

Spring 2021

## Expressions 2021

Wes Null

T. Lane Williams

Kenneth Vierck

Jana Howard

Donna Scheid

*See next page for additional authors*

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**Authors**

Wes Null, T. Lane Williams, Kenneth Vierck, Jana Howard, Donna Scheid, Harmony Kooistra-Floyd, Angelica Parsons, Baylie Bowers-Whaley, Ava Stork, and Isabella Rastetter

# expressions

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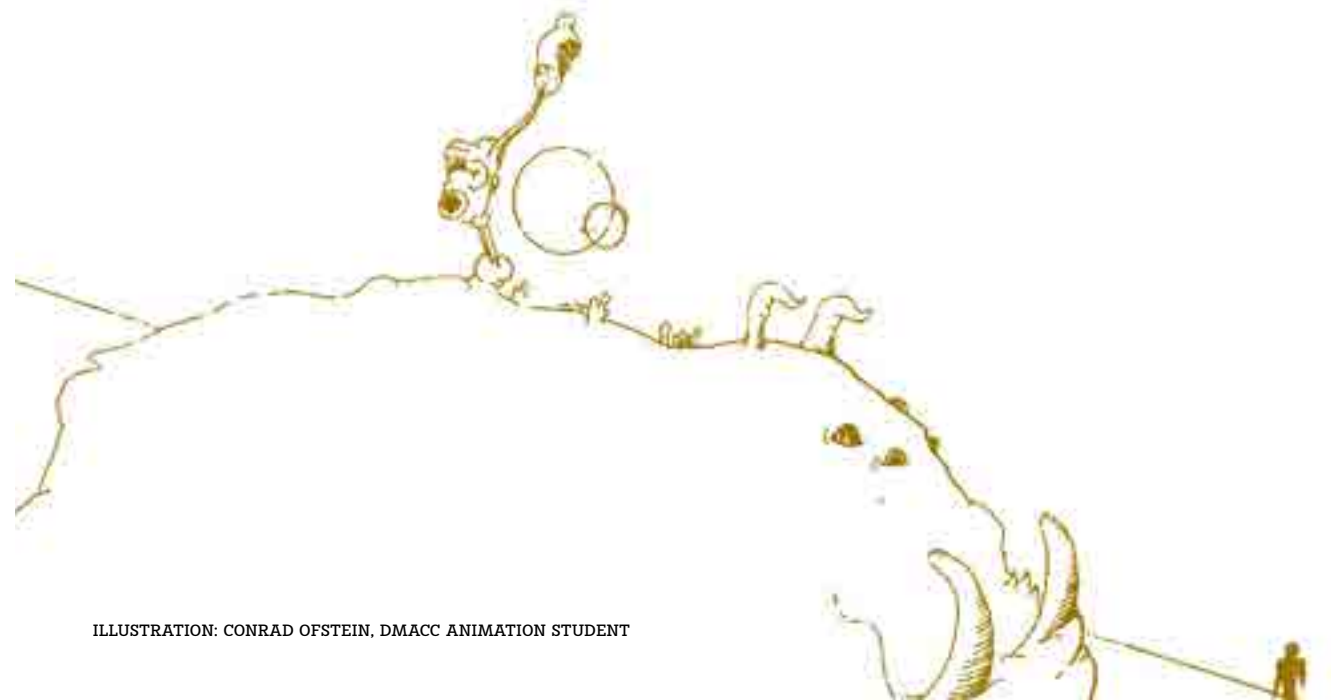




ILLUSTRATION: JORDYN BOSTWICK, DMACC ANIMATION STUDENT

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Wes Null** is a linguistics student living in Ames, IA that enjoys music, long walks on the beach and Lenny and Larry's mint chocolate chip protein cookies.

**T. Lane Williams** is the proud father of a high school artist. At age 50, his satchel packed, he began his educational journey toward becoming a legal advocate.

**Kenneth M. Vierck** is a Midwest poet and writer. His work has been published in the Lyrical Iowa 2020 anthology.

**Jana Howard** is a DMACC student who won Honorable mention for her poem, "Indian Hills 2019-2020".

A student who's spent time in multiple states, **Donna Scheid** will graduate from Ankeny Centennial in 2021, where she participated in varsity show choir, concert choir, band, large group speech, theatre and volunteered frequently. She plans to attend Iowa State University to pursue a Graphic Design degree as well as Full Sail University online to earn her bachelor's in Music Production. Donna uses poetry to emote creatively and plans to continue throughout her life.

**Harmony Kooistra-Floyd** is a curious, multiracial kid who doesn't know much about anything and loves to remedy that whenever possible.

**Angelica Parsons** is a 24-year-old quasi-adult who likes pasta and dislikes making phone calls. Her fiction piece is the first chapter from a larger project she hopes to eventually finish.

**Baylie Bowers-Whaley** started at DMACC in Fall 2019 and is looking to get her bachelor's degree in English and Education at Drake University.

**Ava Stork** is a junior at Centennial High School in Ankeny, Iowa. She is involved in show choir, and enjoys hiking, reading, and writing. She plans to continue writing through the end of her high school career and throughout college as well.

For **Isabella Rastetter**, it wasn't always easy to read and write. She had an eye dysfunction for which she had to do eye therapy for a year. After that, it wasn't until she started getting flowing ideas that she started writing.

# I HATE MUSIC

Wes Null

I hate music

I'm tired of the noise

Leave me to my small white house in my plain green yard

Where I can stay inside and watch daytime TV like I used to

When I was home sick from school and All expectation

I hate music

Almost like I hate the sun

Which lights up every road not taken

And makes plain all that I have left to do

The chatter inside, enjoy life, be that guy, Against the ticking of time

And the twilight of the dying day

Watching warm faces pass by me at work

Their well-being opaque to me

Yes, I hate music

And it's attempts to control me

I don't care how many "looks" that gets

They can all go to hell

And in my tantrum maybe I'll bury myself in a hole

Where I'll hear nothing but the muffled sound of passing cars

Forever and ever

Or at least for a while

I hate music

I got tired of the callouses

That developed on my fingers

And hardly anywhere else

As I stretch my hand over a fretboard

To fill another poor soul's ears

With another false promise

I hate music

And the way it makes me remember

Endless days and nights in summer

Spent on porches, in communion

With the neighborhood lost boys

Rattling off forever on the meaning of life, girls, jokes and all of the above

And leaving our stuff at each other's houses

I hate music

And the way it makes me remember her

Dark hair, soft eyes, the mutuality

Of the baffling recognition

Of what was happening between us

You couldn't pick a favorite song

We agreed it was a stupid question

As we drove for hours up to D.C

Drowning in sound and fantasy, poisoning ourselves in the sweetness

I hate music

For the way it reminds me

Of the last time I felt eternity

The last time I could dream forever

Before the days of reckoning

With decay

And the rot within

And how convinced I am that I carry a soul

Of which not even birds would adorn with a song

I hate music

Because it contains all of the beauty I'd wish to embody

But can't

Because I would rather resign myself now

Then bear myself

To the proven possibility of scorn

By my greatest love

Yes, I hate music

Because most of all

I'm afraid, really

That it's the other way around





# in the midst

Donna Scheid

Aquamarine pools live within your eyes,  
Little koi reflecting the sun  
From shining golden scales

Wildflowers awaken from their naps  
Upon hearing the coo of your sweet voice  
Encouraging even the wilted petals  
To embrace the sun  
With fully splayed arms

And with every soft kiss  
Comes a flood of euphoria  
The taste of rich vanilla  
The waft of earthen lavender  
The sense of melancholia  
Worn away like crippled autumn leaves

The night hides feverishly beneath the horizon  
Irrelevancy set by the sun's screaming light  
Hope performed by the dances of distant stars

And you sit in front of me, oblivious  
You do not know the beauty that you possess  
You do not see the vibrancy of your own light  
And the influence that it has over the earth

My only hope is that one day  
You'll see it too

ILLUSTRATION: KATE CEBAN, DMACC ANIMATION STUDENT



# INDIAN HILLS STILLS

2019  
2020

Jana Howard

Moved an hour away

Made new friends

Made new habits

Smoked every day

Drank every night

Wasted all of my money

Stopped going to class

Stopped eating

Stopped caring

Slept around

Slept all day

Partied all night

Vomited all night

Cried all night

Cried my way back home



# LIFF & DEATH

Ava Stork

**Aven Andrews was the type of girl you remembered. For all the right reasons, for all the wrong ones, it didn't make her any less memorable.**

Her hair was such a dark brown it almost looked black, save for when the sunlight streaming through the classroom window touched it. She always seemed nervous, knee bouncing under her uniform, black painted nails drumming against the old wooden desks of our Advanced Literature classroom. Professor Finley would catch her reading books under that desk all the time. It was almost comical to watch. As soon as the Professor turned his back after confiscating the book, she would pull out another one, glancing up every so often to maintain the look of engagement. By the end of the hour-long class, he would have a miniature stack of Aven's books on the edge of his desk. When we were dismissed, she would simply scoop them up, then gingerly place them back into her leather satchel. She read like she would die tomorrow, and didn't want to waste anytime.

Maybe her jitteriness came from the coffee she consumed every morning; she could practically guzzle the black liquid. After all, she did work at the local coffee shop, a charming little place just down the street from the school. She fit in there, with the dim lighting, the dark wood, the smell of bitter black coffee beans in the air. I watched her often, in a totally non creepy way. I couldn't help it. She was intriguing, like not only did she read stories, but she had many to tell. Every time I went to the library, there she was. Sometimes I craned my neck to see whatever it was she was reading. It had to be good, for it looked as if she had completely tuned the rest of the world out.

Today, she sat hunched over a thick looking textbook, its pages yellowed and fraying at the edges. Her long hair was like a shield around her, the curtains of her wispy bangs falling into her eyes, the color of melted chocolate. They stood out against her sharp jutting cheekbones and the pale, ghostly white of her skin. That was what people called her. "Ghost girl." It sounded a bit cliché and stupid, but was probably very hurtful at times from her end. Yet, she seemed unbothered by it. If someone walked by and whispered it, she would continue reading as if she had never heard them. Perhaps she was so engrossed in her book that she really didn't. The others said

she could see dead people, that the reason she didn't have any friends was because she only spoke to ghosts. Everyone in the school was unique in some way, but no one interested me more than the rumors about her. Everyone else seemed boring and insignificant in comparison. I had to find out if it was true. I knew I had to be subtle about it, though. She didn't seem like the kind of person that would trust someone easily, so I had to tread lightly if I wanted to uncover the truth.

The next day I spotted her in the lunchroom, tucked away in the corner. She was sitting at one of the long tables that stretched across the dining hall, an untouched bowl of soup growing cold beside her. Before I knew it I was making my way over to her, my curiosity too great to keep holding back. It was the only thing fueling my decisions when it came to her. At first when I slid in across from her, she didn't notice. Too busy reading, per usual. And as always, I couldn't tell what she was reading. After a few moments, she seemed to register I was there, blinking up at me with a somewhat confused expression.

"What are you reading?" I asked, pointing to the pale blue cover. Her hands froze over the pages.

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," she answered quietly, running a finger absentmindedly over the words on the page.

"Lewis Carroll," I nodded approvingly.

"My mom used to read it to me when I was a kid, it's a classic," I explained.

She eyed me curiously, a small smile curving at her lips.

"Elliot. Elliot Montgomery," I stuck out my hand awkwardly, and she wrapped her slender fingers around it tentatively. She nodded as if she already knew who I was, blowing a lock of her bangs out of her eyes. I wasn't sure what else to say. I couldn't very well just ask her if she could really see ghosts. She probably assumed I knew her for that reason, so she didn't offer her own name in return. And after all, we were classmates. I chastised myself for acting like we were complete strangers. We technically were, but I assumed she hadn't been as interested in me as I was her. *You're overthinking it.* I pushed my thoughts away and turned my attention back to her. She seemed eager to return to her book, so I



pulled out my own to resume reading. *And Then There Were None*, by Agatha Christie. I'd read it once before, but it was one of my favorites. You could tell a lot about someone by the books they read, and I noticed Aven glancing at the book thoughtfully. Our tastes seemed to be on entirely different spectrums, yet somehow it worked. We continued to read our respective books in silence, until the bell sounded and our lunch break unfortunately came to an end.

We continued our lunchtime reading sessions every day, and I sometimes attempted to make small talk. She always had a new book, though I never questioned them, or her. I continued on to the next mystery book like I always did, and it slowly became a routine. I didn't have anyone else to sit with, and her presence was quiet, yet comforting. She didn't seem to mind my company either, so I didn't stop coming. After a few weeks, I suggested we start swapping books. She hesitantly agreed, and soon Professor Finley had to start confiscating *my* books during class too. Aven's books, I should say. The ones she chose for me were a variety of genres, which I actually ended up enjoying. They were mostly classics, but they ranged from other children's tales to period pieces to greek mythology. My brain had been hard-wired to decipher mystery books, and it felt good to give it a little break from all of the crime-solving.

It took time, but Aven slowly started to warm up to me. I could tell she had slight trust issues, but I didn't blame her, especially after seeing the way the other kids at school treated her. Our discussions mostly revolved around books, but I didn't mind if it meant I got to talk to her. We started meeting outside of the lunchroom, instead sitting underneath the large willow tree in the school's old courtyard. It was still springtime after all, so the weather was perfect.

"Favorite Shakespeare play," I said.

She turned her eyes up to the clear blue sky, pondering. "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*," she answered, crossing her legs underneath her. "And you?" she asked, resting her chin on her hand.

"Othello," I replied, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. She always seemed like she needed three years worth of sleep. I just assumed it was because she read so much. That was the only conclusion I could seem to draw about her, always Aven and her books. They were a part of her, but I

needed to uncover a different one.

"Let me guess, you think that Iago wasn't entirely to blame," she sniffed.

I smirked, knowing she was right. "There's no way he could've plotted that entire agenda against Othello. There was another reason behind it," I insist. A brain hard-wired for mystery, indeed. She rolled her eyes playfully, but didn't contradict me.

"Fine. Favorite character in *Pride and Prejudice*? I gave it to you a few weeks ago, so you should have finished it by now," she observes, leaning back on her elbows.

"I have. And I'd have to say it's definitely...Mr. Collins."

She jolts her head to look at me, horror etched across her face.

I laugh.

She rolls her eyes again but reveals a small smile. "I thought you were serious," she chuckles softly, shaking her head.

"When am I ever serious?" I joke, twirling a blade of grass between my fingers.

"I don't know, it seems to me like you're pretty serious about your mysteries," she shrugs.

She wasn't wrong. They had always been fascinating to me. Never did I think I'd be in the center of one. My smile faded.

"They're only really serious when they're real," I said.

"What do you mean?" Aven asked, cocking her head to the side. I sighed, stomach clenching.

"You know Lilith, right? Lilith Moore?"

Aven nodded.

I wasn't sure if they had any classes together, but they probably knew of each other. She was the school's notorious golden girl, well-liked by almost everyone. She was a bit of a teacher's pet, but she also happened to be our class president, so no one really ever mentioned it. "She was supposed to give a presentation with me this morning in biology, but she never showed. We've only been working on it together for a week, but I don't think she's the type of person to ditch class," I confessed, staring at the ground.

"Maybe she's just sick. Or her parents called her out," Aven suggested, squinting up at the clouds.

“Yeah, maybe,” I replied. I was sort of relieved that I didn’t have to present right away, but I couldn’t help but have a weird feeling about the whole situation.

When a few days had passed after my conversation with Aven, and Lilith was still absent from every class we had together, I began to worry. Even her friends had no idea where she was. The professors wouldn’t say anything, and there was no news or gossip. Despite not having any close friends, I was a decently connected guy. My curiosity soon became fixated on Lilith, and I wanted desperately to know what was going on with her. A part of me knew it wasn’t really my business, but I figured as her classmate and project partner I had a right to know.

Lilith was all anyone talked about for the next week, the school taking on an excited yet fearful air. Everyone knew Lilith in some way, and everyone wanted to know what happened to her. Where she was. If she was doing okay. At lunch, I asked Aven what she thought about it all, now that it was evident that something wasn’t right. She only pursed her lips, choosing to stay silent about the matter. I wondered if she had ever even spoken to Lilith. I ate my food and tried to focus on my book, but my mind was elsewhere. On Lilith, on Aven, on how the whole school was buzzing with activity.

It only worsened when the police showed up during my English class, taking students out a few at a time. I assumed it was for questioning, and I glanced at Aven worriedly. Her brows were furrowed tightly as she stared at the door, watching the police intently. I watched nervously as they gestured for her to come with them, and she did so quietly and calmly. They even took Professor Finley at one point, and our class was left to be supervised by a deputy.

I kept my head low, but my mind was far away from the essay we were supposed to be writing. Soon it came to be my turn, and my stomach fluttered with panic as I was taken out of the classroom and into an empty one across the hall. I passed Aven on the way, and gave her a curt nod. Her eyes were stormy, hands clenched tightly at her sides. I gulped, sitting in one of the chairs the officer gestured at. I glanced at the officer across from me, seated on top of the desk. He had one foot perched on top of a chair, the other dangling on the floor. I’m sure the position was meant to come off as totally non-threatening, but I couldn’t help but be intimidated by

his stern expression. I took a deep breath. People in mystery books were questioned by police all the time. *I could do this.*

“What’s your name, son?” the officer asked.

I glanced at the name badge on his uniform. Sergeant Quinn. I’d have to remember that. “Elliot Montgomery, sir,” I replied, my voice coming out strained. I swallowed again, wishing I had drunk more water today.

“And you’re a classmate of Ms. Moore, is that correct?” Sergeant Quinn said.

“Yes, sir. We have Advanced Literature, history, and biology together,” I answered, growing slightly more confident.

“Biology. Professor Brady, right?”

I nodded.

“Well, Mr. Montgomery. Professor Brady tells me you and Lilith were assigned to complete a project together. Tell me all about that,” he said, leaning back.

“Lilith and I chose to research organelles, and we worked on the project every night in the library. It was due at the end of last week, and on Friday morning we had prepared to give our presentation. When I came to class that morning, she never showed. The night before was the last time I saw her,” I explained, knee bouncing.

“Night was the only time that worked for her schedule,” I added, placing a hand over my knee to get it to stop. I was just as bad as Aven. The sergeant only nodded, turning away from me to speak to another officer in hushed tones. I felt incredibly out of place and awkward, but I tried not to let it show. He turned back to me, expression solemn.

“Lilith Moore is now an official missing person case. From what we know so far, you are the last person that was in contact with her before she disappeared. Is there any other information you have concerning her whereabouts? Did she say anything to you before she left that night?” he asked, folding his hands in front of him.

I felt my stomach drop. *An official missing person. I was the last one to see her. What did this mean? Was I a suspect now? Where could Lilith have gone?*

“Mr. Montgomery?”

“She didn’t tell me anything. It was just like every other night,” I mumbled. The sergeant nodded, standing and gesturing for

"I felt my  
stomach drop."



me to join him. As I was ushered out by another officer, I heard him say something to one of his colleagues.

"Keep an eye out on that one," his rough voice sounded. I decided that I needed to find out what happened to Lilith, now more than ever. I loved mysteries, yes, but I needed to prove that I had nothing to do with her disappearance, even if the police hadn't outright blamed me yet. I had no idea where to start, but I knew I couldn't do it by myself. Aven would need to help me, regardless whether she fully trusted me or not. Not only would I be able to clear the suspicion surrounding my name, but maybe Aven's gift could be of use. If she could somehow find Lilith, then I would know for sure if the rumors were true.

That proved harder to accomplish than I anticipated. Every time I brought up Lilith, Aven would freeze up and change the subject. I headed to her coffee shop after my last period class, relieved to find she was working today. I ordered an americano and found a seat in the corner, pulling out a notebook. I tried to make a list of everything I knew about Lilith, all of her friends, classes, any place I'd ever seen her. It unfortunately made for a very short list. I was no Sherlock Holmes and this was no *A Study In Scarlet*, but it was a start. I looked up as Aven approached me, coffee in hand.

"Thanks," I said as she placed it in front of me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked softly, slightly confused. I cursed myself in my head. She probably didn't realize I knew she worked here.

"Brainstorming," I replied quickly, gesturing to my notebook. She paled when she realized what it said. When she turned to go, I grabbed her wrist.

"Hey, I could really use your help with this," I gestured to the notebook again.

"Let the police handle it," she replied, pulling away.

"The police suspect me," I blurted out. Her eyes widened.

"What?"

"I was the last one to see Lilith, and now they're watching me. If I can find out what happened to her, maybe I can prove to them that I had nothing to do with it," I explained, running a hand through my mess of brown curls. Aven bit her lip, contemplating. She sighed, glancing at the empty cafe before

sitting down across from me.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Is there some way that you can...find her? Or see her?” I asked hesitantly, wincing a bit. We had never really acknowledged her ability, and I didn’t want to ruin the trust that we had built up, but this was urgent. She sucked in a breath, fingers drumming on the table.

“I-”

“Aven! I need you on the bar,” someone called from the register. She shot me an apologetic look as she stood, straightening her black apron.

“Look, let the police do what they need to do, and if they can’t find Lilith, *then* we intervene.”

I smiled at the mention of *we*. She wasn’t outright agreeing to help me, but I knew I had her hooked.

“This isn’t something that should be meddled with, Elliot. Disappearances....they never end well,” she warned, worry clouding those big brown eyes of hers. I nodded, turning my concentration back to my notebook.

“I know. We can talk about it later,” I suggested, and she left me to do my detective work. It *felt* like I was in one of my mystery books. I just hoped that it would end with the conflict being solved. Aven was right. This wasn’t something to be taken lightly. By dinner that night, I was fresh out of ideas. Everything was a dead end; nothing made sense. There were so many possibilities and explanations as to why Lilith would have disappeared, and I didn’t have the slightest idea which one applied to her. I dug my fork into my bowl of pasta, letting out a frustrated sigh. I sat up straighter as Aven slid in next to me.

“No book this time?” I joked, but she didn’t return my smile.

“I have something to tell you. It’s...it’s about Lilith,” she said quietly, eyes darting around the room.

“What is it? Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Not here. Too many people.” she whispered, though she spoke fast and the words ran together. We clambered up from our seats at the table, and she walked fast towards the door. I could tell just by the look in her eyes that whatever this was about, it wasn’t good. We wove through the corridors, and I realized we were headed towards the old courtyard again, our

normal place of meeting. It was still fairly light outside, but it looked like there were rain clouds passing overhead. A solemn sky for a solemn time. The courtyard looked the same as it always did, old stone benches covered in moss sitting atop the overgrown grass. I suggested we sit on the edge of the large round fountain, the marble cracked and covered in vines. But Aven moved past that as well, finally reaching the massive willow tree at the end of the courtyard. I suppose even this matter didn’t provoke a change in scenery. I shivered in the chilly air, realizing I had forgotten my uniform blazer back in my dorm and was left with only my red sweater. Aven settled at the base of the tree, resting her head calmly against the withered bark of it.

“Sit,” she instructed, gesturing to the spot next to her.

I did as I was told, the tree rough and hard against my shoulders. I stretched my hands behind my head, trying to get comfortable. We had no books to discuss this time, rather the story was unfolding right in front of our eyes.

“So,” I began, glancing at Aven. She was staring up at the sky again, probably watching the clouds darken. “What-”

“Lilith is dead,” she stated, unblinking. My mouth instantly ran dry, cold dread seeping into every bone.

“*What?*” I said again, disbelief making my voice crack.

“I saw her when I was coming back from the library this morning. I followed her all the way out here, and I just watched her. It wasn’t until she turned around that I realized that...she was a ghost,” Aven replied softly.

I was at a loss for words. I sat, mouth agape, and just watched as the rain began to come down. I almost didn’t believe her. But why would she lie to me about something like this? She knows what finding Lilith means for me. And isn’t that what I’ve been trying to figure out all along? If it was really true, if Aven could really see ghosts, then the only way to prove that Lilith was truly dead was for us to find her body. It had to be somewhere at the school, right? If Aven saw her ghost in this very courtyard, didn’t that mean that her body was somewhere nearby? But wouldn’t the police have found her already if it was? I didn’t know how these things worked, and I didn’t feel like asking Aven to get into the details. I shuddered, though it wasn’t from the cold droplets pelting my face.

“How-how is that even possible? What happened to her?” I was tired of asking questions, I just wanted answers.

Aven pursed her lips. “I’m not quite sure,” she said as she twisted the silver skull ring on her right thumb. How fitting. A skull ring for a girl who could see death. She said nothing more, and I just stared at her as we watched the rain come down harder.

“We have to find out where she died, so we can at least notify the police,” I murmured. So far, they hadn’t been able to find anything. I wasn’t sure if they were still watching me, but the deputy’s were a regular sight at the school. She nodded slightly, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

“Can you find her?” I asked, glancing at Aven, our sopping wet clothes. She hesitated, opening her mouth though no sound escaped.

“I-I’d need something of hers. Lilith’s. A personal object, something small. I think maybe if I find something that’s connected to her, then I can trace it back to where she died,” she mumbled. I could see the wheels turning in her mind, and for a moment I was almost convinced. If I found something of Lilith’s, it could give me a possible lead, especially if Aven’s plan didn’t work out. I stood up, and reached my hand out. But she stayed on the ground.

“I like it out here,” she said, fixing the hair the rain had plastered to her face.

“You’ll freeze,” I replied, shivering already myself.

“I need to think,” she blinked up at me, still twisting that ring. I sighed and began my way back into the school. Things were eerily quiet in the hallways, and the gilded paintings seemed to watch me as I returned to my dorm.

A personal object. There was only one place I could find that. Most everyone was still at dinner, so I quickly changed out of my soaked clothes and decided to go searching for one. I had pondered everything three times over already, and I didn’t want to waste any time.

I started towards the girl’s dorms, searching until I found Lilith’s. I knocked, and when no one answered, I darted inside, being careful to lock the door behind me.

A sense of unease settled over me as I slowly made my way around the room. The small closet on the other side of the room was filled with a plaid skirt, a few white button up shirts, a red sweater, and an extra blazer. It was the standard

uniform for the girls, nothing out of the ordinary there. The bed was neatly made, no signs of disarray or struggle. Her desk was painfully organized, the pencils lined together perfectly, stacks of sheet music and assignments piled neatly in the corner. I leafed through a few of them, the music mostly just old songs from the 50s. There was nothing in the drawers either, nothing anywhere.

It could have been any other room; you couldn’t tell at all that Lilith had lived here. I was ready to give up and head back to my dorm for the night when a flashing piece of metal caught my eye. A bolt of lightning illuminated the room from outside, and there it was. Sitting just underneath the bed frame. I mentally slapped myself. How could I have failed to check the most obvious spot?

I stooped down and grabbed it, holding it up to the window for better light. It was almost completely dark outside, and I wondered if Aven had finally gone inside.

It appeared to be a silver ring, small and plain. It was obviously a girl’s ring, but the only indication that it was Lilith’s was the inscripted L on the inside of the band. I shoved it into my pocket and made sure everything was as it had been before quickly making my way out of the room. I shuddered



as I closed the door. I felt cold and my hands were all clammy, though I couldn't tell if it was because of the rain and the fact that my hair was still wet, or because I had just been in a dead person's bedroom. Either way, I didn't like it.

The next morning, I met Aven under the willow tree again. I showed her the ring, and her eyes widened. She took it without another word, and I let her. I went to all of my classes as normal, somewhat relieved to find that the police officers were still there. It meant that they hadn't found anything yet, and it gave Aven time to find Lilith. I still wasn't sure if she could, but I didn't really have a choice.

At lunch, Aven was nowhere to be found. When the sun started to set again, I began to worry even more. It was like Lilith's disappearance all over again, the feeling of not knowing. The waiting. I knew how much was at stake. If the police got impatient, they could easily connect her disappearance to me. I considered sneaking out of my dorm to go find her, despite the strict curfew the school implemented. The professors had been even more diligent about it after Lilith went missing. I decided I would find her first thing in the morning. I didn't sleep any easier, though. I was still in utter disbelief at what I had found myself in the center of. Was it my love for mysteries that ultimately drew me straight into one? Was it my impulsive curiosity when it came to Aven? No, I decided. She was just a girl, ability or not. We were similar in more ways than I could have imagined. She was helping me with this after all, that had to have counted for something.

I managed to fall asleep for a few hours, and when I awoke there was a note on my bedside table. It was from Aven, I could tell by her scrawled, loopy handwriting. *Meet me at Ferrier Lake*, it read. It was a few miles away from the school, so I would need to bike there if I wanted to get there faster. I couldn't help but notice the eerie coincidence in the name, knowing that Ferrier was the last name of a character in none other than *A Study in Scarlet*. I doubted they had named it for the book, but it didn't make me feel any less uneasy as I hurtled out of my dorm to the entrance of the school below. I unchained one of the school's bikes; they were always available to students since we weren't allowed cars.

The wind ripped at my hair and clothes as I coasted along the street. The sky was still grey; it looked like it would rain again. I took some of the backroads in order to avoid being

seen, and soon I arrived at the wooden sign that read the lake's name. It was faded and nearly impossible to make out, but I knew I was in the right place. I saw Aven standing near the jagged rocks at the bottom, the wind blowing her dark hair to the side. I abandoned the bike at the top, noticing an identical one nestled behind a tree a few yards away. I raced down to the rocks, greeted with the cold mist that sprayed off the water. The waves were choppy, and the water was dark and murky. Thin fog rolled across the top, and it made for a very somber picture. It was as if the weather knew the graveness of what we were to uncover. When Aven turned around to look at me, I saw that same graveness in her eyes. I stopped, the cold numbness that I felt in Lilith's room washing over me again. I peered past Aven, to the body that was washed up against the rocks not far from where she was standing. I slowly made my way over to Aven, standing next to her as I stared in horror.

"I didn't want to go any closer without you," Aven whispered, moisture glistening on her skin from the mist. I took her hand, and together we made our way over to the body. I sucked in a sharp breath, gripping her hand tighter to keep it from shaking. I didn't stare at it for long, but the glimpse I did get would be forever burned into my mind. Blue tinted lips. Gray, almost washed out skin. Our school's uniform blazer, torn and sodded.

"It's her, Elliot," Aven said, her eyes swimming with sorrow.

"I know," I whispered in reply. It didn't seem real. That Lilith was truly gone. That Aven had found her. That we were here right now, standing before her.

"It doesn't get any easier, you know," Aven said quietly, turning away from Lilith to face me. "Death. I see the remnants of it every day. You'd be surprised all the things they have to say about life, the things they regret. The ghosts, I mean. It's cruel, that some never really get to live it."

I watched the waves crash against the rocks again and again.

"It's like getting to the end of a horrible story, or drinking the last drops of the most bitter coffee you've ever tasted. Like playing the piano and all the keys are out of tune, or when the sun goes behind a cloud and everything gets all cold and dark," She spoke with a faraway look in her eyes, perhaps still caught in the deep thoughtfulness of her words.



“That’s what death feels like?”

Her eyes returned to meet mine. “No, that’s what *life* feels like. Death is bittersweet. Life is full of pain, the kind that hurts and the kind that doesn’t. You just have to decide what pain is worth it,” she said matter-of-factly, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. As if everyone knew what death was like, what life truly meant. She spoke it as if it were something everyone brought up in everyday conversation, though I suppose not everyone had the ability to speak to ghosts. And this was most certainly not an everyday occurrence.

“Do-do you think she’s at peace? Lilith?” I asked softly.

“People always say that you’re in a better place when you die, but that’s something the ghosts never tell. Even I don’t know if that’s true. We all just end up in the same place anyway. Death is a fate no one can escape, no matter how good or bad their life may seem,” she replied. We stood in silence for a moment, listening to the waves on the rocks and the wind in the trees. Before I could think about it, I was taking off my jacket, carefully stepping over the rocks as I made my way over to Lilith again. I gingerly placed it over her withered form, giving her what I thought was a fitting goodbye. I stepped back to join Aven once more.

“Maybe she decided the pain wasn’t worth it anymore,” I breathed.

“Maybe,” Aven replied. We took one last look at the lake, at the fog slowly rolling in closer. Soon you wouldn’t be able to see the rocks at all. Or Lilith. Together we made our way back up to the trees, and I could practically see it. The final chapter in our strange story. Maybe instead of reading them, I could write one of my own. Ghost girl and mystery boy.

*"Death is a fate no one can escape, no matter how good or bad their life may seem,"*



# LOST

Author: Angelica Parsons

The sudden screams of a baby jolted Claire awake. Her eyes took longer than expected to adjust to the blinding sunlight that reflected off the snow surrounding her vehicle. Her stomach turned, and she rested her head back down on the headrest as she tried to focus her eyes. The moment her head hit the cushion, however, a sharp pain shot through her body. She closed her eyes, swallowed down the vomit that kept making its way to her parched mouth, and focused on her breathing. Slowly she gained a semblance of strength and her eyes began forming an image of her surroundings.

Claire shifted her body around in her seat, scanning the back of the car to locate the wailing baby. She focused her eyes and the defined lines and shapes of a car seat emerged. Claire crawled into the back seat, removing the baby from the car seat. It only took a moment to pull him out, as it appeared that little effort had been put into strapping the child in. The baby's face was red and puffy from crying, and as she tried comforting the infant, she noticed that her shirt was stained by leaking breastmilk. Seeing this pushed her out of her disoriented state into reality, and she lifted up her top and began breastfeeding the child after a few minutes of fumbling to get him to latch.

Doing her best not to interrupt or frighten her son while he ate, Claire finally made her way out of the black hatchback. The front end of the car had collided with a large maple tree on the side of a gravel road. Inspecting the damage, Claire found it hard to believe that the crash would have been capable of inflicting so many of her injuries without bringing any obvious physical harm to her child. Walking into the middle of the road, she noticed that there was a forest lining the gravel road as far as she could see. The only tracks in the snow were her own and that of the car, with no sign of another vehicle as far as she could see. When her baby had finished eating, Claire walked back over to the car. Her head and body still ached but the dizziness had improved some.

Next to the car seat was a large, black duffel bag that contained clothes for both her and the baby, some nonperishable foods, a handgun, and a large orange envelope filled with cash. Next to the duffel bag was a diaper bag with "Thomas" stitched onto the side, and Claire flung the bag over her shoulder, opened the hatch, and started to change the baby's diaper. The smell of the soiled diaper hit her nose like the spins on a night of heavy drinking. It had to have been at least 12 hours since his diaper had been changed. She lurched over and vomited onto the snow-covered ground beside her feet, then she finished changing him as quickly as she could and strapped him back into the car seat.

Thomas began whimpering as she kissed his forehead and got into the driver's side door. She started searching for the keys and found them still in the ignition. Luckily, the car had been turned off, so it appeared that the battery wasn't dead. She tried remembering whether she was coherent enough after the accident to turn off the car. However, she inadvertently rested her head on the headrest again and the shooting pain returned, making her lose her train of thought.

"For the love of Jesus, please let the car start," she said as she turned the key.

The engine revved and Claire breathed a long sigh of relief. She put the car into four-wheel drive and reversed away from the tree. Part of the right headlight was still clinging to the tree and the front bumper had seen better days, but the engine sounded unbothered. She looked both directions before driving the way she had been heading before the accident.

"Okay, Tommy. Let's get somewhere warm," she said to comfort her son.

As she drove down the long, gravel road, tears began streaming down her cheeks. The tears felt warm against her still cold cheeks, and she turned the heat on high. Claire had maintained her composure long enough to get her son out of the cold and on the way to civilization. However, when she glanced at the rearview mirror and saw that her face was swollen and bruised, she brought her hand over her mouth and let out a feral yowl. She cried. She cried out, gasping for breath between her sobs. She cried until her tears and her snot ran down her face and neck. Claire drove down the road crying because she was entirely lost. She didn't know where to go. She didn't even know how she ended up where she was.



# ONE OR TWO words

T. Lane Williams

**N**earing the middle of our instruction period, Mr. Fairbanks randomly pairs up students to work on in-class assignments, including a brief interview. “Four and thirteen,” he calls out as he strikes the numbers from the whiteboard. I look around for my partner, thirteen, and David makes eye contact. With a brief round of head charades, it is determined that he will sit next to me at the front of the class.

The lanky young man with well-kept brown hair gathers his items and saunters up. David pulls the chair out from under a desk and slips into his seat, and with his legs spread out in front, he casually interlocks his ankles. “Who’s going first?” He ponders aloud. “Never mind, I’ll ask you first.”

For the next couple of minutes, David looks over the middle-aged, overweight man sitting next to him as he asks for the basics of birth, marriage, children, and the like. At first, he is obviously just going through the motions expected of him by our instructor. He is trying to get through it all so that he can get on with the next step in the activity. However, as the conversation continues, a few answers intrigue David and he offers some insight of his own. Jotting down notes, he is satisfied; and now it is my turn to rattle riddles rhetoric.

Slipping back further in his seat, David nonchalantly answers my initial question, “I’m looking to become a homeowner after getting my Associate Degree. Then, I want to make some improvements on the property to rent it out,

maybe as a B&B.” He is referring to a bed and breakfast, in the parlance of travel and leisure. “Or, perhaps, even an Inn.”

“The BRRR (pronounced like the shiver) Method intrigues me for earning a living through property ownership, increasing equity, and taking advantage of tax laws,” David continues. “BRRR stands for Buy, Renovate, Refinance, and Rent. It’s a practical way to increase your investment.”

His eyes narrow as he tries to remember more about the process when asked for a follow-up if this is like house-flipping, but with a new spin. It is not, he assures. The BRRR method is not about a quick succession of property ownership. It is about acquisition and investment; holding on to the property as a steady source of income while refinancing after the value increased due to renovations. Instead of paying taxes on income from refinancing, the taxation is determined by the lower capital gains rate.

Moving on, I ask him if he considers continuing for his Bachelor’s. His head cocks to one side and talks about the possibility, but he does not fully commit.

David smiles, “The G.I. Bill gives me \$600 each month to attend DMACC while I finish my four years in the National Guard. It’s great and it has gone up each year, thanks to President Trump. I would re-up for another four years if I make the decision to transfer to a university.”

He is currently an E-4, which could be a non-commissioned officer (NCO) position of Corporal. However, there are not available NCO

slots and so David has the rank of Specialist. If he re-enlists, he would like to move over to a different rate (job) in the National Guard. He is already served as a Combat Infantryman and is considering a rate such as Mechanic.

“Officer Candidate School isn’t one of my goals,” he continues. “I prefer enlisted service. You know, I believe it’s important to serve your country,” he states, sitting up straight. “I have had my turn as an infantry soldier, and I’m proud of my time. But I think it’s honorable to support behind the lines, as well, freeing up a spot for others to take their turn in defending the United States.”

I share with him that I was a Gunner’s Mate in the Navy Reserves years ago and talk positively about a couple of my experiences. He appears surprised because he knows from classroom discussions that I am quite liberal. A patriotic liberal is not something conservative news media considers

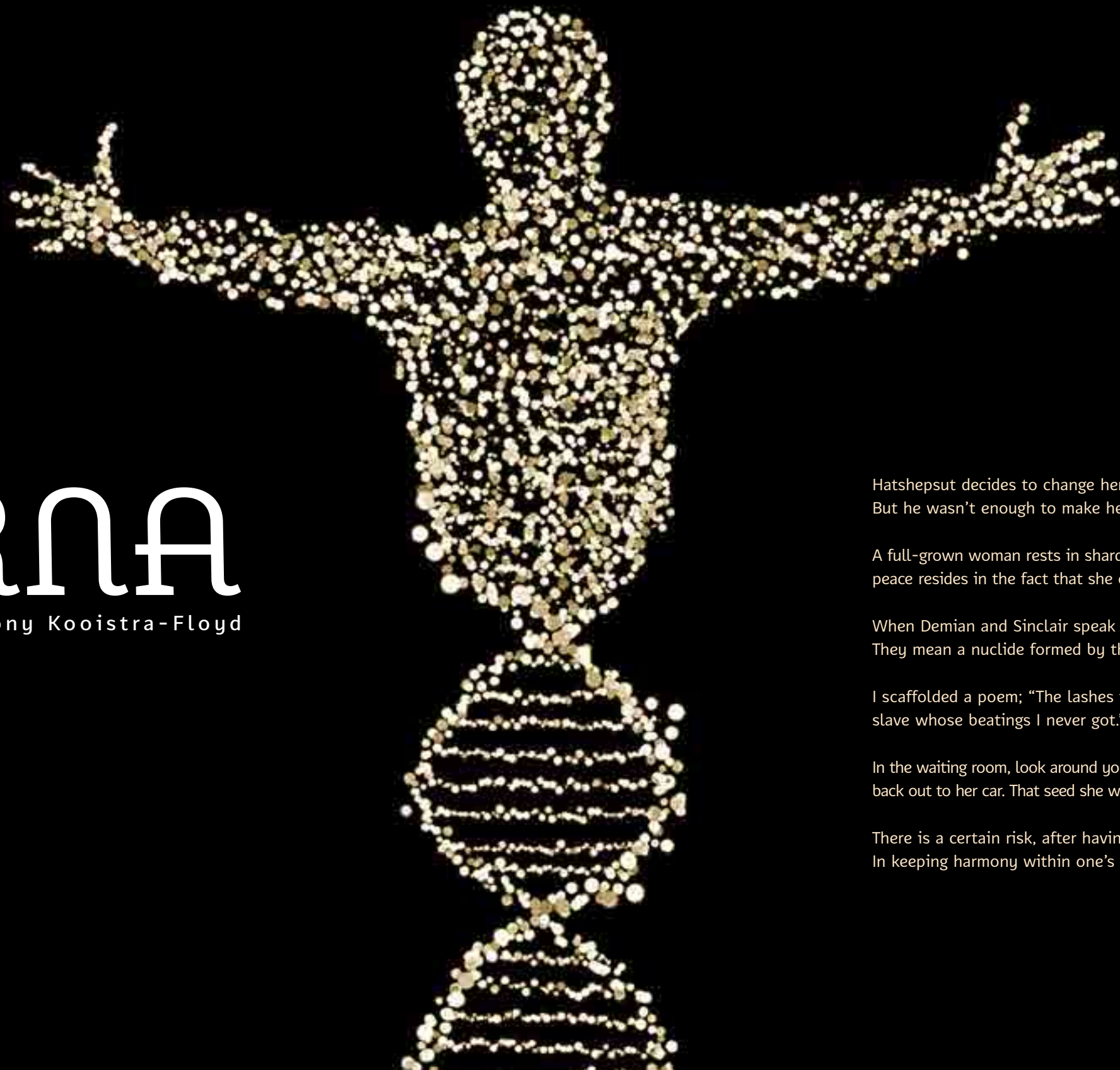
possible, and David relays that he is fan of Tucker Carlson. But he’s not a blind follower; he sees Tucker for both his good and bad qualities. Throughout our interviews, I am also refreshed to have my prejudices shaken.

Mr. Fairbanks brings back our attention to the class with a discussion on the proper use of numbers in our essays. “If it’s written with one or two words, always spell out the number,” he explains. It is good to remember, in our current age of internet memes and labels, that people, like four and thirteen, Zach and David, are not like numbers. You can’t sum them up using one or two words; they deserve full expression.

“  
**A patriotic liberal is not something conservative news media considers possible**  
”

# RNA

Harmony Kooistra-Floyd



Hatshepsut decides to change her name, and therefore disown her father  
But he wasn't enough to make her Pharaoh, so she's the Sun God's Daughter

A full-grown woman rests in shards at her mother's casket, shredded by this – but a bitter  
peace resides in the fact that she can say Goodbye Mama, not as anyone's son, but as a Daughter

When Demian and Sinclair speak of fissures and cracked pillars of youth in becoming  
They mean a nuclide formed by the radioactive decay of another: Daughter

I scaffolded a poem; "The lashes tattooed on my lower back match those of a  
slave whose beatings I never got." I'm history's middle child, her fourth born Daughter

In the waiting room, look around you. You'll see a denied abortion from seventeen years ago. She limps  
back out to her car. That seed she woke up to inside of her could've at least been a Daughter

There is a certain risk, after having dreamt so vividly that pressure in the upper back,  
In keeping harmony within one's ribonucleic and producing another Daughter



# Snow Angels

Baylie Bowers-Whaley

Ever since I can remember I've dreamt of watching snow fall from the grey skies to the frozen ground. Where I could stick my hand into the icy layers and feel the cold rush throughout my body. The first time I saw a snowflake fall from the Georgia sky, I ran outside to hold it, only to feel it melt away on the palms of my hands. Today is another chilly day for the south. Clouds cover the sky, forcing families inside their homes by the fire.

My papa's suitcase lies by the front step, waiting for his return home, only to send him off again. This time, I don't know where. Usually he goes on business trips that sometimes last a whole month. Mama said this time he's gonna be gone for a real long time. Mama's teeth are stained with wine and her cigarettes are falling apart from her long, hard drags. Days like these, I sit on top of the staircase waiting for Papa's return, hoping this time he'll take me with him. When Papa leaves, Mama forgets to cook supper for us kids, me and my little brother, Arthur. I usually sneak down late at night when Mama falls asleep on the chair next to the cracked window and overflowing ashtray. I take some white bread from the basket, add a slice of cheese and split it in half—just enough for Mama not to notice. Mama gets upset when we sneak down for a late night snack. She hates to be reminded of her forgetfulness.

I put Arthur to sleep by reading him his favorite book about bunnies that can talk, hoping he can have sweet dreams about bunnies dancing and singing in a field of wildflowers.

"Anna" Arthur says with a yawn, as I try to sneak out the door

"Yes, Arthur?"

"Can you wake me up when Papa comes home?"

I hesitate to answer, "Sure, Arthur, I can do that." I lie. Whatever will put him to sleep. I leave his room and quietly shut the door.

I lie on the top step watching for Papa's arrival, waiting for his shadow to consume the front-porch light through the

window. On a normal day, he walks in with his briefcase, wearing a suit and tie. I once overheard Mama say that he is a slave to money. But Mama never complains about the big house and nice cars. Papa says he works hard for those things. He says he wants to give us the best life. But Papa doesn't understand when Arthur and I say we want him to come home and stay.

Mama has the radio on in the living room, loud enough that I can hear from the top of the stairs. A high chance of snow and ice tonight, up to two inches. Travel is unadvised as it gets later into the evening. The thought of snow covering the ground makes the knot in my stomach disappear for a moment—maybe Papa will get to stay home tonight after all. I race over to the window to find that not even one flake of snow has fallen from the sky.

I hear a creak at the front door as I make my way back to the stairs—Papa is home. He softly opens the door and immediately spots the suitcase. I almost run down the stairs to greet him, but his expression stops me. It's like the suitcase is pushing him out the door, back into the cold night.

Papa looks up and catches sight of me, his eyes filled with fire—something I'd never seen before. Papa looks toward the room where Mama puts out her last cigarette of the night.

“Lilian, can you come and talk this through?”

Papa walks towards the living room, and I crawl down towards the bottom of the staircase to catch a glimpse of Mama and her shallow glass of wine.

“George, I thought I made it clear by leaving your suitcase by the door,” she slurs.

“Lilian, you've had too much to drink. We need to wait until tomorrow. We promised we wouldn't do this to the kids again.”

“You know who called me today?”

Papa hesitates to answer.



“That's right. You have nothing to say. You know exactly who called. I need you to leave now—for good.”

Papa quickly takes her glass of wine and smashes it to the ground.

I flinch and gaze up the stairs, hoping Arthur is still sound asleep.

“Lillian, dammit, I have had enough of this. You're a drunk and—”

“Get out.”

I run up the stairs so Papa doesn't catch me watching them. I make my way back into my room, where the four walls are there to hold in my scream. I've never seen Papa do anything like that before—the sound of glass shattering replays in my head.

I look out my window at the night where snow falls heavy to the ground. The kind of snow that saves footprints and the fallen snow angels I've heard so many stories about.

Heavy steps come down the hall that sound like Papa. There's a gentle knock on the door.

“Anna,” Papa says through the

I don't say a word. Not tonight. Tonight I only wish I'd been asleep when Papa came home.

“Anna, I'm coming in.”

I grab the blankets from my bed and throw them over my head, wishing I was dancing in the snow fall.

Papa makes his way over to me.

“Sweetie, there's something I need to talk to you about. Something important.”

I feel confused from the moment I just witnessed, a moment

between Mama and Papa I should not have seen.

“Anna, I need to see you before I go.”

I roll over and catch his eyes, a place where the fire that was once there has now burned down to coal.

“Since you’re older now, I want to share something with you I think you need to know.” Papa gives a weak smile. “Mama and I have been having some trouble lately and I—”

“I know, Papa, I know you have been gone a lot. I know.” Tears fall from my eyes. “I saw you and Mama. I saw what you did to Mama.”

Papa scoots me aside and sits down.

“Honey, I know. I need to know what you want from me. I need to know what I can do to make this better.”

“Mama doesn’t like it when you’re home.”

Papa looks out towards the window—his eyes fall softly.

Papa glances back at me with a sorry smirk and walks to my door, his steps so quiet I barely notice he’s left.

I slip out of bed and crack open my door. Papa is in with Arthur, I can hear him speak gently.

I walk over to his bedroom door and hear Arthur wake up—his excitement from seeing Papa makes my heart sink as I realize what I’ve done. I told Papa that Mama doesn’t want him here. But I forgot to tell Papa that Mama doesn’t like it when he’s gone either.

I hear Mama downstairs pacing the living room floor, filling the room with her piercing cries. I imagine the wine glass scattered across the floor, Mama’s bare feet dodging every shard. I walk to the top of the stairs and make my way down to check on Mama. She lies back on her chair, eyes shut as she trembles with each breath. Mama’s cries leave marks on her face, black make-up running down her cheeks. I reach out

to grab her hand and make sure she’s all right. Mama pulls away. “Anna, go to bed. It’s late.”

I grab the shards from beneath her feet and place them on the table nearby. I hear Papa at the end of the stairs. I walk over to tell him of the mistake I’ve made—the part of the story he needs to know.

“Papa,” I say, as he grabs his suitcase.

“Anna, I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

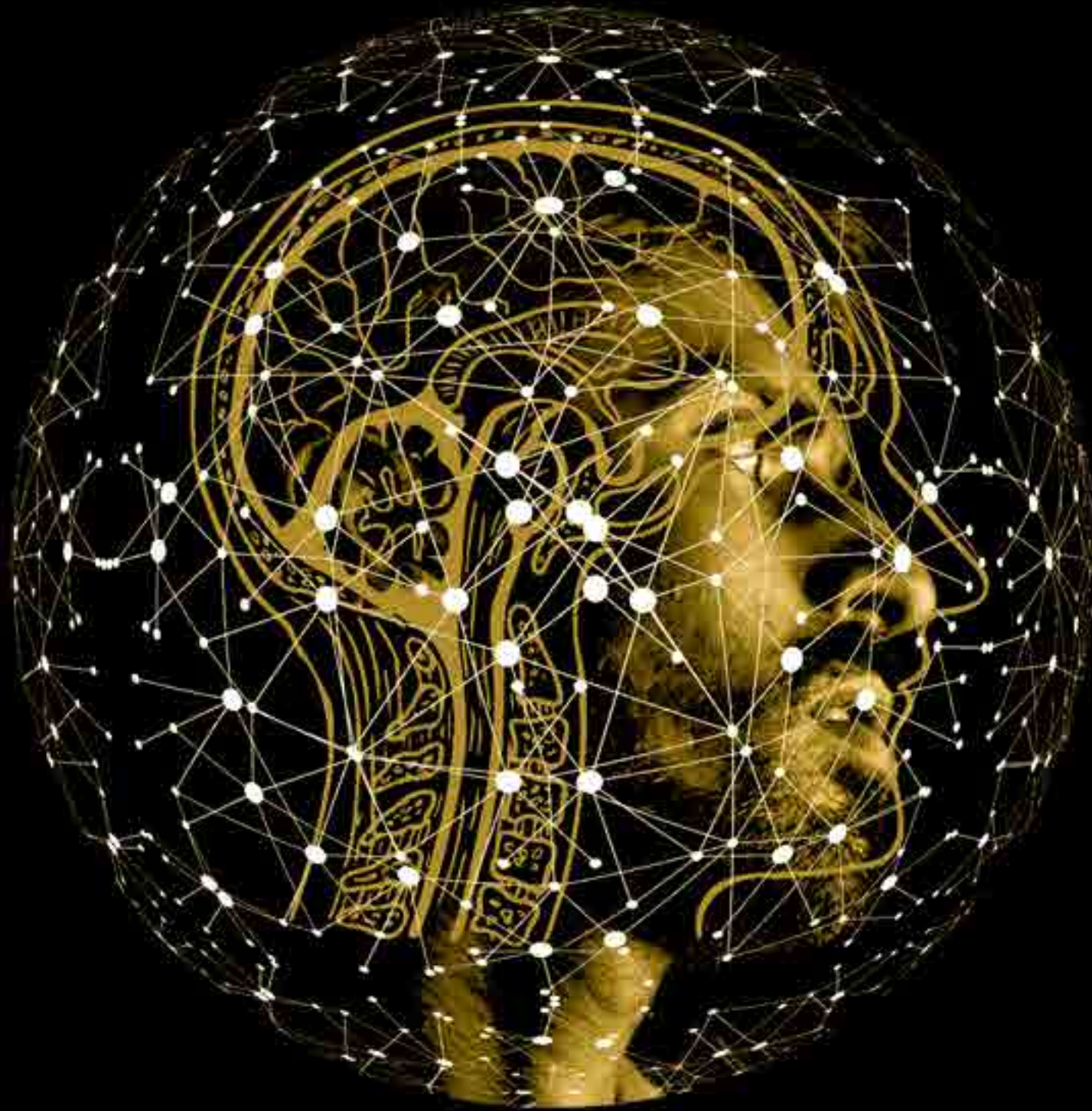
I hear Arthur’s cries from where I stand—did Papa tell him this is my fault?

Papa turns the doorknob and looks back at me to catch my eyes one last time before he goes—an empty goodbye.

I sat on the bottom of the stairs and watched his shadow from the porch light fade away. The snow had reached the ground, leaving a blanket of white flakes, enough to bury my hands in to feel the rush. I sat for a while, watching outside the window as the snow piled up. For once, I had no desire to catch it.







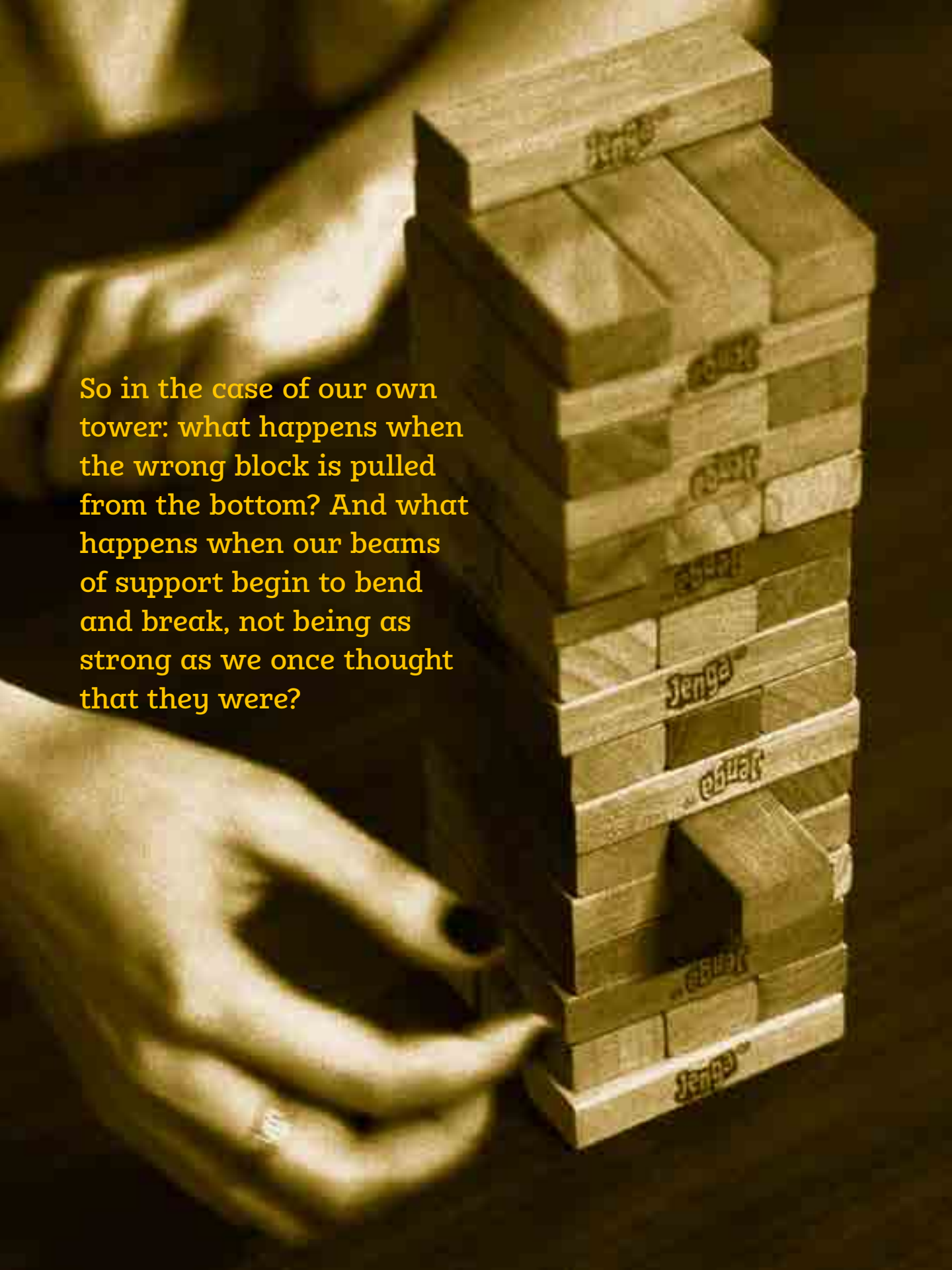
# THE Simulation

Wes Null

In his 1943 paper entitled “A Theory of Human Motivation”, Abraham Maslow, the famed American psychologist, first published his landmark model of human development that was to become widely known as “Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs”. The model was represented as a pyramid divided into five different tiers which described the fundamental forces that drive human beings to do what they do. The forces, in order from lowest to highest, are as follows: physiology, safety, love and belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. It is said that through the course of normal human development, a person has to build their pyramid from the ground-up; they are to start first with the satisfaction of most basic needs to survive and must resolve those stages before they embark on the search for higher, more emotional needs, such as the love of friends and family or their sense of meaning and purpose in the world.



Pyramids are widely recognized by architects and engineers alike as being among the sturdiest of structures with respect to shape, and being notoriously difficult to destroy. When the 12th century Sultan of Egypt Al-Aziz Uthman of the Ayyubid Dynasty attempted to demolish the Great Pyramids of Giza during his reign, he was forced to give up due to his gradual realization of the enormity of the task. When he tried again with the smaller pyramid of Menkaure, his men were only able to leave a single little gash in one side of the structure after eight consecutive months of hard labor. Needless to say, there is a reason that they have stood the test of time.



So in the case of our own tower: what happens when the wrong block is pulled from the bottom? And what happens when our beams of support begin to bend and break, not being as strong as we once thought that they were?

Therefore, it may be natural to assume that the pyramids that we build for ourselves reflect that same imperturbability. Yet, for realism's sake, let's entertain the possibility that our Pyramid of Needs is, in reality, not a pyramid at all. Maybe, it's more like a tower.



Towers, in contrast, fall. Anyone who has endured the chagrin over pulling out the last Jenga block at the birthday party or watches the news knows that. Many times, all it takes to bring down years of manpower and planning is a little incidental damage to the bottom. When the structural integrity of the base is compromised, especially in light of an engineering flaw or the weakness of building materials, a chain reaction can send a tower tumbling down in seconds.

So in the case of our own tower: what happens when the wrong block is pulled from the bottom? And what happens when our beams of support begin to bend and break, not being as strong as we once thought that they were?



To this day I still don't completely know where it came from. One mid-October afternoon you're throwing a football around with the other two male cousins in the driveway, and that same evening your mom and doctor have their hands on your back, telling you to breathe as you try your best to contain your hyperventilating in a tiny, pale examination room. There was no physical injury, no breaking news, no witness of anything traumatic that precipitated it. Yet, soon enough, it would become clear to me that after that day nothing would ever be the same for me again.

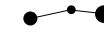


I do know, however, that I was a pretty lonely kid. One of my favorite games that I would play would be pretending to be an explorer through the areas of my neighborhood. I would set off into the woods alone and "chart" new territories, along with their associated creeks, trails, and small abandoned buildings. I would draw maps, swing around a wooden stick as a sword, and plant little "flags" (often other wooden sticks) on various discovered landmarks. All of this I could do

alone. The other kids in the neighborhood played a lot of soccer, but I was never any good at it. Every time I tried somehow I always ended up watching the rest of them play from the side of the yard. Regardless, I still enjoyed their company.

Also, it's not like there wasn't any suspicion before this. A few years prior I remember asking my mom questions about God, Jesus, and the devil. I remember being confused by the fact that God, who knows, created, and controls everything, would create certain people knowing that they themselves would never hear the gospel in their lifetime, and that they wouldn't be saved from hell in the end, no matter how good of a person they might've been during their time on earth. My mom tried her best to assure me that we have no way of knowing God's plan, and left it to me to imagine God giving one last chance to every nonbeliever arriving at the pearly gates of heaven. I remember thinking, "Well, if that's really the case, why even bother talking about the Bible in the first place?" But I didn't say it aloud because I was afraid to upset her. Having not reached an answer I was satisfied with, my doubts increased going forward, but I kept them to myself, not wanting

to worry my mom. I wished I could just let it go, but I couldn't; I needed something tangible to hold on to.



Yet what I felt on that day was something deeper than the religious doubt that I was familiar with. My cousins had branched off to the other side of the yard, tossing the ball between them as I diverged from them for some reason that I can't remember. My uncle had recently arrived to pick them up from our house, and he had gotten out of his car and was talking to my mom. I remember the crisp chill of the sunny October sky in the fall, and the glare in my eyes as I glanced upward toward the sky. In that moment, everything felt in its right place. My mother and uncle were smiling, absorbed in their conversation; my cousins were continuing to run in circles around the perimeter of the house; and I just stood there, taking in the scene. As a ten-year-old kid, there aren't very many situations which pull you into thinking about life itself. It seems like kind of a waste of time at the time, especially when you're in the middle of having fun.

Regardless, in that moment in the sun, I started to think about it.



I noticed all of the smiling and laughing people around me, each in their own conversation, and wondered if they too experienced the same appreciation for the moment as I did; if they appreciated the same chill breeze through their hair or how calming and sweet the gentle wafting of the orangish-red leaves appeared to them from above. I thought about my own particular thoughts and feelings that I couldn't convey in words, and the strangeness that everyone that I saw around me must also contain this indescribable reservoir of thought within them. Miraculous.

But, then again, what if they, in fact, didn't have that, at all? What if that just wasn't true?

I can see their smiles. I can hear their laughs. Yet the realization slowly began to dawn on me that I had no way of making sure that these people had thoughts of their own. Sure, they spoke words and gave their opinions. They smiled, frowned, laughed and cried in the same way that I did. Yet in that moment I recognized that only I myself could prove that these things came from an actual source, and no matter how I tried, I would never be able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that these behaviors actually came from a real place.

It was then that I fully began to feel the gravity of this possibility: my parents, my sister, my cousins, my neighborhood friends, my teachers, and an entire planet of billions of people may be non-playable characters in a vast game in which I was the only one with any real consciousness.

I imagined a panel of humans or god-like entities tending to some remote computer in a different universe, entering code into the fabric of my daily life. I thought of how if it's possible that humans could eventually develop technology sophisticated enough to create a simulated life in the future, then it is all the more possible that I am already living in one.

My heart beat faster as I racked my brain for ways to put this question to rest. Yet this doubt seemed to permeate everywhere. I didn't know where to even begin to search for a resolution. I could feel myself growing pale. I could be living in a gigantic lie



**Yet in that moment,  
I felt like a complete alien.**

While the perception of living in a false reality seems scary on its face, it wasn't just the idea of living in a simulated universe that disturbed me the most. It was the idea that I was alone in this simulation. Being an object among many within the big hologram would be unsettling, but at least then it wouldn't be an idea that I would have to face on my own.

Yet in that moment, I felt like a complete alien. The implication from this line of thinking was that all of the foundational security that I had developed from the love of my friends and family, as well as the general sense of safety afforded to me by my environment, could be torn from its tethers at any moment, at the behest of some far-off team of unseen simulators. My entire universe could very well be some kind of cruel joke, set up for experimentation's sake by some scientists thousands of years and/or light-years away, crossing his or her fingers for their universe's equivalent of a Nobel Prize. It was as if these simulators were killing everyone around me by robbing them of the opportunity to truly exist.

I felt overwhelmed. I was ten years old and felt powerless to make sense of any of this. It was too much for my head. The thought of a mother, father, sister, and friends not being real was too much for a kid to handle. With the most basic assurances of life in flux, I broke down, and my tower collapsed.



Before long I was bouncing between various doctor's offices, building up my collection of prescription-sponsored pens. The first psychiatrist put me on Ability and Zoloft. My mother did the best she could with me, God bless her. My father struggled to understand what was happening at all. He still might not.

Teachers began to all leave the same note on my report card: "Does not turn in homework". It's hard to imagine, in retrospect, how heavy I was on my parents during this period of time. I struggled to make it through the day without breaking down. Talking about it with my mom would help temporarily, until she started talking about God. Then, a lot of the time, it got worse.

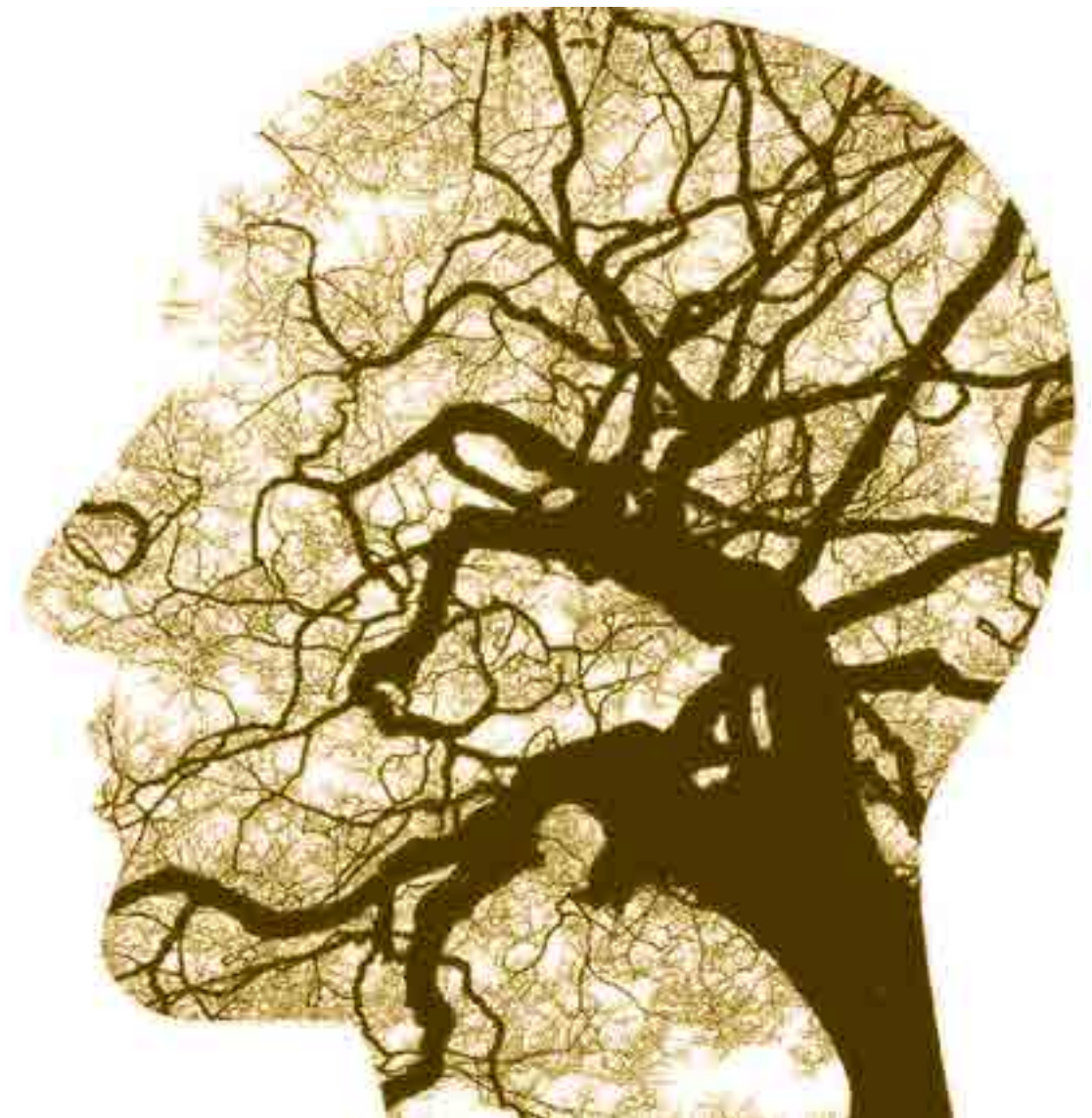
Dr. Reilly, the psychologist that I ended up seeing, looked almost exactly like Richard Dreyfuss in Mr. Holland's Opus. I liked him a lot. Every week I would attempt to disentangle the threads of the crazed back-and-forth in my head; the one that would periodically send me spiraling and have me burying my face in one of the pillows of the guest bedroom downstairs. Yet oddly enough, every week I was met with the same attitude from Dr. Reilly: measured calm. Now that I think about it, this made all of the difference.

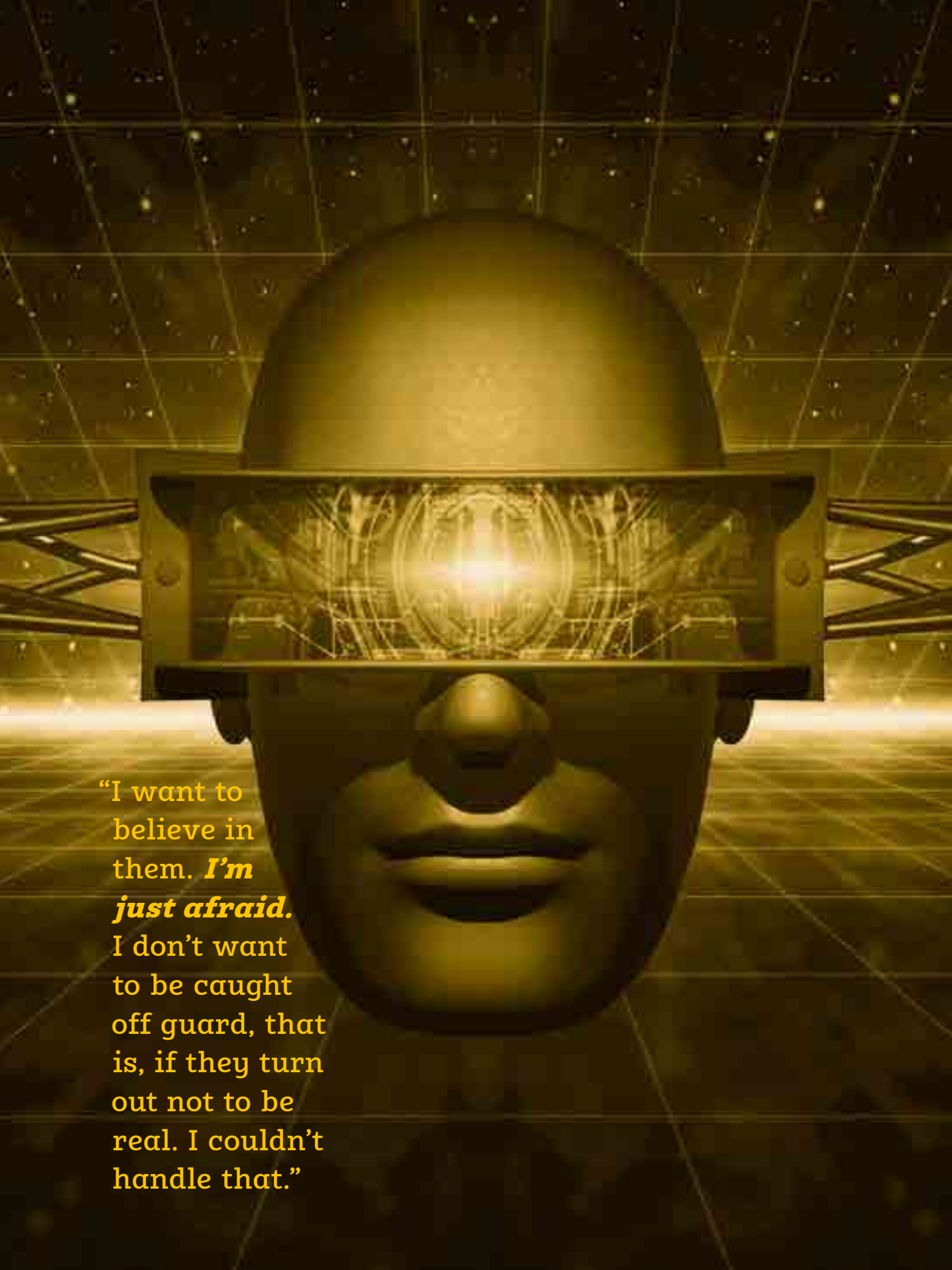
Throughout this time, I had held on to the assumption that my doubts over the reality of the world around me were unique and unprecedented. I had taken it for granted that I had punctured some new hole into the fabric of perception, and that revealing this to others might frighten, estrange, or anger them. Part of me seemed to be afraid of scaring the people around me, and the other more irrational part of me was afraid of my potential reaction to their reaction: that I would take their shock to mean that my questioning had disrupted the integrity of simulation, or had angered the simulators. Maybe the simulators would begin to

move the people I told, like chess pieces, in order to try to silence me, or to try to make me forget about them. Therefore, if I were to start feeling better, it may actually spell victory for the simulators. I had all sorts of ideas about how the simulation worked, and who was running it, none of which were particularly consoling.

Yet all of what I had to say was met by Dr. Reilly with relative coolness. It wasn't a matter of him not understanding me, either. He was more than capable of repeating the things I said back to me, paraphrased. It just didn't faze him very much. Seeing him react this way was a relief for me. Maybe I could find my way out of this after all.

Every session I would explain all of the thoughts and feelings about the simulation that were nagging me that





“I want to believe in them. *I’m just afraid.* I don’t want to be caught off guard, that is, if they turn out not to be real. I couldn’t handle that.”

particular week, and every week he listened, nodding along. When I would finish my weekly brain-dump, he would first assure me that he really did understand the things that I had told him. He acknowledged the problems and the pains that I would run into carrying around such thoughts all of the time. Shortly after, however, he started asking questions. This is where I really began to learn.

“So” he asked, putting his doctor’s clipboard down on his desk. “Do you have proof? Have you actually seen these people running this simulation?”

“Well, no.” I said. “But I can’t be sure that they are not there.”

“Ok” he nodded. “So, if I’m following you, it makes sense to you to believe that these ‘Simulators’ that you’ve never seen are real, but not all of the people, including family and friends, that you have seen so far in your life with your own eyes?”

“I want to believe in them. I’m just afraid. I don’t want to be caught off guard, that is, if they turn out not to be real. I couldn’t handle that.” Then another thought occurred to me. “And if there was a simulation, what is stopping them from making the ‘design’ as real as possible?” I sped up. “Wouldn’t they try to make it convincing, like by making the world super big with a lot of people? What if they are trying to make this make as little sense as possible, just to confuse me?”

I was growing tenser as I spoke, because I honestly didn’t know how he could reply to that. It appeared that I had become trapped in my worst fear. The implications felt menacing. Even if I didn’t completely believe in this theory, how could I ever really stop worrying about the possibility of its truth if the whole external world held no power to refute it in any meaningful way?

Dr. Reilly spun around a little in his chair. “Hmm. Yeah, I suppose it’s possible.”

There was silence. I didn’t know what to say.

“Let me ask you.” He spun his chair back to its original position. “Do you believe I’m real? Me, sitting in front of you?”

“Yes, mainly. At least, I hope.”

“Well, how can you be so sure about that?” he asked. “I could be Dr. Reilly’s identical twin. We could be plotting to deceive you by taking turns each session.”

I cocked my head back a little, perplexed. “Well, I guess I can’t. But it probably would become obvious that something was up at some point.”

“Why would it have to become obvious? We could be pulling off the most successful bait-and-switch trick in history.”

“That seems a bit unlikely.” This was different from the way my mom talked to me.

Dr. Reilly smirked a little. “But not impossible, right?”

I started to get an idea of where he might be going with this. “Why would you be doing it? It seems like a pretty elaborate thing to do for no reason.”

“For the same reason that the Simulators do what they do. Just to deceive you, I suppose.”

I thought back to the images that would intrude into my mind of what it would be like at the end of the simulation. The first option is that I would die and wake up in a lab in some higher universe, where the simulators would reveal to me that my life had always been a lie. The second option would be that the people around me one day would reveal the simulation for what it was, to my face. Either way, I was terrified. I felt deception on that scale to be a fate worse than death.

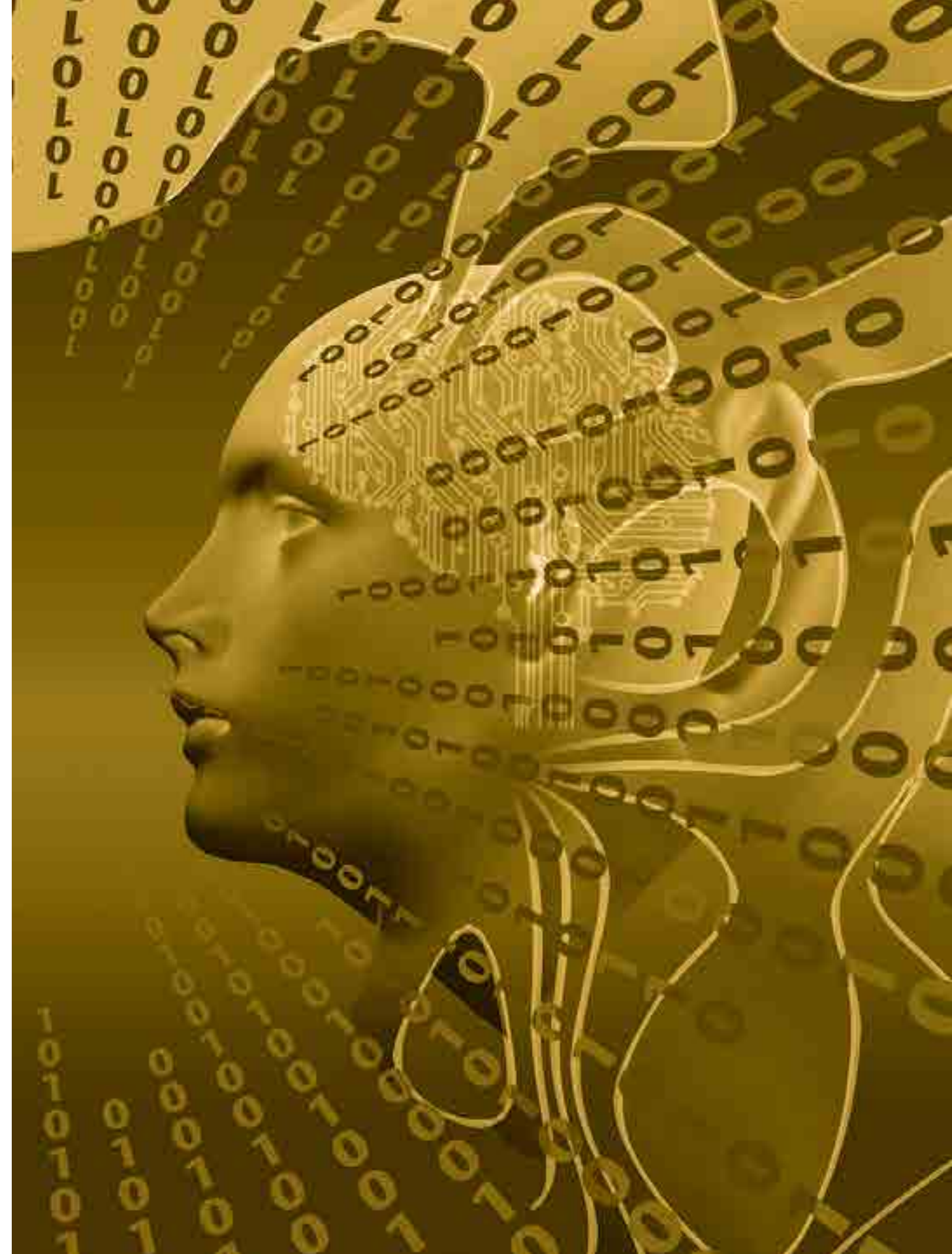
I spoke again. “Well, maybe the simulators have some higher goal in mind. Maybe I’m part of some test.”

“Or maybe I’m the one testing you, right now” Dr. Reilly fired back. “Maybe I work for a large, secret company, collecting data from the trial of your life for my experiment.”

I looked down, drawing a blank.

“But let’s back up for a bit,” he said. “So if you believe that the Simulators are using you for an experiment that means you do believe there are some real people, or beings, out there, right? Otherwise, what purpose would these experiments serve in the first place? It would probably be a situation where the ‘results’ could have an impact on their world, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I certainly can’t rule that out.”



Dr. Reilly raised a hand to his chin. “Yeah, there is a lot we can’t rule out. But, anyway, in this world of ‘beings’, the ones supposedly creating these human simulations for their own particular ends, whatever they may be, can you honestly say with no room for doubt that you are as ‘real’ as these beings from on high?”

I was transfixed. I really wanted to know where this was going. “So, are you asking if I’m real?”

Dr. Reilly swiveled his chair towards me, this time cocking his eyebrow in a clearly performative way. “Well, are you?”

I smiled a bit. “Uh, I feel real.”

“Yeah, but how do you know those feelings are real?”

At this point I was thoroughly lost. “Because I feel them. There are inside of me.”

“I see,” Dr. Reilly said with a resolve in his voice. “So everything that you feel inside is real, while everything you see outside is not?”

I was being led into another trap. I paused. Dr. Reilly broke the silence: “You know that feelings are a product of the brain, correct?”

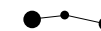
“Yeah.”

“Then have you ever considered that perhaps you’re under a different kind of simulation?” My eyes widened a little. “One where you may not have a real human body at all? Who’s to say your experience of having a body, of having feelings, isn’t just as much programming as the things you see? Who’s to say you’re not simply a brain hooked up to a machine in a laboratory far, far away?”

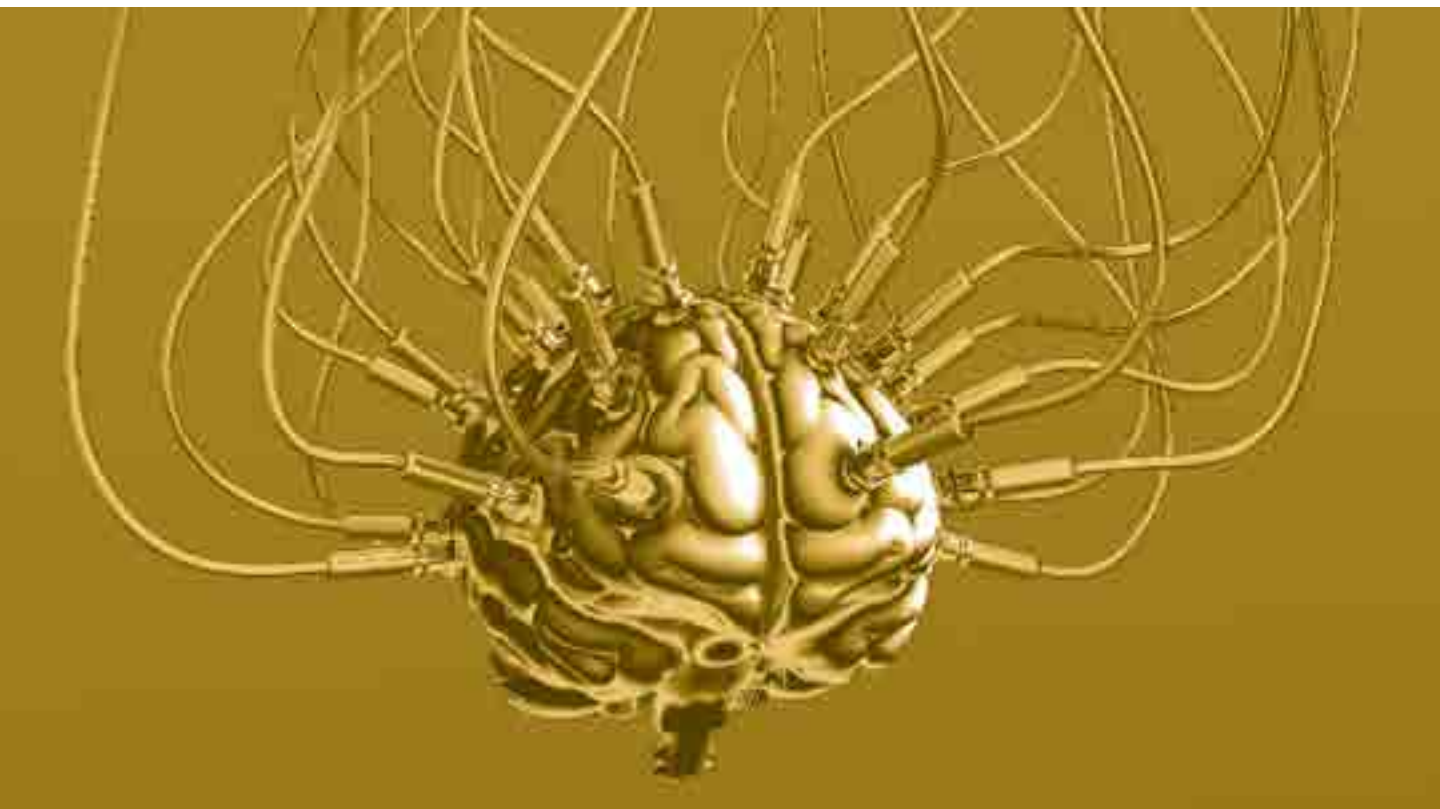
Once again, I had been left speechless.



It’s difficult to point to a decisive moment where I can definitively say that things got better, but eventually they did. Zoloft hadn’t been working very well anymore, so the second psychiatrist I had started seeing prescribed me Prozac in its place. Every week I continued my appointments with Dr. Reilly, where the Socratic dialogue would rage on. While I know that the sound reasoning he provided helped me a lot, as the months went on, I found that the experience of simply being able to talk about these things openly was reassuring for me in their own capacity. It helped with my overall sense of alienation, and it helped break some of the feedback loops of unchecked panic and rumination.



There was also the internet. It wasn’t too long after I had begun seeing Dr. Reilly that I began scouring the internet for anything and everything that involved simulations, holograms, false realities etc. One of the main consolations, both from Dr. Reilly and from Wikipedia, was how when it came to my doubt in the material reality of the external world, it became increasingly clear that I had been beaten to the punch. Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus, Nagarjuna, Rene Descartes, David Hume, Zhuangzi, and many others had all raised questions about the trustworthiness of our senses long before I had ever arrived on the scene. It wouldn’t be until later that it began to dawn on me that many of the same thought experiments or hypotheticals that would arise in my sessions with Dr. Reilly had already been debated vigorously for hundreds of years, as exemplified by the Evil Demon scenario put forward





by Descartes or Zhuangzi's butterfly dream. At its core, the idea that there is no way to disprove the notion that our observations of the external world are not reliable due to subjective perception, and therefore there being no way to disprove the possibility that the universe could be a simulation, is anything but new. Realizing that put me at ease and left me with a desire to learn even more. From that point onward, I made the decision that philosophy was going to be an important part of my life.

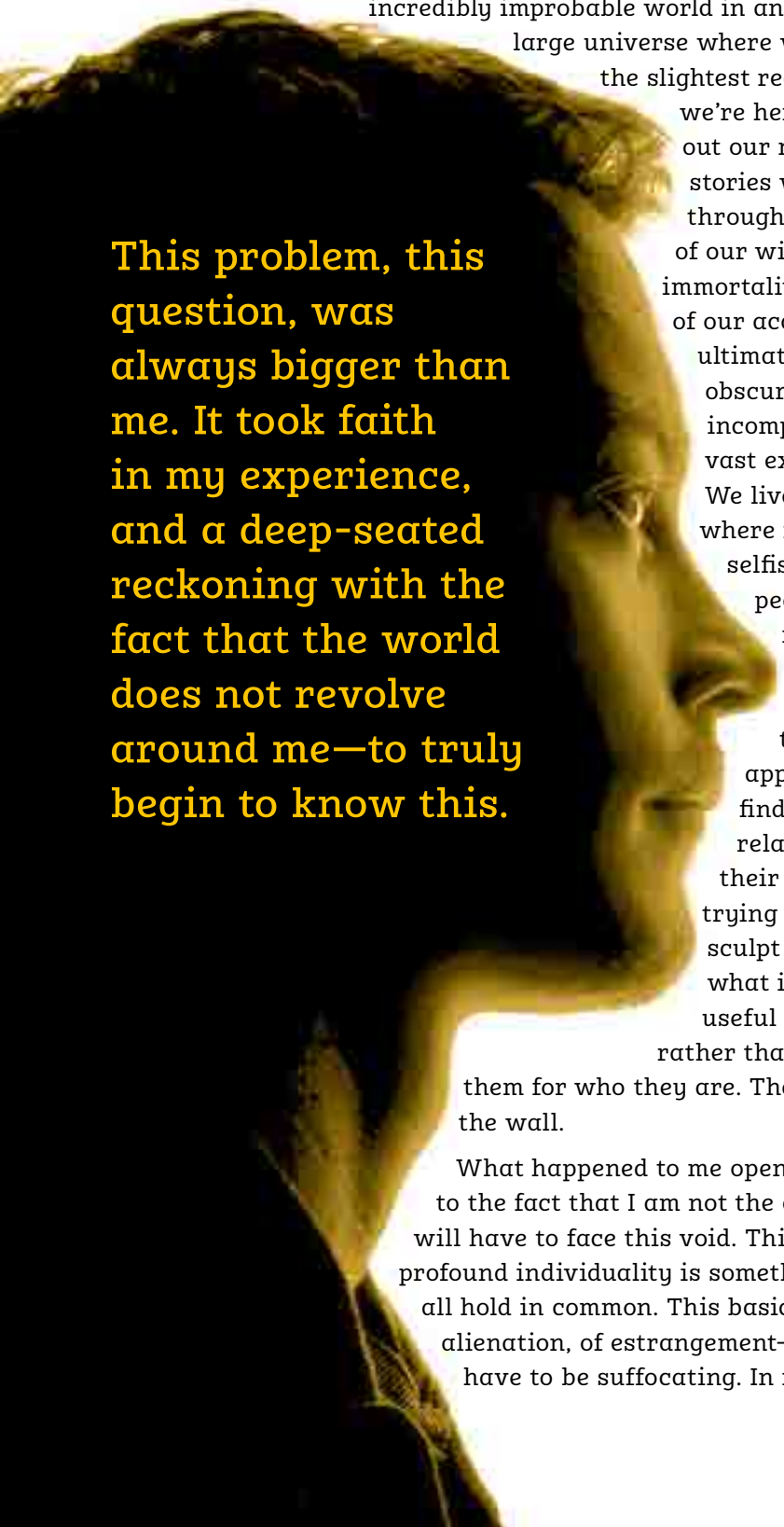
However, just exploring the ideas themselves wasn't enough. When it comes to clinging to unfalsifiable beliefs, the kind that you can never completely disprove, logical argument alone won't do.

Sooner or later, I began to think more critically about the people around me, as well as the means by which I relate to them. I remembered what I felt that day in the driveway, watching my mom and cousins talking and doing what they were doing. I remembered the experience I had just prior to when things started to go wrong; that feeling of interconnectedness, of wonder arising from a newly-realized awareness and insight into the minds of others. I became more conscious of their consciousness, and more keen to the implications of such an awareness.

Deep down, I realized the limitations of what I could know. I realized that nobody can ever be completely understood, and that no matter how much we observe each other, talk to each other, or spend time with each other, there will always be some wall that separates my experience from theirs. Hitting this wall for the first time was disheartening, and I couldn't help but feel trapped under its shadow. If I can't feel your internal world firsthand, how can I ever truly know it's there?

It took some time for me to realize what I needed. I never did arrive at an absolute answer; no logical resolution that put the whole question to rest within a moment, once and for all. It was a gradual process that involved the development of my individual judgement, empathy, and, more generally, faith. This does not necessarily mean having faith in the existence of a creator per se, but of a more basic kind: faith in there being something,





**This problem, this question, was always bigger than me. It took faith in my experience, and a deep-seated reckoning with the fact that the world does not revolve around me—to truly begin to know this.**

anything at all, out there beyond yourself, something often taken for granted until it's not. Every one of us is living within the same absurdity: we are born into an incredibly improbable world in an incalculably large universe where we haven't the slightest real idea of why we're here. We live out our roles in the stories we create, and through the imposition of our will we vie for immortality in vain, all of our accomplishments ultimately swept into obscurity over an incomprehensibly vast expanse of time. We live in a world where many love selfishly and where people are also routinely used by one another to soothe their personal appetites. People find themselves in relationships with their projections, trying in vain to sculpt a person into what it would be useful for them to be, rather than appreciating them for who they are. They, too, will hit the wall.

What happened to me opened my eyes to the fact that I am not the only one who will have to face this void. This inescapable, profound individuality is something that we all hold in common. This basic sense of alienation, of estrangement—it doesn't have to be suffocating. In fact, it can be

liberating. Perhaps this basic freedom, as well as its accompanying responsibility, is the spring by which all else, including that primordial existential anxiety, flows. What I didn't understand then was that just because I was alone, I didn't have to feel alone.

I found faith in connection. I found solace in the others who had struggled as I had, unable to sleep because their thoughts kept them up at night. I let the heart-wrenching bends of the cello of the Adagietto of Mahler's 5th pull me into its captivating lull, feeling as immersed into someone else's experience as I believed I ever could be. I knew in time that I was not the only one to break from their trust of reality. Whether it be by psychosis, delusional disorder, paranoid schizophrenia, or some other diagnosis, it became clear as I learned more that there were many people out there who had developed issues similar to mine—or worse, would probably doubt or deny my existence in the same way that I would have doubted theirs. This problem, this question, was always bigger than me. It took faith in my experience, and a deep-seated reckoning with the fact that the world does not revolve around me—to truly begin to know this.

In the end, I felt gratitude. I felt thankful for my mother, who did everything she could to help me get through that difficult time. I felt thankful for my sister and friends, who were always understanding. I felt thankful for my father, who did the best he could for me. I felt thankful for my ability to speak, my ability to relate my thoughts and feelings to those close to me, and I felt thankful for the ability to listen. I felt thankful for music, for art, for everything that affirmed and validated that deep-seated aloneness we all share. I felt thankful for my freedom as an individual, and thankful for my world: one among many. Besides, if in the infinitesimally small possibility that I was right all along—that it all indeed turned out to be one big deception, one big lie in the end—I don't think I'd regret a thing. I would have lived in the best way that I knew how, and honestly, I think that's good enough for me.

# The TROUBLE of FASCINATION

Isabella Rastetter

The night that Ivy Raven Redwood was born, the North Dakota inhabitants experienced one of the worst storms to date. She didn't enter the world screaming or crying, she entered it completely silent, looking peaceful. The doctors had thought that there was something wrong. Although, when they realized that little Ivy had a heartbeat and was breathing just fine, they handed her to the mother all cleaned up. While the parents focused on their newborn, the doctors exchanged disturbed looks as they felt a shiver – more of a shudder really – running up and down their spines.

They left the parents to take care of their newborn baby; one of them would come back later on to check on both mother and child. At least that was what they were trying to convince themselves. The truth was that one of them would come back when they finally shook off the foreboding feeling. Meanwhile, the mother was staring lovingly down at her little Ivy, as she nursed not thinking that anything was wrong with her; Lizzy saw her baby as an angel, her little angel.

The father, Jerry didn't want to go anywhere near his daughter, for more reasons than one. He was very old-fashioned and wanted a first-born son definitely not a daughter. He also realized that this would

be a one-time thing; the doctors had said that the pregnancy was a miracle given the complications Lizzy had when she was little. Ivy was is not normal nor was it normal that he felt so uneasy about how she was born.

"Honey, come say hello to little Ivy. She's such a beautiful little angel." Jerry heard his wife's sweet voice jerking him out of his musings. As his eyes slowly met hers then moved to the tiny, oh so fragile body of his *daughter* he couldn't stop the shiver that ran up his spine, nor could he stop the disgusted sneer that painted his features. "That *thing* is *not* my child, she definitely isn't an angel. No *normal* child comes into the world quietly." He watched as Lizzy's eyes widened in shock and she moved Ivy closer.

"Get out."

Jerry blinked twice as he realized his wife was talking to him, "Lizzy." There was clearly a warning in the way he said her name. Though it had the opposite effect on his wife, he watched as steel went through her spine and fire came into her eyes, making them become hard, and her jaw clenched stubbornly.

"Get out Jerry, *now*. If you can't be a loving husband *and* father, then I don't want you in this room with me. *Leave*."

He wanted to argue, but Jerry knew when to push Lizzy and when not to. He left the room with his tail tucked between his legs and his bottom and top seemed to be folded into himself.

The door slammed shut and Lizzy couldn't stop the flinch that took her body as she seemed to deflate into herself. She carefully looked down at Ivy and was surprised to see that her baby girl's eyes were open and she was calmly looking at her mother. Lizzy's lips parted as she looked at her daughter in shock and awe, as she felt love for little

**"THAT THING IS NOT MY CHILD, SHE DEFINITELY ISN'T AN ANGEL. NO NORMAL CHILD COMES INTO THE WORLD QUIETLY."**

Ivy fill her entire being; she couldn't stop the words – the promise – from falling from her lips. "I promise my little angel, that I will love and protect you for the rest of my life with my entire being. No harm will come to you my baby." Her whispered promise seemed to reverberate throughout her entire soul. All her little baby did was give a hint of a smile, yawn, and slowly let her vibrant green eyes close into sleep.

What Lizzy was unaware of was that her husband was watching the news in the waiting room. Listening to what the male newscaster was speaking of, knowing that it just added to his resolve to reject that child as his.

"Breaking news! We have just gotten word that over two hundred and fifty people's lives have been taken by this storm. Along

with even more damage to homes, businesses, and other buildings. We ask for everyone to stay calm, stay inside, and wait until the all clear signal is given to leave the safety of their homes."

She became aware of the darkness first, then the frigid cold... she couldn't see anything, not that there was anything to see in the first place. The shiver that stole over her body shook Ivy to her very core. She couldn't remember how she got here or where she was before, all Ivy knew was that she had a sense she was not where she was supposed to be. Even though Ivy had that sense, she had no idea or way of getting out of wherever she was.

Ivy didn't even want to move without knowing whether or not the ground would be there to keep her from falling into a black abyss. She looked incredibly small, broken – no shattered – and so confused. Ivy curled into herself as tight as possible. As she looked into the shadowed chasm, she came into herself. Her whole body moved with her deep exhale and even deeper inhale. She felt determination fill her as she stood up.

"Okay, you randomly wake up in a black hole with no recollection of how you got here... okay, you can work with this! Just start walking; stand up, put on foot in front of the other... just walk. It doesn't matter if the ground gives way, just keep walking. Perhaps you'll find a way out. Great! Now I'm talking to myself!" Ivy shook her head, rolled her eyes while letting out a frustrated breath... she put one step in front of the other... and she walked.

Ivy hummed to "Dog Dream" by Michael Malarkey as she drove through town to get to the cute little coffee shop called The Bean.



She quickly parked, turned off her car, got out and closed the door while locking her car on the way to the front door. Right as she entered, coffee, pastries, muffins, and tea wafted by her. She felt a truly happy and bright grin overtake her features. She quickly made her way to the front counter, “Ivy! Why am I not surprised that you’re here again?” Julie said the owner of The Bean.

Ivy couldn’t stop the bubbly giggle that escaped her, “I’m in love with this place Julie! Besides, you and I both know I come here every day without fail! Which reminds me, I read the sample of your book that you gave me! You should definitely send it to an editor, it’s so beautifully written!”

Julie briefly glanced away from Ivy as a blush started coming onto her cheeks and a nervous giggle escaped her. “My husband

said the same thing, I just... I’m not confident in it. I don’t want to send it in with my hopes up and have it completely dragged through the mud... I don’t think I would be able to handle the embarrassment and disappointment. Are you getting what you normally do?”

Ivy absentmindedly nodded in consent then a frown went across her features. “Don’t change the subject Jules!” Ivy quickly, softly grabbed Julie’s hand, “Just send it in Jules, don’t get your hopes up, don’t expect anything specific to happen! See what happens. Who knows? You might be pleasantly surprised!”

When Julie finally looked up to Ivy she couldn’t stop the hesitant smile that spread across her face as she slowly nodded her head and quietly said. “Okay... okay, I’ll send it in!”

Ivy let go of Julie’s hand abruptly; gave a little squeal, did a little celebratory dance as she clapped her hands in excitement.

Julie let out a loud happy laugh and took Ivy’s money. “You never fail to bring a little light to my day Ivy Raven Redwood! You are a blessing!” Julie’s face was starting to hurt from the constant smile that was on her face since Ivy walked into her little coffee shop.

What Julie doesn’t notice is that a shadow fleetingly dances across Ivy’s vibrant green eyes in so many different, darker memories. As Julie turns to get Ivy’s order for her, Ivy takes that moment to get her emotions and memories under wrap. When Ivy takes notice that Julie is about to turn around; she quickly pastes a smile on her face, trying to hide the darker look.

Julie hands Ivy her order and Ivy gives her a mischievous grin. “Thanks Jules!” She quickly whipped herself around and went

to her normal spot in the corner of the coffee house next to a large window. Her mind wandered as she people watched – a habit she picked up at a young age. People watching was a way for her to make up stories about people she didn’t know; just trying to avoid the cruelty that was her father and the willing ignorance of her mother. Ivy allowed a wry and dark smile to come upon her face. Of course she never found out the truth behind why her father hated her so much; she never did anything to deserve his mistreatment and yet –

Young Ivy slowly and timidly walked up to her father. She waited anxiously for her father to acknowledge her; Ivy had learned from a very young age to not say anything or do anything to draw attention to herself until her dad acknowledged her. She remembered what he said, “*Speak when spoken to girl, otherwise keep your trap shut!*” so she stayed quiet with her eyes on the ground. Too afraid to meet his eyes, Ivy could see her father *finally* look at her and she barely stopped herself from flinching from the frigid look he had in his eyes.

She knew her father wasn’t a very good man. Not a lot of people liked him; he was harsh, crass, judgmental, had old ideals, and was nasty to anyone he saw as different. “Get away from me you little freak of nature.” Her father’s harsh voice echoed in the otherwise quiet living room. Though his voice always seemed to be overflowing with venom whenever he spoke to Ivy, she could never seem to understand why. She asked her mother and her mother would only look at her with pain and heartbreak

in her eyes and say nothing... she did *nothing*. Little Ivy could not stop the hurt that stabbed her chest like a sharp knife, her body from flinching away from her father, or the tears she felt burn her vibrant green eyes.

Meekly Ivy slowly looked up at him, being sure to avoid direct eye contact with him. She responded, “I love you dad,” hoping against hope that her father would finally love and accept her. There was never any doubt in her father’s mind that he could ever love her. He knew she was an abomination so he refused to give her any love or care. A sneer overtook his face as he looked down upon the young girl. “You’re no daughter of mine! Now get out of my sight.”

Ivy’s heart totally and completely shattered. She watched as a tear slipped down her nose and onto the carpet with a soundless drop. Then Ivy left the room as fast as she could without running. She was only seven when she realized her father only barely tolerated her for her mother.

Little Ivy made a decision right then and there, as she hid in her room. She would stay away from her father, wouldn’t seek him out, and wouldn’t hope for his approval or love. When it came to him, she would only speak when spoken to and she would live her life how she wanted. With her heart hardening with resolve, her eyes dried up and she wiped her tears away; knowing deep deep down that something was irrevocably broken and she had *no* idea how to *fix* it.

Ivy continued to walk. She noticed that there was no real change to her surround-

**“YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT DEATH FEELS LIKE?”**

ings. She only saw darkness and there was no change in the surface that she was walking on, no change in elevation, nothing to jump over, and nothing to be on the lookout for. All Ivy noticed was that what she wasn't walking on black glossy obsidian. There is no way for Ivy to tell what time it is or how much time has passed.

"You want to know what death feels like?" Ivy gave a start and completely froze as she heard a deep male voice echoing the question. She quickly started spinning around in a circle trying to see where it came from. There were no changes in her surroundings... no one was there. Ivy carefully and quietly started to walk again, hoping that there wouldn't be anymore voices. A part of her was also hoping that the voices would be able to keep her company. At least then, she wouldn't be so very alone.

Just as she was about to give up on hoping for some form of company to try and keep the full blown hysterical panic that she could feel clawing up her throat at bay, Ivy heard what she imagined pulsing and reverberating sounded like. It kept on getting louder and deeper in sound until Ivy had to slam her hands to her ears to try to block the pain the noise was bringing her. Then... silence... dead silence... There was no sound, nothing. Ivy slowly brought her hands down from her ears and shakily brought in a breath. That's when she realized that her face was wet from tears that she didn't realize she was shedding.

Nor did Ivy realize that she fell to her knees as the noise overtook her senses. On very shaky legs, she slowly stood up. Ivy could feel her entire body shaking from the ex-

perience, but she forced herself to keep walking. Ivy had a terrible feeling that if she didn't keep on walking, she would never be able to get out. "... Kissed by death..." An echoed voice said, it sounded like an old woman had said it and Ivy looked around the vast darkness as the words continued to echo.

Before they completely went quiet, an old man's voice began to echo with words that seemed to dance around her. "... Paths upon paths... taken by everyone... what paths they are don't matter... in the end... at the same path... death... another path... take without... physical being... another world... beauty... happiness.. Love... joy... I am not afraid... Death... another path to the beyond."

Ivy couldn't remember when it started, her weird fascination with death; suicide in particular. All she knew was the moment she had a full realization and understanding of what they were – or rather what they meant – it continued to persist. She sought out beings in their last death throes. She watched it happen with curiosity, what happens to the soul after its vessel gives out. Although Ivy never did it in a cold way, she wanted to be there for whoever or whatever it was, holding space and trying to comfort it as it moved on. Even though she didn't remember it, the very first time she witnessed something pass...from that very moment, Ivy knew *deep* down she was doomed.

When Ivy was five she watched as their pet rabbit took its last breath, her mother

**...FROM THAT VERY MOMENT, IVY KNEW DEEP DOWN SHE WAS DOOMED.**

expected her to cry. Ivy's eyes weren't wet, though, and there was never any indication that she was upset. Lizzy bit her lip as she watched Ivy with worried eyes, "Ivy, honey, are you okay?" There was a long pause as she waited for her daughter's response, which didn't come. "Do you want to talk about what happened? Do you have any questions, little angel?"

Ivy seemed to come out of her reverie; she turned to look at her mom and blinked a couple of times. Seeming to try to bring herself back to the present, back to the space she was in. "I don't have any questions, I know that she's at peace. I just wonder if she felt her soul leaving her," was little Ivy's response. Then she gave a soft shrug and a grin to her mom and skipped away, leaving Lizzy in a complete state of shock. Ivy never realized that she was different, that her response to death wasn't normal. What she did realize, in a deep part of her



psyche, is that at only five years old death totally and completely fascinated her.

"Why would she do such a thing like this?" Lizzy's voice seemed to echo even louder and longer than the other voices Ivy had been listening to. It brought Ivy to a hard stop as tears filled her eyes, "Mama?" Ivy started running. "Ma!" Her running turned into sprinting and the voices sounded as though they are reaching Ivy from underwater. "I'm sorry ma'am, I wouldn't be able to tell you... were there ever any signs?" Ivy watched as the space around her changed until she came to a skidding stop in a hospital room.

She could see herself lying on the hospital bed with gauze wraps around her wrists; she could see her mother standing close to the window staring at her body with tears streaming down her face. The doctor was standing in the doorway and Vincent was sitting on one of the seats next to her bed with a hand carefully covering one of Ivy's. Her mother's exclamation broke Ivy out of her observations. "No!" Lizzy's voice broke with her one word answer, "Sh- she- she was such a ha- happy girl... and young woman... she- I- I never-" Lizzy's sobs of grief overtake her and Vincent quickly got up and went over to Lizzy and pulled her into his arms.

Vincent's voice washed over Ivy as she closed her eyes to take it in, "She has always been kind and open to everyone. She's willing to help anyone in need." Ivy could tell that Vincent has forced his voice to be even. Ivy's body jerked in shock when the doctor was pushed out of the doorway and Julie barreled into the room. The moment she saw the state Ivy she freezes, "Oh- oh," Ivy watched as tears filled Julie's eyes, as

she moved to crouch next to the bed and held one of Ivy's hands. "Oh. Ivy, why-- why would you-- why would you ever do something like this!"

Lizzy sniffled and asked in a broken weak voice, "I- is... she- will she.." Lizzy's hands wave as she is at a loss for words.

"We don't know for sure, she's lost a lot of blood. We will be doing a blood transfusion if she survives the next twelve hours."

The room is dead silent as everyone, including Ivy takes that in. There is no movement. "I'll leave you to stay with her in peace; you can talk to her if you like. It may give her something to fight for."

Lizzy finally speaks after licking her lips, "Thank you..." then the male doctor respectfully steps out of the room and quietly closes the door.

"Hi." Ivy's head quickly whipped around at the male's voice breaking her thoughts. She blinked, taking notice at how uncomfortable and out of place he looked. "Hi?" She couldn't stop the confusion that colored her voice at the random man standing above her. Ivy watched as he sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck and shifted. He cleared his throat uncomfortably, "I'm sorry to bother you, but there aren't any more spots in here..." His eyes darted before focusing on her, "I was wondering if I could sit across from you?"

Ivy blinked a couple times and looked around the coffee shop, and was surprised to see how full it had gotten. How long had she been caught up in her head? When she looked back at the man, she realized she hadn't answered yet. "Oh! Yeah, you can sit here! Please, sit!" The man gave her a grateful smile and slowly, carefully sat

down across from her, "I'm Ivy, nice to meet you!"

The man gave an embarrassed laugh as he realized he never gave her his name earlier. As he took her hand, he answered, "I'm Vincent." Their eyes locked as they shook hands, something passed between them – something neither of them could explain.

As they let go of their handshake Ivy felt a blush overtake her cheeks and she quickly looked away as Vincent grinned.

Ivy's grandfather passed away a few weeks ago. Ivy stood in the middle of the chaotic storm looking completely at peace and serene as though nothing was wrong. Lizzy came up to her daughter and studied her a little bit for any sort of reaction, but Ivy kept looking around her calmly. "What does it feel like?" Ivy's quiet voice broke the stillness surrounding the mother daughter duo.

"What does what feel like, little angel?" Lizzy asked as she looked back to her daughter



with confusion and worry bleeding into her eyes.

"Dying... what does dying feel like?"

"I-" Lizzy's voice breaks off as she cleared her throat, "I don't know Ivy... I imagine it would be cold." She didn't know how to respond to her young daughter, after all Lizzy had never thought about death. In fact, she actively avoided thinking about death, although in her mind death would be so frigid it would freeze the very soul of her being. Although she wouldn't tell her sweet little daughter that.

"I don't think you're right. I think it would be a letting go, into a loving warmth that wraps around you on whatever journey you're taking," Ivy responded with wisdom and depth Lizzy was not expecting.

All Lizzy could do was give her daughter a soft, warm, wobbly smile and hug her. Then, she carefully led Ivy to her grandfather's open casket. As Ivy looked upon her grandfather's body, she gave no reaction other than a sense of inquisitiveness. Ivy was only nine when she realized she wasn't just fascinated by death, but enthralled by it.

Ivy found herself back in the dark pit after what felt like days of watching her mother, Vincent, and Julie's vigil in the hospital bed. She couldn't stop the sigh of disappointment that left her. Ivy was content to watch over them as they watched over her physical body. She decided to lay down on the onyx ground beneath her and await the voices that she knew were soon to follow.

"Slit her wrists; she was barely found in time," A male's voice echoed throughout the pitch black.

"Poor girl, she always was so kind," a raspy woman's voice echoed.

"Darkness about her that couldn't be explained..." This time it was an old woman's voice.

"Saw it when she was a newborn... never cried when there was death... looked fascinated... hypnotized almost," an old man's voice echoed in and out, some of his words lost.

"...napped out of it... always there lurkin..." This man's voice could barely be heard.

"Death kissed her," it was the old woman's voice echoing again.

A few weeks later, I was at her own father's funeral with her mom. Ivy couldn't hide the disgust in her eyes at the thought of Jerry.

## “DYING... WHAT DOES DYING FEEL LIKE?”

"We are gathered here today," the priest's voice broke through her thoughts and Ivy couldn't stop the eye roll that came, knowing what the priest was going to say next.

"Why are we even here?" Ivy whispered to her mom.

"Ivy," Lizzy replied exasperated and strained.

"C'mon ma. He was a bloody terrible father and a crap husband. How many women did he sleep with again? How many times did he treat us both like we weren't human beings? Yet, you still stayed with the waste of space." Ivy had to work hard to keep whispering as she spoke.

"You needed your father," Lizzy didn't even sound like she believed her own words.

"No! I needed a dad who loved me! You needed and still need a husband that is so in love with you that he doesn't even look at

“Y...VY...VY...IVY...IVY...IVY...IVY...IVY...IVY...IVY!!”

other women! Not a man that donated his sperm to give life to a being that he hated for no reason. I wanted a dad. I wanted you to have a *loving* husband!” Ivy’s voice got so quiet at those last words that her mom had to strain to hear them. It pushed Lizzy to tears, hearing her angel say what she really felt; and for the first time, Ivy cried at a funeral. Although, not for the reason others thought.

“...Gave her life...” The same old woman’s voice echoed again, but louder.

“Please, angel, just...old on...ight...ome back to us,” Lizzy’s voice echoed in and out breaking off and coming back into focus, forcing tears to start in Ivy’s eyes.

“Ivy...love...all here...aiting for you to awake... back to us...your times not up yet...feel it... love you...vy Raven Redwood,” Vincent’s voice did the same as Ivy’s mom’s, except it seemed to hit her harder. She couldn’t stop the tears and sobs that brought her to crawling on all fours to try and muffle them. Laughter, talking, and quiet murmuring starts up, causing Ivy to quiet herself fast as she falls back onto her butt.

“y...vy...vy...ivy...ivy...Ivy...Ivy...IVy...IVY!!” The layers of voices calling her name got louder. “Ivy” A little boy’s voice saying her

name softly made all the others go dead silent... a pin could be heard if one dropped.

Ivy slowly looked up to where he was standing. “Who are you?” Ivy’s shaky voice asked before she even realized she opened her mouth to talk. Although, she did recognize him even though she knew she had never seen the boy before. The boy smiled, “I’m you! But not,” he pointed to her flat stomach.

Ivy felt a shock go through her system; her hand unconsciously moved to cover her stomach. “Wake up mama, don’t let us...,” the boy disappeared before she could hear the rest of his sentence and so did all of her surroundings.

Ivy gasped awake, hearing her mother sobbing and Vincent screaming for doctors, “Choking, she’s choking! Why is she choking?”

Ivy could finally breathe clearly after feeling of something pulled out of her throat. “Ivy, oh Ivy, my sweet angel, Ivy. You’re okay; you’re going to be okay.” Suffocated by her mother’s panicked and ecstatic embrace, Ivy locked eyes with Vincent.

With one of her hands covering her stomach. “Am I? Am I going to be okay?” Ivy’s croaky voice filled the room. The silence that filled the room after was full of ghosts.

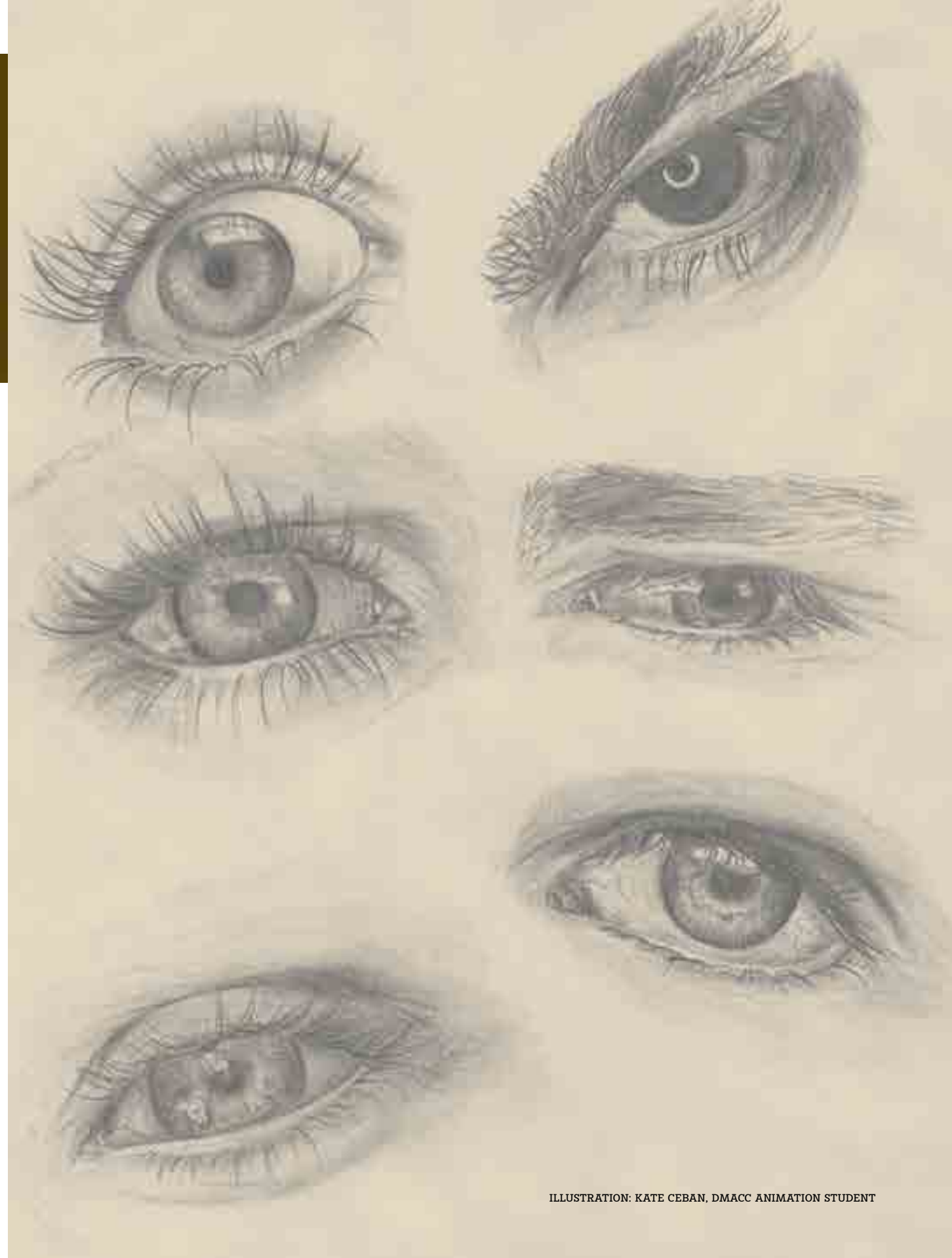


ILLUSTRATION: KATE CEBAN, DMACC ANIMATION STUDENT

# TO EACH THEIR OWN ODYSSEY

T. Lane Williams

Betteridge's law of headlines states "[A]ny headline which ends in a question mark can be answered by the word 'no.'" The reason why journalists use that style of headline is that they know the story is probably not worthy of the bottom of a birdcage and don't actually have the sources and facts to back it up, but still want it to go to press.



Google has dimmed the author's bulb. In "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" author Nicolas Carr reasons the way we are consuming information on the internet is deteriorating the skill of deep reading and thereby destroying the ability of deep thinking. "Deep reading, as Maryanne Wolf argues [in her work *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain.*], is indistinguishable from deep thinking." (2008)

In opposition, Sherman Alexie talks about his incessant want to read anything and everything – no matter the source. "I read the backs of cereal boxes. I read the newspaper. I read the bulletins posted on the walls of the school, the clinic, the tribal offices, the post office. I read junk mail. I read auto-repair manuals. I read magazines. I read anything that had words and paragraphs." (25)

Both authors hold positions of esteem in their literary circles. Both continue to earn awards for their work. However, it appears each comes from a different perspective on how deep reading and deep thinking work and their possible connections. Alexie's main area of work is in short stories and poems. Sure, he also writes novels, but he writes lyrics, too. It is's a varied sample of treasure in the written word. Whatever gets people to read, to think, to write. To live.

Carr, on the other hand, holds a more provincial attitude to reading: a view of superiority shown by some who read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina* or other novels of their ilk. Perhaps Carr is on a maddened mission to seek and hunt down his own great white whale, that of high tea, crumpets, and private education. Though hopefully not intended, Carr sounds to be that of a patrician not wishing to share the wealth with the mob. Long novels and writings aren't as easily accessible to people of varied backgrounds, economic or ethnic, and could include barriers in language and difficulty to connect to the theme of the original prose. It is's not necessarily about thought, but connection. The internet, on the other hand, is a medium for the masses. Though we are're not at one hundred percent saturation for access, once a community acquires access, they gain inroads for an expanse of knowledge never before known. And at that point, the investment in thought increases and the wealth grows in that sharing.

Over two thousand years ago, the Egyptians held knowledge and the written word in high value. So much so, they built libraries across the kingdom to collect every scrap of parchment, papyrus, lambskin, and bark possible. One of the tolls a ship paid when they docked was to share whatever writings on board with city librarians, who would then copy the manuscripts to

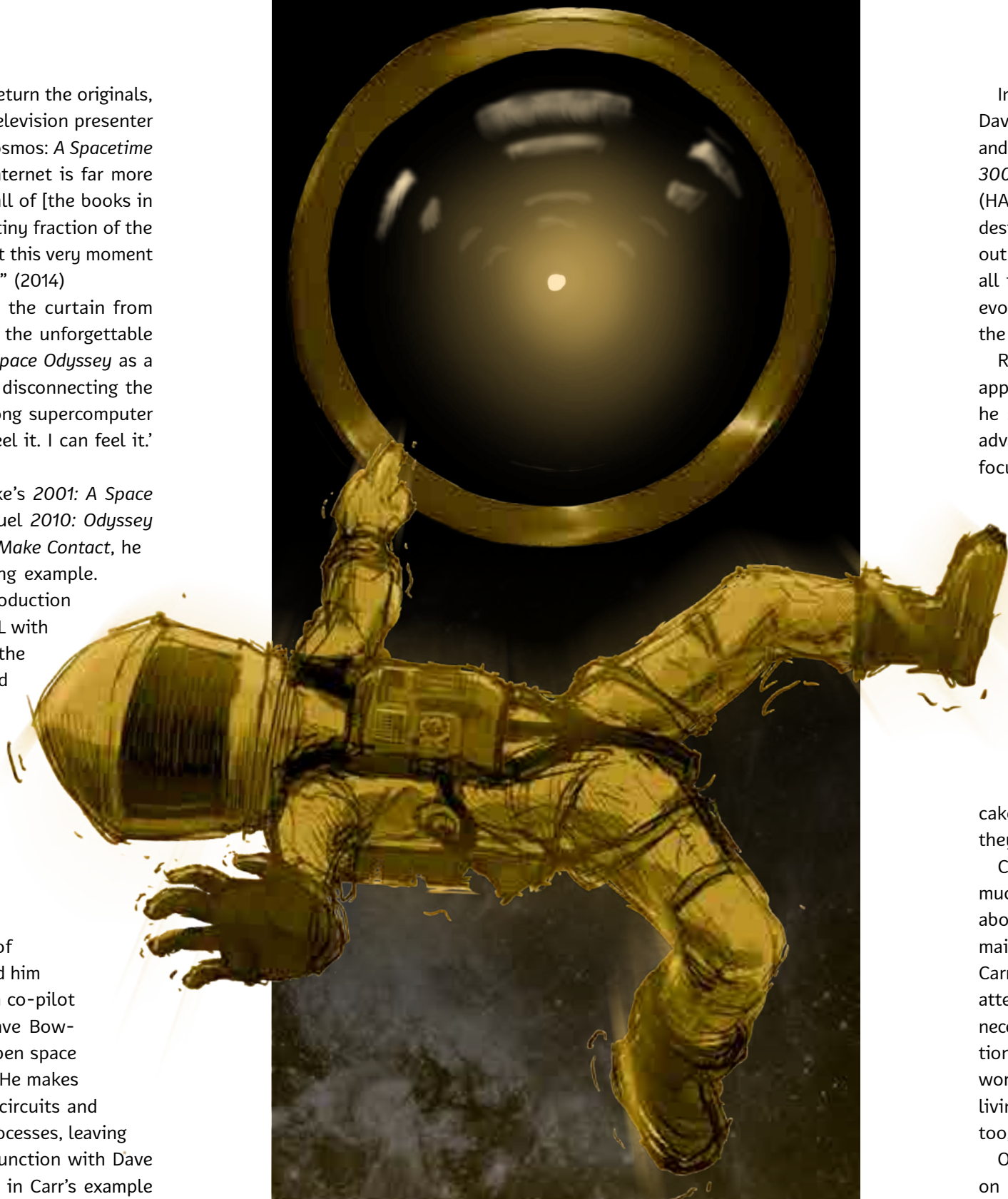


include on the library's shelves. They would return the originals, but the knowledge remained. Scientist and television presenter Neil deGrasse Tyson in the final episode of *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* shares his view that the modern internet is far more important than the Ptolemaic libraries, "And all of [the books in the Library of Alexandria], all of this is but a tiny fraction of the information that you have at your fingertips at this very moment [in] our own electronic Library of Alexandria." (2014)

As for another *Odyssey*, Carr pulls away the curtain from his narrative in his opening paragraph using the unforgettable scene from Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a metaphor. In it, spaceman Dave Bowman is disconnecting the artificial intelligence brain of the malfunctioning supercomputer HAL9000, "Dave, my mind is going... I can feel it. I can feel it." (2008) The 'Net is Dave and he is HAL.

Had Carr actually read Sir Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* novel and continued with the sequel *2010: Odyssey Two* or viewed the movie *2010: The Year We Make Contact*, he would realize his poorly constructed opening example. HAL's mind was already gone due to an introduction of a conflict in orders. Dr Chandra created HAL with candor and insight. Then, in the course of the mission, he was to keep the humans on board their spacecraft, the *Discovery One*, from learning of the monoliths, possible alien contact, and observable data around the gas giant planet in outer space until they arrived (in the novel, Saturn was the destination while in the movie and subsequent novels and film, Jupiter was the goal). This created an internal struggle within HAL which he could not overcome.

This deception developed a sense of deep-seated xenophobia in HAL's AI and caused him to murder the scientists in hibernation, then co-pilot Frank Poole, and attempt to kill Captain Dave Bowman. Dave luckily survives long enough in open space without a helmet to re-enter *Discovery One*. He makes his way to HAL's bank of heuristic memory circuits and proceeds to disengage HAL's higher mental processes, leaving only those necessary for the spacecraft to function with Dave at the helm. The moment we are witnessing in Carr's example is Dave acting as skillful brain surgeon to remove the cancer. Though HAL was unaware of it, he had already lost his mind.



In the third installment of the tetralogy, *2061: Odyssey Three*, Dave returns to *Discovery One* and rescues HAL's consciousness and proceeds to merge it with his own new being. The final novel, *3001: The Final Odyssey*, written in 1997, shares how Halman (HAL and Dave Bowman as one) saves Earth from the possible destruction of the biosphere from the same aliens which send out the mysterious monoliths that are the source of conflict in all four novels. It is about growth and adaptation. There is an evolution at work, as well as the importance of stewardship of the planet and humanity.

Readers may I feel a tinge of sympathy for Carr, at times. He appears to be a man which time forgot. He laments at what he see as the sacrifices mankind made due to technological advances of our past. He talks about his own inability to keep focused upon his reading and looking for distractions. "I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text." (2008) In fact, he appears to lean on anecdotal evidence throughout, his own and a few acquaintances, to attempt to prove his original hypothesis.

Once, twelve 12 years ago, he shunned the 'Net and earned great notoriety, even a Nobel nomination for a book based upon this original essay. Then, just a few years later, he monetizes a collection of his own blog posts, short essays and neatly trimmed, efficient tidbits of writings in a new book. He had his cake and ate it, too. Sometimes people write things because they're commissioned, not because they're called.

Carr's approach to technology and its effect on mankind is much different than that of Verlyn Klinkenborg when he talks about light pollution in his essay "Our Vanishing Night." The main difference between the two is where the conflict arises. Carr blames the internet on what he sees as our ever-shrinking attention span, a problem within ourselves ... a correlation, not necessarily a causation. While Klinkenborg notes that light pollution is a far greater worry, "The consequences of our bright new world are more readily perceptible in less adaptable creatures living in the peripheral glow of our prosperity. But for humans, too, light pollution may take a biological toll." (2008)

Our attention spans are skills and behaviors we can adjust on a personal basis, through good habits and a watchful eye on our activities.

With light pollution, we are changing ecosystems, causing

many species great difficulty adapting to the over abundance of illumination at night. Sleep cycles, eating cycles, hibernation, migration, and more are being altered from insects to humanity and floral life, as well. This is a societal, global issue; not one of petty, prejudicial, and subjective viewpoints like whether my clicking the next hyperlink will ruin my ability of thought forever. From a personal perspective, I researched and wrote my first draft of this piece in four hours on a Saturday afternoon. I did not move from my seat to take a break. This doesn't count initial reading of the materials by Carr, Alexie and Klinkenborg completed the previous evening; just the assembly of my thoughts into the written word.

I have a varied experience with the internet. It has been a boon, it has been a bust; but one thing I have consistently counted on is the amount of knowledge and thought-provoking reading I can consume in mere moments which would have taken days, weeks, months, or even years just a half-century ago. While reading an article about one writer's view of the internet I'm able to learn about studies in thought processes, acquaint myself with great inventions and how those discoveries developed, and then finish my day watching my favorite scene from my favorite movie to hear Douglas Rain sing the song which inspired the bedtime melody for my daughter:

"Daisy, Daisy give me your heart to do  
I'm half crazy, hopeful in love with you  
It won't be a stylish marriage  
I can't afford the carriage  
But you look sweet upon the street  
On a bicycle built for two." (Dacre 1892)

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# WE. FUTURE.

Kenneth M. Vierck

We fly miles in the thousands  
in bellies of metal dragons.

We glide miles in the hundreds  
in wagons made of steel.

We coast miles in the tens on skeletal  
horses made of hardened charcoal.

We walk far less than one mile  
in our abodes in front of boxes

made by alchemists dissolving  
rubber into hard shell, filling within

minstrels, troubadours, jesters, thespians  
trapping them for our entertainment.

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