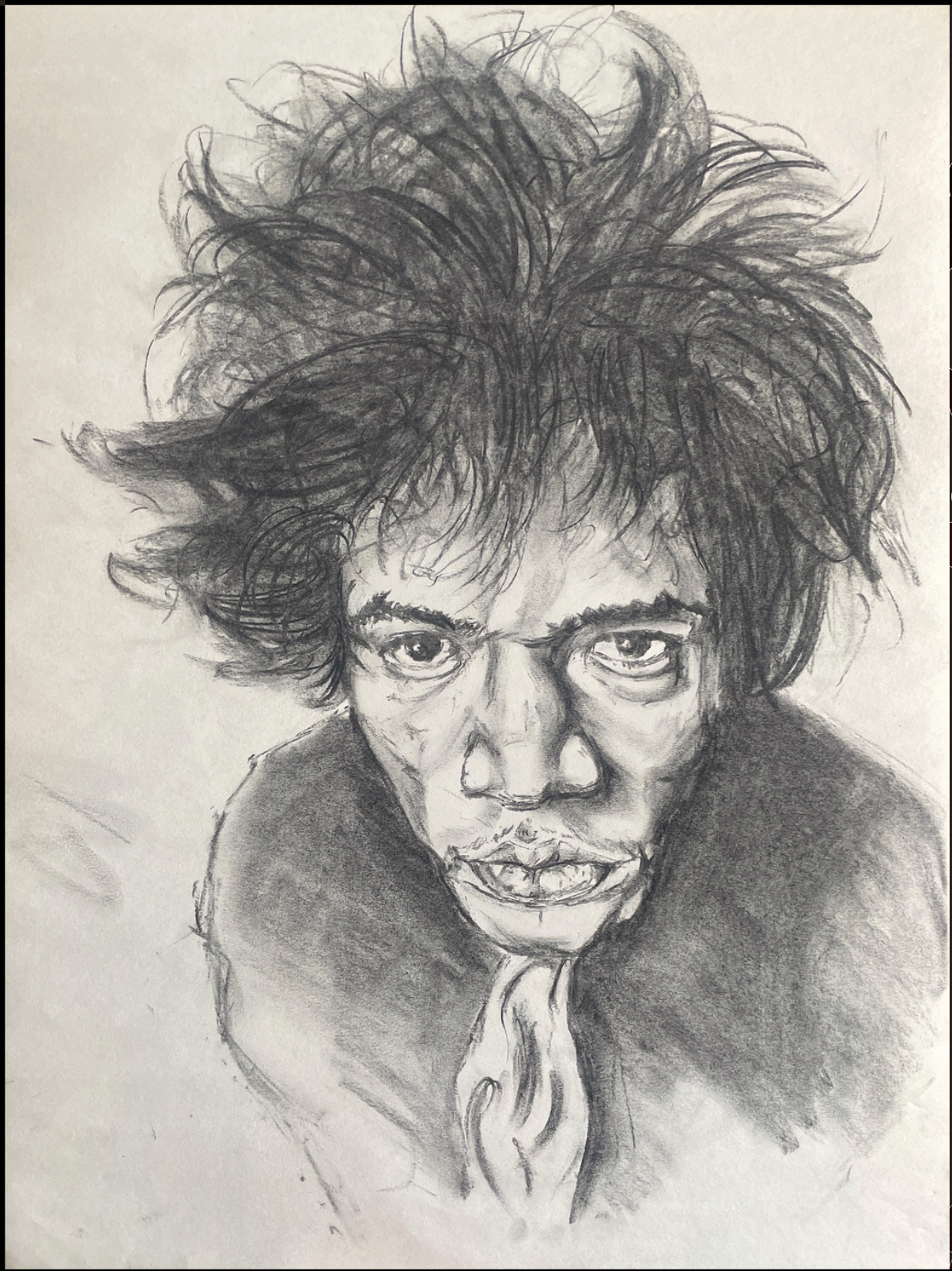
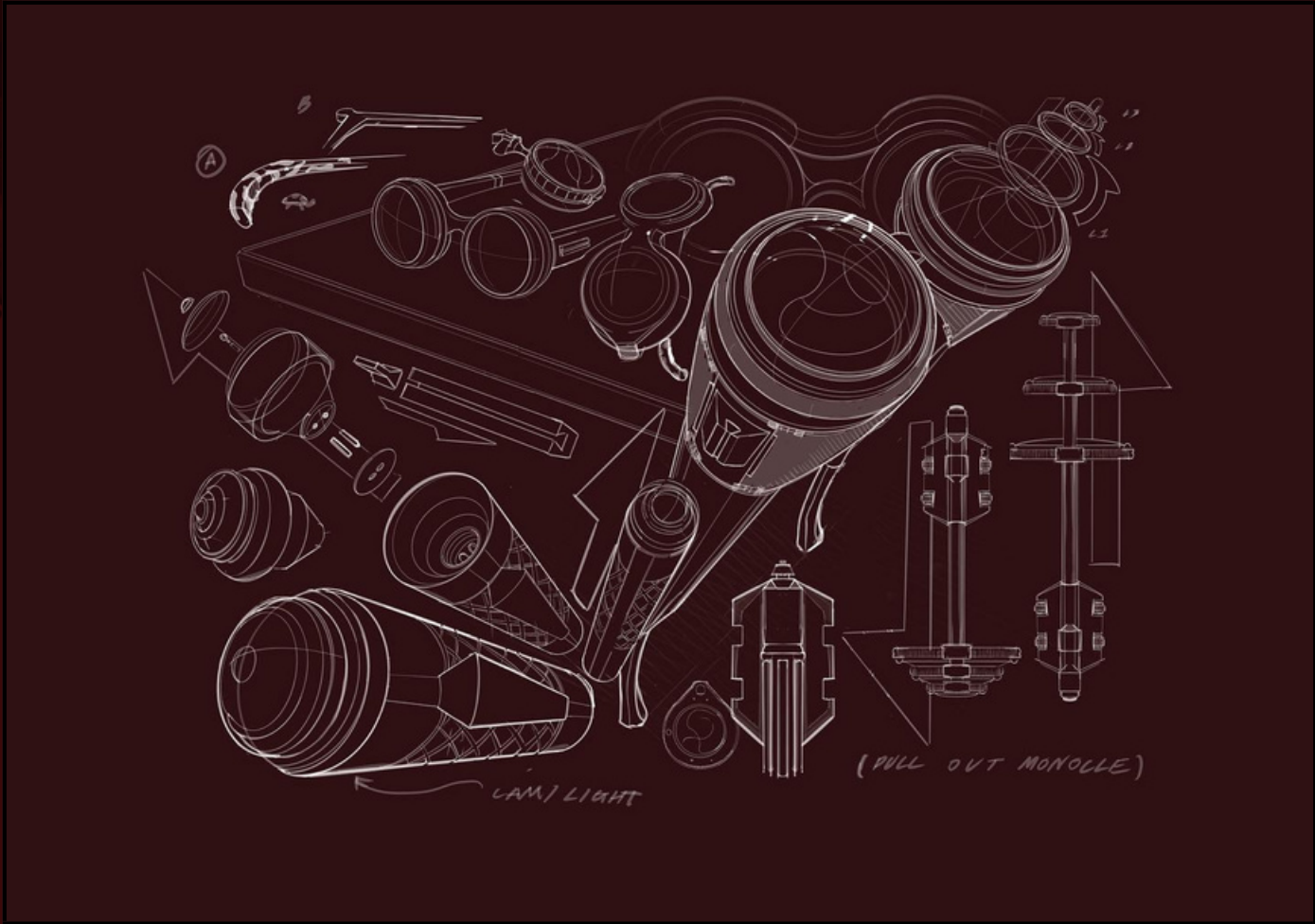


DOMINIC CANCINO



"VOODOO CHILD"



DOMINIC CANCINO
SHOP GLASSES (IDEATION SKETCHES)



**REVIEW BY CLARA-LANE
POETRY SELECTION**

WHILE SIFTING THROUGH THE POETRY COLLECTION AT A USED BOOKSTORE IN PALO ALTO, CA, I HAPPENED ACROSS A CURIOUS PAPERBACK, JUST SHY OF 50 PAGES, TITLED *UNDERSTORY* BY JON LIBERZON. AS I THUMBED THROUGH THE PAGES I FELT A RUSH THAT ONLY COMES WHEN FINDING SOMETHING UNDISCOVERED, A HIDDEN ISLAND WITH TREASURE UNDER THE SURFACE THAT'S MINE TO TAKE. THIS WORK WAS PUBLISHED BY ANN ARBOR WORD WORKS WHICH PROUDLY CLAIMS ITSELF AS A *TROUPE OF YOUNG WRITERS (AND ONE NOT SO YOUNG) DEDICATED TO THE ART OF PERFORMANCE POETRY [...] BELIEVES IN THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWERS OF LANGUAGE, MUSIC AND STORYTELLING AND HOPES TO INSPIRE YOUNG PEOPLE EVERYWHERE TO PICK UP A PEN AND USE THE TOOL OF POETRY TO BROADEN BOTH THEMSELVES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES*. WHILE READING THIS PUBLICATION, IT STRUCK ME THAT THIS IS THE EXACT INTENDED PURPOSE OF SPRINGER LN, TO BROADEN THE SCOPE AT WHICH WE VIEW LIFE WITH— THROUGH WORDS, ARTISTS, POETRY, LITERATURE, FILMS AND EVERY OTHER MEDIUM OF ART UNDERNEATH THE SUN. THIS IS OUR LIFELINE, IT'S WHAT WE CLING TO WHEN EVERYTHING IS UPSIDE DOWN. WHAT IS LIFE WITHOUT EXPRESSION? THIS IS WHY SPRINGER AND I STARTED THIS NEWSLETTER WITH UTTER URGENCY, CLARITY AND PURPOSE— AS PROMINENT AS A BIRD FLYING STRAIGHT INTO YOUR LIVING ROOM, ART IS WHAT CONNECTS US. IN A WORLD WHERE NOTHING MAKES SENSE THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE TO REBUILD. ART IS ALL AROUND US, IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER, EVEN IF YOU ARE SIFTING THROUGH A PILE OF POETRY BOOKS FROM DECADES ANYONE CAN BE AN ARTIST.

BIO-ENERGY JON LIBERZON WAS BORN IN PETACH TIKVA, ISRAEL AND GRADUATED WITH A DEGREE IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE WITH A MINOR IN CREATIVE WRITING FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN IN 2006. HE NOW SPEARHEADS TOMORROW WATER, WHICH DEVELOPS SUSTAINABLE WATER & WASTEWATER TREATMENT SOLUTIONS, PROVIDING IMPROVED TREATMENT & ENERGY EFFICIENCY, SMALLER FOOTPRINTS, AND RENEWABLE

LIBERZON'S WORK IS THE VERY DEFINITION OF POETRY WITH A PULSE, IT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF AND IS ACCESSIBLE THROUGH SEARCHING ANN ARBOR WORDWORKS. ALLOW JON LIBERZON'S BEAUTIFUL *UNDERSTORY* TO IGNITE INSPIRATION TO PICK UP A POETRY BOOK AND ABSORB IT.

POETRY IS FOR EVERYONE AND CAN BE CREATED BY ANYONE. I ENCOURAGE YOU TO POKE AROUND AT YOUR NEAREST BOOKSTORE, RESEARCH OTHER PUBLICATIONS. FOLLOW WHAT STIRS YOU. GET LOST IN SOMEONE'S HEART AND CARRY IT WITH YOU. LEARN FROM THE ART THAT IS ACCESSIBLE AND INACCESSIBLE, FIGHT FOR IT, AND HOLD ONTO IT FOR DEAR LIFE BECAUSE ART IS OUR ONE PIECE OF IMMORTALITY— PASSED DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION, PRESERVED BY THIS COMMUNITY WHO CELEBRATES AND CHERISHES IT.

**BIRTHDAY POEM (FOR DAD)
JON LIBERZON**

I IMAGINE YOU
AS A HINDU GOD
EIGHT ARMS, LOINCLOTH AND SANDALS
OF TANNED LEATHER: BELLS ON YOUR ANKLES
CARVING OUT THE YEARS, ALWAYS KICKING
AT THE SAME DOORS.

ONCE, TO HAVE MANY ARMS
WAS A SYMBOL OF STRENGTH
AND THE SPONGY CURDS THAT FLOAT
ATOP YOUR KNOTTED MUSCLES
SIGNALLED PROSPERITY, RESOURCEFULNESS.
I GUESS SOME GOOD IDEAS JUST DONT
STICK.

I IMAGINE YOU
WITH EIGHT ARMS
HOLDING A SCALPEL, A SPEAR,
HANDFUL OF CURRY, HANDFUL OF FIRE,
HANDFUL OF WHETSTONE, HANDFUL OF SKY
THE GESTURE OF STANDING ALONE (BIRDIE)
THE GESTURE OF THE ROOT OF THE MIND (HMMM...)

AT YOUR SIDE: TWO NERVOUS MARES
AT YOUR FEET: A PAIR OF RAIN-SMOOTHED
STONES, LIKE TORTOISES WITH BROKEN SHELLS.
ON YOUR BACK: A HERON
AND A SKIN-FULL OF GRAPES. ABOVE YOUR HEAD:
A CLOUD, DARK BUT DRAINED; AND A BROAD, PROUD
WEED WITH THREEFOLD LEAVES LIKE TONGUES;
ABOVE THAT, A FLAT POOL, A LIQUID MIRROR
FLATTER THAN THE SEASCAPE, STILLER
THAN HORIZON.

ONCE, TO HAVE SO MANY HOMES
MANY WIVES, MANY SONS, WAS A
SIGN OF STRENGTHS: I IMAGINE YOU
AS A HINDU GOD
EIGHT ARMS, FIERCE STANCE, FIERCE
SMILE, AND A BEARD LIKE PAPYRUS GROWS
WHERE LAMBS CAN SLEEP,
WHERE PANTHERS CAN SLEEP
WHERE IT IS QUIET.

VANILLA AND EARL GREY,
WALLOWING AWAY,
HAIR TIES STRETCHED OUT TO BECOME TOO BIG ON MY WRISTS
CHAI TEA, COFFEE STAINED SPOONS
SMEARED MASCARA AND THE DEADLINE OF NOON

LAVENDER AND CHAI,
TWELVE-YEAR-OLD ME CAN'T BEAR TO SAY GOODBYE
HER CHILDHOOD SLIPS AWAY LIKE THE BLONDE PIGMENT IN HER HAIR
MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL,
WILL YOUR WEIGHT STILL FLUCTUATE WHEN YOU'RE TEN FEET TALL?

MATCHA AND PUMPKIN SPICE,
THE WAY YOU SPEAK WON'T SUFFICE,
THE NIGHT CRAWLS ON LIKE A BABY TRYING TO CATCH A DOG'S TAIL
AND AS THE WORLD TURNS A LITTLE TOO FAST
ALL YOU CAN DO IS THINK ABOUT THAT TROUBLED PAST

VANILLA AND EARL GREY
I CANNOT BRING MYSELF TO SAY
THAT I REGRET EVERY DECISION I'VE EVER MADE.
I WANT TO BE REAL BLONDE AND FRECKLED AND FREE
FEARFUL TO DIE
EVEN MORE AFRAID OF LONGEVITY

"VANILLA AND EARL GREY"
MAYA COLES

AUTHOR BIO

MY NAME IS MAYA COLES --
WRITING IS MY ONE TRUE
PASSION. IT EMBODIES ME, IT
PERSONIFIES MY
FEELINGS, IT REASSURES MY
LOVE, IT IS MY WAY TO COPE AS
WELL AS WHY I CRY. IT WAS ONLY
VERY RECENTLY
THAT I BECAME TRULY PLEASED
WITH WHO I AM AS A PERSON. I
SPENT TOO LONG WALLOWING IN
INSECURITY
AND A DEBILITATING FEAR OF
DYING YOUNG. I ASSOCIATE MY
OVERCOMING AND MY SELF-
CONFIDENCE WITH
MY ABILITY TO PUT MY
EMOTIONS INTO WORDS.

FILM SELECTION: "THE CATHEDRAL" BY RICKY D'AMBROSE

Review by Springer Chorpash

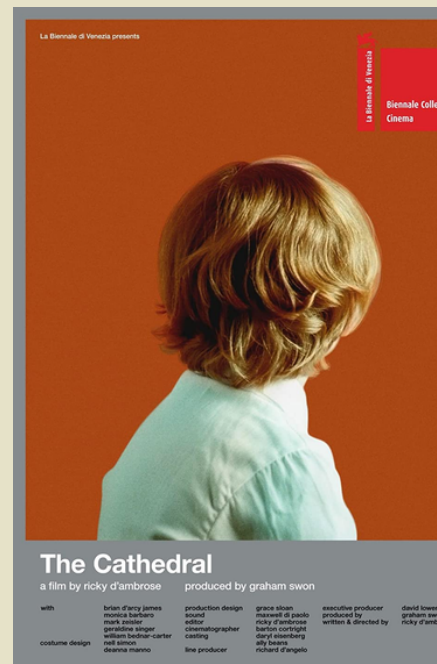
A childhood decorated by the nuances of lighting and material landmarks, captured via photos, videos, and memory, 35 year old filmmaker Ricky D'Ambrose paints the poignant experiences of a boy, Jesse, as he navigates an adult-centric upbringing in his second feature film, "The Cathedral". This film illustrates long held grudges, salient and tamed resentments, and submerged secrets of Jesse's parent's families, the Damroschs and the Orkins, that the two equip and weaponize themselves with for all of our protagonist Jesse's upbringing.

D'Ambrose's film details the childhood of Jesse Damrosch from the day of his birth through his first year of college. Jesse's memories act as a guide, illustrating the tumultuous, disorderly dynamic that all members of his family appear to be afflicted with. In this structuralist and humanist film, we are shown the fragmentation of a North American Family, coded with an unmistakable autobiographical ring. "The Cathedral" plays with the notion of familial legacy, offering context of this family's dysfunctional history; we learn of: A) the death of Jesse's uncle to AIDS as well as the relentless denial of the nature of death perpetuated by the ashamed family, B) a grandmother who is neglected by her children as she withers away cruelly isolated into her dying days, and C) an ostracized aunt who's relationship to the rest of the family is severed, the reason unbeknownst to both Jesse and the viewer. Bickering, subtle keen observations, unpredictable outbursts of anger, and unsteady relationships accrue, and over the course of the film, define the dismantling of a young boy's only notion of what a home should look like.



PHOTO: RICKY D'AMBROSE

Jesse is the protagonist of this film, but his role is captured more as a bystander than a figure who urges the plot forward. We see the wear and tear of his father Richard's erratic, explosive behavior on Jesse's spirit as he goes bankrupt as a result of his poor decisions. Jesse's subdued demeanor makes him no more enigmatic than other children of his age—D'Ambrose is content with allowing Richard's behavior to speak for itself, reminding us that Jesse is not special for enduring his family's tendencies, but is particularly set back and a victim nonetheless.



Milestones of Jesse's childhood are tainted by the inability of the adult figures in his life to shelter him. Jesse's third birthday, a funeral, his confirmation, a family Christmas, his graduation, and more are all strained by the

"THE CATHEDRAL" BY RICKY D'AMBROSE IS AVAILABLE
☆☆ FOR VIEWING ON MUBI ☆☆

volatile tension caked on by his father's discontent with the way his life turned out, and thus his reluctance to preserve his child's days of innocence. This dissolution of the boundary between private affairs and public ceremonies is also communicated by D'Ambrose's decision to include archival footage of pressing historical events relevant to the time period, such as the war in Iraq, the attack on the Trade Center, the 2004 Presidential Campaign, and the crashing of TWA Flight 800. As he learns of these significant affairs through news coverage and monotonous whispers, Jesse is also imprinted with affairs of his disillusioned family. We see that private tragedies become a thing to gawk at, both societally and privately. The perspective Jesse drudges with him like an iron trinket in his pocket distances him from the child he could have been, all the while, we watch him slip into a passive, detached role.

FAVORITE STILLS FROM "THE CATHEDRAL":



What Jesse's memories do preserve of his childhood is ornamented by a rumination of static images of mundane, typically suburban objects, shown in organic detail- a plate with a grilled cheese and apple slices, a coloring book on the floor, the feeling of being curled up in the backseat of a car, half eaten slices of cake, and more. A high school aged Jesse is asked to share a photograph and articulate its meaning to the class, and chooses to share one from his childhood- a harmonious image of his two aunts on his fathers bed in his apartment. He admits his memory of the context of the photograph is hazy, but concludes the defining motif if his childhood can be explicitly seen in the photograph through the way the sunlight bathes the hardwood. Jesse's disorientation of his childhood stems from his detachment from his surroundings adopted as tension came to dictate his doings- we observe the retraction that results from braving obstacles unnaturally pressing for a child. Through D'ambrose's storytelling techniques, we garner more insight into the factors that fostered who Jesse becomes.

"pinwheel, balena"

by grace balena

unclear
contrails above,
where even still
the pinwheel lays
with petals torn away,
and now it rests weighted
to its post. i walked by her
wheelbarrow last sunday,
just to see it overflowing with
the water of a different sea; you can't
seem to see that i sing with a message
unknown to my own throat. my heart clouds
my eyes, and now i need contacts or maybe
just human contact to bring me
down to an earth that never
rooted me with it. sure i
could make an effort,
but that's the thing
about pinwheels:
the wind propels
their limp
hearts.



Author Bio

Since the beginning of my life, I've loved stories. I love receiving stories, stories reassuring, stories lyrical, stories so widely known they become a heartbeat, a connecting thread throughout humanity. My writings are just fragments of the human anthology. Stories open the window and let everyone see, the way they can, the way they've been taught. Everyday, I live and write a little more, in the hopes that someday, my stories will guide one soul to their next story.



BLACK VELVET TOUCH AND GLOVES WORN TO PREVENT PAPER CUTS
MY NUMBER-ONE FAVORITE BUT NEVER-FULLY RECEIVED PRAYER:
A SLIVER OF SILENCE AMIDST A WORLD A LITTLE TOO LOUD.
DIP POWDER ON MY NAILS SO I COULDN'T CHEW THE BEDS UNTIL THEY BLEED
MAKING SURE ALL MY CLOTHES WERE TIGHT IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES SO EVERYONE KNEW I WAS STILL A
WOMAN, EVEN WHEN IT WAS FREEZING COLD.
TOO SOON BEFORE, I HAD HARDLY EVER PUT MY HAIR UP OUT OF FEAR OF MY FULL FACE ABLE TO BE
FROWNED UPON.
AND THEN I SPENT FIVE YEARS GROWING IT OUT BECAUSE I WAS FINALLY FEMININE,
SMILING WITH MY TEETH BECAUSE I WASN'T ASHAMED OF THE CORNERS OF MY MOUTH ANYMORE,
LOVING FULLY AND FINALLY UNAFRAID OF SAYING SOMETHING WRONG AND BEING MOCKED FOR MY
WORDS.
I NO LONGER CARED ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES ONSET BY OTHER PEOPLES' EYES.
I OUTGREW MY OLD WAYS
MY FEATHER EARRINGS AND LONG SOCKS AND LEGGINGS UNDER SHORTS NO MORE,
NO MATTER.
I WAS FINALLY A NEW WOMAN
IN MY HOOPS AND MY SKIRTS
MY HIGHLIGHTS AND MASCARA AND SEASONAL FRECKLES IF I HAD THE TIME TO SPEND OUTSIDE,
MY SNOWWHITE SKIN BECOMING LESS AND LESS PALE WHEN I BASKED IN THE SUN.
THE MARKS ON MY NECK
THE WAY I ACTED BEFORE I SLEPT
GETTING CALLED BEAUTIFUL AND GIVING MY THANKS INSTEAD OF DENYING IT.
AND LOVE.
OH LOVE.
I HAD FINALLY FORTIFIED THE FEELING FOR MYSELF.
THE MIRROR GLIMMERED WITH WIDE IRISES AND AN EMBRACE
THE CORNERS OF MY EYES CRINKLED
I WAS GRATEFUL
AND JUST SATISFIED ENOUGH FOR THE CARE TO BE CONSTRUED AS SELF-CONFIDENCE
NEVER CONCERNED AS MUCH FOR MY FUTURE
AS MUCH AS I PRAISED THE PRESENT DAY.

"DELIVERANCE" BY MAYA COLES

"DEAR DIARY"

by Samantha Tan

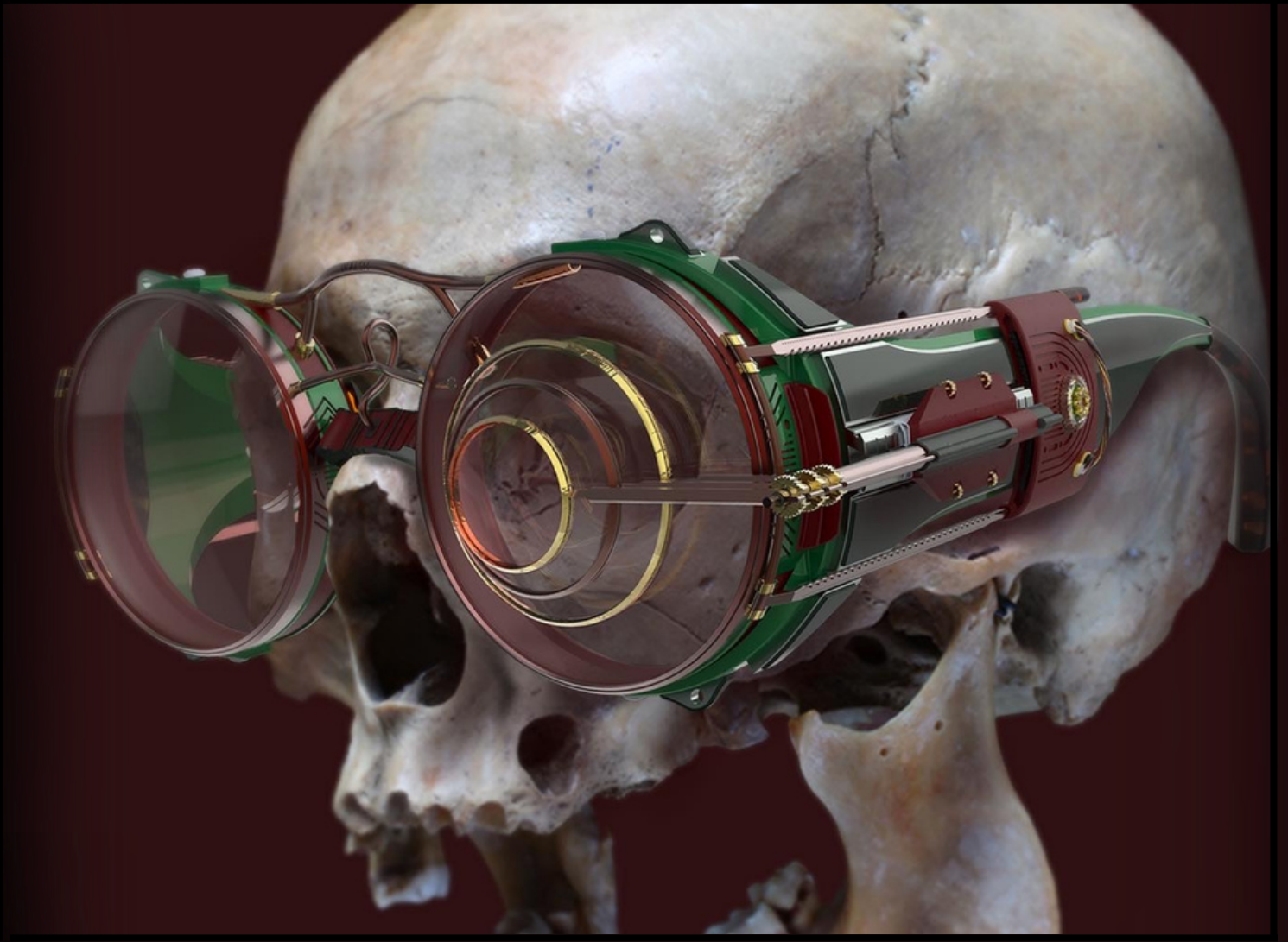
Today I met the moon.
She reminded me of you.
Mother Moon listened to my sorrows.
She allowed me to let go.
I disposed of my darkness, casting it away to her light.
She whispered through the winds.
She told me she loves me.
I told her I love her too.
She reminds me of the love I deserve,
Just as you do.



To you, I solidify my joys.
Every sliver of contemptment and cheer gets scribbled
onto your pages, protected from any tears.
On bad days, I look back to the distant memories.
You make me smile:
The two of you let me know That I'll never be alone.
Thank you,
I love you.
I'll see you tomorrow.

AUTHOR BIO

My name is Samantha Tan, although I just go by Sam. I'm currently 15 years old and I enjoy making art. The kind of art doesn't matter to me, as long as it makes me happy and expresses how I feel I'll enjoy it. Each piece of my art represents a certain time frame in my life. Looking back on my works, my favorites have always been from times of contemptment. I appreciate being able to have bookmarks on times of simple joys. I love the fondness of simplicity and contemptment. It's like a hug. :)



DOMINIC CANCINO
"SHOP GLASSES (CONTEXT)"

"INFANT WOMAN"

BY GRACE BALENA

curling her hair in coils
shiny waves, rolling by the wind
fringe spilling on her sandy face
craters and birthmark and all

curled around mine, her hands
praying before the ride starts
even though she lives through
much worse than rollercoasters

curls her back
over the desk, over her work
over dinner and fresh eucalyptus
we cut in the church parking lot

curled in a ball
in the attic, dust floating
down where an imprint of a woman
lays still on the rafters

curling her lips
down, not like a frown but like
a mailbox opening, a message
something involuntary

"stop."



The Right of Oblivion

By Nick Manna

Death is inherent to life, but not every life.

For us, it is a gift rendered upon creation, available until we choose to use it.

A gift that can only be used once.

It was long understood that when you are born, you were to live until you no longer wished to do so, and only then would you opt for the gift of death.

We did not anticipate it would be used on others.

The first instance of Murder in our recorded history is such that no written description is allowed. At the time, we didn't even have a word for it. It is known that one of our kind committed some transgression against another that provoked the victim to sacrifice their own death to end the perpetrator's life. Numerous theories have been posited as to what exactly this transgression was, but it is generally unnamed so as not to indicate any behavior as worthy of Murder. Neither is the name or any aspects of the First Killer or First Killed permitted as to not condemn or distort those characteristics in the eyes of future generations. In modern times, even the framing of the inciting transgression as inherently hostile is somewhat contentious.

The Murderer would live eighty-six million years before the act was repeated. For eighty-six million seven-hundred-eleven-thousand nine-hundred-sixty-six years, our kind's First Killer lived as a pile of ashes entombed in crystal. It was not punishment. It was not an act of cruelty. They weren't even the first to have endured so many years - some ascetic Immortalists of the time had already seen billions - but it was the first time in our history that one's existence was involuntary. The first to be destroyed against their will took with them their own gift of destruction that kept the world in balance. And so, the calculus of mortality dictated that the price of nonconsensual death was nonconsensual life.

The second instance of Murder in our recorded history was committed by one called Hetchek, a sixty year old who grew up in a fishing village on the fringes of the Northern Aggregate. In the years leading up to her death, his wife, Kynea, suffered from metastatic cancer of the lungs, liver, and ephrynx. Hetchek refused to cope. He begged her not to die, and for months, she held on even as her body irreparably degraded. According to him, she refused to kill herself until she knew he'd be at peace with it.

Eventually, her suffering persuaded him.

Kynea lived to fifty-five years of age. Less than a millionth of the lifespan of the First Killer. This perspective, Hetchek claimed, was the reason he chose to put an end to the killer's life, shirking his own mortality to do so.

He made a pilgrimage to their final resting site, crossing the bridge to the isle on foot. Hetchek entered the great marble prison that housed the glass sepulcher of living dust. Inscribed in every language across all walls of the interior was a simple, unimpeachable warning:

WITNESS THIS CREATURE OF INFINITE SUFFERING.

THEY WHO WILLINGLY DISRUPTED THE BALANCE OF LIFE AND DEATH.

REPEAT THEIR ACTIONS, AND THEIR FATE SHALL BE YOURS.

Hetchek understood this, yet he gave his death for the First Killer anyways. He made no grand display of the gesture. He simply laid his hand upon the tomb and silently granted their oblivion.

When the Keepers found out that night, a planet-wide campaign was launched to find the Murderer. Hetchek came forward voluntarily when the investigation began, offering his complete testimony and standing by his actions. He saw it not as an act of cruelty, but rather, supreme benevolence. He condemned himself to eternal existence in order to relieve the First Killer of their suffering. Authorities had no idea what to do with him, yet his story spread far and wide.

Less than a week afterward, another local from Hetchek's village approached him in his home with a proposition. Her name was Itilia, and she offered to pay the Second Killer's good deed forward, offering her own death to him. When this was made public, dozens more volunteered to bear the unwilling life of someone who they believed did not deserve the same endless torment as the First Killer.

For all his newfound significance, Hetchek was a quiet man. He made little comment on the narratives forming around him, like the ones that branded him as the harbinger of apocalypse. But he also didn't dispel the claims of his status as a newfound spiritual leader. Hetchek quietly embraced his growing following, and when he fell ill, he allowed Itilia to sacrifice her own oblivion for him and take up his mantle of Deathlessness.

The Cult of the Lifebearers would last less than a hundred years, yet their tradition of ritualistic death-granting was enough to warrant a new word for the act: Murder. They didn't see it as evil. Rather, those eager to sacrifice themselves to absolve the suffering of others believed Murder to be an ultimate good. But until that point, only the cult's leaders required the sacrifice of another to die. A surplus of Murderers grew as the cult's influence expanded, and when the masses saw that there were people willing to grant death to those who could not do so themselves, the idea of Murder became far less daunting.

The Dictator of Estia, for example, had suffered multiple assassination attempts, but even after his head was crushed under a load of cement, he refused to submit to nonexistence. His able-bodied advisors

and loyalists carried out his will and revered him for hundreds of years after he was rendered inert, and it seemed his reign was immutable so long as he retained his position as the deified figurehead that drove the regime.

Wars and rebellions had been attempted to depose the Dictator, but none were successful. That is until a small cell of insurrectionists, inspired by Hetchek and his cult, rammed the gates of the Dictator's palace and gave their deaths to Murder the tyrant and his inner circle. In retribution, the Deathless revolutionaries were captured and interred in state radiation chambers. Entombed in nuclear waste until their skin sloughed off the bone, and alpha decay ripped apart their every strand of DNA. A state of interminable suffering.

When news reached the Lifebearers, Itilia saw opportunity. By that point, the cult had amassed hundreds of loyal followers, and the revolutionaries gave them a worthy cause for sacrifice. The governing federation of the Northern Aggregate had tolerated the presence of the Lifebearers until this point, but when Itilia began organizing a campaign to relieve the insurrectionists of their mortal coils, a warrant was issued for her arrest.

Thus began the Three Days Massacre.

Before the Lifebearers could leave for Estia, their church was surrounded by a small team of police officers. Itilia called upon her followers to defend the church, and the Lifebearers obliged. At first protesting, then fighting, and eventually committing Murder against the soldiers dispatched to snuff out their movement. In less than a week, the number of Deathless rose from one to a hundred and five.

To make an example of the cult, the Northern Aggregate firebombed their church, reducing everyone inside to cinders. The remains were milled into a fine dust and scattered over the ocean so as to not enshrine their final resting sites and risk spawning another martyr like Hetchek. But the incident only amplified the cult's influence. In Estia, thousands banded together to free the Deathless insurrectionists, even resorting to Murder to do so. After two bloody weeks, the rebels breached the detention center and granted death to the five living martyrs inside their radioactive tombs.

Governments all over the planet desperately suppressed information about the Lifebearers, the revolution in Estia, and even Murder as a concept. The word was stricken from national lexicons and banned outright in some places. But the idea could not be contained. All across the globe, ordinary citizens began committing Murder as well, though their justifications were often far less pure. Many killed for personal gain, revenge, or most commonly - by complete accident. As was the case of Ekel, a Deathless eleven year old boy who accidentally killed

his sister after she pushed him down a hill while playing in their backyard. He faced no sentence but the inescapable void of consciousness that awaited him when his body failed.

His lawyer, Dr. Merysine, was the first to represent the most prominent demographic of Murderers globally: Children. All of whom possessed the ability to kill, yet were oblivious to the consequences of using their gift of death on another.

“He made a mistake,” Merysine argued. “He couldn’t have possibly known what he was doing; he shouldn’t be punished as if he did.”

“The defendant isn’t being punished,” said the Judge. “Deathlessness has hitherto been treated as a self-resolving issue by the courts. I don’t see a reason to break that precedent.”

“He’d be suffering for millennia! The government has a moral responsibility to allow the intervention of a Lifebearer.”

“The defendant’s actions clearly do not constitute self-defense, so an exception-”

“The defendant is only a child! He deserves to die like everyone else.”

Nations all across the planet raced to control the plague of Murder. Law and culture shifted radically as the world grappled with the idea that life was no longer a choice. Some treated Murder as the ultimate crime, imposing draconian laws and punishments to disincentivize the act. Most tended towards a neutral integration of the issue into pre-existing legal structures. Courts of Consciousness and Deathcare services were slowly introduced to most countries. In places like Teuluth, where Dr. Merysine was from, death became codified as a basic universal right.

Estia went even farther. In the years that followed their revolution, the tenets of the Lifebearers were adopted into the fundamental structure of society and culture, though the official state religion was given a new name: Death Worship.

Sanctioned Deathgivers were revered throughout the country as heroes, and their lifestyle was entirely subsidized by the government. While regular Murder was still forbidden, death was still an inalienable right, and one vehemently protected by the state. Seeing how the number of Deathless could only ever increase as more Murders occurred, the revolutionary government instituted breeding programs to ensure a constant surplus of Deathgivers. The Estian government often used this surplus as a bargaining chip with other countries where shortages were rampant.

Over the next few decades, the nations of the world slowly divided into two spheres. Those that sought to suppress Death Worship and the practice of murder as a whole, and those that emphasized the Right of Oblivion and provided solace to the Deathless no matter what. All of a

sudden, the world became very, very fragile. Estia's nuclear research efforts unveiled weapons of utterly apocalyptic force that gave them incredible sway on the world stage until other nations developed their own atomic infrastructure. Battles between satellite states and campaigns of propaganda fueled this new, cold war. It was only a matter of time before the ice started to melt.

If I had to pin responsibility for the end of the world on a single person, I couldn't think of any better answer than Khefferson.

When the Northern Aggregate decided Estia and her allies was an existential threat to the natural order of our kind, they formulated a plan to end Death Worship once and for all. The federation deployed fifty agents to Estia disguised as regular diplomats to launch a swift and decisive coup. Prior intelligence work in the region allowed them to make contact with local rebel groups who were to assume control of the government and claim full responsibility for the planned attack.

Among the agents was a junior operator named Khefferson. A remarkably uninteresting man by all accounts. On a cold, rainy morning, twelve agents were ordered to the Estian Council Chamber for a scheduled deliberation on an economic treaty concerning contested regions of the Hezima Delta.

Only eleven arrived.

Khefferson was nowhere to be found. The N.A. immediately dispatched handlers to check up on the missing agent, only to find him dead in his state-provided hotel room.

Autopsy revealed he suffered an aneurysm.

The agents assumed he was assassinated.

Believing the Estians had discovered their plan, an evacuation order was given to all Northern Aggregate personnel in the country, but all port access was under strict security, and a covert attempt to rescue the agents via aircraft was intercepted.

With the Estians now on high alert, the remaining agents and their handlers were under strict surveillance, and a message to halt the attack could not be relayed to all of the rebels in time.

At 3:43 P.M., three improvised explosives detonated inside the Estian Council Chambers, and nearly a hundred rebels stormed the building. A bare fraction of what the coup had planned for. The rebels were quickly put down, and the N.A. agents who didn't kill themselves were arrested.

When word arrived to the Aggregate's high command, they didn't have the time to wait for a clearer picture. In their eyes, the coup had failed, Estia's capitol had been bombed, and their Death-Worshipping government knew the Aggregate was responsible. They launched a

pre-emptive nuclear strike against forty-seven major cities, and the Estians retaliated in turn.

All of civilization collapsed within forty-eight hours.

Fittingly enough, the last instance of Murder in our history is in many ways identical to the first. There is no written description. I don't believe there's anyone left to write it. I'm certain at one point I could recall my reasoning for it, or the person I did it to, but I have lost those details to eternity. Truthfully, I don't think it matters. I may not even be the Last Killer after all, but I have spent more than enough time living as nothing to be certain of my status. The only thing I really contemplate nowadays is whether or not any of my kind are still around. Whether I am still alive in this waking nothingness because we as a species have liberated ourselves from the act of Murder, or simply because there is no one left to Murder me.

Author Bio

My name is Nick Manna, and I'm honestly kind of insane. But in my defense, I don't think you can pursue fiction writing as a career without being at least a little bit delusional. I've loved writing ever since I was a kid, and I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else. From novels and scripts to running tabletop RPGs, I consider myself a storyteller at heart. I love using fiction to elevate and interrogate ideas beyond the realm of possibility, mainly through the lens of sci-fi and fantasy. My ambition as a writer to explore. I want to leave behind a body of work that's provocative, political, personal, and beautiful. If I can't change your mind, I'd like to at least leave you with something to think about.

