

The Axe & Quill Writing Society

Anthology Vol. II

Letter from the Editors

We all have our own idea of an apocalypse. For some, it is nuclear war, the rapture, or a world on fire. For others, it is losing a loved one, seeing others suffer, or feeling lonely. The apocalypse may not be the world going up in flames, but that does not make it any less devastating.

We have been and will continue to live in the era of the “pre-apocalypse.” For our entire lives, there has been a sense of impending doom, with the constant threat of disaster in the back of our minds. However, the world isn’t over yet, and we wanted to explore what it is like to live in this space. This anthology features a looming end of days in the form of eldritch gods, hate, environmental crises, and war that could happen tomorrow or well beyond our lifetimes.

From a love story told through the stars to an analysis of the Rwandan genocide, the pieces included in this anthology examine impending apocalypses big and small. Waiting for the end does not always mean waiting for a nuclear bomb to fall from the sky; it can simply be waiting for something to change. We remain in limbo, always expecting the worst.

When is not the focus of this anthology, but rather the waiting.

As we continue to grapple with escalating global conflicts, climate change, gun violence, and human rights issues, we cannot and will not remain silent and complicit.

The 20 pieces featured in this edition reflect how we have come to conceptualize and cope with the ticking clock. We are angry. We are scared. But we are not simply accepting our fate. Living before the end of the world does not mean accepting that it is going to end soon.

So, we invite you to sit with your discomfort, anger, and anxiety. If we want to avoid the impending apocalypse, we must look it in the eye. We must confront the conflicts and hardships — big and small — that are happening around us.

Because soon, we won’t be able to ignore them.

AJ Siegel & Clare Grealey
Axe & Quill Writing Society co-presidents



Letter from the Founders

When we created the Axe & Quill Writing Society almost two years ago, we wanted it to be a community where all forms of writing were welcomed and encouraged. We are both trained in rhetoric and composition, but this organization has brought all kinds of writers together. The vast range of our members' writing experience and work continues to amaze us, and we are so impressed with the range of voices that this group has brought together.

From the beginning, we intended for the annual anthology to showcase members' writing and to give them a space to write about things that are important to them. It is remarkably easy to prioritize other things over your passions, so we consider each edition an opportunity to share something our members care about — whether that is a topic, cause, or the mere act of composing.

As we both prepare to leave Charlotte and begin graduate school, the Axe & Quill is starting to take a new shape. Clare Grealey has been an active and present member from the beginning, and we could not be happier that she is going to lead a group that means so much to us. Clare, thank you for taking the reins — we are so excited to see how you and this organization grow.

We also want to thank Malcolm Campbell, Jon Pope, and Bert Wray, who all helped guide us in creating and managing this organization and publication. And thank you to Catherine Tinglestad of the Atkins Library for providing us with a consistent space to meet. Without you all, we would not have had the support and stability to keep this group running.

We are forever impressed and grateful that so many students would give up their evenings to sit in a library classroom and talk about writing. To each and every one of you, thank you for trusting and spending so many evenings with us.

Everyone's passion and dedication to their craft will be how we remember this club. We both look forward to seeing the future of this organization and all of its members — we know that there are only great things in store.

All the best,

AJ Siegel & Jackson Martin
Axe & Quill Writing Society co-founders



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When the Apocalypse Comes

by Elizabeth Barker

When the apocalypse comes, the billionaires will hunker down in their bunkers, and the president will be moved underground.

When the apocalypse comes, the floodlights will outshine every star in the sky, even the ones in the eyes of the girl you fell in love with when you were nineteen.

When the apocalypse comes, the doomsday preppers will sigh in exasperation, and they will know they weren't the crazy ones.

When the apocalypse comes, children will call their mothers just for their calls to go straight to voicemail.

When the apocalypse comes, lovers will lock their doors and barricade their windows.

When the apocalypse comes, parents will let their children sleep in Mom and Dad's bed.

When the apocalypse comes, people will raid the supermarkets and throw bricks through the windows of CVS.

When the apocalypse comes, we'll be grateful to have a few extra Covid masks lying around.

"But it hasn't come yet." At least that's what they say as they shove doomsday down our throats, and we pretend not to notice.

They tell us to take care of ourselves but give us none of the actual tools to do so; they shake our hands and clap our backs and send us on our way.

The apocalypse hasn't come, so they continue shredding the ozone layer and uprooting acres of forest and mining this earth of all its precious metals because,

"Hey, the world hasn't ended yet!"

"Not yet," they say, not yet.

When the apocalypse comes, perhaps I will be in my room with my cat curled up by my feet and my computer open to a blank page for a poem I'll never get to write.

When the apocalypse comes, I will call my mother, and she won't pick up, so I'll call my father instead.

When the apocalypse comes, my first thought will be *at least I don't have to go to work today*

and I don't know which depresses me more – the impending apocalypse or capitalism.

When the apocalypse is over, the survivors will dig through hundreds of pounds of rubble and lives that used to be, and maybe someone will find remnants of the CDs hung on my wall or pages from the journals I keep.

When the apocalypse is over, the people who are left will cling to the small evidences of humanity that they find buried in the bedrooms of the people we once were.

When the apocalypse is over, they will start again.

And I will be happy that I'm not around to see it.



The Pageant

by Monique Delagey

Lilibet's eyes focused on the grey mouse sitting on the stairstep of their porch. Usually, they were dead, with maggots eating their curled and cold bodies, but the cats hadn't seen this one, whose pink nose lifted in the air. It even pointed to where she stood against the door. She hid her smile, glancing between the mouse and the carnival ahead, not wanting her mother to see it from the window. She knew Mama would call on her father to kill it.

She whispered a silent promise to come back, taking careful steps towards the crowd and a deep breath to adjust her hair. The women mostly gathered near the entrance, their immovable dresses standing in small circles, quietly exchanging gossip with each other. Lilibet could only see past their hips as she politely maneuvered through the group of townswomen. A few said hello, touched her braids, and complimented her beauty.

The clearing opened to where the girls were collected. Around thirty of them stood in a long line, girls from her class thirteen to eighteen, their backs turned to speak to the other. Their white dresses stood out against a field of sand and rock.

"You can stand between us," her friend Julie, with pale blonde hair, offered.

"We wouldn't let you get the last number; it's bad luck," the other girl, Sarah, said. She was the smallest of the three, with round glasses and rosy cheeks. Lilibet noticed lines on her red complexion and that they were stained by old tears.

"Isn't it exciting?" Julie bit her fingernails, looking towards the front, peering over other girls' heads. The line moved fast towards the table where an old man sat with a stack of papers, a clipboard, and a stamp. Julie stepped forward, and she noticed how beautiful the back of her hair was in a long French braid. In school, all the boys took turns pulling at it, and she would turn to them and laugh. All the boys liked Julie. She had a fair chance of winning with her pretty waist and long legs; at least, that was what Lilibet's mother said.

"Next," the old man mumbled, motioning two fingers to Lilibet as she rushed forward, folding her arms together. She knew him, everyone did. He cut to the front of the line for rations, but no one ever said a word.

"Name?" He leaned forward to meet her eyes.

"Lilibet Hansen," she said over the noise of girls behind her. He let out a chuckle, stamping the paper in an energetic punch.

"Little girl, I'd vote for you if I could," the man smiled a toothy grin, which she saw to be a mouthful of green, all except for a piece of gold



in place of a front tooth. She was sure she could sell it for one hundred rations, maybe two, not knowing how much a tooth-sized piece of gold was worth. Her stomach began to growl as she watched it clutch to his bottom lip.

“Your number is nineteen,” the old man handed it to her in a playful manner. She took it, even as his grip tightened on the piece of cardboard.

The gate swung open into a round, wood-fenced pen where they piled in to reunite with the herd. The girls kept to their groups, Lilibet running to her two friends. The spectating men were in full view, congregated and leaning against the other side gate, mostly their backs to the girls. Some of them surveyed the pen, chiming in conversation every so often, their heads bowed in weary impatience. Their sons ran back and forth behind them, laughing and halting at the brightly lit stands. A few older boys leaned over the fence and hollered out numbers the girls hung over their chests.

“Ladies, in your places,” the man said overhead.

Girls began to scream in blood-curdling violence, their arms waving and shoving themselves for places along the fence. They dragged each other back; some of them clawed at their arms or tore fistfuls of their hair. Some drew red blood under their fingernails. Lilibet stood in a panic before a girl shoved her to the dirt floor from behind. Their heeled boots stepped on her hands and back as she gripped in pain. The air clung to her chest as she felt hands grabbing to pull her up from the ground.

“Here!” Julie screamed, and Lilibet fell into the wooden fence, almost against the men who watched the chaos. She caught her breath, wiping the sand from her face and dress, feverishly looking at any other girls who might try to tear her away.

But it grew silent, except for the quiet chatter of onlookers and mothers who had gathered around. The whole town seemed to wait for the pageant. It was the bells sounding over the microphone that forced the girls into a walk around the pen. Lilibet’s heart raced as she stared at Julie’s blonde French braid. Her hands clutched at her sides, even when she wanted to tie the lace ribbon that now came loose.

Around and around, they circled, and her feet ached, but she couldn’t afford to stop, not with Sarah on her heels. As she came round again to the side of the white house, she felt a strong set of eyes loom over her. She couldn’t help but look up despite every slurring voice in her mind screaming no.

The red curtains, which stood like a thorn against the white house, were gone. What stood in its place was a man with an undone collar and an arm that leaned against the windowsill. His eyes widened in shock as Lilibet threw her gaze back to Julie’s French braid, and a wave of fear crashed over her. Had she made a mistake by seeing him? Lilibet’s cheeks flushed crimson, her chest rapidly rising and falling



as her knees buckled together. He'd punish her, cut off their rations. She'd go hungry like the little girls in the stories her father always warned her about. The bells screeched over the microphone again, and she bumped into Julie as they came to a halt.

"We have a winner!" the man yelled overhead. The audience cheered louder than before, and Lilibet thought the whole town must've been there that year. Girls around the pen began to squeal, holding their stomachs so tightly that their fingers grew white. The speaker sounded, trying to disrupt the crowd in its chaotic frenzy. Once the town began to whisper, parents reciting prayers for their daughter's number, the man overhead cleared his voice.

"Number nineteen," he said clearly.

Lilibet watched for the girl who would step out from the circle, but everyone was staring at her. Julie and Sarah clutched her arms, pushing her forward.

"You won, Lilibet," Sarah whispered.

A hush grew over the crowd as they all watched the girl whose number hung like a noose around her neck. No one smiled or cheered; their expressions were blank as Lilibet turned to face the audience. Her body began to shake as her boots shuffled together, boots that were too big for her feet.

"Mama?" Lilibet barely spoke as her throat stung and her voice quivered.

She grew glassy-eyed, scanning the crowd for her mother. Covering her mouth, Mama began to choke, the tears streaming down her face that she refused to wipe away. She let out stifled yelps for her only daughter. And Lilibet's father, a looming shadow behind his wife, would not meet his daughter's eyes. He accepted a few pats from other men while Lilibet's mother clutched her arms together. The women consoled her and rubbed her back in worried and confused glances. This was what she wanted. This was what every mother wanted.

"Come now, girl, follow me," the man with the gold tooth pulled at her arm.

"No," Lilibet pulled her arm away in stifled sobs.

"I've changed my mind. Take my daughter out of the competition," her mother pleaded.

"Every girl participates, you know that." The man with the gold tooth was growing restless now.

"Mama?" Lilibet asked again, but her mother didn't look at her this time, only at her father, who tucked her away under his arm, leading her home. The man yanked Lilibet forward with a strong grasp on her two braids, forcing her to see the path he was dragging her to. Outside the pen and on the side of the white house, he unlocked the rustic door.



In the house, up creaking wooden stairs, she was thrown on her knees into a dark room with dimly lit candles. It was so quiet, except the sound of wheezing and the creaking of the wooden floors made her realize she wasn't alone.

She looked up from her folded knees to see six women sitting around the dark ebony dining table. They kept their heads forward, but their eyes were on her— a sea of white that seemed to pull away from their skulls. Their hands laid neatly on the table backs to their chairs, each wearing the same buttoned-up cotton dress. The candlelight illuminated the gold rings that squeezed their left hands. They were young, one of them she recognized to be in the class above her own. Until she'd become a winner last year.

At the table's center was the man from before, his figure leaning over the table. Lilibet had always thought he would be taller. Instead, he looked sick, restlessly leaning against the table with dark circles under his eyes.

"There is a seat at the table for you," he tilted his head to the empty chair opposite of him. "Go on."

As Lilibet sat down, her feet dangling off the thin cushioned chair, she held her eyes on the reflective white plate. Lilibet felt their gaze but could not meet them. She could never go home again, never see her mother or father again, or Sarah or Julie. Lilibet thought of the mouse and how she'd never sneak it any food in the still hours of the night. She thought about the mouse and how her father would find it — cold and alone — only to kill it.



Death by Broadcast

by Clare Grealey

For all his flaws, Philip Zimbardo had a meaningful impact on theories of violence. He proposed that a variety of factors might lead a person to commit violence, including but not limited to an ideology that legitimizes violence, dehumanization, deindividuation, and the gradual escalation of violence. In short, violence does not occur in a vacuum: It is the product of both the individual and the society.

~

During the European colonial period in Africa, Rwanda was a part of German East Africa and later Belgium from the late 1890s to the early 1960s. Prior to European control, the Hutu and Tutsi were not differentiated much, as intermarriage was common, and they shared the same language: Kinyarwanda. However, when Belgium took over from Germany in the early 1900s, they began to create divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi, showing favoritism towards the minority Tutsi, which led to resentment on the side of the Hutu, who made up around 85% of the population (United Nations, n.d.). The Tutsi population was further depleted after a 1959 Hutu revolution, their rise to power following a coup in 1960, and their eventual independence from Belgium in 1962 (“100 days of slaughter,” 2019). Over 300,000 Tutsi had fled to neighboring countries, lowering their indigenous numbers by a large margin.

In 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) began entering Rwanda from northern Uganda. The RPF was primarily made up of Tutsi refugees (Barker, 2004). The Hutu president, Major General Juvenal Habyarimana, ordered the arrest of hundreds of native Tutsi, claiming them to be RPF sympathizers and being involved. Following this, government officials called for a massacre of the Tutsi, resulting in the death of hundreds. A ceasefire was called, and negotiations commenced. Habyarimana signed a peace accord in August of 1993, which outlined the creation of a transitional government that would include a role for the Rwandan Patriotic Front. This move angered Hutu extremists, who would aim to put down this movement in the coming months (Lemarchand, n.d.).

On April 6, 1994, a plane was shot down over Kigali, the Rwandan capital, killing all passengers and pilots, including the Hutu leader and Burundian president (Lemarchand, n.d.). It is not known which side committed this crime, but regardless, roadblocks were immediately set up, and the slaughter of the Tutsi began. During the three months that followed, 800,000 people were reported to have been killed, with 2 million others fleeing into other countries, living in refugee camps. Official radio stations filled the airwaves with calls for Hutus to murder their neighbors for the crime of being Tutsi, ordering them to kill the Inyenzi, or “cockroaches.” Around 200,000 Hutus participated in this massacre, subsisting on the alcohol and food provided to them by



government officials (Hatzfeld, 2005). The rest of the world remained silent, refusing to condemn these actions, send aid, or speak out in any way that mattered.

The term Inyenzi was frequently used to refer to the Tutsi and was meant to 'other' them, meant to dehumanize them. A cockroach is a pest to be driven out, killed indiscriminately without question.

I have always told you. All the people who joined the part controlled by the Inyenzi Inkotanyi are Inyenzi themselves. They approve the killings perpetrated by Inyenzi. They are criminals like the Inyenzi Inkotanyi. They are all Inyenzi. When our armed forces will get there, they will get what they deserve. They will not spare anyone since everybody turned Inyenzi. All those who stayed there are all Inyenzi since those who were against Inyenzi have been killed by Inyenzi. Those who succeeded to escape ran away to Ngara, Burundi, and to the western part of our country. Those who stayed are accomplices and acolytes of the Inyenzi.

– Valérie Bemerik, June 28, 1994, RTL M

The term Inyenzi was used to describe both the Tutsi guerilla fighters and civilians, implying that both were undesirable and dangerous, as they were all willing to fight. This broadcast uses such “us versus them” language throughout and is action-engendering. Bemerik states that the Tutsi are actively harmful, as they are villains with the agenda of wiping out the Hutu, but also passively bad, as they are intrinsically evil and are vermin.

Even in the very first sentence, an identity is created amongst the Hutu. “I have always told you.” This recruits the “you” into a group identity and makes it easier to commit violence against the Tutsi, who are the “other.”

In March of 1993, Kangura, a Rwandan propaganda paper printed by the government, declared, “A cockroach cannot give birth to a butterfly” (Maitra & McGowan, 2012). Here, the Hutu wanted to dehumanize the Tutsi and practice deindividuation at the same time. Tutsi can never change; they will always be evil, violent, and a pest to Rwanda and the Hutu.

There were thousands of broadcasts just like these all over Rwanda, leading experts and researchers to dub this a “radio genocide” or a “death by broadcast” (Wilson, 2017). Although the government military and civilian militias carried out the actual violence, it was commanded and endorsed by these radio stations. By the end of the genocide, two million people were displaced, and an estimated 800,000 were dead within the span of 100 days (“100 days of slaughter,” 2019). In all likelihood, the number of deaths is much higher than reported.

~

The legitimization of violence, dehumanization, deindividuation, and the gradual escalation of violence are all hallmarks of the Rwan-



dan genocide and of mass violence across the globe and across history. It is seen in Sudan, the Congo, and Palestine today. Rwandans were told that the Tutsi were not to be trusted and that there were blood-thirsty killers living among their ranks, inciting violence and indoctrinating civilians. No one was outside the reach of the Inyenzi. The Hutu released propaganda that stated that the Tutsi were not like them, they did not share the same values, and they were too dangerous to remain alive. This rhetoric has been echoed time and time again by regimes and across history; the effects of this language cannot be ignored—it led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Rwandans, and nothing was done.

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The Downward Mobility of Things

by Will Washburn

Something stinks in the Baylands.

The site is like a gated community, guarded
And enclosed, blanketed in hazard warnings.

Seagulls crest the shifting peak
Of colorful, reeking rubbish
Churning slowly and shuddering in the breeze.

Scavengers have found an easy living
Amongst the junk, swarming and barking
Around pockets of restaurant shavings,
Expired inventory, and dinner table scraps.

One crunches a jalapeño Cheeto
In its beak, one snatches up an earthy
Pizza crust, another steps gingerly,
Avoiding a dead comrade's carcass to
Pick at a roach who peeked through the surface.

The gulls scatter as a shit-coated compactor
Rumbles over the hill, flattening the trash
Into something forgettable.
One cleat snags a garbage bag and flips it
Around and around until it bursts, throwing
Coffee filters, shoeboxes, and laptop shards.

Down at the gate of the complex,
Trucks dump batches of children's clothing,
Coffee-makers, cigarette-lighter gadgets,
Air purifiers, Mickey Mouse plushies,
And desk-organizing trays into the scene,
Among other returns that can't be resold.
They're wasted as they touch the landfill,
Smeared with dirt, moldy film, and seagull shit.
But these products once were shiny and mint, ready to
Jet across the globe in the belly of an airliner.



Warm Days in January

by Olivia Pardo

My sister and I walked to the grocery store
on New Year's Day together.
I'd gone in shorts, and she'd gone in long sleeves.
We wound up tying our sweatshirts around our waists because on
the first day of the year,
it still wasn't cold enough to need them the whole walk there.
It had been nice to chat. I don't see her all that often.
My sister wondered how cold it must have been
for the people walking around the parking lot in shorts.
It wasn't really.

I've lived in this city for over a decade now,
a little less than half my life.
We used to live up north where it would snow every year,
and our parents would shovel the driveway and toss the excess into
the yard
as we bundled up in snow pants and puffy jackets to stick our faces
in the snow.
We'd pat down a pile of snow into a corner of the yard
marked off by some stones into a hilltop and then ride boogie boards
down it,
giving us enough thrust to surf on our stomachs to the other side of
the yard. They're cherished memories.

My family moved down south. I remember it snowing the first years
here,
I have a diary entry from — I love recalling the date, February 20,
2020.
I wrote that it snowed enough for the neighborhood kids on the
street to have a snowball fight.
My sister didn't find any gloves, so she used oven mitts to pelt snow-
balls at people.

I can't appreciate the milder winters the way my parents can.
A few inches of snow. An inch of snow. No snow.
I try to wear shorts for as long as I can into October and November,
but winter always arrives. Winter's arrived later and later each year.

I'll check the news. The last eight years have all been the hottest ever
recorded in Earth's history.
A new hottest year on record, only broken by the one after that.
On a late January day this year, I walked out of class delighted to see
how warm it was.
It had rained the day before, so it was a welcome change. However,
It is cold comfort
to have pleasantly warm days in January.



The Erasure

by Benjamin Nguyen

It is New Year's Day of the year 30XX. In the middle of Times Square, the following message appeared on the Mega Screen:

*THE CONSEQUENCES OF
MANKIND'S INFINITE IGNORANCE.*

*ERASURE COMMENCING IN:
30 DAYS, 23 HOURS, 59 MINUTES, 59 SECONDS*

~

Authorities have attempted to track down the source of the “Erasure” incident and remove this insidious message — but to no avail, as the message continues to paint the skies of New York red.

In the streets of Sunset Park in Brooklyn, locals look to quell their anxieties with a few drinks at one of the city's most popular bars. The Runaway had been known to be a quiet respite from the grind of daily life even before the Erasure. It was a place for people to wind down, grab a drink, and listen to others equally as worn down by life as themselves.

“Not often I see you coming down here this early, Keith.”

Jack spoke to a lone middle-aged man across the bar. The man had visibly dark shadows under his eyelids and sweat on his forehead.

“What can I say? It's been a long week.”

“I can't blame you. I bet people have been up your ass, considering the recent news.”

“Yeah, you don't say...” With a grimace, Keith knocked twice on the bar's marbled oak countertop. “Hey, how about a scotch?”

“You got it.”

As night fell, patrons slowly but surely trickled in. Many regulars show up night after night, though tourists or businesspeople from out of town weren't uncommon either.

“Yo, Jack! How about a beer?” Nate, wearing a worn leather jacket, walked up to the bar with an exuberant gait.

“Your tab is still open.”

“Eh, why do you care? Haven't you heard? The world's ending! Haha!”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“Huh? Aren't you that guy who was on the news? What was it... Keith Lockhart! Man, everyone hates you!”

“Yep, that's me, alright...”



“Hey, do y’all serve any cocktails?” A young woman sat up at the bar, her voice low and raspy.

“We have just about anything. The tab will be under?”

“Olivia. I’ll have a Manhattan.”

“Ooh, how ‘bout one for me too? Name on my tab’s gonna be Patricia.” The cheery woman sitting beside Olivia had frizzy ginger hair and toned arms, presumably from her day job.

“Heard. I’ll have everything right out for you all.”

~

After the alcohol started to kick in, everyone became more talkative, even if their worries remained in the back of their minds.

“Say, Mr. Governor, what do you know about that whole Erasure thing?”

“The White House hasn’t said anything about when or if they’ll get rid of that eyesore,” said Keith as he rolled his glass on the countertop. “We don’t even know who set it up or what they’re planning on doing.”

Patricia sighed and rested her boots on the counter. “I bet the end of the world would’ve come sooner or later.”

“Well, that’s grim,” said Olivia.

“I mean...” Patricia crossed her arms. “Considering the state of the world right now — the century-old climate disaster or technology leaking into every aspect of our lives... Isn’t there something that you figured would’ve led to our end?”

A contemplative silence fell over the bar, drowned out by the surrounding noise, but felt nonetheless.

“Well...” Nate started. “I don’t know about you all, but something that’s been eating away at me has been... people.”

“I was in a gang not that long ago. Call ‘em the Saints Y3K, one of the leaders of the Anarchist’s Movement. Born and raised. It was all I ever knew, y’know? But through it all, there was corruption, greed, manipulation, you name it. It hurt seeing all my friends get torn up, day after day. I decided to leave a week ago — needless to say, it didn’t go down well with them. And now I can’t get a job anywhere. No one’ll give me a second chance. They know nothing about my life. Assholes.”

Again, there was silence, broken only by the sirens and screeches of tires outside.

“Honestly,” Olivia chimed in. “I’ve noticed it too. People are just... colder to each other now. No one wants to look each other in the eye anymore —”

“Livia,” Patricia slapped Olivia’s back. “Don’t think you can get away with riding your high horse. You act just the same.”



“Well, why wouldn’t I? I’ve been burnt out at my job for God knows how long.”

“Where do you work, ma’am?” asked Nate.

“Artifice Tech. They make VR games and entertainment. I thought it’d be exciting, to beat the forefront of modern tech, but I’ve been here for about ten years, and I’ve yet to see any of that. The company gives a lot of lip service to taking entertainment to the next level, but really, they just want to take advantage of hikikomori no-lives to line their pockets.”

“Now that you mention it... one of my gang-mates got hooked on one of their games. It was Freedom Fantasy something; I never saw him leave his room.”

“I’ve been telling you to quit that company, girl!” Patricia nagged.

“Well, I need to pay my bills somehow!” She clenched her empty glass. “And I thought I liked tech at one point, you know? I used to love games, and I thought being a programmer would get me closer to my dreams, but all my dumbass execs want to do is make shitty games and maximize profits! And now I’m stuck...”

~

“So... either of you two have an end-of-the-world sob story?” Nate glanced between Keith and Patricia.

“I guess I’ll start,” Patricia took a sip from her glass. “I mentioned the climate disaster earlier, right? A hundred years ago, oceans were polluted, winters were getting hotter, blah blah blah. Now the Earth’s climate is fucked beyond repair. Our air quality is so low that it’s a miracle we haven’t suffocated to death.”

“And, obviously, I’m worried, for a better reason than most couch potatoes. I found my love of agriculture when I went to college and decided to stick with it. What I didn’t know back then was how little work there is, with the only thing for people like me being environmental rehabilitation efforts, but even then, we’ve already got artificial fruits and vegetables close to perfect if you ignore the adverse health effects. So, my division gets no funding.” Patricia gave Keith a mean side-eye.

“What’s that for?” Keith asked.

“I know about you. You’re apparently one of the leading House representatives pushing for environmentalism and anti-war policies, but despite that, nothing’s changed.”

“Why you —”

“And now you have this investigation on the Erasure, which has seen absolutely zero progress. Seriously, what the hell do you people do in the White House?”



"I'll have you know, I work day and night to push for those initiatives, but when it comes to these... damn bootlickers and sellouts I have to work with in the House, you would wonder how we haven't burned the White House down yet. I promise you, there will always, and I mean always, be some asshole that'll shoot down every good idea you've had, whether it be because of their moral standards or because they're being bribed by lobbyists. They'd see the world burn if it meant they get what they want."

~

It was an hour past midnight, and the bar had been emptied out by the time the bar mates had their quarrel.

"Last call, everyone. Bar's closing down." Jack was wiping down the counter.

"Say, Jack, how do you think the world's gonna end?" Nate asked.

"Honestly?" Jack paused for a moment. "I come to work, do what I gotta do, offer drinks and maybe some kind words of encouragement to people, and go home. I do what I can. The world isn't my responsibility. What happens happens."

There are moments of clarity that one gets through the most casual of interactions, and considering how stunned the four bar mates were by Jack's bluntness, it would be safe to say this was one of them.

~

A month passed after the announcement of the Erasure. Apparently, nothing had happened — at least nothing tangible. After the government confirmed there were no signs of an attack, people went on with their days. Nobody ever found out who the culprit was or what their motive was. Perhaps it was just another cyberterrorist attack or perhaps even a social experiment. Either way, it had left its impact.

"You're quitting that job today, right?"

"Yep. My two weeks are nearly up, and I have another job lined up already. You end up hearing back from Keith?"

"Yeah. He said he was finally able to get his colleagues talking about pushing environmental rehabilitation."

"Yo! Is that Ms. Olivia and Ms. Patricia, I see?"

"Nate! What are you doing here?"

"Nothing much... besides finally getting a place to live. Ended up finding work at a local homeless shelter. They were going to let me stay either way, but I figured I might as well work while I'm there."

"Good for you! That's amazing!"

And so, it was a new day in Brooklyn.



The Road to Oblivion

by Lauren Simendinger

The car turned left, and she shut the radio off, having long grown tired of the static.

She wasn't quite sure how long she'd be driving. Nobody did. It was recommended you take the drive, though.

The view was said to be breathtaking.

She couldn't help but agree as she drove, eyes naturally drifting to the side. The first thing she noticed was the grass.

Oh, the beauty! It seemed to be freshly painted: The green was so bright. Here, there, dots of yellow, white, and purple broke through the green. She had never cared for the smell of grass before; it reminded her of salad, but the sharp assault was sweet, but not sickeningly so. It looked so soft, so inviting. She wanted to pull over and lay down forever.

But she didn't.

She continued on.

What next caught her eye was the sky.

It was bright blue and cloudless. An endless expanse stretching far beyond the horizon. It was like the ocean — you could swim in it forever and never find the end. But you didn't mind drowning in it. You would accept the tiredness when your muscles could no longer push you forward. You would close your eyes and let the blue swallow you whole.

There were many houses along the route, all left in varying shades of love. Worn rocking chairs here, walls of ivy there. One in particular spoke to her, though.

It was two stories, an old farmhouse judging from the collapsed pens and eternal tin roof. The white siding was peeling, and a lone rocking chair rocked in the wind. Lace curtains blew through a hole in the window. They were incredibly well made; even from her car, she could see the crocheted hearts and initials. The faint smell of smoke lingered in the air. It was from cigarettes, not fire. She could picture the grandfather in the chair, a cigarette hanging from his lips. The curtains had been gifted when he married his wife. They raised chickens and horses.

Once more, she continued on.

A few hours later, she passed by a park. An old, rusted swing set creaked. The red slide glistened with streams from last week's flood. The jungle gym provided a new challenge with its twisted heap.

In a meadow shadowed by the ghost of trees, there was a picnic.



The red-checked cloth twisted around in the breeze, held down by the basket. Plates heaped with bread, fruit, and chips littered it. She could taste the salt and syrup, the rich dough. A flash of pink caught her eye, and she saw a pink tulle dress belonging to a young girl. Her bones revealed she was about five, accompanied by a mother and father. They had taken one last outing. They appeared to have enjoyed it.

It warmed her to think of the beauty of it. That joy was blossoming bigger than ever. There is so much to admire when you realize you no longer can. And so she continued on, admiring the view.



Gardenias

by Dakota Currier

I can smell gardenias
that have bloomed from the sun

I can see their purity represented in our young
When they laugh and play, and their faces reflect our still-glowing
sun

Rosy and pink
all across their cheeks
While they have their fun

I could smell gardenias by your side
when we walked, and it was all empty in my head

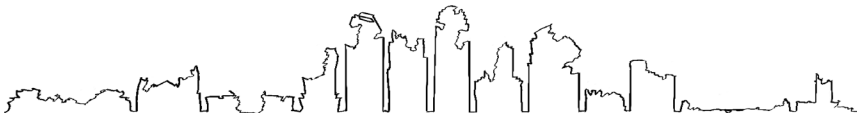
At your bedside, I could still smell them,
Though they weren't there
Not much is here now.
But at least you don't need to care
It's a busy, busy job being unaware

I feel alone in that respect
I'm too aware of the scent
and the sounds
Be it the absence thereof
We scream into the air and are silenced by bombs

I can still smell them
as a breeze brushes through the open window across my hair
It's not so refreshing
and neither is the smell
I turn and look over at the hospital bed
But it's gone

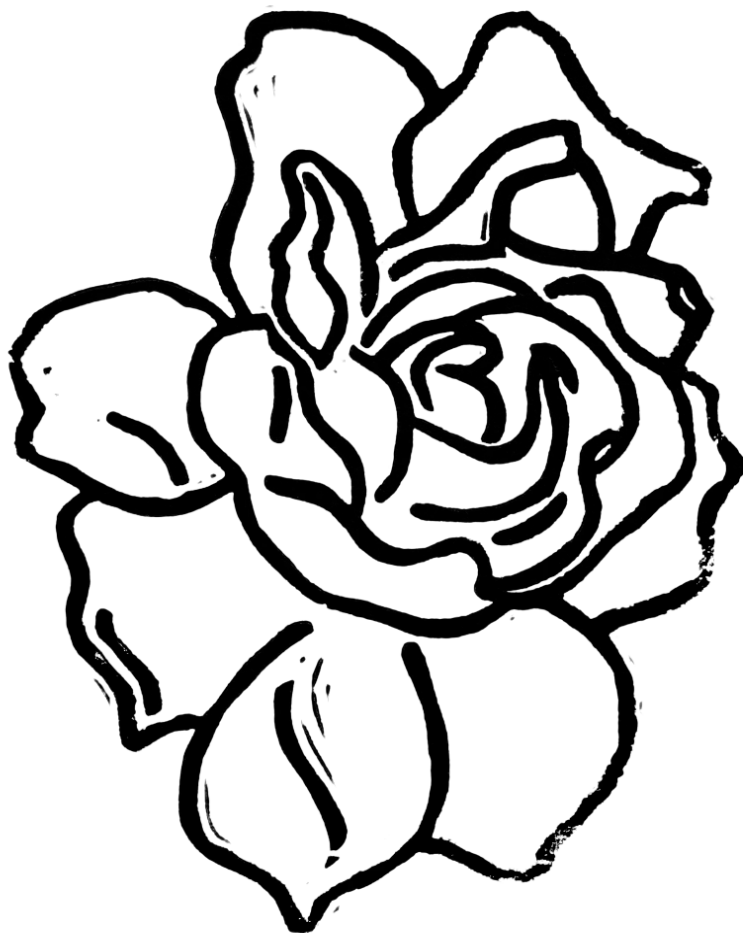
You're gone
and this was all in my head

I feel a hand close around mine,
crushing the sweet scent
And a pounding in my head
As delicate shapes deform and reshape
And silence for a second
Then whistling instead
Bright bangs and flashes



Then I can smell them again
and open my eyes
and realize we were already dead
From the second we were once ourselves
Rosy and young

Like the sweetness of your flowers
that were once bright and warm
Like the hands we would hold
And the heat of the sand
snuffed out by the coldness of a breeze
That suffocates and pushes down
as we were still forced to breathe.



The Waiting Game

by Lily Cagle

Hunger.
Pain.
Heartache.
Longing.

To have soup,
to lay down.
To love again,
to see my family again.

I walked through the desolation of my heart,
wanting to find an escape...
a way to get out.

I thought the turmoil was only outside:
the fighting,
the wars,
the “end of times,”
the deconstruction of democracy,
but it was actually on the inside.

What was outside was a look in,
like a flipped mirror.
A lost glance before you go to bed
But you don’t recognize who is looking back at you.

I can’t wait for Him to come back,
I long to see my Savior.
As the world crumbles around me,
I know one thing for sure.

I will be home in my Father’s arms,
Only a little longer until...
(until I see Him in the sky,
and I am able to fly high.)



The End of Anything

by Valentin Canon

“I am whoever you think me to be.”

A phrase of power like this gives an angel their wings. With a phrase, a mantra like this, extra-dimensionality is acquired. This is an essential quality to hold in order to be a dreamkeeper. This is Somerset's phrase of power. It is not a unique one. No, it is one of the more common phrases of power. Somerset learned this mantra from Charlotte, another dreamkeeper, one who, in turn, has since refined themselves to a smaller scope. “I am whoever feels lost between places” became their new mantra... Somerset would only ever see them again when they were thought to be a person lost between places.

“I am whoever you think me to be.”

With this, Somerset can enter and leave the dreams of dreamers at will, only requiring a form to be provided to them in response. A fast pair of wings, but not a precise pair. Their form is wildly inconsistent, requiring a strong conviction to the mantra in order to avoid fading into lower states of being. Yet, even the strongest of convictions allows for vulnerabilities. The further Somerset stretches themselves, the more people they meet, the more facets to their wings, the less stable their being becomes. A second mantra of power, dark and hollow, a yang to the yin of being “whoever you think me to be,” emerges on the horizon of Somerset's self.

That darkness whispers, “I am not enough for everyone.”

This phrase doesn't appear from nowhere. Much like the smog of a thousand factories can produce a poisoned infant, a thousand experiences of being perceived as lacking can create a phrase powerful enough to shackle an angel and keep them from flying too close to the sun. But oh, the pain, the costs... Somerset has never had a good relationship with the temporal dimension of time. Memory, that system tied to temporal perception, becomes the limb on which this counter-mantra shackles itself, chafes at it, wears it away. Past, present, and future aren't ordered so anymore. Time becomes a spectrum of dark to light, life to death to life again, a spiral both descending and ascending into past and future, centered on a vast plane of the present. Somerset can never quite articulate this to anyone. They are never quite enough for it.

Somewhere, sometime, Somerset's wings begin to falter. That great, doubtful counter-mantra has grown to swallow the horizon. Somerset cannot see the future, and thus, they collide with it.

~

“Who are you?”

“I... am whoever you think me to be?” They could feel the doubt tainting their voice. They redoubled their conviction. “I am whoever



you think me to be.”

“Is that so? What if I don’t think of you? Who are you then?” The voice was soft, feminine, familiar.... yet pointed. The question practically blinded Somerset as the counter-mantra flew from their throat. “I am not enough for everyone,” it rasped as the dark phrase threatened to swallow the second presence.

“No one is enough for everyone... None except Him, who can wield the mantra ‘I Am that I Am.’”

Somerset wept, knowing that this fellow angel was right to invoke the name of their master in the face of this foolishness. They wretched, felt their sorrow pour from them like bile.

“Rest, Somerset. We can tend to your wings once this counter-mantra of doubt has run its course.” It was then that Somerset recognized this voice, though they were blinded by shame and grief. Somerset had become lost between places... and Charlotte had found them. That was who they were, still.

As fatigue overtook Somerset’s body, a truth crept into their stomach where shame had long resided. This was the end. Their wings would never operate by such a fast and wild mantra again. This was why they could see less and less of the future; it was a future without them in it. Somerset mourned for themselves.

“I must apologize,” Charlotte told them as they rested long and hard, “for teaching you that mantra.” When Somerset did not reply, they carried on. “The phantasms required for it are... too much to handle for long. They overtook your senses...”

Somerset wanted to reply, tell Charlotte the fault was all theirs for letting the forces at play tear them in half. It was their fault because they had reveled in the joy and pain of being in many places at once. It was Somerset’s fault that the end was drawing closer no matter how much they rested.

~

One morning, Somerset will awaken to a pinpoint of light, far into the future. It will possess them as all answers within sight do. They will begin to take steps forward, farther and farther away from Charlotte’s domain, until it all seems a distant memory. They will pause when the light grows into a doorway and look back to apologize to all those they are leaving behind. To Somerset’s surprise, Charlotte will be right behind them.

“I’m sorry,” Somerset will whisper.

“For what?”

“I can’t be anything anymore. I’m... I don’t know. I liked being anything, but I can’t do it anymore.”

“No one expects you to be anything but yourself,” Charlotte’s voice will be gentle and warm and pointed as always.



“But I don’t —”

“You don’t have to know. Just be something. Something is its own kind of anything, and better than being nothing. That’s what I told myself when I stood where you do now.”

“Something...” Somerset will whisper. All this time expecting to be reduced to nothing... Their last act will be to embrace Charlotte. This may be the last time they meet.

Somerset will step through the bright hole in the dark future, and cease to be. Once beyond, the future will open up like a sky full of stars above them. They will cease to abide in the times where they were anything and begin to become something. They will become enough for themselves.



True Love Is Not Dead. Yet.

by Brendan Mullen

Come stay with me for all my life.
And you'll be met with little strife.
But I'll be sure you rue the day,
That you tell me you will not stay.

If you say no, oh you shall find,
A shattered skull, my splattered mind.
My rotting, lifeless, cold, dead corpse.
A dreadful day, a great remorse.

My head smashed in upon the rocks,
My drifting flesh below the docks.
A wretched sight I'm sure you'll see,
If you're so bold to reject me.

Up on that ledge, that dropoff steep,
You'll watch me take a flightless leap.
Or from great trees you once did climb,
You'll find me hanging by old twine.

I'll fill your life with endless blues,
You'll be distraught to hear the news,
I hit my head and bit the leaves.
A sorry sight, to see you grieve.

These frights are harsh, you'll loudly shriek,
So choose wisely what words you speak.
For I'll make sure with careless ease,
The stench of death floats on the breeze.



Approaching Extremist Exiting with Empathy

by AJ Siegel

It's no secret that the internet has changed how we communicate in almost every aspect of our lives. Growing up in the age of the internet and social media, I came of age on platforms like Tumblr and Instagram. As I grew older, my understanding of these digital spaces slowly shifted from a source of entertainment to one of fear, disgust, and, eventually, academic inquiry.

I have dedicated a lot of my time at UNC Charlotte to exploring the underbelly of the internet. My research has ranged from neo-Nazi memes (Siegel, 2022) and internet trolls (Siegel, 2023a) to extreme misogynists (Siegel, 2023b) and hyper-conservative retirement communities.

While it's difficult to consume and analyze this type of content as much as I do, it is necessary if we want to start addressing the harm these groups and ideologies pose. Extremism and radicalization are far from new, but the internet and social media have given them new platforms, reach, and audiences (Counter Terrorism Preparedness Network, 2023).

There is a growing body of research regarding the spread and evolution of extremism on and offline, but it is far from covering the full scope of the problem. Within the past few years, research has increased its investigations into digital extremism. In particular, it examines the various ideologies and potential preventive efforts.

But that is not the full scope of the problem.

There is an alarming lack of investigation into rehabilitation from extremist ideology. I became aware of this gap when I began studying online misogyny, which is perhaps better understood as the Red Pill, manosphere, or incel domain space.

I began researching online misogyny with the subreddit r/ExRedPill, which is a space for former and questioning members of the manosphere (a collection of misogynistic digital communities) to grapple with the harm that the Red Pill ideology causes to themselves and others. Shortly after beginning this work, I came across another community — r/IncelExit — that fills a similar niche. These spaces feature a near-constant exchange of resources, advice, and personal stories detailing members' experiences with the manosphere and subsequent efforts to exit it.

My investigation into r/ExRedPill began with a content analysis of those personal stories, and I was quickly drawn to the vulnerability of the writers. Members as young as 18 years old were talking about their confusion and desperation, which was only exacerbated by their involvement with the Red Pill.



When I began this work in September 2022, I was shocked that there was no research about the possibility of manosphere exiting, let alone rehabilitation. Investigating this seemed like the logical next step. We know what the problem is, and we know some ways to stop it from spreading, but we have no idea of how to help people get out of supremacist spaces like the manosphere.

About a year into this research, manosphere exiting research finally began to be published. Researchers like Joshua Thorburn (2023), Ruxandra Gheorghe (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023), Allysa Czerwinsky (2023), and Alyssa Davis (Davis & Kettrey, 2024) have examined r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit and are finally bringing the potential good these communities can serve to light. After engaging with their work and meeting these researchers, it has become even clearer to me that this field is moving in the right direction.

As I begin to wrap up my time at Charlotte and look ahead to graduate school, I plan to continue researching viable means of extremist rehabilitation, particularly that of online misogyny. With each new research article that is published, I am only more inspired to continue investigating manosphere exiting. These extremist and supremacist ideologies have a tight grip on far too many people's lives, and I am eager to do my part in helping to loosen that grasp.

The existence of spaces like r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit is a promising step in the right direction. These resources are far from a perfect or complete solution. But they at least show that there are people who are trying to exit.

Our generation knows the good, the bad, and the ugly of the internet better than any other. There are countless hate groups — big and small — festering in digital spaces. But there are also groups like r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit that may be a light at the end of the tunnel.

So, as you inevitably encounter people who may be tied to ideologies like the Red Pill, just remember that there is a slow march towards exiting, even if not everyone is taking part in it. I am by no means excusing extremists' beliefs, choices, and behaviors, but approaching these people purely with spite and argument does not work. All it does is push them further down the rabbit hole.

I am not asking to agree with or pity them. I am not asking you to save them. I am not asking you to like them.

I am asking you to remember that they are people.

I acknowledge that this is a big ask for most. However, after studying online extremism and harm for nearly three years and not seeing much substantial change, it's clear that we need to shift our approach. I can't say for sure if this empathetic approach will actually make a difference, but it's at least worth a shot.



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A Teacher's Christmas List

by Elise Bagley

Dear Santa,

I have always wanted to be a teacher. I like teaching people new things. I like feeling smart when I know something they don't and even smarter when they finally figure it out because of me. I like learning new ways to teach and finding new gadgets that will help me teach. I've had a wishlist for teaching since I was in high school that has evolved as I have.

First, I wanted to teach really little kids, so I had color flashcards and books to help them learn how to read. Then, I wanted to teach older kids, so I had to think about what to do with phones and how to keep students engaged.

Now, I just want to stay alive.

As I have grown older, so has my perception of the danger of being a teacher. I'm not talking about the occasional thrown chair, although that worries me too. I'm talking about guns and bullets. On my wishlist — right next to my colorful decorations for my forest-themed classroom — is a \$500 bulletproof bookbag, a \$400 bulletproof sweatshirt, and a \$900 bulletproof blanket.

I have to create a lockdown kit that actually keeps my kids and I safe because everyone knows that thoughts and prayers don't do a damn thing.

I have to take a course on how to use gunshot trauma kits so I know how to save my kids when they get shot.

I have to save my money up to buy a blanket that will keep me from having to be a human fucking shield when there is a school shooter in my place of work. And yes, I say *when*, because, at this point, it's only a matter of time before I live through one or die by one.

I love teaching. I love working with kids and making them feel smart. I love learning about how people learn and using that to help kids, but how can I do that when I am constantly worried about dying? About my partner dying. About orphaning my future children by working in the same school as my partner.

I am not a cop. I am not in the military. I did not sign up to get fucking shot at. I should not have to spend nearly \$2,000 on bulletproof equipment to feel safe in a working environment.

Why is it that children are seen as so innocent and impressionable that they can't learn the accurate history of our great country but are



old enough to die by the guns politicians are trying so desperately to protect?

Why is it expected of me to be a human shield to protect children who are not my own but who I love like they were?

I will not stop teaching because the cowards on Capitol Hill don't give a damn about the kids. I will not stop teaching because my life isn't worth the effort it takes to keep guns out of the hands of murderers. I teach because it is what I am meant to do. It's what I am trained to do.

I will pay the \$2,000 for the needed equipment to keep me safe, and I will continue to pay for therapy for the rest of my life to keep my sanity so I can help as many kids as I possibly can.

So, Santa, what do you think of my wish list this year? Think you can help me out?

Sincerely,
Every Teacher in America



I Had My Reasons...

by Daniel “Dekay” Kelly

The end of the world isn't just... nuclear bombs.
It will be when the screams become so loud,
they become deafening silence.

Your little dance moves so fast,
that others are pushed out.
And all that is left for them,
Is to listen to the screams.

They see the halls they built,
and gaze at their prison's architecture.
Their eyes will stretch in horror,
at their chains made of paper and flesh.
Then onward to the columns made from the crucified.

And you sir,
expect them not to grieve?
Not at the very least, ask questions?
I'm not mad that you made mistakes.
But I am still fuming,
only because you knew better.

So here is what will happen (starting now):
the grieving will stop, and wrath will begin.

You will lose every possession,
but it won't be because you're weak.
You will starve,
but not because you're poor.
You will contract every pain,
but you will not have the luxury of dying.

Why? I liked your saviors,
love them, actually.
I try to tell them to stop, but they said,
“Give them a chance, they will improve. They are worth it.”
Oh no... Don't start... I need you to stop crying.
I know you're sorry, but that's not the central issue here...
I understand that you 'were in a uncomfortable situation' and 'could
not risk anything else...'
I hear you...
Listen for once...
Ok...
What I am going to do,
is make the Old Testament look benign.



Don't worry about your worst fear.
They were the leaves in my paper and,
I just smoked them on the way here.
I still got some of their ashes here.
All I need from you is to finish lighting my fire.



Vignettes of the Future

by Brandon Farrington

Blood in the Stars

I had to get home to check on my “cat.” The moon glowered over clouds as I drove home. It was looking at my excuses that I had a pet to take care of, trying to discern if I was driving home for a good enough reason not to stick around, drink some drinks, and socialize with my coworkers like the moon thinks I should. I needed to feed my “cat.”

Pulling in a little too fast, I got back to my apartment in time to see a glint... a pair of eyes looking down at me from the balcony. He was up there. He never waved at me. I slammed my car door and marched up to the building, through the door, up the stairs. “It’s time to get this over with,” I thought to myself.

A cut, a flush of red, a sinking feeling, and the cat’s fed. This “cat” being someone I found on the street, or rather, who found me. He keeps me around because I’m the safest option he has. I wrapped my pinkie in a bandage to stanch the bleeding as Klaus, he calls himself, stepped outside to the back patio.

He reclined on the chair outside and spoke up. “Look at those idiots,” he pointed. “They have all the knowledge, all the technology to stop themselves from colliding with another star, but they’re not even trying.”

“That’s just a patch of night sky; what do you mean?”

“You don’t see it? Someday, maybe when I trust you enough, I’ll offer my power to you. People like me, we can see the stars in finer detail. What you see as black nothing is a kaleidoscope of stars and planets, all competing at once for the same space in the field. Out there, there’s more of us. You know, people, not just me. ‘Dreams are dying in the dark, and blood in the stars.’ It’s too bad I can’t have it.”

‘Too bad’ is right. As long as he’s in my apartment, he can’t get out and bleed anyone else dry.



You Seem Lost

A mysterious figure appeared in front of me. Long hair and a strange uniform: all black but a white wedge on the top left of the jacket. She? Spoke to me without speaking. The words, her words presumably, leaked into my conscience.

“You seem lost...” Her statement was demanding. It compelled an answer, but one wouldn’t come out of my mouth.

Dust settled on every surface. The walls were dry-rotted. A blanket of clouded sunlight coated the hallway we stood in. Nothing appeared on her face but a single large eye through a mass of black hair and shadow. Losing eye contact was not an option. Still, words came from her.

“You shouldn’t come here without an appointment. You should know that you can’t leave.” She blinked at me. “What, do you think you can stay here for free? We always get new patients, and those patients need help. You’re going to have to work for your stay, too.”

What choice did I have? I can’t remember how I got here. I remember... falling. Flashing lights and explosions. Am I blocking out what happened to me? My body seems fine; nothing other than the usual pain in my knee or the stiffness in my neck and shoulders. The fall was definitely enough to break something, yet here I stood.

Her words seeped out. “Well, come on then. I’ll show you around. Maybe your words will come to you.”

A chorus of footsteps echoed down the hallway as we moved. Four feet, one, two, three... Three sets of footsteps? The paint peeling off the walls was distracting me. I collided with a stray wheelchair. One corner after another, we navigated the hallway toward some unknown endpoint. T-t-t-, t-t-t-t-tap.

Clearly, this used to be a hospital. Clearly, most of these rooms are pointless. I can’t imagine what use they, or I guess “we,” now that I think about it, would have for this large a facility.

Voices grew closer, reached a peak, and then passed by one of the rooms. I ripped open my mouth as my stomach dropped to see... the man’s, the patient’s legs were ribbons. His flesh bled and melted into strands from some injury I hadn’t seen, wrapped and splayed around the protruding bones like a maypole. And all he did was stare at me, knowing. He didn’t look pained. The look on his face was hardened, and his eyes showed in the darkness. I knew he was alive. And then the room passed.

The scene begged the question, and with my newfound mouth still



stretched, feeling its way for words again, I asked, “What the hell is going on here?” I knew the man heard me, and I had no shame in it. My jaw felt horrendously sore, like I’d been chewing raw grain all day. I finally found my voice, and the world needed to know right then and there.

The words fell like honey between my ears. “You can tell a hospital when you see one, right?”

“Sure, but why, how is that man still conscious? He isn’t even bandaged. He’s going to get infected. He should be dead!” The utter lack of medical supplies came to mind. “You must be keeping him alive somehow.”

She lit up as our odd-numbered footfalls continued. I got the sensation of her ears perking up as if she had ears. “So maybe I should explain better. This is a hospital; it was a hospital, and always will be a hospital. You might think hospitals only heal people in the present tense, but we heal people in the past tense.”

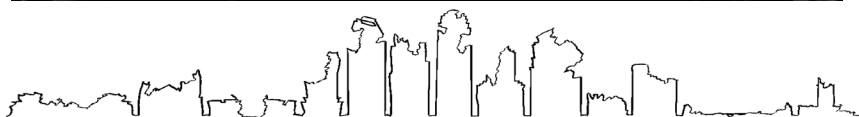
“That doesn’t help, actually.”

“We heal them from what they will be. Not what they were. You might think it’s backward, but for us, it’s just the state of things. Some poor patient comes in with his legs blown off, and we put them back. It’s a slow process.”

“But that doesn’t explain anything. How is that not the same as normal recovery? How do you just put his-”

A liquid formed in my mouth. Warm. I tried to ignore it.

The nurse, attendant, whoever or whatever she is spun around. She exclaimed, “Oh! You’re bleeding. I guess you do have an appointment.”



Last Days of Faith

by Suzy Clark

The Book of the Servants

One

“Hey, Sadie. Wake up.” Sadie groaned and pulled the covers closer, still exhausted from the previous day’s service work.

“Oh well, I guess you don’t get to hear Dad’s special announcement for today,” Mr. Rutherford said in a sing-song tone as he made his way to the kitchen.

Sadie rolled out of bed and made her way to the kitchen. Thankfully, the fresh smell of pancakes was able to wake her up.

“What’s your big announcement, dad?” Sadie inquired, still half asleep.

“I just got accepted as a Shepherd of the Faith!”

That woke Sadie up the rest of the way. “Wow, Dad! You sure have been blessed!”

“Yeah, shame that Jones was taken by the police, but I’m sure it’s part of God’s plan,” Sadie’s mom responded.

“No dwelling on the past, hun. We gotta head to the Congregation Hall soon, though. Daddy’s gotta set up for worship today!”

The family hopped into the car and made their way down to the Congregation Hall. Sadie’s dad stepped up to the podium and pulled up the latest message from the Crown Shepherd, though his face seemed oddly serious to Sadie.

People poured into the hall, congratulating Jesus for Mr. Rutherford’s promotion. Once the crowd had settled, Sadie’s dad played the video.

Two

“Greetings, Servants!” The Crown Shepherd announced before his emotion shifted. “I am afraid to inform you that we are now in the era of the Great Judgement.”

Some people gasped while others spoke in hushed tones. “Several of our Shepherds and even some Servants have been taken by outsider governments! But fear not! This means that Armageddon will soon be upon us, and we will be sent to Second Eden, and all false religions will perish!”

Some were cheering, but others, like Sadie, remained in fear of the Armageddon that they had been taught about their whole life.

Three

The next day, Sadie stepped off the school bus, holding her head so



she would not be spotted. She sauntered toward her desk, tuning out the chatter from the rest of the class until...

"Hey, Sadie!" She turned around in a startled manner to her classmate, Lucy Watson.

"Do you want to come to my sleepover for my birthday tomorrow?" Lucy asked.

Sadie immediately turned around without saying anything, and the tardy bell rang before either girl could say anything more.

Four

A few weeks later, the crowds gathered for evening worship when there was a knock at the door. It was the police.

"We're here for an investigation regarding claims of abuse," one officer claimed.

"You'll never take us down!" one man shouted.

The crowds went into an uproar. A fight broke out. Eventually, someone ran into one of the ceremonial candles, and the carpet caught ablaze. Soon, a good portion of the hall had caught fire. It was not long before the Hall was swallowed in the flames.

The police stood in silence at the inferno before one of them stated, "I guess we have to let you go for now due to a lack of evidence."

Five

The next week, after Sadie was picked up from school, her father told her that they got a new Congregation Hall after the incident. The two arrived at a gray building that looked like it could touch the clouds. As they stepped inside, Sadie could not help but notice the overwhelming darkness. It was all dark as they passed from room to room until they reached the meeting room.

"Today, we're going to do something a little different. Your shepherd will pause this video and pass milk to every servant. The video will resume once everyone has consumed their beverage." Mr. Rutherford paused the video, grabbed a tray of shot glasses, and passed it around until everyone had a glass and drank.

"The milk you drank... was poisoned..."

Everyone flew into a wild panic. Eventually, the chaos died down, and the crowd noticed the video was paused.

"Has anyone here perished?"

The crowd looked around and hesitantly shook their heads.

"This proves that God still has faith in us! We shall persevere through this judgment!"

"Everyone shall remain in the Congregation Hall until further notice. Your children should continue school until the next available break."



As the crowds cleared out, Sadie and all the other children were guided up the steps to a room labeled “Children’s Ward.” The room was mostly empty aside from the small mattresses on the floor. Sadie hesitantly approached the mattress with her name on it and lay awake for several minutes before falling asleep.

Six

The next morning, Sadie approached her desk in a more timid manner, noticing that people had bags and trinkets on their desks, including a small toy shark on Lucy’s. “Good morning everyone! As you know, today is the annual holiday party before break!” The teacher announced.

Sadie approached the teacher’s desk without saying a word.

“I understand you can’t attend, but maybe you can join the other students in the fun this year?”

“I can’t. Jesus and my family would get mad at me if I did.”

The teacher sighed. “Alright, go grab your stuff, and I’ll take you to the office.”

Seven

After school and evening worship, Sadie emptied out her backpack only to discover a plastic shark in her bag.

When did I pack this? she thought. She gasped! I gotta return this before my dad finds out I have something from an outsider!

She rushes toward the door before stopping.

What if Armageddon happens while I’m gone? She pauses for a moment. I’m sure Jesus will understand. She opens the door and steps out into the night. The howling winds nipped at her as she trudged through the knee-high snow. Once she arrived at Lucy’s house, she knocked on the door.

Lucy’s mother opened the door and was shocked to see someone out in this bitter cold.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-ye-essss m-m-maaam-m-m. I j-ju-just w-wa-wanted to g-g-ive this b-b-b-acck-k. I think y-your d-daughter l-l-osssttt t-th-thissss,” Sadie said as she held out the toy shark.

“Um... I think that was for you.” Lucy’s mother replied.

Lucy’s mom stared into the abyss behind Sadie. “You sure you don’t want to come inside? It sure is cold out there.”

Sadie shook her head.

“How about just for tonight? We can get you back in the morning.”

Sadie nodded and was guided into the house. Lucy looked at her mother and Sadie and beamed with joy. “Are you here for a sleepover?”



"I guess so," Sadie responded.

Eight

Lucy was already up and watching TV.

All of the sudden, "Breaking News" flashing on the screen.

"There appears to have been an outbreak of mass suicides around the globe. The deaths are believed to be connected to an organization known as The Servants of the Faith..." The reporter's voice faded to the background, along with every other sound in the room.

Sadie couldn't cry. She couldn't scream. It felt as if the world had stopped yet was moving a million miles per hour.

~

The Book of Sadie Rutherford

A car pulls to a stop outside the cemetery. Sadie steps out of the car and places a bouquet at the grave of her parents. As she stands back up, a toy shark falls out of her pocket.

"I'm surprised you still have that thing!" Lucy remarked.

"Of course I would!" Sadie responded with a grin. "It saved my life after all."



The New Normal

by Aman Holmes

I remember the smell of sunflowers permeating the air. My favorite. Mom would mention how sunflowers represented longevity, but I didn't care. I was only 12 at the time, and I just thought they smelled nice.

"Eve, come on! We gotta finish *The Last of Us*! I'm gonna start it without you!"

"You better not!" I yell. I ran across the flower-filled front yard, sunflowers waving as if saying goodbye as I run up the ragged steps into my home. My home. I wonder what has become of it. As I entered my gray lit home, I saw my father standing near the door.

"Slow down, baby girl, or else you'll trip and fall. You know you can be clumsy and —"

"Marvin! Why would you say that to her? She is fine on her own two feet!" my mom retorted. Her sweet sound reminded me of flowers; even when she was upset or frazzled, somehow, she still managed to make honey through her speech. She was a Southern belle, born and bred, but then she met my dad, who scooped her up in college (of her own volition, of course) and brought her to the city for several years before they decided to move back to the countryside. I barely remember the city; I was born there and was five when we came back, which makes Alexis about three. I know I don't miss it, and neither does Mom.

The countryside is quiet yet bursting, small yet huge. I remember listening to the birds as I ran through the field. The sun would hug me in warmth as I would sit and read by the tree, waiting for my sister to return from school. I loved everything about it. You couldn't get a love like that in the city, or at least we couldn't understand the city the way my dad did.

"Dad, what do you like so much about the city? The country is more fun, and there aren't so many weird smells and smoke and noises and stuff." I asked. I knew I was cutting into the time to catch the show with Lexi, but I was curious.

"Yeah, the city is weird! I still love you, though; you're 'tight' like the city people say." Alexis proclaimed.

"Lexi, stop! The city isn't 'weird.' I mean, I wouldn't say it ain't, but it's got a sort of charm, plus it pushed out this wonderful man right here." Mom then plants a kiss on Dad's cheek.

"Awesome, three against one, nice," Dad chuckles. "But the city carries its own beauty. The skyscrapers are like monuments that tell a story, except they're filled with people. A bunch of lives running around, and there are millions of dreams, wants, and desires. There is something human in it. Something familiar and safe where you



don't also feel like the only one, but that's just my own interpretation," Dad's eyes sparkled. "Funny enough, though, I have learned to love the country as well. Either way, it doesn't matter where we're at, as long as we're together."

Whenever he would explain something, or speak even, you would always pay attention. It isn't the voice of a drill sergeant; it's more soothing, reassuring, and relaxing. I guess you could say it is similar to Mom's, but with its own identity. Then he started talking about —

"Hey, bumpkin! Enough talking; your turn to patrol," said the rugged soldier.

He handed me a pistol and a holster rudely and urgently, but I knew there wasn't anything to be urgent about. The monsters don't usually roam around the prison since we're so far from the city, where there were people still held up, surviving in their own way, desperately holding on to what remains. I grabbed the gun and strapped it in my holster.

"Sorry Rayne, we can finish up later, hopefully?" I asked. She gives me a nod and a smile, and I move towards the prison entrance.

The people here call me bumpkin because of my mom and where we are from. When the virus started, we had to head across the state to the prison in order to find a spot to protect our family. A lot of the town had to go there; it was the closest and safest place. Of course, some people couldn't leave their homes, too many memories or too much pride.

Dad, as usual, toughed it out for us while we went through the ordeal of leaving. Mom worried to death, and Alexis just cried the whole time. I was scared, but I felt like I had to be strong for Alexis, since I was the older sister and all. It took half a day, but we made it. We were surprisingly lucky since this was before the monsters were as far out in the world as they are now. The virus changed the world, and no one really has answers as to why or how. That was six years ago.

Since I'm eighteen now, they said I have to contribute to patrols. I learned how to use a gun before that; Alexis did too. Mom hates guns, but Dad convinced her that it was necessary. My mom has shined her honey-dipped words and optimism to everyone at the base for the past six years; her heavy accent made most love her. My dad would always have to explain to people how a city boy got with a country woman like her, and though that annoyed him, he knew it was just people's innate curiosity.

The soldiers here though, are pretty no-nonsense, maybe because they have to take care of people, or because they're stressed or miss people, but whatever the case, they can be a lot sometimes. There are lots of names they need to learn, so they usually use nicknames. That's how my sister and I got "bumpkin." They won't call my parents that, though. I guess it's a respect for parental authority. I think it's bullshit, but I'm not one to cause problems without having solutions already figured out.



The officer and I head to the gate, and to my surprise, Alexis is standing there looking worried. She can't put herself up for patrols yet unless absolutely necessary. She somehow went from a dress-loving 10-year-old to a grunge 16-year-old, yet somehow still retained her sweetness and teasing. She also became more of a worry wart like mom.

"So, you're going out there again."

Whenever she gets nervous, she twirls her hair — in this case, the fish braid I did yesterday.

"Yeah, gotta do my part. It's not just us here, you know."

"That's true. Though I wish it were someone else. I guess that's selfish, huh?" She smiles and then turns to grab something. "Here, take these, then," Alexis hands me some pistol ammo and my favorite snack, smoked almonds. I put them in the backpack I picked up at the gate and hugged my sister as if I'd never hug her again, though there's no way I'd ever not come back.

"See you in a bit, alright Lexi?" She hugs me tighter.

"Yeah, I know."

"Alright, kid, we gotta go." The soldier opened the gate and then waited. I let go of my sister and gave a nod of assurance. Then, I made my way toward the gate.

Just another day in the new normal.



The Harglash

by Evan Peterman

A rupture shows, the soul dwindles. A rapture awaits for the ones to sunder. Soon is the time of arrival, for they roam far where the eyes of all can't see. Those who don't believe will never see it coming. Those who do will eventually succumb, for they are eternal. A story as old as time passed down to many in warnings of the wolf; that is what they embody. Never mouth the words of the abyss, or you shall become the next target. The boy who once cried wolf now becomes the boy's shadow with a substance of watered-down remains — slime of the taken.

*"Those who neglect the truth will linger
Those who linger will be found
Those who will never make it out
Those who never will fall endlessly*

"Do not let them FIND you

*"Stand proud, never embrace the darkness
Repress the shards of hatred
And never let the ████████ in."*

Hollow as the past of many, a time that shall never be forgotten. A wordless world without wit washed over with waves of worry. Weary souls. Worthlessness wants. They watch and take hold of the cracks. The broken parts that you left behind, only to be pieced back together by a horrid memory to crawl back. That was them. They crawl into your ear and drizzle their madness. Just as rain would soothe your body, they leave you in a panic. A sense of hopelessness and a state of haze, with a television static ringing throughout every center of your brain, wringing out your central consciousness. They have found you, answered your calls of depression, and now, you are found. Oozing blunders that toll with a looming dread, the time of arrival beckons.

A threat has made itself present. It bubbles, peeling off the ground with a deceptively violent nature. Your once-forgotten shade becomes shades of madness with an unknown abyss behind it, a gravity that could pull anyone into itself. Almost as if standing upon the edge of an endlessly pointless existence. A bottomless pit. Bells burrow through the haze but lock you in place, with Big Ben singing a song familiar by none but feared by all. As soon as the twelfth ring chimes, an odd darkness encapsulates the sides of your eyes. A continuous spiral until they are in control. A control so strong it's as if staring at the darkness of the sky with the moon shining only in the worst best spots, not you. Staring into the void, they watch. They entice. You fall.

Under pure luck, your mind fights through the drizzling reverbs, allowing you to notice your lack of control over your unrelenting emotions. Depression sets in and lets you plummet into the sinkhole. Self-awareness is what they don't want, stay hopeless. Remain within the pouring rain. You try and struggle from whence these emotions



came from, but alas, you are a blinded moth within their web. Stuck within your whirlpool of emotions, making you sink farther and farther down. As the ooze churns with ravenous bubbles, death moves on high, shimmering towards the prey. You can feel your life slowly draining as your hourglass has been sped up to the point of bursting, stuck in the quickening sands. Deformed hands of the forgotten twists its constant twirls with agonizingly gruesome shifts.

With this, the arms reach out,
and slowly but surely, they crawl.
They reach with their hands and
claw up from the abyss.

The liquid splashes upon the leg of the lost soul
only to reform and take further upon the body.

Embrace the shadows; knees buckle upon the touch of Alzilal.

A tomb takes all.

A tomb most welcome to all.

Embrace each other before falling back into the abyss.

Embrace the fall.

Embrace the pit.

Soon, they disappear with nothing but an outline of dried blood drawn
towards the lamp, the bench, the alleyway, and a final shape drawn
out: A human body.



A Priori Apocali

by Madison Bradburn

I will find you as Orion finds the floodplains
where silt and sand are pushed into castles of moments,
where I find myself, an atheist in the astral,
speaking in low tones to creatures beyond waking grasp.

Once, the archangel took the visage of the King of Wands.
Along his left arm, he bore a mark, a severance of skin
that lay against his wrist, a failed stigmata.

He led me to Mt. Moriah.
I thought of you, the glimpses of your image
I have caught in others.
Laying those dreams upon the wood,
no ram came in sacrifice.
Flames rose up to consume the days and nights
I let others pretend your shape.

Smoke against the sky, embers a murmuration:
“I feel like a man about to lose you,”
“I don’t want you to waste any time.”
Lost and wasting, I pray finding you will kill me
and lead me, lifeline in lifeline,
into someone.

If the chrysalis is an apocalypse
then I creep, proleg over true leg to you.
I lay upon the valley floor in the dry season.
I beg Orion to drive his arrow into Lepus,
consuming its flesh.
tossing the scraps to Procyon.

When I find you,
the reversed deck will right itself
and each end will show its soft underbelly, beginning.

When I find you,
the sacrifice will become an effigy
and the paradox of this resolution will bend inward, looping.

When I find you,
the red eye of Betelgeuse will burn out
and I will know that even you can crumble, dying.

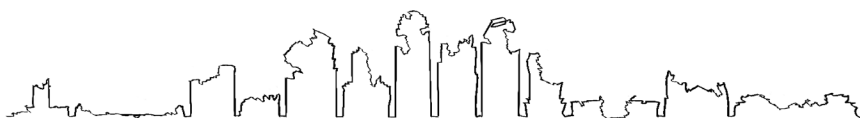


When you find me,
you will make my flesh an altar,
laying out grains, fruits, and wines.
Invoke me in the hours before dawn,
in the light of the waxing gibbous.
Scrawl your sigils in hearth keeper's coal.

Towards the stream, Lepus' head bends for drink,
eyes up, aware of the arrow.
Yet, looking down it finds Alnitak, Alnila, and Mintaka 'round its
neck,
the belt a collar, death and its hands.
The hunter is buried at home,
evoking becoming, a rot worth experiencing,
a metamorphosis, a chrysalis of reconfiguration.

When the Wheel turns and Litha rejoices
the caterpillar will recognize the butterfly yet,
and salmon will seek their spawn waters, a lay in the shallows.

I will find you again as Lepus takes its rest by the old rivers
where rock beds are carved into paths of eons,
where you found me, a believer in the world,
listening to the shouts of people we knew only in dreams.



fieldhouse specimen

by Maya Osaka

We find a heron perched
in the overflow of last night's storm
in the pocket between the fieldhouse
and the parking lot. I know

I am netted in its eyeline.
Standing there, fixated on its wet body,
I am not watching it the way it
watches me.

In the museum by my grandparents'
house, there is an exhibit on American
wetlands. In the far corner, a diorama:

river fish darting in a darkened tank,
silvery eyes shadowed by reeds.
Above them, body half-covered
by plastic cattails, a lone taxidermied
heron steps in an acrylic puddle,
wired foot too embalmed
to share water.

I have never seen this bird alive.

Out again, behind the fieldhouse
I am there a moment too long.
I watch the neck fold,
lines of an oxbow lake I once
saw from a plane over the Mississippi,
see the flash of a beating wing.

In the sky, body exposed
circling, circling, circling —



Afterword

“It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” — R.E.M.

During my 57 years, I’ve learned to trust that most things work out. And yet, after reading this anthology — centered on such issues as climate change, genocide, and the perils of unbridled hate in cyberspace — I’m reminded of all that could go wrong. Add in the possibility of a more vicious contagion, the potential for AI to go rogue, and the rise of the unintended sentence fragment, and it’s safe for any reasonable person to feel unsafe. But I do not.

Instead, I’m reassured by these writers’ resilience. Through giving voice to the Great Uncertainty in which we live, the contributors refuse to back down. They are vigilant. Unfairly derided by Boomers as “kids” lost to their screens, Gen Z is, in fact, at work facing and solving the problems previous generations created. That inspires me to remember that we can take steps to improve our lot. The authors name their fears and, by doing so, begin the process of living in these surreal times.

What can we learn from their work? Much. At the risk of sounding pedantic — something professors are paid to do — here are three lessons I’m reminded of on the heels of reading this volume.

First, live in the present. When the future (or past) preoccupies us, we miss the revelatory power of now and forget that we are alive. Consider a practical way to remember. Rather than end a hot shower with warmth, turn the water cold for the final 30 seconds. The result: You are alive. What can you do that pulls you back to the present and reminds you to live here and now?

Second, take courageous actions, however small they may seem. We can live in fear of another Trump (or Biden) presidency, or we can speak up about our beliefs and vote our conscience. We can let an inappropriate comment go, or we can call attention to it. Small actions, some even as minute as the butterfly’s wing flap, have consequences.

Next, cultivate friendships. The post-pandemic research is dire. We’re lonelier than ever despite what even more research proves: Maintaining relationships improves physical, mental, and community health. Reach out to old friends and invite new ones for coffee or a walk.

Finally, one last lesson for the old folks reading this: Interact with Gen Z. Their openness about their fears and courage in facing them is contagious. Through my work as a teacher and as the faculty advisor to the Axe & Quill, I remember the importance of movement instead of resignation. In these pre-apocalyptic times, resignation is easier. But stasis prevents us from living in the moment, taking brave steps toward change, and warding off loneliness. Remember these lessons, and perhaps the other shoe will not drop.

Malcolm Campbell
The Axe & Quill Writing Society faculty advisor



About the Executive Board

AJ Siegel is one of the co-founders and co-presidents of the Axe & Quill. They are graduating with a double major in WRDS and psychology and a minor in biology. Outside of leading the Axe & Quill, AJ works at the Niner Times and the Writing Resources Center, along with competing on Charlotte's speech team. AJ is interested in studying radicalization and extremist rehabilitation, with an emphasis on digital rhetorics. Next year, they will begin their master's in rhetoric and scientific & technical communication at the University of Minnesota with hopes of eventually becoming a professor.

Clare Grealey is one of the co-presidents of the Axe & Quill. She is a second-year student majoring in anthropology and minoring in WRDS. Outside of leading the Axe & Quill, Clare works as an assistant copy editor for the Niner Times and as an intern at the Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology Lab. She enjoys writing research papers and is interested in studying how linguistics shapes and perpetuates violence.

Jackson Martin is one of the co-founders of the Axe & Quill. He graduated from UNC Charlotte in 2023 with a major in WRDS and a minor in English. While at Charlotte, he was an assistant copy editor and assistant news editor at the Niner Times and a tutor at the Writing Resources Center. In the 2023-2024 academic year, he has taught ninth and tenth-grade English and Language Arts. Next year, he will begin pursuing his master's in rhetoric and composition at NC State University with hopes of eventually becoming a professor.

Monique Delagey is the secretary of the Axe & Quill. She is a third-year student double majoring in communications and English major and minoring in WRDS. She focuses on fiction writing and plans to pursue a career in the publishing industry. Over the spring 2024 semester, she studied at the University of Edinburgh.

Olivia Pardo is the treasurer of the Axe & Quill. She is a graduating third-year WRDS major with a minor in English. She is a creative writer with an emphasis on speculative fiction and sci-fi. She plans to look for writing jobs around Charlotte, hoping to eventually become an author.

Malcolm Campbell is the faculty advisor to the Axe & Quill. During the Pleistocene Era, he graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill with a degree in English. Before beginning teaching 17 years ago, he worked as an ad copywriter, journalist, publisher, and author of three books. During a low point in his career, he wrote an infomercial, which aired for more than three years... to his dismay.



About the Authors

Elise Bagley is a third-year student majoring in elementary education, along with minoring in reading education and children's literature and childhood studies. She is the secretary for Charlotte's speech team and advocates through speeches about various topics in education. She plans on graduating with a master's degree in reading education and becoming a reading interventionist.

Elizabeth Barker is a third-year student double majoring in political science and creative writing. In her free time, you will find her bent over a book or a laptop, furiously writing and reading as if her life depends on it, which it very well may. She has dreams of becoming a writer, and she writes about all things concerning the human condition: love, grief, joy, and life.

Madison Bradburn is graduating with a master's in English, concentrating in composition and rhetoric. She is the president of the Literature Club and an assistant copy editor at the Niner Times. Madison enjoys researching fandom spaces and exploring creative writing. Next year, Madison will begin pursuing an English Ph.D. with the ultimate goal of being a professor.

Lily Cagle is a third-year music major with a minor in English. She enjoys writing academic-based works but is trying to explore creative writing. She plans on pursuing a master's degree in secondary education or musicology.

Valentin Cannon is a senior WRDS major, but they can also be found tutoring in the Writing Resources Center and organizing events for the Niner Esports community. Their preferred forms of self-expression are metaphor and imagery-heavy creative writing, upcycled woodwork, gardening, and gigantic music playlists. Their career aspirations lie in educational reform, mentorship, and community resources.

Suzy Clark is a fifth-year game design and data science double major with a minor in film studies. She enjoys writing fiction, primarily fantasy and horror. She plans on doing another year of school before going into a career in data analytics or game development.

Dakota Currier is a first-year student majoring in religious studies and minoring in Arabic. She is the assistant opinion editor for Niner Times and loves writing. She also helps run the Religious Studies Student Organization as secretary, along with being a member of a book club at a local used book store.

Brandon Farrington is a graduating WRDS student. He is a former Air Force linguist and is still somewhat fluent in Pashto. His final rank in the United States Air Force was Staff Sergeant (E5). Brandon's focus in writing mainly concerns critical theory and analyzing patterns in discourse communities. With classmates, he has produced one PSA on traffic safety, a mini-documentary/interview with a UNC Charlotte



international student, and research on the rhetorical circumstances of Reddit discourse. His hobbies include making and listening to music, playing games, and watching movies and video essays.

Aman Holmes is a fourth-year student pursuing an English major and a WRDS minor. He frequents his time writing creatively with things like short stories or poetry and when not doing that, he likes to read, discover new restaurants, screenwrite, and binge-watch TV shows. He is currently learning how to create good psychological horror stories and teaching himself things like symbolism and how to create memorable suspense. He can usually be found sometime in the Student Union or the SOVI lounge on his off time.

Daniel “Dekay” Kelly is a history and philosophy major who focuses on absurdist writing. They are an artist and writer who looks forward to a future that follows the most rational conclusion.

Brendan Mullen is a second-year student majoring in English with a pedagogy concentration, along with minoring in secondary education. Brendan is an assistant copy editor at the Niner Times and a member of the English Honors College. After graduating, he plans to pursue a career as a high school or college-level educator.

Benjamin Nguyen is a third-year computer science major with a human-centered design concentration. He enjoys reading young adult fiction and watching anime, and he is interested in creating comics and short stories based on fantasy and slice-of-life. Other hobbies he enjoys are illustration, baking, and gaming. More importantly, he is also a contestant in Mister Vietnam of the Carolinas 2024.

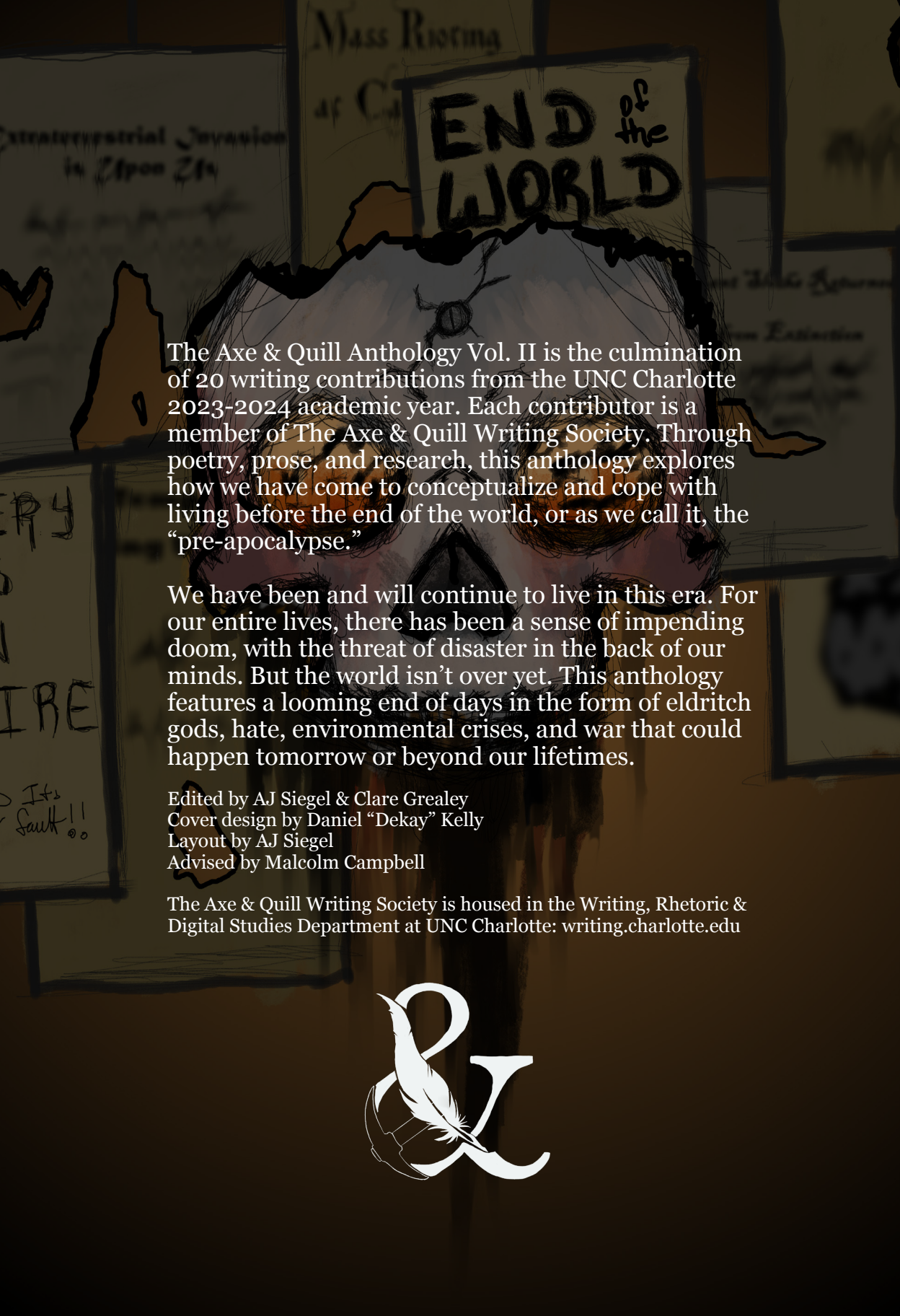
Maya Osaka is a third-year student majoring in philosophy and English with a creative writing concentration. She is also pursuing a minor in Japanese. She works as a tutor at the Writing Resources Center and is pursuing research regarding neurodivergent writers and how writing centers can better accommodate their needs. Outside of this work, Maya enjoys writing poetry and playing rugby.

Evan Peterman is a first-year student hoping to be a finance or accounting major while juggling more than four hobbies at once, which, in the end, amounts to game time. He may procrastinate, but when given a push, he will be able to achieve the goal deadline without fail. He loves gaming, drawing, singing, listening to music, and, of course, writing, especially if the writing is fiction or fantasy-based.

Lauren Simendinger is a first-year communications major. She enjoys reading and writing about hard topics and feels discussing a “pre-apocalypse” is more important than ever. She hopes to use her writing skills to make the world a better place.

Will Washburn is a first-year graduate student pursuing a Master’s in English with a creative writing concentration. He writes poetry, tutors other writers at the Writing Resources Center, and plays in an emo band called Big Backyard.





The Axe & Quill Anthology Vol. II is the culmination of 20 writing contributions from the UNC Charlotte 2023-2024 academic year. Each contributor is a member of The Axe & Quill Writing Society. Through poetry, prose, and research, this anthology explores how we have come to conceptualize and cope with living before the end of the world, or as we call it, the “pre-apocalypse.”

We have been and will continue to live in this era. For our entire lives, there has been a sense of impending doom, with the threat of disaster in the back of our minds. But the world isn't over yet. This anthology features a looming end of days in the form of eldritch gods, hate, environmental crises, and war that could happen tomorrow or beyond our lifetimes.

Edited by AJ Siegel & Clare Grealey
Cover design by Daniel “Dekay” Kelly
Layout by AJ Siegel
Advised by Malcolm Campbell

The Axe & Quill Writing Society is housed in the Writing, Rhetoric & Digital Studies Department at UNC Charlotte: writing.charlotte.edu

