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## Table of Contents

*Rue Riquier* by Laura Silverman

*Untitled* by Luke Schuman-Cawley

*Walking Home* by Olivia Patterson

*Framework* by Sarah Willis

*Cardinals in Michigain* by Derek Jacoby

*Dreamscape* by Justine Garcia

*Sunbather* by Gavin Warren

*Entheogen* by Justine Garcia

*Jeux d'Ombre, Les Plumes d'Annecy* by Marcia Mason Speece

*Sunrise, Salute and Cezanne Analysis* by Perri Funk

*Untitled* by Luke Schuman-Cawley

*History Within Reach* by Christine Lizzie Baker

*Salute in Blue* by Perri Funk

*Rue Esquicho Coude* by Laura Silverman

*Window to the Past* by Melissa Kura

*Serenity* by Sarah Willis

*Reaper* by Derek Jacoby

*Rue Constantin* by Laura Silverman

*Audiophile* by Samuel Davenport

*Dead Man Talking* by Melissa Kura

*my childhood home maims me* by Willow Quine

*Pink* by Aidan Barton

*Détail* by Marcia Mason Speece

*Gnome is Where the Heart is* by Gavin Warren

*Le Printemps est Arrivé* by Marcia Mason Speece

*ANNIE* by Rose Letsinger

*Two Bridges* by Aidan Barton

*God is a Tree* by Derek Jacoby

*Pschodysleptic, Oneiric* by Justine Garcia



Rue Riquier by Laura Silverman



*Untitled* by Luke Schuman-Cawley

## Walking Home

I take the familiar stroll  
over the concrete with initials carved among flowers  
through the trees  
past the house with the cat who lays by the back door  
and up the steps by the iron bench.

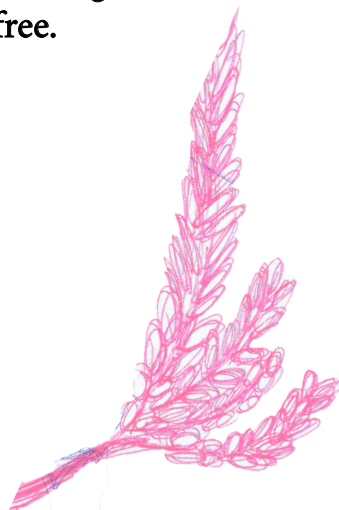
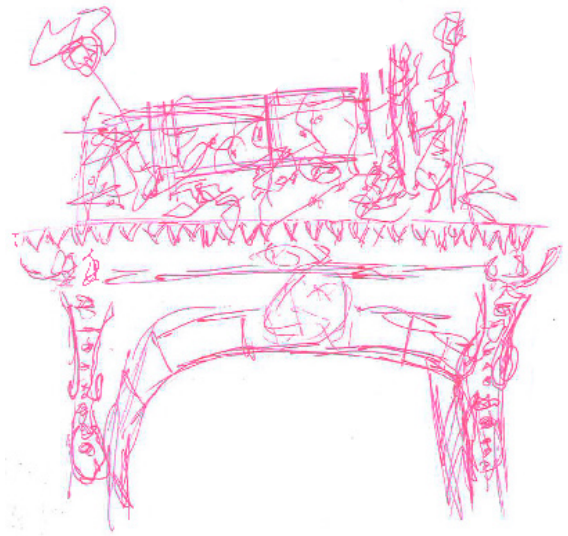
The air is dense  
and thick,  
and I breathe deeply to remind myself  
that home is only a few steps away.  
I look to my right,  
put my right foot on the first step  
and feel slightly relieved.  
my feet shuffle forward  
and up the remaining three steps.

I read the names carved into the ground  
and feel that they are with me;  
they watch me make this trek  
every single day  
and they bless my feet  
as I attempt to walk the road that could lead me to you.

I pass the doors  
and my pace quickens.  
the statue looms over me as I pass  
threatening to reveal that you've been hiding there all along.  
I huff,  
pulling, yanking, and running—  
itching to crawl out of the heavy air  
and into the safety of my moldy, warm building.  
The moment my front door opens I am free.  
you cannot find me here.

I will hide among the ghosts  
until tomorrow  
when I must walk again.

-Olivia Patterson





*Framework* by Sarah Willis





## Cardinals in Michigain

The soul, an ever sprouting bud, holds no inherent worth to be held.  
But you, cuddled next to me after casual sex suggests differently.  
Your fingers tracing circles on my chest, as a quiet hum escapes your lips.  
Your eyes, playful cascades holding a depth of joy, stand closed. And safe.

But they suggest a deeper meaning to our closeness.  
My fear, like a chameleon perpetually shifting shades,  
attempts to hide, seeking to become your image of me.

My perception of your impressions deceive me.  
But despite eyelids shielding your vision, I am seen.  
I tense with anxiety as I accidentally tickle your side,  
Expecting a battalion to rise and batter me.

But your light giggle, like a cardinal taking flight in Michigan,  
Teaches me freedom is found in the presence of the unexpected.  
Your glance is no longer an attack to parry with a turn of the head.  
The horizon in your eyes no longer daunts me, but beckons to be explored.  
Just as the wind that drives the April rain and the crimson October leaves,  
We eternally shift but remain the same...

Our existence serving no purpose higher than  
A regretted tattoo on a rib cage, or a question mark on a forearm.  
But despite the temporality of it all, an eternity exists in this instant.  
As the curve of your hips mirrors that of your smiling lips, I am enthralled.  
And as you moan and bite my ear,

-I'm reminded of every forgotten moment

Where I was too busy living to stop and remember.  
Of every time I laughed till I cried, or cried till I laughed.  
And of every instant worth was known, but never stated...

-Derek Jacoby



*Dreamscape* by Justine Garcia



Entheogen by Justine Garcia

## Sunbather

I turn. She collects upon my skin. There's nobody here but us. Maybe there never was. I want to ask her why. Does she know? Can she? If she even had eyes to see would she tell me? Maybe she turned away for a moment and they all went along with her. Still, if anyone knows it will be her. It has to be her. I shift slightly in the grass, and I feel it dance upon my skin. Maybe spending all day with her has gotten to my head. Surely she'll never answer me, as if that was even an option. I don't even bother opening my mouth anymore, I'm far too sore for screams. What's that they say about sound and space? Well maybe the atmosphere can pass her a message. Am I delusional? Surely, but who wouldn't be. Besides, there's no one left to compare me to, so I guess I'm just the norm. Most sane person alive. I'll have to put it in the record books. I wonder if she can read? She must've been watching us long enough to pick up a language or two. Maybe not this one. Surely she'll get back to me. I gaze at the old weeping willow sitting just on the other side of the yard. It used to scare me so much as a child, I'd always convince myself it was a ghost or some great monster coming to eat me in my sleep. I'd have thought that with the end of the world we might become friends, but nope, I went and started talking to the sun before him. Hope he doesn't mind. I guess he's probably friends with the sun too. Strange how quickly an entire planet can stop feeling like home.

Guess it really is where the heart is. Or 8 billion of them. I've thought about moving. There's nowhere and everywhere to go. I think I'll stay here just in case they come back. They're not gonna come back. At least she'll still be with me. I should reach out again. I feel like talking's just not cutting it. I wonder if I still have that old Ouija board?

....

Here goes nothin'.

H-E—L—L—O/ A-R—E/ Y—O—

\*as he slides the dial across the board, a great buzzing enters his mind before bursting into words\*

*"What are you doing?"*

"Ah fucking fuck, what???" Where were you the last few weeks while I shredded my voice box staring at the sky?"

*"To be honest I didn't think any of you were left. You're pretty small by yourself ya know. Besides, did you really think that would work?"*

"No, but if you haven't noticed I'm talking to the Sun, it's not supposed to 'work'" "What's going on anyway?"

*"No idea"*

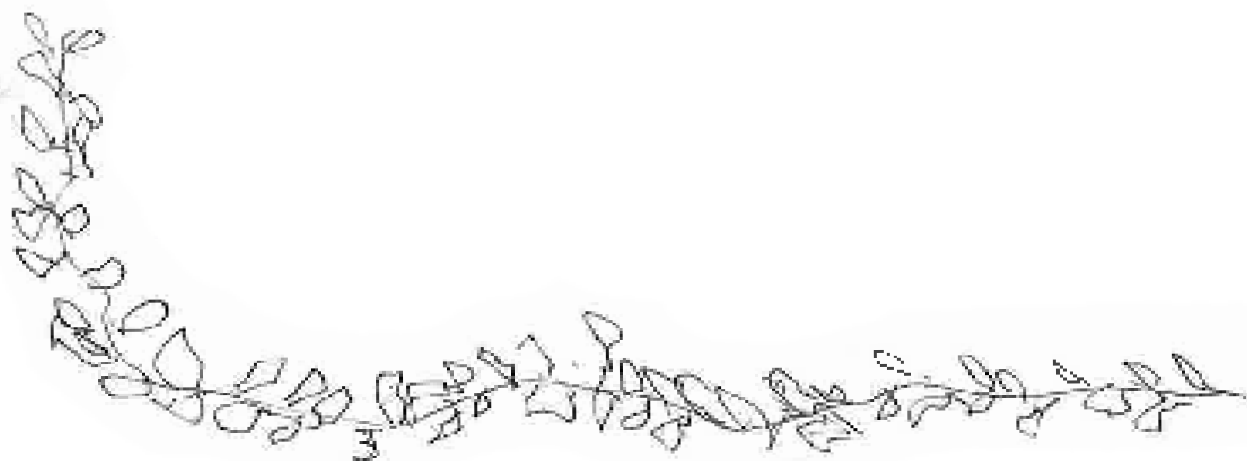
"What, nothing?"

*"Nope, no clue"*

"But, but.... You're the SUN. What, were you looking away? Can you?"

*"You really all think you're the most important things in the universe don't you? Don't get me wrong you're pretty cool but I reach farther than you can dream, and sometimes I like to spend the day off in Andromeda. So no, I have no idea what happened. But I can try and help."*

-Gavin Warren





*Jeux d'Ombre* by Marcia Mason Speece



*Les Plumes d'Annecy* Marcia Mason Speece



*Sunrise, Salute* by Perri Funk



## Cezanne Analysis

This portrait by Paul Cézanne depicts Marie-Hortense Fiquet, Cézanne's wife and his most often painted model. The painter was known to ask his sitters to pose "like an apple," in other words, be still and lifeless. And indeed, in this portrait, the absence in Madame Cézanne's face is distinguishable; her gaze is empty as if she is in some sort of daze. Consequently, we get a sense of Madame Cézanne not as a human trying to connect to us, but as a material subject for the painter, such as a piece of fruit or a landscape.

We can observe this particular approach in the rendering of Madame Cézanne's face. Her lack of expression inhibits us from truly connecting with her. Rather, her face is reminiscent of a mask with features contributing to a completely neutral and even dismissive expression.

Observing the painting as a whole, we can see Cézanne's unique use of colors. Observing the face, we can especially notice the wide range of hues he used just for her skin tone. We may also see that these colors are repeated outside of the outline of her face, as strokes of orange, pink, purple, blue, and green dance around the figure, with subtle shades that add depth and volume to the composition. The strokes around her hair are also broken in places, melding her with the background, giving a sense of unity to the whole. The result is a sense of stillness and permanence revealing that the painter was fully engaged in the true process of painting, aspiring to express the essence, the eternal, and what remains forever, rather than the particularities of the human face. - Perri Funk



*Untitled* by Luke Schuman-Cawley

### **History Within Reach**

When Stephan got the call that new evidence of humans had been found, he almost had a heart attack. Just one sentence roused him from his dim office and out onto the street where he could more easily follow the directions related to him. He swam above the usual traffic, mostly consisting of tourists, to better find the entrance to the low tunnels. Spotting the old-fashioned green and orange railing, he steeled his nerves and dove into the fray. It was the only way to get close to the ground, but, twisting and dodging around all the colorful figures, Stephan wondered how anyone could swim in it as often as these people seemed to. It appeared to be an exercise in claustrophobia, though he never stayed long enough to really find out.

Finally, Stephan got through the traffic and down the entrance tunnel. He stopped for a second, catching his breath, when he caught sight of his friend and co-worker, Lena, waving him over to the platform next to the dark tunnels. Stephan waved back and allowed his vision to adjust as he approached.

“Lena!” Though they hadn’t seen each other for a while, Lena was still one of his closest friends. As soon as Stephan got close enough she wrapped him in a comforting hug, something he hadn’t realized he missed in their time apart. “Thank you so much for calling me.” He pulled away to look her in the eye.

“Of course,” she replied with a smile. “I know how important this is for you.” She pulled gently on his arm. “Now, come on! It’s not too far, just outside of town.”



Soon, the two were racing through the maze of tile and railings. The signs along the tunnel walls were far more recent, enough that Stephan questioned how anyone or anything would have navigated through before, though he had a suspicion it had something to do with the rails sitting below the rapidly swimming merpeople like himself. Stephan had always wondered when the dark, seemingly endless metal rails had gotten there and how the tiles from the platform survived for so long, though they did seem to be dirtier now than they would have been upon installation.

Pulling himself away from his usual musings, Stephan focused on Lena as he took out a notebook and let his pen scribble notes, trying to absorb information and find a point to politely question her. Lena, though, kept talking, gushing about carvings found in a cave near the surface. They were thought to be hundreds of thousands of years old, only being discovered now due to the perpetually rising waters, making the natural tunnels near and on land much easier to traverse. When the archeologists had gotten lost and sent one of the interns to check the surface level, they found carvings in a part of the cave so dark that the bright noon-time sunlight could barely be seen.

Even as they left the tunnels and zoomed through the warmer, brighter water of the shallows, Lena hardly stopped to take a breath. “It’s going to be everything you dreamt of, Stephan.” She looked over at him. “Maybe that big ol’ brain of yours will settle once you see the object of your fascination face-to-face. Closure, y’know?”

Stephan understood what she was trying to say, and appreciated the sentiment behind it, but there was no way he was going to stop his research just like that. Ever since he was a boy, Stephan had been listening to legends of humans, watching for signs of the world they once inhabited. Even if his mother hadn’t been a historian herself, there was no doubt her tales of mythical creatures would bring him right back to where he was now.

Following in your parent’s example, however, would never be easier said than done, especially when following meant taking a sharp veer to the left in search of a species that was more folklore than history. So far, Stephan’s search had been hopeless, only a few clues here and there, and his career hadn’t been looking very good either. Having numerous ideas and minimal proof was just par for the course in this profession, but at this point even his friends had started urging him to look into other areas of interest. Stuck with a basement office and the measly remnants of a grant, he simply had nothing to show. He was clinging on to hope and faith at this point, two things anyone needed when solely relying on Lena, despite the appearance of her connections.

Finally reaching the cave, Lena slowed her speech down to making introductions. Trepidacious archeologists, wide-eyed anthropologists, even the young interns; she knew them all, but Stephan didn’t catch any of it. Nothing could stop his mind from racing. How would the carvings look? What color? How were they so sure the carvings were made that long ago? As the two made their way up towards the surface, Stephan could feel the cold temperature unexpectedly coming back. It most likely had to do with the growing darkness but he still wished he had thought to grab a coat on his way out, or at least something to cover his arms. There wasn’t even any sunlight to warm up the water when he surfaced; only the lanterns brought in by the team were there to properly illuminate the walls.





Despite the dim light, Stephan traced along the incredible piece towering above them with his eyes, now entirely uncovered by both lids. It was made by humans, that was for sure. Probably some of the last, the ones that managed to outrun the heaviest floods and hole up in this cave. Maybe some of his ancestors lived here, making stories that told of the past when the water line wasn't nearly as high as it was now. Getting closer, he tried to discern what the carving was saying. They weren't exactly crude, but it was hard to make out some of the shapes. They were all sectioned off into little pictures of their own, depicting loved ones together, large machines, animals, and other parts of nature that must have drowned along with the populace. It was sad, in a way, to look at something made so long ago, made by people who just wanted to remember and be remembered.

“So?” Lena said behind him. “How... is it?” He moved back to look at the whole thing and stand beside her.

“It's... amazing. Fascinating. All the little pictures show what I assume is a simple design of the human body. It doesn't show any fins or what they may have used to hunt and fight.” He pointed towards the stick figures. “They didn't have one tail, but instead two, or something else entirely, something that allowed them to travel on land.” Stephan went back again to the carving and began to use his short, but sharp, nails to trace farther along, never touching the wall.

“These animals must be ancestors to ones we know now, if I'm correct in saying that we are truly descended from humans.” As he moved farther into the darkness, Lena took a lantern and followed him. However, he had gotten far enough that his vision began to shift like it had in the low tunnels, letting him see in the darkness. It was nothing new, but Stephan had always wondered if they shared these traits. How had they evolved from humans? What was the same and what was different? He reached up to his neck, mindlessly stroking his gills, no longer in use when he was above the water.

Reaching the edge of the carving, Stephan noticed something a little farther down, also carved in. A hand. A hand so much like his own and yet so different. Maybe these creatures knew painting or any of the lighter carving used for the pictures wouldn't last. The hands were carved about an inch into the stone wall, pieces cracked and chipped but still making a clear picture. This one was a little bigger than his, but there were more beside it, trailing along the wall and getting smaller as it went. None of them seemed to have the long nails that were present on his, nor any webbing between the fingers.



Stephan followed the train of hands until he found the last one, a small hand that wasn't even as big as his palm. Stephan stared at it, holding himself there for a moment as a knot unexpectedly formed in his throat. He could feel Lena watching him press his head against the rock wall, breathing deeply. It was here. It was practically everything he needed. He just needed to find it and connect everything together.

Turning back around, Stephan tried to suppress the lump in his throat and properly address Lena. "So," Here, his voice broke, audible even as he tried to mask it by clearing his throat. "You said there was something else? Something the team couldn't reach?" She was still gazing at the wall, but looked at him for a moment, as if trying to process the unforgettable, the unbelievable.

"Yeah," she nodded absently. "Yes, there's a ledge around here. Apparently, there's some carvings that look similar to this one, but the ledge is too high for us to climb or jump and, even if we could, I doubt anyone would want to be out of the water long enough to drag themselves over and get a record of it." She shook her head and prepared to dive back down. "You comin'?"

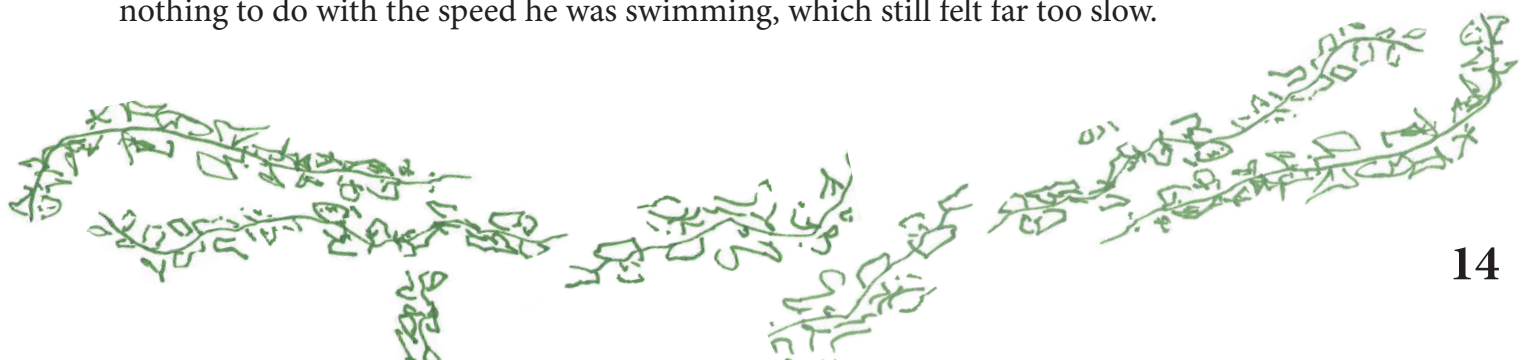
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Stephan took one last long look at the carving, trying desperately to commit it to memory. It was weird. You could listen to a thousand folktales and myths, study pictures, read the theories on evolution, make claims, debate with others, and it still wouldn't feel real until you looked at it with your own two eyes; felt the indents of the carvings. How young was the youngest of the surviving humans? Which ones didn't live to see their life?

"Yeah...yeah, I'm ready." He turned away from the wall, unsaid questions bouncing around his mind. He pushed them away and followed Lena back down to where the team had congregated. Everyone was still bustling around, hardly sparing the two of them a glance except to dodge before a big crash could take place. They made their way through another tunnel, this one a lot narrower. Stephan felt his heart beat faster and his breathing quickened in a way that had nothing to do with the speed he was swimming, which still felt far too slow.



Mercifully, the tunnel soon opened up into a large cavern. The water felt warmer here, though Stephan couldn't see any light except for the lanterns the team had propped up on small ledges along the walls. Lena took his arm and led him back until their backs were against the wall.

"Look," she said, pointing up the opposite wall. "That's the ledge I was talking about. You can't see much over it without climbing, but they told me there are some markings and fragments of what looks like bones."

"And we don't have any way to get up there." Stephan didn't often curse the fact that he had a tail and couldn't go on land. His family, his friends, his life was under the sea. Right now, though, that was the only thing standing between him and the prospective link he had been working towards for years. As if it would lower for him, he leveled a glare at the ledge, cursing at it in his head.

Late that night, darkness covered Stephan's little office under the sea floor. The only thing fighting against it was a glass fish lamp he had found when converting the storage room. No one could really move around the small space unless they dodged the long strings hanging up between three walls covered in pictures and notes, most scribbled on with some actually having legible questions and lists. There was no window, but that didn't really matter. He was too far underground to have a real window, and besides, all it would bring in at the moment was more darkness.

Hours ago, if someone had come in to see Stephan, they would've found him with his head in his hands, seemingly trying to get something, anything, about the carvings down on paper. Admittedly, there was a decent number of notes and theories from the details of the pictures and the carvings, but he couldn't focus on them. That ledge back in the caverns held knowledge he was searching for. Knowledge that was just out of reach for anyone with a tail.

Now, though, anyone who walked in would find papers scattered around. Scrap paper and notes mixed with memos, overdue bills, and letters, many of which threatened his project, his life's work, unless he could scrounge up something substantial. Wallowing in his frustration, Stephan silently leaned over the desk with his head pillowed in his arms. How else would he find them? Would he have to look for funds elsewhere? How much longer could he rely on goodwill and friends before he was left with nothing? Stephan glanced at the time and realized how late it really was. Most everyone in the building had left for home by now. It would probably be advisable to follow that example, but there wasn't anyone or anything waiting for him, even if the thought of his bed produced a yearning in his head and heart. Maybe, though, it would be okay to take a detour on the way. Maybe if he could see that cavern again, it would ignite some idea of how to overtake that ledge.

It would do no good to wonder about "what ifs" and "hows" right now. If nothing came of this, then he would worry. Then he may consider moving to a different project, but he had to take action now. Stephan hurried back through the streets, faster now that there was less traffic. It took practically no time at all to get to the low tunnels. At least, that's what he told himself. Soon, Stephan was shooting through the dark passageways, relying on memory to direct him to the caves. When he finally reached the entrance of the cave system, his body almost vibrated as his hands flexed from the excited energy that seemed to be shooting out of every pore.

Surprisingly, there were a few merpeople remaining on the lowest level, near the entrance. Interns making plans and maps, what seemed to be an engineer and an anthropologist quietly discussing in the corner. Stephan produced his “guest” ID that Lena gave him after their earlier visit and showed it to the man guarding the entrances to the other parts of the caverns. By the time the narrow entrance came into view, he was sure just his excitement could spring him out of the water and up, up, up, onto the dry land. He wondered for a second if anyone thought of that before now and, if so, why no one had tried it yet. Although, he reasoned, there was no guarantee that whoever tried it wouldn't get hurt nor if they would be able to get any water before completely drying out, thus rendering the whole endeavor useless as well as condemning someone to death. Stephan frowned as he entered the narrow passage, trying to ignore the fear of it closing in on all sides.

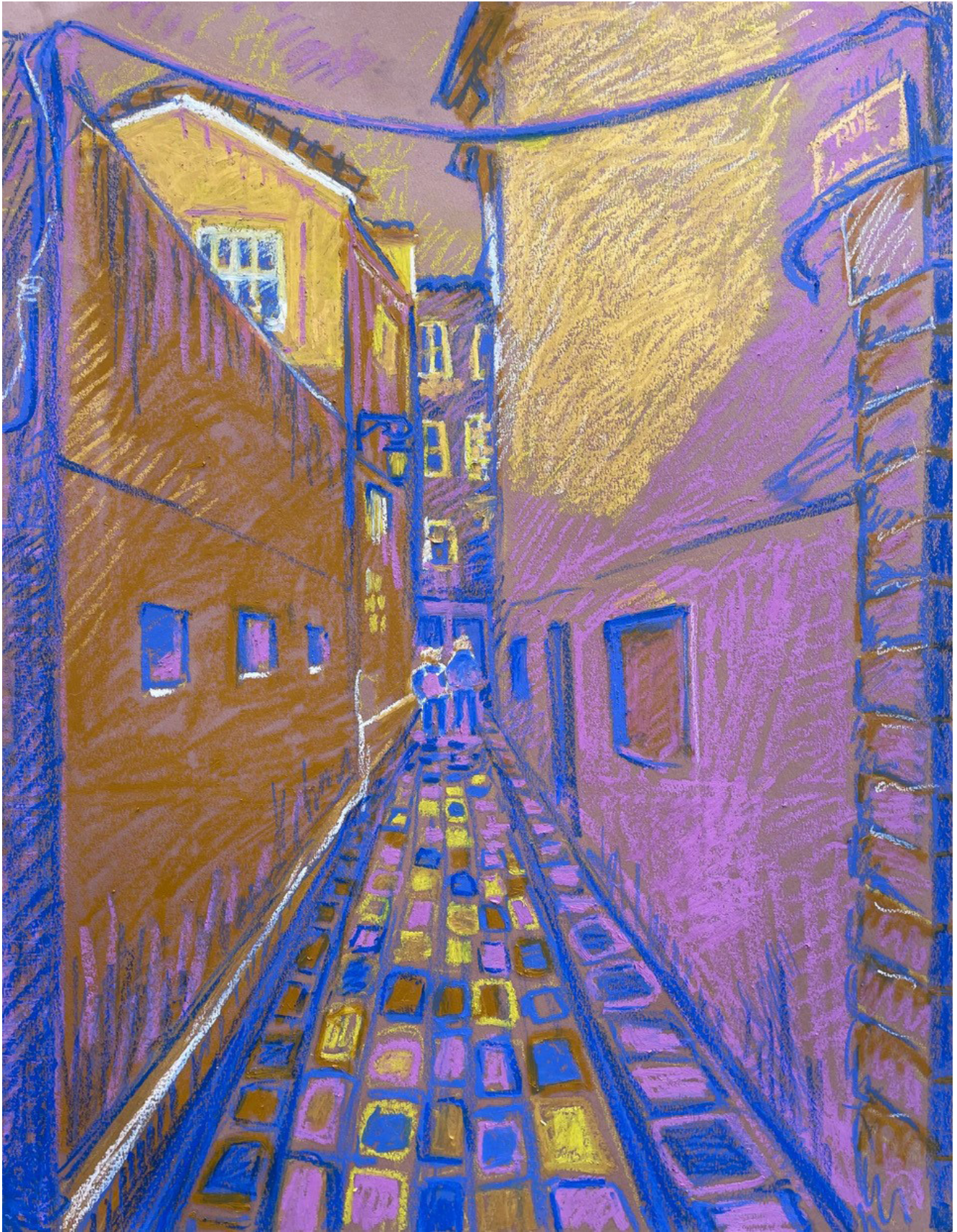
Anxiety suddenly grabbed at his heart, making him hesitate, although that could have also been the progressively constricting tunnel. Despite his confidence earlier, he didn't know what he would do if nothing came of this. *Could* he completely abandon such a dream? And how? Maybe... maybe it would be better not to know, but Stephan could feel in his heart that he would never have closure unless he checked. He would wonder what might have been, haunted by the possibilities. He needed to move forward instead of staying in this stagnant role for eternity.

Surfacing for the third time that day, Stephan locked his calculating gaze on the ledge above him. All things considered, it was pretty to look at. The water running over it smoothed the stones after so many centuries. In fact, as he looked closer, there seemed to be indents and raises along the side. It wasn't like a ladder, but someone could possibly pull themselves up and over the top. Stephan smiled at this. It seemed he really had missed something earlier, how could he have been so blind? Stephan knew that the evidence so essential to his research and sanity was within his grasp, and now, steeling himself and moving back down into the tunnel, Stephan swam as fast as he could, breaking the surface with a splash.

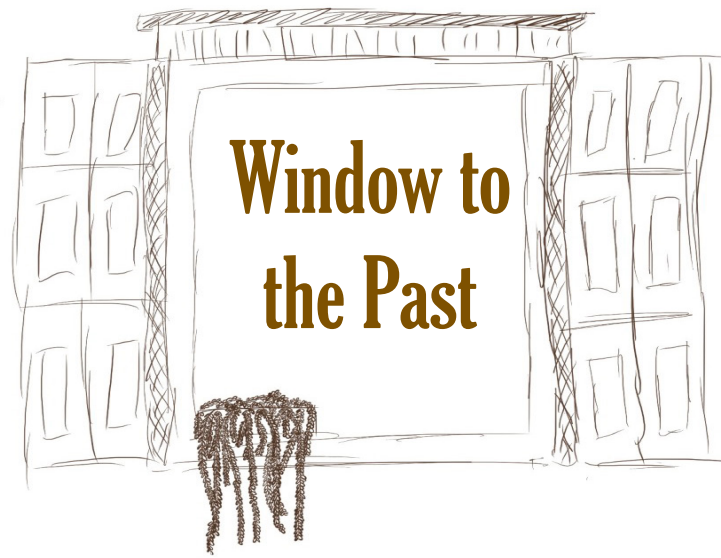
-Christine-Lizzie Baker



*Salute in Blue* by Perri Funk



Rue Esquicho Coude by Laura Silverman



What was before me, I realized, was a graveyard for the past.

With stagnation emanating from the crowded streets. Flat roads, still infrastructures, making up a town, seemingly frozen in time. A new time, tailored to fit a single man's distorted vision of paradise. With two guards posted at the center, guarding the gated doors to justice. The statue of the man on the right side of the courthouse, sat upon an ivory throne, pale and glorious, radiating power and humility. A faithful servant of the people. To his left, another man, perched upon a broken-down chair, scared by the days and sullied by existence, served as a reminder of how fast one can forget those who stray from their given path.

A simple man playing God created for himself a utopia, erasing as he marched every relic on his path. He left behind only one trophy, a symbol of glory: windows into the past, laid on the ground, to showcase the devastating extent of human evolution. Stones placed upon stones haphazardly, disregarded, regardless of any memory they may hold, and yelling in protest. A glance at a life that might have been, had the blight of man not hit.

A lonely man playing God created for himself a family, a series of strange faces adorning the same clothes and speaking the same words. A monotonous regrouping of broken records, singing the songs of others and playing buttons as instruments. With each of their steps being the same as the last, he created himself an army of clay soldiers, deterring all strangers and intruders.

A scared man playing God created for himself a fortress, an impenetrable castle with walls so high that they shield him from even the sun. Walls not of stone or wood, but of heritage and tradition; a material, for some, stronger than any other. A substance made of stories chiseled into the minds of infants who would grow up to believe what they are told, rather than what they see.

What was before me, I realized, was nothing more than a sad story.

-Melissa Kura



Serenity by Sarah Willis

If the reaper,  
Who threshes the wheat field  
Of our dirty and dusty souls...

If the reaper  
Who threshes the wheat field  
Of our dirty and dusty souls...

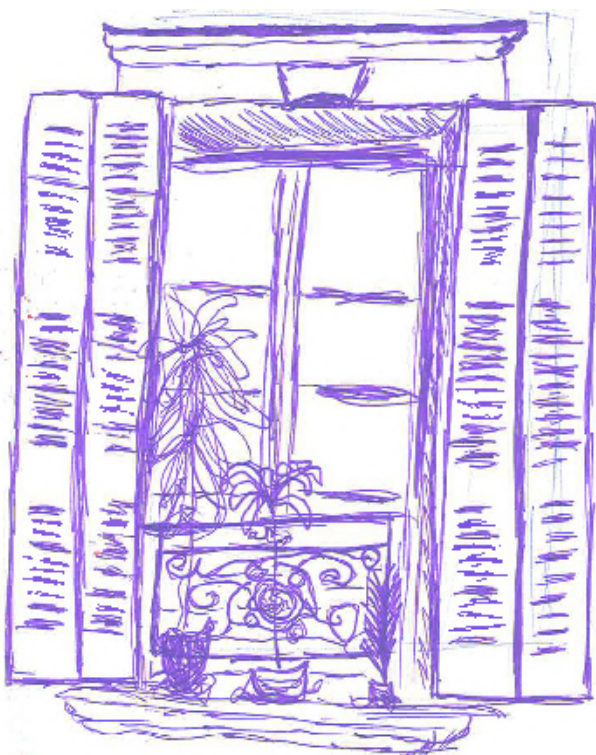
If the reaper,  
Who threshes the wheat field  
Of our dirty and dusty souls...

If the reaper  
In its shroud of the dark infinite  
Was you,  
Was me.

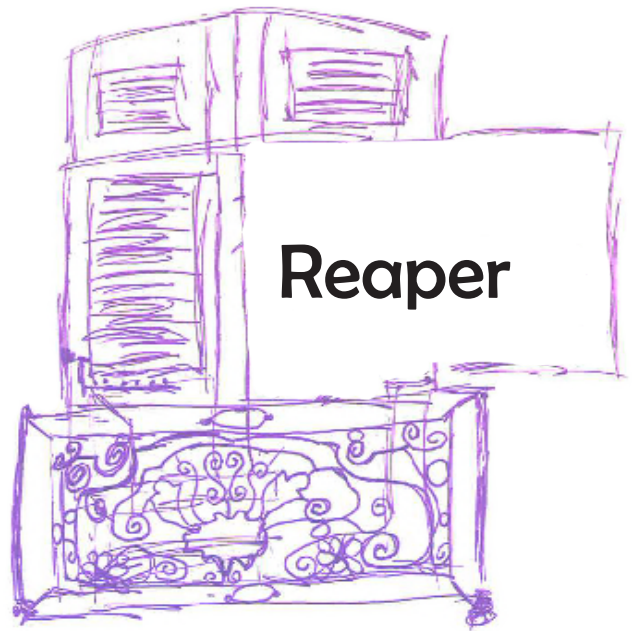
Would the wheat fields  
Remain without reaping,  
Or would the harvest double?  
What would become of the threshold of  
threshing?

Multiplied by an exponential  
fervor of control.  
Ruled by choice,  
And the power to make it.

In the garden we're naked,  
And in the mirror of the  
snakes eyes



-Derek Jacoby



## Reaper

We become the serpent, but  
Remain God's choice  
creation all the same.  
What if the snake,  
Doomed to slither on its  
stomach,  
Has always been coiled in  
ours?

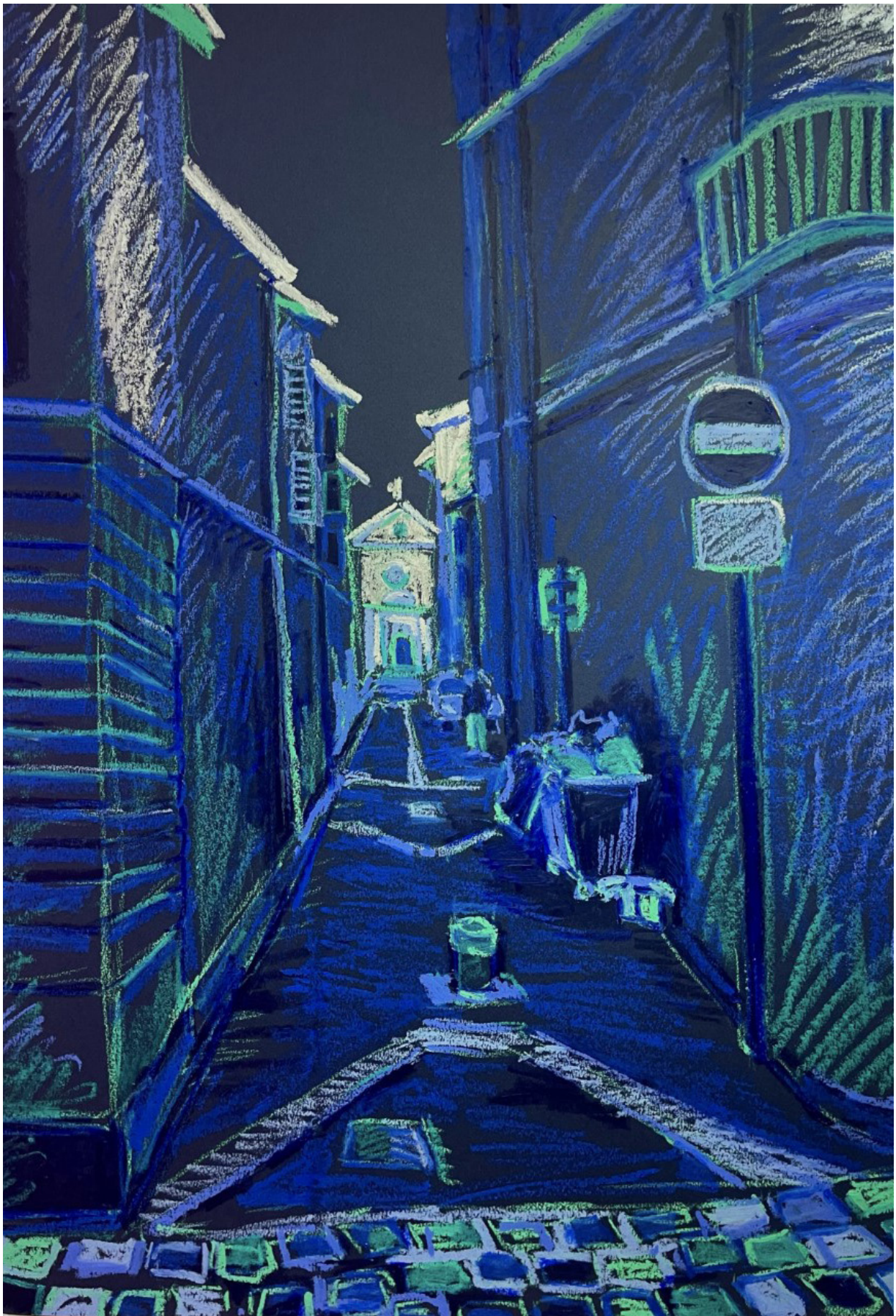
That it, curling on the limbs  
Of that all too well known  
tree,  
Was an illusion of self.  
Our self absorbed existence  
Has always desired  
To hide from God.  
Fearing him imperfect  
And maybe, just maybe,  
We were right.

If the reaper,  
Who threshes the wheat  
field  
Of our dirty and dusty souls...

If the reaper,  
Who threshes the wheat field  
Of our dirty and dusty souls...

If the reaper,  
Who threshes the wheat field  
Of our dirty and dusty souls  
Was right...  
Was us...  
Is...





Rue Constantin by Laura Silverman

# Audiophile

I wish I had agreed to work at my brother's pancake place. Older than me by seven years, he had opened the business early and gotten too comfortable there to try anything else. He had expressed his doubts about my own career for years, and this was not his first time asking if I "wanted a little help."

When I refused his offer, mentioning that a friend from college, now lead singer for the band Desecrated Avatar, had offered me an interview, he laughed. He said that they were so big now they could have any sound designer they wanted, that I was reading too much into a former friend's vain attempts to stay in touch with acquaintances. It might even be a prank, Kiera amusing herself by getting my hopes up.

But Kiera and I had actually been close in college, and I did get the job. I sat in my booth turning dials and pushing buttons, and smiled at the crowd, most of whom never suspected that everything they heard depended on me. I was pretentious and condescending then, and loved telling Brandon, my boyfriend, how stupid the fans could be, to expose themselves to such high, temporary volume, and then act surprised when the volume gets turned down permanently. He asked why I worked for Desecrated Avatar if I hated metal bands so much, and I said that I knew what was safe: I had some audiology training from grad school, I always wore ear protection when attending concerts, I made regular appointments to get my hearing checked. I considered myself smart, successful, well-liked by the band, and had no intention of sabotaging it all.

I also clarified that I wasn't talking about Brandon when I said the fans could be stupid.

I got the headphones in August. Despite our relationship, or lack thereof, my brother and I never stopped sending each other birthday presents. I texted him my appreciation and took the box into the apartment I shared with Brandon, setting it down next to my computer and forgetting about it for the rest of the day. We played chess, watched some mediocre superhero movie, and shared a moist, sweet vanilla cake that night. Unlike some people I knew, Brandon was actually a competent chef; we met when I visited the local bakery to treat myself for landing the job. He worked at the register, not the kitchen; he told me after we started dating that he was waiting for one of the chefs to leave so that he could

apply.

“Are you a fan, too?” he asked, pointing at my new shirt from Kiera after I had ordered.

It’s surprising we ever got together in the first place, considering my response. Satisfied with his impressed reaction, I turned my earbuds back up and sat down with my coffee and lemon scone.

We traded contact information when I returned a week later to get something for Kiera, and we were together when touring started.

Even off the touring season, I had plenty of work, which I enjoyed thanks more to the music I listened to than the mindless, tedious drudgery. The morning following my birthday, I unpackaged the new headphones and connected them to my phone before opening another spreadsheet on my computer. I momentarily guessed which Queen song would be first up before hitting “shuffle play,” deciding on “Best Friend.”

A soft voice murmured a few indistinct words, followed by a distant, out-of-tune piano for about five seconds. Then I heard Freddie Mercury, on “Bohemian Rhapsody,” his beautiful voice barely soothing my nervous confusion. I glanced at Spotify; apparently, the song had just started playing. I assumed it was a technical glitch and got back to work.

It happened every time I tried to use those headphones. Sometimes, it was just the voice, and then an immediate segue to the actual song. Other times, the piano kept playing for up to twenty seconds before the song began. I assumed it was a bizarre prank by my brother, like the time he gave me a DVD of This Is Spinal Tap for Christmas. I went back to my old headphones later that day. He and I had a difficult argument shortly afterwards.

“Why in hell would I do something like that? Do you really think I’m that petty, that childish? And how would I even get the headphones to play random, weird noises?”

“You should know. It could be a virus that hijacks Bluetooth connections,” I said. I was out on the street, in an unusually cool summer night, not wanting Brandon to hear this. I gritted my teeth, speaking softly and proving myself the more serious adult. “Or perhaps you inserted tiny speakers and chips with audio files inside each earpiece, synchronized to activate any time the headphones are turned on.” My brother’s pancake business was hardly successful enough that he could have paid for this kind of technology, I thought, but I considered him a witless spendthrift.

“I don’t know enough about—this is absurd. You won’t believe anything I say. That gig with your college friend has made you even more self-absorbed and stupid than before.”

I inwardly laughed at his rising volume. “You mean the gig that got me the Chicago apartment? You mean the gig that lets me travel the country, that has gotten me connections with some of the best in the industry? But I should let you get back to that run-down joke of a diner. It will take more than what shreds of a brain you’ve got to keep it afloat.”

I hung up then.

It came back around the time we started recording the next album.

I heard a distorted voice, muttering something I couldn’t interpret. Then a piano, playing softly, far away. Sometimes, I heard the lid shut, and then footsteps for however long remained. The track never lasted more than twenty-three seconds.

I heard it no matter which earbuds or headphones I used, whether I listened on TIDAL or Spotify.

I screamed myself raw at him the first night it returned. I told my brother that it wasn’t funny, that I could have him arrested. Then, after checking my computer and my phone for malware, over and over, finding nothing, I called him again. He didn’t answer.

I had told Brandon about the sounds since they started, though I never admitted how much they disturbed collected, intellectual me. He asked why I didn’t borrow someone else’s earbuds while I tried to figure out where the malware was, and I texted Kiera not long after.

We met the next day to record the penultimate song on the band’s new album, “Cain the Saint.” She handed me her earbud case and asked how long I’d need them, and if I knew what was wrong yet. I estimated a week, explaining that whoever had hacked my stuff had done an impressive job, and we went to our respective positions.

I sat down, watching Dana hook up her guitar and Chris grab his drumsticks. I put on the headphones in the booth, and in the instant between when I put them on and the band started playing, I heard it. When they finished, I said I felt unwell and should go home early.

Shortly after this, Brandon asked if I thought I might need some help.

We were walking along the edge of Lake Michigan; I had started relating how the session went. I told him about Kiera giving me the earbuds, chatting

with the crew, Chris's updates on his never-ending RPG campaign and Kelly's thoughts on the novel she was reading. I delayed. I began, "And when I sat down and—and put on the headphones..."

I tried again. Then I started crying.

I collapsed on a bench, Brandon sitting next to me. I noticed strangers glance at us and pretend they had not done so, though I dedicated most of my attention to small patches of concrete below me, the pattern of grime and dust overlaying the surface blurring through my tears. I eventually pushed the whole story out.

Brandon said, slowly, "Arthur, I've been wondering. You know I can't hear the noises when I try your earbuds, and I know you wouldn't gaslight me. I just didn't want to make it seem like I thought you were crazy, or make this a problem. And maybe they're real, and for whatever reason, I can't hear them. It could be anything. But if it's keeping you from working, if it's causing you to break down like this, I think we should just talk to someone. You remember when I saw that therapist, Harriet? Maybe she could—"

I got up, stared at him through the stream of tears. I told him I didn't need a shrink, that if Brandon brought up therapy again, we would need to see a different kind of shrink, together.

I acted like that was a joke, and Brandon pretended to take it that way. We made stupid, fragmentary conversation all the way home.

Up until this point, I had never heard the sounds from external speakers, only headphones or earbuds, Kiera's included, of course. Even when I was alone, I could trust my speakers.

I was driving down the interstate, on a bright Saturday. I couldn't work anymore. The sounds had begun to play for longer and longer each time I put the headphones on in the booth, and were overlapping Desecrated Avatar. Kiera had noticed that I wasn't quite keeping up, and asked if I was feeling okay. Then she started asking how things were between me and Brandon, if I wanted to talk about anything. But I felt that we were work partners now, albeit familiar, friendly ones. I couldn't tell her what was ruining my life.

I needed music, needed to hear anything to take my mind off why I was driving. I turned on the radio, knowing that even if my playlists were corrupted, I could relax with the radio.

This time, I could finally make out the words.

"It's all over now. It's all over now. It's all over now..."

The voice sounded bizarrely familiar, as though it might belong to someone I knew, someone I had grown up with. Then the piano, and then the footsteps. Then some badly mixed, supposedly epic rocking.

I managed to avoid hitting anyone; I didn't even start swerving. I turned off the radio a few seconds into the song, and felt any qualms about my plans vanish.

I drove into the lot at Paul's Pancake Pavilion. I sat in my car, took a few breaths, then walked up the steps and pulled the door open.

The inside was bustling, crowds of people at tables, heaps of pancakes piled atop their plates. I felt nauseous, estranged from my surroundings, baffled by the dissonance between my imagination and what Paul had done. I followed the server to a seat, told her I was actually friends with the manager, and I'd like to say hello. She seemed dubious, but asked my name. I gave her one I remembered Paul fondly mentioning, back when we talked.

She came out with him a few minutes later. He stared at me, glanced at her, and nodded. He loped to my table, his green eyes glinting, his dark hair shaggy, his walk off-balance and swerving.

"Hey, Art."

I breathed in and out.

"You know I prefer Arthur. Can we talk in the back?"

He grunted quizzically. He asked, "Didn't you think I had caused that whole noise thing? Are you fine, being here? Don't get me wrong; I'm happy to see you."

I carefully stated, "I just want to talk. Not even about the noises. I've been obsessive, delusional, and I don't want things to be like this anymore."

He led me into the back of the restaurant. I looked up as we went down the hallway, saw that he had security cameras mounted in the corners of the ceiling. Before, I would have thought that he couldn't possibly afford them; having seen his place, I wondered why he had such an old model. I considered the possibility that he had bought them after spending the rest of his bloated profits paying a hacker to torture me, and I felt my fury surge all over again. I realized we were in his office. He had flowers on his desk, a sign with a pun on it whose exact wording I forget, light tan wallpaper.

He said, hesitantly, "Take a seat. Heh... want any pancakes?"

I noticed that there weren't any cameras in his office. I punched him, I knocked him out of his chair, I did many other things that I can only remember now as a blur of rage and violence. When he collapsed against the door,

breathing shallowly, I eviscerated his desk, searching for any clues to whom he had contacted to code the virus.

I found a letter addressed to me, claiming that he was worried and wanted to talk. I tore it to shreds, briefly wondering if he and Brandon had collaborated this whole time. Then I kicked his desk over, watched the vase with the flowers shatter. His family photos were next, though they failed to reveal any secret compartments as they fell to the floor.

The waiter was smart. She didn't interrupt when she heard the screams, or freeze up in indecisive fear; she just called the police. They broke the door down, pinned me to the floor, and blocked off the area. They handcuffed my wrists, and I saw Paul behind me as I was dragged down the hallway.

The blood crusted his eyes, but they were open, and staring after me, not judgmental, simply shocked into neutrality.

The interrogation took less time than I expected, and I was in jail that night. Alone in the cell, isolation imposed reason on me. I understood that my brother could not possibly detect every time I listened to music, that the pervasiveness and specificity of the attacks ruled out all but the most elite, deranged masterminds, and no such person would target me. I realized that I alone was responsible for the destruction of my life, and I lay on my bunk, incapable of sleep.

They let me have earbuds and an antique MP3 Player while waiting for trial; I think I have Kiera to thank for those. I no longer had much of a reaction to what I assumed was a product of my broken mind, but I listened to that voice anyway, trying to understand why it sounded so familiar. Did it represent my hatred of my brother, some quirk of memory and insanity?

On the day of the trial, the voice repeated its message seven times, more than it ever had. Then the piano played for only two seconds before slamming shut. After that, the footsteps began. It sounded as though they were walking further than ever before, and I heard them stop, clear and staccato, as if someone had come right next to me.

Then the guards came, and I pulled the earbuds out, hard.

At the trial, I saw my brother for the first time in three weeks. Our mother wheeled him in; he had bandages all over his face and his arms. Our father refused to come. Kiera and Chris were there, too, and I saw Brandon enter quietly, just before the trial started.

My brother's attorney presented his case. He announced the injuries, the property damages, and the charges, his opening so unaffected and assured I

had to suppress the urge to scream, just to break the peace accompanying the inevitable. My lawyer took half his counterpart's time, his role a formality. Both wanted to play the recording of the police interrogation as their first piece of evidence.

When you speak, you do not hear the same sound everyone else does. Few experiences are more uncanny than hearing your own recorded voice, and without the visual cue of your face accompanying it, you might not recognize the voice at all, simply thinking it horribly, strangely familiar.

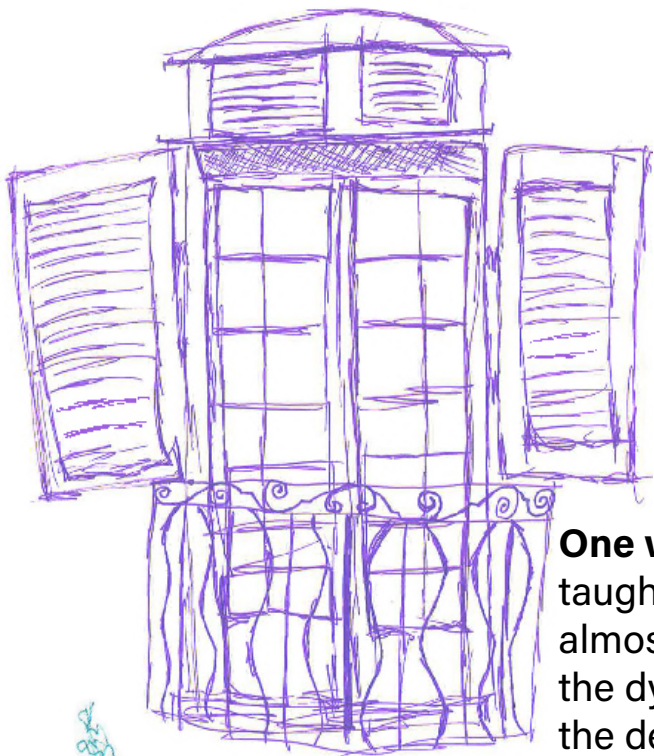
As I recognized whose voice I had been hearing at the start of all my music for the past year and a half, I heard footsteps steadily coming up behind me. As I told the police what I had done in the recording, I heard someone stop, felt their fingers rest upon my ears. Thin, wormy things slithered down from their hands into my ears, and my fingers dug in, clawing my ears apart. Blood spattered across the table; my attorney reached for me. I gripped and tore, felt a rip from my earlobes to somewhere deep inside, and then they pulled my hands away. They tried to speak to me, but I felt a muffled pressure on both sides of my head, and heard nothing but ringing.

-Samuel Davenport



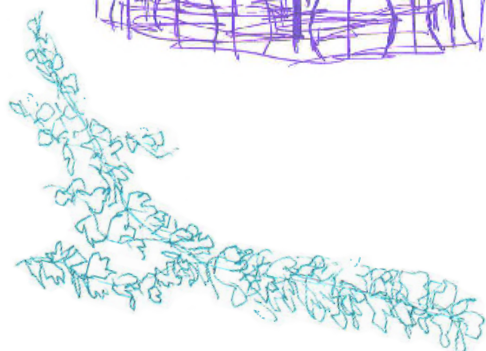


## Dead Man Talking



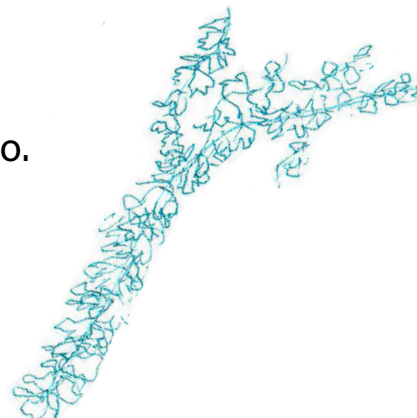
*Tack tack...*

**One word, four letters.** Such an easy concept, taught naturally to the youngest of us, that it seems almost foolish not to understand. Every glimpse at the dying embers marinating the night sky reminds the defeated of its imposing demeanor. It comes and goes, blows and whistles, without care or regard; blessing with its presence only those brave enough to dare.



*Tack tack.. Tack tack..*

Closer and closer it comes, yet farther and farther I want to go. Every breath I take becomes shards of glass in my lungs. My neck itches, my mouth foams, my vision trembles. All of my senses are now tethered to the tracks. The longer the wait, the more shameful the situation. The closer it gets, the more regretful the decision.



*Tack tack. Tack tack. Tack tack.*

It's here. It's time. No way out. No way back. So I lay there, on the sharp gravel in the middle of the tracks. And I wait. Wait for the inevitable repercussion of a decision made by a man abandoned by **one word; four letters.** As the light of the train sets ablaze the embers of the sky, my last thoughts go to lady **Hope**, pulling down her icy veil.

-Melissa Kura



*- my childhood home maims me.*

the two doors yawn and groan  
as i push them open.  
i feel resented every time i touch them.  
the knobs bite at my fingers  
and laugh when i winc.

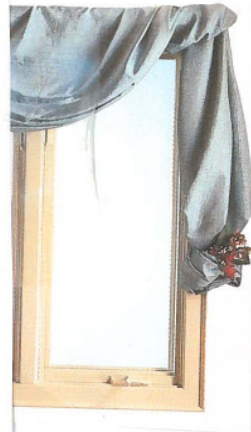
the hallways are long and narrow,  
i must shrink to fit through them.  
the pictures on the walls snicker as i pass,  
saying i was never quite thin enough  
to make it down their hall.

my room is small and cramped  
with stuff i'm not allowed to like,  
and clothes i'm not allowed to wear.  
with pictures of people i don't know,  
and toys i'm too old to play with.

but at night, the whole room grows,  
like my house took a deep breath in.  
and all of a sudden,  
i can see everything in my room.  
but the morning will shrink it all again.

and by the time i remember why  
i came back into my childhood home,  
she has already maimed me.  
into a woman i cannot recognize,  
in a body i can't help but feel small in.

one day, i will push open those doors again.  
without the help of the hallway,  
or the pictures on the wall,  
or even my bedroom.  
i will remember that i am more,  
than just a haunted house.



-Willow Quine



*Pink* by Aidan Barton

## Gnome Is Where the Heart Is

Once upon a time, in a land filled with rhyme, there lived a lonely creature 'twixt the mountains and the vines. No comp'ny did he keep, nor did he ever want, content to sit alone 'midst the silence of his haunt. When once upon a sunny day a strange new mood did strike, our solitary creature knew for sure he'd take a hike! He strolled along a jaunting pace, no hurry to his step, the sun beamed on his wizened face, and one saw, dare say, some pep! The day did pass at last until he knew to be back soon. When on the road, oh did he spy, a glim'ring gold mushroom. "That I must have" did he declare and so, of course, it was. Home he went to it admire, so sheen and without flaws! So off to sleep did our friend go, with nary another word. And on the shelf, the fungus was, and there alone, it stirred.



*Détail* by Marcia Mason Speece

So unbeknownst to our good man, dear resident of Rhyme, would his dest'ny be forever changed, for all of space and time. For on that eve that fungus did, with powers unknown to me, transmit our friend to planet Earth 2023! So just one morn a normal kid, out on his daily walk, thought he might just check the door beneath a new pine-stalk. Well uncommon though this may be, our good friend was not rude, and in light of yesterday's glee, did greet and thus ensued:

"Hello, shalom, and welcome to my home. Despite what may be going on in your smelly-old dome, you'll not set one foot until I've let it be known. Despite my short stature and slightly bent bones, it's not a common creature you've found on your own. No pixie of the land nor orcish man of stone; I'm no goblin, I'm no elf, I'm a G-n-ome."

"Oka-"

"And no common thing indeed for to find me on this hill, for in this domicile you've the pleasure meeting Swill" "Yes Swill's the name like so many come before. So come in, take a seat and do swiftly close the door".... To be Continued

-Gavin Warren





*Le Printemps est Arrivé* by Marcia Mason Speece



## ANNIE

Annie takes her morning coffee with herb. She sits on the back porch with our fat orange cat. Cat's hair is so thick it sticks to Annie's skin, dewey from Northwest rain. I've come to realize Cat has replaced me as Annie's best friend. Annie is surrounded by birch trees and sprouting mushrooms. The muddy earth impedes our home. She dreams of forests and mountains and a life remote. If she could, she'd bury herself in the garden beds; she'd lie amongst sprouting flowers, moss, and greens.

Annie has a mission. She's convinced she'll save the earth.

Annie is exposed bones. She rejects the notion of a filter. She tried to give it up completely, only to discover that without one she is capable of causing harm. Annie is tired. She screams. She buries her face. I don't want to hurt anymore. Mother says it'll take time. Time brings change. Annie will have to work for it. She weeps. Work makes her sad. She is exhausted.

Annie says she loves me. She asks for me when she's hurting. Long ago, she let me in. I was one of the few. Now, Annie forages for love. She gives her heart easily; she shares her soul with many.

Annie used to ask me every day...

how is your heart?

Since Annie changed, she doesn't ask these things.

Annie sings of the things she loves.

The Trees. The Birds. The Leaves. The Sea.

Light. Love. Joy. Dreams.

Annie plays her fingers raw with nylon strings; with paint and ash and dirt ridden nails, she plucks them gently.

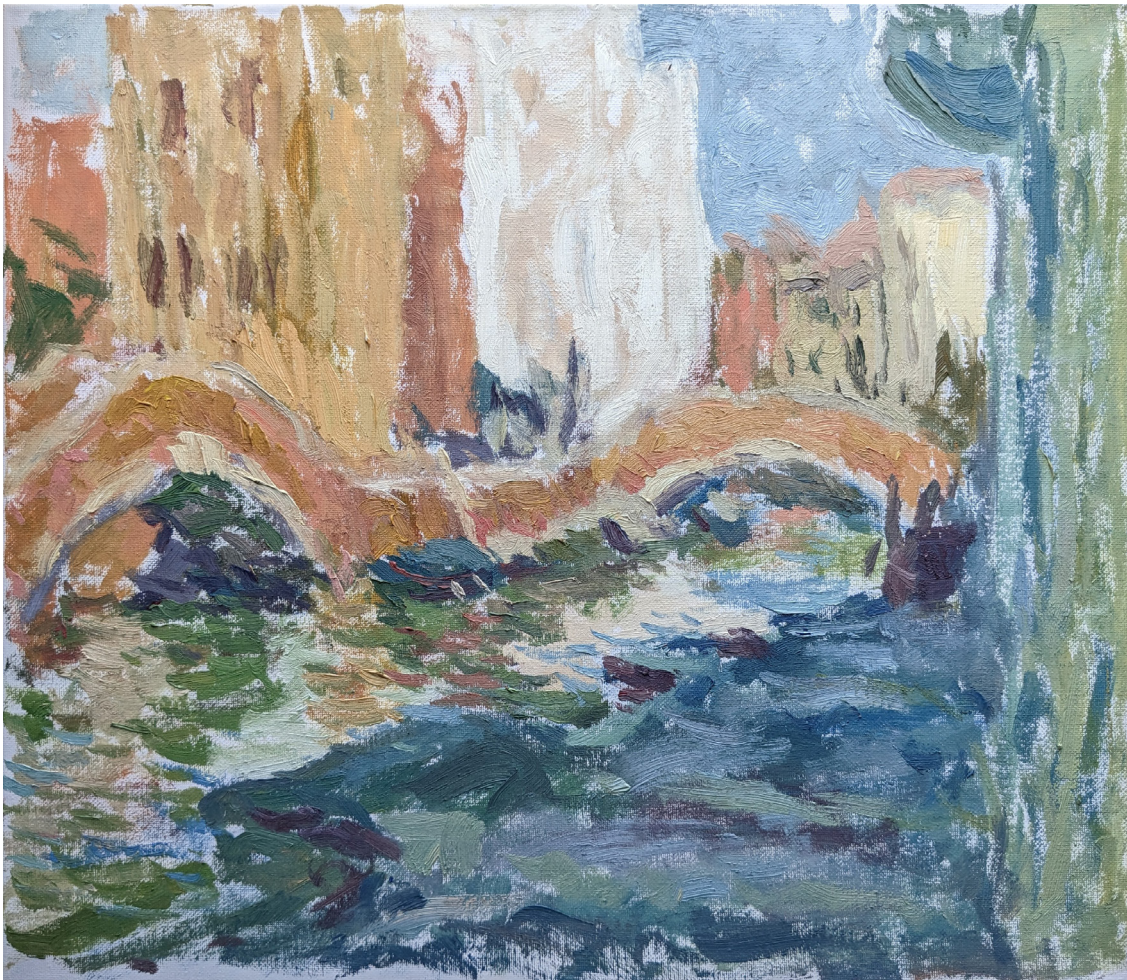
Spring is here. We sit under vernal sun in the afternoons. I weave cherry blossoms, baby's breath, lavender, rosemary, and fern into her curls. Annie picked them months ago. They've been dormant and dry ever since, protruding from old wine bottles and mason jars.

Annie takes coffee with herb. Smoke is captured by the tin overhang, which seems to make music every time the rain comes, like little bells ringing.

Annie says she's happy. I am not sure what that means anymore.

-Rose Letsinger



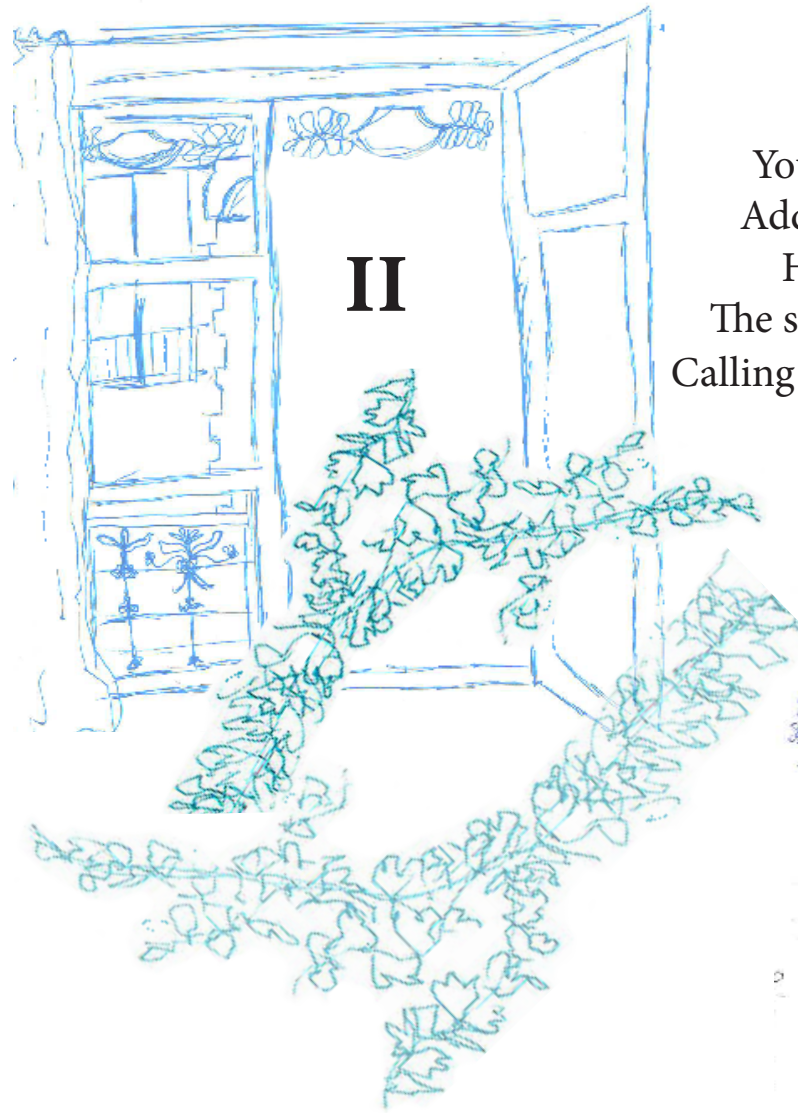


*Two Bridges* by Aidan Barton

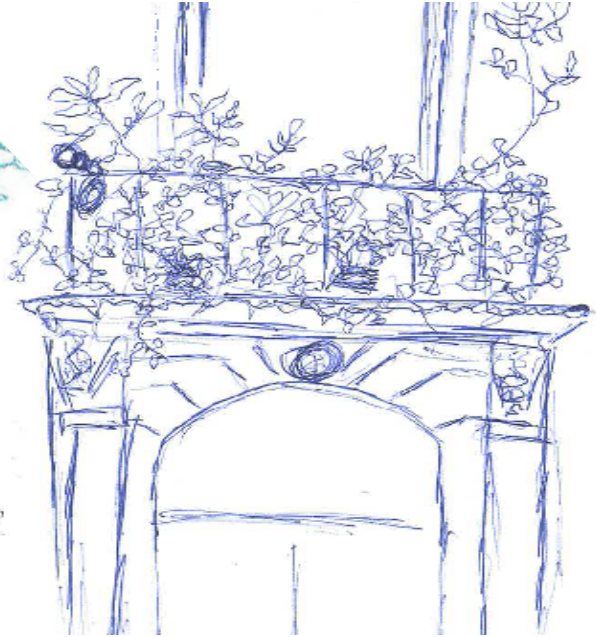
## God is a Tree

### I

To tell, if I should, of the wood  
In the sylvan glens of my consciousness.  
There I sat, within this dale, on a day  
Rather like any other. Beautiful beyond measure,  
Brightness boundless in buoyancy. Rays of light laughing  
Through the leaves, stretching fingers to enliven  
My brooding face as my back rested on rough bark.  
The skin of the tree, deeply ridged and grooved,  
A highway for ants and bugs to traverse. A lane  
Verdant with the vigor of song and dance.  
I prized this tree, breath came to life here.  
Life received breath, beauty once hidden bloomed.  
As I rested, I studied an oak just feet away  
And found the more I gazed, the more it swayed.  
It's dancing causing its body to morph  
until before me, stood God themselves.  
With cordial greeting they approached and said thus:



Youth is a gust of wind that flows,  
Adding to the knotted chain of life.  
Hours spent at the tree's roots.  
The song of the ants, marching with us  
Calling to a moment, a silent eternity spent




On its long outstretched arms. Feeble souls flippantly forming  
Ideologies of enormity, making a home atop gnarled bark.  
A fortress and conquest formed, the foundation  
For every developed nation, found within the mind  
Of the pensive child, whom, with agitation, we deem wild.  
But a time exists, beyond thoughtful determination.  
Where glasses prove superfluous, reality  
Forms perceptions, and expectations ever exceeded.  
For to be a child is beyond the clock, no longer  
A stage or an age forced upon the growing mind,  
But a state of being, a chosen existence. Where  
Meaning is found,  
in the highway underpass and  
The dilapidated church.  
Here is home, for truth is seen, grasped fully.  
Fully known....Fully known  
The enduring tree sits in the yard of our mind,  
This ever present reminder, facilitating measureless actualization.





### III

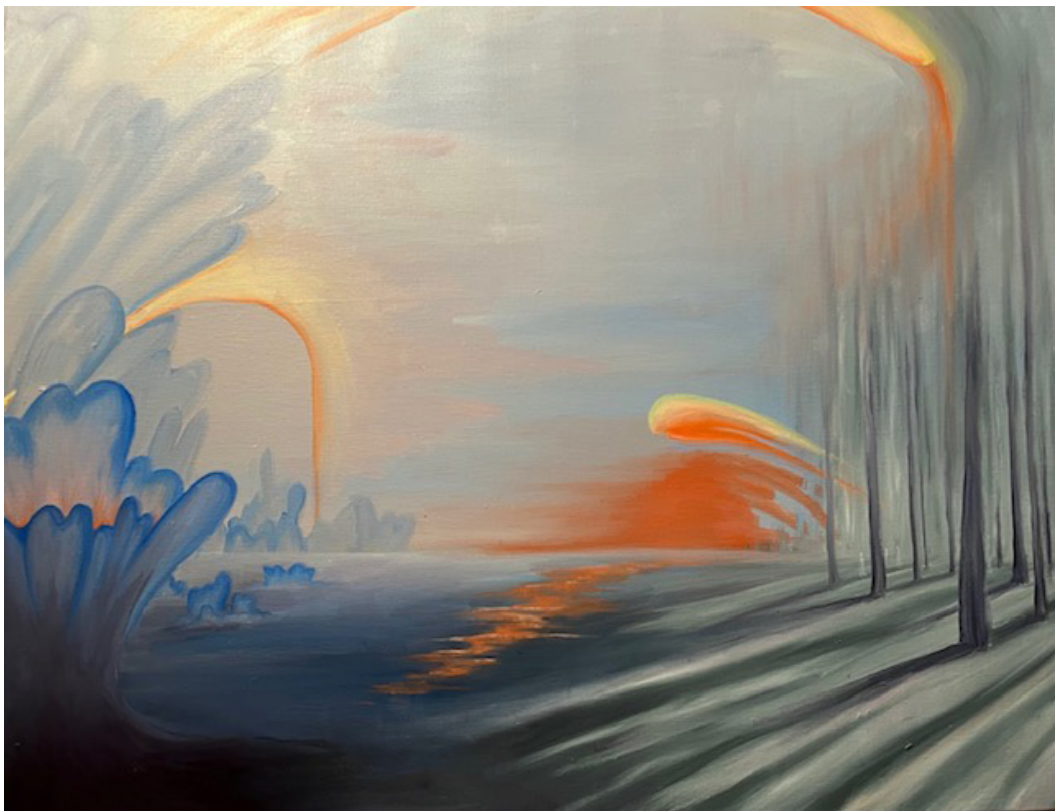
But we learn how to reason.  
For it serves to be beyond reasonable  
For this tree, for its stout wood  
To possess no purpose beyond perpetuation.  
We chop them to their bases, Defamed to a stasis  
Where they becomes famous  
From the rings they possessed.  
Life more beautiful after death.  
Executioners finding elation  
In their wonderful creation .  
Celebrating the age of death  
To augment the process of life.  
The tombstone predating the womb, though  
Burial plots in the form of a church  
Use God's flesh to form structure for life  
Utterly devoid of Christ's flesh and Joseph's wife.  
Constructed pews prove distorted;  
A perpetually claimed revival, ever contorted  
By those who form faith to be rational.  
The glorified face of a stump making us ever more  
Eager to deface life's natural order.  
Turning our maker into paper  
Claiming we'll plant seeds later.  
Sheets of divinity holding  
Emboldened words in flippant fonts  
Holding proofs against our maker.  
Stapling half cooked spittle and broth  
Onto a tree, sap flows, even blood becomes sweet.  
A tax return spurns belief in a higher word,  
Wood planks composing babbling edifices far past purpose.  
The crystal palace scraping the sky, the void,  
but hollow, but facade. Engendering  
A constant cyclical cynicism, ever defaming what is,  
What was, and what will prove to be...



## IV

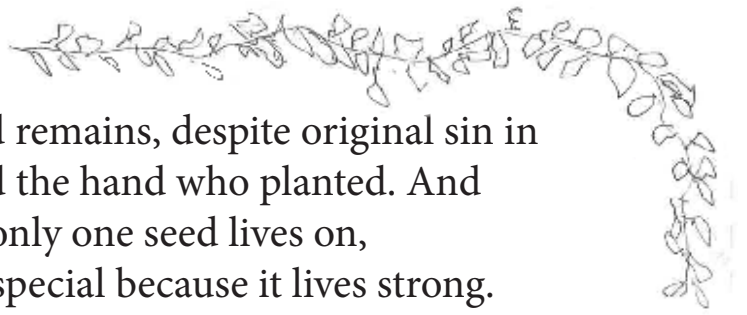
The hourglass flippantly flips again, forming  
a squalid and barren wasteland beneath.

Devoid of all form but brains  
bereft of thought, bodies longing for flesh.  
Despite the war surging and swelling, apples  
Free of animus sprout, touting life with a red sheen.  
The life of a seed unfettered by the hand of man,  
An existential reality birthed from the sand.  
Although truth remains objective, domestication  
Causes the pond beside the sown field to ripple.

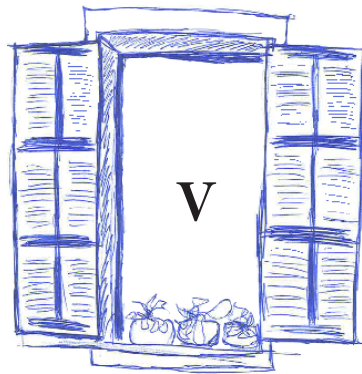


*Pschodysleptic* by Justine Garcia

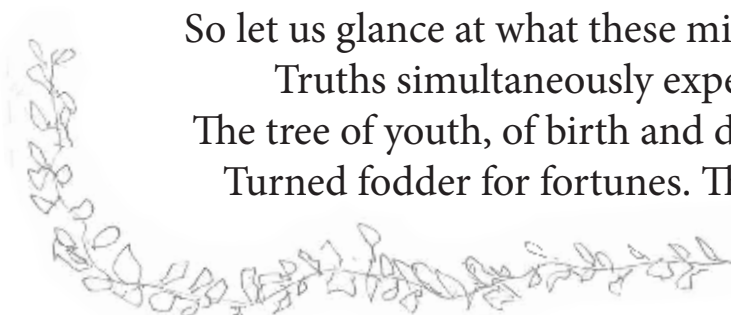
Next to the water, the farmer toils. Seeking to  
Glean grain and gain a profit at the market.  
At first, the seed was carefully handled.  
Planted by soft hands birthed from the earth.  
But now the oxen, now the plow, now the tractor  
Flips and tumbles the dirt. Dirges for death  
In the mechanical hum of an idle engine.



But still the seed remains, despite original sin in  
The man and the hand who planted. And  
Now only one seed lives on,  
but it proves special because it lives strong.  
It sprouts outside of time, boldly blooming  
Whether planted in past, or present, or future.  
It cajoles the control of the seasons.  
Whether lying dormant for a time, or sprouting  
At full tilt, it never does wilt. The crop multiplied,  
A hundredfold for man to hold. The field the flesh,  
The flesh the body. The pierced side made irrigation.  
The furrowed field a stigmata. The sacrifice for man  
Made modern industry. But the seed is I. The seed is I Am.  
The seed is an inevitability ever planted by the rivers.  
It will never wither, never waver, its vines  
Ever producing the sweetest fruit. For as the fruit abideth  
In the vine, the vine in the seed, and the seed in the earth,  
So the earth in the seed. Available fertility must produce,  
Present life must live, excess love must sacrifice.



Eternity is always and never  
a reflection and refraction in a maze of mirrors.  
God is eternity, just as breath is wind. The clock  
Winds down to zero while ringing midnight.  
So let us glance at what these mirrors hold. Paradoxical  
Truths simultaneously experienced guide us.  
The tree of youth, of birth and death. The same timber  
Turned fodder for fortunes. The seed beyond time.



The tree rested under, the tree who spoke as a plurality.  
All these we see, all these we feel. Man is a circle  
Formed around this tree. A plurality of subjective  
Perspectives of the truth that Is. Every second a  
Shattered mirror. An eternity of alternative visions.  
All life an amalgamation of a billion subjective experiences  
Of objective moments. Murder? Protection. Patriotism?  
Power. Death? A treadmill. A void. A deliverance. God?  
Religion. Rape. Reverence. Every minute microcosm  
a distorted infinity, but the tree sap still sweet. In  
Your pocket rests a seed, in this seed a glass shard.

-Derek Jacoby



Oneiric by Justine Garcia

