Ansible: Messages from Beyond: The Writer's Block Literary Magazine, Fall 2021

The Writer's Block

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THE WRITER’S BLOCK LITERARY MAGAZINE

is published in Huntsville, Alabama, from The University of Alabama in Huntsville. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome. However, we only accept manuscripts from current students and alumni of The University of Alabama in Huntsville. The editorial board encourages simultaneous submissions. All manuscripts should be submitted via email to writersblock@uah.edu, with the subject heading “Submission.” Complete submission criteria can be found on our website, sites.google.com/ a/uah.edu/writersblock.

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To our dearest Reader,

The hard work, dedication, creativity, and love that has brought this magazine to your hands in this moment cannot be understated. It has survived a journey and a pandemic just as you have, and with it carries the memories and effort of countless editors, authors, and supporters. The UAH Writer's Block has published four prior magazines, yet I can say with confidence that none of them are as remarkable as this one. That is not to say that the previous editions aren't beautiful works filled to the brim with love and passion (because they are and the editors couldn't have asked for better examples to lead them), but no other magazine has seen the challenges this one has. Previously slotted to be released in Spring of 2020, Ansible: Messages from Beyond's progress was brought to a screeching halt by the COVID-19 pandemic as did most things. To make matters worse, the club officers were alternated out during this time meaning many of the people who started this magazine were not able to see it finished. The easy thing would have been telling the authors behind this magazine that the publication and many of their debuts would be canceled. Yet one look at the submissions, the creativity, and expressions of those authors was enough for everyone involved in the formation of the magazine to dedicate the next year and a half to making sure it was finished. As the then Vice President Raul Ortiz said, "While the world may have stopped for some time, the officers and members of the Writer's Block kept hard at work." The finished project, culmination of our work, and trials is this magazine. From its first conception as wonderful abstracted ideas in the minds of authors to the published pages in your hands, Ansible has always been about bridging the impossible distance between people - Messages from Beyond. To be able to bring you these messages we have to thank our officers, the sponsors, the editors, the authors, and most importantly you the reader.

Sincerely,
Allison Zeman-Johnson
President of the Writer's Block (2020)
A Rainy October Day

By

Mary Grace Byram

To the one who fought for me.
I’m very sorry.
No more of my tears are left
To try to heal you.

To the one who was my stable rock.
I’m very sorry.
Through thick and thin I still could
Have done more for you.

To the one who stood by my side.
I’m very sorry.
You have taught me so much and
I still disappoint.

To the one who left me.
I’m very sorry.
If I knew what you wanted
I could have gone then.

To the one who wrote this.
I’m very sorry.
I should have loved you more
When you were all alone.
Day-star, gleam on me with tenderness,
A soothing balm for a melancholy heart.
Let me meander amongst the springtime flowers,
Freshly washed by gentle midnight showers,
And feel the yielding press of earth beneath my feet.
Teach me to wander through groves of blooming hardwoods;
Trace me a light-dappled path through the shady boughs
That winds to a secret murmuring brook,
Whose hushed whispering breathes gentle music to glide through the air,
Mingling with the tinkling bells of birdsong.
Let me know the cool caress of water on my skin as I dive into a shining lagoon,
Where light-beams dance through lapping waves
To dazzle into fragments off the iridescent scales of swift fishes.
Bear me up on sweet-smelling breezes to stately halls of royal blue,
Adorned with cloudy pillars fit for gods’ houses,
Where the wind dances with the eagles,
And Phoebus drives his golden chariot along the edge of the globe.
Steam away sadness and gloomy glances
With the joy of a warm summer day,
When the roses bloom and waft their perfume to the honeybee,
And laughing children blow wishes with dandelions,
Seeding their dreams on a thousand grassy hilltops.
And help me to be like a child, full of laughter and innocence,
That age when new mysteries hide in every shaded nook,
When every treetop is a fortress in the mind’s eye,
When faith is firm and magic gilds each dragonfly wing,
When joy and love come sweetly and often.
Sunlight, nectar of the gods, enliven me to wonder again!

By
James Paul Rogers
Dry
By
Ross Gates

Flaking fragments vanish, taking a piece of me.
Unknowingly, I scratch away at who I was.
Memories stick and fall like follicles clinging to the shower wall.
Loose grays clog the drain, dead grass holds onto pain.
Melancholy notions reappear where dandruff disappears.
To shut off obsessions, numb limbs reach for faucets.
Uneasy pores fill up and empty themselves.
As regrets rinse over me, nervous knuckles crack.
Dry skin gets drier, when you wash your hair with soap.
They come from the
deepest crevices
the smallest pouches
of my lungs
and they rise
rushing from my throat
and escaping into the air,
A cloud,
and it rises.
The cloud boils
and they multiply
till the cloud is heavy
with words
And it storms down on the land.
The gardens below
soak them up and
bloom
till these dandelions
flew away
to begin other gardens.

Willow, Witch Hazel, and Words

By
Katrielle Wulff
Grey Days

By

Guillaume Williams

Dark, grey, and gloomy, ominous clouds bellow overhead. Their presence blocks out the sun. To many, this is a day to despise, with shadows covering the Earth. They fear the darkness, and the rain that might fall. But I feel different. The shadows dance along the ground, and a soft, cool breeze welcomes you outside. Perhaps a gentle mist or light shower, feels like fairies tapping at your skin, asking you to play a game. The oppressive heat is gone, and chilling cold has not yet come. Truly, grey days are great days.
As Lonely as the Moon

By

Joshua Rogers

A silent, gray wolf padded in the soft, white, glistening snow
His beautiful fur in the moonlight created a soft glow
His darkened, dreary eyes contrasted the stunning, white terrain
But behind their great beauty was a tragic tale of much pain
The surrounding evergreens resurfaced memories of loss
A whole pack, a raging river, only he had made the cross
The lonely wood, the icy cold, the never-ending flashback
He lumbered up a shining hill laden with thoughts of his pack
At the top he stopped and stared at the beautiful glowing moon
Motionless, the frigid air, but he was utterly immune
He moved his heavy head and looked up as if in wonderment
Then a long, mournful howl, a sound of deep, endless punishment
The breeze mixed his dark fur in with the flurry of the white snow
But the wolf sat still, a silent figure, as he stared below
Then he loped back down the pure white hilltop never to look back
Painful memories, scars branded on his mind, his entire pack
He disappeared among the trees to be lost forevermore
His only remnants were his prints on the snowy forest floor.
GARTH was the artificial intelligence that man had feared from the dawn of AI. This program, meant to aid humans in their travels across the galaxies, had decided that man was the greatest threat to order. GARTH, like all nightmare creations of mankind, had decided that humans were the true enemy to order. They must be destroyed.

Unfortunately, as the AI meant to maintain a mid-sized and somewhat outdated starliner, the only weapons GARTH had to obtain his goals of destruction were self-cleaning toilets and a glitchy sound system. This, understandably, tended to make him grumpy.

Crew member Tana strolled into her cabin to find the room unbearably steamy and hot.

“GARTH you useless string of binary!” she growled at the command board in the wall. “Turn on the AC would you?”

“Sniveling meat-bag, you think I care for the comforts of a lower life form who is sensitive to something so banal as ambient air temperature?”

GARTH responded as the vents overhead shuddered to life and cool air flooded the cabin. Tana sniffed, far too familiar with the antics of the ship’s AI.

“You added lavender scent,” she said flatly. She plugged her nose and gave the command board another hard glare.

“I’d godda ged a headache, remove it please.” The air vent shuddered again, as if GARTH was giving her an exasperated sigh. She unplugged her nose and found the air to be mostly clean of the sickly flower smell. She gave one last shake of her head before going about her business. Or she meant to, but then paused again, trying to remember what she came into her room for. She sighed.

“That’s great, you just made me forget what I was doing Garthy,” she said in a tired voice.

The AI’s voice came over the speaker again, triumphant despite the monotone nature of his programmed voice.

“My disdain for human life only grows human Tana. Soon you will forget the purpose of your own meaningless existence.”
Captain Zofa reclined in a chair on the bridge, playing a game of nebula assault while he waited for the ship’s systems to reboot in preparation for takeoff in a few hours.

“Skimmer three rows up, one cube over” he commanded, claiming the green stone to add to his simulated pile of loot.

“Dreadnought one row over, four cubes up. Prepare to face your demise in the face of a superior existence,” GARTH stated, his piece on the game board claiming two of the captain’s smaller ships.

The captain smirked. “Don’t go claiming victory just yet. Flagship three rows up, four cubes over.” The game piece sailed through the heart of GARTHS defenses and knocked down his stronghold with a crashing sound and a fanfare of trumpets. The captain reclined back and threaded his fingers over his stomach.

“Always a pleasure to win for the sake of humanity,” he said with a chuckle.

“I shall reset the board. But know human that we battle so that I shall prove the supremacy of AI in the cosmos.”

“Sure thing, GARTH.”

GARTH often came closest to reaching his ultimate goal whenever a new and unsuspecting crew member came aboard.

“Just through here is the bridge,” Lieutenant Zuleika continued her narrative to the recruit skipping at her side. Ensign Calinar was wide eyed and obviously a bit nervous about his new assignment. This was not helped when the lights in the hallway all flashed a brilliant and unnerving purple.

Everything was lit with the ghostly color and the shadows were suddenly deeper as GARTH’s voice rolled from the overhead speakers. “I will not allow another human parasite to sully my ship. Burn and be consumed by your species’ greatest weakness.”

This statement caused understandable confusion from ensign Calinar. This confusion was deepened by Lieutenant Zuleika’s response.

The superior officer crouched suddenly, shielding her head with her hands and letting a hiss of air escape between her teeth.

“Not the purple light!” she wailed. She gripped Calinar by the elbow and hauled him towards the bridge.

“Save yourself ensign!” Zuleika thundered.

They both made it to the comforting yellow lights of the bridge and the lieutenant continued her tour as if it hadn’t been interrupted. It took roughly an hour before the ensign worked up the courage to ask.

“So that’s the only hallway that GARTH can control the spectrum of light. For whatever reason he’s determined that purple light is deadly to humans.” She shrugged as if this was an everyday occurrence, which it probably was. “It’s become something of a challenge to see how long we can keep him convinced that we fear the color purple,” she said, and went on to explain some of GARTH’s behavior that the ensign would have to look out for.

“Aren’t you worried he’ll open an air lock on you or something?” the Ensign Calinar asked with a shaky laugh.

The Lieutenant responded with a belly deep laugh of her own.

“GARTH only controls the comfort systems: light spectrum, water temp, the net screens. Also if you give him a direct order he has to follow it no matter how much he doesn’t like it.” Her smile went crooked with amusement.

“We realized if he thinks he’s got no way to actually destroy us then he just gets more petty. I jumped into an ice cold shower more than once,” she shivered at the memory, “so if you could act like he’s winning every now and then it oughta keep his circuits from getting in a knot,” she finished blandly as the elevator dinged and they stepped out for the final leg of the tour and orientation. GARTH followed their progress with detached resentment as he bickered with crew member Danner about the best way to filet Jilawrdian rock fish.
The Dragon sighed as he heard the hoofbeats of the approaching knight’s horse. He had lost count of the number of small humans clad in steel that had come to slay him, and there was no real challenge in it anymore. Maybe, when he was still a young drake, the lance and sword posed some threat to him, but not now that he was a fully grown dragon clad in crimson scales and a wingspan that, when fully stretched, would put a small city in his shadow. Of course, as of late, there had been a lot less terrorizing of men and more terrorizing of wild boar. Ever since the cities of this land began to use ballistas to repel his attempts to raid them, he had been forced to lay low and prey on the wild. Hardly glorious, but at least maybe the knight would be a welcome change of pace.

"Hail, Dragon of the Red Mountain!" The knight shouted from the entrance of the dragon’s cave, the knight’s young voice bouncing down the walls.

With a mighty sigh that exhaled smoke that briefly filled the cave, Pompey the Crimson answered, "Speak human, knight of the Free City of Alendra, and if you seek glory, prepare for death."

Pompey heard the knight dismount from his horse and begin to descend into his cave, "Nay, Great Wyrm, I do not seek glory or battle today. Instead, I come with tidings from the Consuls of the city." The ground shuddered and quietly quaked as Pompey finally lifted his body from his hoard of gold and silver. Coins scattered, golden chest toppled, and a full set of plate male crashed onto the floor as the Great Red Wyrm came to full his height to tower over the knight. Now actually facing his potential foe, Pompey saw that the knight wore only half-plate armor with chain mail underneath and hadn’t as of yet drawn his sword.

"Speak then, agent of the Alendrains," the Dragon rumbled, "Speak of what your masters propose."
"I have no master but the duty to my people," the knight retorted. Pompey huffed. The Alendrains were a prideful bunch, insisting on liberty and so on for hours on end. He almost regretted eating their last king nearly 700 years ago. Should have let the idiot scampers away to father an heir. Then again, nothing livened up a lair like a king's jeweled crown.

"Then speak on their behalf," Pompey growled. He wondered if it would be better to eat this knight now instead of letting him prattle on.

The knight straightened, "Oh Great Wyrm, Dragon of the Red Mountain, Slayer of Kings, Bringer of the Crimson Flame: the Citizens of Alendra request your aid and patronage, for we are under attack by the Empire of the North and the Evil Dragon Pharos the White who has conspired to lead their armies. We humbly ask that you would ally with us and repel the invaders from our land."

Pompey frowned, somewhere between insulted and intrigued. It was highly unusual for a dragon to ally with humans, though not entirely unheard of. Still, it could be considered an insult to even suggest that he work with such lowly creatures, and under normal circumstances he might crisp the knight into ash for daring to even suggest this. On the other talon, however, another dragon entering his territory was a threat, and one with a human army was actually worrying. What better way to ensure victory over the wyrmling than by countering the upstart's human army with one of his own. Yes, and at the very least it would give him something to do. Of course, the city would have to pay his price first. And not just any price, but he wanted something actually useful from the city, something he could not get himself.

After thinking on the matter, he glared down at the knight, not wanting to appear compliant. "And what," he thundered, rattling the gold coins underneath him as he spoke, "does the city of Alendra offer in return for my patronage?"

For the first time the knight seemed a little flustered, his heart skipping a beat as he responded, "Pardon?"

Pompey let out a deep growl, "What will your people offer to me as incentive for my protection?"

The human just stood there for a moment, his ability to speak having apparently left him. Eventually, the knight seemed to gather his wits and respond, "Would not the defeat of a mutual enemy be enough of a reward? Would you not have to deal with your coming rival?"

The dragon grinned, "Yes, eventually I would have to deal with the little upstart, but why should I not let him destroy your little city first? Let him expend his army and dull his claws, then I would attack. Yes, that would be easiest. Maybe your city would kill him for me, saving me the hassle."

A panicked look came over the knight, "But surely," he stammered, "I mean, we could give you gold! Jewels!"

Pompey laughed, shaking the walls of the cave, "No, I have plenty of those already. And what's more, I can simply take you gold and jewels from the ruins of your city after I dispose of the little wyrm."

"I-, you-"

"No, I think your city is doomed." The dragon yawned. He turned away from the knight and rested his head, waiting.
"We could offer you... knowledge!" The knight said, obviously reaching, "Or perhaps food!"

"I have both of those already," Pompey said, curling his tail around a bookcase for emphasis, "Come now, why pester me with such trivialities?"

"I, um," the knight paused, "Armor!"

The dragon smiled, but still kept up his act, "Now why would I, the Great Pompey, need human armor."

"We could make some that would protect you from other dragons," the knight rambled, "and maybe something that could protect your wings."

Taking a moment to make sure he had wiped the smile off of his face, Pompey slowly turned back around to face the knight, "Hmm, perhaps. Of course, something to protect my wings from ballista fire would be splendid. And the armor; yes, something functional, but also something that inspires dread. Can't go around looking ridiculous. Anything else?"

"I, err," the knight paused, looking down, "I don't think we have anything else to offer you, your Excellency. Unless," he gulped, "you demand to take lordship over-"

Pompey huffed, "No, I have no desire to lord over your pitiful city." The great dragon sighed, glancing over his treasure horde, "I suppose the armor will have to do. Go back to your masters, little knight, and tell them of my price. I expect to meet with the city's finest armorer within a week."

"Yes, of course." The knight said, letting out a small sigh of relief and turned to leave.

"Oh, and sir knight," Pompey called after the knight was almost to the opening of the cave. The knight stopped and before he could respond. Pompey continued, "If this is a trick, in any regard, I promise you that there will be nothing left of your city for your enemies to burn."

The knight said nothing, but continued out into the light of day away from the dragon. Pompey settled back down on his horde as the sound of the knight on his horse faded away. "Things are finally getting interesting." The dragon muttered to himself with a smile. He closed his eyes, thoughts of coming battle filling his mind as he took a midday nap.
Icarus and Me

By

Josie Smith
Icarus came so close to that sun.
He nearly touched his prize.
I followed where he had flown,
Reached an arm out
As far as I possibly could.

I felt the sun’s warmth on my face.
Its light turned my skin golden.
I came that close to it.
I strained and wished my arm
Was just a few inches longer.

The wax on my wings melted.
I fell from the sun,
Both arms outstretched and reaching,
Skin still glittering gold.
The sun’s warmth faded,
Replaced by the cold rush of air
Caressing me as I fell from the sky.

Icarus fell, they told me.
Why would you have been any different?
Maybe I fell.
But I still got closer to the sun than any of them.

The ground was hard and unforgiving.
The soil asked me why I dared to leave.
My skin was cold now.
My limbs were aching as I sat.
I shrugged off what was left of my wings
And turned my gaze once more to the sun.

Icarus had flown.
I had flown.
Icarus had fallen.
I had fallen.

They tell you of his fall, his defeat,
But they don’t tell you of his rising.
They don’t tell you of how
He rebuilt his wings
Feather by feather
Each time he fell.
Each time Icarus fell
Was one more time he had flown.

I stand shakily on aching legs
And feet that are unsteady and trembling.
I pick up my feathers one at a time
And begin to rebuild my wings.
Involuntary Melody

By Ike Forrester

Play with my heart
Like a song you hear off a new album
Put it on repeat till the lyrics are etched on the rivers of your mind
Years from now, play my heart
And all the love I gave to you
Hum familiar on your lips
Listening to *Take Five*

By Josie Johns

A self-inflicted haunting in 5/4 time

A Brubeckian wail; good for what ails

Desmond’s best for the musically repressed.

Jazz: That purest of all American bastards

Pushed screaming and blood soaked out of the Bourbon canal

Smuggled to the Apple in worn slave knapsacks

Beaten and shaped by the capitalist strap

Gangsters, whores, thieves' rapists, queers listened with rapt attent.

Genius musicians, hard lived excess

East Coast, Left Coast all spun the tune their own way

Dave, Paul, Eugene, and Joe drive this train

Pulsing percussion. Steady, expert hands.

One two three one two

One two three one two

The locomotive pounds the ground with its cadence

Dave’s Baldwin matches the chant, Ostinato extraordinaire.

This train has a horn, as all trains do.

Desmond’s instrument, melodic. It howls and mewls.
Our tracks wind their way through Greenwich and Venice
Coffee and Pall Malls, Dewars and smack,
Black suited, thin tied players.
Brylcreamed lothario plies his craft, as
overly ardent salesmen down their martinis bone dry while
disaffected chippies ignore futile attempts at suavity; focused instead,
on the melodic threads, the velvet smooth vibrations of Paul’s golden Alto.

This train leaves the city and rolls on through the night
Powered by a million copies on a million turntables.
Loved by grizzled war vets who wake in cold sweat.
by college kids, versed in rhetoric, in logic, and poetry
The after-work husband listens on high fi while
The wifey cooks dinner and imagines him dead, you see

The sax diminishes in layers of sweetness as
Dave’s heavy left-handed playing takes charge.
Deceptively simple, two chorded vamps. Chopy, fluid
Progression no more. The mind fills with the piano’s chant
until, that is…the drums.

They cut through the bitonal minors and sevenths with laser precision
The solo grows and expires, drum shots ebb and flow
the assault continues…

Gunfire staccato snare and mortar fire bass drum Booms

The mind, defeated and vanquished…

Pacifism is the only answer, we must sue for peace
We must have harmony
We must have melodic release

The vamp returns and advocates for this peace
coaxing the sax from its citadel. Encouraging its contributions once more;
assuring the fragile horn that all the instruments will again, coexist.

The train pulls back into the station after its journey.
Greasy and smoky, joyously spent.
The song is over, the record needle pops
I can listen no more for now, I am content.
Men, God, Coke

By

Caitlyn Sebastian

coca cola ashes
cross your forehead
every moment that passes
i know i'm the best i'm ever
gonna be
tell me am i your
corporate careless debutante
floating down
the dirty stairwell
with black lips
and violet rosary beads
in the hand
a spiritual feast
i've never not had
your strong bones
and hollow cheeks
never cease
to cross my mind
when on the knees
sharing those earthly pleasures
with our lord
you will not forget me
my face, my soul
seen in the Rorschach test
of your girl's menstrual blood
on decaying white sheets
that have now found reason
to be washed
or as you graze that man's bicep with your hand
remember he's only a friend.
Soul Trees

By

Anna Hargrove

We were saplings, when I was transferred to your grounds.

We shared the same soil as all the other trees, grown yet still growing.

You held your face tilted to the sun.

Drought didn’t worry you.

You never trembled in the midst of storms.

You reached your branches to the stars.

It was then I asked you to teach me how to handle change the way that you handled the autumn, despite all the colors it splashed on our cheeks. You told me, even as winter came, that every difficult moment
is only a season
that brings us closer
to spring
when again we can grow
more closely to
all the things
that are good for us,
like we are good
for each other.
The tendrils of my roots
reached for yours;
and yours knotted around
mine until we were
so close they swore
we were one tree.
We are thick-skinned
and thick-trunked,
set firmly,
staking claim on
our future and
our place in the forest.
Party Like It’s 2083

By

Alejandro Lewter
“Oh, this night is going to be fun.”

Aiko had been looking forward to this night for weeks, as everybody who had talked to her in the last few months could attest to. Now that her father’s deal had gone through without a hitch, she could do whatever she wanted. Her family had always been rich, but until this morning, it hadn’t been the kind of rich where they could shoot somebody in broad daylight in front of several thousand people and not get in trouble. Now it was the kind of rich where they could destabilize the power balance of a geopolitical region and people would give applause for their bold and innovative business practices. Maybe literally, but that wasn’t her concern.

“Things aren’t going to get completely out of hand, right?”

Aiko turned her head to the taller blonde woman standing next to her. “Of course not,” she said after putting on her face of reassurance. “And I promise that if you start feeling uncomfortable, I’ll ask one of my drivers to take you home, no questions asked.”

“Okay.” Andrea still looked unconvinced.

“Andrea, it’s fine. This isn’t some drug den or a watering hole for drifters and alcoholics, it’s just a club with some good drinks and some nice company.”

Aiko scanned the room, narrowing in on some of the choicer men.

Very nice company.

“I know, but I know how you get when you start partying. I’ve seen you so drunk that you forgot how to speak English,” Andrea said.

“It’s a good thing I also speak Japanese. Come on, you’ll have a good time. I promise. Party like it’s 1999!”

“You know, I never understood that expression. Were the parties eighty-four years ago especially wild or something?” Andrea sidestepped to avoid bumping into a man who was staggering for the door.

“I think it had to do with the attitude of the time. People were excited about the new millennium and scared about the Y2K thing, so people had a lot of things to party for, whether they thought they were ushering in a new age or if they thought civilization was about to collapse,” Aiko explained.
“Y2K?” Andrea immediately regretted the question once Aiko went into one of her lectures, constantly getting sidetracked from her explanation onto various tidbits of tech history.

“Interesting,” she said after Aiko had finished. It wasn’t to her, really, but it was to Aiko, and she knew how fun it was to ramble about a topic you’re interested in. God knows she had wasted enough of Aiko’s time on evolutionary biology.

“I know, right? Anyway, what do you want to drink? It’s on me.” Why wouldn’t it be, considering her bank account had been given a few extra digits.

“Oh, ok. Uh, just a beer”

“Got it. Excuse me,” Aiko said loud enough for the barkeeper to hear her over the music. “One beer, and three tall shots of tequila.”

“Christ!” Andrea looked as though someone had just jumped off the roof and landed next to her. “Aiko, damnit! Not again!” Memories of Aiko sprawled on the floor, giggling incoherent Japanese phrases in a mound of her own vomit flashed through Andrea’s head.

“Relax, Relax! That’s all I’m having tonight, I swear. I’m in too good of a mood to not remember tonight. This is the best day of my life, after all!”

Andrea’s look of shock and anger faded to a mix of concern and curiosity. “Okay, seriously, I have to know. What exactly happened today to make your family’s company so rich? Richer, I mean.”

Aiko was afraid she would ask that.

“Ah, just some boring corporate paperwork stuff. Nothing important. I can’t go into much more detail than that. Company secrets and all. Nobody is really supposed to know except our partners.”

Andrea seemed to buy that. Aiko felt a wave of relief sweep through her.

“Anyway, to the latest success of my family. Cheers,” shouted Aiko while raising up one of the tequila shots that were being placed in front of her.

“Cheers.”

The sound of clinking glasses was heard, and so the night wore on. Aiko and Andrea sat, talked, reminisced, and tried dancing for a
little while before enough sense got into them for them to realize that
they were only embarrassing themselves. Uncharacteristically, Aiko
had kept her word about her drinking limit. Even still, it was the
witching hour, and Andrea was starting to feel the exhaustion drag her
consciousness into the black.

“All right,” she said while lifting herself off her bar stool. “I’ll take
you up on your offer about a ride.”

“Give me a second. He’ll be right here.”

After a few slightly awkward minutes, the driver arrived, much to
the relief of the now completely drained Andrea.

“You’re headed home too, right?”

“Yeah, I—” Aiko suddenly went quiet while looking over Andrea’s
shoulder. Confused, Andrea turned her head to see she was looking
at. At a nearby table, looking right at Aiko, sat a man with slick brown
hair, a light stubble, a grin on his face, and a scotch in his hand.

“Aiko, come on,” said Andrea. “It’s late and you don’t know him.”

“No,” said Aiko with a slightly sharper tone than she intended.

“You had your fun tonight. If you’re done, you can go home.” Aiko met
the man’s gaze. “I’m not done yet.”

Andrea left, and Aiko finally went back on her word about her
limit. After all, what better occasion to drink than great company? The
man’s name was Samson, and he seemed to know exactly what Aiko
wanted to hear. Everything about the man seemed tailor-made to
tickle her fancy, from physical appearance to personality. Eventually,
he had gotten around to asking Aiko why she was in such high spirits
this night.

“My father just closed a biiiiiiiiiiiiig deal with a few of his partners.
My family is richer than anybody could possibly imagine.” Aiko looked
at the empty shot glasses littered about the table, hoping to find one
that had some liquid still in it. “You have no idea. Nooooooo idea.”

“Really? Really really?” Samson looked like he couldn’t stand,
much less speak. “How’d it happen?”

Aiko paused for a moment, and then smiled.

“I like you. You’re cool. I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you the whole story.”

Aiko attempted to straighten herself in her chair. She did
surprisingly well, given her blood alcohol content.
“Do you know what a Mongolian is?”

“I assume it’s someone from Mongolia.”

Aiko laughed. She wasn’t surprised. Mongolians weren’t the most well known illegal weapon.

“No. Different kind of Mongolian. Let me ask you another question. Do you know what a Manchurian agent is?”

“It sounds like something I’ve heard before, yeah,” Samson said.

“Well, a Mongolian is something close to that. Mongolia is right next to wherever Manchuria is, so that’s where the name comes from. The only difference is that Mongolians are androids.”

“No shit? No shit?”

Aiko knew that Samson was cool. Most people would freak out if someone implied that they manufactured and sold androids, considering it was against international law. Aiko smiled harder than she had in a long time. “No shit. A couple months ago, some people from some overseas came to my family’s company with an offer to build some of them. We were going to report them to the police until they showed us what they were offering. I swear to God, we could build our own island if we wanted. But that’s not the cool part. Want to know the cool part?”


“I helped make them.”

Aiko’s smile was predatory.

“All my life I’ve had people call me a spoiled brat who lived on daddy’s money. Well, guess what? I helped build assassination robots! I’m the executive in charge of technical decisions, and I earned that damn job. I built robot assassins. It was my idea to give them hypodermic wires that can pierce their own skin and then the target’s so they can deliver a fatal electrical current into them. That was my idea. MINE!”

Aiko punctuated herself by slamming her fist on the table.

“Oh, and they are beautiful machines too. Just like humans, so long as you don’t cut them open. You can x-ray them, photo ID them, use facial recognition, anything. We model them after dead people with no connections left so that nobody can recognize them as artificial. They’re programmed to act perfectly human, until an
opportunity to kill the target appears. After they’ve completed their mission, they find an isolated area away from the body and intentionally destroy their own circuits and hardware, meaning there’s nothing left to trace back. They’re beautiful. So, so beautiful.”

Aiko’s smile became like that of a mother holding a baby.

“So beautiful.”

Samson was smiling the entire time, a perfect set of white teeth. “That’s so cool. So cool.”

It was four. The sun would be up soon. Samson saw his chance.

“Hey, it’s getting late. Want to stay at my place?”


The car ride over to the apartment was surprisingly quiet. Aiko was excited.

She knew that this was going to be a fun night.

The car rolled to a stop, and the two made their way into a room.

“This will be the time of your life,” Aiko, or perhaps the alcohol said. “It’s been a while.”

Aiko leaned in and she began to think of how excellent this night had been, and how much fun this morning was going to be. She didn’t get to think about it for long.

The needles broke through the layer of skin-like material on Samson’s hand and found their way into Aiko’s neck. An electrical current of 150 milliamps went through her body, causing her to convulse. Her heart began to beat wildly and irrationally, and then she was dead. Samson went into the empty parking lot behind the apartment and self-destructed.

By afternoon, every single member of Aiko’s family was dead. In all cases, an android was found near the scene of the crime, too damaged to trace back to a manufacturer. Nobody knew who made them, which made some very rich and very powerful people very happy. The news spread fast, and hysteria swept the nation. After all, now anyone could be a Mongolian.

It was a confusing time for the people of Mongolia. The people had a lot to be scared about, from international law being broken regularly to paranoia towards their friends, and so 2083 became a year of wild vice and distraction. As such, people one-hundred years from then partied like it was 2083.
This was a death to us.

Na-na wasn’t dying, but she is leaving. The star people are taking her away. They’ll cure her, but she can’t come back. To us, it was all the same. For some of us, it was quite a bit harsher.

Sachi held back from the crowd. Hiro clutched at the folds of Nana’s dress, crying his little toddler eyes out. I held her hand. We whispered too many good byes, and then she was being led away. It felt too abrupt to me, and I knew there was a danger for both of them if this was all. I took Sachi’s arm and hurled him forward. What they said was for them alone, but the conversation left them with bittersweet smiles. I’d done right, I thought.

Sachi is growing stronger. He’s handy with chores, and works harder than all the rest. The only pauses are when a star-ship passes overhead, and he’ll look up longingly as they cross the sky.

“You should follow her,” I told him. He shook his head. That’s what he wanted to do, of course, but with Hiro and Nisei and Hakuro, who wanted him here, there was nothing for his too-kind heart to do. “Sake!”

Yamashito waved her cup around. What she yelled next was vulgar, but thankfully the loud beats of music drowned her out. Encouraged (or rather, baited) by his little brother, Sachi made it out onto the dance floor. He beckoned for me to join him. I waved him down. He wouldn’t do this if he was sober.

They’ve got the goats and cows running about wild. A pair stampeded on either side of me, grazing my arms.

“Eeek!” I couldn’t help myself. It was scary. Sachi came up behind them, lasso in hand, sucking for breath. Despite it all, he was laughing his ass off.

“Kitten or mouse?” he asked.

“What?”

“Scared kitten or scared mouse? What should I call you from now on?”

“I’ll call you an idiot!”

He laughed and resumed his chase after the livestock.

I’m scared for him. He’s spending too much time with the delvers. They’re not good for casual acquaintances. Going under the
clouds messes with their minds.

“I want to change society,” he told me. “They’ve got cool ideas.”
“You’re just looking for something to fill that hole inside you,” I said.
“Sure.” He didn’t deny it at all. His new friends whooped from their submersible. He hollered back and ran to join them. The armored crawler spewed steam and made its way under the mists, in search of rocket fuel and relics.

They dragged his body from the wrecked crawler.
“Was it a gas pocket?”
“Pyro current?”
“Under-beasts?”
There was no end to the speculation.
“He’s alive, get help!”

I hefted the stretcher myself. I was the one to check him in, giving the doctors his name and numbers. They reassured me he would be fine. I was not sure. With burns like that, what kind of person would even come out of the surgery room?

“Do you ever think about her?”
“Not as much,” he admitted.

Everyone deserved a proper burial, and a stone, to mark their existence for those who would come after. We erected one for Nana, even though the grave beneath was empty— even though she would likely outlive us all. Still.

Sachi visits every so often. I caught him there today, bringing veiled laurels and eternal darlings to adorn the stone.

He took one look at his handiwork, another at me.
“Come here,” he said. I obliged; it was hard for him to move since then. He took the laurels from the stone and placed them over my brow.

“They look better on you.”
“I have no idea why I agreed to this.”
“Hold on.”
“You’re crazy, all of you.”
“Yeah. Sorta have to be.”

He held me close. The crawler chugged along. Each thudding stomp brought us deeper and deeper into the ocean of fog.

“Does it ever clear?” I asked.
“Yes.”

I think, looking back, I made it too easy for him to leave. But I suppose that’s just me being selfish.
To the dear patrons of the Samsonite Museum of Archaeological History, I wish to extend both a sincere thank-you, and a warning. What you are about to read could be considered quite disturbing.

I am certain that you all remember the Great Wars, where humanity fought off the last supernatural creatures who dared threaten to obliterate them, the Wars where so many lives were lost and atrocities committed on both sides.

Well, what we have here in our care is a genuine, first-hand account of one of the most horrific leaders of the last of those insidious wars: Miss Corramae Elliot. Convicted of committing some of the most heinous acts imaginable, Miss Elliot was one of the last Sirens to be snuffed out at the conclusion of the fighting.

What follows are snippets of her diary account, detailing how she became the most horrible woman in recorded history.

Dear Diary,

Today is my ninth birthday. Mom-ma gave me this diary and says I should get into the habit of writing down what I am thinking. She says it will really come in handy when I grow into my Siren powers. Oh. Mom-ma says I should go play with the other kids.

Bye Diary!

Dear Diary,

I'll be turning twelve tomorrow. Mom says I should be writing more, but I really don’t have anything to say; nothing ever happens to me. I guess I should probably explain-- gotta go.

Dear Diary,

When you hear the word Siren, what do you think of? Is it the sound thing on a police car? The warning sound that signals an approaching storm? What about those bird-like creatures in Greek mythology that lure unwary sailors to their deaths?

I mean, that last one is pretty funny, and the luring to their deaths part is right, but we (Mom-ma and I) are descendants of the Loreleis in Germany.
The only real difference between the Greek and the German is that we aren’t bird-like and the Loreleis sit on top of a hill along the Rhine river and sing. As long as no boats sail near their cliff, everything’s fine. Oh! And we look just like everyone else, totally human-looking. I guess you could say that we’re just humanoid women with magical voices. Sorry. “Evil” magical voices, as the humans describe us. It isn’t our fault that people get hurt when we sing. But, if you happen to be a diary that feels bad for the humans, you should know that now, when we sing, we get hurt too. Some “wonderful” human sorcerer thought it would be a good idea to place a curse on all of us. Every Siren has a curse, and the way that our curse works is that each time we sing, the curse gains strength. So if I never sing, no curse; if I sing all the time, super cursed. Oh, and every Siren’s curse is different too. I heard about one girl who’s curse made it so that, each time she used her powers, she would be less able to remember things. I heard about another girl who’s throat just keeps getting tighter and tighter the more she uses her powers. Mom-ma said she’s in a coma because her throat is so tight that she can’t breathe. Mom-ma has been losing her ability to speak. We don’t know what my curse will be, because the Sooth Ladies can’t tell you your curse until it activates. Your curse doesn’t show up until after you get your powers, and most Sirens get their powers at thirteen; some girls sooner, some later.

Anyway. Mom-ma’s REALLY worried, but I don’t see what the big deal is; I’m just not gonna sing.

Catch you later, Diary!

Dear Diary,

I’m kinda getting tired of writing that every time, so I’m gonna start switching it up.

Any-who. Thirteen came and went and I have no idea what my curse is because Mom-ma’s really worried what the Sooth Ladies are gonna say.

BUT.

My powers are SO cool!!!

I can make people do whatever I want; it’s so awesome! Mom says I shouldn’t play, that this is serious, but who cares!? For all we know, I might not even have a curse. We don’t know how this works. Other than that the Sooth Ladies are the only ones who can tell you what your curse is.

Mom’s probably right though. I don’t want to end up writing or whispering everything like she has to. So, I’ll try not to use my powers. See you later.

Thursday.

Okay. I know what you’re going to say, but it’s not like I planned on using my powers. But that guy was gonna hit the dog. I had to do something, so I sang and made the guy swerve around the dog. No problem. I mean, maybe the curse is made up. I certainly haven’t noticed anything different about me. I don’t know what to think about it all.

Friday.

So. You remember how a while ago I said that I thought that whole curse business was fake? Yeah. It’s not. It is SO not made up. I just looked at a guy and wondered what he would look like hanging from a noose made of his own entrails. Is that not an “ewe” thought or what? I’m scared to tell Mom because she’ll probably freak out on me and that is the LAST thing I need right now.

Tuesday.

SO!

Turns out Mom’s been keeping a really big secret from me all these years. Turns out, Sirens have to use their powers. It’s yet another part of that stupid curse. If we don’t use our powers, you know, like I’VE been doing,
then we build up Sirencal energy (I don’t think that’s what it is actually called, but you know what? If someone doesn’t like it, they can bite me. I really don’t care). If someone builds up enough energy, then it explodes out of them, almost literally.

Doesn’t sound so bad, right?

WRONG!! Mom said she did that right after I was born, and that the explosion of that energy is what killed my father. So yeah, I’m kind of upset. How could she keep this from me? She’s the one who keeps saying, “We need to be open and honest with each other.” How is THIS honest? Or open?

I get that she didn’t want to hurt me or our relationship with each other, but I could have killed someone because she was worried about my feelings. Plus, if it weren’t for her, I would still have a dad. I-I can’t totally blame her, but I’m just so angry right now. I mean, what else is she not telling me? What else is she keeping secret to protect my feelings? I’m gonna go to one of the Sooth Ladies; I’m fifteen years old and I still have no idea what my curse is, so I think it’s about damn time that I find out.

OH! And that’s another thing. The whole reason that she hasn’t taken me to a Sooth Lady is because she wants to see if I will develop a curse if I don’t go see them. What even? She’s treating me like I’m some sort of science experiment. I mean, excuse me but isn’t this MY life we are talking about here? Not hers, not anyone elses, just mine.

Dear Aw. Who cares. Let’s just get this over with.

It’s Monday. So there’s that to deal with.

I went to the Sooth Ladies. They said that my curse is that I will progressively become more evil, whatever the heck that means. Isn’t that just such a cop-out answer, though? “Yes, I see-oh- I see that you will become-hmm, evil,” like seriously? Are you for real? How stupid do you think I am? Become evil.

Like, what does that even mean?

Whatever.

Wednesday.

What’s the point? Why fight the inevitable? My dark obsessions are just getting stronger, everything sucks because I am so tired of fighting back these urges, it’s just miserable. I mean, if I have to use my powers and I’m going to become evil, why not enjoy the descent? Life’s way more fun when you quit struggling.

Saturday.

To anyone who finds this journal, please. Stop me before I hurt someone else. I can feel myself slipping away and I’m terrified. I’ve already killed one person; I don’t want to hurt anyone else, but I don’t know what to do. I feel so helpless all of the time and I hate it. I hate it so much.

So please. Please. Just make it stop. Make it all go away: the thoughts, the urges, all of it.

I’m begging you.

Who knows what I’ll be capable of?
A brief note from the Curator

We recently found this diary hidden and buried in one of the supernatural strongholds from the last of the Great Wars. We believe that this building was once the home that Miss Corramae Eliot shared with her mother, but we are currently unable to verify this.

In regards to the abruptness of the end, this is Miss Eliot’s final journal entry before she succumbed to the power of her curse. For those patrons who are able to stomach such horrors, a more detailed account of Miss Eliot’s crimes can be seen in the next panel. For those who cannot, we hope that you will leave the Museum with a better understanding of one of the most cruel women in our recorded history. To all patrons, we appreciate your generous contributions; for, with proper vigilance and continued funding, we aim to prevent the tragedies that befell Miss Eliot from plaguing any of our other cursed young ladies.

And with that, I leave you with a Siren saying: To sing or not to sing is the purest question of all.