



## Working-Class Surrealism

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## Introduction

### Writing Process

I write about ordinary people revealed through extraordinary psychological rupture. I'm drawn to moments when a familiar world splits open and exposes an internal psychological landscape. I use environments as diagnostic tools—spaces where a character's outer world blends with their inner mind, allowing setting to become a way of navigating emotion. Throughout this course, I realized that I consistently explore emotional hunger through relationships that cannot fully exist, relationships that are imagined, distorted, or disrupted.

Lately, I've been drawn to writing horror with tenderness. My work includes gore, hallucinations, and psychological horror, but never for shock value. I use body horror to explore longing, identity, and vulnerability. By focusing on bodily distortion and sensory uncertainty, I began to recognize my recurring motifs and to ask myself: what does it mean to be embodied? How does the world warp when the body becomes unreliable? What happens when the body and mind no longer align?

In the past few days, I realized that what I write can be described as working-class surrealism—surrealism from below, from the margins, centered on people deemed “outside” of society. This framework helped me better understand not only my subject matter but also my perspective as a writer.

I write to navigate my own identity and presence in the world, and to understand what it means to be human in contemporary society. I write to feel something beyond the daily grind of adult obligations, to loosen the constraints I've placed on myself at this stage of my life. Writing allows me to explore the range of human feeling and action, as well as the psychological and physical impact of being alive in a body. I want my work to linger with readers, which is why I often write unresolved, reflective, or haunting endings, or at least strive to.

I also write because I was discouraged early on from pursuing creative paths after high school, told that writing would be a waste of time. Writing now feels like a way of reclaiming that lost time.

My process usually begins with an idea, issue, or fact I've encountered over days, months, or even years. I ask myself, "What if this happened?"—to a particular person or group of people. I sit with that question and imagine the extraordinary, whether good or terrible, and then shape those thoughts into a story I hope resonates, even if only with a few readers. Thinking outside the box energizes me, and I'm drawn to placing characters in uncanny situations because, deep down, I believe that is how the world truly operates—even if most people fail to recognize it.

## Growth

I didn't fully realize what themes, motifs, or types of people I'm drawn to writing about until taking this class. With the help of my classmates, in-class exercises, and the readings throughout the semester, I recognized a clear gravitation toward dissociation, loneliness, altered perception, and the desynchronization of mind and body. In other words, I found myself writing literary surrealism with emotional stakes.

Initially, I thought my fiction would align more closely with adventure, science fiction, or subtle slice-of-life narratives, largely because those were the genres I read most often and felt comfortable with. Over time, however, I realized that genre itself matters less to me than whether the core emotional and psychological truths of the story remain intact. As long as that central messaging rings true, my work can exist across a wide spectrum of literary genres.

A final reflection on my classmates: many of them wrote from a place of enthusiasm for a specific genre and a desire to explore its conventions. Seeing that curiosity in action motivated me not only to better understand what I naturally write toward, but also to give myself permission to experiment with genres I hadn't previously considered. That shared environment of exploration helped me become more intentional and confident in my own creative direction.

## Peer's Influence

Tori Schott's *Return to Sender* inspired me through the use of psychological themes, which put a name or feeling to what energized me about the story. I enjoyed how the piece went in other directions where in previous or future readings I didn't necessarily see, especially through the lens of Tori's writing. The story intrigued me, because the

author used subtle psychology as subtle, but real life occurrence—whereas I write to the extreme, but Schott’s writing proved that themes that deal with psychology can be subtly done without extremes. The writing style inspired me as well, where Schott trimmed and edited her sentences where the action remained short, and the longer sentences examined thought. I would like to take that particular tool with me for my future work.

Keegan Jensen’s *Embers of Life* inspired me to see how writing can be turned into metaphor and meaning without extremes as well. By examining the heroic nature of the character and the symbolism of the house fire, echoes depth and meaning behind the simple gesture of a man running into a house fire. It reverberated poetry between the lines and I would like to use that for my future work.

## My Writing Toolbox

### Helped Me Grow

The concept of worldbuilding and setting plays a crucial role in shaping narrative perspective, particularly when a story positions itself against the expectations of a traditional viewpoint. In *The Great Silence* by Ted Chiang, the reader experiences the world through the internal dialogue of a parrot, a perspective that is both unexpected and intimate. By granting narrative authority to a nonhuman consciousness, Chiang challenges anthropocentric storytelling and invites the reader to consider how intelligence, grief, and communication exist beyond human awareness. This shift in perspective expands the emotional and ethical scope of the story, demonstrating how worldbuilding is not limited to physical settings but also includes whose voice is allowed to speak and be heard.

Tim O’Brien’s short story *Stockings* influenced my piece *Janitor’s Cart* through its use of an inanimate object as a lens for character development. Rather than relying on direct exposition, O’Brien allows the object to accumulate meaning through association, memory, and emotional weight. I found this approach powerful because it invites the reader to infer character traits indirectly, creating intimacy without overt explanation. In *Janitor’s Cart*, I aimed to similarly let the object serve as a silent

witness, revealing character through interaction, neglect, or care. This method emphasizes how physical objects within a setting can function as narrative devices, carrying personal and symbolic significance.

*Kiley Reid's Come and Get It* helped me better understand the importance of dialogue in character differentiation and realism. While dialogue is an area I continue to practice and refine, Reid's work demonstrates how subtle details, such as pacing, tone, and the physical positioning of characters during conversations—can deepen characterization. The dialogue in the story is often grounded by action or environment, allowing gestures, movements, and spatial relationships to inform meaning alongside spoken words. This integration of dialogue with action and setting reinforced for me that effective dialogue does not exist in isolation; it is shaped by what characters are doing, where they are located, and what remains unspoken.

## After Class

One of the most important tools I will take with me after this course is the use of worldbuilding and setting as a way to challenge traditional narrative perspectives. *The Great Silence* by Ted Chiang demonstrated how powerful it can be to tell a story from a viewpoint the reader would not normally encounter. By centering the parrot's internal dialogue, Chiang expands the emotional and philosophical scope of the narrative. Moving forward, I plan to continue experimenting with unconventional perspectives—whether nonhuman, peripheral, or overlooked—in order to deepen my narratives and encourage readers to engage with the world of the story in unexpected ways. Much like in many of my stories.

Another tool I will continue using is character development through inanimate objects, inspired by Tim O'Brien's *Stockings*. This story showed me how objects can carry emotional weight and reveal character indirectly. After this course, I want to rely less on direct explanation and more on implication, allowing objects within a setting to reflect memory, identity, or internal conflict. In my own piece, *Janitor's Cart*, this approach helped me explore character through presence and absence, and I plan to keep using this technique to create layered, subtle characterization in future work.

Dialogue is another craft element I will actively continue developing beyond this class, particularly after studying *Come and Get It* by Kiley Reid. Reid's work reinforced that

effective dialogue is not just about what is said, but how it is supported by action, movement, and spatial awareness. Going forward, I intend to ground dialogue in physical behavior and setting, using gestures, positioning, and silence to distinguish characters and add tension. This approach will help me create more natural, dynamic conversations that reveal character without relying on excessive exposition.

Exploring and understanding narrative arcs is what I'd like to explore outside of class as well.

## **Concepts, Tools, and Habits**

The eavesdropping exercise significantly helped my writing process because it encouraged me to observe real conversations with intention. While it allowed me to “snoop,” it also trained me to recognize the natural rhythms, interruptions, and unfinished thoughts that shape authentic dialogue. Taking dialogue from real life and translating it into fiction helped me understand how much meaning exists beneath what is actually said. Moving forward, I plan to continue using this practice as a way to ground my dialogue in realism, borrowing the nuances of everyday speech and adapting them to fit my characters, scenes, and emotional stakes.

Developing a structured revision process has also been one of the most valuable tools from this course. My first draft functions as a space to get ideas onto the page without judgment. The second draft allows me to focus on clarity, tightening language, refining structure, and ensuring the scene is understandable. By the third draft, I concentrate on emotional resonance, asking whether the scene is doing the emotional work it needs to do. Beyond these drafts, I've learned the importance of allowing myself to experiment through radical revisions, re-envisioning scenes, shifting perspectives, or altering structure entirely. This layered approach to drafting is something I intend to carry into all future writing projects.

Understanding the importance of audience awareness, particularly through peer workshops, has also influenced how I approach my work. Knowing the genre before I write within it and having my classmates understand that genre, helps shape expectations and feedback. This awareness encourages me to make more intentional craft choices and ensures that my writing is communicating what I intend. After the

course, I plan to continue seeking feedback from readers who understand the genre I am working in, using their responses to strengthen my storytelling.

Finally, one of the most lasting takeaways from this course is the relationship between setting and character. I've learned that setting is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shapes behavior, emotion, and conflict. When setting and character work together, they create a more immersive and impactful story. Moving forward, I will be more intentional about how characters interact with their environments, allowing place to reflect internal states and drive narrative tension rather than simply describe where the story takes place.



## My Work

### Piece One

#### Analysis

9.12.2025

With this piece I wanted to demonstrate the experiences of a janitor's psychological rupture, as he experiences the factory as a shifting hallucinated maze full of 2D people, vanishing identities, and existential loops—through a coma induced accident. The piece explores setting by the 3M plant becoming an existential labyrinth, expressing the Janitor's burnout, dissociation, and erasure. The piece explores emotional hunger, but having the Janitor and the Cart be the only relationship that feels "real", yet is inanimate. By addressing how the Janitor loses agency in his own body, being in a coma, but also by taking sleeping pills to manipulate the body's natural waking hours.

### The Janitor's Cart

Two thirty in the morning, stationed on my wheels in the thick heat of the men's restroom again, alongside my good friend Janitor. His palms rest heavy on my handle, with slick, slippery latex gloves, and I feel the weight of him leaning there, as if I'm holding up more than just buckets and rags. The 3M manufacturing plant hums everywhere beyond the tiled walls, but here it's only us, the silence, the bleach, and the sound of him breathing like the machines might swallow him if he stops.

For seven years, I've noticed the little things about him and accumulated his mutterings and soft, spoken conversations between us. Every Friday, he pulls out his flabby wallet and thumbs through his worn single-dollar bills, the recent lotto tickets, and pictures of lost loved ones. Nowadays, he leans more on his left foot because the soles of his work boots are thinning to the point of unbalanced comfort. My friend has about nine dark navy t-shirts on rotation to unify all the contracted cleaning crew amongst the chaotic floor during shifts, but Friday's shirt is stained with bleach whites and oranges. Friday's jeans were covered in dirt, cobwebs, and particles of unnamed messes from restrooms and cafeteria wastes. He lets go of me and stretches his body across to search for a new urinal mat pad to replace the organic browns and yellows from the last. When he spotted the last one, he looked down at his upside-down reflection in the murky

mop water. "I didn't recall having deep lines as before, heh, I suppose working over nights will do that", his smile twitched with bittersweet sadness reflecting his statement towards me.

A woman ducked underneath the "CLOSED FOR CLEANING" sign lodged between the door's frame, her work boots squelched and thundered towards us. From the Janitor's conversations, she oversees his progress and overall experience during shift hours. The Manager is forty-five and going young, to my friend's age of thirty-seven, or so she likes to think, but who am I to judge? They're both from similar backgrounds, yet she grew up much poorer than he ever did. She looks like what you imagine a person eating poorly and lacking access to a better life would be. The Manager shifts her eyes around the bathroom and stops before my friend to explain how the cafeteria wasn't adequately cleaned this time again, and how crumbs, dust, and liquids are still hidden beneath cracks under the tables. I can testify—the Janitor's body contours each corner to ensure spaces are cleaned to perfection. I see it Monday through Friday, ten hours a day. My friend's shoulders slump into aggrieved hills. He turns to grip my handles again, staring into the tiles as if mapping the room's lines. Harder to look in the mirror, I noticed, where the Manager's words weighed on him. Why suffer that double vision of contempt? The Manager rumbled out, if I didn't know better, resembled the rolling summer storms we've been having lately. In one of my yellow pockets, the tiny blue radio playing the Bus 103.3, the news breaks of a storm on its way towards us.

As I was listening...

The incoming storm suddenly surged the factory—doors clanging, machines groaning, men shouting down the corridors. My friend had just left my side when the noise sharpened: a shout, a grind of metal, the scuffle of boots. I waited for him to return, but instead only saw a blur of workers rushing past, faces drawn tight. No one told me why. They never do.

From the distance people ran towards the Janitor's crumpled body lay a few feet from a motorized vehicle that was rounding the corner.

In the hospital room, the doctors quietly breathe coma into the space.

The Janitor stares ahead.

It's Friday, two thirty a.m. again. This time I'm standing in the entryway out back at 3M. Most employees use it to clock in or to duck into the cafeteria for something quick to eat. The floor is

red tile, lined with fridges, and one of the restrooms I keep clean. I know each crevice and surface, but now everything is brighter—reds, whites, blues, sharp and unreal. There are shadows. Or are they people? I can't tell. If I don't clean at the right time, they'll rush in and claim the space as their territory. Do not disturb. But I still have to clean. I roll my trusted cleaning cart into the cafeteria, the space is bigger than the other two cafeterias, but manageable in minutes. I don't remember putting my latex gloves on. I don't remember leaving my apartment this morning, but it's Friday, and what a week it's been.

The only person who speaks to me at work is my Co-Worker, sitting in the tight confines of the bolted dining tables. I walk toward him, but his face is fuzzy, with only specific details sharp. Uncanny, almost inhuman. My eyes could use a doctor, overdue, but I haven't had the time or money. I slide into the gleaming wood seating, hoping for some camaraderie. His eyes shine black, flat, 2D, and the rest of him looks the same. "How are you?" he says. I choke. Nobody's asked me that in years. "I'm fine," I mutter, wishing for the latest gossip or anything. "What do you wish for?" The question hangs.

Why ask now?

Why me?

*I wish* I could go back in time, and *I wish* I could change everything from when I left high school. *I wish* I could go back in time. That's what I want to say to my Co-Worker. *I wish* I could change everything from when I left high school. *I wish* I dared to speak, to practice articulating what I feel. *I wish* I'd had patience—to believe in myself and see that I could do great things, even in a world that pushed me into poverty. *I wish* I could have married. I was afraid of talking to anyone, fearful of conversation itself. Twenty years mainly passed alone. At one time, there was a woman I thought romantically—I couldn't believe she would ever love a lowly cleaning man with just enough for lotto tickets and 2 a.m. gas station donuts. I loved walking and painting. But in my community, who painted? Instead of brushes, my hands held ratchet tools. When I couldn't advance in automotive work, my family steered me to janitorial work, where my potential was measured in mop streaks and scuffed floors.

Pools of water blinding against my tiring eyes.

Blink.

I'm standing in a hallway near the chemical department, where they test adhesives and experiment with new compounds, my favorite area to clean. The air hums faintly, sharp with the scent of solvents. The place looks staged, like a backdrop for a science fiction film, or something deeper, something I was never meant to understand. Nobody in sight but the flickering bulbs above me, myself, and my cleaning art, but I want to find someone else, maybe they can tell me what's going on. I reach for the department door, but it stretches away; the hallway curves, the ceiling tiles, and I stumble, though nothing is beneath my feet.

The cart looks along the empty hallway.

My wheels hum across the tiles. My friend is not here. I wait—but then Co-Worker grabs my handle. I have no say. He steers me into the worst places: narrow aisles, loading bays, where machines scream and motor carts cut too fast. The push is a shove, not the slow press my friend Janitor gives. My wheels snagged; he kicked me without looking. Hands rummage through my yellow pockets because I'm left ignored; a tissue, a chocolate is gone. I keep them safe, all the same. One day, he'll need them back. I hope he comes back.

As we rounded into the chemical department hallway, I felt his *presence* like a warm weight in my memory—and I remembered how he liked this place. He used to joke that it would be a challenge to paint a science-fiction scene here; he said he wouldn't mind the work and might strap a traveling paint set to me. He knew painters, he'd talk about color and brushstrokes, and though the idea was too organic for me to grasp fully, it meant something to him. So I listened. The lights above *flickered*, more than usual. The storm had damaged the town's circuits, or so I'd heard in passing. The Co-Worker's jaw tightened at every blink; the flicker annoyed him. If my friend had been here, he would have known what to make of it. I only knew that something felt off.

We turned toward the small office nearby, the one that housed the cleaning crew. Managers came and went, Co-Workers too; some stayed months, others only weeks or days. My friend called it homey but cramped, muttering often about the lack of space. It was a three-in-one: clock in and out, mandatory courses, and a breakroom. There was a corner to rest alongside the other carts, a soft pocket of quiet for me—a small luxury. I miss our conversations; Monday and Tuesday were lonely.

Blink. The Janitor's eyes.

I stand at the office door, one hand resting on the cleaning cart. The bathroom entrance to my side keeps repeating—door after door, like I've blinked incorrectly. The world tilts perpendicularity with each closing of my eyes. I think it's the three high-dose sleeping pills I take to accommodate working the third shift. I should go visit a doctor about my health. But I don't want to think about doctors; I'm unsure what's in my health care network. Not sure how to talk to a doctor about my company's cleaning concoctions or the cleaning solutions they've ordered. If I'm here, maybe I should check the records. Or perhaps I should go home for a while. I turn the office doorknob and glide in, feet moving as if walking, but my weight barely registers. The Manager is already at her desk.

For a moment, I am sure I remember a conversation about my upkeep and cleaning.

Remembering being broken down and humiliated and here is my chance, I tell myself. I can stand up for myself. My body grows, I hear my bones cracking under the stretching muscles, fat and skin to tower over her. The room brightens; the walls flare a neon sea-foam green. The smell hits me—rubbing alcohol and antiseptic, sharp and dizzying. It distracts me. I blink, and the Manager is suddenly right in front of me. She has the same flat, 2D feeling I've seen in others, and still, I know she's solid here.

“Can I go home?” I ask.

“Do you have a home to go to?” she answers. Her voice folds into other voices around her, echoing.

I want to say yes. I want to leave, because this place makes me sick. I want to say something to prove I've got somewhere to go.

“Yes. I'm unwell. I should go home.” I tell her, the words tasting like hope.

“Do you have a home?” she repeats.

The second time it lands differently. I realize I do not. Nobody on the plant floor has ever asked me about one—about family, about mornings with loved ones. The third shift keeps you out of sync with the ordinary hours. My relatives are gone: some died, some drifted away, and others vanished. Maybe that's what growing up does: people change and grow out of one another.

It may be time I found a home, one to call my own. I straighten and meet her eyes. “I do have a home,” I say. “One with friends. With art. With color.” The words feel strange, but I let them stand, like a painting I've been waiting to create.

The cart is anxious.

It's two thirty in the morning. My wheels rest in the thick heat of another Friday. I am still by the office door, where the Co-Worker left me three weeks ago, or so he says. Time doesn't work the same for me. I overheard both the Co-Worker and the Manager say another Co-Worker left the company yesterday.

I still haven't seen my friend since. I wait. I listen.

Then hands grip me, rough, hurried—Manager, with Co-Worker beside her. I hear something about my Janitor friend: an accident, “sent into a coma”. Traveling, is that what they meant by sent? Will he be back? He once told me vacation days were for traveling. Maybe that's what this is. They wheeled me past the places we knew: the scuffed walls, the flickering lights, the quiet restrooms we cleaned past the chair near the chemical shower, where he lauded and muttered about this day to me. But they didn't stop.

Manager: “He died this morning. Better post the job on Indeed.” she mentioned with a shallow intake.

Co-Worker: "Since the other one left, we don't need two cleaning carts. Save money and hire only one person."

I sit among the forgotten relics. Everything is quiet except the distant clatter of machines, and I wait. I wait for Janitor, my friend, though I know he will not come. The smell of bleach, the echoes of his laughter linger in me. I think I was the only one who knew he existed.

## **Piece Two**

### **Analysis**

11.16.2025

This piece's goal is to demonstrate the character Arthur's reflected homesickness, desire and burnout and cultural displacement. By allowing a fleeting connection between Arthur and Rebecca through hallucinations, exploring emotional hunger through relationships that can't fully exist. By adding uncertain human body parts appear where they shouldn't (ears and fingers, etc). By blending in horror—the softness and grotesque is an interesting juxtaposition for the story.

## Chinese Buffet

In the chair his leg lay lazily draped across his left thigh, stiffened by forty years and the added toll life exacts on this Earth. The 2006 polo he pulled on hung loosely over his 2025 frame, shifting endlessly with each movement, its red hue plucked from the rainbow pile he'd secured in his suitcase. While waiting near immigration after his flight from Chicago O'Hare International Airport, he looked down at his worn denim jeans draped on his legs; New Balance retiree shoes comforted his soles. At O'Hare, he had wandered past the Calvin Klein store and, on a whim, bought brand-new underwear. Now sitting afterward (with the new briefs on), he felt absurdly transformed—coolly composed, yet vibrating with nerves. His newly fabricated suitcases waited patiently for the adventure beside their companion. Arthur's weathered hand moved in a restless cycle: through his strawberry-blond hair (cross fingers it's still there next year), down to his lap, onto the suitcase, and back once more. His lips curled into a smile he hadn't worn since his early twenties. A warm pressure rose in his chest and fluttered at his throat. At Shanghai Pudong International Airport, his face beamed with an electric excitement that seemed to pulse in rhythm with the soaring architecture around him. As Arthur sat back, he ignited a memory from before his vacation planning. He was sitting with his co-worker friend on a typical Friday night outing of Panda Garden Buffet and a movie showing downtown Newton.

"U're going to use up all 'ur vacation time on China?" The befuddled co-worker spoke in between mouthfuls of pepper chicken, more mounted on intricate plates with dancing Chinese dragons trying to escape the edges.

"I haven't left the state in twenty years—in fact I haven't left the town in ten years." As Arthur takes a piece of garlic bread and wipes the sauces left over from the peanut chicken on his plate.

"What are U going... to do there?"

"Explore. Eat."

"Oh, yeah...I gottcha."

"Understand a new way of life I suppose. I've seen YouTube travel walks in Shanghai and I thought why not experience something besides here Dick. I don't have a family or responsibilities—might as well, eh? I may not get a chance like this again."

"Heh, well...best luck to ya then... be careful they have a different kind of eating experience."

Arthur thought to himself repeatedly, this experience will be well worth everything he sacrificed at Bruin Manufacturing. Time toiled molding plastics. Time disappeared with paystubs. Time is nonrefundable. Time to *feel* something outside his Iowan viewpoint. His eyes teared with tiredness and ached for sleep, but Arthur took two thumbs and excavated out his fatigue. He had read about the challenges of international travel, how the experience could cause disorientation, but now at the airport, he felt exhilaration despite his body's warning signs. *Be damn those warning signs*, he thought. Arthur drank in the environment, the ceiling housing electrified spokes that danced diamonds against the darkened gray ceiling.

The airport hummed with life. Standard chairs and holding bars seemed to whisper welcomes and adventures, pulling travelers away from the familiar and into the unimaginable. Overhead, loudspeakers hurled important announcements, their words bouncing and fracturing against the walls in jagged echoes. Luxury-bright screens plastered across walls and pillars pulsed with welcoming ads, guiding newcomers toward the terminals. Colors shifted in smooth transitions—red to gold to the warm glow of a Pizza Hut logo sliding into view. Arthur felt a flick of amusement at how *alive* everything looked. He spotted the immigration line thinning and moved quickly, almost buoyant, as if the terminal itself were ushering him forward before the crowd surged again.

Foreign passport holder. When the time came, Arthur held his breath and slid his documents forward—the visa, the arrival card, the passport, each one placed with careful precision. A micro-smile threatened to stretch into a full, foolish grin. *Hold your shit together, Arthur*. The immigration officer looked barely out of college. Dark brown hair, a clean, fresh face, and eyes that had that soft shine of someone just beginning to imagine a future of their own.

In English, the officer asked, “What is the purpose of your visit?”

“To vacation in Shanghai!”

“How long will you stay?”

“For about two weeks.”

A curt nod followed by a, “Look here” gesturing towards a mounted camera. Arthur's heartbeat thudded once, bright and definite, like a drum cue. His hands pawed at his ceaseless polo, taming the fluttering nerves across his body. Facing forward, a subtle click of the aperture might go

unnoticed by many, but Arthur picked up on the crisp clink of the lens, resulting in a photo that illuminated a restless grin. The officer compared the photo with the passport and all was set.

*Here we go.*

Passport stamped with the accompanying documents. Arthur made his way to the baggage claim in Terminal 2 (where international travelers pass through), screens overhead showing flight and carousel numbers where travelers find their suitcases upon arrival. Arthur, feeling appreciative of his good fortune, reminisced about his past travels and realized he was standing in his third airport trip. Des Moines was the first. Chicago second. Shanghai is the third. While waiting, Arthur peered around him and felt impressed by how the airport functioned smoothly amidst the chaos. Arthur grabbed his suitcase with the custom keychain he purchased in Des Moines, a small flat ear of corn illustration with the *I ❤️ Iowa* slogan. He steered himself to customs to begin his journey into Shanghai.

Light on his toes and his chest high for the adventures awaiting, he quickly absorbed the surroundings and spotted the familiar green mermaid logo. Arthur felt tempted by a quick cup of coffee before boarding the Maglev train, a chance to sit down and strategize his actions before the first steps into Shanghai. Before he stepped inside the coffee shop, he questioned himself why he would travel across the world to spend his time at Starbucks, where he could do that at home. He pushed away from the store. Arthur decided to access the Main Arrivals Hall to secure currency, a SIM card, and last-minute necessities before his train arrived. As he floated down the terminal toward the Hall—towing his luggage, absorbing the sweep of the modern architecture, practically bouncing with excitement at the thought of the Maglev train—Arthur felt like he was gliding through a place built exactly for this moment. As Arthur was walking, he glanced up towards a flight attendant, wearing the signature red cap, long-sleeved top, and skirt suit dress—but when walking towards her, he saw his neighbor Sherri's face dressed in the signature Air China stewardess dress.

It must be fatigue. That's all. Sherri is back home in Newton.

He sidestepped out of people's way to rub his face, to breathe in and out before joining the Hall. Arthur made a quick circuit of the arrivals hall—passing the open seating area, the people

holding signs, the currency-exchange booths, and finally the counter where he picked up his China Unicom SIM card. Arthur looked up, the big, clear bilingual signs hanging from the ceiling pointing towards the Maglev. Arthur had first read about the Maglev in an old magazine—the *fastest train in the world*—and now he was about to ride it. He followed the signs the way he might drift through a shopping mall, letting them guide him down the escalator toward the platform. He knew, even now, that he would remember this moment for the rest of his life.

Arthur picked up his ticket and stepped onto the atmospheric platform. In the distance, the Maglev hummed—a low, electric sound threading through the air. Its white body and teal trim emerged first, and then the black windows at the front lit up, casting a glow around the conductor’s cabin. Face-on, the train looked almost alive, its lights like eyes as it glided slowly toward him. He boarded and blushed with excitement—if only Dick could look at him now. A real traveler boarding a train straight out of a futuristic movie. Arthur packed his suitcases on the overhead track. As he did so, he glanced down at the open window seat and sat down triumphantly. Arthur sank into the retro teal plush seat, the cushions giving beneath him as the darkness of the platform slipped away and the city’s gold daylight flooded in. Through the glass, buildings rose above a spread of lush treetops; looking down, he felt as if he were floating above them, the elevated rails lifting him into the air. The Maglev’s low hum tightened into a sharper, faster vibration that seemed to pace his heartbeat. Power lines towered over neighborhoods like metal sentinels, while stretches of green unfurled in every direction, stealing his breath.

Inside the cabin, conversations drifted around him—mostly Mandarin, blended with voices from other corners of the world. He didn’t understand the words, but he didn’t need to. The sound alone felt like part of the journey. Exhaling and inhaling air he wouldn’t have thought could happen in his lifetime. Physically being in a space thousands of miles from his small town, the moment overwhelmed him. He looked around the train and realized his eyes started to blur somewhat. Faces that seemed clear were now starting to fade and focus again, much to his annoyance, but he chuckled—he wasn’t young like he used to be.

The Holiday Inn off the Maglev line sits perfectly near the airport. Arthur walked through the automatic sliding doors, noticing the modern feel of the hotel, yet the familiar layer of

comfort. At the front desk, a professional young woman with long black hair and soft brown eyes neutrally asked for the usual information for check-in. As she placed his information into their data system, he glanced around the space and noticed a man standing with his back against Arthur. From the distance he seemed ordinary, but a slight twist of his body revealed features almost resembling Arthur's old drinking buddy. Arthur eyed the floor, grinned nostalgically, remembering the friendship they had, even if it was centered around drinking beer on Thursday nights.

When the young woman gave Arthur the key card to his hotel, he plodded up the elevator to room 197, where he haphazardly placed his belongings on the single bed. His stomach ached with longing for food, but his body was acclimating to the unfamiliarity of the city. While traveling the metro to the Holiday Inn, he had noticed a McDonald's on the corner, the singular building he'd witnessed thousands of times before. The lure towards the convenience and the comfort of the restaurant gave relief from the novelty of his trip that had drained his body. Just this once. Tomorrow I'll explore the real cuisine of the city. Locking the hotel door. Down on the sidewalk. Back into this room. With his McSpicy Burger. He knew there was some outside life while walking towards the golden arches, but everything was timed perfectly for a grab and go.

The next day he rustled inside his hotel duvet. The early morning sun speared the dust motes hanging in the air—Arthur sat straight up, hair careened without direction, staring across his room. The silence swallowed up his single self in the room—the crinkling of atmosphere, the hushed intake of breath, and the heart of a silent man in bed. Shaking himself from his trance, he remembered a full itinerary today—*can't be sitting in bed all morning long*. Bathed in Dove and Pert Plus soaps, dried with cloud-like towels, and now brushing his teeth with the trusted, dentist-approved Crest, he ideally thought of visiting the temple on the West Nanjing Road. Arthur's plan tightened its hold on his mind. Dressed in his finest polo shirt with a flamingo on the side breast for extra flair, tan cargo pants, and his retiree shoes—he traveled down the hotel, past the desk clerk and onto the metro towards Jing'an Temple.

The temple exhaled a luminous gold, soft yet absolute, giving the architecture the power and wonder to behold. Arthur felt very small against the magnitude of the temple. The beauty and awe muted any words he could express. Mouth agape and wanting more to see: the Buddhas

that lined the architecture, the ornate Chinese motifs, and the large Jade stone in the center which, when rubbed, might bring good luck. As Arthur studied the jade stone, he felt a quiet insistence for food. Forgetting breakfast because of his excitement, he decided to explore the street foods outside the temple. *Might as well enjoy a fun brunch on vacation.* Arthur found a vendor with a sign that advertised xiaolongbao buns (pork buns). The steam rising from the buns smelled rich and savory, nothing like anything back home. He watched the vendor fold the dough with a rhythm that looked almost meditative. Excitedly, when the pork buns were done, Arthur carefully took the buns and paid for his meal.

When he glanced at the handwritten sign, the characters fuzzed for a moment, rearranging themselves into “Iowa Pork Ear”. And for a second, he saw ears—pink, small, human—nestled between the spaces where the buns were before. He picked up the ear that throbbed a burning heat, a sticky secretion of human blood clots, skin mucus, and membrane stretched into a string pull that made Arthur blink. He blinked hard. The vision snapped away. Just dumplings again. He laughed nervously. He shook the thought away. *Jet lag. Homesickness, maybe.* He bit into the bun, and broth flooded his tongue—hot, savory, strangely comforting.

After he finished his second helping of dumplings, he went across from the temple into West Nanjing Road, a popular tourist attraction holding separate malls throughout the route. Arthur wandered into Jiuguang Department store. He strolled in as the big swoosh logo glossed his view—his eyes were starting to fuzz in and out again. He rubbed his face with the bottom of his shirt, and when he looked again, his lungs were arrested by the sheer, overwhelming display. Standing in front of him, in Chinese decorated police gear, was his high school English teacher. In the flesh, he could see the same features that had expressed belief in Arthur’s potential as a writer, but hadn’t pushed too forward and would look away when Arthur would scuff off homework. Arthur strolled up to the police officer. When he did so, the officer with Mr. Johnson’s face spoke clear Mandarin to him. The world *tilt, tilt, tilt*—Arthur immediately balanced himself on the balls of his toes, crouched over, hands over the back of his neck. The police softly, speaking—tried to help Arthur up. When the *tilt, tilt, tilt* of the head went upwards, the surrounding faces resembled those who Arthur loved, hated, and a few for uncommitted feelings. A group of women speaking clear Mandarin walking by had the faces of the same

clique at work that walk by him every morning before work. Tears and sweat dripped out Arthur's orifices while he leaned on the steady balance of Mr. Johnson.

The next day Arthur sat alone in the mall outside Starbucks, on a cafe-style table and seat set, exhausted and still shaken by this new development in his travels. Last night while Arthur was sitting in the hospital's ER, the on-staff doctor, while speaking English, had the face of his ex-girlfriend—he knew she wouldn't be this kind to him. Let alone parse Mandarin towards the nursing staff. He took the liberty to touch the doctor to see if this had been a dream—it wasn't a dream. The sensation of touching an ex-lover, while being shone a light in the eye socket, with a Chinese decorated uniform and accent, left a cold, buzzing residue in his thoughts. The doctor mentioned reasons for his predicament, but the reality was lost in the sheer volume of plausible causes.

Sitting there in public, the faces still blurred, but the majority were faces he had seen from his past. While Arthur was drinking his coffee, which he sat next to Mr. Newt's restaurant, out came a woman whose face didn't match anyone he knew before. Short bob haircut, even trimmed bangs—emphasizing eyes that were hot with quiet intelligence. Small nose, small mouth, and small in stature—her confidence pulsed steadily from her center. She enjoyed the American name Rebecca, which she picked up while learning English during her compulsory lessons in college. Spotting Arthur, his face slick with a cold, desperate sheen, upper body folded on the table with a hand resting on his chin, with an expression of bewilderment and deep exhaustion. Rebecca thought perhaps this foreigner might be having trouble and might as well practice her English skills—*it's been at least thirteen years since her lessons*. Her corporate job was demanding more of the language to be spoken and written within her department. Rebecca drifted towards his table. While slumped in his seat trying not to look into the crowd, he glanced up towards the upcoming woman with the bright eyes. Her presence was a shock of pure reality, and he felt the dizzying pull of relief. His perception had suddenly reversed. The woman dressed in a short black dress, boots, with a t-shirt that read, “That's the Answer Hoe”—Arthur was ecstatic but in disbelief when he saw her walking up to him. Gripping his white coffee cup,

sitting straight up, dislodging the phlegm, and about to reveal an open smile when Rebecca extended the first introduction.

“Hello, my name is Rebecca! You look lost, do you need help?”

“I-I’m ok for now. I’m...taking a quick break. Arthur by the way.”

“Where are you from?”

“Newton, Iowa...in the United States.”

“Oh! Have you been to New York?”

“Oh...er, no. But! Hopefully after this trip I’ll take more trips around.”

“That’s the first place I’ll visit in United States.” Rebecca remembered that her company was sponsoring a two-week trip seminar at the New York offices. Perhaps this might be her nudge towards applying, the only downside might be because of her personal life. Typically her other colleagues had first priority over these international trips. In her department, she acknowledged her unmarried status as Leftover Woman<sup>1</sup>, the binding title of 剩女 as a barrier into more lucrative roles. Instead of talking about future projects, the conversations steered towards marriage and children, especially at her old age of 35.

Rebecca takes a seat across from Arthur, setting down her purse and crossing her legs on the steel seat, “What brings you here to Shanghai?”

“To experience the outside world from Iowa. I’ve read about China in school..watched online videos... and love the kung-fu films! I’ve seen this place as something magical that I wanted to see for myself. To see something real from my everyday life.”

“You came to see something real and different, yet you’re here at Starbucks.” She grinned, palm resting on her chin.

Blushed. *She’s got a point.* His body had automatically entered the cafe, and the illusion didn’t break until the barista asked him for his name. His younger co-workers showed him the app where he occasionally ordered coffee to go; he must’ve mindlessly pushed the pay button. His deepest need was for comfort. The world felt unmoored and liquid, and all he could think of was finding a wall to press his back against. Rebecca shifted in her seat—thinking about a drink herself—but wanted to know something.

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<sup>1</sup> is a stigmatizing term for unmarried Chinese women over a certain age, often 27, who face social pressure to marry

“What do you mean by *real* from your everyday life?”

“I mean...in my life everyday consisted of working fifty hours, going home and watching TV, and eating whatever was convenient at the time. The past few weeks it’s been Casey’s pizza.”

Rebecca looked at him with a scrunched up face.

“It’s a gas-station that makes pizza...which is pretty darn good in my opinion.”

Rebecca didn’t know what to think about the tumbled words from Arthur, but she understood the sentiment. Her vigilant eyes saw past the sweat and the confusion; she saw only the hollow burnout of a man exhausted by the predictable. She was reminded of her own life, where she was brought up to have expectations of motherhood and being diligent towards her family. Her life began modestly but her family came from the rural countryside outside Shanghai, where her mother supported her family from the earnings she made while working at a factory. Growing up, her parents funded her schooling and college—which she was grateful for—but they wanted a predictable life for her, and she wanted to break out to forge her own.

“I understand what you’re trying to say”. She shifted her eyes away, looked at him through a naive lens, then continued. “But I think you are thinking fantastically about Shanghai. This is a place with people living their lives as you are in America. Experiencing different countries is good, but take what you see here and apply it in America. Does that make sense?”.

Arthur felt the statement land like a physical weight on his chest. He glanced away to ruminate over her idea. As she leaned forward towards him, “learn how we live and why to take back home. Maybe you might find a way here that makes sense for you in America”. Rebecca hoped that Arthur would stop being naive and open himself rather than keeping himself separate from his experience. As she grabbed her purse—looked at Starbucks—grinned, while shaking her head. *Decent coffee, but not that good for now.*

Afternoon golden tones blanketed across the duvet in his hotel. Two days had passed, where Arthur rested in the hotel and ate whatever food was available. He enjoyed the occasional ramen dish, which the front desk woman had recommended in passing while Arthur went out days before. Arthur reflected on what Rebecca said, what the doctor mentioned, and overall his view

on the last few years. Stuck in a small town going through the motions and scheduled appointments: be at work this time, pay bills at this time, eat at this time, and go to bed at this time. No wonder vacation allowances were allotted only two weeks out of 12 months. The more time you spend away from your job, the more time you think about how you place yourself in the world. No extra time to think about the world or people. The only way to glimpse into the world is through a screen. Even then, what would a person on the other side of the screen say about the places they're at?. The world at your fingertips. *Whatever that meant*, Arthur mused to himself.

Thinking of Rebecca, he thought about venturing back out there again and back into West Nanjing Road to see the traditional areas rather than the Western spots on the road. To see the areas without the tourist traps along the way—he was open to whatever he may find—but hoping his filter would change back. After a warm shower, Arthur stood in front of the hotel mirror. Dressed in a purple polo with denim fitted jeans—a quick look in the mirror with a “you’ll have fun today” grin, under dark droopy eyes. Sleep would’ve been plentiful, if not for the ruminations crisscrossing his mind the past few nights. He rode the lone elevator back down, the silence heavy after his mental collapse. At the ground floor, the attendant's face was a studied mask of neutrality, fractured only by a rapid, plastic snap of a customer service grin.

He trudged the 18 minutes from his hotel to the West Nanjing Road. While navigating his heavy feet, he realized the people around started to look unfamiliar, but a few faces from his hometown stood out once in a while. Coming up on his right, he recognized a kid that worked at the movie theater downtown, always wore headphones while working but seemed like a nice kid. *I think he's in college*, but noticing him now—tears welled up in him, he forgot how time goes so quickly.

He came up towards the entrance of the road, and followed yet again the same path he took towards the Jiuguang Department Store. Instead of venturing back toward the similar floors, he went to floor 7F where he came across a tea shop that sold traditional Chinese porcelain tea sets with few teas for purchase. A small shop amongst voluminous department stores. Arthur entered the store, slowly and deliberately, wanting to see the sets rather than breezing by them. Each pot was handmade and was carefully sculpted for individual purchases.

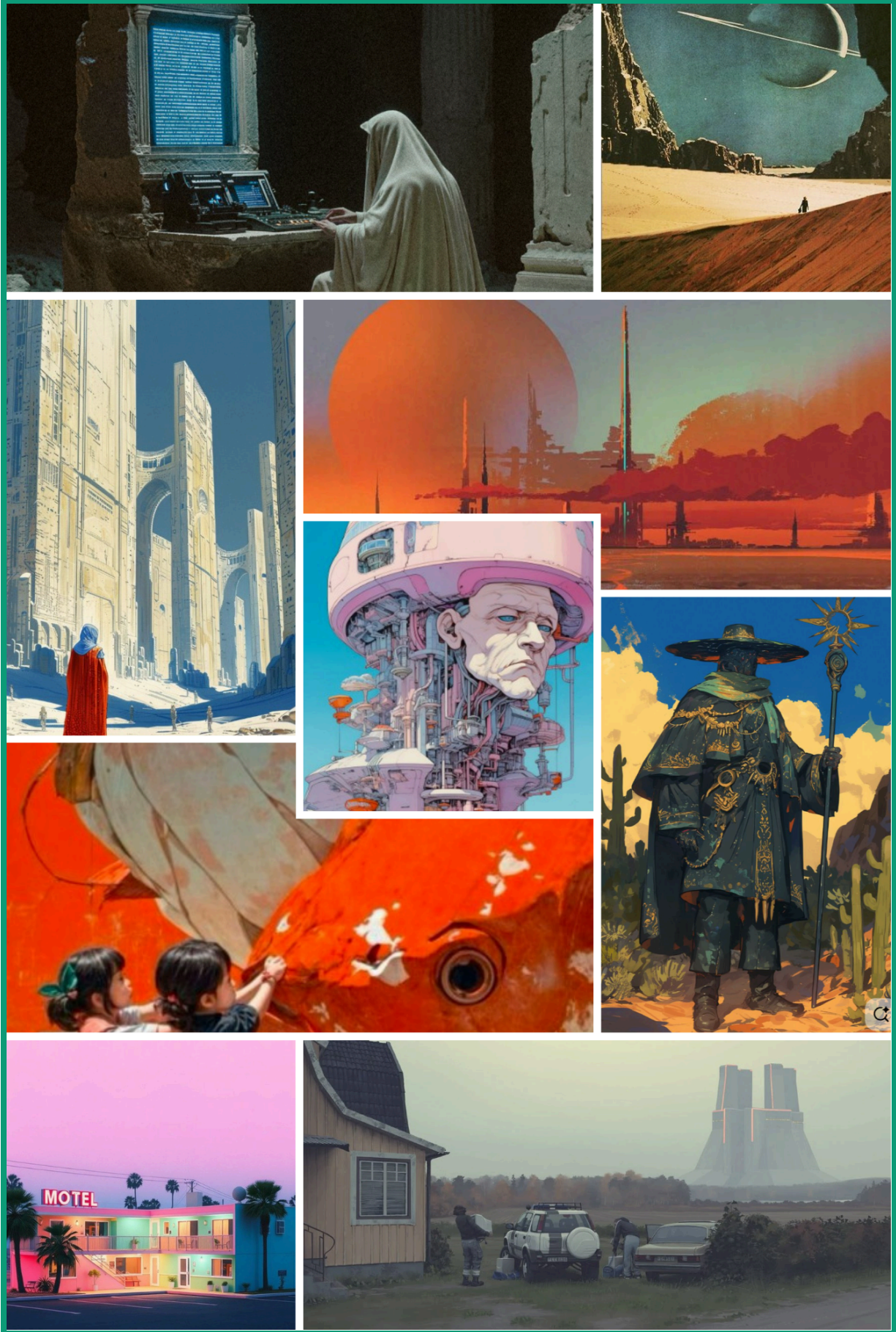
The owner, adjusted to foreigners coming in, asked Arthur if he needed anything. Fixed on the shop owner, he could see his late grandmother—sweet and cheerful before death. He enjoyed her company and flinched internally seeing her in the flesh again. Eyes shut, smoothing his hands over his face, he opened them again to see an unfamiliar face in place. The shop owner furrowed her brow with a troubled compassion. She stood her ground waiting for a response. Arthur smiled and choked out through relieved breaths, he was looking around for a present. He was drawn to the tiny, ordered ecosystems of the porcelain sets. He noticed a tea set with a pot and two cups—leaning in, the cups had dragons on the sides and two prominent dragons on the pot. The surface of the tea set was smooth, ornate, with designs imprinted on the soft, honest luster of the set. The dragons hoisted themselves into their back legs, demonstrating power and strength which Arthur found reassuring. Arthur holding the set resembled the quiet symbols of his unrealized hopes once he returned back to the states. As he was making his way to purchase the set, he felt a presence close by—another figure close to him.

Arthur walked away from the shop, carrying his new tea set. With a new sense of self, he wandered down two levels, towards the restaurant Rebecca came out of when they first met. Noticing the Starbucks from before, he quickly walked into the Mr. Newt's and noticed it was a buffet to be exact. Much like the ones he'd visited in his hometown and neighboring towns, the menu was above the cashier and host station. He entered, and a host guided him towards a small booth near the window. He wasn't expecting this but enjoyed the higher end of this buffet—with ornate glassware and modern smooth tables with jade rounding the edges of the dark, mahogany tables. Painted with gold outlines, Chrysanthemums flowered in place on the plush seating.

Setting his new tea set on the booth, he approached the main line. A heavy damp wall of artificial steam rose from the aluminum chafing dishes, clouding the bright, desperate faces of the customers. Arthur gathered some traditional Chinese cuisine, with a few other pieces he recognized from previous buffets. He chuckled as he picked up a few pieces of beef from a menu item called Mr. Newton's Delight. As he sat down, he glanced out the window and gasped—he saw Rebecca walking towards him through the crowd. But when coming closer, her face started to blur and change. Arthur looked away; perhaps it would take a while for his mind to transform back again, back to his old filter. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing a minute of internal quiet to recalibrate his perception. When he opened them, the world was still blurred, but he managed to

seize the fork and cut a piece of the unrecognizable meat from his plate. As the fork was about to reach his face, he noticed something... the piece of beef looked similarly like a human finger. Arthur inhaled a breath deep in his chest cavity—in between the prongs he was holding a human finger. Viscous red fluids slowly detached from the finger, sliding down towards the plate, which now had eyes, noses, mouths, all intact but positioned enough to create a human screaming face. Swirling in the sauces, and crunches—even a human piece of scalp made its appearance on the left. Arthur took a napkin to wipe up the clear fluids, mixed with pink hues and skin—dancing along the edges of his plate. Arthur's shoulders caved with the weight of the moment, and he let out a deep, rattling exhalation. Arthur crunched through the bone, slurping down the flesh of the finger.

Arthur looks up towards you and asks how the human soup was.



## Piece Three

### Analysis

9.28.2025

The overall goal for this piece was to demonstrate my exploration of human psychology in extreme ways, with Perdita she lives entirely inside constructed fantasies because her reality is impossible. By experimenting with setting and environment, with the hospital room and Perdita's fantasies becoming one fluid environment setting, revealing her longing and identity crisis. Having Perdita not have a body, the piece explores body distortion and sensory uncertainty.

### Limerence for the Body

Perdita watches an IV drip in rhythm with the one o'clock rerun of *The Young and the Restless* on the T.V. in front of her hospital bed. The sheets beneath offer a cool landscape of winter wonderment, a stark relief from the alligator weather of Florida. She knows this only by rumor, overheard from nurses in the hall, how fortunate she is, they say, not to wander into the Florida strange and its rush-hour chaos. She smiles at these niceties, but in truth Florida baffles her. She knows it only through books and screens—an idea, a lore—but outside her window, she isn't sure what Florida is. Her brown eyes drifted to the candy-coated pink chairs lining her right side, her mother's choice. *Might as well give it some fun*, her mother said, but the color buzzed too sharp, too sweet. Pictures of petite flowers and puppies hugging the white walls amplified the cheer, turning the room into a failed children's department store masquerading as a home. Perdita stayed still, watching, small, suspended, while the chairs leaned toward a child who would never come. The dresser untouched in years, white with youth trim, dusted still in case for use but now felt obligated as a decor of normalcy. The room was built in youth and stayed in constant purgatory, only Perdita's college courses documents, homework notes, and a T-shirt from her college's club (Virtual Geographic Adventures) ornamented the room as her own. In secret, with the help from the nurses a stash of gay pornography magazines hides away; the nurses didn't know where to find readily naked pictures of men—except from their own romantic histories.

Perdita attended online classes for her bachelor's degree, through the use of an awkward clunky laptop donated from the community. Her whole life has been supported by community donations, funders, and government programs who heard lore about Perdita, and seeing firsthand

her circumstances life brought on her. Her parents accepted the money then and still accepts money now, but Perdita's concept of money is unique because she's never held a physical dollar bill but can understand how money shapes the world outside her window.

The nurse adjusts her drip.

Perdita closes her eyes.

The breezy air brushes against her arms, the sun massages her legs with tender warmth. Flowers flooded the environment with sweet whispers of fragrance circling around her and Billy Abbott. They were seated within the Botanic Garden Conservatory—the date was perfect, she saw Billy Abbott on screen but now he's in her orbit.

“I see you more clearly than the sun above me. You've haunted my every thought, every breath these past few days.” Billy flirtatiously smiled at her.

“Lucky we're in love...I thought I could let you go, but I would be lying to myself. You're the reason I'm alive, Billy. The only reason.” Perdita's breath hitched.

Perdita's brown hair romantically bends with the breeze, shoulder length with a touch of sunkissed caramel highlights, brown eyes that sparkle with a kaleidoscope of greens, golds and browns. Wearing a white cottage dress that compliments the purple iris nearby. Billy's blue eyes animated with her presence, the waves of blues drowning her with sensual feelings and blonde silky hair she wanted to breathe in. The white button shirt, outlined his body, called for her to explore the caverns and creaves underneath.

Her lips curved, “You've haunted my every thought, every breath these past few days”, which felt authentic but hollow when she said the words out loud. Her nose scrunched, the perfect thin eyebrow tenderly outlined her thoughts...those were words from a script she's memorized throughout her years of watching soap operas.

Perdita's hand reached towards Billy.

The nurse snaps her fingers.

“Do you want me to turn to Oprah? I think Matthew McConaughey is on today...also, remember it's a new formula of Nutrient in your IV bag, let me know if anything goes wrong,” while walking away briskly.

Her fantasy fractures, and the hollow silence of reality rushes back in.

Perdita is just a head—no body, no arms, no legs. Her neck rises from the sterile bed like a lone column, veins faintly pulsing beneath her skin. The hospital’s compound Nutrient formula drips steadily into her, a slow rhythm that keeps her conscious, keeps her *alive*. The doctors assured her the compounds and synthetic vitamins will help keep her fit. “Alive” feels like a strange word. She wonders if it counts when everything that moves, grasps, or runs has been left behind years ago. When she was an infant, her body was infected by a viral anomaly that poisoned her body—doctors suggested a radical treatment, where both her parents said yes to—stupidly.

Oprah has been a staple of her routine since she was a little girl, the aunt she’s needed in times of crisis. Now in 2006, becoming an adult, she still needs Oprah in her life, and a relief rushes in when the show notes hit her senses—

Perdita closes her eyes.

She’s on the couch, smooths the hem of her dress, the one that fits like it was made for her. Under the lights. Oprah’s hand warm on her knee. The audience applauds, rising in a wavy way just for her. “Welcome to the show, how’ve you been?!”

“Great! It’s great to be here also.”

The blazing lights highlight her formed body, the static of the air waves tickle her ears, the taste of anticipation within the room is like a buffet ready to devour.

“I saw recently that you got engaged to Billy Abbott. Congratulations!” As Oprah leaned in.

Perdita blushes a deep pink to red blossom on her cheek, but joyfully embraces her new revolution. “Yes, it’s true. Billy and I are engaged,” as she turns to the audience awaiting for her lavish details, “It was romantic... by our favorite spot in the botanical garden where we confessed our love and happily said yes!”.

The audience gleefully stood and erupted with hands clasped, cheers and open smiles for Perdita. Love vibrated throughout her vision, as Oprah smiled brightly and waited for the cheers to settle down, the last claps to be heard and voices quieting.

“Is that what you’ve been looking for in life? Marriage? Kids?”, Oprah asked while sitting back on her couch looking at Perdita.

“I think so, I haven’t thought about marriage or children at all to be honest. Growing up, that wasn’t a possibility for me because of my upbringing and condition... Being with Billy brought all my worries and concerns out in the open...and together we faced them. I’ve been grateful for his presence in my life.”

“That’s right, you’ve had a challenging upbringing right? Tell me more about that.”

“I was born without much of anything in life, my parents did their best until my little sister came along twelve years ago...I love her, but I hardly see her or them nowadays. I have a condition that doctors call Reflexive Body Limerence...it’s a strange kind of sensory blindness. My mind constantly generates the body—I see it, I move it, I live in it—but I can’t feel anything. I can watch myself cross my legs, but there is no pressure, no warmth, no touch. It’s like living in a beautiful existence entirely through a pane of glass.”

“I’m sure it’s been difficult with your relationship with Billy with a condition like yours..”

“Oh sure, it’s hard to feel him but with his support and sweetness, I don’t need touch to understand his love for me. He’s really been the best.” She looks back and side to side at the audience, knowing they’re hanging on to her story.

Oprah shows her radiant smile to Perdita, to the audience, and to the camera while bringing the next question into the space, leans toward her, eyes kind: “Do you think having Billy is helping you see a well-lived life? Or, how do you define a well-lived life, Perdita?”

“That’s a good question...,” she crosses her legs, the hem of her dress falling just right, caresses the gold ring on her finger, tailored just for her. The lights are hot, but she feels cool, certainly.

“A well-lived life,” she says, smiling at the audience, “is when you make meaning out of what you’re given. Even if the world only hands you fragments, you build something whole. You don’t need the perfect body, the perfect script. You need imagination, love, and a little bit of nerve.”

The audience erupts. For a moment she is all body, all presence, radiant in the applause. Oprah waited as the audience settled quietly. “Aside from your upcoming nuptials, we’re here to talk about your book on the *Ideal Self*,” she said, leaning forward, chin in hand. “How would you describe your ideal self?”

Perdita leaned forward, fingers tapping lightly on her lap. Her chest lifted, her hair seeming to puff with excitement. Her mind raced through her script, ready to speak the words she had practiced, words that might just capture the life she wanted.

“My ideal self...is the one who reaches for connection, even when it feels impossible. Who finds ways to love, to laugh, to exist fully, even if the world doesn’t hand you the body or the moments you expect.” With this sentiment, Perdita nervously squeezed her ring while smiling at Oprah. She meant the feeling, but the script didn’t feel right between her lips. Even with mentally practicing each line, Perdita clasped the soft fabric of her dress, where she imagined her heart would be at. Oprah, with a flicker of confusion between her eyes, watches Perdita clasp the wrong side of her chest where the heart was meant. Perdita froze. Her phantom body was momentarily betraying the script, revealing the physical lie of her existence. Then, Oprah, leaning in, said, “Can I ask you—what do you think is the purpose of the human experience? To lay around”?

Perdita shifted her body on the couch close to the edge for the quick run, but close seconds she noticed the red eye camera for the world to see her. She wasn’t expecting this question, especially an insensitive one: does Oprah think her existence isn’t fully human? Sweat dripped loosely on her scalp and soon created miniature rivers alongside her neck, chest and hands, while the world watched on.

*Drip, drip, drip.*

The IV drip, anchored to her head, was leaking a thin, sweetly medial line alongside her face, but she couldn’t do much about it until the nurse arrived. Aside from her with convenience, a stick tool in mouth, her tongue danced the stick towards the call button close by and hoped a nurse would arrive soon. The short-staffed nursing crew had been working twelve hours over time, separated from their families outside the hospital...and many stayed away from Perdita. She sighed, hoping someone would come, even if the time was tight between nurses. Today is Matthew McConaughey on Oprah, as she shifts her head away from the drip. Oprah’s question had exposed the lie of her existence. If she couldn’t prove her value to the world, she would disappear into a place where her body existed without argument, only movement, only touch, only grace.

Rich dark soil underfoot, walking along the edge of the floodplain forest of Bulow Woods Trail, Perdita feeling the sensation of imagined warmth and steadiness of Billy’s hand. The pair walk along the hike, Perdita’s favorite spot because as a college student she would take frequent

trips to Bulow Woods when she wanted to get away from reality. Perdita looking around—viewing the landscape as a panorama of picturesque dense greenery as the trail winds to the left down a single track, sweetgum and red maples grow within the floodplain. Her paradise of soft leaves bending with the air, stretching and pulsing the sun's energy, the smell she could only speculate of aquarium humidity from science classes years ago. Tangy with the punch of dense liquid caressing the face. Billy, although handsome, Perdita unconsciously views him differently today—she sees him now as someone familiar she's seen before, perhaps while visiting the hospital years ago, a nurse's husband. The man in general was taken, but she couldn't help but blush when he smiled at her; at the shift, Billy's dark satin brown eyes gaze adoringly at Perdita while his black sapphire hair hung loosely around his shoulders waiting for Perdita to pull back in a rush of desire. A smile that felt like an opium hit and would do anything for another smile tailored made for Perdita.

“Did you know you're the most beautiful woman right now, right this second in the whole world?”. He wrapped his healthy arms around the snug, the curved and womanly body of Perdita—she felt in her womanhood, or what she would deem as a slice of her own experience as a woman.

“Right this second huh? How about last second ago, was I the most beautiful woman alive?” The systematic heartbeat, thumbed through her neck veins, her ears blazed with excitement, her lips felt wet with fever of love as she spilled out those words. Her flirting skills were limited to only the few novels her mom picked up, the *Cosmopolitan* magazines the nurses would read to her, and her beloved soap operas.

“Last second, this second and forever milliseconds from here I'll always love and bathe in your beauty Perdita.”

“I haven't felt this way about anyone else in the world Billy, I don't think I'll ever meet someone like you again. You're my everything, darling...the world, the air, and the life blood in me.” Perdita's nose crunched up, the tilt of head and the teeth tucking her underlip with complete hollowness from her words. She's heard the poetic declarations of love before on *The Young and the Restless*, but in her mind, it felt as though she zombied the sentence out, the words a practiced lift of her voice.

Until now.

Maybe she should try again.

"Baby, I can't wait for our wedding. I've been dreaming about this my whole life. My life is yours alone and the only love I'll ever know in my existence. I hope you feel the same way?"

Billy grabs Perdita's hand, turns her body towards him with graceful emptiness that she wished for a minute she could feel but immediately, her eyes focus on Billy's face.

"The fever in my bones is hard to tame with your presence around me, the mere grace of your finger tips touching me engulfs the passion of a thousand suns, a thousand violins and a thousand rose petals...all because of you." The words that left his mouth are the human wishes she wished she could hear, but the artificial sweetness she knew deemed dangerous to her health. She didn't want to know, but she knew the words meant nothing truly on his end. Her experience with love was limited by the physical products within her vicinity, the stories and lore—which she tries to repeat, but how can the actors, the actresses and the characters seemlessly voice their feelings true but she cannot? She looks up while the dense, miniature pixel detail of marsh ferns filling under the trees ahead, craning her neck up to view the canopy being hosted on hundred feet tall oaks, creating shadows on her, dancing with folly at her inexperience with voicing her true sentiments.

They walk along.

"Would you stay forever ...if I asked you to?"

"Yes, I would—forever in your arms."

"Would you like me, even if I lacked everything a woman has?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if I lacked a body, arms, legs, and overall lacked everything a human can do from point A to point B?"

Crossing a bridge over a musical stream, dripping with the rhythm of life and diamonds, Billy stops in the middle of the bridge, "What do you mean? I think whatever you're trying to say—regardless of the hypothetical, you've been the one person...I could hold nothing back but the better version of myself. You have the capacity, the patience, and the will to love Perdita...your love can show the better version of people all around the world. You are capable of greater things than right now. I wanna stay forever in your love."

Tears rivered along her cheek.

*I wish I could think of you and know you were real...*

Predita opened her eyes.

“Hmmm I thought I got all the liquid off, sorry about that sweetie. I wish things weren’t made cheaply..ya know,” as the nurse said, interrupting her.

The T.V. static with broken blurbs of images rupture the fantasy, feeling sadness because what she wanted was only a small minute daydream that can easily be shattered with the massive boulder called reality. Her experiences of life are fragile and only replayed throughout her day, like an expired rerun set again, and again on the same station, the same experience but with only different outcomes but the same hollow feelings. With the last wipe of tear from her eye, she glimpses out her room’s window to see a man, with black sapphire hair, a Billy look alike, and flowers in hand to greet someone he’s dear with, but not her. Maybe it was the trick in her psyche now—perhaps now her physical reality might collide with her inner reality. She pondered how it would be to go into such a state of mental downward, to set herself seeing internally rather than facing the outside as a grown adult. Should she accept her arrested development?

She looked towards the window again, seeing the human bodies parade through the corridors with their physical capability. Knowing people weren’t paying attention to anything else but their internal thoughts as well gave her comfort, knowing that people were more concerned about their inner perceptions than what people on the outside thought about them. From conversations with the nurses, she gathered they thought good of themselves—good people with good intentions and that’s all that mattered. *Sweetie, as long as you know your place as a kind soul to this world, then that’s all that matters.*

The T.V. resuming the daily programming now, as Predita looks, as her nose sucked up the loose sadness, up to see a new soap opera took center stage, but her surroundings change into the garden of a thousand suns, thoughts jewels and Billy sitting beside her. Panning out away from the hospital bed, in Predita’s room with the youth of years ago, outside her hospital window you can see a woman encased with her true life inwards.

## Piece Three: Revision

### Analysis

12.14.25

As a writer, I am drawn to psychological surrealism and sensory distortion, drawing together a picture of everyday people in unstable realities.

My penchant for overly radical, uncanny, and uncertain environments can lead to clarity issues.

For my revision I decided to draw on realism aspects with the sensory touch weaved into my narrative. I focused on grounding the speculative premise in sensory experience, especially touch, so that Perdita's emotional arc is carried by physical absence rather than explanation. I worked to compress exposition, unify point of view, and build recurring tactile motifs and culminate the final image. At first, it was uncomfortable writing realism—but the more I honed in on the heart of the matter—the more I enjoyed re-telling this story through realism.

### Room 147

The hospital hallway gapes like a throat. Its air is cold and scrubbed raw, smelling faintly of bleach and recycled breath. Aurelia walks down it with her arms full—paperbacks pressed to her ribs, soda-flavored lip balms clacking together in her pocket, recorded VHS tapes of MTV's *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* bumping against her hip with every step. Plastic edges bite lightly into her skin. She likes the sting. It reminds her she's here, finished, free. She has just graduated from the University of South Florida. Her last finals still hum in her wrists, in the tight tendons of her shoulders. She wants to spend this freedom the way she always has, by giving it to her sister.

She knocks softly on the familiar door. The metal is colder than she expects, numbing her knuckles. When she opens it, she fumbles, balancing her offerings against her body, leaning her weight forward.

Room 147.

Perdita.

Perdita is only a head.

No torso beneath the sheet. No arms tucked at her sides. No legs tangled in blankets. Her neck rises from the bed like a stem cut too cleanly, skin pale and stretched, veins fluttering faintly beneath it. A tube slips into her, feeding her a slow, steady drip of Nutrient formula. The liquid travels somewhere unseen, keeping her awake, keeping her tethered.

The sheets are crisp and white, pulled tight where a body should be. They hold the cold the way winter ground does, unforgiving, untouched. Aurelia feels it immediately when she steps closer, the chill reaching her shins.

Perdita's eyes lift.

She has always been this way. As an infant, a viral infection rotted her body from the inside out, turning flesh into a ticking hazard. The doctors, young, ambitious, reverent, made a choice. They severed her head to save her. To study it. Her parents, poor and young, signed the papers with shaking hands and never quite recovered.

Perdita has never known weight. Never known pressure from gravity pulling at her hips or heels. Never known the ache of muscle after running, the dull burn of standing too long. She knows only what presses against her skin: pillows, air, the adhesive of medical tape tugging when it's peeled away.

"Hey, stranger," Perdita says. Her voice is warm, practiced. "It's been a couple months. Where've you been?"

Aurelia steps closer. She sets the books down, then the tapes, arranging them carefully on the bed as if placement matters. The mattress dips slightly beneath her hands. "You know... finishing up school."

Perdita watches her hands. Always the hands. Fingers capable of so much—opening doors, lifting cups, brushing hair from eyes. Nurses touch her constantly, but it's functional touch. Gloved. Efficient. When Aurelia touches her, it's different. Familiar. Sisterly.

They talk the way they always do— about nothing, about time passing too quickly and too slowly at once. Aurelia pulls up the old pink chair their mother bought years ago. It creaks under her weight. She unwraps snacks: Doritos crackle, Philadelphia Cheesecake foil sighs open. The smells bloom instantly, salt, artificial cheese, sugar.

Perdita feels it all anyway. She feels it in her mouth, in memory, in the ache that spreads behind her eyes.

She remembers eating—vaguely. She can imagine texture more than taste. The resistance of bread between teeth. The softness of the cake collapsing on the tongue. Now she feeds through liquid, smooth and unending, sliding through veins instead of lips. It strokes her from the inside. It is the closest thing she has to being held.

Aurelia eats. Crunching. Chewing. Swallowing.

Each sound lands heavy.

Perdita drifts, as she often does, into *Laguna Beach*. Into sun-warmed sand slipping between her toes she does not have. Into the weight of a body beside her, skin against skin, the electric shock of contact. She imagines a boy's arm draped across her shoulders, the solid heat of him anchoring her in place. She imagines the friction of movement, the press of hands, the ache of wanting and being wanted.

“Stephen's cheating on Lauren,” Aurelia says through a mouthful of chips, orange dust clinging to her fingers.

Perdita smiles. Plays along. But the fantasy collapses with a quiet snap. Reality presses back in.

The bed beside her remains cold.

She thinks of the hours between nine and three, when the nurses don't come. She thinks of the IV line taped to her skin, how easy it would be to pull it free. She imagines the tape resisting, then giving way—skin tugged, a sharp sting, then nothing. She imagines the drip stopping. The slow dimming.

Would anyone feel the absence the way she feels everything else?

She knows her parents wouldn't notice until the donations stopped coming in.

Aurelia claps suddenly, hands coming together in a burst of sound and cheese dust. "You know, I had my last math class this semester."

Perdita startles. Focuses.

"I passed," Aurelia continued, softer now. "I kept hearing your voice. The way you used to explain things. That's how I got through it."

Something loosens in Perdita's chest, an ache she didn't know could still exist. Warmth spreads, phantom and real all at once. She has mattered. She still does.

They sit quietly as the show ends. Aurelia leans closer. Carefully, she rests her head against the pillow beside Perdita's face. Their temples are nearly touched. Heat transfers—subtle, precious. Perdita closes her eyes.

Touch.

When Aurelia leaves, the door clicks shut with a final, hollow sound. The room cools again. But Perdita does not drift to the beach alone this time.

In her mind, her sister is there too—sand warm beneath them, hands brushing, staying.

## My Conclusion

### Reflection:

My time in class was both exciting and deeply resourceful. The workshop provided invaluable insight into a core challenge I face: understanding if my work truly connects with readers and if they grasp the heart and content of the story. It was wonderful to witness people react to my writing, which was a deeply affirming experience.

I am particularly proud of accomplishing this body of written work. It is the first time I have completed a sustained creative project that wasn't in an essay format, marking a significant personal milestone.

Moving forward, I plan to concentrate on developing work within science fiction, speculative, dystopian, and realism fiction. While I may revisit weird fiction, I believe exploring outside my current comfort zone will be highly beneficial for my general body of work, specifically allowing me to experiment with different narrative structures.

My goals are ambitious: I intend to submit work to literary journals and, even more excitingly, prepare my portfolio for submission to an MFA program.

It was wonderful exploring fiction tools and concepts alongside others who share the same passion for the craft. The entire experience was made even more enjoyable by taking the course during the Halloween season.

## Sneak Peak

A sneak peak into a future novella in progress.

### Green River

They sit around the kitchen table without touching it.

The wood is swollen from years of damp, its surface scarred with old knife marks and darker stains no one asks about. Grace keeps her hands folded in her lap. Olivia stares at the wall above the sink, where a square of lighter paint marks the place a calendar used to hang. Luke stands instead of sits, his shoulders bowed, as if gravity has doubled since morning.

Outside, the river moves.

It has always moved—thick, slow, green—but now it carries something else, something that resists naming. You can hear it at night, slapping against the banks, dragging debris with the patience of a thing that knows it will outlast you.

This has been happening for years.

Not the sitting. Not the silence.

The fear.

Since Iowa closed its borders in 2025, the state has learned how to live inward. After COVID hollowed out the economy, officials filled the land with factory farms, long sheds packed with breathing bodies, waste lagoons shimmering behind them like misplaced lakes. They promised recovery. Jobs. Stability.

What they built instead was a system that leaked.

The waterways thickened. Algae bloomed. Something bacterial, viral, depending on who you asked, entered the water and did not leave. People got sick. Then they got wrong.

Grace was the first to notice patterns. She was a veterinarian, trained to see the early signs, tremors, discoloration, behavioral shifts. By the time humans started coming to her with the same symptoms she'd seen in cattle, it was already too late. She still runs the timeline in her head, still imagines the moment she might have stopped it if she'd spoken louder, sooner.

Olivia does not speak of timelines. Her husband drank from the tap. Her children bathed in it. By the time the state acknowledged the contamination, she was burying what remained. The virus took their language first, then their faces, then whatever made them recognize her as their mother.

Luke's farm sits twenty miles from the river and might as well be underwater. The soil is sour. Crops rot before harvest. Nothing that grows there is safe to touch, much less eat. He stays because leaving would require permission no one grants anymore.

The sound comes from the porch.

Not a knock.

A breath.

Low and wet, dragged through a throat that no longer understands air. Olivia flinches. Grace's hands tighten in her lap. Luke moves toward the door before either woman can stop him, habit overriding sense.

They all know what it is.

The word *zombie* still exists, but it feels inaccurate, borrowed from movies that promised spectacle instead of this slow, intimate ruin. These bodies do not chase. They wander. They follow water. They remember hunger. *Brain drain*.

The moan comes again, closer now, the sound of something leaning its weight against the doorframe. The house answers with a soft creak.

Grace thinks of the river.

Olivia thinks of her children's bath toys, still floating somewhere downstream.

Luke thinks of his fields, green once, before green meant poison.

No one reaches for the door.

Outside, the river keeps moving.

