

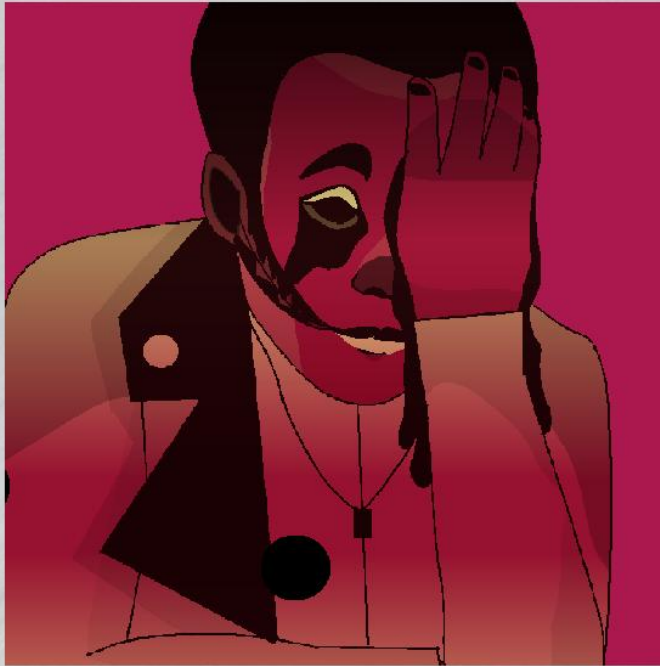


Keep Out!
(No, seriously.)

#2

12 2023

recent art



Discontinued

"what do you want?" the man asks, his voice distorted and rumbling as his form manifests into solidity, having escaped from the glass that kept him. he approaches me and i notice his legs are a little bit actually made of thistle, but i was always taught that it's rude to stare at differences - also hypocritical, when i have so many of my own - so instead i look at him in the face and smile, wide and toothy. my teeth are stained and crooked, but h seems to accept the smile as a peace offering, mirroring me with his own smile, wide and toothy again, though his grin is much less crowded.

"what do you mean?" i ask, because no one has ever asked me about my own desires before, and most of all i have never been spoken to by someone so enchanting. i don't want the flavor of him to dry out, so i'm stalling. but can you blame me? you'd never notice, but when i look at him i see a blobfish, mostly, after it has been removed from its natural habitat and beauty and irreparably changed by decompression. but also, when the clouds shift over the sun and darken us just briefly, i see the anglerfish, the one that lures you in with its light and generosity before biting down, and i see the smaller, parasitic anglerfish, who cannot survive without attaching itself to something greater. he shakes his head in exhaustion and i whisper to myself i know too much about fish and i do not know enough about nightmares and when he tells me he couldn't quite hear that i laugh and tell him i'm just talking to myself, i tend to do that, it's kind of embarrassing, actually, but i'm working on it, so.

he shrugs and i catch a flash of dark lightning behind him as his shoulders dip. it envelops him in something webbed, but i don't think i'm supposed to notice, and the fibers are phasing in and out of reality in my vision, so if he's only half-trapped, it can't really be that bad, can it?

"you know," he says, staring up at the ceiling, his hands expand into a square, miming a photograph, "thinking about the big picture, what do you want most?"

i dig my teeth into my fingernails, picking the stress out of my brain as my incisors shave off another layer, he seems slightly disgusted when i put a fingernail in my mouth and start chewing on it like gum - he is even more surprised when my mouth opens to reveal only a straight stick of bubblegum, and it's rather amusing; i can tell he's trying to figure out if i need his help at all or if he needs to shake up his strategy.

"maybe a quesarito," i tell him, beaming in every direction, my light merging against the sun's, it's getting late, i think, i can't remember when i noticed he was trying to get my attention, but i'm pretty sure it was a while ago, maybe a few days, i don't know, what i know is that he thinks he is powerful, and he has an interest in me that neither of us can excavate, i move closer in excitement, "can you get them to put it back on the menu? i think they discontinued it."

"what you want most, in the big picture," he stresses, "could go further than... a quesarito, you're capable of amazing things, you know, maybe you just need a little help achieving them," he stops for a moment, and in swings a brief connection to earth, "you really go that hard for taco bell? you clearly don't understand what i'm offering here."

"but hypothetically," i ask, "you do have the power to un-discontinue - or whatever - the quesarito? that's the one thing i haven't been able to figure out yet."

"i have the power to do practically anything you want," he says, and i know what he's thinking, but i can't be the dog's dog, i cannot follow him in that chain of loyalty because there will be no one beneath to catch me if i fall, i'm just not cut out for this, you know, but i don't know how to give him a flat-out rejection either, my mama taught me manners! it would be rude, he's looking impatient,

"so that's what i want,"

he rubs his temples with his fingers, which all curl down to knuckles of entirely exposed bone, without flesh or muscle, it's extremely nauseating, but he doesn't seem to mind or worry or ache, he seems, throughout his soul and its inverse, defeated, in a way he could never verbalize.

"can't you just make one at home?" he asks.

"i mean, yeah, i could do a lot of things."

"do you—" he stops, inhales, he clenches his fist, a sick sound of scraping bone, it still doesn't calm him, "do you know how to cook? i mean, like, anything?"

i curl my hair up in my own fingers, the petals sloughing off,

"no, not really," i respond, and it's the truth: "they always cooked for me, but now, obviously, you know, that's not gonna happen anymore."

"we could avenge them," he suggests, "i know you'd do anything."

"right now, i'd do anything for some melted cheese," i roll my eyes, and the earth shakes with my movement, tumbling him onto the pavement, "to answer your question, i think what i want is for you to make one for me."

"i'm not making you a q—"

"and then," i interrupt, "we can talk business."

photography



HYPOTHETICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE PARADOX.

Healing is rare. Some scientists have argued that the conditions needed for healing — for example, a safe environment, a calm and equally weathered voice, a warmth extracted from something celestial, that loving quality in the humans we center ourselves around — are so rare that they are nearly impossible to attain. These researchers posit that frail, newborn hope cannot last very long if, from birth, it is pulled in unsavory directions and forced to submit to apathy.

Forgiveness has not yet evolved a fear of predation. Many attempt to study how emotions form in the human brain, but a developing theory questions the overall capability of emotions to integrate into one, singular personality. In simple terms, no one has ever truly been able to pinpoint why some people become prey and others end up lurking as the opposite. Forgiveness is another species of hominid entirely, and it is not predicted to survive past another few centuries as it always ends up submitting to its fate, never running away and seemingly lacking any indicators of fear.

Those who have healed are too far away. True recovery may exist somewhere in the universe, but at a distance so great that reaching it would be nearly impossible. Divine miracles exist, and we, as a society, have seen them, but it seems unlikely that we're destined to evolve into safety any time soon.

Those who have healed are deliberately avoiding us. The hypothetical healed individuals perceive themselves as superior to humanity for any reason, and therefore refuse to contact the struggling despite being aware of our existence. Some suggested reasons for this avoidance have been that we are not useful to them, our existence is too primitive compared to theirs, or we're simply too unpredictable for their tastes.

True healing does not exist. This controversial explanation of the paradox insists that healing can never truly manifest in a human being, because our skin scars too easily and we don't get a new one unless we're lucky enough to have it burnt up, our bodies manifesting as suns above the flames. Humans can be stained, and irreversibly so. It's more common than one may think.

It is the nature of intelligent life to destroy itself. Solace is too busy desecrating its own potential to gaze upon what has already been desecrated.

i.

I hope this is my most beautiful poem; I am going to make something beautiful for you, my most beloved. I am going to suck the weaponry out, peel off the infected flesh with my teeth, and I am going to make myself useful. I wasn't molded into something that attacks with precision; God would not gift me with breath if I was destined to waste it, to carve the air into little sharp arrowheads for my just-in-case crumbling paranoia. I'm not dead yet, for God's sake.

I am going to make myself useful, after I fight my way out, and write a beautiful poem, but for now their teeth are scraping up my heels and gnawing into the tendon. I can't remember what you smelled like, but I don't think it was gasoline or smoke or the disaster that blurred into dark spots of more disaster, like shaky inkblots on parchment, suffocating us with the scent of charred flesh. Smoke, smoke, and more smoke until it kills you,

but I can't die before I figure out how to reverse our hearts, each valve and ventricle visible on the research table as I reach across the cool metal

and touch you for the last time—*No, darling, that's the opposite of beautiful*. No, darling, that *is* beauty, stripped of its clothing and deception. Enlightenment is unattainable until you find someone who is willing to hollow you — to scoop your essence out, turn you into a raw defenseless mess of creature — and nurture you into life again, forever altered.

ii.

The artist missed a few details on the painting, but I don't know how to explain it. I don't think he painted you beautiful enough. I don't think it looks like you. I don't think the being that you are will be satiated with a painted existence, or maybe my neuroses are ruining the picture again, too out of place for the rigidity. Too controlling. On the other side of the glass, the artist is exaggerating the other details, inverting you into that terraformed, mirrored version of yourself where you're consumed by envy and it's safe to be just like my father.

I think I've fallen back into it, the reprehensible shadow puppetry in which I animate you into something that you will never be, because I don't want to feel guilty for leaving. The truth is that I do love you, but I don't know how to make up for it. In the holy books I've read, there is always a test of faith. I love you and I always come back after the bite gets stitched up.

iii.

I think I might have rabies but my doctor says I haven't seen the animal in nineteen years and this is what they call a *delusion*. I don't think so, because I hear Him, you know. God whispers to me at naptime. I tricked my body into forgetting how to swallow and now I choke on everything I eat and one day it's going to kill me if the paranoia doesn't get me first. I'm scared of dying but mostly I am scared of dying before I go to my first wedding. I'm not sure what I'd wear if I make it that far. I don't want to overshadow the bride, and I want the bride to be my mother and I want the groom to be someone my father's unsteady mind would despise, and I am telling you all of these things very bluntly, with my bare flat affect and run-on sentence, because I want someone to recoil at the sight of me before I die but I just don't think it's working.

Excerpts from The Reposing Force of the Great Lakes (First Draft)

Kira's hands shake as she pushes open the door to their public restrooms, each digit trembling, trembling in harmony with the pulse of her heartbeat, so fast and fragile in the moment. The memory forms a film over her eyes, and now all that she can see is Ivy White, belittling her in front of everyone else. Ivy White, accusing her. Ivy White, and her anger.

She shouldn't let this bother her. Ivy clearly has... issues. Kira doesn't even know this poor woman, but she clearly has... issues.

With one hand against the wall to stabilize herself, Kira turns on the faucet. When she feels steady enough, she splashes her face with the cold water - they taught her how to do this in therapy - and the cool shock of it slows her down, allows her to regain the composure she tries so desperately to juggle at all times.

It's not like every recruitment interview goes smoothly. She's been doing this for four years, she's had her fair share of adverse experiences. Not everyone can be as considerate as Kira Ramos. There have been protests, there have been infiltration attempts, there have been mistakes.

The worst part of this, the aspect of the situation that poses a more immediate threat, is the fact that Kira finds Ivy just as impressive as she finds her annoying. She's got bite. She's brave, and her bravery is of a nature that Kira cannot yet comprehend. Ivy's personality could crush Kira with the brush of a fingertip.

No. Ivy White will not join the Reposing Force if she can help it.



Excerpts from The Reposing Force of the Great Lakes (First Draft)

She tries to ignore them.

She moves throughout the lobby at viper-strike speed, winding and twisting through like she's on a heroic journey to Avoid Kingsley And Rowan. She ducks underneath the crowd, tries to find her escape, but there are simply too many people here for it to be effective. Too many metahumans in this crowded world. Too many people seeking help from the Force that they will never receive in the way that they deserve. Too much selfishness. Too much admiration. Too many people talking to her, too many people perceiving her presence in the universe. Too much, too many. It's all just so much, so overwhelming. Ivy melts over the flooring, tries to keep herself intact until she can leave.

She glances back - Kingsley doesn't look pleased. Rowan has him in tow, his hand tightly clasped around Kingsley's hand, dragging him through the chase. He looks like he's tired of Rowan's antics - he must do this often - and he has the body language of someone who would rather be a corpse than be in the current situation.

But when he catches Ivy's gaze, he manages a smile and an awkward wave with his other hand, and it's entirely infuriating. Today was a mistake. Today was, potentially, the biggest mistake of her whole existence. She transforms into something mistaken, a shimmering, shifting inhuman being composed only of fallacy and untruths. She melts, again, over the flooring, and she groans when she pulls her gaze away.

The ridiculousness of the situation does not escape her. It's not as Kira suggested; they're not stalking or harassing her. For some reason, she wishes they were stalking or harassing her instead of the unfathomable, insurmountable truth, which is: they care about her. They're chasing her down to wish her goodbye after meeting her. They're being kind. Ivy is not too familiar with kind; she is, however, familiar with intimidation. It's easier, sometimes, to deal with facing violence than to accept the opposite.



front page

Interviewer: "Where were you around 7 AM on November 18, 2017?"

Girl: I was asleep. I keep telling you that I was asleep. I keep telling you that the birds were singing at night and the skies were casting light over us even before the sunrise. I keep telling you that I was dreaming about killing my father and that's my alibi. Why don't you believe me?

*We note that **The Interviewer** smiles here.*

Interviewer: "Let's rewind a bit. Do you remember where you were born?"

Girl: I was born in Mears, Michigan, I think, but it might've been Kalamazoo, or maybe Phoenix. I remember that when I was born I almost suffocated, and then I suffocated and they couldn't bring me back. That's not relevant. I'm pretty sure it was Lincoln, final answer. Why don't you look me up in your little system?

Interviewer: "Keep in mind that I'm the one asking the questions."

Girl: Or what?

***The Interviewer** coughs, and wipes his mouth with his sleeve. There's a string of wetness that definitely needs to be recorded in the session's notes. Another calm smile plastered over void.*

Interviewer: "Would you have made a different decision in her place?"

Girl: No.

Interviewer: "You answered that awfully fast."

Girl: Don't you think I've asked myself the same question? Remove your hand from over my mouth and peer inside. My jaw has been tamed and I can't hurt you anymore. I should've taken the gun out of the sock drawer. I should've kept my mouth shut. I am telling you all of this raw and without coating and I command you to believe me when I tell you that I was asleep that day until I heard the screaming and I'll admit if someone had to die in divinity's plan for us, I'm glad it was him but I didn't do it. I don't remember the wings or the singsong chirps but I remember his halo of dead pigeon and extinct plant matter and I remember the living birds circling above us. So, no. I would've done the exact same thing and I wish I could say that I'd do it stronger in comparison but that isn't very fair to either of us. I think my strength stayed inside of her and rendered me defective by the lack of it.

Interviewer: "Do you have a pen on you?"

Girl: What?

The Interviewer passes it a pencil, pushing it towards the Girl and letting it roll in the Girl's direction. He sets down a piece of paper.

Interviewer: Answer carefully. We've got time.

True or false?

Circle only one.

1. You were alive on November 18, 2017.

TRUE | FALSE

2. You are in love and in love and in love and this time it's really true you swear.

TRUE | FALSE

3. You are in love and in love and in love and this time it's really true you swear and you aren't going to let the miserable fatherwraith scraping your agony to the surface defeat you. You won't let him strangle you or lead you away by the hand. You won't let him take you.

TRUE | FALSE

4. You won't let him take you.

TRUE | FALSE

Print your name on the following line: _____

Print your name on the following line: _____

Print your name on the following line: _____

5. Did you write it three times?

YES | NO

6. Did he do it three times?

7. You obey too much.

TRUE | FALSE

8. You can't disagree with me. You're too scared. You'd follow my orders off the cliffside to avoid inconveniencing God.

TRUE | FALSE

Girl: What kind of test is this?

MONTHLY PLAYLIST / DECEMBER 2023

- 1. MINDS WITHOUT FEAR by IMOGEN HEAP**
- 2. EXHUMED by ZOLA JESUS**
- 3. SIGNS by BLOC PARTY**
- 4. MY SECRET FRIEND by IAMX**
- 5. MARBLE HOUSE by THE KNIFE**
- 6. CREATOR, DESTROYER by ANGEL OLSEN**
- 7. TOGETHER by THE XX**
- 8. THE DARKEST STAR by DEPECHE MODE**

