

[/lit/ writing competition; March 2025; organized by yodo.

17 stories were submitted with the following prompt in mind:

Theme Requirement:

The work must critique or celebrate the resilience of the human spirit.

Character Requirement:

The work must feature a character who is a fugitive or prisoner.

Thank you to all the participants.

The stories shall now begin:]

Chains of Strength  
by VampDaddy

The cracked cast-iron chains were like snakes that slithered round his bare body; chaffing cuffs dug themselves deep into his wrists and the cold grit of steel constantly stung his skin.

He stood like this day and night chained against the stone wall of a dungeon.

A small sliver had been chiseled into this stony wall some heads above so that some light still seeped in, but he could not turn to face where it came from.

This sliver of light had not been something merciful but rather a purposefully painful reminder of the world outside that he would never see again; its purpose was to fan that little longing flame inside of him only so that he would suffer more severely, as one does when there is still some hope.

Once a day-somewhere in the evening, judging by the dim rays of the setting sun—a man would come by.

His black-hooded head was faceless and he never spoke. The prisoner had tried many times to speak to him; at first to try and understand what had happened to him, then after some time merely to hear a human voice.

But that was many years ago, and when the prisoner thinks back on his pathetic pleas for sound, it makes the corners of his mouth curl in amusement.

This hooded figure would come to feed him; some pitiful meal perhaps consisting of porridge, fit for pigs and nothing more. Then the speechless figure would take away the bowl and the dungeon door would slam shut with a haunting creak and the sliver of light would once again be the prisoner's only companion.

It was many merciless moons ago that the evil sorcerer had him damned to this sepulchral tomb. What for, he could not remember.

And sometimes it even seemed to him, that not only could he not remember what he had done, but also who he had been—and perhaps whether or not he even existed.

Many years were passed in this sort of agony. He pleaded with the gods but his many calls were never answered.

Then the hot coal of agony burned so hot that it melted away even itself and from that day onward the prisoner felt nothing—not even pity for himself—save for a smoldering heat like that of a blacksmith's forge.

And so, he set his sights on a singular possession: that of strength—and plunged the hot iron of his desire into that fiery forge.

Instead of letting his mind dwell on the pitiless procession of thoughts that plagued him daily, he would gather together all the forces of his mind and bring them all to bear onto a single point; some far flung pin-prick at the center of his being. And like so, some sort of seed took hold inside of him and from that day forward his strength began to grow.

Then when his mind was weary from his contemplation and he was well-fed on the piggyish porridge, he began to strain and strengthen his body.

He would pull and push at the chains; straining his muscles as the steel refused to relent. He would contort himself into every position possible and press and pull from each and every angle so that his every muscle was worked in every conceivable way.

The prisoner would even grasp at the chains with his fingers and pinch and pull them until his tendons ached.

Day in and day out he would apply himself thusly; training his mind in the morning, and training his body at night.

And so, over many years of this tribulation his every sinew was like steel and his every muscle like iron—and his mind too became like steel and iron, and was perhaps the most hardened thing of all.

The clattering chains that so agonizingly bound him became the very thing that had given him his strength, and so, after some time, they began to crack and chip as his strength became too grand even for them.

One day, perhaps for the 10,000th time, the hooded man came by for the daily round.

His veiled face gazed mercilessly at the prisoner like it had done uncountable times before, but this time the prisoner did not kneel and grovel.

Instead, he braced his steely sinews and with a vigorous flexing of his iron-like muscles he broke free from the chains at once.

With his legs that were now more powerful than even the strongest steed, he leapt at the hooded man, and slammed against him like a slab of stone, so that he was easily was knocked down.

Then the prisoner grabbed hold of this faceless figure and tore off his veil.

He did not care to look him in the eyes; to see who had been complicit in his lengthy torture, to see the man he had know for so long without actually knowing.

No.

He only cared to see his newfound strength.

The prisoner took his fingers, now like iron-nails, and thrust them eagerly into the man's eyes.

Like a child sticking his hand into a jar of honey, the mushy substance overflowed from his eye-sockets; like yolk from a cracked egg.

Then the prisoner grabbed hold of the man's head on both sides, squeezing him like a vice.

Bone gives way to steel, and the man's skull cracked and shattered as his brains poured out.

The prisoner-prisoner no longer—stood up and turned around; he looked through the sliver of a window and saw the sky.

[End of 'Chains of Strength' by VampDaddy]

Junta  
by Wol

"The bastard's dead!" Carla cheered as she threw the paper in front of Otávio. His aged eyes peered up from a book to read the headline.

"Well, I'll be. Good riddance!" He picked up their coffees before standing and kissing his wife on the cheek, then poured both cups down the sink. "This calls for celebration! Such an occasion deserves real coffee." He began to rummage through the cupboard, humming a song he had helped compose in his youth.

Carla studied the paper. "Died in his sleep last week, lucky bastard. His son Geraldo's in charge now."

"Well, Anselmo always did want a dynasty," joked Otávio as he pulled a glass jar out of the cupboard, "such a shame he couldn't live to see his dream a reality." He spooned two large piles of coffee beans out into the grinder and began to twist it.

"I wouldn't be so certain. Sending your son to be schooled in America seems like a pretty good way to turn him against your regime. It says here that 'Geraldo promises reforms against his father's brutal, undemocratic excesses.'"

Otávio snorted. "Brutal excesses indeed. Ah, we can always trust America to speak against a junta 40 years later."

Carla went silent again as she continued to read. Otávio resumed his humming as he finished grinding and set the coffee to percolate. Just as he was filling her cup, Carla

shouted and stood up.

"Otávio! He's given a statement about political enemies who sought asylum! He mentions you by name!" She read excitedly: "To those brave fighters who fled the iron fist of my father, we welcome you home as heroes. Any charges against you by my father's government, spurious or otherwise, have been dropped. I speak to the Carlos Villars, the Otávio Almansa," here she stopped and looked at him expectantly before returning from his questioning face to the paper, "the Léila Guarnieris: come home." She threw the paper on the table. "Otávio! It's over!"

He lifted the two cups of coffee above his head to let her hug him and pressed his head against hers for a moment, cradling her sobbing body as best he could.

"Carla," he said with a smile, "I could hug you better if I could put the coffee down."

She pulled away, nodding and laughing as she wiped the tears from her eyes. As soon as the cups hit the table she was in his arms, shaking with relief. He held her tightly and smelled her hair mixed with the cooling coffee of his home as the sunlight from the window showed him the red of his eyelids. He kissed the top of her head and spoke softly:

"The coffee's getting cold."

Carla quickly squeezed him once more before moving back and sitting down. She took a sip from her cup and started to cry once more. "Soon home will be more than just the flavor of coffee."

Otávio put his cup down and spoke tenderly: "Carla... you don't really think we're about to go back?"

The confusion on her face broke his heart. "What do you mean? This is what we've been waiting for! Anselmo's dead, his son's revealing the worst of his laws—he's accepted UN peacekeepers into the country. Bengell and his jackals have been arrested and are headed to The Hague as we speak! This is it!"

"You trust him so easily. What, because he went to an American college? Does The Humble succeed The Magnificent?"

"It says he hasn't taken an epithet; he finds the practice pompous."

"Pompous, mm. Does he still call himself 'Sar'?"

She hesitated. "It's the inherited title."

"The title his pig of a father invented."

"His dead pig of a father. Look, Otávio, I have no love for the son of such a bastard but this is our chance to go home! I don't know how you've managed to turn this into a bad thing."

Otávio turned away, shaking his head.

She continued: "Do you think I'm being hasty? Forgive me, it's only the forty years of homesickness. I'm not saying we go right now—I'm not so foolish as to take him at his word right away. But give it a year! See if he follows through! This could be our chance to walk the streets of Olivarero once more! See your sister, see my nieces! Be free in our home!"

"Free," Otávio scoffed, feeling the word in his mouth for the first time in years. "Free." He turned around to face her. "We are not free. This 'Sar Geraldo the Epithetless' does not give us our freedom! Nobody can give such a thing! Any freedom given out of kindness can be taken out of malice; it cannot be counted on!"

She'd heard the words before, said them and meant them. But now they felt foolish.

"The time for such slogans is four decades passed! Maybe one day our families will be truly free, and they will look back at us now and shudder. But I don't care! I want to go home!"

Otávio put his hands to his temples like he always did when he was frustrated. "You say this sort of thing because you no longer read. You let emotions cloud your knowledge of the struggle. You are not at home where you are not free!"

"I am not at home anywhere! You have never let us find a new one! I've lived in this tiny apartment for thirty-four years and it has never once been my home! When I first met you, you talked of raising our children as revolutionaries, but you've never wanted to raise children 'away from home!'" She threw her hands to her temples to mock him as she said this. "And now we are old. Too old to have kids, too old to even adopt in good conscience! And I was fine with it—I'm still fine with it! I regret it but it was my choice as well as yours. But finally, there might be a chance to feel home somewhere other than each other's arms and you won't take it!"

He began to speak in a tone she hadn't heard in years, fiery and young: "It's not freedom if it's a gift! Freedom is fought for, died for!"

"I heard you the first time! But who will be fighting, who will be dying? You?" She poked him in his soft bicep. "You're not a fighter anymore, neither of us are! Last year you couldn't leave bed for a week because you threw out your back from sneezing too hard! The fight is over for us; the battle faded into the background of the world thirty years ago. Nobody's even noticed that the white noise of our struggle has finally stopped—Anselmo's death wasn't even front page news!"

"That's because our struggle hasn't stopped! Another Sar has taken up the throne of his father and made some concessions so that Europe and America won't guiltily feel the need to put tariffs on our exports! What a change for the common man!"

"It's something!" she immediately became aware of how loud she had become and began to speak in a slow, controlled tone, "it's something. But this something is all we'll ever live to see."

He looked at her through a thin film of tears, spoke through his trembling mouth: "So that's it? Forty years and you have no faith left in the struggle?" "Not our struggle, no. Maybe our nieces and nephews will fight their own. I hope they do. But we'd need to see them first to tell, wouldn't we?" Carla reached for his hand, which he quickly pulled away. For the first time in their forty-two years together, he looked very small to her. She stood for a moment, uncertain of what to do. Eventually it became clear that he would say no more, so she poured the rest of her coffee down the sink as she spoke to him. "As I said, I'll give it a year, see if he really means it. I'm not a fool." Still, he gave no response. "And if he holds to his word, if he isn't overthrown by some rogue cancelador, I'm going home. I'm going to see my family, I'm going to see your family, and I'll walk the streets of Olivarero as free as I'll ever be. And I hope you'll be there with me." Otávio made a move as if to speak, but said nothing. Carla moved towards the door. "I'm going to go for a walk. I'll probably be back late." And with that she left. His coffee had gone cold, and he soon realized that he was finishing it out of habit rather than pleasure. And then he remembered that night when they had to flee so quickly he couldn't even say goodbye to his mother, the twinkling lights of the city sinking behind the falling plain, Carla's head on his chest as they lay in the brambles, the circling helicopters soon giving way to the slow wheeling of the stars.

[End of 'Junta' by Wol]

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The Visitor  
by Watson

Between the hours of four and five, there can be reliably seen a young man supping in the corner table of Emilio Petralia's restaurant. His wife disliked him. He dined for hours, always alone, on meats and cheeses and fruits with a great, mechanical enthusiasm. His sunken complexion grew red with wine-drunkenness. Finally, at a late hour, he would rise, dust himself off, and leave wearing the lean hunger and dissatisfaction of someone who had not eaten at all.

"Tonight's the night," Sylvia Petralia whispered to Emilio. She glanced to make sure the young man in question had not heard. "You've got to get him out of here."

"He's done nothing wrong, my dear."

Just then there was a great clatter as the young man knocked a glass to the floor. He made a motion of regret, then defeat, gathering the broken shards with a napkin and placing it at the far end of the table before resuming his meal.

Sylvia glared. "What now? Shall we bring him another?"

Emilio placed a hand on Sylvia's arm, willing her to ease. "I'll go and talk to him, alright? We can reach some kind of agreement."

"Today?"

"Right this moment." He slipped around Sylvia to get the kitchen, for mere politeness insisted that it was still his intention to bring the young man another drink.

As Emilio approached, the young man scarcely seemed to take notice. Spread in front of him was many an empty plate and glass. Slowly he raised his head. His eyes were a dullard's eyes, unseeing and uncomprehending. His speech was uncertain and thin as he thanked Emilio.

Emilio thought of his promise to his wife. The young man unnerved him too. Best to be done with the matter--but a moment's quiet first? He began to retreat when the young man spoke again.

"What is your name?"

"Emilio Petralia."

The young man nodded. "Drink with me, signor?"

Emilio hesitated.

"Oh, go on."

"Of course." He pulled out the seat across and sat, pouring wine for himself and his guest, who continued to eat, birdlike, from his plate. "Where are you from, young man?"

He smiled. "A little town, a little ways from Munich."

"So you are--?"

"Oh, yes. Decorated for bravery, long ago." Emilio noted a smear of sauce on the young man's yellowed shirt.

"How are you finding Italy?"

The young man's mouth pulled to a side. It might have been a smile. "I like it very much."

"Do you really?"

"Lovely country, lovely countryside. Lovely people, hospitable."

"We were, we were. Now we are...not so lovely." Emilio broke a piece of bread as to occupy himself.

"Don't speak of such things. You will be lovely as you were in the days of Constantine." The young man said things like they were the start of a great comedy that he himself found unamusing.

Emilio experienced a strong dislike. "You speak of what you don't understand."

"You're right, sir. I don't understand very much at all. I apologize."

There was a long pause, and the young man straightened. "I need to tell you. I keep telling it. I'm afraid if I don't, I'll forget."

"What will you forget?"

"My girl." And the young man smiled a young man's smile. "Katherine. Do you she think she misses me?"

"She does. Do not fear, she does."

"I do not miss her, not really. But I miss..." His fork paused midair. "I used to bring her little gifts. It would make her so happy. I would put thought and care, a ribbon for her hair, chocolates when the sugar rationing began. And she wanted me to promise her to see her again...if she could see what a blithering invalid I've become."

"You were stationed here?"

"No," said the young man neatly. "I have come a long way to see fair Italy. I have come through London bright with fire, and soon I will go elsewhere. I don't know where, but I will go."

"Why not go home?"

"Why do I hide here like a coward? I am a coward. I cannot go home. I am--how do you say--deserter? Criminal?"

Emilio might have received some degree of satisfaction. So he and his wife had been right, about the young man, who sat at his post like death. But instead he felt an odd coldness.

"But why do you not go home to your family?"

For a time the young man looked at him. "They are all dead, Emilio Petralia."

"I am sorry."

"Do not be sorry for me, my friend. I am not so sorry for myself."

"But you are alive and they are dead."

"And is that not a gift? Is it not?" The gentle words were touched with anger, each one carved from unyielding stone, wrenched from the earth. "Where there is life there is...there is goodness, there is hope, there is the promise of more." He drank deeply. "That is what your people tell me. It's the incredible resilience of the human spirit, and the indelible soul."

"You disagree, I presume."

"I go to your churches. I listen to your priests. It soothes me. I sit there as long as they'll allow. They're so--they're so beautiful. One could weep, yet I do not weep. I listen to the music. I know that people far more hopeless than myself have persisted with dignity and elegance, have bled for their faith."

Emilio shook his head. There was nothing to be done for the young man. He would leave here and shoot himself, if the night was merciful.

"Let me ask you a question. I've been asking this question of everyone I meet. How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

The young man raised his arm, gestured to the restaurant that had survived the bombings, the streets that were rubble, the sky that was unspoiled blue. "Any of it. Kiss your wife and children."

"I suppose I do it the same way any man does. What do you do?"

Very darkly, the young man replied. "I amuse myself."

"Seems a form of hell."

The young man inclined his head. "What else is there?"

"So much," Emilio said softly. "So much you do not understand."

He shook his head. "I don't understand. I don't understand any of it, anymore." He stared at Emilio. In his eyes was a question, a terrible question. "I like to watch people riding bicycles. Some of them wear helmets and some of them carry baskets of flowers--terribly romantic, you see. Some of them go at dizzying speeds. People with their sweethearts. Those people are alive. Those people are alive in a way I'm not."

"I like to feel the sun on my face." He hummed. "Like a cat." He turned to the weak warmth of afternoon sunlight, which came through the window to age the furniture. And indeed an expression of contentment smoothed the agony of his face.

The young man paid his bill, and he bid the Petralia family farewell. He walked with the tottering, feeble step of a man gone simple with age. It seemed to cost him great effort. Emilio watched him stop to admire the flowers.

[End of 'The Visitor' by Watson]

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Fog of War  
by Red

The war was lost. That much was certain.

Leutnant Karl Weber had lost his unit during their retreat, and had been trudging through fields churned to mud, and past the smoldering ruins of what was once pastoral France. The Americans were closing in from the west, the English from the north. He could not bring himself to surrender--to vanish into some cold prison camp. And he would not return to Germany to be sorted back into the meat grinder. He would be shot as a deserter, but he had seen enough of war.

He spotted a farmhouse in the distance, sagging and half-buried in autumn snow. He forced the door open, rifle raised, but there was no one to greet him.

Then he heard the breathing. Shallow. Pained.

In the corner, a soldier lay against the wall, wrapped in a tattered American greatcoat. His helmet had fallen beside him, revealing a shock of auburn hair. His face was bruised, a crust of blood sealing one nostril shut, and thick bandages were wrapped around his eyes. His right leg was mangled, a crude splint tied around it.

Karl should have killed him. The thought came quickly--cold, logical. An enemy left alive was a risk.

But instead, he knelt beside him.

The man stirred. "Who's there?" His voice was hoarse, wary.

Karl swallowed. His English, once polished at Cambridge, was rusty but serviceable. He forced himself to lose the sharp, clipped syllables of his homeland.

"Easy," he said. "It's okay. I'm English."

The wounded soldier exhaled sharply. Relief. "Christ. Thought you were a Kraut."

Karl clenched his jaw but kept his voice calm. "You're hurt bad. We need to get you patched up."

The American gave a weak laugh. "You a medic?"

Karl hesitated. "Something like that."

"What's your name?"

"Karl."

"Nice to meet you, Carl. My name's Daniel."

Karl scavenged old linens to change the man's bandages, boiled water to clean his wounds, and spooned what little stale broth he could scrape together past cracked lips. He learned more about the American-Daniel Monroe, from a farm in Ohio. He'd been cut off from his unit, caught in a skirmish during the thick of it. A blast had knocked him unconscious, and when he woke, he couldn't see. Men found him, helped him, but then left him here to pursue the enemy.

Daniel talked often, as if filling the silence was the only thing that still tethered him to the world. Being blind meant he had to rely on other senses for comfort, and Karl enjoyed listening. He had forgotten the comfort of conversation.

"How long you think 'till our boys get here?" Daniel asked on the second night.

Karl hesitated. "Not long."

"Good. I don't wanna die in some French shack." He chuckled, then groaned in pain.

Karl looked at him, studied the gentle curve of his features, the way his breath hitched when he winced. He felt something stir inside himself--something he had long buried beneath uniforms and salutes.

That night, as Karl pressed a damp cloth to Daniel's fevered forehead, a hand closed around his wrist.

"Karl," Daniel murmured.

Karl froze.

Then Daniel smiled. "Your hands... they're soft, but too gentle." He exhaled. "I know you ain't no medic. But you're kind."

His words hung in the stillness of the simple farmhouse.

Karl turned his hand over, let Daniel's fingers brush against his palm. He should have pulled away. Should have let it pass unspoken. But he didn't.

Instead, he leaned in, until he could feel the warmth of Daniel's breath. Until, for the first time in years, he wasn't a soldier. Just a man.

When their lips met, it was quiet, trembling, like something forbidden and holy all at once.

By the third day, Karl knew the Allies were close. He could hear the distant rumble of tanks, the occasional crack of rifle fire coming ever closer.

He watched Daniel sleep, knowing what he had to do. He could lie, keep Daniel here until the Allies passed them by, say the heavy thunder of tanks outside were German, convince him to wait. But that would be selfish. He could not keep this man to himself--a man who in another life he'd spend that life with.

As the Allies grew near, Karl stepped through the doorway, and into the pale light of morning--leaving behind the little world he'd made, the little French farmhouse where he found love for the first time in his life. His breath fogged the air as he raised his hands. He had no weapon.

"Here!" he shouted in English. "American soldier! He needs help--"

The gunshot came before the words had finished leaving his lips.

He staggered, pain tearing through his chest, and fell to his knees.

Footsteps rushed toward the house. Someone shouted. He tried to turn his head, tried to see Daniel one last time, but the world blurred.

Then--darkness.

Daniel woke to the sound of gunfire and voices. Not Karl's. Others. Familiar.

He forced himself to sit up, his body screaming in protest. His hands fumbled with the bandages over his eyes. Karl had said to leave them on. But something felt wrong.

He peeled them away. Light flooded his vision. Shapes emerged and sharpened.

American soldiers stood in the doorway, rifles raised. And just outside, in the cold, a body lay sprawled in the dirt.

A German.

Daniel's stomach twisted. He stood, limped forward, rage surging through the haze of pain and exhaustion. He spat onto the corpse in the doorway.

"Fucking Nazi."

A soldier clapped him on the shoulder. "You're lucky you made it, buddy. Come on, let's get you home."

"Wait," said Daniel. "There's another man here."

"It's just you," replied the soldier.

"No, he's here." Daniel, favoring his good leg, began upturning furniture in the small farmhouse. "He's here."

"It's time to go, son."

Then his eyes fell on the German. He had such soft-looking hands.

[End of 'Fog of War' by Red]

Iteration  
by mintjulia

I woke up on the beach and immediately held my hand up against the invasive sun. Everything around me was the same as the last time I looked.

A cloud of familiarity hung over every experience as I imagined myself returning to this place in world after world, each time playing out exactly like the last one, including my very own stream of thoughts. There was never a version of me that behaved in any other way. I knew this because I was the very person who discovered the count. Since photons travel at the speed of light, the entire universe unfolds in front of them within a singular moment. A cosmic blip. Each time the whole thing starts and then it ends, and all of our lives occur within the space between those two verbs. I found a way to measure a property of photons, not what you'd normally call a lifespan, but the amount of times it blipped. Each one of them. The test was so simple it could be performed anywhere, if anyone other than me knew about it. I hoped no one ever would. I assumed sooner or later someone else would make the same discovery and not be a coward about it the way that I had been. I just didn't want to be that person.

Everything would always unfold like this. I knew there was no other way for it to happen because otherwise the photons would not give a readout bigger than 1. What a ridiculous number. There had never been that few of anything. I knew my discovery should have pushed me towards a more meaningful life, considering that whatever happened would happen every time I was here. But this knowledge seemed to destroy any kind of will I might have had. There was nothing but the number, always present, a mocking reminder of something truly inescapable, that is existence itself. Day after day passed and I failed to put myself together and create any semblance of an organized way of being. I knew that nothing I did would disrupt the holy balance. There were still ways to keep faith, of course. I heard about some kind of religious group who embraced the discoveries of carbon dating which suggested the universe was much older than previously thought. They just said it was intentionally done by God. He made it seem older on purpose. I found the idea interesting and a bit funny, but I could never get behind it myself.

I remembered visiting this beach quite a lot as a kid and then we moved to another city. I drove here today just to lie down on the cold grey sand, close my eyes, listen to the gentle hush of the waves and then open my eyes and pretend that this is the start of the loop. At this point you could call it a ritual or a tradition. I knew I had done it many times before. This was my start.

There was another girl at the beach, sitting there on a blanket with her arms wrapped around her legs, looking out to sea. I walked up to her.

"Hey there," I said.

"Hello," she replied, looking up. "Here for the sunset?"

"Not exactly. But at this point I might as well stick around, if that's okay."

"Sure."

"Do you come here a lot?"

"Not really. Though I don't live that far away. I think sometimes it's harder to visit a place if it's really close to you."

I nodded as I watched the skies. The red ink of the sun had spilled all around it and a white pillar of light skipped across the waves to meet us. My breath sped up as I forcefully closed my eyes in an attempt to escape it for just a moment.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, patting me on the back. "To me it's really quite beautiful."

"Yes," I said. I opened my eyes and tried as hard as I could to see it from her point of view, to find something worthwhile, a thing I could appreciate despite everything else, because shouldn't beautiful things do that to you? Make you ignore the rest? Nothing else should matter. There was nothing but the everlasting light. It beamed through the void and invited me to forget the past and the future. They would always remain there. No sunset could ever be the final one, but the spectacle sure made it seem that way. Once again it managed to fool me along with everyone else. For just a second it all seemed truly unique and I couldn't help but make a gentle smile and, oh god, the words left my mouth before I even realized.

"How often do you get to see something like this?"

[End of 'Iteration' by mintjulia]

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Pygmalion

by meteor

Christopher Williams wasn't like any other producer in his firm. He was a true believer. He conducted himself within a set of narrow principles. He took on only the shows that moved him, that, when he read through their pilots or bibles, he could feel within his gut some intestinal change. He was very much a gut man, matter over mind.

His gut made no response to the file before him now. At the same time, he could not help but be curious. The author claimed that it was absolutely necessary for the protagonist to be a clean slate. Someone who knew nothing of the ideas by which the show had been designed. "An everyman with a dismal outlook in his remaining years. Preferably a young man in order to bear the physical pressures that would be put upon him."

Dr. Patrick Kittle was a distinguished professor at Yale though he had explicitly requested that his name be kept out of the credits. He would nevertheless serve in an advisory capacity during the show's runtime. Such advice would certainly be necessary, because Chris could not bring himself to accept the central premise. It was, in fact, a violation of his most deeply held beliefs. The agency and self-determination of man.

"I don't want it," he said to Cece, one of the executive VP's, his reluctant advocate for the last ten years, and the only woman whose friendship he could honestly call platonic. It helped that she was twenty years his senior.

She fell forward on her hands, the sharp thin points of her elbows resting on the table like the points of a compass. She rubbed her sagging eyes and sighed.

"Why are we even entertaining this?" said Chris, beginning to pace. "It barely even makes any sense. A shock collar? And why would anyone on God's green earth watch this?"

"Because it's on tv, Chris."

"Don't give me that bull. This has ivory tower navel gazing written all over it. First year film school level stuff. I mean for god sakes the pilot came with a bibliography."

"Which is why they want you to do it."

"And I have to tell you, I find the whole idea repugnant. We might as well just throw a guy in jail—" Chris stopped. "They."

Cece let the word hang in the air a minute. Chris slumped down on the chair in front of her desk.

"Did you know Mahomes went to Yale?" asked Cece. She was carefully sliding out a Newport from a carton on the desk. Cece had quit smoking after her first kid, but claimed the ritual of the movements still possessed a calming effect for her, and she went through them now. Tapping it gently on the table. Closing the carton. The moment it touched her lips her shoulders sagged. Her eyelids fluttered. An involuntary shudder ran through her body. Then the moment passed, and she quietly flicked the perfect cigarette into the trashcan by her feet.

"If we're just pandering, why not let Garrett do it?" Garrett would put a camera on a dead possum if he knew it would please one of the higher-ups.

"Because we're not pandering. Mahomes read the script. He likes it. He thinks it has legs."

"Oh for god sakes. What are they paying you for then?"

"Dr. Destiny sent the script directly to him. What was I supposed to do? Kill the mailman?"

"You've gotten soft. A couple of years ago you would've convinced him out of it. Don't matter if his own brother sent the script."

"Why don't we just cut to the chase? What do you want?"

"To have nothing to do with this abomination."

"And a close second?"

Chris pretended to think for a minute. "Caesars."

Cece laughed out loud. "Talk about first year film school."

"Tit-for-tat. I do this one for you. I get to do one for me."

"You know you could just go to Las Vegas on vacation like the rest of us."

"I'm not a betting man."

"Well, the table stakes for this are one-point-six. 18 to 49 bracket."

"Not impossible."

"And we'd want a second season."

"As long as I'm not the one handling it. And I get to pick my own writers."

"What writers? This is reality tv."

"Very funny. We have a deal or what?"

Now it was Cece's turn to pretend. She leaned back in her leather chair. "A second season." Chris didn't say anything. They'd known each other long enough not to need such assurances.

The show would make or break on the strength of its main character, that was obvious. What was less obvious was how to find the strange combination of wretchedness and latent potential the show required. And matters were only made worse by Dr. Kittle's constant interference. He had shown up 1 week into production citing an extended sabbatical to help work on "the experiment". He didn't care about ratings. He didn't care about the audience. The show was just a vehicle to prove his outlandish, outmoded theories about human nature. He was nevertheless a hit with the crew, especially the writers, who hung on his every soft-spoken, slightly accented word.

But Chris had the doctor pegged all wrong. It's not that he didn't believe in free-will, it was much worse. He believed that man was better off without it. "Man is born free," he would say, "but should live in chains." When asked who decides the chains, he would just smile slightly, rubbing his long gray beard, his ice-blue eyes twinkling behind his designer glasses, the spitting image of a philosopher-king.

It took two months to find the right one. But when they did, they knew instantly and unanimously that he was it. His name was John Falmer. He was unemployed, uneducated, unattractive, a borderline alcoholic, a twenty-two year old kid with no prospects. In a word, perfect.

"And so I have to wear this thing all the time? Like, even in the shower?"

"That's right," said Chris. He had been against the shock collar from the start, and had managed to at least relegate it to something less conspicuous and worn on the ankle. But he had not been able to budge Dr Kittle on the point of the shock itself. "There is no more expedient means to shape behavior than pain," he had said.

"But not to worry, young man, the device is quite water-proof." Dr. Kittle had also insisted on being in the room for this first official meeting, much to Chris's annoyance.

"But, like, the water with the electricity?"

"Ah, the device does not deliver an electric shock, only the imitation of one through the use of vibration," said Dr. Kittle.

"Like one of those buzzer toys," added Chris. "It's painful, but completely safe."

"Right."

"You'll be paid per day," said Chris "The crew will set up and check all the hidden cameras every morning before you go out. On your clothes, your car."

"I don't have a car," said John. "I ride the bus."

"You may get a car over the course of the show."

"But I don't even have a license," muttered John, looking at the space on the carpet between his beaten loafers.

"I think you're failing to appreciate the gravity of this opportunity, young man," said Dr. Kittle. "What we are offering you is nothing less than a total transformation in mind and body. A new life. The meaningful existence to which we all aspire." Chris pinched his nose. Why not just call him a loser while you're at it? "John. I'm not going to sit here and lie to you. Tell you that you're in for the time of your life. Change is hard. It's painful. And what we're trying to do, what this show is about, maybe what all television is about, is documenting that change. Your pain."

"And people want to watch that?"

"They do, because they know what lies on the other side." Chris took out the evaluation that John had submitted from a thick manilla folder. "You wrote here that you feel like you're in a rut. Like you're confined by rules and circumstances beyond your control. Believe me, I know what that's like. I think this might be exactly what you need right now. Something to knock you into a new course. Something exciting. And we're gonna go off everything you've given us. We won't try to make you into something you don't want to be. But it's up to you. We can't force you into this or anything else. It's entirely your choice."

Dr. Kittle scoffed. Chris paid him no mind. He knew he had said the right things and that it was just a matter of waiting now. He sent John home with the consent form, expecting it to be signed and on his desk by morning. Yet, later that night, he felt his gut act up inside him. That had only happened once before, the morning before his disastrous first marriage. But he reminded himself of the prize at the end of this rainbow, how his hands were tied, and fell fast asleep.

It was times like this that Chris was glad he didn't have a family. He had slept maybe four hours total in the last three days, trying to handle all the fallout of the accident, camping out in the hospital waiting for the kid to wake up. At the same time, hoping that he never did. The woman had come out without a scratch. They already had her interview on tape, the tearful confession of her intentions of suicide, the hand-wringing gratitude, the serenity of spiritual transformation. All primetime stuff. Another Emmy for the mantle. More praise. More critical acclaim. More money. So much money. And all Chris could do is wish death upon that woman, wish that she had collided with the bus she had chosen to be her conclusion. Because then John might still be OK.

But even then, he wouldn't be free. The show had been renewed for a sixth season. It had become impossible to keep the bubble from being penetrated by John's fame. Even if they pixelated his face, people recognized him by his voice, by his name, by his clothes. They triangulated his local haunts and gathered there for a chance to be on TV. At the medical school John now attended, the female students flirted unabashedly with him for their fifteen minutes of fame. Most of it didn't make the final cut, but Chris couldn't keep all of it out. The little that did make it sustained the overall enthusiasm. In the fifth season, they moved things abroad in an effort to reintroduce anonymity, but the show had captured an international audience and there was simply no escape.

No one could have predicted such success. Except perhaps Dr. Kittle, who, satisfied with the results of his little "experiment" by the third season, had returned to Yale elevated to the rank of prophet and seer. He did his interview circuits, wrote his books, and in the end had his name put into the credits as creator. A title he flaunted about as unassumingly as the byline of "God" on the cover of a Bible.

How was Chris supposed to know how hungry the world was for a modern Pygmalion? For absolution? To be told that nothing was their fault, that they too could fulfill their potentials if only they had an ankle monitor that shocked them into submission when they deviated, and an ivy-league witch doctor to pull the switch, orchestrate them and shape their lives as if they were pigeons and rats.

They didn't see what Chris saw. The Zolof and Lexapro never made it to the final cut. Neither did John's confessions of meaninglessness, the feeling that nothing was his own, not his so-called progress and success, not his transformation, not even his thoughts. Every act and feeling and response was merely the conduct of a prisoner to rules. They hardly administered the shocks at all now. Dr. Kittle called it a complete success.

On the fourth night, John woke up. By morning he was strong enough to get the tubes taken out of him and to eat some solid food. The doctors were confident he would regain full function of his leg after a few more surgeries and a year of therapy. John listened to all this with vacant attention.

The first thing he had asked Chris, as soon as they were in private, was if the cameras were still rolling. Chris lied and said they weren't.

The second thing he asked was about the woman. Was she alright?

The third thing was if the shock he felt before the accident was to stop him from saving her, or to spur him on. Was he a coward? Was the bravery he had displayed his own or just another rule he had unconsciously obeyed?

Chris knew the answer, of course. He was at the switch that day, not Dr. Kittle. He knew what his own intentions were when he ordered that they buzz him at full strength, when he saw the woman step in front of the bus, and saw John noticing her and running after her before they could put a word in his ear. He knew that he wanted to save John. To stop him from his instinct. But whether that instinct was John's own, or arose out of the five years of meticulously sculpting his soul-would his old self have done it? Chris didn't know. But if he didn't know, couldn't he still give the kid the benefit of the doubt? Give him something to hold on to. If the cameras weren't rolling... But they were rolling. And Cece had promised Chris this would be the last year. After this, he would work on his own project, with or without their support. He didn't need them anymore, he could raise the money himself, easily. But only if the show ended as it was supposed to. Only if it maintained the message the people wanted to hear.

"No," said Chris. "We buzzed you because you were just standing there. It was us."

John said nothing. He leaned back on the bed and turned his head away from Chris.

In the editing room that night, there would be a shot of John with tears falling down his face, and the music that would swell when it was broadcast for the season finale, was hopeful and sweet and moving.

[End of 'Frankenstein; or, The Modern Pygmalion' by meteor]

Chicago  
by Meadowlisp

Much as Tarquin, had he to Lucrece's final pleas relented and fled to what honor would yet have him, pulling that tearing end of his and her acquaintance, worrying through

bouts and punctuations of lust both off- and un-sated, should find no rest under that pendulous night:

John Grady has forgotten what he's running from, but his passenger reminds him that he's running. She does it every few miles between bites of what he thinks are Funyuns and through stained layers of hoodie that encase her from gangling knees to dangling comb-tooth bangs.

She tells it like this: "You got a bad look about you. You sure you bringing me all the way to Chicago?"

And like this: "This beer is warm and you got anything better than beer in here anyways?"

And, no matter the fact he's certain she can't see a thing of the road with how she balls herself up, like this too: "I seen that same car following since way back. I don't know or care what you did mister, but it ain't my crime and best not become it."

Between speech she is a moss-green lump cradled in passenger seat, bulging within itself, subject to a probing protuberant internal organ, the appendage now and then peeking from preputial sleeve to scratch at some bit of the scant exposed flesh before retracting within and resuming digging into the unseen bag of crinkling junk, eating by drawing her mouth down through the collar-line. The bangs shiver all the while, soldier-straight and grease-heavy. He drops her off at the next stop feeling not at all sorry. Junkies like her are a dime a dozen and there's always a poor sap ready to turn his bland life poetic over her.

The attendant is a clean-cut old black man eyeing him through the ceiling-mounted mirror like he's thinking through ways of kicking him out if he spends much more time wandering the aisles, so John hurries himself up and takes his coffee and jerky up the register.

"That your lady out there?"

"No."

"Thought she came with you."

"She didn't."

"Well she wasn't there before and she's there now. Awfully quiet in the morning. Ain't been nobody in but you."

"Haven't been watching."

"Well tell her to get outta here."

"Okay."

He doesn't say a word to the girl when he passes where she sits hunched on the island curb between two pumps. He just reaches in his pocket and tosses a bottle of pills at her feet. She looks at him with a pair of big beady brown eyes he hadn't seen before then.

The next stretch of road is the first he's driven alone. The silence claws at him no matter how much he cranks the radio up, and the coffee keeps waking him up no matter how much rum he pours in- right along with the rest of the world; the sun is rising from seemingly every direction. The whole salted rim of the horizon is rubbed wet and clean and has been rung.

He would like to tell himself it was in that hazy unremembered section of the night it happened, but he remembers just fine. He remembers crawling out of bed because he was thirsty, sipping orange juice in the kitchen and sneaking one more gulped-down glass of merlot. He remembers the moment when he realized what he was thinking, when he saw within himself how badly he wanted it, how little it would take. He remembers the cold unfamiliar hardwood floors under his feet. He remembers trying to count how many glasses she'd had through the night and realizing he hadn't paid much attention to her at all except when she'd bent over to fiddle with the Bluetooth speaker. She'd had a seltzer, he thought, but he wasn't sure. Maybe a couple. Maybe some wine. He remembers the moment when he decided he didn't care what it would mean.

It wasn't some pure vision of her that did it. She wasn't a freeze-frame of singular beauty etched into his mind. She wasn't a persistent obsessive thought. She was simply something beautiful for that one night, which he could never have.

"A ten-mile hike just to slip in the parking lot." Adam had told the story just that night, the same way John had heard it so many times over the past month. And Adam laughed the way he always did after that line, patting the hard plastic of the boot. That was where the pills came from, John figured. It hadn't taken much looking. They had been sitting right there, innocent as could be in the company of aspirin and Band-Aids and allergy meds behind the pop-out mirror of the downstairs bathroom. He had them spilled out in his hand and counted fourteen little white angels. He thought it would be enough. The booze would help. He set them back in their bottle and onto the counter.

Upstairs, through the crack of the door, she lay. He let his head waver back and forth so the thin strip of light resolved into a whole vertical scanline image of the room. She was a small form covered by a sheet, head held in the crook of her own arm. One foot peeked out near the end of the mattress. A tower fan oscillated over the whole scene, stirring the delicate edge of the sheet where it hung untucked, but everything else remained so serenely still. She was breathing heavily but not snoring.

He approached quiet as he could.

She didn't scream when he woke her, or even when he breathily and gropingly tried at what he intended. She just sat there, eyes wide and pleading, looking so much like his wife, him running his hands all over her with one bra strap hanging pathetically off her shoulder, asking him again and again to stop. And, for a reason he couldn't quite pinpoint within himself, at this moment so far past the point of no return, he did just that.

He found himself stooped, stepped back and standing there in just his boxers, not sure where to look, skin beginning to goosebump. She had pulled all the sheets up around herself and was sobbing in a deep quaking way that hadn't yet reached her eyes.

"John."

"Yeah?"

"If you come back in here again, I'll kill you."

"I know," he said, and still not turning back, closed the door behind himself.

He needed a cigarette at that moment. Each breath was a disappointment of cold inert air, too easy and almost buoyant with the sweet lilt of alcohol. He needed the satisfying tug against tube and filter.

He doesn't remember much of what happened between then and now. There are fragments in his mind, bits and pieces: finding some clothes, sitting in his car, working through things in his mind, counting and counting the pills in his hand like a loaded gun. Looking furtively around the street light-lit culdesac and tugging at the thing in his pants but finding it limp and useless and crying at that more than anything else, driving past his own home and seeing the lights all off and driving right on by.

The bar was mostly empty. He'd thought maybe this was the one Adam had gone to, when he and his buddies had left John to sleep it off in the guest room. But it wasn't or they had moved on to a more exciting scene. Sitting on the cracked burgundy faux-leather of the barstool, tuned to the clattering of billiards, he recalls stealing himself for an act of grand and wanton self-demolishment. He pictured shot glass upon shot glass stacking up empty, then running into the street and maybe drowning himself somewhere. He made it two shots in before his liver pulsed in protest and he had to hold himself from vomiting. Even if he could've stomached a few more, the bartender was getting an impatient sort of look by then. He still thought it seemed as good a plan as any, so he stopped at the liquor store.

He lingered outside, pill botling rattling between palm and fingers. He got lost in worries for a moment and knew he was sobering up too much so he cracked the fresh bottle of rum and took a swig. He caught the eye of a lonely-looking girl that was loitering around and offered her a swig too because she looked like she needed one and they got to talking with her. She was heading to Chicago, she told him, and that seemed to John Grady as good a direction as any.

[End of 'Chicago' by Meadowlisp]

Cotton Candy Grapes™

by edisonm

Grapes. It was all because of the grapes. Cotton Candy Grapes™ by BetterGenetics. From: South Africa. Expiry date: NEVER.

One of your five a day, so - standing in fridge-light starky bollocks, at, microwave time was 03:45 which means actual time 01:13am - you ate about fifteen at once. They're cold and crunchy. You'd left them in the back of the fridge, a trick your nan taught you, so they're almost-but-not-quite-frozen. Crispy-cold cotton candy juice sloshing in your mouth with the heavenly texture of a soft fleshy popsicle. Then pain in your left molar like you've been tased in the mouth.

The pleasure of the grape is over. You wince and swallow, like you do with everything.

You imagine the hole in your molar, tooth 18, distal decay - you'd been there through early-stage caries, watch and monitor, and distal caries, shallow lesion, plaque is the consistency of double cream for twenty-four hours, until finally, decay and rupture, you need a filling. You'd known and done nothing, but you wonder how its possible for collective human intelligence to figure out how to land a man on Mars, sow computer chips onto spinal chords and find the cure for cancer, but not come close to solving the need for us to brush our teeth? Isn't there some non-corrosive chemical formulation reactive to plaque they could make into a mouthwash? Not mouthwash itself, no, that's toothcare DIC, pay-to-plaque-remove, I'm talking about a serious futuristic concoction - gurgle and spit, that's it! Maybe there's some sort of thick paste you could wipe on and rinse out in seconds? Something fizzy maybe? If your great-great-great grandfather could see how life was lived now he wouldn't recognise a single god-damned thing except the fact that two hundred years later, we're still standing in the mirror every morning and night wasting two beautiful minutes schmucking our mouths up and down with some bristles on the end of a stick. You hate brushing your teeth. You hate engaging with scams, it's why you're philosophically against printers, but let's not get started on Big Dental and all that red white and blue nonsense. Why? Because it started with the grapes. Beautiful green pearls, edible emeralds, so juicy, so sweet. But, you wonder how a fruit can be trademarked? SEEDLESS. You wonder about that too, okay, so, first gay frogs now a-sexual grapes. Actually, which one is 'a-sexual'? You're not sure. How do they grow them without seeds? Maybe you could say infertile grapes but that sounds too human. Anyway, they're delicious. They taste exactly like cotton candy grapes. That's what scares you, at first, and then you think again about, EXPIRY DATE: NEVER. TRADEMARKED. SEEDLESS. BetterGenetics. You asked Alexa what BetterGenetics was and you found out BetterGenetics (Better Genetics) is the world's largest multinational corporation specialising in grape cultivation and distribution. You learn Cotton Candy Grapes™, seedless, were invented three years ago. Invented? Alexa explained, some scientist discovered the gene involved in the synthesis of fructose and was then able to 'copy and paste' the gene into a host grape from which was cloned the remarkably sweet Cotton Candy Grape™.

You hold a single grape up to your eyes. The fridge beeps -doors open- but it's the only light in the dark so you let it beep and beep while you skinned the grape with your fingers. You press it between your thumb and index, slowly, like some giant naked torturer squeezing for information tell me your lies, grape! and the sweet juice bleeds down

your fingers and smells terrifyingly accurate and amazing.  
Oven time is 18:56, so, actual time 1:20am.  
You close the fridge and fumbled for the hood-light switch behind the stove.  
Nothing is real. Not time, nor grapes. Toothpaste is what causes cavities, apparently. That's what they're saying now. You've got your own theory about how the filters in cigarettes are what give you cancer, not the tobacco. You shouldn't say anything, but one day, you will. On your page, you post a picture of Cotton Candy Grapes with the caption:  
Did you know Cotton Candy Grapes aren't even real grapes? They're made in a lab! #BOYCOTTGRAPEES. #MAKEGRAPEGRAPESAGAIN  
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK  
You stop, freeze like a grape - you don't move, you don't even shift weight on these creaky old floors.  
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK  
The blur stirs behind the security glass.  
"H-hello?" you creak.  
"Hi there, Mr. Schott? Number 24?"  
Your stomach drops again.  
You think about dropping to the floor and waiting until the stranger disappears. Instead you think about next door, and you realise there is hope, so you say "Are you my new neighbour?" Yes, this is normal. It's just your new neighbour, knocking on the door at 1:30am to introduce themselves. Your old neighbour moved out this morning, after all, you saw it after waking up - more like, after being woken up - at 08:28 by beeps but unlike the fridge, these beeps were loud and outside. A truck reversing. You'd wanted a lie-in but no, you're ruled by beeps and boops. You are just another package from delivery line, scanned and stamped, soggy on the doorstep of life.  
The neighbour was moving out. No sign in the yard or nothing. You twitched at the curtain. The old madam next door shuffled on her zimmer frame down her crazy-paving driveway. She then turned around and looked back, right up at you. You'd resisted the instinct to duck behind the curtain and disappear from sight and you met eyes with Mrs. Number 22 and she smiled, so you raised your hand kind of pathetically, but sincerely, and you kind of smiled back; no teeth, you smiled with your eyes and your lips and your cheeks. She saw this and waved back to you. For some reason that smile got you. Her little old lady smile, thrown over her shoulder, as she was getting helped into the back of her grandson's car, seemed to reassure you about your own life, and how you might be living it. All your screaming and crying into the early hours of the morning. Your arguing with Them, the police on the phone, the police on the flat roof. Slamming doors, blaring music to drown out the sound of throwing up. All of that was normal, the smile seemed to say, it was okay, she had heard everything, obviously, every sound, and still, after knowing who you were, the real you behind closed doors, she still turned her back and smiled a smile that said it was all going to be okay.  
You think about Mrs. Number 22 now and the calming reassurance she gave with just a look. You are okay, you say, with all other senses screaming otherwise.  
Goodbye Mrs. Number 22.  
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK  
You walk to the door. You apologise to your nan in the sky as you wrap her hand-crocheted blanket around your lower body, twice wrapped, because the weave is exposingly loose and for a second you realise actually, the blanket is quite shit, the weave far too loose and easily pulled apart, and it upsets you to think that your nan was also a real person who was bad at things and got embarrassed and most likely lied to you about inventing frozen grapesicles, but your hand is on the door handle now and the cold brass brings you back to the room.  
You check the monitor and you see on the live feed the woman with a ponytail face-lift in a pants suit wiping her pumps on the welcome mat.  
OPEN UP PLEASE.  
You open the door. You're suddenly hyper-aware of your nipples and their brownness and their girth.  
The woman is smiling. Her skin is taut against the bone and shiny at the forehead where it reflects the porch lights. She holds her clipboard close to her chest.  
"Hello."  
"Are you new my new neighbour?"  
"New neighbour? Oh well, not quite--"  
"You the new landlord there then? All my neighbours here, I don't know what's wrong with them, they're recluses or something. Mrs. Number 22 was the last of the good ones."  
"Not exactly, I just--"  
"You going to turn it into an airbnb or something?"  
Air BnB, that's their game.  
You're being priced out. Never, no, not you.  
You've always preferred hotels. You didn't trust airbnbs - even though everyone else is over it, since the Airbnbbutcher of '49 you'll never stay in one again. You don't miss them. You didn't like how airbnbs made you feel.  
Even though you always made sure the place perfectly embodied your character, that it spatially represented your beliefs; where the interior design suggested a learned life of creative contemplation; a bookshelf, a cheese plant, pastel coloured sofas and carpets and curtains. Framed movie posters from the last century. Something whacky like a traffic mirror or a stuffed squirrel. You deluded yourself, staying at these places, blinded by the voyeuristic pleasure of sleeping in someone else's bed, cumming in someone else's shower. But although the flats were invariably dressed up to look like the apartment of some architect maybe, you could imagine a writer living there, scribbling away in the morning sun, or a painter, peering out the sash windows; the decor, the arrangement, the feng shui, it all inspired something, it all buzzed with potential; you'd think if only you lived there, then you could write that book and you'd watch those old movies you always said you would, and you'd eat properly and exercise often. You'd make use of the open plan kitchen-dining-room and you'd invite people over and cook that curry your nan taught you.  
But in reality, you'd arrive, drop your bags and then be out until the evening. You'd return late, more than likely drunk, which meant no chance were you waking up early, so, no chance were you using the picturesque kitchen to make a healthy breakfast - like you promised you would when you spunked twenty quid at the shell garage on the way there (a carton of eggs, feta cheese, and spinach, never made it out the carrier bag, just sweating away on the floor at the foot of the bed.) You remember feeling dirty after checking out, having stripped the bed and cleaned up, after yourself even though you've paid a cleaning fee almost the same price as the room. There was something prostitute-y about it. You feel bad for the airbnbs. You're sorry for those flats, they once had dreams of being homes and studios. That's why you prefer hotels. It feels more like going to a Parisian brothel, there's something quaintly historic and charming about a hotel, and indulging in the services of Madame Corporate. Your bed is made for you everyday. Forgot your toothpaste, again? Housekeeping will bring you some. Free shampoo and conditioner you'll use liberally and often. Whereas AirBnB, it's like the OnlyFans of accommodation. The photos are more than likely fake, you think you're speaking to someone real but you're just fluffing it with an AI assistant.  
"Mr. Schott," the woman said. "Excuse me, I know it's you, yes it's frustrating, but can you please confirm verbally, you are Edison M Schott?"  
"Yes."  
"Username Schottish Lights?"  
"Yes."  
"Did you post this?" She presents a phone showing your post about Cotton Candy Grapes. You read comments underneath it:  
@shrimpink2000 - bro idc if these were made in a lab or in a wizard's cauldron they hit different 🔥🔥🔥  
@frogsupremacy - we're one step away from creating Skittles that grow on trees and honestly I'm ready for it 🌈🍬  
@lettucehead69 - y'all mad at grapes when cereal mascots been trying to gashlight us for years  
@mysticrat420 - bro these grapes got alchemy vibes I feel like I shouldn't be eating them but I can't stop  
@voidsnack - if fruit starts getting DLC I'm gonna lose my mind  
@chaoscheese - I would like to personally shake hands with the grape wizard responsible for this unholy creation  
Everyone loves the fucking grapes. You feel embarrassed that no one agrees with you. A small part of you thought you'd go viral, that'd you'd wake up and see #MAKEGRAPEGRAPESAGAIN in the top five trending; you'd be known for exposing the greatest conspiracy of your era, the headlines would read Grapes Are Fake; everyone will then find your post and realise how smart and funny you actually are and how, yes, you did have something to say that everyone might want to hear; you'd get a journalist in your dm's hey, I love what you said, would like to be interviewed tonight on BSTV? And you'd go on and be even more funny and erudite, and so cutting; you'd perfectly encapsulate the mood of the times, and then everyone will pay to hear your opinions and then you'd be rich, of course, but you'd be responsible with the money, of course, and give to charity and buy local and organic--  
But no. Six likes and six comments by six people you don't even know.  
"Is there a problem?" you say.  
"I don't want to argue, okay?" she says, taping away on her clipboard. "I have to inform you, under the jurisdiction of Them", it's come to my attention there may have been a breach of contract." She rushes through the rehearsed speech. You've heard it before but there's nothing you can do about it, she has to say it, it's part of their job, it's what they do, it's like an unskippable ad before the video begins.  
"What did I do--"  
The clipboard prints a piece of paper that chk-chk-chks out from the bottom. She tears it with one hand like an expert in this. In giving out tickets. She reads it.  
"Edison M Schott Username: Schottish\_Lights. NEGATIVITY VIOLATION."  
"Oh, c'mon! For the grape thing?"  
She reads it more. Her face drops, not her outside, work-face but her inside, human face.  
"It has been decided by Them your sentence has increased by another year."  
She hands you the fine. Inkjet evidence of your face and name and username and recent search and comment history.  
"I thought you'd learned, Mr. Schott. After the whole Big Dental incident. You know I hate giving bad news."  
"Don't turn make this about you," you say.  
"It's not so bad. You've not been banned from your phone again. At least you're still allowed to use it."  
"I don't care so much about that," you say. "I'm just so bored and sick and tired of being alone. I have so many things to say, so many thoughts I'm thinking. Can't you stay?"  
"I can leave you with some advice--"  
"-oh not your advice--"  
"-yes, my advice. Sell-up. They're only harassing you because you won't leave."  
You hold your blanket tight. "My nan was born in this house. My mum was born there, in the kitchen. I was born in the bedroom, upstairs above the garage."  
"You've told me before."  
"I've seen a photograph of this road, some time in the late 19th century. It was of a street party of a mysterious origin, with criss-cross bunting and flowers in everyone's garden. Tables with cakes and pies and bowls of boiled sweets. Tables with apples bobbing in buckets. The image is slightly blurry and I like to think it's because the photographer giggled while taking it, laughing at the child in the foreground who looks like he's in mid-trip, or at the horse cut off by the frame so you can only see his backside and the mess he had made."  
The front door blows  
in the wind and hits the coat rack  
and you just about see the woman ducking into a silver car with blacked out windows. Before the door even closes, hums off down the street.  
You shut the front door. You read the ticket again and at the bottom in small, unassuming typeface, it reads: DAYS REMAINING: 24,567  
Anyways, where were you? Yes, the photograph, the brown and grey one...

[End of 'Cotton Candy Grapes' by edisonm]

Deathrun  
by I need a name

Of the twelve in the room, Ezra Jude and Rowan included, one would survive. There were Caucasians, Mongoloids, and Negroids, and aside from Ezra-he did not know about Rowan-they each had their own families to return to. Some wore rings, others stroked portraits, but most had etched onto their faces that they wanted to survive. They were eyeing their surroundings, their competition, with hawklike eyes and sharklike teeth. Ezra had seen those looks before. They were the looks of a burglar when he passed by a jewelry store. That hunger, that thirst-the worm in his eye stirred like it detected his heartbeat.  
Rowan did, too. He pat Ezra's shoulder with a soft hand, to which Ezra reciprocated with a lean. They had sworn before this that if one of them died, the other would live, and it showed in their eye contact before the officials arrived. With a stamp of their boot, they stood at attention, then introduced themselves from left to right. Vivienne Grace,

Elizabeth Snow, and Charlotte Peach—an all-women squad. Did they omit their ranks for a reason? Ezra had no time to ponder as Elizabeth, the one in the middle and therefore the leader, began the briefing.

"You twelve have defiled natural law, the harmony of yin and yang, and as such, you will die as monsters in deathrun."

Half of the inmates shuddered. One even prayed through his handcuffs. The word deathrun rang like a death knell in everyone's ears, even Ezra. As for Rowan, it seemed to instill something else in him—something that drove him to yell at the officials.

"It is you who defiles this so-called law! What harmony of yin and yang can we find in a system like deathrun?"

The room reacted with shock. Ezra especially. Was Rowan doing this for their sake? That shock soon turned to anger from the others, and they joined in after Rowan, their jeers even harsher than his, but not harsh enough that the officials acted. Instead, Vivienne, Elizabeth, Charlotte—the three stood, three statues together, as the loudest noise Ezra ever heard blared from the speakers. The inmates covered their ears, Rowan among them, and after a second or two, the noise faded. And when they did, the officials drew their pistols.

"What you just heard," Elizabeth said, racking the slide as her subordinates followed, "was a sample of the training we endured as officials." She turned to Rowan, aimed the muzzle at him. A sound flew past Ezra's ear, a sound he did not want to be real, a sound that, if it were wind, would mean the end of all things. Rowan sprang back in his seat, a hole in his head. There was a bang after that. And blood on the wall.

Ezra could not tell what had happened. His vision blurred, heat rose to his face, he twitched his body, but it did not move. He saw the worm, the worm in his eye, it danced to a tune, but he heard no music—did that mean something or did it not? Where was Rowan? he wanted to ask. Rowan could answer every question. Ezra just had to find him, but where? In this room? This room with a corpse in it? Everything was coming back to Ezra, and it came back faster than he wanted it to. First, he heard Elizabeth and her voice, second the inmates and their fear, third, himself and his breathing. He was still alive. He felt dead, but he was alive. So were everyone else, everyone not named Rowan Cedarstaff. That had to change.

With the smallest glimmer of hope, Rowan could survive.

"Hey," Ezra raised his voice. No one but Elizabeth had in the silence after the gunshot, so it reached everyone loud and clear, and they turned to him, a majority of them confused. "I heard that the state grants the winner of deathrun any wish."

Elizabeth crossed her arms, and eyed Ezra up and down. He had a madness to him that she as an official sensed more than anyone else. "You heard correct," she said.

"Then I can wish for the revival of a dead person?"

She smirked. "You can." Her answer brought a smile to his face. He never expected to feel warmth after Rowan died, but he did, and it was like Rowan was embracing him from the afterlife. Ezra, for the sake of Rowan, swore to participate without reservation, without qualification and without demur in the ninth circle of hell known as deathrun.

[End of 'Deathrun' by I need a name]

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The Last Woman and the First  
By Mingo

Rollo of Almetry felt defeated. Mingo the Masterful had halted the caravan for the night and the two homunculi, Wisk and Brask were carefully supervising the victual preparation to be eventually distributed to the party. Rollo recognised the waystop, a long decrepit ruin situated on the road to Almetry. He had been here before, but at the time, he had been fleeing a deadand and had not stopped long enough in one place to admire the skillful mastery that still radiated from the mostly standing stonework even after aeons the place was last inhabited. What a feeling it might have been, he thought to himself, to work on something with care, time, and precision for something that most of the workers would not have lived long enough to enjoy.

His musings were not for long though. "Hoy fleet-foot! attend, the Master speaks" rasped Wisk, while Brask served out the portions onto plates made out of leaves. Mingo had gotten to his feet and was waiting for the full attention of the party.

"Well now troupe, remark that Almetry is two days ahead", Mingo intoned in his low, laborious voice giving each member his equal attention. "This gives us plenty of time to practice for the jamboree that the Great King Sutha has organised. I had grown weary of these limbs when the sun was fully red. Me, who had mastered more than any of Phandal's conjurations than those before me, who had mastered the lore of vianding dragoncraft and deadand alike, remembered the silky taste of smoky, grey air, and who has outlived all the magicians, before and after my time, am now committed to rest my shadow on this earth. So remember well that I aim to win the Kampas. Wisk and Brask have expressed keenness regarding ownership of your remaining days on Earth and are most eager to garner your trust and confidence wilfully".

Three days ago had the company formed, when Mingo had visited The Plaza, the only institution of its sort, as far as anyone knew on what had remained of Earth. As the red sun had looked on, Mingo had made a bargain with the chief of goblins that had commission of The Plaza to obtain three criminals, one each from low, medium and high to form part of his dance and theatre troupe and Rollo had been chosen. Along were Keilvish—the-Brash and Pretty Naz. Rollo had then watched as Mingo had worked up some devilry with his words and the company caravan was soon moving at a rapid clip. Rollo had been puzzled by the lack of animals until he had met Wisk and Brask, who were as adept at changing forms as duplicating them, a handy feat considering that there were only three real players in the troupe, with Mingo having taken the role of director.

They dined in silence, the three keeping their heads lowered and focusing on eating. They had tried to escape, all three, but Mingo had installed a part of himself in them, and such forms of resistance aroused him to their schemes and their will would be sapped. Mingo had been quite cheerful in his caravan when he had first detailed the plans to his would-be players. Keilvish had sneered at any import that would have him flounce for bits and had unwisely launched himself onto Mingo's person.

Only then was the true scheme of Mingo revealed. He had transferred his parts into the three of them, and the attack had failed. On landing, Mingo had announced, "The days to us are but short, if they were ever long. King Sutha has planned a revelry to outshine any that have been held before. With a stratagem of unknown devise, he has managed to procure a most curious substance that will give its taker everlasting peace, a final ceasing to any who are vat-born. He promises this miracle cure to any who amuses him and his court the most during this revelry. Hear then my scheme, which I have prepared from Jaxa's Flouncing Bunions", and Rollo found himself moving without his volition. In short order the three new members of the troupe had completed a stunning routine of piroettes, athletic gymnastics, and competitive ten pyramids. Mingo, watching, had declared himself satisfied on the magic's potency. "But meriment and rakishness at the fete must not be left to the chances of athletic vigour alone" and he had uttered further spells whose import Rollo was unable to immediately grasp. Soon after they had been given their first viand of the trip with lots of elbowing and muffled guffaws between the two homunculi.

After the meal, Rollo had found it harder to move his limbs, though he saw Pretty Naz and Keilvish moving as before. Maybe not as before, no, not entirely. Keilvish, who had been buff as a deadand, and who always walked with a swagger, was now moving with an exaggerated motion of hips that swayed to-and-fro. He stopped and sought to walk again, but his movement would not change. He moved to exchange words with Mingo who sat peering into the campfire. "What have you done to me?" asked a most dulcet and sonorous voice that stirred reactions from Rollo that had never been fully realised. Pretty Naz too stepped into the light, looking puzzled, though only barks would issue from her mouth. Wisk and Brask had been glancing sideways at Keilvish and stepped close to Mingo to exchange propositions. Taking Keilvish by the ampits delicately on both sides, they had marched him to their tent, all protestations from him only further inflaming their passions. Rollo had moved to do something, what? Say something? What? But his innards were as lit with a cold fire. Pretty Naz was collared and tasked with guarding the campsite, and Mingo eventually went to his camp to sleep, leaving Rollo and Naz in the open, undoubtedly prevented from any mischief by Mingo's wards.

So, it was in this order, that the company reached King Sutha's palace. The plaza leading up to the palace had been razed and widened as if to accommodate all of the thousands of the remaining pure human race on Earth. Rollo could see a thousand or maybe more but not by much. The palace itself a grand five-story structure was the main building of the kingdom, of maybe even the world. He did see many gaily-clad groups and assumed that they too were here to compete for the Kampas. Dark had already ascended, when King Sutha made his appearance. "Welcome Vat-born! Welcome!". The assembly had gathered in one of the larger courtyards, that looked small and misbegotten, compared to the forlorn solitude of the vast places still unfilled. The wines and amphora had flowed by then and there was a nature of general merriment in the air. Mingo had dressed Keilvish in loose fitting robes so as to not excite any comments and Wisk and Brask were keeping a close eye on the three members. "Long have been our nights, and shorter our days" intoned the King, slurring every second word. "But there has been no one to soil those times with our ill-intent", he paused for some time as though stuck by a deeper introspection. He continued, his voice stronger, but also more bitter. "We, who were born in cold brine, and warm jelly goo and crystallised glass. We who were cursed to live always till the sun itself swallows the Earth. We... the only type of children ever born, never to experience the tenderness that the poets spoke of.. We have at last found a cure."

At that announcement, there was a tumult of roar, hiss and applause. All of Almetry had come to hear the fantastic proclamations and what they had heard was agreeable. "But there is a catch" whispered the King, after the ululations had settled and the throng strained to hear the sibilant promise. "But has there ever been NOT the case with us" boomed the King and the cries were taken up once more. "The creatures that we found, on a world with a dark sky and dead stars, who shared with me the cure, themselves only had enough for some. Long I searched their plane, but there was no one alive to ascertain the verisimilitude of the claims. No matter! Eternal bliss is in sight for some, the rest will have to await the final cold embrace of the sun, while others must settle for being ministered under goblin piety strictures and the deadand slave conclave. But those lucky few... ahh! What bliss awaits. So come now, my friends and let us revel till the first piece of cold stars fall on earth!"

The event was a gala affair by all means, Rollo had to admit. First came the Porophry Fires, long outcast of the Gwently Forest, who put a show of a man turning into a bat and the imagined damsel, who drew the loudest cheers when unveiled, was played by a ghoulish looking pale man with long hair, who spoke into his hands in gravelly whispers and fell down ever so often. King Sutha laughed louder with each fall, the wine and goblin meat flowed, amphora smokes were freely shared. Next came the Prismatic Bunglers, they of quick hand and of deft touch had a play where an imagined woman, here a goblin dressed as a woman of authority, had to go through multiple scenarios where she was attacked by ingenious weapons, and she had to defeat the attackers, the usual tactic being of kicking between the would-be attacker's legs. Rollo had to admit that the goblin played the part with great zeal and gusto, though the play came to a dramatic end when the goblin tore off a man's private with his teeth and began gnawing on them on the crescent-shaped raised stage. The events continued through the day, more smoke was shared now, the entire ordeal a miasma borne of foul humours and shared by all. By King Sutha's decree, Mingo had been given the honour of holding the last event, as the only surviving wizard, and as per the demand of the others who had grumbled that his performance earlier might lead the King to disfavor anyone else.

So it was, that when Rollo and his troupe finally came to the stage, expectations had been built to a crescendo. Mingo nodded in the direction of the King and rolled his sleeves. "Now then. Larry-up and Hoop and skatter, and Up and go." The three flawlessly executed the routine of twirl, jounce, twist and tango, rhythmic hurling and three-man pyramid building with every combination. The crowd seemed suitably impressed, but they had seen better performances prior to this one. "And now, for the final piece, a play" said Mingo quietly. Anointed in a bucket with bells, Rollo stepped on to the stage with ponderous gait, bowed shoulders and slightly trembling hands. Wisk and Brask had divided into multitudes of people to give the scenery a crowded feel, with Mingo conjuring an image that heightened shadows, deepened colours and made the voice on stage audible to everyone in the assembled crowd.

Rollo approached Naz who had been strapped to a table and spoke with a final hope at majesty, "Arise, the female form, praise Rivenarr the Wise for your creation, and join your male brethren in the glories of Old Earth beneath this fetid green sun." The simulacrated crowd and the real looked one as Naz rose from the table with unsteady feet.

"Speak what name most pleases you and it would be yours", Rollo had now turned to face both the crowds in jubilant anticipation, his crown of fools accentuating his every movement. But no sound came from the stage. Rollo turned back to look at his last creation, "Why do you not speak, creature? Does the form not please you?" But when Naz opened her mouth to speak no sound would come forth. The scene now shifted; Rollo now stood gazing at the distant skies. "Rivenarr" came a voice, with a pleasant lilt, cast with a higher pitch than what any had heard, and it broke Rollo's heart into a hundred pieces, though he did not know why. Keilvish came sashaying onto the screen, the crowd sat with rapt attention.

"You look forlorn, what bothers you?"

"The last of the first genetic material is expunged, and the creature that issued forth is sub-standard. She has no voice, no female organs, is maldororous in that she excretes waste through her skin and seems desirous of harming everything that breathes. The only change I can make to her primordial ooze is to increase her tolerance towards life itself so that she does not seek to harm it without necessity" said Rivenarr with a pent-up sigh. This elicited a pause that seemed to linger forever.

"Rivenarr, I am afraid" a small, anguished voice, no more than a whisper. Rollo felt a curious sensation, an immense need to go to the voice and protect it with all his might.

"It will be alright, my creations will keep on climbing out of the ooze with a varying amount of human mixture as long as the second genetic material is available. They shall re-build our Earth with vast lands of metal and glass and work on newer and newer creations."

"Who will they build this for?"

"Who? These are the descendants of explorers, philosophers, poets and wizards. They will keep building so that everyday the sun passes the Earth, it will be reminded that here still lies a race that lived on in glory till its very end." The crowd was bewitched with Keilvish's voice, Rollo saw, grasping on to every word like catching fairy gossamer in trembling hands, undoubtedly, some foul sorcery of Mingo.

"And what if they choose not to? What if they lay in stupor and malaise? What if they should seek oblivion instead?" The bells on Rollo's head chimed prettily as he swung his head about to answer this unseemly query. "Ha! That will never happen. For they will never be faced with a choice to seek oblivion."

There was open weeping in many quarters of the audience now, apparently, even the copious amounts of wines and amphora were not enough to dissipate the assembly's self from the effects of the play. "The winner is Mingo the Masterful and his troupe" King Sutha said to the crowd with a hitch in his voice.

They assembled then in a great circle to observe the effects of the Kampas on their brethren. King Sutha and Keilvish who had long been embraced in amorous affection came to join the rest of those who would take the cure. Rollo had been surprised to hear that he, Naz, and Keilvish were also granted the privilege of taking the cure along with Mingo and King Sutha, while Wisk and Brask alternated sullen looks at Keilvish and Mingo. King Sutha took the cure first, as was right, and Keilvish, his paramour took it just after to better embrace in the void. Naz took hers with an oddly peaceful countenance that Rollo had never seen on her before. Mingo came next, applied Kampas to the side of his head that swelled immediately as had been the case with the others, glowing with a faint pinkish-orange glow.

Rollo felt the constricting effects of Mingo's magic ease from his body, and he felt able and sure-footed again. He took the Kampas in his hands, the crown of fools still tittering on his head. The cataracts of the baleful sun glared and waited impatiently to look down on one final scene of defiance on old Earth, and Rollo of Almerly realised he had never felt more alive.

[End of 'The Last Woman and the First' by wingo]

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Grave for a Gravemaker  
by Mordred

How long had it been, he found himself wondering. How long had it been since the fall of his master and the start of this new world? He didn't know. Time was funny here at the best of times, and for someone like him, time had no real purpose. But he thought it had been at least 50 years, maybe as many as 60.

Long enough for these men to know of him, to fear him, and yet, here they were hunting him.

He had heard the legends about himself, had helped spread them on occasion, true or not, hoping more than believing that it would help keep people away. It worked, for the most part, but every so often, the very brave or very foolish, which were usually the same thing he had found, would venture forth to try and find him.

From his vantage point, he could see them easily, despite their efforts to remain undetected. They moved with care, yes, but it was clear the 3 men beneath him were not the most experienced in stealth. They made no great mistakes, but he had figured that only the best of the best would attempt to find him, not, well, amateurs.

Maybe his legend had waned in recent years. That would have been a good thing, except that more people would seek him out, and die needlessly. He took no delight in killing, which would no doubt be a surprise to all who heard of him, but he would do so if need be.

He hoped that need wasn't present here.

For one, these were young men, the oldest surely no older than 25. That was bad enough on its own, but throw in the fact that these were clearly Wesson's soldiers, judging by their leather dusters and chainmail shirts, and that meant that killing them would only send more here, for justice or revenge.

He'd have to move. Again, no matter what happened. A bounty hunter or two was no big deal, but commissioned soldiers of The High Sheriff was another matter entirely.

He watched for a time, from his vantage point in the cliffside, as they 'silently' and methodically snaked their way through the forest.

Once, they got so close to him that if they had looked up, they would have seen him, inexperienced or not. He had taken effort to hide himself, but a perceptive man would have seen him, if he had only thought to look up, but these men were clearly not the most perceptive. He, however, did get a good look at them. They were indeed young, as he had guessed. That did not surprise him. What did surprise him was that the youngest man seemed to be their leader. They all bore the insignia of Marshall Valen's company on the back of their dusters, but only the youngest had a gunbelt. The other two carried swords strapped across their back, a habit he had never understood. He was no swordsman, had never had the aptitude for anything longer than a dagger, but it struck him as entirely inconvenient to not carry them at their sides.

He mused to himself that he should ask them about that, and almost chuckled to himself at the thought.

They passed by him, finally catching sight of his little home at the base of the cliff, and excitedly hurried closer to it, only making a little unnecessary noise as they did so, leaving him behind. They stopped at a fallen tree about halfway between his hiding spot and his home, hunkered down, and began to talk amongst themselves in hushed tones.

They had no idea that the man they were seeking was 20 feet behind and 10 feet above their backs. They had no idea that if he so desired, he could gun them all down before they even had a chance to react. If he was the man he had been, or even who they thought he was, they would be dead. The Gravemaker would have killed them without care of who they were or why they were here. The Gravemaker would have desecrated their corpses and strung them up as warnings for all who dared challenge him.

But he was not the Gravemaker. Not Anymore. He Was Ehrin Callahan again, no matter what the wanted posters or hushed whispers said. And Ehrin Callahan did not gun men down if he could help it.

It was Ehrin Callahan who left his hiding spot. Ehrin Callahan who snuck up behind them, and listened to their words. Ehrin Callahan who would leave that forgotten little forest at the base of that unnamed cliff, with a purpose and conviction he hadn't felt in 50 (or was it 60?) years.

And luckily, for her, for him, and for the world, it was Ehrin Callahan that would meet Julia Kerrigan.

[End of 'Grave for a Gravemaker' by Mordred']

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Little Sister  
by WORK

I awoke to a kiss from my little sister. Our tongues battled, hers keen on dominating mine, but I fought back with a hand to her chest and another beneath her skirt. She slapped me, and I yelped in surprise. "Stupid big bro," Navy said; her red ears betrayed her anger. I laughed, and Navy pouted, "What are you laughing about, big bro? Are you laughing at me?" She gripped the ends of her braid and pulled them over her face. I couldn't help but tease her. "I am. I'm laughing at how cute you are." As I glanced in the mirror behind her, I noticed my disheveled state—black hair, a handsome face and no pants. I wondered if Navy had taken care of my morning wood while I was asleep. My gaze drifted to her mouth, and I speculated about what might have happened. I moved in closer, sucking on her bottom lip. The sensation intoxicated me, and I knew I was crossing a line. Navy pulled back, her voice firmer than usual. "Big bro, stop." She changed the subject, asking, "Do you want to eat breakfast?" I agreed, and we rose from my bed, heading out to the kitchen. With our parents away, we had the house to ourselves. Navy cooked a delicious bacon and eggs breakfast, which we devoured together. As we finished, I caught sight of her panties on the floor, the frilly lace catching my eye. I picked them up, feeling a thrill of excitement. Sniff, sniff. Navy's face turned bright red as she scolded, "Oh, big bro, you idiot." Her blush only added to her charm, and my heart skipped a beat. At that moment, I realized I was under her spell, a prisoner to my little sister and her charms.

[End of 'Little Sister' by WORK]

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M22  
by Heng

In the glass city every tree you see is dead, but all posed lifelike, like taxidermy. No forests but forests of people on sidewalks, escalators, pedestrian crossings. All like taxidermy too. No mountains except pagoda office complexes. No valleys except apartment-block chasms. CCPNot that I get out much to see. Start job in university part-time, then continue semi-full after I drop out of Literature. Shift is eight-eleven hours, traffic-dependent. Twelve fen a post, plus bonus jiao per processed thread. Make just enough yuan to rent glass pane, wifi and coffin capsule, eat ramen and vitamin twice a day, smoke cigarettes and watch AV. Wire remainder to ba and little sis back home in forest.

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Nightshift start 00:00. Unsleep glass pane, login M22. I am not a robot.

CCPInstructor already aporising in sidebar to S81, K38, U04, plus dozen other posters on shift. Most of the time instructor just comment in sidebar text. Sometimes interrupt with black screen and digital voice. But even when not in sidebar or main window, instructor always lurking, watching, monitor all traffic. Instructor always quote and paraphrase Master Sun: type mottoes like An army depends on its spies or These are ambush sites, nests for spies. Tonight instructor quick drill us again in Three Ds - Disrupt, Distract, Derail - and drum hard distinctions between mis-, dis-, and mainformation. Then send us off to work with All war is total and endless. Your enemy knows this, and so must you.

CCPstart scan for threads. Highlight possibles and wait for instructor to signoff or overrule. Turn music on while wait, start podcast on Jin Yong. First few highlighted threads dismissed by instructor: too min users to note. Or instructor deem subject benign and/or uncontroversial. Instructor's text scroll on right periphery throughout. Always coaching us in sidebar. Your enemy is everywhere and watches everything you do. Run mute kung-fu AV in other window, open side chat on dumbphone with K38 and U04. Find new thread about north capital strikes so highlight and report.

CCPInstructor type, Go.

CCPTwo red traffic lights in mosaic, select. Capture is character for "brother". Post comment on user response. Ask dumb question, then another. Switch account and VPN, then attack same user later in thread. Accuse someone else of misinform everyone. Then switch account and VPN again. Switch mask. Switch voice and writing style: sometimes eloquent,

sometime clumsy. Masks and veils may obscure your movements and intentions, but these new identities will also be monitored, tracked and attacked. Keep switching targets until the whole thread dissolve in argument. Then report another one and start new post. Three bicycles in next mosaic, select. Capture is "silence". Reply to user responses from new burners and sock puppets. Request assist from mirrors on side thread about factorylands famine and soon all dissent quash.  
CCPYou can become ten thousand spies, but remember that all are ghosts of you.  
CCPOn microbreaks we dumbphone text or talk on side. Jab U04 about his fave basketball team lose to mine. Congratulate K38 whose daughter say first word today. Then back to it when new whisper appear or notify bubble pop.  
CCPAll your ghosts will lead your enemies to you.  
CCPNew OP says civil-war rebels should bear brunt of blame. Job now to challenge strength of conviction. Instructor type, Correct mistaken ideas. This a kind of running joke: that any idea can be wrong or right, or that any idea can be rectified. Or a thought. Or a person. In truth our job only to mime the motions. No real difference.  
CCPSo from three new voices agree, mock as kowtow, and accuse of disinfo. Then watch results proliferate: msgs support, dispute, criticise, dissect. With four new voices run it again, and again with ten new. Five trucks, no horses. Capture. Belink hundreds, thousands of times. Watch my bank credit chime up.  
CCPYour ten thousand spies must affect shades of your enemy to camouflage.  
CCPMove on to new threads but always keep small windows open on olds. Monitor same cycles of all: info-embryo birth, growth, evolution, mutation and dissolution. All live the usual one-four hour lifespan as calculated. Then auto-mods and site harmonisers sanction and preserve thread, or sanction and delete.  
CCPCamouflage yourself within the landscape, but do not become a part of it.  
CCPThings go on and on, back and forth like this - highlight, request, post, capture, heed instructor, archive, delete - for first few hours, just like any Thursday shift.

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Then around 03:45 priority thread shunt to front of stack. Special attention, instructor type. Pause put on all else. Last time a VIP barge and bulldoze all inferiors was during elections last winter.  
CCPOpen attach, follow browser launch to new chat. Unfamiliar site, heard of but never scroll: old host board and whisper space, popular only with ancients and teen ironists. But OP images familiar: like elbow breaking my jaw.  
CCPYaya, from back home forest.  
CCPIN arrest-process pix she's thinner than last see in high school. Hair longer, dye emergency-red on one side. But same bust tooth in smile, same dead challenge stare. Yaya 100%. OP title read Traitor! Venomous whore! Death to blasphemer! With multilink to arrest report, riot drone pics, protest blog, minifesto.  
CCPINstructor type, Research/familiarise. Besmirch/defend. Divide/conquer.  
CCPThread only forty seconds old and already explode with hundreds of replies. Already teem with bots and posters for and against. Strobe the OP text ripped from memetics essay Yaya alleged to write for a semiotics paper:  
CCP. . . and why the ghost country is often misconstrued in concept, its dual reality overlooked. That the ghost town image - a once-populous, now deserted place, plagued by wind and dust and banging shutters, abandoned to stray dogs - could simply be magnified to encompass the larger version is a two-fold mistake: the ghost country was never truly inhabited, nor was it ever designed to be. The ghost country does exist: from a distance, without close inspection, it appears to be exactly what it pretends to be. But equally the ghost country does not exist at all: it appears on maps but remains unseen; it has a government but no tangible industry or culture; its name can be said aloud but its population is silent . . .  
CCPThen strobe all linked items on 4x speed catch background gist, then again at 2x better absorb. A fave entry run 79 screens long, and take me almost twenty secs to blink my way through Yaya's parable on how a hive is not its structure or longevity or texture of hexagons but the will of each insect and all their combined force.  
CCPBut whole time strobing info I'm thinking of her, not as some terrorist or blasphemer. Part of my brain and flashing eye see her as I remember.

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Yaya around village, in school corridors, at forest parties, but never with same gang, often alone. All teenagers lonely, but she always seem most like outsider look in. Double so in Language and Literature classroom twice weekly, where Yaya, only sixteen, gets pushed up with us just for module on C.20 writers. Senior girls sneer while their bfs snicker at this smart upstart who win school writing award and jump two tiers, but Yaya just dead stare them. Softly nickname them all, confirm their worst fears true, and no one in L1 bully her after that.  
CCPFirst unit on wuxia, compare Jin Yong's martial arts novellas. In one class Yaya ask about connection to later punk poets, citing clear influence beyond surface dissonance, and teacher just dismiss and deny all connection to future dissidents, warn Yaya not to interrupt, silence her. Then in later unit Yaya write on Zhang Ailing as her elective, but not Lust, Caution as assigned. Yaya write on Zhang's works during counter-rev years, and teacher call her out in full before everyone: "Xi Yayun, this cannot go unpunished." Whole mosaic of distance students on screen plus everyone else in classroom: all faces blank and pale. See Yaya's face fall like being deleted. So just to deflect I say something about "double purge" and sing "Yeah, let's witch hunt again, like we did last century", and teacher yell at me and it works: ten hours detention. Yaya still pariah for rest of module, but not expelled from class or school. Sometimes later catch her eye and smile, and for a split moment I know her and her me.  
CCPRoom C.20 L1-L module end and Yaya go back down two tiers, but I still see her in corridors sometimes and wave. Sometimes see her down arcades and smoke cigarettes together and talk about Yang Xie or the Guangzhou Salon. One afternoon, drunk after school, we even kiss in the woods behind the communal hall. But feel all wrong; more like kiss little sis. And Yaya agree: both say never again, shake on it. So stick to talk about Xu Zhiyuan and Lu Min whenever we hang out, Bai Helin and Da Tui and all the other punk poets. In the last few months before school end and I move here, Yaya and me talk about write our own rebel verses, but never do. "Picture a sledgehammer exploding a head full of plum blossoms," she was fond of saying. "That is what our message should be."

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All that five, six years ago now. In time since Yaya follow through on what we always dream about. Write something important. Something taunt, provoke.  
CCPINstructor type, Post replies please M22.  
CCPSomething impossible ignore.  
CCPINstructor type, Reply M22. M22 reply and post.  
CCPAnd what Yaya say is this:  
CCPThe write about control and censorship and freedom of speech and unipartisanship and token concessions and condescension. She write about citizen right to fair trial and representation and agency and right to response. Her message run gamut from microbe to planet, from macro to universal, and criticise every avenue she encounter: all politics, realpolitik, philosophy, psychology, sociology; all history, anthropology, education, entertainment. From the most sacred sutra to the newest videogame DLC, she attack everything as distraction, existential agitprop. Above all, in all her comments and manifesto frags and blog posts, in every character tapped in her reverending online war, her writing keep hammering home the point that any future impossible without unity, and unity impossible without paradox of individual. Without paradox of collective individuals, Yaya say, we all stay stuck at this intersection, lights red or green or amber no matter, and nothing change and no one move. She never bomb state institution or kill committee member or kidnap editor; never incite violence or rouse rabble from their AV slumber. She only dream of a republic where no city is an empty theatre set, no building is cardboard, no house is corrugated tin. Where nothing is faked or juke for show. Where people are untraffickable, undisappearable. Yaya dream of a world where thoughts float unpolluted, where ideas fit like flowers on winds across a smogless sky. She imagine a different juncture, where multiple paths branch in different directions, toward different possibilities, and just imagining this is enough for the rest of the hive to denounce her, expel her, haunt her dead.

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Instructor gone full screen now. Blinding white. Electric voice drown out music and background AV.  
CCPINstructor on vc saying, "Reply." "Respond." "M22, respond."  
CCPMirrors in side chat appear on right, then left, all echoing instructor in text.  
CCPPost Write Reply Go Now Respond.  
CCPS81 join chat, dumbphone light up, ask UOK??  
CCPU04 msg too with Brother court chaos no reply.  
CCPThen electric voices choir start screaming.  
CCPViolent garble, unintelligible threat.  
CCPSo loud my glass pane's tiny speaker's tear.  
CCPStill don't type reply or talk or respond to anyone. Over all distorted noise and msgs felt everything recede. Think distant hypothetical: maybe my pix come up next thread, Venomous coward! run underneath. And think about Jin Yong and my literature course, and Lu Min and Feng Tang and punk poetry, and the Guangzhou writers, and Yaya.  
CCPAnd instructor. Over three years at same gig, hours and hours of derral, confuse, malinform and censor, and instructor never once quote my fave Master Sun-tzu motto. So now instead of reply to U04 or S81 or respond to instructor by speech or text or get to work like electric voices scream and pile in on witch hunt Yaya, I type it out. Type it out now and hit send:  
CCPThere are roads not to take.  
CCPThere are armies not to attack.  
CCPThere are towns not to besiege.  
CCPThere are terrains not to contest.  
CCPThere are ruler's orders not to obey.  
CCPThen everything switch off. All windows close in quick wave, like office tower lights going out, and glass pane screen go blank. Dumbphone wipe black and S81 and U04 cutoff, disconnected. Everyone deleted. No wifi, no link.

- + -

In the sudden silence and dawn dark I can feel how tight my capsule is. I think about me in here, and about all the people I can't see around me. Everyone lying in coffin rooms like this one, or wandering the glass chasms outside. All like ghosts. Like messengers.  
CCPI think about Yaya in a prison cell, in our classroom, in the forest. I remember someone once telling me that if you go to the midcity junction and take the elevator all the way down, you exit just under the smog line. Maybe Yaya's down there now. If you peer through the right crack in the seawall, someone said, you can maybe see the sea. You can watch the great grey waves still smashing the concrete shore.

[End of 'M22' by Heng]

Five Steps  
by Beineberg

For the third time that day, I was staring at my mother's photograph. Compared to my last memories of her, it was utterly soulless, but that's a given. A camera can never truly capture someone's self in a single picture. That's an ability exclusive to those few great artists, who not only capture, but sometimes even surpass their subject. I was never skilled enough to do that.

It was a tragedy, of course, but in a way, her death put me on the right path. On the practical side, I inherited a sum of money large enough that I could afford to not work for at least a year. And from an artistic standpoint, it was my sad story. The shock to the system that every great artist needs to melt off the outer mind layers and get to the Real essence underneath—that's what I was waiting for since I was a child. I always fantasized about horrible things—war, disease, every kind of apocalypse—that would truly puncture my soul and rescue me from boring, more everyday kinds of pain. My mother's death didn't do it exactly as I imagined, but it did provide me with the right kind of melancholy that could potentially manifest in some interesting expressions.

In this intersection of perfect circumstances, I decided: I would either become a great, True artist, or die. Simple as.

What helped my determination immensely was how reachable it all felt. All the right ingredients were inside me already, they were for a long time, and now, I just had to reach

inside myself and pull them out into the real world. The only thing that ever stopped me was my own will. This was my time of transformation; these would be the days that, if I were to become famous, would be the one thing everyone would ask about.

It was time to focus. I cancelled everything I was planning, gave up on everyone I was talking to, locked myself in my house, and got to work.

The first few weeks were quite difficult. Attempts to express myself felt awkward, as if I was trying to speak with a stutter or dance with a broken leg. The struggle was not quite in technique but more in creating something actually honest, something that could resonate, an image with a tangible soul. But still, I persisted. There is no problem on this earth that cannot be solved with enough determination.

I drew and drew, everything I could, every single day, 10 hours a day, the most I could manage before my brain started melting. When I wasn't drawing, I was studying. To become a great artist, you need to learn all the fundamentals; that's a given. I did many master studies, especially of art, that I felt had a soul, that felt Real. I paid attention to every single stroke, line of action, primary, secondary, tertiary shape design, every single carefully placed decision, and dreamt about the day, that my work would also feel Real.

Not having a job anymore certainly helped me with this effort. When I had to spend the day talking to people, it messed with me, stiffened my hands, made me nervous and panicky in the most unproductive way. After work, I'd spend hours lying down, staring at the ceiling, trying to reconnect with my own mind.

I only realized how much this was destroying me, when I could finally spend hours, days, weeks completely alone. The more time I spent buried in my art, the more the thought of talking to others seemed like a distant nightmare.

It was bliss, really. Nothing mattered, except me and my work. I would wake up, not even knowing what time it was, draw and study as much as I could, then go to sleep to recharge and do it again. One thing you always hear about great artists is that they were completely submerged into their art, and now, I finally knew what that felt like. I was my art, and my art was me, my tools being my speech, my work being my thought process. My brain was a carefully built primordial pool, only filled with the most aesthetic thoughts.

Despite this joy, over the months, my frustration heightened. I was doing exactly what I always wanted to do, so I didn't quite understand why. I figured it was a problem of will, a roadblock I had to battle against. When my jaw clenched and my thoughts started racing again, I just gripped my pencil and worked harder. Worked harder, worked harder, that was all I ever did. It hurt, but in a punishing way, it felt right. Even at my lowest, I thought I was exactly where I needed to be.

I learned to love frustration, frustration is good, frustration is growth, artistic growth. You have to experience it and get to the other side; smash your head against the wall, and it will eventually break.

For the first few months, this tension fueled me. It felt like something Real. But eventually, there were moments where it was too much to bear, even with the power of pure will, and I had to get up from my work and pace around in my bedroom, back and forth, back and forth, five steps from my desk to the door, five steps back.

I had the whole house to myself, but I did not like any of the other rooms. They all felt separate from my artistic self, full of memories and associations that would contaminate my mind, curated, fragile and specialized, like a lab-made chemical mixture, that would fizzle out when touched by anything different than itself.

But that was okay, really. My room reflected me more than any other place on earth; it was perfect for my routine. Everywhere I looked, there were my art supplies, my art taped on the walls and lying on the floor, along with prints of works that inspired me. Why would I need to go anywhere else?

And yet, despite all this, despite all the work, despite all the frustration I endured, despite molding my whole existence to this one endeavor, my art still never felt real. Quite honestly, it felt dead, as if made by someone who never saw the real world before. I comforted myself. Every day, I told myself that the reason it was so difficult was because my path was so grand. A fly can be born and live its empty life after just one day, a swan needs a month, a lion 4 months. I could feel my teeth growing day by day, but they were never visible. I told myself that I just had to wait, I had to keep working hard, one more day, one more drawing, one after another, one more, one more.

One morning, something in me broke. I just did not want to draw anymore. My whole body was stiff with terror. Looking at my supplies filled me with such visceral disgust, that I had to look away. I took a few steps towards my drawing table and, without even thinking, backed away into a corner, next to the door, pressing into it, trying to get as far away from art as possible.

I sat down, wanting to press myself into the floor and hide, like some kind of rodent. The walls were looming over me. There was still a rational voice in my head, telling me, that I needed to get back to work, but it felt distant, weak against the choking primal fear.

My hands were shaking. I closed my eyes. I couldn't draw, I didn't even want to be in the same room as my art anymore. But if I couldn't do that, if I couldn't work hard for my destiny, what else could I possibly do?

In my nervous daze, I realized, that my phone has been ringing for a couple of minutes. For a moment, I thought it was some kind of hallucination. No one ever called me, I haven't even touched my phone for a long time. It was lying on the floor, in the middle of the room.

I tried to ignore the sound. I always hated phone calls. They made me feel like I had no control. But as it kept ringing and ringing, my heart rate was increasing, my breathing so quick that I was gasping, I realized, that I needed to do something. Anything. Anything at all.

I lunged towards the phone and quickly brought it back into my corner. My fingers were so sweaty, that it was difficult to even accept the call.

It was my former classmate. We had similar tastes in many things and got along quite well. He was one of the few people I ever gave my phone number to. He was saying something to me. I asked him to repeat. He said he was going to a nearby art gallery and that we could go together. He said he remembered how I always loved art. He said he wanted to reconnect. He said he could come by my house and pick me up in his car. What did I think? What did I think?

I said yes. He said he would come soon and hung up.

For a moment, I did feel nice. Hearing his voice really lifted my spirits, reminded me of better days, when we talked about all kinds of things. I wondered, if he grew his hair out as he said he would, the last time I saw him.

I thought about what I agreed to. I liked art galleries. Maybe I would have a great time.

My hands started shaking again.

No, this wasn't great, this was a nightmare, actually. I realized, that second by second, he was getting closer. Eventually, he would arrive in front of my house, knock on my door. And he would look at me, and then we would go out, further and further away from home, go between the strangers and the loud sounds, and there would be nowhere to run.

I was hyperventilating. We would go to the gallery. Have I been in that one before? I don't think I have. I would probably have to get a map of it. Do they have those there, or not? What would I say, if he'd ask me about my opinions? I can't express anything True. I would vomit.

I tried to steady my fingers enough to type his number. This number does not exist, try again. Missed it again by the last number. Third time.

The moment he picked up, I yelled that I wasn't coming. I wanted to be polite, to be normal, but my mind was racing. I took a deep breath and still half-shouting, told him, that I was so, so sorry, but that I didn't have the time, that I needed to focus on my art more. Before he could respond, I hung up and threw the phone across the room.

There was a moment of silence. Then, relief.

This was close, very, very close. After this shock, I was so relieved that I was still in my room, on my own, surrounded only by my own thoughts. Yes, I really was happy. There was nowhere else in the world, where I wanted to be more.

Still shaking, I got up, took one, two, three, four, five steps across the room and sat down at my desk. It was time to focus again.

[End of 'Five Steps' by Beineberg]

Method of Escape  
by Duck

Bu dump, bu-dup, dbpdd-kr-whwooo krach, "shit." Anatoly Silverslav heard rebounding from behind the thin concrete wall. What followed were barely audible groans and a bellowing, "I broke my damn mirror. I can't believe I broke my damn mirror." Anatoly shifted from his cot and kicked the wall while yelling, "please, please shut up."  
"I broke my damn mirror and my balls got a hole in it."  
"I heard."  
"Then I gets to yell."

Anatoly waited a bit longer before he could hear the groans start coming back. The groans turned to wall punching and wall stamping, "I hurt my damn hand." Followed by more wall punching. Anatoly had the misfortune of being cell neighbors with possibly the loudest Jew in the entire complex. Everyone called him Koufax on account of his love of the game of baseball and how consistent a pitcher he was in the courtyard wiffleball games. He was loud, lanky, had great hair, and loved by the entire Hasidic crew during the summer when stick ball games could actually be played. Anatoly on the other hand was fat, piggy, and no one liked him. He was balding; had no talent beyond his exceptional ability to memorize long strings of numbers.

There were some others that were in Anatoly's room, another man named Levi, an Italian Jew who didn't speak any German, but was quiet and clever, so no one minded when he was around. A Polack transvestite that could never decide between absolute confirmatory or rebellion. No one cared for this person, and so he was rarely discussed beyond negging. No one knew why he wasn't with his countrymen.

Anatoly considered his cellmates and himself as a superstitious people. The following day would mark the 70th day since jubilee. The Germans had another name more official for it, Wäschtauschen, and the Hungarians just called it the big swap. All the cloth would get sent in for laundry and thus all the wealth of the prison would reset. Without a real system of money, undergarments, cloth, and anything else was the primary means of exchange. People would tear their shirts trading for tobacco, or other goods like spoons, but most of the time it was tobacco. Anatoly didn't smoke, but he considered picking up the habit.

The swap had no consistent schedule, conditions on the front effected truck routes which in turn delayed the cloth market reset. New shipments of prisoners would often cause more laundry as the fear of lice and other diseases that Hungarians and Slavs carried would be introduced to the prison unless effectively eliminated by the wardens. This caused a speculation market that went under the Germans noses. Prisoners would attempt to find prisoner intake schedules, predict happenings on the front, military production

needs, or expected disease outbreak news in order to stay ahead of the game of when the wealth reset were to occur.

Anatoly was smart enough to usually end up on the wealthy half after a month or so of the reset, but when he predicted wrong life was miserable, the soup was dirtier, and his cellmates would not speak to him until he could trade back up to a useful level of wealth. Koufax on the other hand some how always ended up with a new ball at the end of the cycle. This annoyed Anatoly. In fact this annoyed him so much Anatoly could not describe how much this annoyed him, but he was not good with words.

The following day Levi and Anatoly were resting behind the tent producing Luger bullets. Levi rummaged around his pockets for a cigarette, but couldn't find any, so he spent the next half hour searching through the dirt for scraps of the paper and leaves to put one together. He was offered a full one, American made, if he were to give up his shirt. He did.

They entered back into the facility and a German with a very nice hat asked Levi where his shirt went. This was only a formality, he knew where the shirt went. Levi said he lost it, and was pistol whipped for trading his shirt for a cigarette. Anatoly did nothing because he did not wish to be pistol whipped too. Levi didn't mind Anatoly's inaction because he too would not have done anything.

That night Levi slept exceptionally well either on account of his head trauma or the rest that comes from a hard days work, Anatoly assumed it was the former. Anatoly did not sleep well. He was upset, Koufax had received another mirror and a better ball. All the water in the facility was opaque on account of the dirt in it. Anatoly bent himself over to peer into the water in the small jug. He moved closer magnetically drawn to it. The water seemed to get clearer, the surrounded walls of the jug got more blue. He began to fall through finding himself elevated and falling two hundred feet above a gorge of water. Infinity green on all sides, a forest sprawled encompassing the most beautiful lake he'd ever seen. The wind opened his lungs and he breathed again. He neared the water and the wind was warm. He hit the water and his whole body relaxed and he was free. He sank deeper to where the light could not penetrate. He stopped sinking and began to fall again through the roof and down smashing his water jug. He fell asleep. When he awoke he smelled like stale dirt and old funk, but he always smelled like that, so he sat up and went back to work taking a piece of bread by the door.

[End of 'Method of Escape' by Duck]

.....  
Wotan  
by Pancakesyrup

Wotan.

It was him who sent me down. I can't really prove it though. I saw him - Wotan, I mean - pacing throughout the court unnoticed, whispering in the judge's ear; the judge with that stupid silk shit sitting on his head.

Then he started painting the walls, plunging a fist into his dead eye, squelching around for ink. Runes, six feet high and a clotted red, everywhere on all sides and glowing. Like some grim ancient underpass covered in dripping graffiti.

The judge rapped the gavel, very nice, polite and lavender-like. Tap tap. They took me out as Wotan stared me down, his dethroned eye an abyss, standing there before his runes unregarded by all. I was screaming my head off. The judge thought he had got me good. Not true. It was Wotan. I was still out of it, even then.

I'd often been spazzed out in the town library before this all, watching a lot of YouTube videos about Wotan actually; paganism and all that bollocks. I think that messed me right up, because that's when I began having visions when I was on it, just like that last time in the courtroom. Well that was all because I strangled some guy or something and now here I am.

I woke up after five days in the cell feeling like an open grave; no water, no food in me, nothing. Someone must have watched me stirring, cos they slid some grub through the gate right after and also a big bottle of water that only just about fit. I devoured it all.

Prison can be quite a sour place for a guy like me. I don't care much for it. After a while I was just squeaking and humming and singing all the time up there, talking nonsense and such, just to pass the time, and they must have got tired of that cos pretty soon they put me on gainful employment, so to speak.

One morning they brought me to a small room, about the size of this place, with a cheap office chair, desk and computer in it. I remember the small window with the light just about getting in but it was heavily barred and fogged out anyway.

Rehabilitation is what government policy calls it, the guard said it would give me a sense of purpose, but really it's just slave labour.

Nowadays there's so many robots and bugs and viruses and evil spirits on the internet if you want to talk to anyone you first need to prove that you're a human. So they sat me down in the chair and shut the door and every so often something would pop up on the screen and I would have to convince the thing I'm there, and the internet would be happy and then I'd sit there and wait for the next one. It'd be just me in there 'til they came back and got me. I never asked what the pop-ups were for.

But the best thing about the job was the chocolate bar I'd get at the end of every shift. Yeah I love chocolate, I do. In fact that's exactly how they sold it to me, otherwise I'd still be singing the echoey cell blues, lying back on the cot all on me lonesome like.

They gave me a time limit for each one. For a lot of them I just had to click on a little square. Those ones were easy money. For others I had to match the images, or do some maths, or type a code. And I was locked out of everything so I couldn't do nothing else even if I tried. The guard said the last guy got in trouble for doing something like that.

And the white light in the room gave me a headache.

It was the hardest job I ever had.

Here's the complete list of chocolate bars I ever received:

- Twix
- Wagon Wheel (not technically a bar but I asked for them)
- Mars Bar
- Toffee Crisp
- Yorkie
- Lion Bar
- KitKat
- Aero

I told them if I ever get a Bounty I'd pack it in.

And that was it for a while; wake up, escorted to the shower, back to the room, small breakfast through the door, short commute down the corridor to my lovely office, prove to the computer I'm human a hundred times over, luncheon, work again, chocolate bar, back in the cell, hum for a bit, dinner. One day whilst waiting for the shower I saw them drag a fellow prisoner down to solitary, all solemn like. He'd been acting up, apparently. There but for the grace of God go I!

Funny, although I hated the work it turned out I was pretty good at it, you know, matching the images, not tempted to rig it up for porn and all that. Pretty soon my good performance got me some more privileges, so I got a book out from the library, and you know even after that day at court I was still pretty obsessed with Wotan so I got a book out about him ("Wotan and the Germanic Belief in Fate"), and then they allowed me letters from the outside, but I never got any. Me friends and family didn't want nothing to do with me after all that whole business, you know. Can't blame 'em. And the other junkies, they don't really care about you, once you're gone.

So one day I was singing to myself again, something nice and soothing like a lullaby, getting ready for bed. I'd been reading the book about Wotan until I got close to dozing. Then the grate to my room slid open a split second and something flicked through. I wasn't sure it was the door at first, cos sometimes I still get those little explosions in my head when I'm close to sleep. And it was strange, because I didn't hear no guard outside like I usually could, but then I was always more alert when hungry and waiting for dinner. And I was pretty tired, I guess.

I walked over, picked it up and gave it a looksee. It was a plain white windowless envelope you'd see anywhere. The front was unmarked and the flap on the back was tucked into itself rather than stuck on. I stuck a thumb in, prized it open and pulled out a three-folded sheet of plain A4.

I unfurled it and instantly recalled being dragged out of that courtroom months earlier. Under the eye of Wotan, under the runes.

The grate couldn't be opened from my side, so I just threw thing in the opposite corner and jumped into bed, holding onto my knees in the corner with the light still on for a while as my heart grew steady again. I was a state. I could still see the dull red, dagger like scrawl stabbing at me incoherently from the folded page.

I couldn't do nothing else but turn the light off. That helped. I slept, surprisingly well, and didn't look at it until the next evening after work. I got in, picked it up and took it over to my bed. It helped the nerves that I still had a Wagon Wheel, which I ate as I looked it over. The first thing I wanted to know was, how did it get past screening? Every letter that gets sent to the nick gets checked for anything sensitive. So how could they tell? And if they gave it to some Viking up there to check, didn't they think to provide a translation?

I must have read my library book from cover to cover in the next two nights, just for something to help decipher those runes. It was to no avail. They continued to stare back at me under that harsh prison light, just like He once did back in the courtroom.

Then it got so bad that work suffered. I didn't dare to bring the letter, but in those moments of boredom between the puzzles I swear the secret almost came to me. And then I'd miss the pop-up, or I'd get something wrong, or sometimes I'd enter words and messages into the text field, just to see if He answered me. Little messages down to Him, the Psychopomp.

The chocolate bar they gave me that day was the last one I ever got. It wasn't one from the list. It was a Snickers, completely out the ordinary. All nutty and variegated. Perfect fodder, I thought. And a sign. I took it back to my room, stuffed it down my pants, and opened my runes until I fell asleep under the light.

By the next morning the Snickers had turned to a sticky mash among my thighs. When the guard knocked on my door to take me to the showers, I gave him a handful of it.

And now I'm down here, down in solitary. And you're here with me.

[End of 'Wotan' by Pancakesyrup]

.....



"That's something you don't see every day," Lyndon snidely remarked to Woodrow on his way to the door, which his partner was still dumbstruckly holding open.  
"Yes, at least not here..."  
They both stepped outside together into the crimson sunbeams.  
Woodrow had encountered a few women in his post-grad classes, but seeing someone like her this far East was not something he expected at all.  
He wished he could have been more polite.  
And seeing her face at first, and not just his...  
It had been very long indeed since Woodrow had first confronted the notions these seismic feelings unlocked, and now they were rocking him anew.  
Reaching the car, each man opened their door, sat down, and closed it in complete synchronization with the other, as if reflections.  
Woodrow would sometimes make deliberate efforts to distinguish his own movements from Lyndon's—and thereby Lyndon's from his—but not with his brain as frazzled as it was, even if it had not been for the visage of the woman, because:  
Waiting for Woodrow at home would be the Draw results.  
He punched 239 students—CHILDREN—into the Pool... and he knew that only 5 of them wouldn't be Drawn.  
All throughout the appointment, at the time the Draw must have been taking place, Woodrow had been praying—  
//Pass over Grover.. Pass over Grover... Pass over//—  
"So, excited?"  
Woodrow hadn't yet started the car.  
"Of course, Lyn. I mean, after all, we're finally going to be parents..."  
"Mhmm! It's been just the two of us, and now it's really going to be three. And who knows what the future has in store? Maybe more..." Lydon mused, lowering his head affectionately into Woodrow's chest.  
//Does Lyn really not see the irony in the words he's using?//

#### EXECUTION DAY

Of course Grover wasn't spared.  
The thoughts of the 234 eclipsed the 5, and the thoughts of the 234 simplified into Grover, that innocent, terrified young boy who so reminded Woodrow of a younger version of himself.  
The new family had been home all day—it was a global holiday after all.  
Lyndon was always very subdued and introspective on Execution-Day, thinking about his three brothers whom the Eternal Punishment had once ferried away.  
On the couch in front of their TV, Woodrow bouncied Rutherford on his lap, attempting to find meaning inside the infant's effulgent eyes—eyes which were genetically identical to his own eyes, to Lyndon's, and to the eyes of everyone he had ever and would ever meet.  
While overt meaning never shone, Woodrow knew at least he had found beauty and love, and they would have to be enough.  
A blurring wave of memories swept over his mind:  
//Do I remember bouncing myself on my knee like this?//  
Meanwhile, Lyndon had already gone uncharacteristically quiet—the broadcast was starting...

VOICE-OVER: 327 years ago, Marcus Stansfield murdered 4 children belonging to our Galaxy's Royal Family.  
324 years ago, he was sentenced to die for his crimes, recursively, and with extreme prejudice.  
320 years ago, between the ends of a pair of rifles, Marcus Stansfield was compelled to erect the first cloning vats on Tantalus.  
These rifles were trained on him by two of the Royal Family's Guardsmen—the only humans not sharing our DNA to ever set foot on Tantalus.  
302 years ago, Marcus Stansfield offered Marcus Stansfield Jr. as proxy to fulfill his first sentence.  
Also 302 years ago, Marcus Stansfield committed suicide.  
Over the next 300 years, the prisoners of Tantalus—all of us copies of this heinously evil man—have lived and died for only two reasons:  
1. To satisfy Stansfield's sentence.  
2. To possibly achieve Rehabilitation.  
As of this year, the Galactic Queen has declared that Rehabilitation has not yet been achieved.  
As of today, 42,828,137,922 executions have been carried out.  
After today, 42,944,183,441 executions will have been carried out...

#### EPILOGUE

After the Drawn are brought to the Royal Family's planet and dispatched, what is left of the Executeds' bodies are sent back to Tantalus.  
Woodrow didn't tell Lyndon, but he attended Grover's funeral.  
After the service, Woodrow approached Grover's father, Donald, who gave the high school counselor a tarnished envelope.  
"He knew what you were trying to do for him, Mr. Hayes," Donald said, "And, in the end, that was enough. Thank you."  
Woodrow hugged Grover as an adult, and saw himself in the faces of the man's children, who squeezed him back.  
In the tear-and-blood-stained envelope were all the words Woodrow needed to read to not want to quit his job anymore.  
Also inside was a strange-looking flower from a planet he knew he had visited once before.

END OF QUOTA  
BY INEPTIA

[End of all 17 stories.]

This text-to-speech was read by the 'Karen' voice on Mac, exported as .aiff via Terminal, and converted by ineptia to .mp3 @22050hz/32kbps using Audacity)