never upset me. I look back fondly at the points of required cleaning where you would bathe me to get out an accidental stain. The moments where private knowledge remained private because I blocked out any unwanted listeners. I know each of you better than you know one another. When you are alone, separate from the others, I contain the multitude of all your individual chronicles. I am a treasure chest of your identity.

My closets flooded with pieces of you. Purses paraded my shelves. Stuffed animals too dear to ditch but never hugged called my windowless room a grave. Shoes with nowhere to go waited patiently to see the world. The part of me that held the keys to how you present yourself to everyone that I don't belong to. Your ever changing articles of clothing piled up and, as the years went by, evolved with you. The closet, a cove, a physical conglomeration of all the parts of yourself you share freely.

My living room was where you all lived together. Popcorn aroma and the dim glow of a movie. Laughter and daily check ups held within my tender insides. Board games with miniature versions of me paired with the playful yell of a loser and the triumphant shriek of a winner.. Secret parties that I would never get you in trouble for. The stubbing of pinky toes on the legs of the coffee table. My fireplace warming the room as you all sing along to Christmas music late at night. The glow of our tree providing the only form of constant light as the orange flickering begins to die out. I became a part of your family through this part of me.

The three of you have been packing for days. Memorabilia flung into boxes. Odds and ends tossed into the trash, never to be seen by us again. I can feel the shifting of weight inside of me. I am becoming lighter as you take things away. You are upset to leave me while still in me. The physical weight I bear lessens but my atmospheric weight increases. I know you feel this burden, too. I embrace you the only way I know how: by standing still.

Tomorrow you leave for good, a family I protected for thirteen years. I was built for you. I wonder if I'll fade away without you. A shell of what I once was. If I do, I hope one day you'll find my skeleton and call me home again, for I will always truly belong to you. Your love will be the place I reside in for the rest of my days. My windows and walls would wave if they could.

Exposition of Self-Destruction

My laying body desires to be unconscious, unaware, as the dark glow of my sleeping computer system blares into the room. Its buttons pulsing, their beg to be satiated by being turned on. (did insomnia exist before electronics?) It's that darkness that allows you to see nothing and everything at the same time. Things that don't exist in the daytime glide effortlessly through my dimly lit room and I can catch them out of the corner of my eye if I focus just hard enough. (do those tiny shapes know i exist? do they have really small brains and eyes but no human knows it yet?) I pretend to see the little atoms that make up the life around me, that shape my world, that feel safe, comfortable, reliable. (is spontaneous combustion something that actually happens? maybe

these atoms aren't so safe?) This darkness numbs the rest of my body, but my mind resists. It dulls my other senses to where nothing feels real anymore with the exception of my unfaltering consciousness. A floating jumble of electrons (is that even what makes up a brain? electrons? no, neurons?) traveling through a void on a rock that has a molten lava core. Or maybe

I'm just breaking the code of the simulation in which we live and once I do I will wake up to a sublime, magnificent world where I'm a god and will live forever (does forever ever become boring?) and nothing is ever wrong. (all anyone does is talk about what is wrong with the world. it must be quiet and boring to exist perfectly)

If I am me in another place, then how are we different? Am I learning from this or is this like a person playing a video game? (hello, my puppeteer, my conductor [,me?]) Do we live in a

world of more chaos and destruction and violence than the one controlling us? Our world is a dictator that fuels itself off of the more mundane work of real dictators. But is it actually the government controlling us? Yes, and

capitalism, the system that can't be broken because we're hopelessly addicted to it. (or am i just repeating instagram facts?) I'm aware that I'm no better than anyone else. I peer over at my computer system that's so new 25 years ago no one could imagine it would exist and so prehistoric that in 2500 years it will be gazed upon in museums

like a poorly preserved bowl from ancient (aren't we ancient to the future? who's to say we aren't continually antiquating ourselves?) times, rightfully so. Or maybe

I just mean naturally so, though nature always has a way of being right in the end so I guess they're interchangeable. The world might not even make it far enough to see its population take tours of what structures remain from this time period, though. If the world doesn't make it till then, then nothing matters anyway. Hell, nothing matters as is. (how can i live a life in which i truly believe that statement?) But long story short - capitalism (could be?/) is a finely tuned, corrupt, universal addiction who emotionally, mentally, and physically abuses all of its victims. (maybe

capitalism is the embodiment of my toxic exes lmao) It's been so long since I've been with somebody. I think I forgot

everything. How can I fuck somebody in a hot way? (hot for me or hot for them? what's more important?) How am I supposed to ride a dick? (i guess it feels hot to be in control?) I want to be so good in bed, but I don't practice sex with partners enough to keep up my practice. (maybe it's like riding a bike? a skill that can't ever be lost?) I've been practicing in my head (then again sex is more natural than bike riding so there's gotta be hope) on my own. Trying to

pretend that a (faceless) partner and I start a moment and fall into a cuddle position then they caress me and hold me, but they don't smother me like how it happens when you cuddle in real life. Then he gets so turned on by how much he loves me and that turns me on and we have the best sex ever and finish at the same time and stay cuddling in that unrealistic world paused in a moment that never existed in this universe (the curtains close

and are immediately befriended by a standing ovation). A figment of my imagination, a false world. A nice thought, but a little too hopeful for this reality. (silly goose) Men don't need love to be turned on. Maybe

everything we imagine is a different life we could have lived. (there's that optimism![], fashionably late to the party) What if every thought we have is an effect of a cause in a different lifetime? What if astrology isn't real? What if astrology is real, but it's not what we think? (is it even astrology still then?) What if astrology is the soundwaves or energy waves or some type of wave that reaches us wherever we are on the planet and that's why there are weird trends like every fifth customer ordering the same thing the whole day or me noticing 8 red cars in the same lane back to back. (maybe

it's not astrology, but where do coincidences originate from?) What if those waves have been with me since before I was me? People call me an old soul

and I think I know why; I have one of the oldest particles inside of me. The universe has built itself for me because I am the universe (growing and expanding at every point). I built me for you (i'm not talking about you, my conductor, if you can hear me [lol i like this bit], i'm talking about the general you) and you built you for me and any other combination rings true. Whatever space is, it was created (a vacuum, right?), and the smallest atom of me was there resulting in that little nothingness making a home inside me. (maybe

that's why i feel empty?) That little particle exists, hiding somewhere near my chest, and like a supernova of a star, the spot implodes and creates a suction drain, a black hole that leads to nowhere. I'm ripping myself apart from the inside. Each piece of me spaghetti-fied, atomized, vaporized. It's happening so quickly that I can't comprehend it fast enough. A forever loser in the race against my own self-destruction. (some mario kart race tracks are more challenging than others.)

I used to think I could be everything (i want to be more of everything, a full everything), but now I am close to being nothing for absolutely no good reason at all. I still think I could have been an astronaut or a lawyer. I still could be if I was so determined. I've always been destined for success because that's what I was raised to believe, but don't we all assume we're exceptional? Isn't a life just a life? Why do these paths exist? I am destined for greatness (what is actual greatness?), but so is everyone else so I guess we'll see what my special is? (can it be defined? pinpointed? commodified?) What makes a person more special than another? (am i actually special or do i just claim i am? if everyone is special, what makes being special special?) Why is sad and lonely fame the epitome of success in my mind which knows much better than to believe that? (consumerism? [/] instagram?)

I think part of me will always believe I'll wake up one day with some superpower or as some sophisticated wiccan sorceress and I'll go on my hero's journey (i'll give percy jackson a run for his money) and be who I'm supposed to be (an instagram influencer sent to save the world from itself), but I think I'm starting to realize that every moment in life is the beginning and the ending and everything in between all at once. Maybe

we can be trapped in a moment, but if it was this moment how would I feel? (if the movie of my life faded to black now, what would i have learned as the only audience member?)

I read recently that Venus and Earth are sister planets with a very similar history despite the vast differences between the two and no one knows why they turned out so differently (i imagine this is what it's like for parents with their children). (you know what i wonder?) I wonder why Ancient Romans decided to name gods after the planets they did. Did they know Venus was hot and cold and that's why they named her the goddess of love?

I'm laying next to myself and we're happy, we're in love. I could never live in that place in this lifetime unless I chose to make my life that life. If I willed myself to be different, then I could do it. (would that be self-acceptance or narcissism?)

I wonder how much the way I was raised, my childhood, was seared into my soul in this lifetime. (does it stick with me after i die?) I remember how good it was (grabbing five quarters and running outside to catch the ice cream man in his van) and how bad it was (grabbing the counter and running outside to hide from the hand that hit me). I always took for granted the privilege I had. (i wish i was skinny like i was when i was a prepubescent 12 year old like society tells women we should look like now) I wish I was born into a different family that was blessed with older money. Money that never expired or ran out.

I still think of Chloe in all her beauty. Sometimes I wonder how much pain can come from having so much. Money, charm, attractiveness. But the world around her didn't add up. She was left to suffer in a hidden way (doesn't everyone secretly suffer, though?), a secret way that jumps out of the dark at you (isn't that what makes getting to know someone exciting?), leaving you defenseless and unarmed against your own mind (comparing how much your traumas line up?).

I often think of what her mother experienced in Chloe's final moments. Figmented last moments of people's lives have turned into my adult imaginary friend

(or rather acquaintance - i don't like her all that much nor do i enjoy her company).

For Chloe, I imagine a fight between her and her parents and her discreetly grabbing a gun from somewhere after she ran out of the room they were in and her father sighing by a fireplace that's casting eerie, long shadows around the room. He exits without a word to his wife and sits down in his extravagant office. His dark oak desk and bookcases encompass him

in this moment. (i see him through a black and white filter. he looks presidential like those images of every modern american president where they look out the window of the oval office in deep thought. he is a cliché in all his power) Her mother refuses to give up and, after taking a moment to gather herself,

she starts after her daughter. She heads up their Gone-With-the-Wind type staircase when a terrible noise stops her in her tracks. (i've never heard a gun in real life) The answer is evident to her before she could even fully process the soundwave itself. (my lack of experience in the sound of guns going off leaves my imagination to mimic and search. i replay gun sound effects from scenes in tv shows to fill this absence) This soundwave emanates, beams on me like a star's energy. This soundwave follows me everywhere,

defining who I am and who I will be. This sound is a part of me now and I didn't even hear it. I wasn't even there. Just like her mother,

her father stops at that noise. (two birds, frigidly still, in hopes that they will survive their predator's threatening presence) Hearing it, the real noise of that fatal gunshot, would become a continual stabbing in one's ears until all that's left is to feel so sorrowful that you hang yourself like Chloe's father. I worry that his last terrible moments as he was hanging there, waiting for his last breath to be squeezed out of him, were lonesomely escorted by the echo of that noise

growing greater and greater, louder and louder (a whistling tea kettle), until he slipped into an eternal quiet

(the kettle is removed from the stove). Or maybe

worse, it haunts him beyond his own death, never becoming unheard again. That soundwave won't ever die. He died with it in his head and it shall live there forever.

Her mother runs up the stairs hoping for a child that can be put back together. (does that awful sound still ring in her ears today?) The scene of Chloe in her room, pulling the trigger, and then collapsing as bits of her physical body split from each other is one that never feels authentic, but rather cartoonishly gory. I imagine a shotgun in her mouth (the black hole in my chest ingests another piece of me). I imagine her being so carelessly angry that she pulls the trigger without a worry. (no, please

—) She's tried to die before and it has never worked out. She can taste the next cottonmouth moment in her life (you can't always be lucky) when she wakes up in the hospital and the fight is forgotten and her family is glad she's alive. But the bullet missed her intended target of escapism and killed her instead. Death by eternally being misunderstood. (couldn't we all die from that?) The all-encompassing soundwave of that shot is followed by a miniscule thud of her body. That noise must have been diminished (thank god[/God?]) by the relentless, overpowering, mechanical echo ringing through her parents' ears.

Her mother must have ran like her own life depended on it because is her life not her only daughter? The blood, hair, and skull bits seep and settle into the bohemian blue rug. This rug is her final resting place. Pieces of her exist in its interwoven fabric on a microscopic level even after her mother discards it the following day. Not even the waves of her mother's sobs could shake those pieces of Chloe from the fabric. (i wonder where that rug is now) The rug's new

identity was forced onto it in impulsivity, the final moments of her life (buried deep in the dirt of some obscure wasteland). Just like the rug, the stains of her death, her father's death, can never be removed from their withering familial tapestry (a medieval family tree tapestry).

My family and I are hurricanes and tsunamis and tornadoes (is this how i learned to destroy?). We rip through the world and suck up everything around us to spit it back out, bent and broken (have i destroyed the world?). I have no real grasp on (do i only have myself left to destroy?) if I have an actual family or not. I think I might. (beat me. call me a monster!) Did I become what I was unknowingly being conditioned for?

I have always been sad and sensitive, but my tongue is my best defense. I can pick holes in any argument, even my own (i am perpetually exhausted

by my own existence). A skill I am proud of (should i be, though?). No one knows anything of this world or the morals we (who is 'we?') search for ('we' the people?) and try to proclaim. Every statement guesses at what the ultimate truth is (assuming there is an ultimate truth).

Like rats in a subway station, we lack awareness of the grander world around us. (what is the ultimate truth to a rat? what if our ultimate truth as a human isn't *the* ultimate truth?) What if like rats, the idea of God is something too far advanced for us to understand, too? Humans' hamartia is eternally thinking that the world has evolved for millions of years in order to create our knowledgeable species. That we are the peak of creation, nothing is greater. ('we,' so flawed) If God is real, then I hope, I believe, He/She/They are beyond the confinements in which we try so hard to place Them.

As for the debate on if God is a just God, a fair God... Isn't God nature? This is why insistence on defining morals is absurd (and impossible). Nature is complex, the most multi-

faceted being in existence. Waves of water miraculously lift themselves up towards the heavens and gracefully descend back from where they came (sounds of a rainstorm, sounds of a rainforest), yet sometimes

the waves rise too high or murderously spin around killing, destroying, ransacking (unidentifiable screams). If our society can't even begin to understand the ethics of seemingly immoral nature, then how will we ever understand its Creator?

Who am I to think I mean something to this world? Why did humans get blessed(/cursed) with consciousness (sometimes

i imagine myself as a slug or tree or cat. how do things function if they don't think in language?) if all it does is provide a devastating awareness of our own inevitable demise. (sometimes

i yearn for) Animals live without facing this truth (ignorance). The evolved beings of the future, if the future exists, are closer to God than we could ever hope to be. (what does evolution look like when we aren't looking backwards but forwards?) Humans exist halfway between primitivity and divinity.

Somehow I am my own biggest problem (self-deprecating or true?). I laugh at and make a mockery of the world around me and wonder why no one takes me seriously. There is an intelligence inside of me, but I feel like a puppy dog whose paws are too big for the rest of him. Maybe

I need to grow into myself? (who am i if i am not her yet?) Maybe

I've already arrived and I just don't like who I am. Does anyone like who they are? If one completely does (then my strategy for humanizing people is faulty), how does one grow? Isn't

dislike our (/my) motivation to change? Forever evolving into better and better versions of ourselves; we are disintegrating (fire crackles) in order to be reborn.

I am at the point in my life where I can actually recall five years prior (shampoo suds sneak in between my soles and shower shoes), slipping into nostalgia while at the same time recognizing my flipbook of memories (england school trip) has only just begun. The longing for my other self in that other moment only grows with age. Moving forward is tricky.

Is self-evolution a layering or stripping action?

(putting on a morphsuit or peeling like an onion?)

Is self-evolution a synonym for self-destruction with a positive connotation?

People's lack of self-awareness never ceases to astound me. (am i self-aware?) Some people seem incapable of change. (yes) My self-destruction contradicts itself by freeing me and oppressing me simultaneously. (a bottle of bubbles being compressed only to

escape as iridescent orbs) Divisive decisions lead to exponential growth. I think this is true, but perhaps I'm feeding the thought to myself on a silver spoon of denial. (why are we born with certain fixed traits?)

(maybe

it's genetics?) The people of the world who lack self-awareness must be genetically different. (animalistically oblivious or evolved beyond trying to perceive perceptions of themselves?) It's the only explanation that makes sense to me. (do self-aware people know who they are?) Mike knew nothing of himself,

yet championed on taking my identity. His finely-tuned facade rarely cracked and was fed by each empathetic impulse I had. (at my aunt's house, i rip away the soft shell of hard boiled eggs) I craved a merging of souls, the sweet loss of self in the deep well (looking up at the

distant daylight from the bottom of an empty well) of someone else. I didn't realize how unhealthy (intoxicating) that is until recently. Rather than fusing together (atomic bomb) like I had hoped, Mike expedited the process in which I was destructing. (do i chase destruction?) By the time he was done, (do i attract it?) he looked down on the shell of me with pride in being the catalyst (should i have slapped that smirk right off his face to prove i didn't want it?).

Catastrophe clinched into every crevice of my being.

(fight or flight?) Self-destruction became a welcomed visitor, an old friend coming home.

(maybe

i was born less evolved than most of the world)

I see orange, I see red, as the color of leaves change around me. I cannot change who I am in this life (i can try, i will always try). Are the other versions of myself imagining this version of me? Do they like me? (am i the universe, expanding?) Do I like them? (am i

growing? evolving? self-destructing?) Maybe

I am my own undoing in this world and the next and the ones that don't exist (and that will always be a pleasure).

tundra

today i realized i am a bamboo
tree. my pride puts me too high, vertigo
thoughts. i wait through your winter nights, shadow
of mine then greets your haughty sunrise dew.
you spew your darling drops of thoughts, you, who
strain your tsunami into particles of snow.
sometimes you see me sway or shiver. no
remorse. yet here i am still. i endure you.

you overload my limbs like a nightgown,
gauche silk. your selfish rain and snow and sleet
constrict my leaves. icicles make a crown,
much heavier now. snow takes too much out of me.
your volatile touch weighs me down.
i don't want to be preserved, only released.

A Mind of its Own

Vincent woke up with only four brains and three limbs. The evolved humans usually had five brains and four limbs - one main brain in the head, and four smaller brains, one for each limb, which tuck themselves into sockets. These brains function in the same way an octopus with its nine brains does. He still had all of that, just not all attached. Unknown to him, Right Arm had been removed. Groggily, he let the glare of white light come into focus before looking down and noticing his missing arm. Vincent heard his heart machine rage with this alarming realization. So did the nurse. She rushed over immediately.

“Vincent, can you hear me?” she asked in a weary voice.

Agitated, he responded, “Of course I can hear you unless you removed my ears, too! What the fuck happened to my arm?”

“Well, we had to remove it because the injuries were so severe. You’re lucky the elevator didn’t close on your torso. Things could’ve been a lot worse.”

“My painting arm! I need my right arm to make a living.”

“Oh, um, don’t worry. We’ll be reattaching it. It just needs to rest in a limb cryohealer. You should have your arm working for you in no more than two months.”

“You should’ve led with that. The art world would go into crisis if I couldn’t work again,” Vincent hissed at the young nurse.

Flushing red, she apologized and scurried away.

Staring at the ceiling, Vincent’s main brain started putting together its recollection of the trauma. It had been a normal day. He was heading to the supply store. He entered his elevator

and pressed the ground floor button when suddenly his right arm flung his keys out of the elevator. He leaned forward to pick them up while, oddly, his right arm was clunking around where the keys were, but not grasping them. The doors began closing. Vincent tried to yank his body upright, but his right arm kept pulling him towards the keys outside the elevator, putting himself in danger. The doors slammed on his arm and didn't reopen. The elevator started going down. He thought he had seen a notice that warned of elevator trouble, but assumed it had been fixed. He felt his feet leave the floor as an awful crunching noise rang in his ears and sent howling pain signals to his main brain. His left arm slammed on the emergency button. The elevator stopped. Right Arm could feel the hot blood of its insides slinking down its own skin like tears of relief. Vincent saw a painting of a small red river of blood with skin banks, almost entirely his own idea. Then the canvas went black.

He passed in and out of consciousness for some time. He remembered through frosty glass in his main brain's memory: Loud mechanical noises. Shouting. A release of pressure. Bright lights. Then waking up.

The doctor came in with her ponytail flying in self-created wind, disrupting Vincent from his reflective state. She carried with her the limb cryohealer with his right arm strapped in, visible through a small window. Pale Right Arm looked as if it had been taken advantage of by someone. Black bruises and deep red cuts made the window look like it was a black and white photograph, but the cuts were too vibrant to be muted. Still, in its battered state, Right Arm felt like a one-limbed rocket ready for blast off. The proximal end of the right arm was covered in a metallic aluminum material to insulate the brain. Without it, no brain could survive the cold temperatures needed to assist the arm's healing process. The doctor set the case on a bedside table.

“Vincent, I’m Dr. Shelley. Your right arm should make a full recovery in two months. If all is well, we should be able to reattach at that time. Do you have any questions for me?”

“My right arm does all the work for my career. I am Vincent Voss. Famous painter. It *must* heal faster!” he demanded.

“My apologies. We’ve done all we can for it at the moment, Mr. Voss. You’ll have to give the arm time to heal.”

Vincent had just enough decency to not spit at Dr. Shelley, though he heavily considered doing it and blaming it on the meds.

“The nurse has completed your discharge paperwork,” Dr. Shelley continued. “You’re free to leave. I recommend resting for a week and doing as little as possible.”

Vincent stared at her with his dark eyes emitting a deep sullenness that forced her to nod and leave the room after a brief and uncomfortable silence. He turned and peered through the cryohealer’s small window, feeling a boiling, ugly hatred for his detached arm. For a split second, he felt that if his arm could smirk, it would - while looking him dead in the eye, thankful it was rid of the rest of his useless vessel.

Vincent shook his head to clear it. He let out a large sigh which began his journey home. At the nurse’s station he told the impish nurse from earlier to call him a taxi. She gave him a curious look.

“You sure you don’t have anyone I can call to come get you?”

He only sneered in response.

His ride home made for an uneventful evening. It consisted of him maneuvering the limb cryohealer around in the backseat and switching between whispering “Fuck!” and “Shit!” quite often. The taxi halted in front of his steel gray, brutalist apartment building. He entered the lobby

and approached the elevator. Feeling a rush of fear as the elevator dinged open, he quickly lugged Right Arm into the back corner of the elevator. Once in his home, he begrudgingly placed the cryohealer on a wooden stool inside his studio. Beaten down, Vincent retired to his bed and fell into a black sleep. This was unusual as his dreams were normally full of color, color that he poured out onto his canvases. The blackness wasn't just a lack of dreams, but a void.

He aimlessly wandered around his apartment the next couple of weeks. Having food delivered once a day. Watching crime shows nonstop. Avoiding his studio at all costs. Only glancing in through the glass walls occasionally. He never allowed himself to look at Right Arm.

One night as Vincent was drifting off to sleep, a strange noise infiltrated the dark, incessantly. It sounded like scratching. *Scritch. Scritch.* He left the warmth of the sheets to listen from the doorway, opening the door with a creak that echoed into the stillness. *Scrrrrrritch. Scritch.* The noise wasn't coming from his living room. It was closer to the kitchen. He tried to shrug it off, telling himself the only thing that could be making a noise like that would be the pipes or perhaps some small, harmless animal. He went back to bed to the emptiness of his dreams. He didn't give the strange noise another thought. For a day.

The next night around the same time, he heard the scratching again, but it stopped before he could even get out of bed. The night after that, all the noises happened quicker than before. *Scritch. Scritch. Thud!* Vincent got up at the thud. He grabbed a small sculpture a peer had made as a gift that he had never liked from his bedside table to use as a weapon if needed, though he wasn't sure how he'd effectively be able to defend himself using only his uncoordinated left arm.

He opened his bedroom door slowly, wishing he had remembered to oil the damn hinges and hoping it wouldn't creak loud enough to alert his scritchng tormentor. All of his brains were awake and pulsing with adrenaline. He squinted into the dark of the living room and kitchen lit

by the moonlight sneaking in from the windows of his studio. He paused, waiting to see a movement, a shadow in the shadows. Nothing. He crept towards the kitchen soundlessly and elbowed on the lightswitch. His left arm swung reflexively and clumsily into the air as the light exploded into his pupils, blinding him. He blinked. Nowhere was there an intruder, human or otherwise. He set down his impromptu weapon of choice and opened all the cabinets checking for anything hiding. He saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Breaking the silence was a quick, light scurry. Vincent knew it couldn't be human at this point or else he would've seen it by now. He sighed and forced himself into the room he thought he could avoid until he had his painting arm reattached. The studio.

He trudged his way to the glass door and pressed it open. He turned on the lights and glanced around with caution. If a small animal tried to attack him, it might be able to do more damage than a human. Vincent would probably end up losing his balance and get attacked further by the creature. Thinking of this caused him to nervously shuffle around at a slow pace to be as quiet as possible. He sleepily gave up on finding the source of these noises and retreated to bed with confusion and dread still lingering in his body.

Empty desolate dreams filled with alien noises consumed Vincent's minds throughout the night for the next week. Each day he continued the same lazy routine. Eat. Watch TV. Avoid the studio. With bone-weary fatigue, each night Vincent hoped for soundless sleep, which never came. Nearing one month after his accident, the noises began echoing in his dreams so loudly that they were drowning out the sound of his own heart. He got up to try to figure out what it was once and for all. He flicked on all of the lights, pushed and shoved the furniture, ransacked cabinets in the kitchen, and threw all the smaller items in the living room about in a frenzy trying to place the noise he couldn't unhear. He collapsed onto the edge of his upended couch, gasping

for breath. As he glanced around the room like a cursed man seeking an easy solution, the clouds outside his studio window moved, allowing the cold moon to cast a single light through the glass. It was a spotlight on the door of the one room he hated checking. His studio.

Glancing into the room through its glass walls, his gaze took in the comforting mess he liked to keep it in. The only place he ever truly let go. No order. Only art. He gazed beyond at the trees outside the studio and wished they were the cause of these nightmarish noises, but they were too far away to take the blame. Sighing and burying his angst, Vincent headed towards his studio door. He pushed it open and turned on a floor lamp. He looked at the red-ish orange Persian rug, the ridiculous amounts of paint stains on it, lovingly dripped from brush to carpet hair as they missed their target of canvas. He smiled nostalgically. Though he could get Right Arm reattached in about a month, he had an uneasy feeling that something would change that. As if he would be deprived for much longer.

He walked around his easel to sit in front of the art he had abandoned, but to his surprise he found something unrecognizable. Foreign, yet clearly in his style. Something he had never dreamt of. Somehow more beautiful than anything he could ever make himself. An impressionistic landscape of the trees outside his window with his infamous slashes of abrasive colors slashed on top. The dream-like quality the impressionistic landscape achieved was unparalleled to any artist Vincent had studied or anything he himself had ever made. Intrigued and equally mortified, Vincent stared. If something had been making those noises, who's to say that that same something didn't make this? Overwhelmed by this realization, Vincent stumbled backwards and veered at a diagonal out of the room, left arm flailing for balance.

After that night, he was less bothered by the noises and would occasionally go in to check on the painting's progress, obsessed with the raw beauty being carefully and carelessly placed.

The duality was striking. It was a piece that would resonate with anyone who viewed it. One night Vincent heard the scritch and wanted to see if his guess that the maker of the noise was also the maker of the painting. He snuck out of his room and peaked into his studio. The sight was repulsive! Right Arm balanced on Vincent's stool. Right Arm's brain still covered, sparkled by the moonlight. Appalled and panicked, Vincent rushed to his room and locked the bedroom door. He knew that Right Arm never moved about during the day or he would've heard it. If he could wait until morning, he could take Right Arm to the hospital and figure this all out.

When Vincent awoke, he saw he had six missed calls from Eddie, his agent, and groaned. He called him back as he got out of bed and put him on speaker so he could immediately take Right Arm in after the call.

"Hello, Eddie."

"Vincent, my star! How are you?"

"I'm doing fine. I'm wondering what was so urgent that you needed to call six times this morning?" Vincent asked slightly annoyed at Eddie for already wasting his time. He put toothpaste on his toothbrush, continuing to get ready.

"Ah, yes. Well, a private buyer is wanting to purchase your newest work and is willing to pay hundreds of millions if that's what we ask. I know you had that little incident, but I'm hoping you've still continued to work with your other arm?"

At this question Vincent stopped brushing his teeth. He thought about telling Eddie that Right Arm was working on its own, but he didn't think that would go over well. It looked like a monster. No one would accept it.

"Vincent?"

“Yes, sorry, Eddie. I was brushing my teeth. I have been working a lot. How about you come in a week and give it a look?”

“Excellent, excellent! Ciao, Vincent. Talk soon.”

Vincent halted getting ready and walked into the studio to view the work. It must be almost done. It’s so exquisite already. Vincent didn’t trust the independent creature that once belonged to him, but he did trust its work. For the next week Vincent checked on the painting’s progress daily. This would be his magnum opus.

A week had gone by and Vincent waited nervously in the living room for his agent to arrive, the fingers of his left hand thrumming onto his coffee table, fingernails clicking with each tap. This background noise disturbed his minds. He was looking strangely down at his remaining arm, feeling anxious, when he realized the limb cryohealer and Right Arm were still sitting in his studio. Obviously that wouldn’t do. Right Arm was disgusting in form and part of Vincent knew he was being shady about this whole ordeal. He rushed to move Right Arm in the cryohealer to his bedroom as he heard a knock. He answered the door to his agent, a short, round man who wore glasses even though he didn’t need them.

“Vincent! If it’s not my favorite client! How are you?”

“Eddie, I’m well. You look exuberant,” Vincent added a fake smile and hugged the rotund man. He almost forgot what hugs felt like. He still didn’t like them.

“Aw, you’re too kind. Now, what’s this new piece? I’m dying to know.”

“Yes, of course! You must come see it for yourself.”

They walked into the studio and looked at the work. Eddie was speechless. He looked on in awe for a few minutes. *Scratch. Scratch.* Vincent heard the loathsome noise. It was the first time he had heard it during the day. *Scratch. Thud!* Why was Right Arm moving during the day?

What was it trying to do? Vincent interrupted Eddie's hypnosis in fear he might notice the weird noise before it ceased.

"So, it's brilliant, isn't it?" He said abruptly and a bit too loudly.

"Completely," Eddie said as he looked over his glasses at the canvas.

"I know."

"And you've been working on this with your left arm?"

"Of course." He coughed. "Yes."

At that very moment, his bedroom door creaked and the men glanced through the glass walls to see the horrific sight. Right Arm crawled upright on its agile fingers towards the studio door. The aluminum still covered its brain like an unearthly crown. The bruises had dispersed into purple puddles and improperly healed scars covered Right Arm. Right Arm looked fresh off a corpse. Vincent felt sick not from Right Arm's appearance this time, but because he wasn't sure what would happen next. Eddie looked at Right Arm in as much awe as he had the painting. Right Arm pushed open the glass door to the studio with a strange but graceful lurch, and began approaching the two men and the painting.

"I-- I don't know...," Vincent stammered and tried to hobble towards Right Arm, but Eddie put out his arm to stop Vincent and shushed him without taking his gaze away from the surreal scene in front of him. Right Arm approached the canvas and climbed the chair right in front of the piece using its fingers to maneuver and its forearm to balance unfalteringly. It grabbed a small brush from the shelf of the easel and dipped it in the oil paint still sitting out. Sitting on its upper arm, it began writing in the bottom right corner of the canvas. Once it finished, the signature read "Vincent Voss" in blood red. Disgusted that the creature that made this work was his removed limb and not himself, Vincent began panicking. How would this look

to Eddie? Eddie looked from Right Arm, who was now resting in the chair, to Vincent, then back to Right Arm, and again to Vincent. He tried to speak, his mouth gaping open only to close again a couple of times before he figured out how to speak.

“Did *this* paint the whole thing? How did it do that?”

“No, no, no, Eddie! I’m just as shocked as you. I have no idea how it did that. You gotta believe me,” Vincent said just a little too needily.

“Do you really expect me to believe that? We just witnessed it climb your stool with such ease and sign your name identical to every signature of yours on previous paintings. What is going on here?”

“My arm has been healing for over the past month in a cryohealer. Look, I’ll go get it!” Vincent pulled at straws. He left and came back like lightning with the container.

“See, this is where my right arm has been. It’s never done something like this before.” At this instance, his shaking from stress and aversion caused the lid of the cryohealer to flop open, revealing the inside. Countless scratches covered the interior. Eddie looked down at the scratches and looked back up at Vincent’s face.

“Vincent. There is no way this arm--” Eddie stopped mid-sentence when he saw Right Arm point at its signature. Somehow he understood what Right Arm meant and corrected himself.

“There is no way *Vincent Voss* has never done that before. The execution was too precise. Its work is genius, but it wouldn’t have known where everything was. It doesn’t even have eyes for crying out loud! Explain yourself. Did you force this artist to make this?”

“No, Eddie, I promise. I- I don’t really know what happened. I saw it working once and just left it alone. It’s a part of me. Why does it matter?” Vincent spluttered out.

“Vincent, this is beyond your normal skill. This arm is the artist. This arm is Vincent Voss, not you. This is its genius, not yours.” Eddie turns to address the dismembered arm of the artist formally known as Vincent Voss and asks, “Am I correct, Vincent Voss, the *true* Vincent Voss?”

At this question the arm Vincent moved its fingers into a thumbs up, then pointed to the door. Eddie nodded his head and picked up the arm artist.

“We will leave you now. I can’t let you hold this unique artistic being hostage, taking credit for its work. Despicable. Truly.”

With that, Eddie shook his head in disgust, snatched the cryohealer from Vincent’s left hand, and headed for the door. As he passed by the painting, Vincent’s former arm grabbed its work. Vincent felt a knot in his chest. Once they had left, Vincent let out a guttural wail. He felt betrayed by his own body. Didn’t that arm need him? Had his arm risked its life just to gain freedom? How did this happen to him? Why did this happen to him? He no longer had dreams of what to paint, anything he tried to make would be uninspired. He had lost everything that made him *him* when he lost the arm that made him *the* Vincent Voss, iconic painter. Vincent Voss, the arm, knew it didn’t need him. Vincent was only restricting what this arm could do. It wasn’t *his* right arm, anymore than he was still Vincent Voss. They were now two individuals and one of them felt he could no longer claim the name. If he kept the name that his painting arm signed, he would be nothing but a poser now.

As Eddie placed Vincent Voss carefully in the passenger seat and buckled it up and smiled. What a relief to have an artist that doesn’t talk. Vincent Voss continued holding onto its masterpiece the whole car ride. They would make billions.

That night Eddie released a public statement which read:

Today, my client Vincent Voss has been freed. As many of you know, the human formerly given attribution for these priceless works of art was in an accident which required his painting limb to be removed. Originally, the plan was to reattach his limb after it had properly healed in a cryohealer. However, these plans have changed.

Upon my visitation to my client to check in on his well being, I heroically discovered that Vincent Voss the artist is solely the limb itself. Its former human had knowledge of its independence and was strategically planning on secretly exploiting its work. In a frantic state, this man tried to convince me that he was still the creator of the great many pieces we have all come to know and love despite the irrefutable proof of new work being made without any of his effort.

The limb is the artist. The limb is Vincent Voss. The intelligent being communicated its desire to be freed and, as any good agent like myself would do, I listened to my clients wishes. I have emancipated Vincent Voss as well as its latest work which I believe to be its most spectacular yet. We will hold an auction very soon with a starting bid of \$125 million.

I am sure many of you will be interested in setting up interviews with Vincent Voss and myself. I look forward to hearing your offers via email. Thank you.

The news went internationally viral within a few short hours. Every news channel that evening was debating the future of independent limbs and ownership of content. The next day Eddie took Vincent Voss back to Dr. Shelley for a checkup as he was determined to keep his invaluable artist healthy and producing for years to come. Dr. Shelley entered into the private room that Vincent Voss and Eddie waited in and tightened her ponytail with eagerness at

being the doctor in charge of this new discovery. She had heard the news. Eddie and she smiled at each other with excitement.

“Hi, you must be Eddie. I am Dr. Shelley, the doctor responsible for the surgical liberation of Vincent Voss, here,” she said as she motioned to the limb with its aluminum covered brain.

“Yes. Pleased to meet you, Dr. Shelley. I am hoping that you can confirm Vincent Voss’ health and be our main point of communication with the medical community on this incredible being.”

“Absolutely, absolutely. Let me take a look at Vincent Voss.”

Dr. Shelley moved towards the patient table and Vincent Voss waved. She stopped in awe and waved back. It motioned for her to come closer as an open invitation to begin her work. She observed the fading bruising on the limb and its overall improved appearance from its original arrival at the hospital. After a few minutes of scribbling down notes, Dr. Shelley released a happy sigh.

“Well, Eddie. It looks as if Vincent Voss is in a much better condition than previously. The healing looks as if it is almost complete. Naturally, I ask that you allow for appointments to be set up so that I can run tests to give us a better understanding on what makes this miracle of a being possible.”

“Yes, of course. I, myself, am also intrigued and desire answers.”

“Wonderful. Also, I would recommend that a permanent metal covering be surgically attached to protect Vincent Voss’ brain as immediately as possible to reduce the risk of any brain damage.”

“I think that is an excellent idea,” Eddie said in admiration of Dr. Shelley understanding longevity as a goal.

“Alright. Please set up a surgery date with my nurse on the way out and I will send you a list of the tests I believe beneficial to run within the coming weeks. I look forward to seeing you both again very soon.” Dr. Shelley finished with a small head bow and departed.

Eventually in his home, Eddie set up a room for Vincent Voss to work in. It made art at its discretion and everything it created was untouchably beautiful. Better than any full human creation. Eddie and Vincent Voss took the art world by storm. The value of Vincent Voss’ work skyrocketed.

People wondered if this meant the supposedly subsidiary brains on evolved humans could all survive without the main brain - a thought that terrified the evolved. The tests were inconclusive thus far, but Dr. Shelley believed a definitive answer was close. Limb reattachments were banned until further notice due to this incident with Vincent Voss. The limbs were now to remain independent and were gathered to be a part of medical experiments.

Vincent Voss never saw its former human ever again and never learned that he changed his name and lost his fortune. It had no desire to connect with the body that had originally controlled it. It vowed to never again creep around in the night to make its art again.

Arm POV

So thoughtful of Vincent to put me in the studio. To abandon his work. Ha, he knows he's nothing without me. He knows I am the one who has made our name renowned. Here I am free to roam and paint once I get out of this healing device. It's frigid in here. Cold and steel. I feel practically numb. My efforts to escape have been miniscule movements, barely anything. The inside rim of the lid doesn't feel secure from what I can tell, but my sense of touch feels like a dissociative experience. Did I lose part of myself when the doctors removed the rest of that stupid body? No. NO. — I must paint. (the feeling of holding a brush, the weight of paint on its bristles) Painting is who I am. *Slithering backwards.*(signing a painting when it's complete) My art is who Vincent Voss is. *Rearing up to launch against the lid.* I am more Vincent Voss than the rest of the body I was formerly attached to. (the loudness of its intolerable voice vibrations - silenced now, peaceful, quiet now) *Scurry forwards.* I can't go back. *SLAM.* Ah! Freedom! The soft carpet of the studio. (rubbing on the carpet like a snow angel, all four limbs sliding in unison, the heat from the ground's friction) *Inching out of the cryohealer.* I'm becoming myself again. *Defrosting.* The light warms my right side. *Flip.* Ahhh. Freedom from my lesser body parts almost made me forget what relaxing feels like. (floating in a bubble bath of warm water) But this isn't what I want most. I want to paint. *Flip and crawl.* I need to get on top of the stool. The rest of me never cleans up. I bet the paint and brushes are all near the canvas. *Flailing, but progressing.* I've found the stool's leg. Time to climb. *Elbow bends. Fingers reach the horizontal foot rest. Lift. Elbow leverage. Lift. Fingers grab the side of the seat. Lift. Plop.* The grain of the wood seat. Oh, how I love the tiny ridges, barely detectable, yet those ridges are the

wood's DNA. Nothing else with this exact molecular blueprint in the world. *Twist*. I've made it. This stool is the mountain I have always dreamed of climbing. Alone. *Forearm extends and fingers grip the stem of a paint brush*. This moment must be what humans mean when they say, "Dreams come true."

emotional satisfaction.

beautifully more genuinely
you wonder

and you are
everyone's love

major show , what burnout.

found , discovering , trying
burnout
But improve
energize reality
fascinating: excel
unique.

you're love
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Glass Houses

The west glass wall let in all the rays of the setting sun. Cece knew her parents were angry because she was watching them argue on the other side of the house. She studied the way their bodies moved, infused with aggression and something else—exhaustion. The interior glass walls separating them from her blurred the words she wouldn't be able to fully understand, but failed to shield her from the violence that overtook their bodies, the turmoil within each individual given form through exaggerated energy in this moment of rage.

Ash, her fifteen-year-old sister, noticed Cece focusing on their parents. “Hey. *Hey*. If this story isn't a good bedtime story, what if I tell you an old fairytale?” This got Cece's attention. She loved fantastical stories like all seven-year-olds do. Ash set down her copy of *Animal Farm* and began making up a story.

“Once upon a time, there was a witch. This witch was a very bad witch. She was the witch in all the stories you hear about princesses and one day she was finally caught. All the princesses came together to discuss what to do with the witch.

“A few said they should kill her, but others worried she would put a curse on them if they did that. Some thought killing her wasn't fair though she had committed many terrible crimes. Eventually the princesses agreed that banishment from their kingdoms was the best way to truly protect themselves from danger or revenge. So they brought their idea to the King of All Kingdoms.

“The King of All Kingdoms listened to the princesses and saw that they were right. However, he suggested one more protective measure be taken. Banishment *and* confinement. He

believed they could never trust the witch to stop terrorizing the kingdoms unless they kept an eye on her.

“The princesses erupted into many conversations between one another wondering how they could banish *and* confine someone. ‘Wouldn’t she just be our prisoner then? Wouldn’t she just curse us for imprisoning her indefinitely?’ they pondered. The King let the princesses debate for a few minutes amongst themselves though he already had a solution.

“‘Listen, princesses. I have an idea,’ said the King in his burly voice. ‘We know we do not want her near us so we will put her far away from the boundaries of the kingdoms, but not too far. We also do not want to lose track of her or she could trick us one day again in the future. I think the best solution is to build her a glass house on the land to the north. The darkness of her caves and shelters in the woods are what allow her to grow powerful. If we put her in a glass house where no trees provide shade, she’ll lose her strength. This way we can also have her watched by our men at all times thus giving us peace of mind in knowing she cannot try to sabotage our kingdoms again.’

“The princesses all applauded the King’s wisdom and praised his ingenuity. The only thing the princesses didn’t consider was the lengths the witch would go to if she was confined and trapped. The King, however, had considered this. And so, the glass house was quickly built north of the wall. On the day the witch was brought in front of him, and him alone, for her sentencing he sang the same melody he had sung to the princesses but to a different tune in the hopes of tricking the witch into being appeased.

“The King said, ‘Evil witch, we fear you and I do not wish to endanger my Kingdoms any further with exposure to your impressive dark arts. I worry that imprisoning you will lead to angst that you may one day turn into vengeance which I do not desire to face either. I would like

to banish you to the walls outside my Kingdoms, but discreetly provide housing accommodations for you in the hopes that my good will will be repaid by your submission and peace for my Kingdoms. We have prepared a home for you north of our guarded land where you may reside. Everything you need will be brought to you and you will be able to live out your days through the generosity of myself and this Kingdom.'

“The witch was shocked by this ruling and eagerly accepted these terms with gratitude. She had heard terrible stories of witches in other lands being killed and tortured upon being captured. To learn that would not be her fate amazed her.

“Early the next morning, the witch was taken to her new residence. Upon her arrival, she realized that the completely glass house would drain her powers. Yet, she did not care as she was grateful for her life and a semblance of her freedom. The humility of the King made her see her powers as unnecessary because perhaps the King and his Kingdoms were not her enemy after all.

“She was escorted into her glass house by guards. They told her she would be watched at all times with one guard always on duty by her house and they would be living in the cottage just across the field. They would bring back her requested supplies from the Kingdoms along with their own sustenance.

“All was well for a while. The witch was still blind with appreciation for the way things had turned out after all her evil doings. She even began to feel remorseful for her corrupted ways and deceitful practices against the princesses. The witch and her guards started to build a friendship through mutual respect. The guards would turn away when she changed or went to her bathroom and oftentimes when a guard would have a daytime shift, they would come inside the witch's glass house and have tea with her.

“Almost every single man had a wife and children to go home to on the weekends, except for one. He never left the area to visit anyone. He seemed to have no personal connections to anyone inside the Kingdom. His name was Damion.

“Damion was a lonely young man. He was unkempt and crude, but the witch didn’t mind. She enjoyed being allowed company. But as time went on she began to notice a change in Damion. He started smelling strongly of liquor and began to watch her even when she changed. If she caught him watching, he would look her in the eyes with a disturbing smirk before looking away. The witch became uncomfortable with Damion and his drunken leering, but she didn’t say anything because who was she to complain.

“The moment the witch knew she had to do something, though, was the first time Damion caressed her during one of their tea times. This unwarranted affection was easily averted by the witch in most instances, but one time he became a bit forceful and grabbed the witch too aggressively. She asked him to leave her house and he did, but the witch felt that this was not justice.

“Over the next few weeks she planned to make a potion to get revenge on Damion. She was too weak to perform any spells, but she still remembered the recipe for a potion that caused the victim’s eyes to burn whenever they closed them to sleep even though she had never used it before. She requested a few ingredients at a time and before long was ready to brew Damion’s revenge.

“To not draw suspicion to herself, she made the brew discreetly alongside the tea. When Damion came inside to visit her, she poured just enough of the potion into his tea so he wouldn’t taste a thing. The beauty of this potion was it wouldn’t affect him until he was trying to sleep that

night so it would appear like the witch had nothing to do with his new illness. Everything went seamlessly and Damion drank every last drop.

“Once their visit was over the witch waited until nighttime to find out if it had worked. As she lay in bed that night, she couldn’t help but keep one eye open in anticipation of the panic that would most likely ensue. She was not disappointed. Damion came running and screaming out of the guards’ cottage. The guard on watch duty ran over to him. The witch slipped out of bed and ran to the glass wall closest to the commotion. She feigned concern.

“Damion was taken to a doctor in the Kingdom who said he must be getting dry eyes when he’s falling asleep. He recommended squeezing goat’s milk into his eyes every night before trying to sleep and sent Damion back to serve his King as the witch’s guard. For several weeks following, Damion would squirt goat’s milk into his eyes at night but it did little good. Slowly he grew used to the constant pain, though. Exhaustion allowed for him to fall into a deep, uncomfortable slumber every few days, but his lack of sleep began making him seem deranged in the waking hours.

“One weekend it had been decided that all the men would go home to their wives and children. After all, the witch was good now. The only man who chose to stay behind was Damion. The rest of the guards left in the afternoon. Back to the Kingdom. Back to their homes and loved ones.

“Shortly after everyone had left, Damion told the witch he would be making dinner for himself and staying in the cottage for the night. She wished him well and told him if he needed help with anything to knock on her glass front door.

“As the day turned to night, the witch fell asleep in her bed peacefully. She had come to like most of the guards who watched her, but it was the first time in a long time she had not had

anyone occasionally looking in through her glass walls while she was sleeping. It was the best slumber she had gotten since her captivity.

“Until... she was awoken by an angry shadow of a man dragging her out of bed and shouting at her, ‘I know you did this! It had to have been you!’ At this point the witch’s eyes adjusted to the darkness and she saw Damion’s face before her, morphed by madness and rage. He began to tossle with the witch. They violently tumbled around until Damion got the witch pinned against a wall in her kitchen. He held her there with all his might and ferociously said, ‘You did this to me! Now, I will do whatever I want with you and no one can stop me.’

“The witch was weak but the night gave her strength. In this moment, she called upon all the powers that once resided in her and made the handle of a kitchen knife fly into her hand. Damion stepped back, but it was too late. The witch held the knife firmly and stabbed him twice, once in each eye. He screamed out in fear.

“The witch mocked, ‘There, there, poor Damion. Now your eyes won’t burn when you try to sleep.’ She looked down at the man crumpled on the floor below her with disgust as he died a slow death. Once his whimpering stopped, the witch realized she would have to have a very good explanation or they would most likely hang her for murder.

“As she was figuring out what to do, she saw one of the guards on horseback rushing down the path from the Kingdom over to her. The witch tried to mentally prepare how to escape if need be, but to her surprise the guard was yelling, ‘Are you okay, witch?’ as he rode up to her. She looked at him shocked.

“‘Well, yes, but Damion just attacked me while I was asleep. And...’

“Yes, I saw from atop the hill that leads to this valley. I was looking to see if Damion was outside watching you so I could signal it was one of our men. When I looked through my telescope, I saw him run towards your room and start beating you.’

“You saw he attacked me?’ the witch asked, relieved.

“Yes, that’s why I rushed down here, but it looks like you were able to protect yourself.’

“Yes, thank goodness, but I’m very grateful you are here. What brought you back this evening?’

“I forgot the flowers I had picked for my wife and turned around to come back for them right as we made it to the Kingdom’s gates.’

“Well, I would say you should grab them and head right back, but I’m not sure what I should do here.’

“I’ll bury him in the forest nearby. You’re locked in here so when all the guards come back no one will assume you had anything to do with his disappearance. I’ll just suggest that he deserted his post. He was going a bit mad anyway so it’s a safe assumption to make. You just need to say you didn’t see him at all while we were gone. You can pretend you didn’t see me because you were already asleep and when I made it back. I’ll tell them Damion was still here in the cottage. Okay?’

“Okay. Thank you,’ the witch said earnestly.

“And with that the witch got her justice on the man that looked into her glass house too closely. The end,” finished Ash.

“Wow, that’s a good story,” Cece said with a yawn. “I like that witch. Was that the first glass house?”

“No, that’s a story I made up, silly. Glass houses weren’t made until a few years ago, but you’re too little to remember. We used to have a house kinda like the people a few streets above us in the neighborhood.”

“Hmm. I like our glass house. We get to see if our friends can play or if they’re busy. It’s nice.”

“Sure, but our old home was nice because you could have a little more privacy.”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Cece. Ash knew she didn’t get it, but how could she expect Cece to? This was just the way it always had been to her.

“Alright, silly. It’s time for bed. Goodnight.” Ash leaned down and kissed her little sister on the forehead.

“Goodnight, sissy,” responded Cece.

Ash shut Cece’s door to a crack just as dusk finished squeezing out its last glimmers of light. She glanced over to her parents’ side of the house. They were still at it with one another. Ash wished their house wasn’t made of glass. Not just in those moments when she wanted more privacy herself, but in moments like these, too. She moved her head down and watched the ground the rest of the short walk to her room. The smushed dirt up against the glass almost tricked her into believing it was hard wood floors and sometimes she let herself believe that. She closed her bedroom glass door and grabbed her headphones off her nightstand. As soon as she put them in, they began playing the metal rock playlist a friend sent her. She plopped onto her bed and simply listened.

When Ash was growing up, when Ash was Cece’s age, glass houses hadn’t been mandated yet. Their home had been a quaint house with wood walls. It had stood on this very same plot of land and was slowly ripped apart and torn down to be replaced by this transparent

residence. Those walls didn't completely block out the adult matters that swirled around her as a child, but she realized her innocence and belief in fairytales hadn't been taken away from her as violently as she feared was happening to Cece. The faint strained noises of her parents' arguments didn't compare to the sight of their strained bodies, of their veins rising to just barely underneath their skin. When Ash saw her parents' veins protrude so pronounced, she thought it was because those veins were eager to escape the person they were attached to. She never wanted to see her veins that close to breaking free.

Strategically Ash's bedroom was set up to block as much of the view as possible from the living room and the other side of the house. An old wooden bedframe, the bulkiest at the second-hand store she and her mom found it at. She had encouraged Cece to set up her room similarly to give all the family more privacy, but it was a pointless suggestion. Cece was unfazed by the exposure of their glass house. Her little sister had insisted on being able to see towards the center of the house because "it's like watching a movie about family" when she's in her room.

Their parents always told Ash that she was just being a typical teeneager and fighting authority. Her parents believed these glass houses were a blessing to their community. Everyone was safer because they could be seen. The glass house mandate had made her father's job easier. Being a policeman that can see directly into everyone's home meant less risk to the community. He could observe any danger from the outside and take the best steps to protect the house's inhabitants. The loss of privacy when showering or using the toilet or changing clothes or making love were small prices to pay when you considered all the benefits. Ash disagreed. She wanted one place to hide away from the world's watching eyes and she didn't understand why it shouldn't be her room.

When Ash opened her eyes and let the world around her back in, she looked through the bathroom walls that stood between her room and her sister's. Cece was sound asleep. She peered around her headboard and saw her mother watching TV with a glass of wine in hand while her dad must have left for work since he was nowhere in the house. Ash made her way to her mother to test the waters.

She entered the living room and saw that her mother, Janelle, was watching the news with the headline reading "GLASS HOUSES MUST HAVE 90% GLASS FURNITURE WITHIN 1 YEAR."

Without turning away from the television her mother said, "We're gonna have to get you glass furniture for your room. No more wood pieces. And I don't want to hear any complaints. We're just going to do what we're told, am I clear?"

Ash felt herself prematurely grieving.

"Yes, Mom," she reluctantly complied.

She moved to sit on the opposite side of the couch from her mother. The news program went on to say that on top of the new glass furniture mandate, the glass house mandate would begin including the next socioeconomic level. Previously it had been for households that made \$100,000 or less a year but would now include those who make \$150,000 or less. Construction was to begin soon on those homes as the end of construction on the lowest socioeconomic level was coming to its final stages and was opening up the temporary shelters for new families. *It's spreading*, thought Ash.

With a sigh of acceptance mixed with defeat, she turned to her mother and said, "I put Cece to bed and tried to distract her. Is everything okay? What's going on with you and Dad?"

Janelle took a sip of her wine and looked down. There's a moment of silence.

“It’s complicated, honey.”

“Okay.”

Ash sat with her mother as the news program ended and an old show called “Tales from the Crypt” came on. It was a show Janelle had watched at her grandparent’s house growing up and whenever it was playing on TV in Ash’s youth, they would watch it together.

“Do you remember when we would watch this in our old house?” Janelle asked Ash as she poured herself more wine.

“Of course, Mom. And we’d blast the AC so we could turn on the fireplace because I thought it was spooky lighting,” Ash laughed.

“Yes! And you’d curl up next to me with a blanket over your face with one eye peeking out and you’d bury your little head in my side when you thought it was scary.”

“I can’t believe I thought this show was ever scary. I was so young.”

Ash’s memory made her feel like watching it now was slightly wrong. The coziness of her memory juxtaposed the odd feeling of vulnerability she felt now. The distance between her body and her mother’s. The glass walls allowed the television’s light to escape beyond their home, like strangers could partake in this private moment if they decided to without Ash or her mom ever fully knowing if they didn’t notice. It was hard to recognize when you felt someone’s eyes on you now because that feeling never really left a person anymore.

Janelle finished her glass of wine and poured another.

“You’re becoming an adult, Ash. You probably should start learning about adult disagreements anyway, huh?” she asked the statement as a question, to herself and to Ash.

Ash glanced at her mother. She could feel her on the precipice of sharing. Ash stayed quiet in fear that she would give the wrong response and cause her mother to close up again. Janelle grabbed the remote and muted the TV.

“Yeah,” Janelle responded to herself. “Well, I’ve been pushing—no, *suggesting*—that your father gets a job at the glass factory because glass is in such high demand. They’re always in need of workers and it pays well. Or at least better than what he makes now. But he doesn’t want to.”

“Would he make enough for us to move out of a glass house?” Ash couldn’t help but let a little excitement slip into her voice at the possibility.

“No, Ash. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh. Well, why wouldn’t he want to make more money?”

“He thinks I have ulterior motives,” Janelle said with disdain.

“Ulterior motives? Why would you have ulterior motives?” Janelle freezes at the question and relaxes once she decides to proceed.

“Well, I’m human, Ash. I’m flawed just as anyone else as you’re starting to find out the older you get. Because of stuff in the past, stuff that happened when you were little, before we had Cece. He’s bringing up things I thought we moved past, but it just feels like I’m finding out he’s never fully trusted me since and I’m not sure what I can do to prove myself to him now.”

The television’s light reveals Janelle’s glossy eyes to her daughter. A subconscious part of Ash felt like this made sense even though this wasn’t something she fully registered. Her intuition had picked on the tiny moments of distrust her father had with her mother her entire life. When her mother would give him directions in the car and he would briefly hesitate. When her mother would do something nice for him and her father would try to distinguish what strings

were attached before saying thank you and accepting the gesture. This instinct had become a part of Ash, too, yet it was never a thought that crossed her conscious mind. All she could think at the moment was concerned with what her mother had done while trying her best to remain sympathetic.

“But you stayed together, so whatever it was you both worked through it, right?”

“I thought so.”

“Then why do you think it has anything to do with the past? Maybe he just doesn’t want to work at the glass factory.”

“Because he told me, Ash,” her mother responded coldly and unmuted the television.

“Okay. I’m sorry,” Ash said as she got up. “I’m going to get ready for bed. I love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too, honey,” Janelle said. Ash could tell her mother was already lost in her own world of regrets as she said it. Ash and the TV were just background noises to the racing of her own thoughts.

When Ash got back to her room, she paused at her doorway to take a moment of appreciation for all the things she would be losing in the coming months. All the wood furniture that made her nostalgic for her early years. The last material objects she had that gave her some pretense of privacy. *What a waste*, she thought as she looked around. And with that grabbed her phone.

She texted one of her favorite friends, Xavier, who was pretty cool for a kid whose father owned the glass manufacturing company that was producing for the entire country. The whole reason she despised the glass house mandate is because he hated it and taught her to also. They had a routine of him helping her sneak out, despite it usually being past the country’s curfew of 9

p.m., so they could go talk inside a shed in the fields near her house. It was the one place that felt private and sacred to both teens.

They met at school because they lived in the same neighborhood. Ash's family lived at the bottom of the hill where the poorest homes were and he lived at the top in a luxurious mansion not made of glass but rather plywood and plaster like all homes used to be. They wound up as science partners one day and their relationship had developed quickly into friends. They both liked each other because they felt safe sharing thoughts and secrets that no one else would grant them the privacy of admitting.

Ash turned off her bedroom lights so the whole of the kids' side of the house was only lit by the moon and distant construction crews working through the night on more glass houses one street up. She slipped into black clothes and waited for the dark clothed figure she knew to be Xavier. She would occasionally peer around her bed frame to check in on her mother. A few minutes before Xavier arrived she watched as her mother clumsily made her way to the master bedroom with the rest of the wine bottle in her glass.

Xavier wandered over to Ash's glass wall on the exterior of the house. He waved hello and Ash nodded to him. Xavier stole a thermal glass gun from his father's factory which was in fact not a real gun but rather a device that was capable of cutting and mending glass. It was given its name based on the visual similarities it shared to a hot glue gun. He placed the device against the lower part of the wall and began creating a square for Ash to crawl through. As Xavier directed the glass gun to make the fourth line of the square, Ash put her hands in the middle of the almost complete shape so she could push it outward to prevent the loud clanging of glass on glass if it fell inwards onto the house's floor. With the square complete, Ash pressed the glass outwards. Xavier grabbed it and placed it down in the grass.

For an entire house that could classify as an enormous window, this moment of fresh air always made her miss the real windows of her childhood. The ones that let light in at her discretion and fresh air if she opened them. It was strange to never be able to let the cool spring breeze in. The house always felt a little stuffy even when the air conditioner was on full blast.

She crawled out onto the grass like a fugitive and stood up. As she dusted the specks of grass and dirt off herself, Xavier wordlessly started leading them on their trek to the shed. The glass square was always left purposefully on the ground as a means to cut down the time that one or both of them were standing outside a glass house surrounded by other glass houses. Nothing bad had ever come of it. They slipped underneath the wooden fence that once was the perimeter of a farm long abandoned. The mandated industrial manufacturing of all food caused farms to go extinct many years before glass houses were ever forced onto the lower classes. They walked through the soft, tall grass silently to lower their risk of being caught.

One time Ash asked Xavier what would happen if they got caught out past curfew. He told her he wasn't sure as the law was never clear on what the punishment for the crime was. He did mention that he was worried the punishment would be much worse for her though so if it ever came down to it then he should be the one to get caught if she could hide or escape the situation. Ash told him that wasn't fair and he responded that life wasn't fair anyway.

sitting at the back of the church for your funeral was the worst mistake

me with the freezing-from-the-inside-out pain
not seeing the distorted illusion of life which clinged to you like a leech.
me sitting in the back with my rain.

your reconstructed face concealed. vain
of me to ask you to beseech.
me with the freezing-from-the-inside-out pain.

i convene with my malicious imagination, insane.
what you did, you did to us each.
me, still sitting in the back with my rain.

all those years you'll never attain.
just as your hair, your body must now be bleached.
leaving me alone with the freezing-from-the-inside-out pain.

now you haunt me and it's as addictive as cocaine.
what i wouldn't do to have you give me another speech.
me sitting in the back with my rain.

emotions stem from either the heart or the brain
and you make the worst of them screech.
me with the freezing-from-the-inside-out pain,
me sitting in the back with my rain.

The Forbidden Chest

Lola stood in the gloom of the empty cemetery next to her high-strung mother, who seemed strangely at ease even though the wind thrashed around them. They silently wept over the freshly laid dirt that covered her sister, her mother's daughter.

An unnatural gentleness in her mother's voice surprised her, "Lola, I never believed in an eye for an eye until now." A chill went down Lola's spine. She knew her mother. She knew she meant harm.

The two-blocks-straight-and-one-to-the-right walk home passed uneventfully until they reached their white picket fence. Her mother suddenly stopped and, with an icy glare, turned to stare at the man smugly smoking a cigar across the street. He lounged in a rocking chair on the porch. They knew what he had done. They knew who he had hurt.

Lola carefully watched her graceful mother crazedly turn and march inside their home before Lola even had the chance to move. She quickly ran after her to catch up. She slowed to close the front door and took one more look at the man across the street, starting to feel the boiling within herself. Her insides were beginning to scorch.

Her mother dashed to the room that held the chest Grandma forbid them to open. The old, black wood chest with indecipherable words or drawings exuded a dark energy. Her mother, half uncertain, half entranced, slowly reached for the rusty locks. As Lola anxiously waited for what was to happen next, her mother touched the metal guards of the chest. It was unclear if she was being guided by something deep within her or hugely beyond her. Whatever it was, they weren't alone. They were being assisted with their desire for revenge, for equality.

Her mother's touch gave life to this thing. She moved back to stand by Lola. The locks unlatched and fell to the floor with a rattle, then silence. Neither Lola nor her mother knew what to do, but they knew what was coming next.

Their New Orleans home transformed from cozy to cold as the lid of the ancient-looking box slowly creaked open. Something pulled them closer and closer to this mystical object. Little whispers and murmurs teased their ears. As the air grew colder, Lola became more aware of the warmth radiating from the open box. The heat grew stronger as if they were stepping towards a bonfire. Lola's knees bumped the chest and it encompassed her in an overwhelming burning sensation. She lost her sight.

Visions flashed. Women before her. Ancestors. Powerful women. The empowering energy that she felt growing in her, these women were bursting at the seams with it. She felt the loss that they felt. She understood it. The suffering. She also understood what it gave them. What they always had, but never knew. How they fought. She might not have recognized their faces, but some part of her soul knew to listen. Her spirit knew they were her family if she chose them to be.

Darkness overtook Lola's vision and the dusty room came back into focus. She and her mother looked at each other. Enlightened. A look of awe danced across her mother's face and Lola could feel her own face mirroring it.

Moments later something pulled them back, and the chest swiftly closed. The locks clanged as they fit back together, and then silence. The room grew cold again, but that same energy was falling out of every pore of Lola and her mother. Unerasable. Unchangeable. Unpredictable.

They both turned to leave the room. They didn't speak. The women walked differently, more assured. Their presence was magnetic and overwhelming. The descent down the stairs was much calmer than the chaotic sprint upwards. They both glided down the stairs, with the faintest of steps just there to remind them they were still somewhat human.

As Lola's mother opened the front door, Lola noticed the storm had become inescapable. Yet, they both stood calm as the wind swirled around them. They could sense the universe was on their side. They charged forward with as much conviction as the bustling air which whistled or shrieked.

Lola and her mother passed their white fence and looked across the street. They never paused or doubted what they saw. The rocking chair tilted back and forth in the wind, empty, accompanied by a slow burning cigar on the porch's old, wood floor. The portrait of a time-traveller.

The pair started the one-block-straight-and-two-to-the-left path back to cemetery. The enormous, yet frail, iron gates stood before them. They paused together as the wind thrashed, yet avoided them. The weather felt like it was fighting against something. It left Lola and her mother alone as its strength grew. They merged with the charged howling.

Lola began to take a step forward and her mother followed. 'An eye for an eye,' Lola's mother summoned. On the opposite side of the graveyard, they spotted the man staring defiantly through eyes of fear. Lola and her mother's newfound power glowed vigorously within them. It guided them. They knew what to do next.

An unearthly scream echoed across the cemetery. A rumble erupted from the core of the earth. Lola balled her fists so tightly she could feel her nails start to pierce her palm. The vibration of her body was a side effect of how much energy she was emitting. Her mother stood

with arms in a low V-shape, fingers spread so far they could almost be deformed. As they focused harder and harder, they both felt lighter. They floated, a transcendence of gravity.

The man disintegrated into orange light. His atoms making a fine dust which floated in the shape of his body like a fuzzy TV channel and then aggressively collapsed down into the dirt. With his remains, Lola and her mother sank back down onto the ground. The voices of the wind calmed and only one voice remained ever so faintly.

“Mama?” a girl called out. Lola and her mother whipped around to see Lilith-Ann levitating about a foot above the freshly laid soil of what should have been her grave. “Lil!” called out her sister, Lola. Their mother took in the scene of her littlest girl, alive again - revived. Tears of relief overwhelmed their mother. Lola ran over to Lily and as she approached, Lilith-Ann came back down to the rules of gravity. With what Lola assumed to be shock on Lily’s face, she squeezed her in an embrace that would’ve proven to be a challenge for any kind of force to break. Their mother arrived and joined in the hug. Holding her two babies in a primitive, natural way. Once they broke free, Lola and their mother realized there was something strange about Lily’s expression. She wasn’t shocked. It was more than that. She needed to say something, but looked like she couldn’t find the words.

“What is it, baby girl?” their mother gently asked Lily.

“I... I’m back, but-”

“But that’s all that matters,” comforted their mother.

“No, no. I’m back,” Lily struggled, “but there are more men like him. Women, too. They’re evil, Mama.”

“What do you mean? How do you know?” Lola asked.

“They told me. The women. I think they’re our family from long ago. They said that somehow the evil in that man has grown in this realm. There are more women like us, but we have to find them.”

The Philosophical Artist

Your career has come to an early end. Machines, at last, have taken the only human job remaining: the philosophical artist. No longer do you have to go into your cluttered workspace and ponder pressing questions like how one can determine the weight of a single, minimal life. You should be overjoyed. Like the rest of the population, you can now live without working, taken care of and sedated into oblivion by the machine manufactured materials which shape your existence.

You sit on a windowsill looking at the falsified snow falling as your hologram television projects background noise. The realistically-animated news anchor says that more than 40 percent of residents in your area have complained about the snow. The most common reason is because it reminds them of the rarely-discussed past when snow signified cold temperatures before weather machines existed. You grasp onto the vague memory of cold snow reddening your nose and numbing your ungloved hands. In your youth, it excited you to make snow angels in those strange particles in the consistently room-temperature outdoors.

You could do anything. You've always been able to do anything. But that endless possibility, that endless potential, feels trapped inside your infinite, engineered world. You feel like an ant being told that it can travel from California to New York if it so desires, yet the only roads are for humans with their cars and you can't read. The journey you desire to go on seems to no longer be available. They, the tech giants who shape your reality, tell you the cliché: *The journey is more important than the destination.* You smirk at the fact that whoever originally

said that was somehow prominent enough in their life to be quoted and have their words turned into propaganda now.

The snow stops falling. You watch as the barely visible line created by the weather machine separates the last snowflakes from the empty air. As that final, white-speck matter reaches its destination, the tiny holes in the ground open and suck away any proof of its short life. One stray snowflake dances downward, alone towards the abyss.

The flake hits the surface of its fall and you wait for the ground to swallow it. It does not. You stare at the singular white dot against the grey ground. It looks so petite when compared to everything else within your view.

Most people feel limitless within your free, new world. You really *could* do anything. You're only 34 years old. Yet, you are forced to watch from the wings as non-humans do your human job with uninspired, glacial efficiency. The world, your world, is based in that final human occupation that always defied the coding of computer programming in the past. They have taken your identity in this final step towards a perfectly automated world. You mourn the passing of individuality, that last pillar of humanity.

They told you not to worry about this. They told you that machines produce philosophical art from downloads of human history. They assure you the machines are programmed to ponder every facet of human life, just as you did. They refuse to provide further information.

You contemplate if the wires in a machine function like neurons, a metallic, unfeeling brain. The human experience cannot be mimicked, taught, or transferred. Soon the only philosophical art will be a machine's calculated evaluation of what society needs to hear. You fear this will begin to seep the humanity out of humans, making individuals into machines with warm bodies and no wires.

Weather machines were one of the earliest steps into this new age. They pushed back against those that did not welcome this mechanical miracle. They secretly quieted any unrest until it was quickly forgotten about. The carefully controlled news dictated the truth and repressed counter-arguments. You remember being happy at 9 years old that the weather would always be nice.

You process what it meant to be one of the few who remained as a blockade of this technological colonization. You could do anything, but you could not win this battle. This battle had been lost long before you knew of its existence.

You think about the cold you once knew and how it must have felt to others to make them reject it. It's as if all the walls and all the ceilings weren't enough protection from the past, from their memories. You feel like you are the only one who wants to remember.

You stare at the snowflake. You shiver. It melts underneath your gaze.