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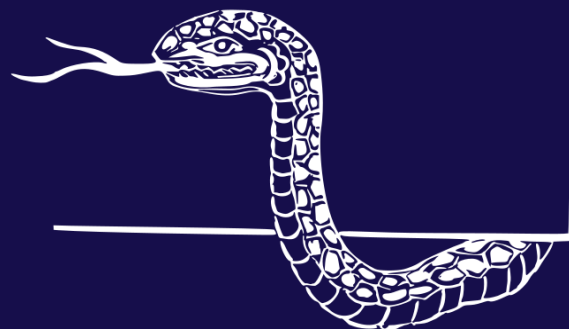
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OUROBOROS MAGAZINE | EDITION XI



OUROBOROS

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OUROBOROS MAGAZINE



EDITION XI

Fall 2025

One University Drive,
Orange, CA 92866

Here at Ouroboros

We aim to provide an outlet for artists who push the bounds of reality and imagination—writers, illustrators, and creators who play with the unreal in the realms of horror, paranormal, science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism. Because sometimes it takes a moment from another world to better understand our own.



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Letter From the Editor-in-Chief

Welcome, Reader,

Coming out of last semester's milestone issue, this year's edition of *Ouroboros* is defined by new beginnings: new members, multiple new contributors, and a new audience of readers. New beginnings can be exciting, but the unknown, and the unfamiliar can also be daunting, and strange. I must admit, I was quite daunted coming into this year with a new issue, new crew, and being halfway through my undergraduate years. But being back and having settled into this role again has truly been a lovely thing, surrounded by lovely people with a shared passion for the arts.

This issue has a myriad of intriguing art and delightfully strange stories tucked within its pages— including a piano that plays on its own, a cyclical journey through an alien planet, a surreal floating heart, and an uncanny alternate America. Our editorial boards, designers and contributors worked hard, under pressing deadlines, to make this launch happen. I truly can't thank them enough for contributing their time and talents. You're all so special to me, and your time, commitment, and eternal patience (with me) does not go unnoticed.

Thank you also to my executive board: for Bri Velez, who put together the layout, took the lead on onboarding our new art and design board, and who brings much-needed warmth to the team. Thank you Casey Shimazu, who has taken on managing social media, and designs a lot of the flyers and posts you see online. Thank you Ameen Veach, for helping to keep meetings on track, breaking the ice, and reassuring me when I felt overwhelmed that everything was going to work out— silly me, it did! It always does.

Thank you to our advisor Morgan Read-Davidson for his continued support, the Chipotle and R&B Tea in the Orange Circle for hosting fundraisers, for my family for their understanding when I was busy, and my partner, Erik Lund, for always believing in me (as well as taking photographs at every launch party). Thank you to our talented contributors, for having the courage to share a piece of yourself with us, and allowing us to publish it. And thank you finally, Reader, for giving us a chance. I hope you find magic here. And I hope you take a little with you, everywhere you go.

With love and humility,

Selah

Editor-in-Chief, *Ouroboros Magazine*

Fall 2025

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The Picture of Dorian Gray

Jo Martinez
digital art

The Thesean

Ameen Veach

cw: references to slavery, amputation

Dearest Claver was a man exhausted with time; it was how he found the bridge, and it was why, when the dogs had run him out of Custer in the Central Union, he had come there to die.

The molten brand on his back, the mark of an abominable slave, burned hot and without end, his skin pulling tight to knit over a wound that would not permit itself to die. That burn had kept him warm since his birth, when Spudman Josiah hired his first Hydra, and made plans for him to birth a litany of little serviles and downcast drones, their names to be spilled about the dirt. A Hydra's flesh would continue to reknit without sufficient heat or cauterization, leaving most of the unlucky born with the condition with a kind of cancerous regeneration, organs and limbs spilling from their points of damage. No one had told him this, but in another life, he'd learned it through the sizzle of iron needles on his once-wounds, and the ever-burning slave's brand upon his back.

Before he was born, his name had been Henry. Then Josiah had fed him, offered him a home, and bought him; Henry then lost an arm. As he regenerated, so too did the bloody pulp and pole that had splattered upon the ground. When the gestation was done—only twenty minutes, Dearest Claver had been told—he had been born from the stump of that arm, and branded the first of Spudman Josiah's many *Theseans*.

He was Henry for a short while, had been Henry, and some nights he used to think he might be able to live as Henry again. Dearest Claver, despite his wishes, he had long since come to terms with the fact that his body was only a replica of God's true creation, a clone of a "real" man. Legally, he was nothing more than dead skin. Dead skin, said the Western Vatican, had less soul than a fetus, and enslaving it charged the true believer no sin, nor want of confession. So he'd been Henry, and then dragged away while they'd strapped his former body into the steel chair to make more of him. When they branded Dearest Claver's back and sent him out into the fields, wading in mounds of dirt and scraping at raw, American earth with hands that had been trained by shadow memories, he remembered deciding that he would kill Henry if ever given the chance.

Here on the bridge just across the Kentucky border, in the Summer of 1953, there was a stream and a bench, and an old woman feeding the birds. Here, the dirt and elements had refined themselves into the sunny evenings of free folk. Here, the stone was cut by lovers and masons, and all the cares of men made merry music on the sunset streets of a town just beyond the bridge. Moonlight started early and envious upon the waking world, growing bolder as

the sun dipped lower behind the hills. Even the great Mississippi, whose banks were wide and rapids furious, was given its space below him, left to its devastating beauty. He saw all of it, if dimmed in the late of the day. This place had been carved to be envied, spiting the eye and biting the hand that fed the table. Dearest Claver stumbled across the bridge as the river stones within the grand Mississippi shifted against its weight, and the water spluttered beneath the land of the living. He turned and sat on the edge of the bridge, catching his breath. His favorite place in the world, and he'd only just met it.

"Young man?" An old woman sat across from him, benched and surrounded by pigeons and doves, her flecks of once dark hair now bled into a lively dance of pale death. "Are you in love?" Dearest Claver cocked his head, and the old woman smiled, "Yes, you are, you are in love! Oh dear, tell me everything, please, everything!" Her eyes had borne little children, tiny sparks of youthful curiosity that she swaddled, oblivious to the sidelong looks of the Thesean.

"How did you know?" Dearest Claver said, and smiled sheepishly. He remembered Henry loving; it had likely gotten him killed.

"When you've lived as long as I have, you learn to read young people. I try not to pry..." She leaned closer, worried, or perhaps hoping, that he might need to whisper his story.

"I don't see the harm in telling," he said, "If you'd like to know about my morning." The evening cast long shadows that turned the scabby smile on the old woman's face into a terrifying grin with accents of pitch. She nodded eagerly.

"My love has a strict father. Doesn't let him leave on his own much."

"Yes," the old woman nodded, "Yes, that sounds right."

"I work there, for the home." He shifted. She couldn't see his brands, couldn't know, but he turned farther to face her anyway. "He and I, we're close. I feel as if I've known him longer than I've known myself. I couldn't part from him if I tried." Dearest Claver lamely flicked a pebble from the bridge rail off into the rushing water below. "I just knew we had to leave."

"Of course you did." The old woman nodded vigorously, "Yes, yes, of course you needed to! What could you have done if you had stayed? The father sounds like a rough man. Was he a rough man? Was he demeaning, overbearing? Did he hurt your love?"

Dearest Claver grimaced, "He hurt all of us, worked us hard, but he made special work of his son. Strapped him down and made him bloody. We had to leave, like I said, so we did."

"In the night?!" Eschewing her cane, the old woman bounded to her feet, scaring the doves and sending them away in a flight.

"When else?" This caused his audience to giggle maniacally. He continued, "I threw him over my shoulder, and we fled into the sunset, into Dixon

and the Great States. He wanted us to start a new life, he and I. Then, I got up and left him by the Mississippi, and when I returned, he'd gone off somewhere I couldn't follow." Down the street, the sound of barking slavers and dogs made him shiver. The old woman gave him a look of dramatized sorrow.

"Give him time, dear. He's making his own way down the river; that's what life is after all, a winding old river. See—" Dearest Claver, for the half-life of him, couldn't contain his laughter. He giggled madly, triumphantly, till it became a roar, overpowering the hum of yips and shouts he felt breaching ever closer. The old woman huffed indignantly, half confused and more than a small touch insulted. She looked Dearest Claver up and down, and before she could ask just *what* was so funny, he hacked up a reply.

"By now, he's past the bridge and down along the rapids, if I tied his binds right." He couldn't stop the laughter, his body wracked with a giddy thrill. "He'll keep growing lungs the more his own fill up with water. I wonder how many his poor neck can take before it bursts." Dearest Claver flashed the old woman a wicked smile. "Give it a few years, you'll meet him soon enough."

The dark strokes of sunset drew realization across the old woman's face, and she gasped, a sound like thunder accompanying a symphony. She turned and stared out over the river, searching for the characteristic bulge of a body, but all she found were oval stones and stream water. They could both see the slave catchers now, men wearing rifles and dark coats. The man at their head, the only man without a dog and brandishing a pistol, was a dowser of some repute. He could find any runaway, living or dead, but Dearest Claver was no ordinary runaway.

He removed his shirt and drew a sallow-bone hunting knife from his trouser pocket. His slave scars caused another outburst of terror from the old woman, warding herself against the blood-spawn clone, the cursed Thesean child that had very nearly touched her. The marks on his back, the marks stoked in molten iron, proofed against his unnatural ability to heal, were shaped into an ouroboros; a serpent consuming its unwanted tail, the mark of a Thesean Hydra. He was like Henry in that way; he could regrow from anything, as could his severed limbs. It was the only way he'd ever be like that, preening jailbird, stuck up in the house like a donor for the damned. Never a thought for his Theseans had crossed Henry's mind. His chair had always been too tight, his drinking water too metallic, the needles too pointed. His Theseans weren't really him, so he'd never objected to their labor, not until their masters had stopped meeting his needs. It was then he'd called for Dearest Claver, whom he claimed to love as much as he loved himself. He'd spent the rest of his free evening tasting the purer waters of the Kentucky River, arms and legs bound and screaming for the shore.

His Thesean now sat on the edge of the bridge and looked over the closing hunters. They wouldn't be afraid to use their bullets, so long as they

missed his head, they'd have their regenerated mule back free of charge, but he wouldn't have them. Dearest Claver, Dearest because he had been first, Claver because it was a fine name for a worker, calmly lopped the first finger from his palm.

By the time he had severed his fifth finger, reaching for the wrist on his right hand, the first shot broke the air, catching him in the hip and burrowing into his thigh. He tried to laugh and failed as the knife ground against his wrist. With a final spasm, he forced the blade past the bone, sending the hand tumbling into the water. Even as it fell, he saw the blood begin to clot, and the fingers regrowing on their stumps. His own stump had already stopped bleeding and was beginning to grow upwards. If he didn't burn it soon, he'd end up with an uncontrolled growth of palms. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

With a final laugh, he sent himself over the edge, the buzz of hot lead sweeping past as he, head covered by his arms, splashed into the river below, body beaten against the stones. He tumbled and cracked along, the water steering him down brutal corners as every nip of rock bit away a bone, twisted a ligament, or beat a muscle into violet paste. Bullets riddled the water, but few marked him, and soon the howl of the hounds grew softer, chasing the scents of soon-to-be-born Dearests. His missing fingers would grow into siblings, most dead or free, perhaps both, in the current. The water set against his scars, lapping at his scabs and forcing him to gasp for breath. He could practically hear the markings sizzle against the cold.

Hours later, Dearest Claver would float downriver and into the heart of Dixon, an Amnesty State though not above the Vatican. He thought of his new siblings, and of Henry, and if the poor man had survived, or found some fire to cleanse his wounds before he became overgrown with flesh. His own palm had grown into an oblong fractal of near-hands, fingertips protruding with the beginnings of new appendages. He dashed them against nearby rocks whenever he could. Finding that the current had at last become easy, Dearest Claver chuckled to himself, back and markings washed to scalding as he wondered where the stars would take him, and how many Henrys it would take to free him from his scars.



She Didn't Answer the Question

Fish Young
digital art

Unfinished Business

David Prue

cw: car crash, mentions of death

Graduation ends with five seconds of silence. That's all Emma Taylor gets. No speech. No tribute. Just a name and a pause.

We weren't close or anything. She was an honor student among the honor students, and I'm...well, me. I don't know if we ever exchanged any words, but I'm weighed down by the blanket of somber covering the room. After all her work, she didn't make it to today. All because a drunk refused to call an Uber.

I sit in a row with my classmates whom I'll surely lose touch with the moment I walk out of the auditorium. The uncharismatic and balding principal dismisses us for the final time, and I move through the sea of caps and gowns. Tacky, colorful ropes decorate the students smarter than me, designating them to some honor society or other scam.

Photos are taken. Caps are thrown. I smile politely, since it's what I'm expected to do. I hug my parents, who look more relieved that I actually graduated than anything.

After I change back into my street clothes in the guy's locker room, I toss my rolled-up diploma in my backpack, where it'll remain until I remember it's there. Afterwards, it will probably live at the bottom of my closet or in a desk drawer somewhere. As I move through the heavy double doors of the gym, a tingling sensation runs through my neck—the feeling of being watched. My head jolts to the side thinking I caught a glimpse of something red out of my periphery. No one is there. My dad, catching my reaction, raises an eyebrow.

"Seeing ghosts?" he asks.

"Who knows?" I say, exiting the school. I don't look back.

The door groans behind me, sending a chill down my spine. Holding my breath, I count the seconds, but the light in my parents' room doesn't turn on. Adjusting my backpack, I jump on my bike and pedal. No helmet. No destination.

I can't remember exactly when I started biking at night, but it was probably on a similar night to tonight. It's the only thing that seems to clear my head. My parents' relief lasted only a few hours before we had another fight. It's the same one every time. Something about me not taking the future seriously enough, or them not seeing any other path than the one they followed.

So, as always, I hop on my bike and ride to nowhere.

I like this city more at night. It feels brighter somehow. No one's around. No one needs anything from me. It's the only time I can just live.

I breathe the crisp spring air as I bike through my small town. Orange

streetlights illuminate the way for me, and no cars drive around here this time of night. The vibrations through the handlebars accentuate the calm, rhythmic beats playing through my headphones, and tension leaves my shoulders as I build up speed.

Traversing the route that my tires have followed a hundred times by now, I make my way through downtown. For reasons I can't explain, I change direction. Something about the park calls to me tonight. I bike through it occasionally, when I don't feel like being next to other cars on the road. There's a path that cuts through the middle, that tonight I'm inclined to take.

I smell finely cut grass when I cut through the park's freshly paved sidewalk. This city may get claustrophobic, but it gets a few things right. I ride past swings and benches and towards the children's playground structure, made of well-maintained wood. That's when I catch a glimpse of red out of my periphery again. That's when I see *her*.

Clutching the brakes, my bike screeches to a halt. It's everything I can do to keep from flying over the handlebars. Standing at the top of the structure is a red-haired girl in white. Her hair does not flow with the wind. And I recognize her instantly.

"Em...Emma?" is all I can force through my throat.

Her sea-blue eyes flick down and meet mine. They widen. "You...you can see me?"

"I...I think so."

She collects herself and appraises me. "Chris, right?"

"Yeah. But you're..." I can't get the words out.

"Dead?" she says with her lips curving into a sad smile. She glances at her hand. It flickers, translucent, as if she's made of shimmering light. "Yeah. Looks that way."

Emma takes a light jump off the play structure and her body floats down, like a feather. As she lands weightlessly in front of me, I wonder if I'm dreaming. My foot tests the pressure of the pedal, in case I need to bike away. *Should I be afraid? She seems harmless enough, and it's not like she'd have anything to hold a grudge over.*

My curiosity wins out over my caution, and I take my foot off the pedal. "What are you doing here?"

"Dunno. What are you doing here?"

"Wandering, I guess."

She nods. "I guess I could say the same. It's late."

I look around the empty park. "I like it. It's quiet."

Emma follows gaze. "It is peaceful. I always liked this park, growing up." She gives me a soft smile. "Hey, would you mind staying and chatting a bit? I haven't had anyone to talk to in a while."

My mind goes blank. "I uhh..."

She smirks. "Relax, I'm not here to haunt you or anything. I just wanna

chat."

I take a deep breath and steady myself. Kicking down the stand of my bike and dismounting, I toss my bag next to it. "Sure, why not. It's not like anything's gonna top this tonight. What'd you wanna talk about?"

"Anything. Just life." She grins softly, "or lack thereof."

The night settles around us as we walk through the abandoned park in silence. I follow her to a swingset, and sit in the plastic seat. My swing gently rocks under my shifting weight, while Emma's sits motionless beside me. A light breeze offers a bit of coolness to the spring night. "So did I hit my head, or are you really..."

"A ghost?"

"Yeah."

She cocks her head. "Well, I can't speak on any possible head trauma, but I think I'm real."

"Huh." It's not much of an answer, but I'm not really sure how to process the situation.

"Any other questions? You're humoring me after all," she says with a grin.

I think for a moment of all the possible questions and decide to start small. "Can anyone else see you?"

"You're the first so far."

The breeze kicks up, and I feel the chill on my skin. "What's it feel like?"

"Nothing."

I look over at her. "Nothing?"

Emma raises her hand into the air. "I can't feel anything. Not this swing, not the wind, not hot nor cold. Nothing."

"Is that a bad thing?"

She thinks for a moment. "Undecided."

"So why are you here?"

She shrugs. "Dunno. I'm just as lost as you are."

"Maybe you have unfinished business?" I offer.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"I'm not so sure about that."

Emma looks at me. "If you died right now, wouldn't you have unfinished business?"

I rock my swing back. "Don't think so."

"Nothing?"

I look to the ground swaying underneath me. "Nothing that would keep me here."

"Huh."

I'm well familiar with that look. Usually, from my parents and guidance counselors, vexed by my lack of ambition. I decide to change the subject. I've

played it safe with my questions so far. Might as well go for broke. “Maybe you’re here to teach me the meaning of life?”

She shakes her head. “You’re outta luck there. I don’t know it.”

I nod as I kick off the swing, landing in front of the set. “Shame. Well, worth a shot.”

This time, I lead the way. I can’t remember the last time I actually spent any time at the park, instead of just biking through. I decide to climb to the top of the playstructure. I sit at the top of the slide, overlooking the park. The path lights illuminate the trees, freshly blooming for spring. Woodchips surround the play area and bring a scent of cedar into the air. At the edge of the park is a stage for outdoor events. Emma stands next to me, with her back to the guardrails.

“So, there’s really nothing?” she asks with that familiar appraising stare. I dodge the look and let go of the handles, letting gravity carry me down the plastic slide. My feet crunch against the fresh-laid woodchips. When I look up, Emma is already waiting for me at the bottom. “Boo.”

A sigh escapes my chest. “I don’t know. I’m just kinda taking it day by day.”

“No plans for the future? Graduation was today,” she says, refusing to let me escape.

I prepare the same pre-rehearsed plan that has saved me from these conversations over the last year. “I’ll go to college, I guess. Just the local community one. Major in business.”

She moves in a bit closer. “What kind of business?”

That’s new. No one ever pushes after I tell them what they want to hear, and I don’t have a prepared response. “There’s more than one kind of business?” I ask, genuinely confused.

Emma scrunches her nose. “Well, you gotta pick a specialization. Finance, accounting, marketing, etcetera.”

My head swims with potential paths, none of them endearing. “I’ll figure it out when I get there.”

Her eyes flicker from side to side as she processes. “Why business?”

“What?”

“Why choose business if you know nothing about it?”

I think of the most truthful answer I can muster. “It pays.”

“Lots of things pay.”

“My dad wants me to do it,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s what he did. He turned out okay.”

Her head tilts. “And you’d be okay if that’s how you turned out?”

To that, I have no answer.

I retreat back up the structure, and find a seat on the rope bridge. I let my feet dangle off the side, my hands gripping the rough lines. Emma sits beside me. I decide that this time, if I question her, she won’t have time to interrogate

me further.

“So, where were you off to, Ms. Valedictorian? You musta had big plans.”

She chews on her lip, staring out over the park. “Yale was the plan. Then law school. But not to be one of the scummy lawyers. I wanted to actually help people.”

“And that was the path *you* wanted?”

She pauses for a moment. “I don’t even really remember anymore.”

“Yeah, I get that. At least your path was something remarkable.”

She gives a sad, distant half-smile. “Well, not like it matters anymore.”

“Still, I can barely plan out what I’m doing on any given night. Hence, me being here now.”

Emma swings her legs. “Well, maybe not having a plan has its upsides.”

“Maybe.” I shake my head. “Still, I wish I had it all figured out like you.”

“I didn’t have it all figured out.” I notice a hint of bitterness in her voice.

I look over at her. “C’mon. You’re like the ideal student. Perfect grades, a million community service hours, never a single detention.”

She raises an eyebrow. “How’d you know I never got detention?”

“‘Cause I woulda seen you there.”

Emma laughs before the seriousness of the conversation is once again reflected on her face. “But it’s not like I was this perfect genius girl. I was just terrified of making a single mistake. I just always felt this...overwhelming pressure, you know?”

“Can’t say that I do,” I say with a shrug. “But you’re really gonna claim that it was just hard work that you got you there?”

She rolls her eyes. “I mean, fine. Yeah. I was born smart or whatever. But that’s why there was so much pressure. If I was born with gifts, don’t I have a responsibility to use them?”

I study her for a moment. “Responsibility to whom, exactly?”

She furrows her brow while she thinks. “Everyone?”

I can’t help but chuckle at the overly ambitious girl. “Yeah, see, in my opinion, that’s too much. You’re just setting yourself up for failure if you’re trying to please everyone. You gotta be a little more selfish, Emma. So what if you were born smart? That’s your gift, no one else’s. Use it how *you* want.”

She mulls over my words for a minute. “How *I* want, huh?”

This time, she’s the first to head to a new location. I follow her as she wanders, seemingly lost in thought. She passes a metal piece of playground equipment, painted blue. I can’t help myself from giving it a shot.

Crash. Ouch. It’s been years since I’ve tried the monkey bars, and I apparently still don’t have it. I loved these as a kid, but I’m not exactly an athlete these days. Emma looks down at me, laughing. I dust woodchips off myself. “I’d like to see you try.”

“I could, but I don’t think it’d be very fair,” Emma says, letting herself

rise into the air.

“Right...”

The ghost girl floats down next to me. “So, Chris, we’ve gotta decide what you’re gonna do next.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the business degree. I’m vetoing it,” she says, making an X with her fingers.

“What? Why? Who says you get a vote?”

“I do,” Emma says with a wink. “I mean, if that’s really what you wanna do, then great. But I don’t think it is.”

I groan. “But I don’t know what I really wanna do.”

“And that’s okay.” She raises a finger. “But we do know one thing.”

“Which is?”

“That you don’t want to major in business at the community college.”

I hang my head. “Well, then what?”

“I told you, I don’t know the meaning of life,” Emma says with a shrug. “But we know what you don’t want to do, and that counts for something. So just think on it, okay?”

I nod in defeat. “I can do that. I just...don’t wanna screw everything up, you know?”

Emma nods in understanding. “Take it from me. As long as you’re still breathing, you can screw up and still start over.” She crouches down next to me. “So why not just try anything and everything you ever wanted? Just live...the way you want. And if you wanna go to school later, you always can.”

I study the overachiever. “And this is all coming from the perfectionist, Type-A valedictorian?”

Emma smirks. “I’ve done a lot of thinking over the last couple months. Thinking I should have done a while ago. So do it for me, ok?”

“Well, guess I can’t let you down,” I say, climbing to my feet.

She crosses her arms. “No, you can’t. I won’t stand for it.”

I can’t stifle my laugh. “So stubborn.”

“I get that a lot.”

I take a few steps forward in no particular direction, glancing back at the red-haired girl. How could something so horrible happen to a girl as sweet as her? She’s so quick to offer me a smile, but even I can see the sorrow she’s trying to hide behind her eyes. Yet she’s spent her time tonight comforting and advising me—someone she doesn’t even really know. It’s just so unfair; I can’t wrap my head around it.

“Can...Can I ask you a question?”

She gives me a puzzled look. “I’m the one who asked you to stay and chat. Ask away.”

“What—” The words catch in my throat. “What exactly happened?”

She stares at the ground. “I made a mistake.”

“A mistake?”

She clenches her jaw. “I thought I had enough time to make a turn. But the other car was speeding. And I guess he didn’t see me until it was too late.”

“That’s not your fault.”

Emma sighs deeply. “I froze. I saw he was going to hit me, but it was too late to do anything.

“I’m so sorry, Emma.”

She gives me a sad smile. “It’s okay.”

“Nothing about this is okay.”

“That’s life. Or lack thereof.”

A bit later, we find ourselves sitting on a bench in front of an ancient tree with stretching branches. There’s a brass dedication on the backrest to someone who passed away years ago. The air is clearer between us than it was a moment ago. For her sake, and mine, I try to take our minds off it.

“So, any idea why I’m the only one who can see you?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

I look up at the cloudy night sky. “Maybe we’re spiritually connected or something.”

She eyes me. “What, like soulmates?”

I chuckle. “Man, that’d be unfortunate.”

Her gaze sharpens into a glare. “Excuse you?”

I throw my hands up. “No, I mean...I meet my soulmate two months after she died. That sucks.”

“Think about it from my perspective,” Emma says with a pout.

“...Point taken. Maybe it’s not so bad.”

She rolls her eyes. “Gee, thanks.”

I offer her a smile. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad I can see you.”

She drops her pout. “Me too.”

I check my watch: 3:23 a.m. I try to stifle it, but I yawn. “Getting tired?” Emma asks.

“No.”

She smirks. “You’re a bad liar. You should go get some sleep. I release you from our chat.”

I stare at the girl. I’m missing something. I have to believe that this is more than some coincidence. I’m the only one who can see Emma. I’m here, in this park, on this night, with her, for a reason.

“Not just yet. I still have something I need to do.”

She cocks her head. “And that is?”

“What’s your unfinished business?”

Emma leans her head back, looking to the sky. “You didn’t go to my funeral, right?”

A wave of guilt washes over me. “No. I’m sorry. We had a moment of silence at the school.”

She shakes me off. “It’s okay. You didn’t really know me. It was small.”

“It was?”

“Mostly my parents’ friends, teachers, and other students who felt obligated to go or just wanted to skip class.”

“You didn’t have friends?” I ask.

“Not really,” she admits. “I ditched a lot of social stuff to focus on my studies. I mean, I had friends. Just not close ones.”

I rub my finger across my chin. “So, your unfinished business is to make friends?”

She glances at me. “I don’t think that’s it.”

“Shame. You’re already up one friend tonight.”

Emma gives me a soft grin before her face falls again. “No. I just want to know if it all mattered. That *I* mattered.”

My voice catches at the audacity of her self-doubt. “Of course you mattered.”

“Did I? What did I leave behind?” She gestures at the open air. “A single moment of silence? That’s not even a eulogy—it’s a complete lack of commemoration.”

“It’s...it’s gotta mean more than that. Right?”

Emma wrings her hands. “In 50 years, will anyone remember me? I didn’t even get to graduate.”

“Is that really such a big deal?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I mean, I worked so hard. I would’ve liked to see that through at least.”

I take in my surroundings. My gaze drifts from the play structure, over the open field, to the outdoor stage. It clicks. “Well, if that’s all. I think we can make that happen.” Emma raises an eyebrow as I jump to my feet and rush to my bike and bag. “C’m on.”

Emma stands off to the side while I stand in the center of the park’s outdoor stage. I don’t know how to work the lights, but the clouds have dispersed enough to let the moon illuminate us.

“Dear graduates, faculty, families, and distinguished guests,” I say in my most pompous voice, looking over the empty field where chairs and guests would be in a real graduation, “it is my privilege to welcome you to this graduation ceremony. Today, we celebrate the accomplishments of our brilliant students. Let us reflect on those who supported us and the friendships we made along the way. Those who will undoubtedly leave us with lifelong memories. Who better to

commemorate us than Emma Taylor, our valedictorian? Which basically means she’s better than us.”

“I never said that,” Emma calls out from the side.

“A girl so arrogant,” I say with a sarcastic smirk. “She thinks she can just interrupt our dashing and charismatic master of ceremonies.”

Emma rolls her eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you’re making a scene. Don’t you have a mind-blowing speech to give?”

Emma smiles as she shakes her head. She trades places with me, taking a deep breath and exhaling before the phantom crowd.

“Fellow graduates, today marks a bittersweet moment. We stand at the end of a chapter and the beginning of a new one. One, no doubt, full of twists and turns. No matter how confident we are, we can never truly know what comes next. However, we must trust that our experiences have shaped us for whatever awaits. And while this next stage is daunting, there is something exciting about these unlimited possibilities.”

She steals a glance at me before returning to the imaginary audience.

“These last four years may have dragged on at times, but they were over in the blink of an eye. We had successes and failures, we made mistakes, and formed friendships and memories that we can carry with us into our next stages. I believe I can speak for all of us when I leave you with this simple message: We lived. We loved. We cried. We laughed. We were here. Please, for just a little bit longer, don’t forget us.”

I stare at the girl in awe for a moment, and she looks at me expectantly. I quickly move over to her, holding my diploma that was previously at the bottom of my bag. “I don’t think you’re supposed to upstage the MC like that.”

She grins at me as we switch places again. “It’s not my fault that you didn’t prepare a better speech.”

I shake my head. “It wouldn’t have mattered.” As she gets in place, I turn to the imaginary crowd. “We will now commence our graduation ceremony. I will now call our first and final graduate: Emma Taylor.” She walks across the stage and passes me before turning in my direction. “And with that, you are now graduated,” I say.

She smiles. “Thank you. For all of this.”

“It was the least I could do.”

“You really didn’t have to.”

“But I really wanted to.” We smile at each other. “Ready?” I ask.

“Ready.”

Before I can act, one final thought crosses my mind. “Am I ever going to see you again?”

She mulls over her words. “Well, if time and space are infinite, or there’s reincarnation, or if there is a God...” She trails off, “I hope so.”

“Me too. I’m truly glad I met you.”

“So am I. Don’t you dare forget about me,” she warns.

It’s a needless warning. “Of course I won’t. You matter, Emma. To me, you’ll always matter.”

“Thank you, Chris.”

I reach the diploma toward her, and she wraps her hand around it.

“Congratulations, Emma.” As I let go, the diploma falls to the floor, and my gaze follows. When I look back up, Emma is gone. Vanished into thin air. And I am alone again. I sigh as I lean down to pick up my diploma.

I hop on my bike and ride to nowhere, on a night just like any other. But I’m different somehow, I think. I didn’t find the meaning of life. But maybe I found a reason to keep moving forward—even if I don’t know where I’m going. Wandering, even if aimless, is still movement.

Finally, I start to cry.

She was here. She mattered.



Epiphany Escape

Mel Fleming
digital art

Maya

Cory Panttaja

cw: medical setting, death, cancer

It's been a bit since I've written in this journal, but...if I ever needed it, I need it now. The government put the age at 25, as that's when the brain is fully developed; I'm still 18, but my parents said I get to make the decision. After they had my little brother, Mama and Mom talked. They could barely support us. So now there are two Mamas. They tried to explain what was happening to me. There would be a great fire in a sealed room and out would come two women where one was before. Identical. Both Mama. I know now that it's because they disintegrate the original and make two more. I cried because they were killing my Mama. They stepped out of the machine. I ran and hugged them, one and then the other. They don't remember the disintegration.

My Mamas are more different now, a couple of years in. One plays piano, and the other sleeps in late. But sometimes they still seem like the same person. Sometimes I forget they don't share memories when one will tell me why the other is late. The three had to buy a bigger bed, which we could afford now. We were doing better. But Mom wonders sometimes if she should've been cloned instead when the two look at each other in fear. Maybe someone died that day. But they think they lived, most days. And we survive. It's been good. Until the cancer. Which... yeah. Twenty percent chance of survival. Or zero percent chance.

Enough stalling.

I want to live.

But I also don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

But I want to go to college and laugh again and cry and hold the people I love.

— Okay. Maya 1, May 4th

The cancer is spreading. Mom hugged me when I told her my decision. She's happy. She already has two wives. Mamas are scared. They're trying not to let it show, but they are. The doctors don't know what treatments will work on the cancer, and we only have so much time. Each body's cancer will spread differently. If we make enough of me, one treatment and one luck of the cancer not spreading will let me live. One of me will make it out.

— Bye, Maya 1, May 7th

Hi. I know they gave us numbers. It's a hospital, the computers have to

be able to differentiate us. They're keeping us in the same room for morale for God's sake! How else do they tell us apart? They're not telling me, though. We don't know how to refer to ourselves. It sucks. My bed's second to the end. It is a pretty good room. Just us, a window on one side. Still small, it is a hospital after all. There are ten right now. I wonder if I'm gonna be one of the ones to live. Statistically, no. I won't. I'm sorry Maya 1. I...it has been a month, but I didn't think I could write in the journal. I'm guessing none of us felt like we had the right. I think we haven't diverged yet. So they're thinking this, too. But it's still me who's writing. I guess I'll pick a number.

— Hi, Maya 54, June 2nd

Turns out we all picked 54. Fuck. We're drawing straws now.

— !?, June 4th

Okay, so we're writing in this now? Good. It was weird walking out of the machine. Seeing myself. I'd been in and out of the hospital before, but we got moved here full time after the cloning, so they could monitor which treatments are working on who. The beds are kinda packed in. Sometimes Mamas and Mom visit. Not often. It's hard to watch your daughter die, let alone 10 of us. We're encouraged to walk around outside during part of the day. No pool though. It did rain. We sat there for a while. Well, I did. 37 had to head in, she was coughing, and a couple others followed her back. I don't know who "I" is really. Or who "we" is.

— Maya 48, June 5th

73 is getting sicker now. She can't leave her bed for the walks. We gathered around and played poker with a deck Mom left last time she visited. We always failed at persuading her to play with us back home. She joked about us having someone to play with now. It kinda fell flat. 4 won the game. We were gambling with pillowcases though, so the nurses made her return her winnings. Afterwards we lay in a pile on the linoleum floor around the bed. There was a scuffle about who got to lie on the bed next to 73. She just laughed sadly at it. We're scared. We didn't say any words, but we knew. We know the memories of the decision. We know the future she'll never have. Of the ten futures she might have. We know the dreams of standing on rooftops and swimming in the lake again. Of warm hugs. Of the fact that it might not work. Of the fact that it might. We lay there till the nurses separated us. They're clones, too. They seem happy. Maybe we can be like that.

— Maya 37, June 14th

They said I could keep 54 because I wrote it in the diary and it would be confusing otherwise. 59 and 4 are bedridden now, too. 48 is coughing up blood. I can feel every heartbeat rattle my bones. 91 still moves fine. Maybe she'll make it out.

— Maya 54, June 19th

73 died. I don't... I'm dead. I'll never get to grow up. I'm still here.

— 4, June 28th

We're dropping like flies. 4 died yesterday. They said that there's gonna be another round. We'll go with three digit numbers for them.

— Maya 91, July 5th

They didn't bother to hide the assigned numbers from us this time. Ten of us again. With random three-digit numbers. Different from every other clone of anyone they've ever handled. I can only just hold 907's hand every night across the gap between beds. Maybe she'll make it out. The walks have stopped. The IV's make poker harder, and 4 still won the last game. That's all she is now. The one who won the last game. Mom stopped visiting. One Mama still comes by. She smiles sadly. She holds as many of our hands as she can.

— 332, July 7th

We hold tight when we're allowed to get up. Everything hurts. We started singing randomly yesterday. Just to make something other than the pain. Even writing hurts now. Sorry the entries are getting shorter. The world fades. But I know her thoughts. I'll live.

— 648, July 15th

I woke up and the nurses said we would survive. I looked around the room. 10 beds. 3 beds down sat another. I saw her. She saw me. It was 734.

— 264, July 21st

It would be frivolous to make graves. But we still wanted somewhere to put the flowers. We threw them in the river. I don't know how to mourn. I died.

My friends died. No one died. I laughed with these women. But I knew what they were thinking. We moved as one. And we survived.

— 264, August 10th

264 said one of us should be Maya 1. I don't know. I remember writing the first journal entry. I remember that hope. And she was right. I'm alive. But I'm not Maya 1. 264 doesn't want to be Maya 1 either. We stood on a bridge over the river out of the lake we swam in. Mamas and Mom stood at the bridge behind us holding my little brother. Their daughter survived; they're happy. The flowers float down the river, separating as the current carries them away. I hold 264 close and cry. She knows.

We are not Maya 1. I'm sorry, but you died.

— Maya 734, September 1st

We rode on a boat. We laughed at the water and pushed each other in. We held our friends. We cried for all the me who isn't here. But we are.

— Maya, September 28th



Fare Thee Well

Erin Ohline
mixed media

Oh Susannah

Anna Birchler
cw: implied child murder

Mom found the piano in the attic. It was antique, and covered in dust. It must have been up there for years. According to her, the last time it was ever used was many years ago, when she was just a little girl my age. Mom wanted to bring it downstairs and display it in the living room.

"Think of what everyone will say," she said. "We'll be the talk of the neighborhood!"

"We don't have the space for that," Dad protested. We did, in fact, have the space. The whole dining room was nearly empty after we sold the antique dining table to pay off all the private detectives. Mom told him so.

"Well, it's tacky," he said.

If my little sister Susannah were still around, she would have wanted to keep the piano. She used to take piano lessons in the Summer, and she would have been ecstatic to have her very own to practice with. I voted to keep it in her honor.

Mom was pleased that she won. She liked me when I took her side. She hired big men to carry it downstairs for her, since I was too small and Dad wouldn't touch it. He just grumbled about how the whole thing was a waste of money.

Dad must have hated the piano, or maybe he just hated letting Mom win. When guests came over, he quickly ushered them past it. If anyone asked, "Hey, is that a piano?" He'd change the subject. If anyone asked if he could play, he'd say, "Play what?" When people asked about the odd smell, he'd say there was a burst pipe in the bathroom.

I asked Mom about the smell once.

"See, you're just like your father, you're all turning against me," she said. I dropped it after that.

One day, Dad came up to me and asked if I could hear it, too.

"Hear what?" I'd asked.

"That awful piano," he replied. He swore to God that at night, it would play itself when no one else was awake. Always the same song. *Oh Susannah, don't you cry for me, for I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee.* I'd never heard it, and I told him so. It didn't seem to make him feel better.

Dad must have felt bad for how he treated the piano. One night when I came down for a glass of water, I saw him resting his head on the piano and crying. He asked it to forgive him for hiding it away.

The smell got worse. The piano wasn't drawing in guests like Mom had hoped. If anything, it was scaring them away. But Mom wouldn't let Dad win that easily, and the piano stayed in the dining room.

I heard the song one night when I couldn't sleep. *Oh Susannah, don't you*

cry for me...

I crept downstairs and saw the keys pressing down on their own, just like Dad swore they did. I tiptoed closer for a better look.

The smell at this point was overwhelming. I saw something dark and smelly leaking out from under the lid, and I wondered if something inside was broken. Maybe that's why it kept playing itself like this. I pulled up a chair from the kitchen, stuck my fingers under the lid, and managed to lift it up.

Mom and Dad always told me Susannah had gone somewhere far away and that someday, she'd come back. I had no idea she'd been in there the whole time. I think my screaming woke them up, if Dad even slept at all by that point. Then Mom was screaming too, and pulling me out of there, and soon enough there were more big men in our house, but those men were dressed like police officers. Dad just stood there, quiet and still, tears going down his face like that one night he sat at the piano.

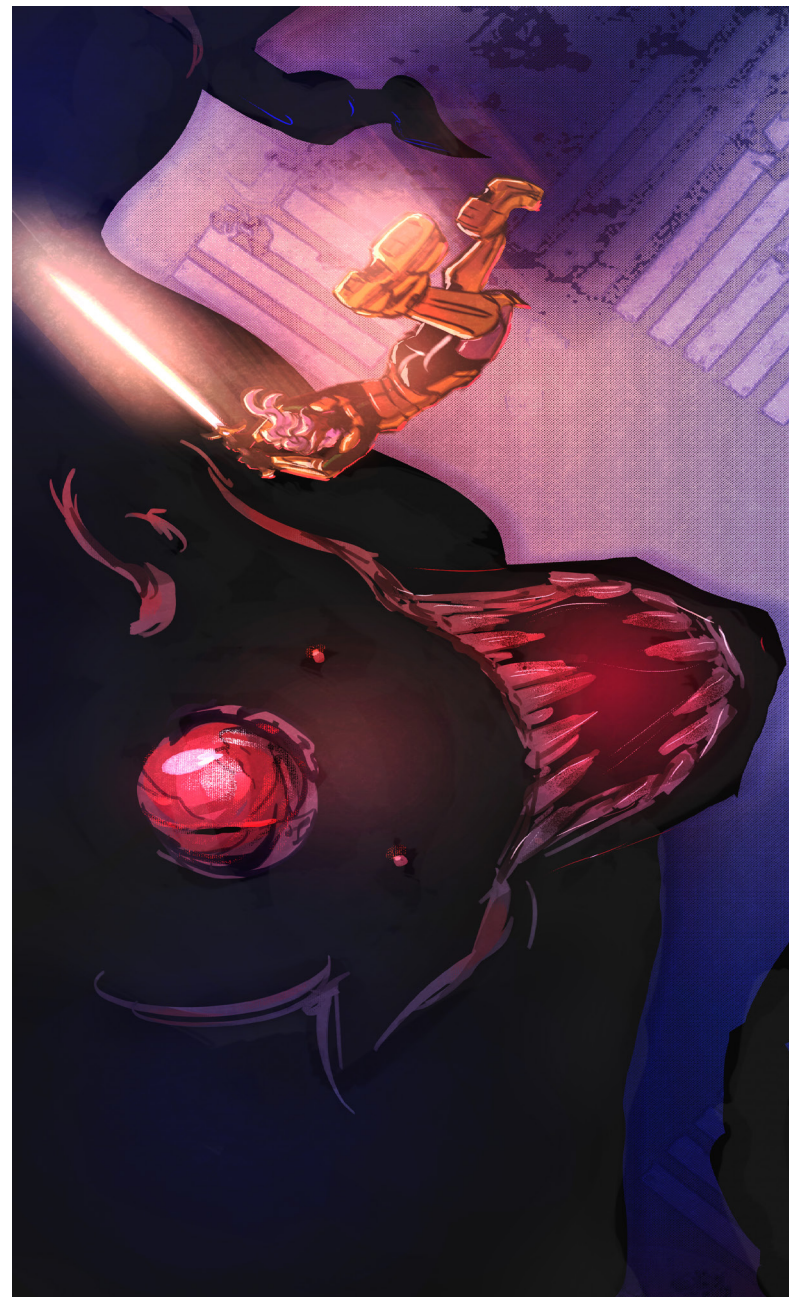
They took Susannah out of the piano. It took a lot of chemicals to get the smell out, too. Mom wouldn't touch the piano or show it off anymore. I think she was waiting for Dad to tell her to get rid of it again. But it was like all the fight went out of him. He barely talked anymore. Just stared at the piano's open lid with this mixture of longing and fear.

Even when Susanna had gone, the piano still played itself all night. Always the same song. Sometimes I heard Dad creeping past my room, like he was going to respond to its call, but he always stopped before he made it down the stairs.

Mom finally admitted defeat. That weekend, we were going to put the piano out front on garbage day.

On Saturday morning, Dad was gone. The piano had finally gone silent. Satisfied. Full. The foul smell had come back.

This time, we didn't need to open the lid to know who was crammed inside.



Shadowfight

Kaia Benedicto
digital art

Wingin' It

Li Hong

cw: descriptions of injury

The only reasonable thing Manok can do while hurtling down through the sky is to not panic.

Magic drips off his bloodied feathers, zipping away into the vast skyline. The sheer force of gravity is enough to rip off any natural traces of it from his skin—not that drawing a protective rune matters once Manok plunges thousands of zilmets into the bubbling volcano below and explodes like fleshy confetti.

Manok's signature phrase pops into his head. The one he says whenever he dives his famous "Badass No Wing Challenge"—the one where the ground nearly smashes his beak before he flaps up and out of danger. "When things go awry, Manok knows what to do." And then, he'd wink to the flapping webcam and unfurl his wings against the imaginary wall. Right, right. Manok *always* knows what to do—a broken wing doesn't mean nothin'.

Manok is not only the coolest daredevil around, but also a talented mangakulam. His viewers don't all know this, but he used to study hella at the Academy. And what's the catch-all solution for a practiced mangakulam like Manok? Casting a rune.

Manok puts a claw to his plumage and scrapes up the dredg-

es of magic like the burnt crust of an ironcast. Barely enough in his body for a final rune, enough for a last shot at living. Manok's claw shakes against his downy stomach, crooked lines hiccuping behind each stroke. Did Manok mention he isn't panicking anymore? Because he definitely isn't. He'd never be that uncool in front of his chat—and he definitely didn't flinch from his busted wing just now, then shift the direction of his teleportation rune. It's all according to plan.

Manok lifts his claw. His organs temporarily crush themselves in a space vacuum as the rune ignites through his plumage, and Manok's *Teleportation* rockets him a thousand zilmets farther up into the air, leaving Manok's beak wide open as the world shrinks instead of sitting solid under his talons. The teleport rune squeals a sad, helium puff, then goes dim. And then, gravity takes over—plunging Manok down as if he's hogtied to an anvil, and leaving behind punctured clouds with a puff of feathers. Manok, like the professional mangakulam stunt performer he is, wastes the remaining oxygen in his air sacs cawing hysterically for his mother hen.

Turns out, Rune Mechanics 101 was correct—practice the basic strokes, and always keep a steady hand. Otherwise, the rune will not accurately activate.

The eager maw of the vol-

cano below widens, and the wind howls louder than a tao slaughterhouse. Wait, has Manok been at this height before? He has, hasn't he? That speck down there is that stupid ass floating weathervane statue—the very bronze beak that tore his wing like wet paper earlier. Manok tips his weight to the right and dives past the statue, his wing throbbing. He hopes that thing's *Levitation* rusts and cracks its brass skull open on the forest floor.

Gold feathers spiral off his head. All that work preening his feathers for the camera, now nothing but stress-induced bald spots. Not that his livestream matters much once he goes splat. Manok swallows the knots stacking in his throat.

Okay. At least *Teleportation* bought him hella time. All that's left is to break the fall. Just gotta ace the landing on his talons.

He already broke his wing, and that was hatchling level shit. Broken legs'll be a breeze. A breeze? More like a demonic gale banging pots and pans in Manok's ear. The one that keeps blaring "LAND DOWN THERE? IN THE ACID VOLCANO? HOLY CRICKETS THIS IS IT—I'M GOING TO DIE."

Tears fly off Manok's face without a chance to run down his beak. Okay, Manok can admit it now. He's panicking. Panicking so hard that the six-cheese tao ravioli in his intestines surges back up. As if the blood and sweat and crusty

magic moisture aren't enough already to season his soon-to-be corpse, vomit will be the little garnish drizzled over a roasted Manok at a high-end restaurant.

What the cluck is Manok even doing here, suspended in air and soon to melt into boiled goop from the grape-flavored acid below, with thousands of alans heckling on their screens?

Well, it all started from the moment he hatched.

Okay—too far.

This whole daredevil gig all *really* started when he got put on probation, then quit his time as a student at the Academy. It isn't Manok's fault that they are sad, clipped-wing sops, all squawking and jealous of the sick air he can catch on his rune-modded scooter-moped-kicks. Plus, the hot alans are always cooing after his tail feathers after a mean plummet. What reason wasn't there to make it a surefire living with a few easy drops?

Other than turning into paste in a volcano basin.

No.

No way.

There isn't a *chance* he'll let those wrinkly, sniveling Academy clucks get the last caw.

Manok pinches his wattle, preventing it from flapping like a surrender flag. Okay, okay. Panic time's over. He *will* break this fall.

First off, he's gotta high-tail it away from the acid. Slow the fall—maybe glide away from the

volcanic crater—toward those fluffy, DNA-looking trees over there. He's gotta spread his wings to catch the wind.

Including the broken one.

Manok grinds his beak together. All in one go. Both wings at once, or else he'll spin out like a tornado and turn into scrambled eggs.

He anchors his gaze onto the acid pit expanding below him—and cuts through the howling air like a guillotine.

Thundering pain splits down the right side of Manok's body, spreading out to the tips of his primary feathers.

White heat flashbangs the back of his eyes like the world's most painful firecrackers lighting in his flesh. Something warm bubbles down his arm.

Air resistance pounds him flat into a pancake, grinding salt into his wounds—or rather—inflaming the crooked angle of Manok's right wing. The winds toss him upwards several zilmeters.

His feathers tremble, each one fighting to keep his wings outstretched. Oh cluck—okay, okay. Good. Now, rather than getting frisbee'd down into acid like runic ash into the dumpster, he's uncontrollably speeding straight into the sea of trees below. Awesome. *Outstanding*. It can't get better than this.

The best-case scenario now is a tree breaks his fall—at most, he'll shatter all the bones in

his legs before being rescued. If he gets rescued. He wonders if the livestream chat told anyone yet. Probably not. Those freaks yank it to stuff like this. A devastatingly handsome alan wracked with pain and sieved into jelly before going splat on the grass? Absolute breeding ground. Maybe he'll get a few pity donations for the incense burning at his funeral.

Not that Manok will die. No, no, he doesn't plan on dying here. Anything but. He'll live through this and prove those clucks wrong about him. Manok will live and leave beaks hanging and cawing in his wake.

The ground torpedoes closer with every blink. *Oh Alan*, what is he doing? Manok thinks harder than he ever has before. How can he break the fall any further—it's already impossible to survive a fall and not be split in two like a wishbone. He needs an answer.

A practiced mangakulam's answer. The radiant spotlight of inspiration swings down onto Manok. That's it, a rune. An impact rune. Like *Negation*—no, no, turning something into nothing requires stupid-big sums of magic.

Manok needs a different rune. *Elevation*? No, getting slingshot upwards is the last problem he needs. *Diffusion*? Sure, Manok can easily survive, but with what Aswang to pick him up and cast *Fusion*? He'll be as sentient as a headless tao. These are too complex.

Manok needs something simple.

Something he learned in

101, years ago. He needs to transfer the force—*Transferral*. Send it into something else—anything, whatever he lands on. It's a basic rune—the framework of *Teleportation*. Which means he can easily reuse the magic lines fading off his feathers. All he's gotta do is wipe off the extra lines, no sweat.

Eight strokes glimmer faintly on his skin. It's a miracle they haven't worn off yet. Sweat flies off as Manok scrubs a diagonal stroke so hard it burns. It isn't coming off. *Holy Alan*—it's suctioned on like that one time he scorched magic to a counter by letting *Ignition* run over the timer.

Wait. How did he get that crust-ed stuff off before his momma hen came over? All he can remember is clucking in circles with some stupid rhyme stuck in his head from class that day, each syllable bouncing along. Then, after that, the residue wiped off easy. How does it go again? Manok knocks the side of his head a couple of times in an attempt to rattle out the abandoned tune. Runes la-uhn? Runes Ah-laan? Runes *a-gone*—that's the rhyme.

Rune's a-gone, poppets pass on, magic fades with lifeblood. Ugh, now it's stuck in his head. That professor was soooo annoying. She never bumped Manok up to that B-. More like *magic-fades-from-your-withered-hen-of-a-sick-mother's-lifeblood*.

Wait, lifeblood—blood? Magic *fades* with a thing of blood?

Manok scrambles in the air, feathers flying out like pillows shredded in a tornado, and reaches for his wounded wing. Every touch shakes it like a fragile tree branch. Jets of pain scorch through Manok's arms. Fresh blood gushes down his claws, smearing into the little scaly like a fragile tree branch. Jets of pain scorch through Manok's arms. Fresh blood gushes down his claws, smearing into the little scaly crevices of his palm.

He groans, his right wing crumpling down, tucking away into his side. The hard lines of green forest and blue sky spin like a roulette wheel. The wind whips up—and all the guts

in Manok's body siphon like they're going through a blender.

He scrapes away the first line of the old rune and leaves behind a sticky swipe. Panic surges up, threatening to explode out of his ears like overpressurized pipes. He paves wet streaks through a maze of plumage, erasing each one. Their shapes and sizes brand his mind, shining beyond the torpedoeing colors.

Manok's breath hitches into a strangled cry as the forest swings into focus. Like he's a gold-feathered Dorito being mercilessly shaken out of the cool ranch sky. His claw cuts into his skin, rattling with trepidation and unbelievable amounts of badass adrenaline, then lifts off for the last time. A searing crackle trails the blood rune magic clinging onto Manok like his latest ex, and the

runes activates with the sensation of a flare gun shot into his gut.

Manok hacks up a pained, victorious caw, “SUCK IT!”

Screw every single moth-eater who ever clapped him on the hill of his wing for dropping out of Rune Mechanics and Engineering because goddammit,

Apparently, that day, a Manananggal hiker happened to pass by a bizarre, half-plucked body—so she left the lower half of her body behind to fly the unconscious Manok over to the nearest hospital in a panic. The Manananggal’s lower half, however, discovered something that was originally underneath Manok. After hitting every branch on the way down, a tao cushioned his fall. Not just any tao, but an especially problematic leader—taos and their bizarre need to elect leaders within leaders—who was directing most of the species to make a petulant demand for more land. Why play a strange game called *politics* when they could just elect the tao with the highest prowess for... whatever taos are so good at (besides becoming excellent raviolis). Anyway, thanks to Manok’s fat ass, such a problem was fixed. A tasteful art exhibit of the featherless bipedal’s cheek-indented skull silenced the entire movement.

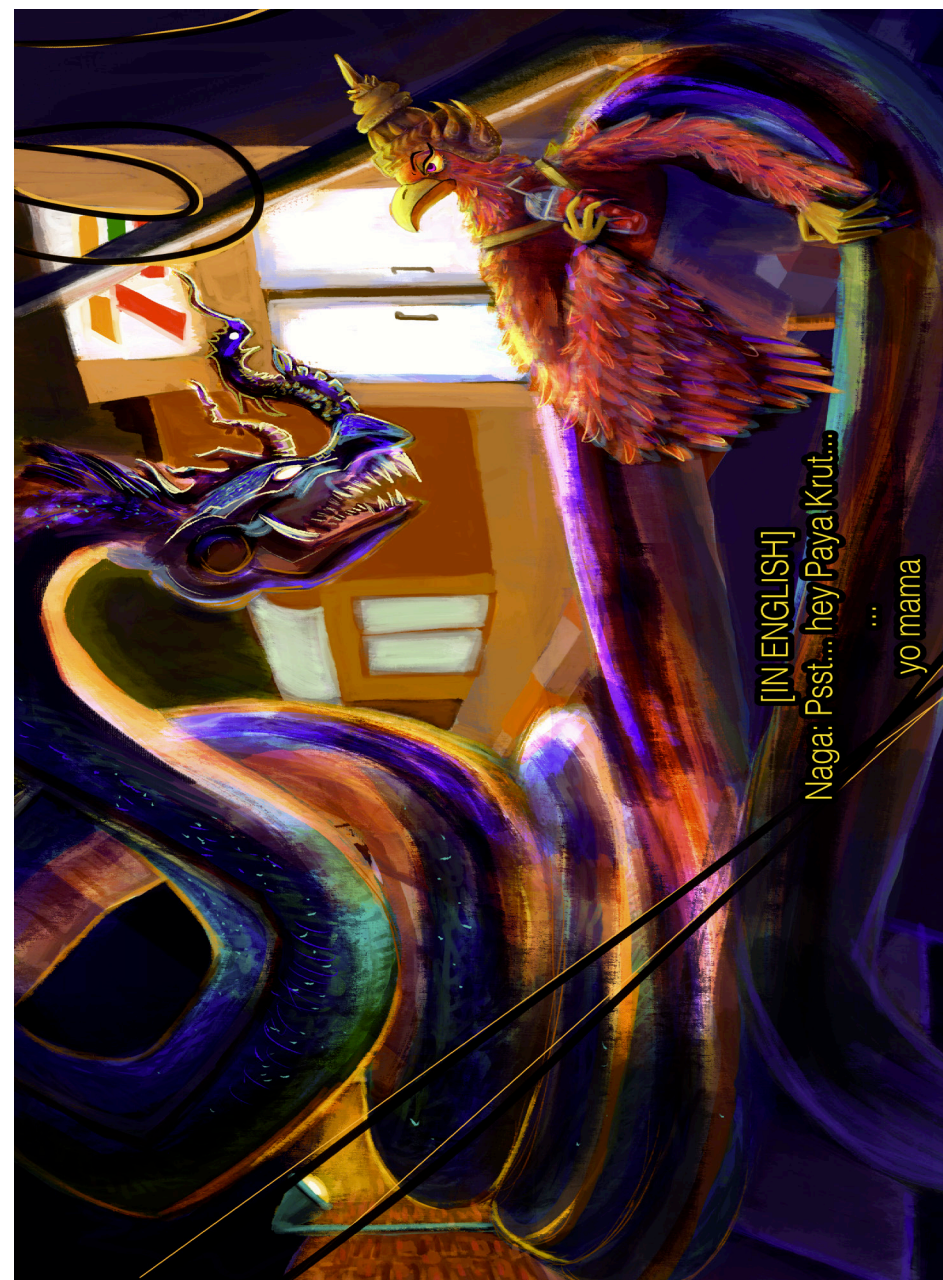
Good riddance, in Manok’s opinion. He always thought it was creepy that they only grew fur out of their skulls. Their fleshy, beakless mouths were the worst part, with horrible bony appendages they called *teeth*. Ugh. Manok was never taking a tao anatomy class again.

The Bureau of Invasive Tao Extermination awarded Manok with an 800 zil yearly grant for his heroism, into which Manok funneled his crippling student debt and re-enrolled in the Academy. He decided to major in Rune Mechanics and Engineering again.

It was probably a good time to brush up on the basics, then catch up to the third years. It’s no biggie—he could crunch all the assignments double time, no sweat.

Manok *was* pretty good at that casting runes thing.

he is a *whizz* at this drawing stuff. And just before the g-force of seven cars tongue him good night camera that’s blocking out the biggest sun. With that, Manok hits his first tree branch with the crunch of a dozen bones compacting together.



Stepbrothers

Fish Young
digital art

Bessie Among the Stars

Selah Sanchez

The land is full of light,
Gray and rounded floating atop the field
Like a distant memory.

It wakes me up and I think it is a star, it must be,
For nothing so bright has ever been seen in the day, save the sun.

Why would a star want to visit?
Perhaps it will speak if I come close and listen.

Then everything I ever knew
That I have ever loved,
The grass that brushed my hide
And sustained me since calthood removed
From under my hooves

And I am gone
But I remain.
And I am different
But I am the same.

Elevated before my herd, before my tall grizzled guardian
Stares shaking, as I am wrapped in cold foreign light.

The light brings pain, I will die, my stomach says so,
Instincts begging to 'look down.'

But down is all I've ever looked.

The star's smooth, solid body glares above my head,
With the black eyes and gray shadows,

And I won't scream, and I can't cry,
And all I can do is wish
For a second to be still.

My legs hang useless,
Far above the fields of green and blue
Bodies that stretch before my sight, houses

Frail like newborn hooves on my beloved soil.
Built on childish thoughts— vestiges of mother's milk.

How strange to see the world beyond yourself,
That has been here all this time
Never to be seen again.
It is beautiful, and it is terrible,
But for a moment at least it is mine.

Goodbye, friends.
I hope the stars are kinder to you.



Into the Portal

Kaia Benedicto
digital art

Flowers

Cory Panttaja
cw: self harm, body horror

You know when you see a rose, and it's still closed, like they sell them, before the flowers are ready, and the outer petals are just a little limp and ugly? Starting to rot. So you peel them off to make it pretty.

My skin itches. No, that's not right. What's under it itches. I want to tear it apart. To be free of the pounding and the itching and the need. I go to the store and buy a scalpel. I run it along the back of my head down to my tailbone. I peel the skin off, breaking the ties of sinew and fat. Ripping the remains as I peel away. I stand in a pool of fat, protein, and blood. I'm free.

You know when you're cooking brussels sprouts, and the surface has been eaten by bugs? And you take the outer layer off, but that just reveals the layers of bug shit underneath?

I want to know them. But when the bugs touch my flesh it burns. I can feel the wet slap of my feet against the ground when I walk. The leaking blood makes it soft. The kind hands of humans make it scream. And I scream. But it still itches. The itch pushes through the screams and demands. So I make the screams louder.

Do you know how to eat an artichoke?

The layers fill my room. At first it was one a day. I planned, I cut, I hung the layer on the wall.

"This time it will be enough," I said. They didn't seem to notice me getting smaller. It kept getting stronger.

I stood on the bank of a river and I tore. I pulled it away. And the next. The people on the road could see, but no one stopped. They had their own flesh to tear. Their own skin suits to make. Eventually, the last layer gave way. The last skin sack came off. It was a little one, no bigger than the hand or foot of the first, so many months ago. The red liquid inside splashed on the ground. I sank through the sand. I met the river. It held me. My parents found the room with the walls coated in castoff flesh. They burned it. The piles of red on the riverbank rotted.

Do you know how to grow roots?

The river held me as it flowed. It met the ocean, and died. Like I had.

The ocean held us. I met a thousand rivers. I became a thousand seas. One day a clam said hello before it died. It had torn both its shells away. I borrowed its final crust. I put it on. I met a drowned sailor. I took his body. I met the last sigh of a tempest. I took her soul. I met the god of the sky before they died. I ate their meat. I met a robot who was scared of flowers. I took its love.

I rose on the isle of Cyprus.

They call me Love.
 They call me War.
 The flesh I chose was not mine. They soothe the itch as their blood
 warms me.
 We made Aphrodite.



The Balladin

Brianna Velez
 digital art

The View From Here

Anna Acosta

Stooped over in a field of mud, on a planet far away from Earth, FXT-045833 digs gentle fingers into the muck, planting row after row of small green stalks. FXT is alone, as much as any robot that is always connected to the Central System is ‘alone.’ Which is to say, not really. Notifications ping softly within its processors, but it only gives them a passing affirmative, barely focused on the contents. The messages are simple things: updates about where each unit is located, where they should go, what fields need attention, etc, etc. Alone, and yet not, not with the steady stream of information it receives.

Still, alone is better than the alternative, though it hardly has time to think that before its systems flash with an upcoming link. FXT doesn’t falter in its movements, but there’s a press of... something. Its thick, rounded fingers jolt just a second before they continue with the motion, smooth as all the others before it.

A human finishes linking to FXT’s cameras, positioned approximately where a human’s eyes would be in its humanoid face. They watch for a moment as it goes about its task, burying the plant roots into the ground before taking another bundle from its other hand and repeating the motion a little further down the row.

“What is it?” the human asks, sounding bored already.

“It is rice,” FXT answers. “Specifically, it’s—” The human logs off, already disinterested. Possibly to reconnect to another robot that has a more interesting view, perhaps of the stars, or something else. FXT isn’t sure what humans find exciting, only that they frequently pop in and out of its own eyes, always leaving after a short time.

It doesn’t mind; it prefers the relative solitude. Humans ask the same questions over and over again and will hardly wait for the answers. They’re always in a hurry, though for what, FXT is never quite sure.

With some other models, humans can even control their movements, like a character in a video game, except with real consequences. However, that kind of experience requires money. The ability to look through a robot’s eyes is free, allowing humans to peek into different worlds and environments, something wholly unlike what they experience day-to-day.

At least, FXT assumes that’s what the appeal is.

Its day continues on as normal—planting rice for humans to eat someday, before it shuffles off towards the charging station. Fortunately, no more humans attempt to connect with it, and the window of time when FXT is required to allow the experience expires. FXT unlinks itself, and as it does so, something loosens in its circuits, something that feels a lot like what it understands to be relief. While having humans connect to its eyes isn’t a struggle it’s... FXT

attempts to find a word.

Annoying, maybe? Not the actual feeling of humans watching itself, but the way humans bounce so quickly in and out of the connection. FXT knows that some robots can get several humans at a time, and some even have humans who come back frequently, chatting with the robot over time and developing a kind of friendship.

While not every robot is allowed to have the ‘Open World’ connection, it’s an easy way for companies to make money. For the robots that do the more interesting things—fixing up spaceships and exploring distant worlds—humans pay money to watch those video streams. And robots that manage to establish friendships with humans will often be sponsored if they ever need repairs.

Friendship.

FXT pauses at the thought.

Perhaps that’s what bothers FXT the most; with its current job, humans are disinterested in making a real kind of connection with FXT itself, and it can admit it has always craved that.

The next day arrives, much like the day before, and the day before that.

FXT works silently, and when its systems ping with an incoming link, it presses the little shoot into the mud a little too deeply. The connection is made, and FXT continues to work.

The human doesn’t speak at first, and FXT doesn’t care to initiate a conversation.

After a few silent minutes pass, the human asks, “Is the mud very soft? Or is it grainy?”

If FXT were walking, it might have stumbled. It has never gotten this question before and it takes a moment to consider its answer. ‘Soft’ is objective, and there is an instinct to ask more questions back, to be thorough in FXT’s understanding so it can give an accurate response, but it knows that humans do not like to be so concrete.

“...It is soft,” it eventually agrees. “Not grainy, no.”

“Mm. It’s rice, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see where you’re at?”

Pausing in its planting, FXT slowly looks up, stands, and does a sweeping pan across the field. Flat greenery as far as the eye can see. Other robots work alongside a few humans.

“Thank you,” the human says when it finishes and resumes its previous task. This has now officially been the longest time FXT has ever had a human

connected with it. “I know it lists the temperature, but is it very muggy, too?”

“Muggy?” FXT repeats, a little distressed at having to repeat the question. It doesn’t want the human to disconnect so soon for its failure to answer promptly.

“Uhh. It’s like when it’s really hot, but the air is wet? So humans sweat a lot more. It makes the heat feel worse than it actually is. Do robots feel any of that?”

“Our systems can get overheated, but it does not feel the same. And my line is more built for heat than some models. What is your name?”

All users are given a randomly generated number; only those who pay money are listed by name.

“It’s Lucy,” she replies. “What’s yours?”

It rattles off its model and serial number. Lucy laughs. “Can I call you FXT?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What do you do when you’re not planting rice?” Lucy asks, and, feeling something like eagerness, FXT starts to explain.

Lucy comes back day after day. FXT is... there are many words to choose from. Elated is the one it likes best.

As they chat, Lucy shares more about herself. She explains that she is immunocompromised—unable to leave her home without fear of getting deadly ill. Lucy frequently connects with various robots and enjoys watching the feeds, but she finds the conversations to be the best part.

“They’re all so different!” Lucy says with a laugh. “You can tell the ones that are used to speaking with humans.” There’s a long pause, as if Lucy is waiting for something.

Today, FXT is repairing some rotten wood in a shed. After nearly a minute and a half of silence, it realizes that Lucy is waiting to be acknowledged.

“Oh?” FXT prods. It’s learning that humans like words like these—more sounds than anything else—to indicate listening.

“Yeah, they use a lot more slang, or maybe just understand it better, I dunno. I enjoy talking with you though! It’s nice. Do you normally not get many people?”

She means humans watching its stream. Lucy has seen people pop in and out before quickly leaving again.

“No. I believe they find my work boring.”

Lucy snorts with amusement.

“Do you like it?”

“I do. I am good at it. And it... satisfies me. Even if it isn’t the most glamorous.”

“The only thing that matters is how you feel about it,” Lucy says firmly. “To be honest, I know that a lot of humans wouldn’t like to do what you do either. But... I find the idea nice. I have a lot of houseplants, but I don’t think it’s the same as actually working with your hands like you do.”

“Is that why you enjoy watching?” it asks.

“Yeah, but also, you talk to me a lot. That’s my favorite part. A lot of robots, they’ll answer you, but you can tell they aren’t really engaged.”

FXT gets a little fizzle of something.

“I enjoy it as well. Your company is highly appreciated.” Lucy gives a laugh at that.

A few weeks into their acquaintance, Lucy makes a request. FXT can find no reason to refuse, so one night, during shut-down hours, it pulls itself up onto the roof of the highest building and opens up its connection. Lucy logs in right away.

“Wow!! The view is so pretty!” she gushes immediately. In the distance, lights of other houses twinkle, like faraway stars. In truth, the view is really not that interesting. Through the dim light of the night, the rice fields look even less appealing than they do in the day, the sun unable to reflect off the water that floods the fields or shine upon the green of the plants that grow here.

However, it is not the landscape that Lucy has requested to see. After a few seconds of letting Lucy settle into the view, FXT tilts its head back slowly.

Lucy gasps. “There’s so *many*.”

There is no moon to lighten the sky, so the brightness of the stars feels almost unreal, shimmering and fantastical. It’s as if someone blew glitter into the air and it stuck, leaving barely any spaces between the glowing pinpricks of light.

“You can hardly see the stars on Earth anymore...” Lucy says, voice hushed. FXT knows this, and that’s why it assumed she had wanted to see this.

“I am sorry you can’t experience it for yourself,” FXT tells her solemnly.

Lucy laughs lowly. “Nah, don’t be. There’s a ton of things I can’t do, but you thought of me for this, right? You had me wait for a certain day. Was it because you knew it would be better to see the stars?” FXT replies in the affirmative—the last few days have been cloudy. “It means a lot. If I got upset at every little thing I can’t do, then I’d just get bogged down by everything. Instead, isn’t it better to enjoy a nice view with a friend?”

Friend. FXT nods, even though it feels a little bad for making the view shake as it does.

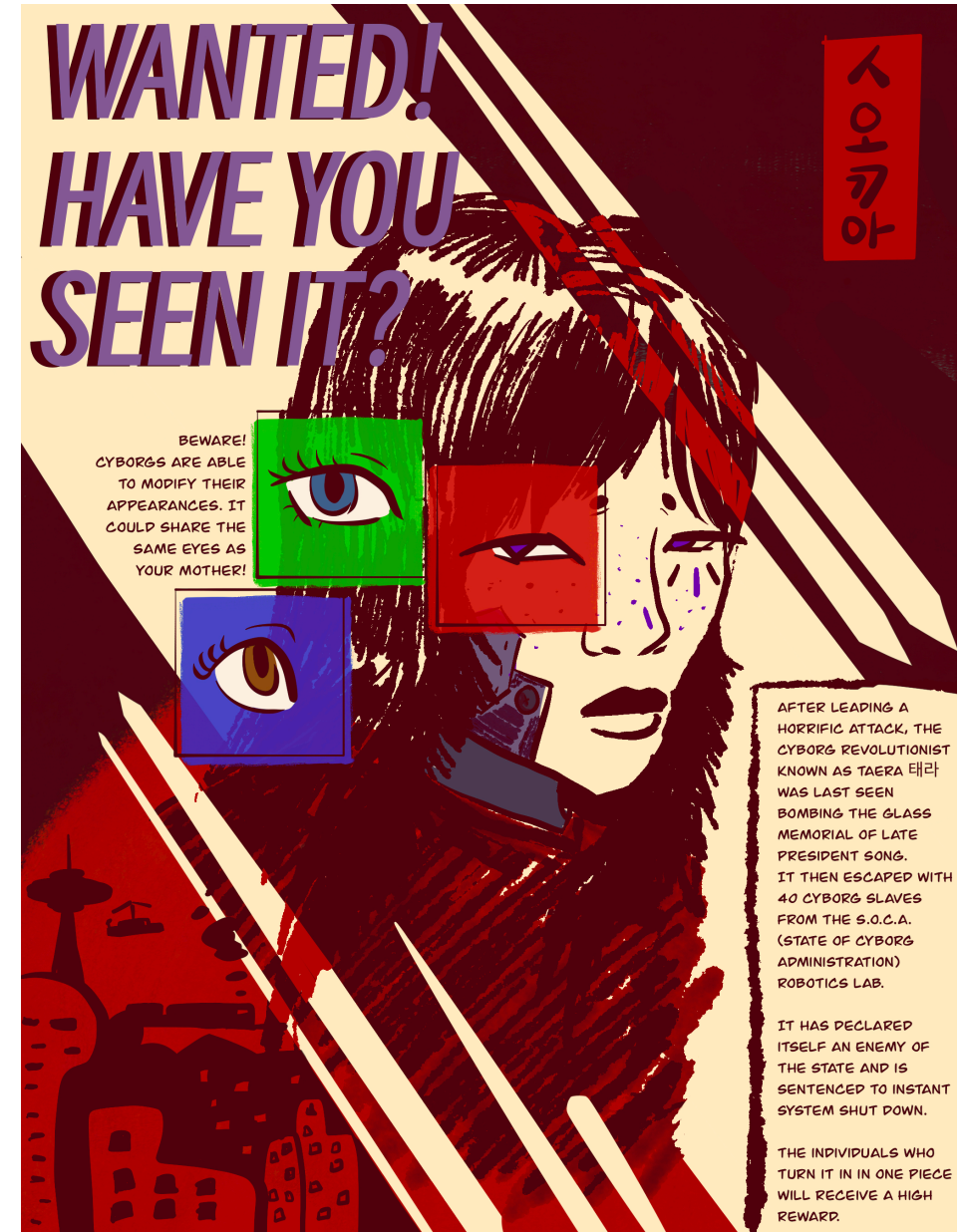
“Yes, you’re right.”

“Besides, there’s stuff *you* can’t do. Like eat s’mores. You don’t know what you’re missing out on.”

“What about a s’more makes it so appealing?”

Lucy lets out a loud groan. “Oh, *man*. It’s so good. Like *extremely* messy but so, so worth it. Okay, so first off, there’s like a ton of textures going on and—”

Slowly, the stars shift across the sky as the planet rotates, and FXT sits and watches them all, listening to the voice of its faraway friend.



Song City Taera 테라 Attack and Revolution Posters

Halle Ahn
digital art



Song City Taera 태라 Attack and Revolution Posters

Halle Ahn
digital art

Electric Angel

Aleksander Lam

You don't make a habit of running lowrider jobs for the Methanes.

Last time you collided, a foot soldier called you a plant and unloaded three shots into your tyres. It took all the force of flicking a fly for you to pull out your katana and slice through his shitty automatic visor, shiny red wires and hard bone polymer spilling out of his hyper-processed skull. Plants have poison, friend. Nothing wrong with keeping your body the old-fashioned way. The worst part of the whole pissing contest was the trip to the Fixer's. 'Charged you a million or two bucks just to jack up your bike and swap out the rims. At the end of the day, you cope by blaming Mr. Red, White, and Blue for the price: a dozen imported parts from Greater Taiwan and a dozen alloys from Sudan Incorporated gouging themselves on Hard. Earned. Californian. Dollar.

Anderson economics. *Andernomics*. Blame him for why you're running this job, transporting several pounds of clear liquid to yuppies in the hills. What's in your trunk isn't your *baby drug* — not like those screenborne highs that the net junkies watch. These are *real* physical drugs that The City's elite inject, *real* particles that soak into your bloodstream, *real* hormones that give your vision that old-timey camera jitter. At least *they* can get away from it all. For the split second the needle kisses a vein, they get to fly out of samsara — like a drone into a lightning storm. You get the privilege of staying sober and awake. Lucky you.

Your handy buzzes in your pocket: area code seven twenty. You know who's calling: capital S. B. Not Southern Baptist — they died out years ago, replaced by The Revelationists — but S.B. for **SuBurbia**, aka...*your mom*.

The call slides to your helmet's corner HUD as a tiny square. You change lanes, whizzing past a 2031 Datsan truck, her outer shell polished to an old-fashioned mirror shine. Inside, the old catalytic purrs and drinks oil, dissimilar to her electric model XYZ neighbours, making her one of the last plants puttering around on the freeways. Her, and *you*.

Southern California is just a hotwire circuit with a hundred optoelectronics blinking on and off, and another hundred thousand traces tangling up into freeways. *You* are a single electron in a sea of a hundred million electrons, swimming around until the whole country is choked up in a ball of its own crumbling infrastructure.

So you slide onto the exit ramp and let Ma go to voicemail.

The transcript starts scrolling in the same corner, the AI reenactment two shades off of your actual mom reading it out loud — it still stumbles over pinyin. “Xiǎo Tian天,” it warbles over the *Xi* and the *an*, “你为什么bu 接wod的 电hua?”

You let it play out and promise yourself you'll call her back later.

"Its only one lifetime out of a million, Ma."

Your engine whines onto a main street, buildings lined up neat and close like die on a semiconductor wafer, and you barely avoid tearing through a joydoll working a corner. City lights give her bright skin a healthy pink glow, and she waves a perfect hand attached to a perfect wrist with perfect peach nails at you, and when she calls after you with a *hey, handsome*, her teeth are lined up like white soldier tombstones.

Never trust someone who looks fully natty. There's only one *real* organic operating in The City — *you*. Other mercenaries see you stacked head to toe in black carbon fibre composites, down to the last toenail. Like a tank crawling through the desert. Underneath it all, you're as vulnerable as a squirrel on the highway. They think you're *compensating* for your real flesh and blood. They call you *plant*.

But you prefer it this way. Better to keep the sanctity of flesh than to become *her*. Under the joydoll's epidermis, there are miles and miles of thermal wires bundled into her nervous system, syn-skin on the surface like a shimmering shield.

Couple minutes to the Seven-two-o's. You contemplate telling Ma you'll swing by — but if she asks what you're doing, there's no promise that the Methane boys won't wire something nasty into the ignition of her burbmobile. So you promise again, silently, you'll go see her.

You turn into a slick alleyway — a shortcut that's more of a hike into one of the yuppie communes. Almost into the hills, now. *San Rafael*.

And then you see him — heavy armour and an oil-sheen claymore stand solid before you. Your bike purrs to a stop.

He is a citadel. Like charcoal smeared onto stained glass.

He turns to you — and like lightning — his weapon streaks and burns through the air so fast a single boot buckle *clicks* open and dangles from your thigh.

You draw your katana. You have a delivery to make, goddamnit, and no wannabe street samurai is getting in your way.

Neither of you move.

Then you do. Two flashes of light slamming into each other with the true *zing* of hybrid metals, helmets like rams' horns — bat swung into a ball — and you have *never felt more alive*. Maybe you're both more creature than man — two crustaceans hiding inside obsidian polymer shells, claws cracking against one another.

In a shining arc of swordsmanship, you jut your elbow into his face shield, praying that carbon fibre isn't a lie, and my *god*, it works, and a crack shudders into the dark glass of his helmet.

His pupils are dark and small, and just for a fraction of a second, when they meet your own data visor, they **widen** — and you see a piece of The City's madness streaking through his brain, synapses exploding in a society built from hard light, neurons sweet from adrenaline. The air slows to a syrupy colloid.

In this city, in this lifetime — you and he are the same. Two hulking pieces of meat splattering onto cement walls, then condensing into a body that'll do it all over again, just to feel the wind slice through your nano-weave gloves.

"All natural. Fully organic. Just. Like. You," you breathe.

You see his nostrils flare with recognition, and his helmet deconstructs, black panels peeling themselves off his face. You inhale.

Pools of purple highlight his cheekbones, neon seeping under ebony skin. White braids frame his eyes. Like thin doves perching on a bundle of wires.

He's beautiful.

He mimes at you to take off your helmet. Then your visor. Then he sheathes his sword. You think, maybe, that Gabriel and Raphael and Azrael have nothing on this guy. *Your* angel, bathed in corporate blues and pinks and carrying a claymore that strikes like heaven.

"You're the Methane courier," he states. It's not a question. He never asks questions. You nod.

"You're *sedating* them." It's an accusation.

Again, you nod.

You have to. Have to keep them happy. Keep the masses happy. Keep Ozempic and Botox and a dozen other things running through their systems and let America lull you fast to sleep while the planet keeps spinning and spinning. Don't think about transcendence, don't think about anything besides the *here* and *now* and *credits*, because what happens when the sun dips below the tarmac and goes around? The illusion of The Everglowing City starts to fray, bits and pieces of it shucking off in the daylight until... until....

"You're not made for this," he concludes, voice soft. He steps closer.

His hands are suddenly warm on your chapped face.

You remember, once, that you saw a real angel. It made a nest out of shredded takeout containers and electrical wire and cooed softly into your window. You remember that you liked to poke the glass and watch its feathers ripple in the wind. You remember it dying when a delivery drone completed its job.

He is that angel. Reborn anew. You know it.

"All natural," he whispers.

"Fully organic..." His thumb grazes your cheek—

"...Just us." He says it like a prayer.

The beeps and hums and crawling green text that you've lived off of for so long fail you.

Nothing has ever prepared you for this. Like a screen tearing, the world liquefies into watercolour as he takes your wrist and slides his hand under your nano-weave — your tendons mold themselves to fit under the ridges of his fingertips.

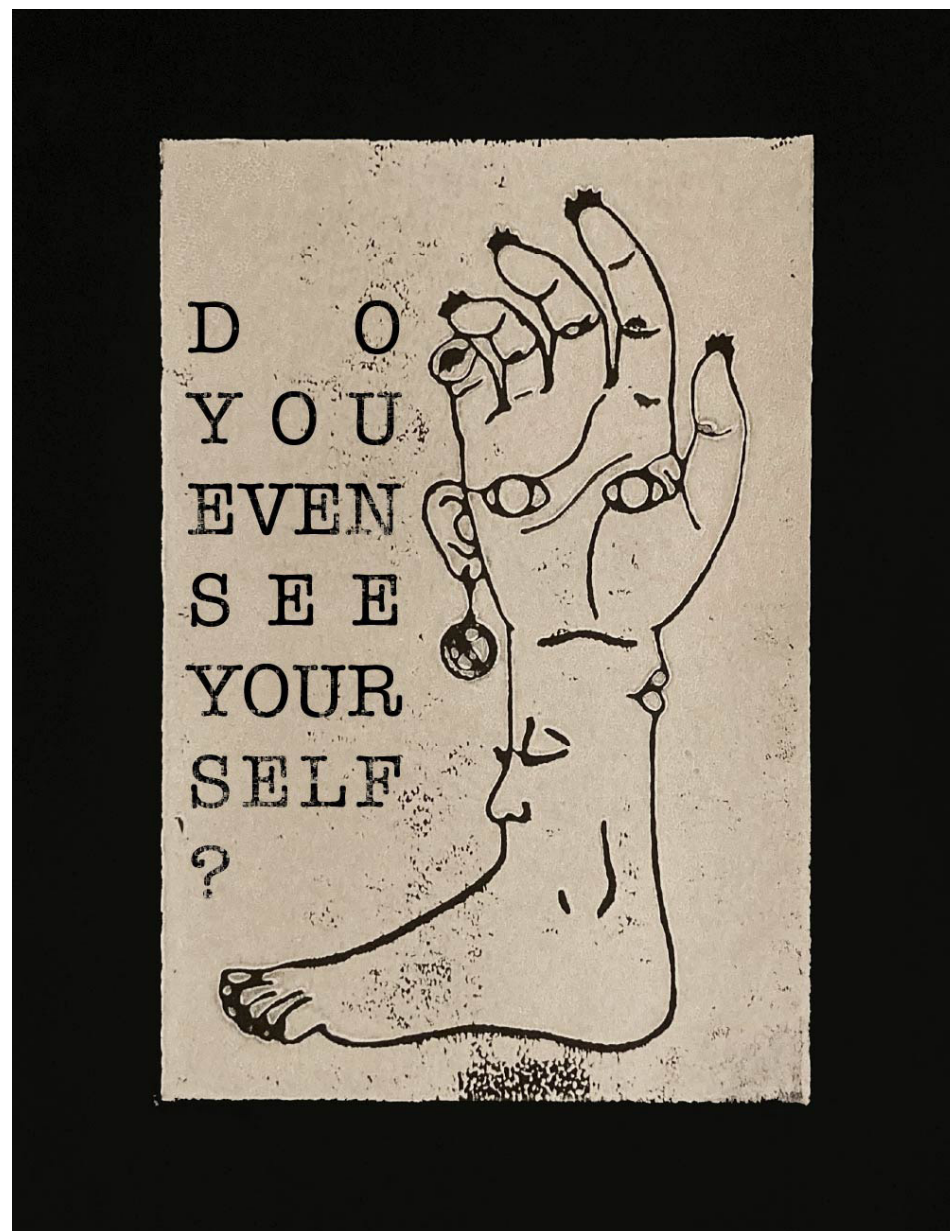
"We have to leave," you manage to croak out. "You have to *take me*." It's necrotic. It's cell death. It's waking up in a different year, in a different lifetime, and still breathing — oxygen oxidising into your body and burning slowly in your lungs until they finally give out. There are other ways to live. You know it.

"I know," he murmurs. "I've been waiting. Waiting for someone like me." His lips part. "I can take us there," he says. "To *Nirvana*."

You've never prayed before. You don't make a habit of it. Last time you tried, a billboard outside crashed into static, screen regurgitating bits and pieces of wholesale cryptocurrency. You took that as a sign from god.

But now...you close your eyes. You bow your head. *God* is listening. God is here, holding your hand.

He presses a small enamel knife into your palm. It's warm. You think about how bodies radiate heat and how His life is heavy in your hand. He folds you gently into his wings. There's a whine like a thousand electric nightingales singing you to sleep, and His light crawls over your eyes and nose and mouth and hollows out a cavern in your body, and you feel His blood on your neck and His chest on yours, and you're oozing, oozing onto the pavement and into the gutter, and whatever was left of your small, blinking life is freed.



The New Human Body

Erin Ohline
mixed media

Beyond Eternity

Alex Lark

A decision. It had been a long time since Traveler had made one of those. Traveler's eyes opened. The white sun shone above, illuminating the landscape with its constant glow. Warmth soaked into Traveler's bones. Water lapped at the riverbank, mud squelching each time it pulled back. An aytia grew nearby, vast feelers slowly reaching towards the sky. Next to Traveler, Flit's four wings shimmered golden-brown as they shifted in its sleep.

A decision. Yes. Something small, a tendril of thought, of desire, in the back of Traveler's mind. It longed for something more. But what? There was nothing more. Traveler's eyes slipped shut.

Judging by the rise and fall of the riverbank, several cycles passed before Traveler next stirred. A torabar the length of Traveler's legs poked at the mud nearby, softly huffing. It was Garsoth, according to the red-brown coat of feathers on its flank. Garsoth had surely undergone several Evolutions since Traveler had last seen it, but it looked largely the same.

With another huff, the torabar's thick snout lifted from the mud and pointed towards the aytia. Rising on its back four legs, Garsoth pulled on the river vine's closest feeler with its frontmost paws. It munched on the leaf for a few minutes before settling down and curling up under the vine's trunk.

Teal light melted from the broken leaf, flowing like steam off water. It billowed about, nebulous, before coalescing into veins spreading from the inside of the feeler. More light melted to fill in the gaps between veins, and with each passing moment, it thickened, growing more opaque until the leaf was whole. The new leaf was almost identical to the original, if not slightly bigger.

Despite the Partial Evolution, the leaf barely changed. The aytia didn't seem to mind being eaten. Probably the reason the torabar remained one of the only non-photosynthesizing species on the planet. Why change, why Evolve, when there was no reason to? Why change in a world of perfection?

So why did a part of Traveler want to change? To move?

A decision. It seemed to be building, slowly. A vague concept, gradually solidifying. The sun sank below the horizon, light fading as Garsoth snored softly nearby. The lorias unfurled as their petals began to glow in shades of blues, whites, and pinks along the riverbank, mirroring the emerging stars. Beautiful arms of the Andromeda appeared above, shimmering with billions of suns, as the hum of awakening capsies filled the air. The insects fluttered to life, six wings blurring around them as their antenna sought out the glowing plants.

Traveler watched them, counting, as they played in the lorias' nectar. How long would it take to catalog every single one? A few hundred thousand cycles, probably. A nice diversion, if that's what Traveler wished.

Was that what Traveler wished? After all, it was just a small drop in

11.8 trillion cycles.

At one point during the night, Flit looked up, regarding Traveler with those intelligent orange eyes. It chose not to speak. The cosmos rotated overhead, and the white sun crept over the southern horizon, marking the dawn of a new Revolution. The lorias dimmed, the capsies settled, and Garsoth raised its head. Slowly, Traveler stood. It wasn't a decision, not really. But it was something. Traveler would do what Traveler did best: walk.

"Moving on?" Flit asked, revealing the green streak of leaves down its spine as it stretched. With a hop, it lifted into the air before perching on Traveler's shoulder.

"I suppose."

"Where to now?"

Traveler shrugged, causing Flit to chirp in annoyance.

"I feel it too, you know," Flit said.

Traveler moved away from the riverbank, away from Garsoth, away from the aytia, picking a direction at random and walking towards the horizon.

Flit continued, "This... desire, to do something. To do anything really. I don't know the word for it."

"There isn't one." Traveler shrugged again.

Slowly, continuously, Traveler walked. Mud turned to hard-packed earth. Hard-packed earth turned to sand. Day turned into night, night back into day. Revolutions passed, and Revolutions turned into Sequences. The seasons changed, and Sequences turned into Cycles. Endless monotony, broken only by occasional conversations with Flit.

"Have you decided yet?" Flit asked, flapping in front of Traveler's face. "Where we're going?"

"Not yet. These things take time," Traveler replied, stepping to the side.

"We've been walking for over a cycle already. A half-dozen more or so and I'll be ready for an Evolution, and you look ready anytime now," Flit said, following to once again block Traveler's view.

"You're still young," Traveler said. This time, it closed its eyes and walked forward. Traveler had walked the planet enough to know the landscape's exact shape.

"And you're old, *really* old. But I know you feel the same way. Don't tell me you don't feel this desire to do something more than just walk until the sun burns out," said Flit.

Traveler didn't respond.

"Besides, you're the one who created me."

Traveler stopped. "I had Squall's Reincarnation Chip..."

"Would any of the others have done what you did?" Flit asked, "Would they have created me? Even Nurture couldn't understand your decision, and it's the most active Sentient I've met besides you."

No. No they wouldn't. Traveler continued forward, lost in thought. Why had Traveler used the Reincarnation Chip? Squall was Gone. Truly Gone. Not like the deaths ordinary creatures experienced, or the ancients did before the invention of the Reincarnation Chip.

Traveler absently raised a hand to its head, where the main body of the Reincarnation Chip resided. Of course, it was far too small to feel from the outside. Lost in thought, Traveler didn't notice that a soft-shelled carnacize had wandered across the path.

Flit chirped in alarm, but it was too late. The carnacize squished underfoot, and Traveler hurriedly stepped back.

The insect's soft brown shell fractured, its ear stalks twitching in the sand before going still. Then it began to glow. Teal light coalesced, filling the cracks in its shell, running along its legs and ear stalks, swelling to form thick thunderclouds of light coating the creature. It remained there for a moment, the light undulating across the dead carnacize. After a moment, the essence stilled, then sank into the insect and disappeared.

Full Evolution complete, the carnacize opened its eyes, raised its ear stalks, and tapped a tentative claw against its hard red shell. Newly reborn, the insect took a moment to examine Traveler and Flit, then continued on its way.

A wave of guilt washed over Traveler. What if the creature had had friends? A life of its own? It wouldn't remember them now. Traveler continued on the endless walk as Flit settled back on its shoulder.

The insect had died. Memories, personality, life itself—wiped away in a burst of light. The other Sentients understood death; most had seen the Last Generation Evolve for the final time, their Reincarnation Chips calibrating during that final Full Evolution.

Traveler passed a thorwalk stretching high into the sky, roots holding pools of water beneath its shade, outstretched limbs forming platforms where sand had settled over the ages. A few of the other Sentients weren't far from here. Were Traveler to turn, it could reach them within a cycle.

Traveler continued on. The others knew death, but they didn't understand how it felt for Squall to be Gone. Squall had raised Traveler, back when those sorts of things had been necessary.

Squall never got its Chip. It was an accident, an explosion with the Temporal Bubbles. Squall, inventor of the Bubbles, was atomized, reduced to dust. Frozen in a pocket of collapsing time until there was nothing left. Squall never got that final Full Evolution, that final light. No more traces of it walked the planet, except in the memories Traveler carried.

Eventually, Traveler's muscles weakened, bones weary. It was time. Traveler laid down to die. Stars sparked into existence, the arms of the Andromeda galaxy reaching out to hug Traveler in its body's final moments. It began. Power, energy, light, flowing

into Traveler as if from Eternity itself. For one single, infinite moment, time spun out before Traveler, millions of possibilities swirling throughout its being. Millions of tiny changes. Millions of decisions. The flood of light ceased. It settled, taking shape, becoming Traveler. In turn, Traveler became the light.

The Reincarnation Chip thrummed to life in Traveler's head, restoring memories, personality, and Traveler itself. A Limited Evolution, only made possible by the Reincarnation Chips that all Sentients, plus Flit, held. Strength returned to Traveler's muscles. Warmth returned to Traveler's bones. Vision returned to Traveler's eyes, showing the cosmos above.

And finally, a part of Traveler understood. It wasn't a decision, but it was a path to one. Traveler stood, body fresh, and turned.

"Oh?" Flit asked with excitement, "Are we finally doing something?"

"We're going to see Nurture."

Traveler ran a hand through its coat, now more leaf than fur. The leaves brought a new buzz of energy as they drew power from the sun, urging Traveler forward.

The desert turned to forest, the forest to mountains, and the mountains to sea. Flit, body growing old, Evolved underwater. Together, they traversed the ocean, Traveler walking along its floor, Flit swimming besides with its new gills and sleeker form. The fish gave them odd looks as they passed by.

They emerged onto land, waves lapping against the shore. Trees ringed the island, the brightly colored leaves in shapes and sizes seen nowhere else on the planet. Blue-violet grass poked through the earth, growing denser as they moved inland.

Nurture waved to them as they approached. "Traveler, Flit, what brings you by?"

It stood by a tree with several thick, orange leaves weighing down the ends of its branches. The Sentient looked roughly the same as the last time Traveler had seen it: Tall, with large eyes and thick fur that matched the color of the grass. It had a long, straight claw on the end of both pointer fingers.

"I need advice," Traveler responded. "Nurture, are you content here? To sit and watch the grass grow? To watch time pass you by?"

"Yes, I am. I'm at peace. Why would I not be?" Nurture asked.

"I don't know. Doesn't it feel like there should be something to do?"

Nurture turned toward the nearest of those thick leaves, cutting it from the branch and catching it before it fell to the ground. Teal light flowed along the branch, and the odd leaf reformed, the stem thicker this time.

Nurture took a bite of the leaf, then offered it to Traveler and Flit.

"Oh!" Flit exclaimed after poking at it with its beak. "It's sweet. This is good!"

Traveler tried it, nodding at the flavor.

"I have plenty to do right here, should I wish," Nurture replied.

“That’s not what I mean,” Traveler said, “Shouldn’t there be something more... important?”

“There isn’t. Every problem has been solved. Every question answered in the time of the Last Generation. This,” Nurture gestured around, “Eternity—is a gift they gave us. It’s ours to enjoy.”

“And someone like Slumber? Buried beneath a dozen lengths of soil, not having moved in a million cycles. Is that truly fulfilling?”

“To Slumber, yes. For me, fulfillment is guiding the plants as they grow.”

Traveler looked towards the sky. “And what if I do need something else? What if I’m not content?”

Nurture was silent for a while, so long that Flit flew off to investigate the other plants nearby.

Finally, as the sun was sinking over the horizon, it replied, “I... can’t say I understand the feeling. Maybe you should talk to Tinker. It’s been working on something new lately.”

“I’d been thinking of going there anyway,” Traveler nodded. It began to turn.

“But,” Nurture said, “I will say this: this time we have, it’s a gift. It’s up to you to decide what to do with it. The rest of us will be here when you do.”

Traveler left, Flit catching up after a chirped goodbye to Nurture. Nurture was right. The others weren’t going anywhere. They’d be here, waiting for Traveler.

“So, this Tinker. What should I expect?” Flit asked.

“Actually, I think you’ll like it.” Traveler said, watching the stars emerge.

“That’s surprising. Now we have to go see it!”

They were quiet for a moment. Flit looked at Traveler, then to the sky, then back at Traveler.

“You know,” Flit said, “If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, it’s a good decision.”

Traveler nodded. The decision wasn’t final, but it was close.

Leaving the island, they crossed back through the sea, then the other direction across the continent. Twenty cycles later, they arrived at their destination on the opposite coast.

A city, abandoned, rising from the flat landscape, height rivaling even the great thorwalk trees. Eon, the city of the Last Generation, was once home to all five hundred Sentients on the planet. Now, only kept from sinking into the earth by Preserver. They weren’t here for Preserver, though.

Passing through the city, Traveler and Flit continued onwards, Flit admiring the ancient city. A few massive buildings appeared in the distance, even bigger than those in Eon. These were home to much of the Last Generation’s most advanced technology, as well as their old Voyage Ships. Strangely, the air shimmered between them and the buildings, flickering in an arc across the air.

As they approached, the flickering moved towards them. It continued until they were almost upon it, then Traveler blinked and the flickering stopped. An odd creature stood in front of them.

Flit made a surprised noise and leaped off Traveler’s shoulder.

“Traveler!” the creature said. “And you must be Flit!”

Traveler examined it for a moment. It looked vaguely like one of the other Sentients, but was oddly built, with a puff of curly black fur growing from its head and bright violet eyes.

“Tinker?”

The creature, Tinker, nodded. “It’s been a long time! Though longer for me, hence the different appearance.”

“Longer for you?” Flit asked. “How does that work?”

Tinker smiled at Flit. “Wow, Traveler really did use the Reincarnation Chip on you. I wasn’t sure if I believed the rumors. How does it feel to be alive?”

“Slow.”

Tinker laughed. “Does that make you one of us then, a Sentient? Of course, the rest of us developed intelligence long *before* the use of the Reincarnation Chips.”

“Tinker,” Traveler asked, “How have you changed so much?”

“Turns out Evolution still has some plans for us. Besides, I am roughly a hundred million cycles older than you now.”

“That flickering,” Traveler said, an uncomfortable feeling forming in its stomach, “It was a Temporal Bubble, wasn’t it? Why?”

Tinker began walking backward towards the cluster of buildings, gesturing for them to follow. In the distance, a lone torabar chewed at one of the shrubs dotting the landscape.

“As you know, the Bubbles were originally designed for the Voyage ships.” Tinker said, “Of course, those were abandoned after the accident. Now most of the others think everything is fine, that everything is solved, but I’ve realized that there *is* still something left to fix.” Tinker grew animated, a new light entering its eyes. “Others think that we have forever, but that’s not strictly true. We only have 11.8 trillion cycles. Only 11.8 trillion cycles left of peace. Then the sun goes dim, and we have to move the planet to a new home. Everything changes.”

“And you can stop it?” Traveler asked.

Tinker nodded again. “I’ve already expanded a Temporal Bubble’s radius to twenty measures. It may take another billion cycles, but I will expand it to cover the planet. Then, truly, we’ll have Eternity.”

Traveler shared a look with Flit, whose expression, for once, was serious. Traveler had its reservations about Temporal Bubbles, but if anyone could get them working to that extent, it was Tinker. That wasn’t the issue.

“You’re serious?” Traveler asked.

“Of course,” Tinker frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be? Finally, we can all

truly rest. No more problems. Forever.”

And with that, the last piece in Traveler’s mind clicked into place. A small part of Traveler had been waiting, always, for the sun to burn out. For something to change. For something new. Traveler took a breath and made its decision.

“Then I,” Traveler said, “will be leaving.”

Tinker paused. “Leaving?”

“The planet.”

“What?!” Tinker took a step back, “You’re serious? Are you really planning to *leave*?”

“I am. I’ve made my decision. It’s not forever, but I am leaving.”

Tinker took a long moment to think. “I... maybe I understand. If this is really what you want, then I won’t stop you.”

Traveler turned to Flit. “Flit, what do you want to do? You can stay here, with Tinker, with Nurture, with anyone or no one; it’s up to you. Or you can come with me.”

Flit hopped on Traveler’s shoulder. “Stay here? For what, forever? I can’t even comprehend that. I’m coming with you.”

Traveler smiled. “Then I’m glad to have you.”

A short time later, Traveler and Flit boarded one of the five hundred Voyage Ships, one for each Sentient, meant for the eventual evacuation of the planet. The Last Generation had later decided to just move the planet itself instead. Now, even that would never be necessary.

This ship was labeled Squall. It rumbled beneath them and, with a bright flash of green, took off into the sky.

The sky grew dark as they left, stars appearing in the billions without the atmosphere to block their light. Any of them were Traveler’s and Flit’s to explore. Now, the universe was theirs to travel.

They were leaving everything either of them had ever known behind, but it would always be there waiting for them. And ahead—ahead waited everything they could ever know.

Traveler took one last glance back as behind them, the planet, Eternity, faded into the blackness.

Contributors

Anna Acosta *The View From Here* has a Master's in Literature and Writing and is currently earning her Master's in Fine Arts for Creative Writing. She has an interest in science fiction writing, with a particular focus on androids/robots. She's been published in *318 Journal*, *Easterday Editorial*, and various zines.

Halle Ahn *Song City Taera* 태라 *Revolution Posters* loves *Ouroboros* very much—that is explicitly why they are trusting the team with these other-dimensional artifacts acquired by chasing a tardy, white rabbit that turned out to have an on/off switch. Now if you'll excuse her, Halle has to go buy AA batteries now.

Kaia Benedicto *Shadowfight & Into The Portal* is a sophomore 2D Animation major who likes to draw and write about her OCs and geek out about Transformers.

Anna Birchler (she/her) *Oh Susannah* is a senior 2D Animation major. Her biggest passions in life are horror, lesbians, and writing lesbians into horror stories. She is a proud mother of many haunted dolls.

Mel Fleming *Epiphany Escape* Creative Producing freshman, class of 2029. I have been drawing since I was very little and have worked to improve my skills and meaning in every piece. I have won multiple Scholastic Art and Writing Awards in high school and aim to keep making art in college.

Li Hong *Wingin' It* is just a little kitty in a big, big world of writing. He is also Vietnamese American, and as such, acknowledges space for Filipino and Filipino American writers to express their culture—as his Filipino mythology-inspired short story, *Wingin' It* does not hold the same authority that Filipino writers have. His intentions for this piece are to write a fun story that brings visibility and combines mythology with modern fantasy.

Aleksander Lam (he/him) *Electric Angel* is a Gotham native and runs a fan blog stalking Batman. In his downtime, he likes to fall into vats of acid and have his memory reset by another flashpoint event.

Alex Lark *Beyond Eternity* senior, Data Science major. I took some inspiration for this piece from Doctor Who, plus my own magic system that's somewhat featured in this story. I also just wanted to explore a world where time is almost eternal, and its effects on a character that wants to change when that change will never be driven by time.

Jo Martinez (she/her) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a senior from the Communication major and Graphic Design minor. She dreams about writing and writes about her dreams (and sometimes tries to doodle in between)!

Erin Ohline (she/her) *Fare Thee Well & The New Human Body* I am a first-year BFA in Art student with an interest in exploring personal experiences and a love for the human form.

Cory Panttaja (they/them) *Flowers & Maya* Cory is a sophomore Physics and Philosophy major. They write to help understand the complicated emotions that arise from being alive, and thinking about the way the world works. They paint to help make their world more beautiful and express those same emotions and tell those same stories.

David Prue *Unfinished Business* Hi! I'm David Prue. I am currently in the first year of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at Chapman University. I have a broad interest in fiction and screenwriting, and many of my works contain a speculative spin. All of my art is created to answer or explore a question that is deeply personal to me and my life. Usually, I aim to explore themes of relationships through loss and grief, while also focusing on hope and perseverance.

Selah Sanchez (she/her) *Bessie Among the Stars* is a junior year Creative Writing BFA major. She is a woman of few spoken words and far too many written ones. You can find her work in Chapman's *Ouroboros*, *Calliope*, and *Rooted In: Rite*. When she's not writing or doing college, she's contemplating rats, baking, or finding strange and wonderful places to explore (in her mind or real life). Despite everything, she is happy to be here.

Ameen Veach *The Thesean* is a Creative Writing and Education major from Morgan Hill, California. Ameen's personal favorite stories to write are ones that examine complicated social and political situations through the lens of one or more characters. The inspiration for this piece came from a long night of brainstorming an alternate timeline with a close and brilliant friend.

Brianna (Bri) Velez (she/her) *The Balladin* is a junior Creative Writing major who enjoys all things fantasy and fantasy-adjacent. She loves playing DnD and other TTRPGs with her friends, as evident in her art piece for this issue. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that it's the closest thing she can get to being a sword-slashing, cloak-billowing, running-through-the-forest-on-a-quest-to-save-the-kingdom type of badass, or maybe she just likes the pretty dice.

Fish Young (they/them) *She Didn't Answer the Question & Stepbrothers* is a novelty artist, sci-fi podcaster and comic author. They also have experience in sound design, music production, and electronic synthesis. Fish graduated with a Bachelor's in English Literature spring '25, and is looking for disability-friendly creative work. Their latest project is a comic series set in a post-human-apocalypse future. Robots inherit the Earth and inadvertently redo the Wild West... but for robots... cowboy robots. The story follows two sisters and an elderly cowboy, as they trek through the West and explore their mortality. For more information or more art, find the website on the Instagram @fisheyeyoung

Ouroboros Magazine Masthead

Executive Committee

Editor-in-Chief Selah Sanchez is a woman of few spoken words and too many written ones. She's also a sophomore Creative Writing major. Her pastimes besides writing are baking, reading, and singing to herself. Her writing is a jumpy, fickle creature—much like herself—mostly settling on fantasy and magical realism. When not writing or doing college, she's taking a stroll, contemplating rats, or both. She's happy to be here, and hopes you are too.

I have seen **Co-Managing Editor Ameen Veach** in the shallow blinking of the southern star, and in the dead of the winds that howl around the wildflowers beneath it. He skulks there, that dread thing, festering all sick and pallid. Where he lurks there is terror, and of that terror, that which stalks the night...
He also helped make this magazine!

Co-Managing Editor & Art Director Brianna Velez is a junior currently majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Latinx and Latin American Studies. She has been with *Ouroboros Magazine* since Spring 2023 and has loved every minute of it! So far she has been an editor, a designer, Art Director, a sea creature, a robot, a god, a backstabber, a monster and Co-Managing Editor. She's ready to transform once again into any new roles this wonderful magazine requires of her!

Social Media Manager Casey Shimazu is a Graphic Design major. With a love for design, photography, and film, they're truly passionate about all forms of art. They enjoy the simple things in life like foam soap, small spoons, and cute keychains. When they aren't saving Gotham City from danger, they can be found rewatching the same TV shows or eating shrimp chips.

Editorial Board

& Selah Sanchez & Brianna Velez & Ameen Veach & Raquel Head & Dani Torres & Em Baltz & Lian Alba

Fiction Editor Tim Deutschman is a junior pursuing his Creative Writing major. He enjoys spending his time hanging out with friends and playing story-rich video games. He is a big fan of anything that has to do with superheroes, mainly Spider-Man. He also enjoys stand-up comedy. His goal in life is to create a superhero universe that spreads across different art forms in order to show that a person's differences are what makes them extraordinary.

Fiction Editor Ella Murry is a sophomore Creative Writing major and Honors minor from Portland, Oregon. She's been reading and writing for as long as she can remember and is obsessed with fantasy stories and Disney! She also loves singing, acting, and drawing—anything creative, really. She hopes to publish best-selling novels one day but enjoys editing others' stories for now.

Fiction Editor Avery Marks is a Creative Writing major from Happy Valley, Oregon, and yes, it is fairly happy there with the gorgeous greenery and sweater weather. While she appreciates the California weather for aesthetic outdoor cafe reading and writing, she prefers cozing up inside with hot tea or iced (yes iced I'm from the PNW) coffee as it rains. She's excited to be on the team and to continue to grow creatively outside of her passion for the written word while supporting other creatives. A couple of her favorite pieces within *Ouroboros*' genres are *The Alchemist* and "Lab-yrinth."

Fiction Editor Charlot Born is a junior Creative Writing student from Seattle, Washington. When she's not on campus participating in the numerous organizations she doesn't have time for, Charlot spends her remaining free time dancing on the fine line that is creativity and delusion. She enjoys swimming whenever and wherever she can, and dreaming of the perfect willow tree to read beneath. Also, she occasionally likes to write, and by occasionally, I mean she's woken up in the middle of the night with an unrelenting urge to put pen to paper.

Fiction Editor Jasmine Flanders is a junior Creative Writing and Technical Theatre major from Monterey, California (the location of the aquarium in that Star Trek movie where there are whales in space). She loves nothing more than helping stories come together on page or onstage and is so excited to be part of such an amazing team. When she's not sitting in a dark room writing or in a dark corner backstage, she can be found drinking an overpriced latte and obsessing over something stupid.

Fiction Editor Julian Romano is a snooty film critic-to-be who, each night, dreams of constructing a plastic robot army for goals that seem unknowable to the masses. He also enjoys to read, to dabble in the occasional video game, and to write (naturally!), and is working on a novel!

Fiction Editor Li Hong is just a little kitty in a big, big speculative world.

Visual Art Editor Kaia Benedicto is a sophomore 2D Animation major who loves anything that has to do with sci-fi or action. She originally found her love for art in comics, but it later branched out to film. If Kaia isn't busy animating away in the DMAC, she likes to write and illustrate comics, watch films, swim, or take an excursion to get coffee.

Art & Design Board

& Brianna Velez & Casey Shimazu

Designer Raquel Head is a senior in college with a love of reading, writing, and art. She is oftentimes found lost in the clouds or plotting out her next big story or campaign! Also, probably dreaming of centaurs or fairies.

Designer Lian Alba is a Creative Writing major on his second year at Chapman. He enjoys reading and occasionally, when he has good ideas, writes stories of his own. He also enjoys drawing and taking nature walks—though somebody should probably give him some bug repellent. When his head isn't buried in a book or he's isn't drawing, you'll find him rewatching his favorite shows and movies, listening to music, or calculating how to fit more books onto his makeshift bookshelf.

Like a mystical wizard who lives up in a tower, **Designer Em Baltz**—junior Creative Writing major and Game Development Programming and VFX double minor—dreams of far away worlds and seeks to make potions in their dreams. As both an author and an artist, they've always created fantastical worlds through literary and digital arts, and hope in the future to become a published author with a book that includes a map one can pull out and follow along to. They are grateful to be on the *Ouroboros* team and looks forward to more fun speculative adventures."

Designer Dani Torres is an eldritch horror entity and illustrator/writer hailing from a cozy town in the underworld. If that wasn't terrifying enough for you, she's also a Business major. Besides illustrating for *Ouroboros*, she can be found at your local antique mall or at a cafe dreaming of having her own animated show.

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