
THE DAPHNE REVIEW

WINTER 2025



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“Daphne Review”
“Winter 2025”

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Dear Readers,

I have a confession. I've always hated baking.

I crave cookies, beseech bread, and pursue pie, but much to my tastebuds chagrin, combining the forces of unbaked flour, preheated oven, and me is a recipe for disaster. Of course, this is okay. People are allowed to appreciate the products and not the production. The trouble is, I *should* like baking. I love making meals that require physical effort. The work of chopping and preparing vegetables and crumbling pre-pressed tofu helps me channel intent into my meal (can you taste the love, babe?).

The truth is my aversion to baking comes down to a lack of control. I can reel back in an over-soy sauced stir fry, but once the oven doors close, there's no going back.

The works in this edition of The Daphne Review explore this theme of going back. What if we could turn back the clocks on that extra pat of butter you added to the cookies or the one-too-many stirs on the brownies? The young writers in this edition muse on a perceived moment when everything changed. They look back at the overuse of attention-grabbing first sentences, at the time when a relationship changed, at a chair that misses the man who once sat there.

These works remind us that hindsight is a double-edged sword. It allows us to reflect on what came before and find ways to grow from it, but it also forces us to grapple with what cannot be undone. The pieces in this edition do not offer tidy solutions—they exist in the realities that have already been baked, showing us that we need to accept the circumstances to grow from what has risen, burned, or fallen flat.

As you read, I encourage you to let go of the need to fix or rewind and instead embrace what these young writers offer: an honest, often tender reflection on what it means to move forward with what's left behind. After all, the beauty of baking, and of life, lies in the process—not in perfection.

With gratitude,

N.L. Sweeney
Fiction Editor

Winter 2025

To the ghost under my bed

Drift, night is liquid
diffusing through my crenated skin
schmaltzy is the art of silent drowning
I hear you marmoris, gnaw
the edges of reality.
I am a gossamer star, collapsing inwards
fingers comb the marrow
of my bones, turning my spine
In a moonlit staircase
Descend
warp my heart into a star
destined to be lost in the crevices of space
and burst into a thousand moths
Time ripples in its wake
Eons of trembling stillness
Pacific moons eclipse

my bed sinks, a depression
I am dark fluid
in the folds of my thalamus
my periocular skin, burning
Build a cathedral of nothingness.
in space I once occupied
gullible echoes
calligraphed with phantasms
of butchered psyches
frosty calls of transience
hammer reverberations of sanity
I fish light in the void, freeze
my epithelium pounding crimson
elasticizing my heartbeat
I am a frozen cadaver of dreams

Alaspure_Meheru

Stars of Yesterday

“Up,” you said, “look up.”

Dutifully, I followed your finger with my eyes and heard, as always, what you had to say.

“That’s our future right there.” You had begun to trace the countless stars scattered amongst the folds of the night sky, but I wasn’t looking anymore. Instead, I turned my head to watch you lying in the wet grass beside me, tracing the constellations mapped in your eyes.

You were wrong, anyway, but I didn’t realize it then. The stars aren’t our future. Each time we watched the stars together, we were gazing into our past. We didn’t realize that what we were seeing was light that had started traveling years ago and had just now reached us. The stars would have changed since then. If someone had told us this on that day, we could have cared less. But now, it serves as a painful reminder...

“C’mon.” I tugged at your arm. “Let’s go inside.” I managed to tear your gaze away from the sky long enough for us to tumble into your house, still wiping grass off each other’s soaked backs.

The next morning, I was hastily shoved out your door instead of enjoying the usual lazy pancake breakfast.

“My father is taking me to the city,” you explained. “He says I have ‘things to learn’ about the ‘real life.’”

“Why can’t you learn them here?”

You just shrugged, so I didn’t push it.

“Six months,” you said.

We looked at each other in an uncomfortable silence—or rather, I looked at you and you looked at the worm inching its way out of the grass. I nudged it back in with my foot. Things are meant to stay as they are. As they were always meant to be.

“I should go then.” I gave you a hasty hug and kiss on the cheek before stumbling down the hill leading to the forest, away from your house. I didn’t look back. Did you? When you passed the little post in the dirt with a sun bleached, tattered red cloth waving in the wind that marked the edge of our countryside, did you look back?

Every day while you were gone, I visited that post and wavered at its edge. I’d never been any farther, and I assumed that when we were ready to face the bold new world, we’d cross that line together. I guess you just got ready faster than I did. Everyday, my urge to take that one step past the post increased, but I never did. I told myself it’s because one of us needed to stay behind to guard the world as we knew it, but deep down, I just wasn’t ready for change.

One particular day, I was sitting in the vast fields of wheat, watching the stars alone. I knew I would itch afterwards, and my mother would yell more than usual, but I stayed. The creek gurgled along nearby,

accompanying a symphony of crickets and rustling leaves. Fighting to keep my eyes open, I watched the bright dots of light littering the sky, just to make sure they didn't change while I wasn't watching. I fell asleep.

You came back six months later, just like you promised, with a new gleam in your eye. You smelled like cold, hard dreams of success. I smelled the same as I always had.

"It's so much better there!" Your arms waved animatedly and you stumbled over your words, your mouth moving faster than your brain. I was stuck in slow motion, unable to understand your zeal for ideas so foreign.

I waited for you to finish before hesitantly asking, "Can you see the stars?"

"What?" You paused mid motion as if your thoughts were rearranging themselves. You blinked once, twice, thrice. "No, there's too much light and smog." Seeing my face fall, you added, "But if you look from a distance, the city lights look like stars. You must see it!"

But I didn't want to see it. Your words fed the bitterness in my mouth and it grew like a monster in the dark—the monsters you always protected me from—and it spread to my heart and mind. For once, I didn't want to hear what you had to say, and the words that used to dance on your tongue and float in the air around us were now demons that buzzed near my ears and reddened my vision at the edges.

"I need to go home," I said. I didn't go home. Instead, I went down to the creek where my sorrows mingled with the water, which was slightly saltier when I left.

The smell of lavender and wheat, wet earth on rainy days, your hair after you'd just washed it, clear winter nights with bright stars—it all went by too fast. Salty creeks, cold hands, distant eyes, greed, and ambitions last forever. Your face is nothing more than the scraps of scattered memories that I grasp at, and I can no longer count the years since you left to chase your big city dreams. I've outlasted your mother and father, my own parents, the faded red cloth on the post. Will I outlive the stars as well? Can I outrun my own past?

The nights I am able, I shuffle the few steps to the porch and sit, with much creaking from my joints, on the chair we used to share. Some nights, I see what I have left of your face in the stars. It took me decades, but I think I finally realize that's all you are. As you predicted, you joined the stars chasing ambitions I couldn't understand, leaving just hints of yourself behind. Your voice whispers to me in the night breeze, your fingers reach from the overgrown grass to tickle my ankles, and your eyes twinkle in the stars. And finally, I've learned to leave you with my stars, with my past.

Bidani_Diya

Bridge of Planks Divided

A bridge of fifty planks—
aligned—
a sturdy walkway
over raging waters, sinking fate,
to new land—
beyond dismay.

A plank—
one—
two fall astray,
adding to a fracture,
making the sturdy shake.
Left to right swings the structure,
bringing crossing legs to tremble—
give way.

A skeleton bridge of united planks—
divided by gaps—
open space,
warns in whispers, “Stay.”
“Ropes too untwined,
no strength to carry feet away.”
Each movement
bids farewell to another plank,
further sealing—
an isolated dismay.

Michael Roque

The Chair

Enveloped in the delicate ballet of morning light, my dad's chair, dressed in a palette of soft whites and light blues, rests calmly. For years, it had been a silent observer of our almost nomadic lifestyle. But now, it holds within its frame memories of a presence admired from miles away.

The room the chair calls home is adorned with maps of the Middle East and France, each contouring a testament to the world my dad has traversed in his lifetime. Bach and Beethoven dance through the air like forgotten whispers. A picture of him as a boy, mounted proudly on a camel, bears witness to his adventures in faraway lands that he still pursues— a snapshot of a life well-lived. His “treasure box,” as he calls it, is stowed away on his favorite shelf next to books about George Kennan, his hero, and Henry Kissinger, who he tells me is a complicated man.

In the center of the room is a rich Middle Eastern rug. The rug is pillowed by delicate threads of our dog's hair and faint footprints that remain everlasting from late-night laughs and lectures about continuous tensions in Armenia, his ancestral home. My dad's chair is positioned strategically upon this rug, facing the window that frames a world of memories. It was as though my dad had choreographed this arrangement, ensuring he would never stray too far from the world he loved.

The chair, with its soft cushion and firm armrests, has cradled him through countless hours of thought. I often found him there, gazing out the window at the overgrown garden he loves so much, with a book lying flat upon his desk, waiting to be picked up again. Mountains of books and piles of unorganized files, his constant companions, surrounded the chair— a testament to his insatiable thirst for a nuanced understanding of the world we live in.

Then there was the crease.

A subtle indentation in the cushion of his chair, a physical manifestation of his presence. It was a mark that lasted for mere days before slowly rising, like a ghost returning to its delicate realm, only to reappear each time he sat. It was a reminder that wherever the chair was, there was my dad, his essence imprinted upon the very fabric.

But now, the crease is no more; too much time has passed. The crease, that tangible connection to his presence, has vanished. In its place, there is only the empty chair, a silent witness to the void left by his absence. Since he left, the morning light doesn't dance as it once did, and the chair's soft blue has begun yearning for the warm presence it once caressed. Once vocal in their silent eloquence, the books have lost their allure— faded into a quiet melancholy.

As I sit in the empty chair, I feel the weight of his absence, yet the echoes of his spirit linger, subtle but unyielding.

Djerejian_Isabel

“Between Sips and Silence”

The cupboard doors shroud my world in darkness as a sliver of light shines on my round handle. I sit and look around at my fellow mugs, cups and plates as they all eagerly wait their turn to be used. It's a privilege to be chosen, to be used by our owner; a privilege I was never granted. I pictured what it might be like to cradle warmth, to feel the steady rhythm of breaths and sips, to know the tender touch of a human's lips. As I witnessed cup after cup, mug after mug get selected and used, that hope that I would join them one day slowly faded as I accepted my fate of being stuck in this dreary, wet, slightly moldy cupboard my whole life.

That is why, when the doors slowly opened and the once small gap was widened, I didn't expect much, until I felt a firm, calloused hand grip my handle. A sort of pride filled my chest as I was finally chosen by my owner, feeling a sense of divinity take over. As I was lifted into the air, I couldn't believe how bright the world was, as I stared at the empty space where I planned to rot. My owner gently placed me onto the gray marble counter, looking at me with weary, swollen eyes as red tinted the rim of their waterline. As I sat on the counter, I caught glimpses of my owner staring blankly out the window, their eyes following something out of my vision. For a moment, their shoulders seemed to fold in on themselves, as if the weight of the morning light pressing through the curtains was far too much for them to bear. For the first time, I was able to see the kitchen in its entirety.

The only times I ever saw the kitchen were the small glimpses I would take as my owner opened and closed the cupboard throughout the day. Tears started welling up in my eyes as the morning light seeped through the sheer white linen curtain just above the small stainless steel sink. The kitchen was messier than I had imagined, with cleaning utensils piling in the sink, and smaller too with it approximately only fitting maybe three people at a time scuffing the eggshell coloured tiles. There was an orangish sticky grease that clung to what was probably once a pearly white tiled backwash, oozing with neglect and abuse.

My owner came back with what I assumed was a kettle containing scorching hot water, with an empty stare, a juxtaposition between their benign touch. A half-empty bottle of cold medicine sat on the counter beside a crumpled grocery receipt. As they poured the boiling water, their movements were slow, deliberate, like those described in scripture, dripping with sacredness. The fear of the hot water boiling my sides slowly dissipated as the hot liquid warmed each crevice, slowly rising, until it reached the top; I reveled in its sticky warmth as I allowed it to soothe me. I then felt a bag of tea bob softly up and down as it occasionally grazed the sides of my body. I was almost lost in the new stimulating sensation that I must have missed when my owner lifted me into the air and languidly opened their lips and pressed them onto my rim; their hands were gentle, almost reverent. Feeling the pressure of my owner's mouth felt odd. The new found wetness where their lips were had left me uncomfortable, a passing chill breeze further emphasizing the lingering emptiness of a place once filled with warmth. My owner's hands, calloused and trembling, gripped me tighter than I expected, as if trying to hold on to something slipping away. I noticed the frayed cuffs of their sweater, the stains that dotted its edges. I wondered if they saw something in me that they needed—something warm, steady, and untouched by the world's filthiness; to them, I was pure. I

wondered what thoughts brewed behind those swollen, sleepless eyes—thoughts they poured out in quiet, uneven breaths between each sip of tea.

As my owner finished their drink, caressing my handle and side so gently almost as if touching me the wrong way would shatter me into a million pieces. But when the tea was gone, the softness disappeared as they walked towards the sink and turned on the tap. Water submerged my entire body, rushing like daggers, quickly filling up the sink. I fought for my life as I bobbed in and out of the water the sink continued to fill up with, sirens blaring in my head. Just as I finally reached the surface, the owner grabbed me, their once tender demeanor now foreign, and harshly rubbed soap all over my skin with a prickly ball, feeling as though they might break skin and I would bleed out and die in this damned sink. I wondered if this was my creator's plan, to grant me warmth only to strip it away with the icy rush of water. Was this their divine will, or a lapse in their omniscience? They scrubbed my sides with a desperate fervor, as if trying to wash away not just the stains but something invisible clinging to their skin. Water was then washed over me, more painful than before, as the extreme pressure dug holes into my ceramic skin. They then lifted me once more and for a moment I felt free again; how I yearned for that dreary cupboard shrouded in darkness to keep me safe again!

The owner then flipped me upside down on a plastic rack and I thanked whatever divine creature saved me as I felt void of any emotion. The affection and safety I once felt only minutes prior seemed like a distant memory. As I shivered from the cold water slicing my wet and vulnerable raw skin, I longed for the warmth of the hot water to wash over me again or the firmness of the owner's unyielding grip to piece me together again. I stayed on that rack, barely alive, the entire morning.

As the sun began to set, painting the kitchen in vibrant hues of pink and orange, the vivid array of colors seemed to mock how disillusioned I had become. When I was finally placed back in my dreary cupboard, I felt different, as though I outgrew it—like an old coat that no longer fit, squeezing on my sides. I stared at the mugs and cups and plates that surrounded me, once unified by the collective feeling of being unwanted, and felt like I no longer belonged. Physically, I was indistinguishable from their polished handles and ceramic sheen that coated, yet I was different, as though I was beaming with a wisdom I recognized from the many used cups before me; that to be chosen is to be changed, and to be changed is to be set apart, forever lingering between warmth and silence.

Duale_Aliya

Eternal Law

My nothingness stretches
between two ends:
the ache of absence,
the numbness of becoming—
a line from a poem
recited by the executioner.

I wear my grief,
pass my hand through my hair
and kiss the mouth of wretchedness
before I taste the tart wine
offered by pale angels.

The corrosive blade
cleaves the breezy day
slaying my once-valiant soul.
A marred version of me
welcomes this transformation.

Strange it is to see you—
waiting, with no words to say,
your eyes fixed on the wall.
You know I can't console you.
My chain is too short.

Lefcothea Maria

Good Little Girl

they place you on a pedestal
 it's a girl! they cry
your mother calls you sayang girl
 sweet girl
you were a good little girl,
they said
now you've grown
you grew taller and your hips widened and your body began to bleed
your mother looked at you sweetly
you're a woman now she said
but all you could see was the blood gushing out of yourself
 rusty-
 a betrayal of your body
all around you
they smile with rosy cheeks and shining lips
 you meekly touch your colorless cheeks
 and pallid, dry lips
all around you
they boast their full chests and curvy hips
 you hunch over in shame-
 hiding your sunken chest
 you check your clothes-
 make sure every inch of your skin is covered
all around you
they dance on the pedestal you were placed upon
the one that now towers over you
 you hunch into the shadows
 hide the ugly mess that you are
the papers say f for female
but you see f for failure
 the papers say f for female
 but you see f for fake
you are not enough you will never be enough so
take this plasticky mess called skin
 scarred and scabbed from eons of pain
take these bones
 brittle from eons of hiding

take these lungs
 papery thin from eons of suffocating
they can take your everything—
but they will never
 break you down
to nothing

The 4 Seasons of Us

(Spring)

Our love was a quiet love
Just like the flowers that began to bloom around us
We stole shy glances at each other
Then began to share meek touches
They all saw it before we did—
We denied our love with flushed cheeks
“Best friends,” we called it
And nothing more.

(Summer)

Our love was a sweet love
Just like the strawberry juice dribbling down our chins
The flowers were in full bloom,
And so were we.
We held hands and hugged and loved
They all rolled their eyes at us with a smile—
But that was okay
Because we knew that we had something special.

(Autumn)

Our love was a mellow love
Just like the music we listened to together
We were like the falling leaves—
Wandering, but wandering together.

I leaned my head on your shoulder

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Balloon Play

red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet—
i'm a rainbow balloon plumped with just a breath
with each sigh to lift a world.
side by side with clouds, i rise, floating free
borne on cold winds, sweet winds, wild gusts, thrills.

have you felt it—that rush of lifting off,
leaving earth small & hazy below,
mountains flattening out like crumpled sheets?

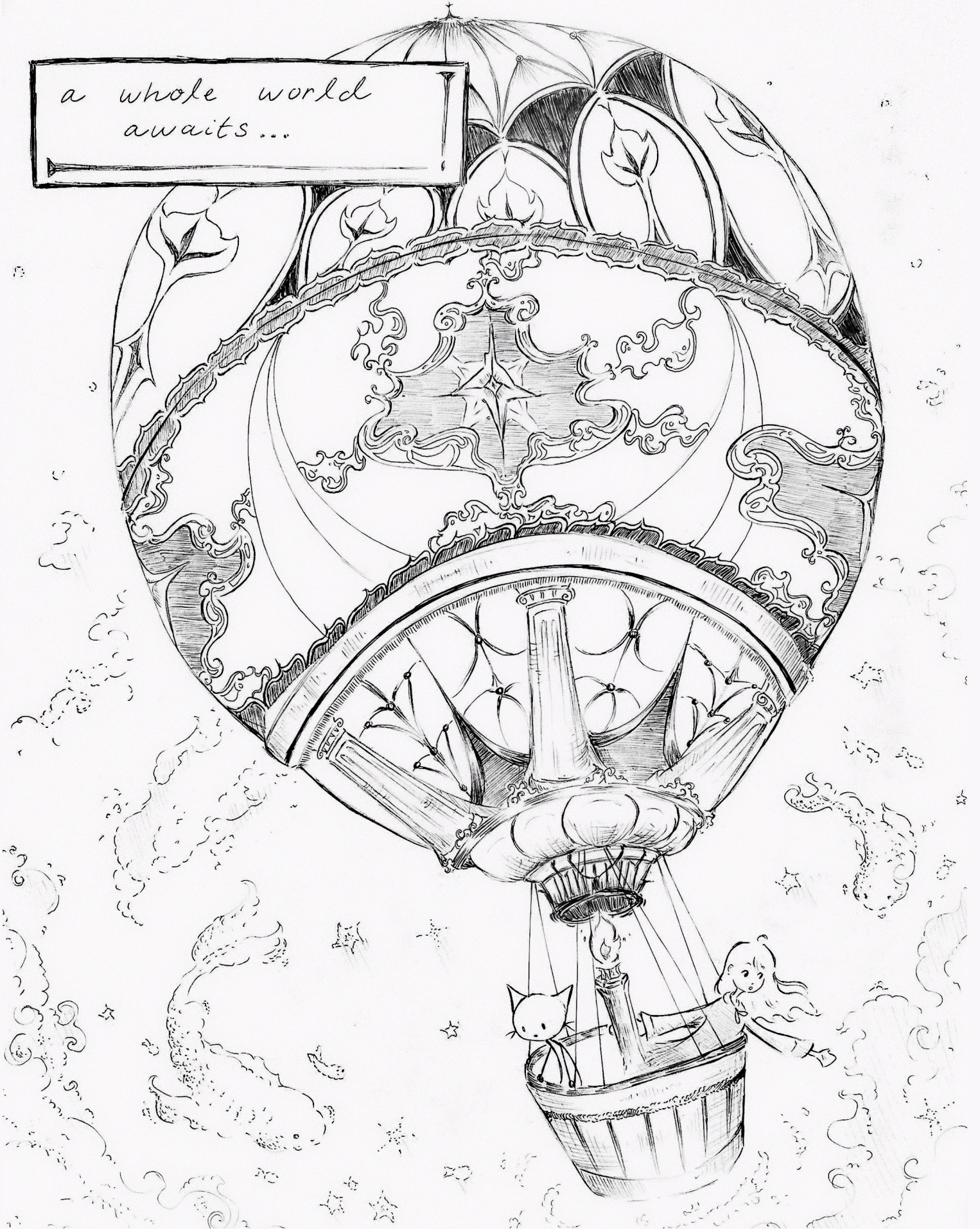
i've soared above the clouds so many times,
only to fall back down, deflated, tossed,
rolling through streets like an old coat.
the sky's crowded with balloons like me,
& down below, eyes follow with envy.

i peek over clouds, colors gleaming, high & bright,
but in one flushed, giddy burst—i'm gone.
gone again, fading like a dream in a stranger's eyes.

but the wind here is warm.
& you, tired & hungry—
come, let me fill you, lift you, just one breath.
let's rise together, just once,
& see what it's like to drift past the moon.

Jennifer_Choi

*a whole world
awaits...*



Fields of Glass and Childhood Masks

even when I was innocent I didn't like staining my skin, so instead of running through rolling fields of glass I would sit in them, let the shards cut through me as I watched the flowers flinch. (now I only have the red and black splotches marking each time I watched a tear roll down her cheek.) girls are supposed to play with dolls, so I let my limbs get twisted until my skin rippled outwards like water when a pebble pelts its surface and my face get carved like steak with red and brown Crayola markers and my hair get knotted into mats of black. my parents told me to study, so I learned, learned to sew, sew small pouches and miniature pillows and felt hand warmers filled with rice and cloth puppets with hands shoved into their edges making them spit the words "*I am happy*," sew my mouth shut. I was supposed to know people, so for a few I knew their faces, recalled their names from a whisper or two, recited their names in my head when I passed like a toddler outside a tank, leaving handprints the ecosystem inside could never see, the sharks nor the minnows. I was supposed to be happy, so I just stayed quiet.

Jwa_Erica

집

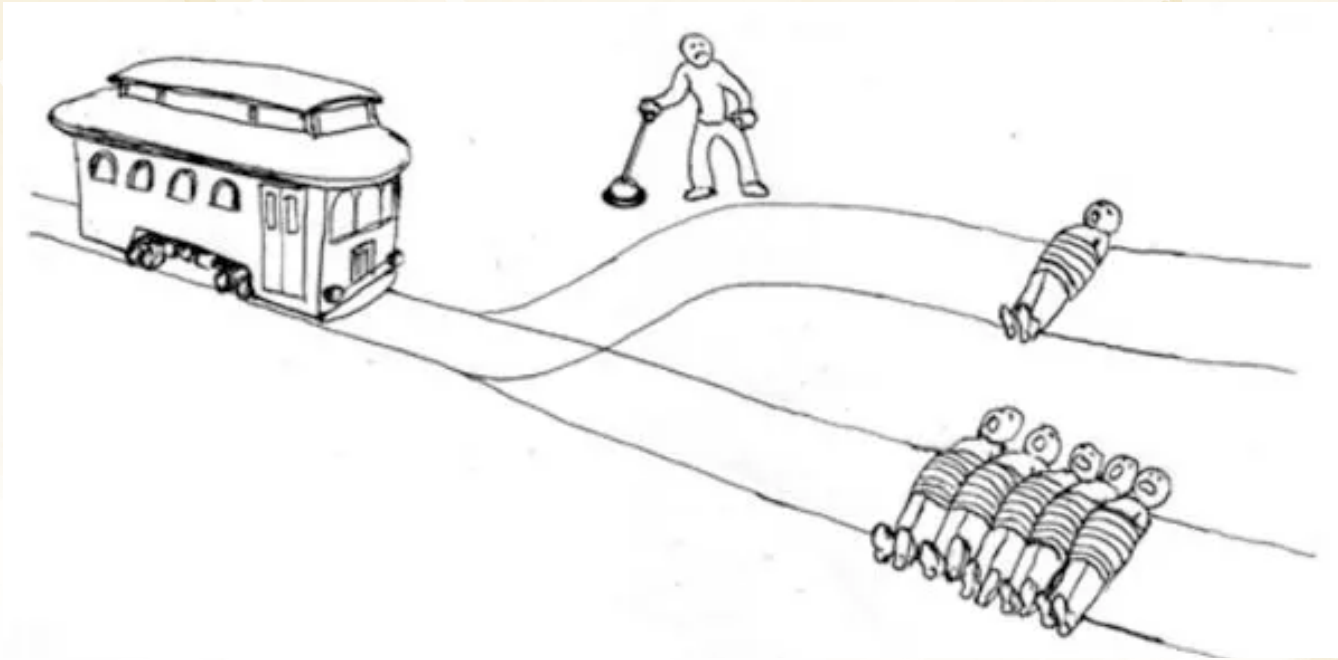
집 (Korean) = Home (English)

“Quickly! Quick, fan harder!” she yelled at me as the fire alarm blared,
 A bead of sweat
 drips from my
 forehead, I grinned,
 heart racing, as she
 flips the cheap
 pork, the oil
 sizzling like
 thunder. The room fills with
 savory, fog, thick
 with, garlic, ginger,
 and laughter.
 In that moment,
 I was back in
 my mom’s kitchen,
 the familiar
 warmth hugging me, the scent of home filling every inch of air. The emptiness
 that had
 been building
 up ever
 since I
 arrived disappeared. For the first time in days, I could breathe easy.

It feels like home, because, for once, it really is.

Kim_Aiden

The Trolley Problem



Before the exhausted construction worker fell into slumber's warm embrace, he was expecting tomorrow to be like every other day: wake up with the same alarm sound, gulp down the same breakfast oatmeal, and hurry to work to build the same trolley track. Time was not linear but rather a Mobius loop, except there were no mathematical beauty or elegant twists in his life. He lived a dry, yeastless existence, conducting a solo piece of metronome beats without instruments. Yet the predictability of life has not yet engulfed the last bit of his passion and burning ambition of youth. He was sick of living the same day for years. He desperately wanted a change, a twist in fate, to make something of himself. He would rather die a thousand times a hero than surrender to a life of nothingness.

The next day he woke up, but not in his bed.

He first felt the blazing beams of sunlight spreading over him and fumbled to cover his eyes with his overwashed comforter. Reaching down, his calloused hands failed to grasp the familiar weight. He was seized by the pain of coarse ropes digging into his skin. Sharp physical sensations halted the motion of a hibernating mind slipping into autopilot. The burning hot steel he was tied to, he realized, was the very trolley track he constructed yesterday. Along his side were four familiar faces — his fellow workers, suffering the same fate but in peaceful, lucky unconsciousness.

Meanwhile, a trolley cart careened down the track. Its thundering roar paralyzed the worker, an insignificant, powerless being in front of the gigantic, merciless machine. His entire life flashed before

him like fragments in a grainy film as he lay there frozen with fear. How much he longed for the dull predictability and stability of his old life, from the always-overcooked turkey slice in his lunch sandwich to the artificial lavender scent of his fabric softener. The trolley was approaching.

The trolley struck.

For an instant he thought his body would erupt into pieces of gruesome flesh, splattering all over the very deathbed he had constructed himself. He closed his eyes in denial. He screamed with the agonizing realization that this was the end.

...Or was it?

Pain magically vanished. He opened his eyes and was still alive.

But right before the overflowing ecstasy of survival assembled into thought, he recognized the same terrifying environment — the same four peaceful faces of his coworkers, and the same ghastly roars of the approaching trolley. Filled with dread, he knew that his fate would be repeated.

The trolley ran over him the second time. In an instant, his vision blurred into a void of darkness.

The third time he opened his eyes on the trolley track, he was able to vaguely detect a lever some distance off in the train yard and a dark human-shaped figure standing next to it. He could not tell their gender or discern their facial features. But with a flick of their hand, the trolley was diverted onto the sidetrack. The worker gasped in disbelief: *I was saved!* But as his vision followed the runaway trolley barreling down the other path, he noticed in horror another man tied to the sidetrack. The trolley crashed immediately into the man, but the stupefied worker was transported back to the beginning.

The fourth time: A large man was pushed off the bridge directly on top of the track. His cumbersome body stopped the trolley, so the rest were saved. The worker recognized the same dark figure standing over the bridge. He was seized by an intense fear of being even remotely close to such an omnipotent yet cruel being.

The fifth time: He lay on the track with another four unfortunate beings dressed in neat white lab coats. He vaguely remembered seeing them on TV as distinguished scientists receiving some prize, which might have been why the dark figure pulled the lever, thereby directing the trolley to hit the four equally innocent workers on the sidetrack. The figure did so without the slightest flinch.

The sixth time: By his side were four young children blooming in vibrancy. Across on the sidetrack lay four white-haired seniors. The dark figure hesitated. The worker was surprised: they were not a perfect decision-making machine.

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The worker had died a thousand deaths, each blurring into another. Excruciating pain became numbness; witnessing gruesome murders became tolerable. He could not assert whether his past life was a reality or a dream. What now solely occupied his mind was the identity of that mysterious dark figure playing god. Toward them, he developed a strange sense of awe mixed with disgust and fear of their omnipotence. He revered them as a divine being and dared not speculate how they made the decisions on who lives and who dies. In blind admiration, he wondered if his god was good or evil.

After a long day, the god sighed and shut off the simulation application for their thought experiment. There were infinite scenarios to consider, and what would be the basis for their moral judgments? As they saved the new progress and dragged it into a digital file, the philosopher pondered the solution to the famous trolley problem.

Claire Lin

My grandma was the kindest person I knew. She never had to think twice about helping others. She was the reason I began loving musicals, she was the reason I was able to wake up to a Christmas tree surrounded by gifts labeled, "From: Santa" some years, she was the reason I got through my fear of being on an airplane. My grandma was the reason for a lot of things.

When I was nine years old, my parents sat my little brother and I down on my grandparents' couch and told us that we would be welcoming a new member in our family in May. I had a sleepover at my grandparents' house that night, and the next day, my grandma took me to the mall to distract me from the overwhelming news I had been told the night before. My grandma bought my unborn baby brother and I matching teddy bears that I picked out on that shopping trip. We both still have those matching teddy bears all these years later.

A couple months later, my little brother and I were told that we would be selling our childhood home, and with that, we would be moving school districts. Leaving the home I was raised in, and all the friends I had ever made, was difficult for me. Again, my grandma was there. We lived in my grandparents basement through the time that our new home was being built. My grandma knew I was struggling with leaving behind my home, so she made the basement as comfortable for me as she could. She cleared out an area in the basement so that I could put all my American Girl doll stuff there. She called it my American Girl doll's apartment.

While living at my grandparent's house, I was in fourth grade and at a new school. I had adjusted to my new school by now and our class had been told that a student from another class would be joining our class. This addition to our classroom did not impact me, I really paid no attention to the announcement, until I started hearing rumors. People from the other class had warned my class that the new student is known to steal. Knowing this information, I took home my pencil box to write my name on all my supplies.

I was sitting at the dinner table that night, all my supplies scattered in front of me, when my grandma asked what I was doing.

"Why do you have all your school supplies?" my grandma questioned.

"We are getting a student from another class tomorrow and she is known for stealing. I do not want her to take my stuff, so I am writing my name on all my supplies," I answered as I continued scribbling my name.

"How do you know she is that one that stole?" my grandma asked.

The question made me pause. I had not thought about the possibility that they were lying. I did not even know who this person was and I was already judging them; I have not even given them a chance yet.

The next day at school, I put the rumors aside and decided to partner up with the new student for an assignment. I could not get what my grandma said out of my head and wanted to make my own opinion about the new student. I continued including the new student throughout the year because no one wants to feel excluded, especially at nine and ten years old.

Winter 2025

My grandma passed in May of 2019. My grandma continues to live on through those that loved her. I see my grandma's beauty in my aunts. I see my grandma's passion for Christmas in my home every year. I see my grandma's kindness in my family. I can no longer physically see my grandma, but who she was is always surrounding me.

Moynihan_Olivia

AGD

Insert attention-getter here.
Have you noticed,
how most books begin with some snappy little
one-liner,
desperate to grab hold of your attention?
No substance, all style,
a plea that you will pay attention.
“Perhaps I have *always* been broken.”
“The portrait was a *lie*.”
“Samantha *hated* her bedroom door.”
I’m so sick of this. . .
What’s worse, all I see is this,
or the most contrived, classics-esque run-on sentence
known to man.
If you found that line infuriating, just wait till you discover
the frustrations of modern “literature.”
So that I am not only complaining, I shall offer a solution:
Substance over style, always.
Allow your first sentence to be longer than eight words,
if the need be.
One last thing, while I am still here:
Stop using the word “female.”
Thanks.

Sisk_Savannah

Unfinished Exit

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine, who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem, it feels like a
eulogy.
A desperate attempt to
capture something that's already
gone.
But maybe that's why we keep writing, keep searching for
the right words,
because in this world where everything is temporary,
poetry is our only chance at
immortality.
So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.
For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost souls
who never got their own
missing person's poster.
Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit to find its proper
ending.

Claudia Wysocky

Cigar

A man walks through the door, smoking a cigar. A heavy coat rests on his broad shoulders, which barely squeeze through the wide door frame. The rhythmic thumping of his mud-caked boots on the tiled floor interrupts the quiet of the night. Each step serves as a testament to the sheer magnitude of his figure. Moonlight outlines his silhouette, but the baseball cap on his head shades his eyes from my view.

“There’s no smoking in here, sir,” I say.

The decadent, woody aroma of the cigar fills my nose. The smell reminds me of a country club, and I half expect the man to reveal a white polo and khaki shorts under his coat.

He slowly shakes his head. “Just get me a coffee. Something strong.”

“I can’t do that until you put that cigar out.”

I try not to associate with smokers. My mother always told me to avoid breathing in the air around them-poison, she said, a symptom of the city’s illness.

He lifts his head, revealing his dark, deep eyes.

“Ain’t nobody else here. You *really* going to be like that?”

I glance at the clock-only half an hour until closing time, just about when I would ordinarily call it a day and get ready for a good night’s sleep on my soft mattress back home.

I tell myself five more minutes at work couldn’t hurt.

I turn to the coffee grinder, filling a portafilter with finely ground beans. Glancing behind me, I notice the stranger watching me, analyzing my every move. A slight shiver makes its way through my body as my eyes return to the task at hand. I smooth out the top of the filter and lock it into the espresso machine. Out comes a dark, amber shot of coffee, which I pour into a mug, topping it off with hot water. The man’s gaze sears into my back as I work. Still, he’s completely silent.

I turn back towards the man. He fishes a crumpled five-dollar bill from his pocket and hands it to me. The stranger considers where to sit for a minute before deciding on the table closest to the register. There’s a weight to his movements— a barely perceivable difficulty and strain that reveals itself each time he moves. He takes a long draw from his cigar and then a quick sip of the coffee.

“Why don’t you take a seat?” he asks.

“My manager wouldn’t like that,” I reply. “Just like he wouldn’t like you smoking in here.”

“Your manager here right now?”

He isn’t.

“Please, I insist,” he says, pulling a chair out at the table and gesturing for me to sit down.

I stare at him, unmoving. After taking a good, long look at the man, I quickly realize that even if I didn't want to sit, he could probably make me. Fear kisses my fingertips as they twitch ever so slightly.

"Christ, didn't nobody tell you to respect your elders? I don't bite," chuckles the man. "Just looking for some friendly company, is all."

"Maybe when you put out that cigar. Like I said, there's no smoking in here."

The stranger snorts. "You're a stickler. C'mon, sit down, and I'll put it out just for you." He pats the empty seat.

Reluctantly, I step out from behind the counter, fidgeting with the knot which holds my apron in place. The man's eyes don't leave me as I step towards the table and sit down. I wrinkle my nose at the overpowering smell of the smoke wafting into my face.

"Quit it," I mumble, but it's too quiet for him to hear. Any hope I had of the man putting out the cigar evaporates and floats away along with the smoke.

"What's your name, boy?" the man asks.

"Thomas, *sir*," I respond, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Stop with that. I'm old, but I ain't that old. Just call me Cain," says the man.

I nod. "You can call me Tommy."

Cain smiles. "How long you been working here, Tommy?"

I take a moment to think. "I bet it's been just about a year now."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen," I respond, though still unsure of the purpose of the impromptu interview I've suddenly found myself in.

"You like it here?" he asks, puffing his cigar.

"It's nice. It pays alright for a part-time job."

"So, is making coffee what you want to do for the rest of your life?" he asks, scoffing slightly.

I shake my head. "Probably not for the rest of my life, but it's a start. Speaking of which, I should probably get back--"

"You got any other jobs?"

I sigh. "Three more."

Cain looks at me expectantly.

"I'm a cashier at the grocery store around the block, a line cook at that old diner down the street, and I tutor math at the middle school."

“Jack of all trades, huh? You got a favorite?”

I think for a second. “Probably tutoring.” The memory of lively middle schoolers and messy handwriting replaces the thought of getting back behind the counter, and the corner of my mouth turns upwards in a slight smile. Cain wafts the air with his hand, gesturing for me to explain.

“Well, I just really like working with the kids. They’re all pretty bright, even if sometimes they don’t act like it.” I chuckle. “The teachers at that school aren’t great, anyway, so they seem to like me the most out of all of them.”

Cain nods, thinking for a moment. “So, do you want to teach when you grow up?”

I shrug. “Maybe. But I’m working mainly because those kids deserve to learn properly, even if their teachers don’t want to do their jobs right.”

He lets out a prolonged whistle of surprise. “Sure is a lot of work for a young kid like you. What do your parents do?”

I grimace. My fingers shift against each other in my clenched fist. “My dad’s gone, and my mom’s a waitress.”

Cain leans back in his chair. “I know what it’s like to grow up without a father. Must be tough on you.”

I meet his eyes again, my gaze softening. I nod slowly. “It can be. I’m sorry you had to go through that as well.”

A small, sad smile flutters across his face for a brief moment. “Don’t be. He would’ve just caused more trouble if he were around. The old geezer had it coming.”

I silently wish I felt the same about my father. Indifference would be comforting.

“Well, I’m sorry anyway,” I say, averting his leer.

“It’s fine, really.” The man sips his coffee and smiles slyly. “So, how’d your dad kick it?”

I raise an eyebrow.

The man chuckles. “I’ll go first. Mr. Cain was a bad man– he made his living stealing. Tried to mug an off-duty cop, and he was dead before he heard the gunshot.”

“I’m sorry,” I croak awkwardly, swallowing in a desperate attempt to wet my dry throat.

Cain laughs loudly. “It’s quite alright.” He takes another draw from his cigar. “And you?”

Our eyes meet, and I suddenly feel exposed. It almost feels like he knows what I’m about to say.

“Cancer.” My fingers drum on the table’s surface.

Cain nods slowly and takes a quick drink from his mug. He grins. “Hell of a way to go. At least you’ve got your mom, right?”

“Yeah, but she’s always working,” I add.

“Damn, a dead father *and* a neglectful mother? You seriously drew the short end of the stick,” Cain sneers, leaning forwards.

“Don’t talk about my mother like that,” I snap.

“Well, *excuse me*,” Cain interjects, relaxing his posture. “Guess I just don’t get why you and your mother are addicted to working dead-end jobs. Is it genetic or something?”

“Everyday for three years my mom has been working nonstop to feed me and claw our way out of debt. Working a couple jobs to help out is the least I can do.”

“The best people always have it the worst. Getting sick, going into debt, dying. And the worst of the worst, the most terrible people, they just get to walk free out there, robbing, hurting folk, doing whatever it is they want. Sometimes I wonder what the hell kind of god would let those kinds of things happen, you know?” Cain blows smoke towards the ceiling.

“*You* believe in God?” I ask, half-jokingly but curious as to the man’s response.

A low chuckle rolls from Cain’s throat like distant thunder over the horizon. I half expect to see a flash of lightning. “I don’t believe in nothing no more.”

He looks like he’s considering saying more but ultimately decides against it. The cafe is still for a moment.

“How far would you go for her?” Cain asks, his voice cutting through the silence.

I look to the floor. “I’m not sure what you mean by that.”

The cigar is no more than a butt now. Cain removes it from his mouth and grinds it into the tiled floor with the heel of his boot.

I begin to stand uneasily. “I should get back to work-”

Cain puts a hand on my arm and sits me back down. My heart begins to race like a frenzied animal thrashing in the jaws of a predator.

“I mean, love is a powerful thing. I’m asking you how far you’d go for your loved ones,” he clarifies, draining his mug with one last leisurely sip. He sits silently, staring at the empty mug.

Cain leans forward, and his voice drops to a low growl. “Would you kill someone for her?”

I flinch. A sickening sort of fear washes over me. “I’m not sure, I don’t think-”

The man clicks his tongue and inhales sharply. “No, no, Tommy, it ain’t an ‘I’m not sure’ sort of question. Yes or no.”

My breath quickens. Cold sweat gathers on my palms.

Cain closes his eyes and massages his temples.

“You see, Tommy, I’m in a bit of a situation. I’ve got a mother, too. And a wife. We have a son. I’m getting old, and I want to leave something behind for them, which is why I took up the line of work I’m in. But there’s a bit of a problem. There’s this lady who owes money to a friend of mine, and it’s bad for business if we let her get away with not paying us back.”

My throat feels dry like sandpaper.

“Well, what would you do?” he asks expectantly.

I purse my lips, a lump rising in my throat. “I guess I’d ask for it back.”

Cain chuckles. “I wish it were that simple, but that’s not an option. You see, my friend wants me to kill this woman’s son. He thinks it’ll seriously scare her into getting the money back. My friend isn’t a very good person, and he knows where my family lives, so-well, you know how it is. He ain’t all there, anyway.” Cain sticks his pointer finger out and twirls it around his ear, rolling his eyes.

“You don’t have to-”

Cain reaches into the waistband of his work pants and brandishes a pistol. The man racks the slide back, peers into the chamber, and releases. It clicks into place, and he sets the gun in the middle of the table. I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” says the man. “Either you shoot me, or I am going to kill you.” His voice remains even and cold, but his eyes glisten with sadness and fatigue.

“I could never-”

“So you’re picking me, a stranger, over your own family?” the man scoffs. “What kind of logic is that?”

“You have a family, too,” I sputter, desperately grasping for the words to reason with the crazed, armed stranger in front of me.

The man slams the table. The mug wobbles and loses its balance, bursting into countless ceramic shards on the floor.

“Who do you think I am? What kind of people do you think I’m involved with? Think, kid,” he snarls. “Logically, it’s one life for many more. Make the right choice.”

“I can’t-I’ve never-”

“Think about your mother-what will happen to her without someone to pay her medical bills? Without someone to care for her? Without you? With that debt, she’s practically painted a target in her own blood on the sheets of her hospital bed.”

The stranger inches ever so slightly towards the gun.

A bitter taste coats my tongue as it stiffens, refusing to move. For a moment, I can see my mother.

The stranger fishes a phone out of his pocket and tosses it onto the table. It clatters onto the wooden surface. He gestures for me to take it. Gingerly, I pick it up.

“Call your mother,” the man commands.

With shaking hands, I flip the phone open and punch in my mother’s phone number, one digit at a time. The dial tone rings through the air.

“When she picks up,” the stranger begins, “Tell her that you’re going to die.”

The dial tone rings again.

“Tell her that you tried to be a good person.”

The silence between each ring of the dial tone grows longer and longer.

“Or maybe don’t say anything-the sound of the life leaving her son’s body will be enough.”

I watch myself lunge for the gun, aim it forward, and squeeze the trigger.

Zhang_Kyle

