

Milligan College

The Phoenix

2015

The 2015 *Phoenix*

The Phoenix has a long history at Milligan, but this is only the 4th edition to feature an interdisciplinary and multi-genre approach. This year's *Phoenix* features a range of work, including research, essay, short fiction and poetry. Of particular note is a spoken-word piece by the talented Mickey Woods, whose transcribed poem generates an energetic and powerful cultural critique. The contributors come from many different disciplines and showcase the talented writing from across our campus. Be sure to take a look at the feature—an excerpt from Rachel Hulshult's *Comic Con Tales*, a playful reinterpretation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. And in our new tradition, *The Phoenix* also highlights two excellent analytical pieces as well. Special thanks to Samantha Baugus, Darcie DeLong, and Adam Derrick for their work on the magazine for the past two years, and best wishes to them as they graduate.

The Prologue

By: Rachel Hulshult

NOTA BENE: Below is an excerpt of a longer work, a modern version of the *Canterbury Tales*, featuring young adults traveling to Comic-Con, a national convention held annually in San Diego featuring all things nerdy and pop culture related. The full collection of six short stories follows the journey of six twenty-somethings as they drive across California on their way to Comic-Con. They pass the time by telling science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories inspired by all of their favorite movies, television shows, books, and other aspects of popular culture. With this project, I was able to combine my love of writing and my love of all things popular culture and it helped me discover what kinds of stories and characters I most like to write.

Included here are the prologue, Henry's story, Ian's story, and the conclusion. Willow is the narrator and the heart of this group of friends, and these stories explore the bridge between childhood and adulthood for her and the other characters, as they try to navigate this transition period in their lives.

"Oh my gosh! Seriously? Thank you so much!" I said into the phone, waving off the questioning looks of my friends. "Yes. I'll be in San Diego for the next few days, but I'll be back in plenty of time to start. I'm so excited I got the position. I can't wait to start next week! You, too. Thanks again. Bye."

"So you got it then?" Michelle asked. I nodded. She ran over and hugged me, buzzing with excitement. "Oh, that's awesome Will. So exciting. You'll be a regular Scully in no time."

"I'm a glorified intern at the moment, Em; it's just an entry-level position," I laughed. "Besides, I have no plans to be a field agent."

"Well, cyber expert at the FBI still sounds super exciting," she said.

Ian came into the front door. "The bags are all packed. We're ready when you are." He noticed that I was no longer on the phone. "Oh, so how'd it go?" he asked hesitantly, trying to gauge my reaction.

I tried to feign disappointment to trick him, but failed. "I got it!"

"We all knew you would," he smiled. "You guys ready?"

"Yep," we answered simultaneously.

We all piled into Ian's slightly beat-up SUV to head to Kirk's house. He was the last stop before we began our nine-hour journey to Comic-Con. I'd never been and could hardly wait. As I slid into the middle seat beside Michelle, David and Henry both produced something from the back, yelling, "Congratulations!!"

"You guys are awesome." I smiled at the cupcakes. "What were you going to do with them if I didn't get it?"

Henry smiled. "We knew you would, but we figured cupcakes could also serve as a good pick-me-up."

"True," I laughed. "We better go get Kirk; he'll probably be running late."

We drove the few minutes to his house, and Ian laid on the horn. Kirk stumbled out of the door, wheeling a suitcase and struggling with a Cyberman helmet and various other metallic body parts. In the car, we all just stared. As he nearly dropped an arm, I jumped out of the car to help him. "So this is the costume you've been working on all this time," I said taking the helmet and arms from him. "It's awesome."

"Thanks," he smiled. "You're practically floating, so I'm guessing you got the job."

"Yes," I beamed at him. He reached to hug me, which was difficult with our bulky loads, but nonetheless sincere. "I'm proud of you," he said into my ear.

We piled his stuff in the trunk, leaving Ian a sliver of rear window out of which to see. Our luggage had become a Tetris puzzle that we'd later have to carefully disassemble. Slamming the trunk, we climbed back into the car and pulled away from the curb.

We had only been driving for around ten minutes when Kirk asked if we could break out the cupcakes.

"For breakfast?" Henry asked.

"Hey," Kirk said. "We're celebrating Willow's awesome achievement. Besides, this is our last weekend to be childish and ridiculous and what happens at Comic-Con stays at Comic-Con, right? And the real world, where for some reason it's frowned upon to have cupcakes for breakfast, doesn't start until after. So, yes. Cupcakes."

"Works for me," David said, opening the plastic container and offering it to me. "Here, Will, you get first dibs."

I sat there, eating my purple-icinged cupcake and watching the city pass by. My excitement hadn't worn off yet, but I still didn't want to think too much about the real world, whatever that was. Not yet. I looked around the car, Ian driving, bobbing his head slightly to the murmur of the music, having already wolfed down his cupcake. Kirk, beside him, cupcake in one hand, phone in the other, updating his Twitter for what would likely be the first of many all-caps Comic-Con related tweets. Michelle sat beside me, looking contemplatively out the

window, probably crafting some awesome story in her head. David and Henry sat in the back, heads bent over a map, arguing over which route was best, though Ian would likely just take his own directions anyway. It was kind of funny; we'd come from all over the country and had such different backgrounds, but our love of all things pop culture had given us a common ground. From that we had built some pretty remarkable friendships. That's why this trip was kinda bittersweet. Sure, Comic-Con would be fantastic, but afterwards, we would all be off to our separate jobs and internships and what-not. It hadn't really hit me until they'd called about my new job. It's not like we'd be going far, but still, who knew where we would end up?

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After driving for another few minutes, David broke the silence, which was beginning to grow awkward, and said: "You know, nine hours is a long time. Surely there's something we can do."

Kirk was the first to offer an idea, turning in his seat. "License plate tag!" Ian looked sideways at him.

"Really, Kirk?" I said with a smile, raising my eyebrows. "I'm just guessing, but I don't think that's what David was suggesting."

"Oh, come on! People from all over come to Comic-Con. Look! There's Wisconsin!" Kirk said.

Michelle chimed in now. "Yeah, and there's California, and there's California, and there's, well, North Dakota."

Ian, who had been driving silently this whole time, said, "Okay, I'm bored just listening to you guys. Surely there's another way to pass the time."

"Hey," Henry joined the conversation from the back saying, "Turn up the radio," as Carry on my Wayward Son began. "We could sing." And he jumped into the chorus; Ian and Michelle both yelled "NO!" at the same time.

"Okay, so no singing," Kirk said with a smile. "We could...."

I had been thinking and jumped excitedly. "What if we each tell a story. You know, like the Canterbury Tales?"

"The Comic-Con Tales?" David smiled. "I like it. Are there any parameters?"

"Nah," I said. "Let's just keep the stories interesting. Oh, and how about no direct fan fiction. Let's make up our own characters."

"Ooh, that's brilliant," stated Michelle. "Let's say we leave some time to come up with ideas and then go."

Soon after, Henry jumped in. "Well," he said. "If someone's not itching to go, I'll go first."

"Go for it," I said. "You gonna wow us with a historical epic?"

"Nah, I'm taking a break from history this trip," he smiled. "Okay. So. It was a dark and stormy night..." Henry began.

"Really?" Ian turned to look at him with a smile as he slowed the car at a red light.

"That's how you're gonna start your story? That's super original."

"No, not really," Henry laughed and any tension in the car vanished as he began to tell his story. "Anyway, it was a dark night, but not particularly stormy. There were two men, facing each other at a deserted intersection that hadn't been used in years..."

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Henry's Story A Deal at the Crossroads

"You summoned me?" A man had appeared suddenly out of nowhere. He was dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit, but he still seemed disheveled somehow. He turned to face Jim, the man who had called him.

A face of strong angular features with dark sunken eyes turned to face Jim. They stood at a crossroads, the intersection where two long-since-abandoned dirt roads met. The full moon hung like a lantern in the night sky, the stars twinkling fireflies around it. Jim stared at the man in black.

"So, you're supposed to grant wishes, right?" Jim asked.

"No. Wishes implies a lack of price," the man in black spoke warily but charmingly, as if he'd had this conversation dozens of times and just wanted to get the job done. "I can grant what you desire, yes." He continued. "But it will certainly not be free. It's a deal, a contract, signed in blood, blah, blah, blah."

"I'll give you whatever you want, man." The words tumbled out of Jim's mouth before he could think too much about what exactly he was promising.

The man looked at him unblinking and then sighed. "Of course you will," he said. "You're new, by the way," the man in black considered. "How did you know how to summon me?"

"I... one of my friends, he got an epic promotion last month. He showed me how he did it."

"Did he tell you when his payment is due?"

"No. And I didn't ask. He said it was worth it," he fidgeted, shifting his weight from one side to the other. "Look, I'm desperate, man. Are you gonna help me or not?"

"Don't test my patience, human." Venom crept into the man's voice momentarily, but he soon slipped back into his bored monotone. "I will help you as long as you're willing to pay. What is it that you want?"

"It's my kid brother, Andy," he paused and took a deep breath. He pulled out a picture from his wallet. It showed a young family of three. The father looked like Jim, but younger and less broken by the world. The bright green eyes of the beautiful red-haired woman beside him sparkled even in the still photograph. Their daughter stood between them, the spitting image of her mother, though her eyes weren't quite as piercing. Jim's glance shifted from the man in black to the photograph in his own hand as he spoke. "My brother's in a bad place, man. He's got a daughter. Cara. And she's real sick. It doesn't look like she'll make it much longer. And Andy, well he don't make much money and her medical bills ain't cheap. See, her mother, Juliet, she... she died last year." Jim's voice quivered slightly when he mentioned Juliet. "That's when Andy went a little crazy, man. He, he lost his job and I, I tried to be there for him, you know, but he wouldn't let me. I've gotten all mixed with the wrong crowd and crap that he don't want around Cara." Jim sighed. "I mean, I get it, but it was all too much for him to handle. And if he loses her, man, I don't know what'll happen."

"As interesting as this little tale is, what exactly do you want me to do?" The man in black spoke slowly, deliberately, chewing on every word to make sure they had the desired effect, treating Jim as though he were a child who was being reprimanded for the third or fourth time.

"I, I want you to heal her. Cara. Just make her better. Andy needs her, she can help him. He needs to move on from Juliet's death." Jim's voice wobbled again on uttering Juliet's name.

"Do you?"

"What?" said Jim, caught off guard.

"Do *you* still need to move on from your sister-in-law's death? Your voice cracks when you say her name." An amused smile spread across the man's face as he watched Jim's expression. He was almost enjoying himself. Almost. "Did you... did you love her, James?"

"I..." Jim stood in silence for a long time, but then the words came tumbling from his mouth, words that he'd kept locked inside for years. "Look, man, I'm nothing. My brother, he was always the stand-up one; the straight-A student, the one who went to college, found a girl that our parents loved. I'm just the high school drop-out. The deadbeat druggie who spends time in and out of prison. She wouldn't have loved me. She fell in love with Andy, what was I supposed to do? I was no good for her. They deserved each other. They were happy. It don't matter now I guess." He let his voice fade into the silence, which hovered over the pair like a thick fog.

"I must admit, you've piqued my curiosity," the man in black finally answered. "But, what about your happiness? Instead of wallowing in your own self-hatred, why not ask for money? Go somewhere exotic and waste away the rest of your miserable little life with women and booze. This so-called brother of yours stole the woman you loved. Are you truly willing to trade everything for him?"

"I told you, man, she was better off with him. Neither of them knew how I felt. And Juliet. She would want Andy and Cara to be happy. I want them to be happy. They deserve to be happy together, to live decent lives."

"Awww." The man in black screwed up his face in mock sadness for a moment before adding dryly, "How sentimental. I'm getting all teary eyed."

"Go to Hell, man."

The man in black laughed, genuinely, not something he did often. "Been there, done that, bought the t-shirt. You know it's really not all it's cracked up to be. Too many noisy patrons to get any real work done. And there's the temperature, one level's too hot, the next too cold, it's never ending. And don't even get me started on the cell phone reception."

Jim sighed. "Look. I've made a mess of my life. I know I'll never amount to anything, but they, they still could." He paused and then added, desperate. "Just heal her. Please."

"I can do what you ask. But healing cancer is not easy; the price will be high. Are you sure you're willing to pay it? The hellhounds will be at your door rather soon, metaphorically speaking of course."

"I've told you. I'll pay whatever it takes."

"Alright, then."

The next day, Jim went to the hospital to visit Cara. He went while Andy was at work. He wasn't allowed into the room, but he watched her through the window. She didn't know he was there; she didn't really know him at all. She sat in her bed, playing with a stuffed dog and bear, pretending they were attending a party. Looking at her always made James think of her mother. As he watched her, a couple of doctors passed behind him. He overheard part of their conversation before they entered Cara's room. "It's unbelievable," one said. "The cancer's just gone. Vanished without a trace overnight."

A few months later, Jim sat alone on a park bench in the fog of the early morning. The man in black walked up and sat silently beside him.

"It's time."

"That's it?" Jim said, not turning his head. "No hellhounds, or drumbeats, or fiery furnaces?"

"Oh, don't worry, there's plenty of fire," the man in black said tonelessly. "I can call the hellhounds if you'd like something more elaborate."

Jim sat in silence for a while and then turned to the man. "Fine," he said. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be, I guess. Let's go."

The man in black and Jim stood up together. The man slowly reached out his hand to rest it on Jim's shoulder. His eyes seemed to flash completely black for a moment, but Jim was sure he'd imagined it. "Hold on," the man muttered. "It's a long way down."

Before they could move, a woman appeared out of nowhere with a fantastic burst of light. A bright light seemed to exude from her skin as if she were glowing from the inside out. It was nearly impossible for Jim to look at her. She turned to the man in black with a flash of red hair.

"Demonic filth. You will not harm this man." She spoke calmly, as if stating a simple fact.

Even the man in black had to shield his eyes from the light pouring from her. "Is that so?" He tried to muster some bravado into his voice, but he knew light trumped dark in the so-called celestial sphere. And he didn't seem to care anymore. "What's so special about him?"

"He has done an extraordinary thing and does not deserve to be punished."

"Deserve? Who cares what he deserves? I'm just collecting a debt. How about I call my hellhounds and we'll just see how extraordinary he is." But his words rang hollow, like he was saying them simply because he was supposed to be sinister and nasty.

"I could smite you before you could even raise your finger to whistle," she spat. "This has nothing to do with you, spawn. He used his deal to save the life of another, an act that had no direct benefit for him."

"I don't really care about the details. He called me. I delivered. A deal's a deal," he sighed. "He's like all the others: 'make me rich,' 'heal my kid or lover or dog,' 'make me pretty,' 'save the freaking world.' They sell their souls for whatever. It makes no difference to me. I make the deals and collect the price. It's my job. He knew what his price was. You can't just come in here and..." Before he could finish his thought, the woman put her fingers gently to his forehead. He screamed as two beams of light shot out of his eyes. His lips twisted into a smile an instant before he vanished in a puff of black dust which floated, calmly silent, to the ground.

She turned to Jim, who stood speechless, unable to move or even think straight. "I cannot let you die this way," she said. "Not many would make the sacrifice that you did, even for family. You don't deserve to go to Hell."

Jim just looked at her. He blinked and she was gone, leaving a burning afterimage in his eyes, an image that was branded in his mind forever. He had not been able to look at her directly, but he could never shake the thought that those eyes that had bored into him when she spoke were a startling shade of green.

"Whoa," said Kirk. "That was pretty intense."

Michelle smiled. "But awesome. You could totally write for a show like 'Supernatural.'"

"You're up, Ian," Kirk said, turning in his seat.

Ian was silent for a minute before answering. "I think I'd better concentrate on driving."

"Oh, come on," Kirk looked sideways at him. "You can talk and drive."

"Yeah," added Henry. "I've heard you tell stories and jokes and stuff, I know you've got it in you."

"Alright," Ian consented. "I figured you guys wouldn't let me out of it. Okay, it's about a guy around our age..."

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Ian's Story The Force is Strong with This One

He didn't want to go. He knew he should. Not that it mattered either way; it wasn't like he had much of a choice in the matter. He was a "prodigy," after all, as the adults at the orphanage never stopped reminding him. And he was eighteen; it was time for him to make his own living. He was going to overcome his poverty stricken upbringing and bring hope and charity to the other wayward orphans... or something like that. As if that were the easiest thing in the world and didn't put a mountain's worth of pressure on his already struggling shoulders. All of these thoughts and more raced through Luke's mind as the limousine sped down the busy highway. He should have been excited; there he was on his way to one of the most elite technological business corporations in the world, and he wanted to be anywhere else. It wasn't that he didn't like fiddling with computers, he did, but there was a big difference between hiding in your bedroom and passing the time writing codes and working on the best equipment money can buy. Also, he didn't know (and had no desire to know) all the things the corporation did in their spare time. And he had absolutely no idea what they wanted him for. The adults at the orphanage didn't stop feeling grateful and relieved long enough to wonder why, out of all the kids in this run-down blot of a town, they would choose him. But he knew he was nothing special.

Luke turned to look out the back window, his town no longer visible in the distance. Not that it was much to look at anyway. It was grey most of the time, like all the other towns in the Sprawl. Old dilapidated buildings, empty storefronts, entire families living on the street, while the people up there in the Haven swam in their opulence. No families went hungry there. Those advertisements that flashed across the media screens every few hours, in the cottages of those few in the Sprawl who could afford one, showed all the benefits to living there, all the amenities that came with your brand new home. Homes, by the way, that did everything for you. They washed your laundry, made your beds, you could even get ones that would cook three meals a

day for you. Of course you had to have money, piles of money, to purchase even the tiniest apartment in the Haven. He couldn't even have afforded a window from one of those houses. That was why he had no choice but to accept the offer to work at their pretentious tech corporation. Maybe he could get a grand job as a computer programmer or corporate businessman. Those were the only jobs worth having these days; business, advertising, and information technology. Nothing else made any money. Luckily for him, he liked computers.

The gleaming metal city in the distance grew larger as the limo approached it. Luke's body tensed. He had no idea what to expect, other than scorn at having come from the Sprawl. The limo pulled silently into a large parking garage full of the fanciest cars; there were even a handful of state-of-the-art hover car prototypes. The boss, Mr. Oswald, had come to escort him personally in one of the company's best limos. He waited for the chauffeur to open the door. He smiled at Luke, but Luke didn't trust that smile any more than he trusted the ads that flashed across his media screen every day.

"Well, Luke, we're here," Mr. Oswald said. "I'm sure you're excited to meet your coworkers and find out where you'll be living."

Luke slung his tattered black backpack over his shoulder and followed him silently. One foreboding footfall after another, he marched up to the imposing circular skyscraper that was Haven Technology Incorporated.

The atrium was even larger than he had expected, and he'd expected it to be pretty big. A large metal desk, like a crescent moon, sat in the center of the room, elevators lining the walls to either side. People in expensive looking business suits walked by, focused intently on their destination. He looked down at himself and felt out of place in his faded black Batman t-shirt and tattered jeans, even though it was his favorite shirt because it had been given to him by a kid at the orphanage.

A young woman sat at the desk, rapidly typing on a blue-green image of a keyboard projected on the desk's smooth surface. She smiled at them as Mr. Oswald led Luke to an elevator. The elevator arrived quickly and as they stepped inside Luke turned to view the buttons. His eyebrows shot up. They weren't printed with numbers; they were each made up of a tiny screen with the name of the destination scrolling across it. The floors had titles like "advanced algorithms and data structure" and "artificial intelligence department." But that

wasn't the weirdest thing about the elevator buttons. There were far too many of them; there couldn't possibly be that many floors, could there?

Mr. Oswald saw Luke staring and said, "Many of those are for private offices and special divisions. For now, you'll only need this one" he pointed to one reading 'entry-level offices: getting to know the technology and basic programming,' "and this one." He pointed to another that read 'entry-level male apartments.'

Well, that didn't answer why there were so many buttons, but Mr. Oswald didn't offer anything else. He had already pressed the "entry-level offices" button and the elevator zoomed upwards. Luke looked out through the solid glass that made up the back of the elevator. The landscape surrounding the building was all sparkling metallic houses and artificial green lawns and fancy hover car prototypes; he even noticed one house that had a white-picket fence and a little robotic dog.

They arrived at the floor with a faint 'ding' and Mr. Oswald led him down a long corridor lined with doors. Their shoes clacked obnoxiously on the smooth gray-tiled floor. The sound reverberated off the metallic walls and ceiling. This sound and the stark whiteness of the walls made the hall feel sterile and empty, the copper ceiling giving the whole place a cave-like atmosphere. The doors lining either side of the hall were stainless steel. There were no visible light fixtures; the light seemed to emanate from within the ceilings and walls themselves. The doors were marked with nothing but black numbers; the numbers here were in the 700s. Mr. Oswald finally stopped at door number 745 and opened it. Luke stepped inside and gasped. The room was enormous. It stretched outwards on both sides, but there were no other doors leading into the hallway. How could that be possible? If the room were this big, there should be doors lining the wall that was now behind him. The first coherent thought he formed was *it's bigger on the inside* and he couldn't help but grin. They had only had one media screen at the orphanage and all it had played were old sci-fi movies and television shows. Not that he was complaining, he loved that stuff, but now he inevitably found pop culture references in everything. Doctor Who was especially close to his heart; he even carried with him a miniature TARDIS a friend at the orphanage had made him out of wire and blue foil.

Mr. Oswald smiled his disconcerting smile. "We have special technology that allows us to fit the desired amount of space into the small spaces we are given. You'll get used to it."

"Yeah, Time Lord technology." Luke murmured under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Right," Mr. Oswald said. "This is where you'll be doing most of your work. These computers are state of the art; much better than anything you've ever touched, I'm sure."

As Luke had recovered from observing the size of the room, he began to look closer at its contents. Cubicles lined the walls, each one containing a medium sized table with a screen inlaid in the surface. Employees stood working on floating holographic images at various stations throughout the room. Other than a few sideways glances, no one paid any attention to Luke and Mr. Oswald. In fact, they seemed to concentrate even more when Mr. Oswald entered the room. Mr. Oswald led Luke closer to one of the tables and waved his hand over it. A 3D image of a cube formed above it. The cube was made up of millions of bluish-green numbers, letters, and symbols, moving rapidly. For a terrifying moment, Luke wondered whether he was about to be unplugged from the Matrix and shown the horrifying truth of humanity.

"This is what you'll be trying to decode. You can access this image from any computer in the building if you're authorized to," said Mr. Oswald.

Luke stared at the cube. "I can't decode that. I work on two dimensional coding, like with a keyboard, on a screen. That's just jumbled characters. I don't know what you think I'm capable of, but I'm not Neo."

Mr. Oswald looked down at Luke with raised eyebrows. "Should I be impressed that you've seen *The Matrix*? Besides, by our standards, that's ancient technology."

Luke didn't let it bother him. And how advanced was their technology anyway? "Right. Of course it is." He answered. "Decoding 3D holographic Rubik's cubes. Very advanced, I get it. Look, surely you have people who are more qualified for stuff like this."

"No. You are perfectly qualified. In fact, it has to be you. We are not asking you to decode it right this minute. I was only showing you what you will be able to do before long. You will decode this cube for us, Luke."

Luke distinctly heard the threat hidden in those words.

At that moment, a young man came up and addressed Mr. Oswald and Luke.

"Hello, you must be Luke. We're pleased to have you here; I'm sure you'll fit right in. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to your apartment."

Something felt off about the people here. Like they were putting on some kind of performance. Luke just wanted to get to his own room, away from all the elite business men and women.

Over the next few months, Luke wrote codes, created programs, and hacked into advanced computers. With the Haven's technology, he was able to do so much more than he ever could have at home. He worked mostly by himself, but someone was always keeping a close eye on him. He treasured the time he was able to spend alone in his room, reading and re-reading the only book he owned. It was a tattered, barely-together copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* with at least half the pages dog-eared. He had had all the *Harry Potter* books at one time, but he had lent them out to other kids at the orphanage. He knew the whole story by heart anyway, and he often escaped into the world of Hogwarts in his downtime. He also spent a fair amount of time writing in his journal. He didn't have anyone to talk to, so he made do by talking to himself. It was a threadbare leather journal that he'd been writing in for as long as he could remember. Writing his thoughts down also helped him to work out all the coding he was doing.

He knew they were monitoring him; he just wasn't sure why. He still felt uneasy about the people around him, but his love of what he was doing began to overshadow that. Mr. Oswald hadn't mentioned the cube again, though he had been to check up on Luke several times. Luke knew it was only a matter of time before something went wrong. He knew that he wouldn't like whatever they were hiding from him, but he had resolved to deal with that whenever it came up.

It wasn't long before his habits were disrupted. Mr. Oswald came in one afternoon as Luke was working. He pulled him into an empty adjoining office. It wasn't a good sign that Mr. Oswald wanted to speak with him alone. That hadn't happened since he'd arrived.

"It's time. You're ready to decode the cube," Mr. Oswald said.

"I'm not decoding anything until you tell me what it's for."

"You say that as if you have that luxury."

"What's that supposed to mean?" spat Luke.

"You think we picked you out of the hundreds of thousands of people in the Sprawl based solely on your superior talent?" Mr. Oswald laughed humourlessly. "Where do you think that

talent came from? You think you were just born special? We made you, Luke, and you are ours."

Luke stared. He knew he was being mocked. He had known that there was something behind all this, that he wasn't special, but to hear Mr. Oswald say it was still unsettling.

"What do you mean 'you made me'? Unless I misunderstood all of biology, I'm pretty sure my parents made me. And I taught myself how to code," he added defensively.

"Yes, Luke, your parents conceived you, but we're the ones who implanted you with all your computer knowledge." Mr. Oswald spoke as if he were lecturing a five-year-old. "No one can teach themselves to code like you do."

Luke's outer shell of snide humour was cracking. "Implanted? Wait. You put something in my head?"

Mr. Oswald turned to Luke with a smile, not even trying to hide his enjoyment anymore. "You're our poster boy, Luke. Our new brand. The perfect rags-to-riches success story. If you can make it big, anyone can. We need all those vagrants in the Sprawl to believe they can become somebody." He paused, letting his words sink in; Luke was speechless. "We've been monitoring you for years. All those codes you stayed up late writing. You didn't know what you were doing, how advanced it was. You thought you were just playing with numbers and symbols, but the way you used them was unprecedented." He shook his head, sounding impressed. "Your skill and calculations and speed are extraordinary. The chip we implanted in your brain when you were an infant is even more powerful than we had expected."

"So, I was just some experiment for you to observe like a rat in a maze?"

"Not just for our observation, no. Besides, at least the rat knows it's in a maze. No, Luke you don't get it. You're the first subject that made it. You're the one that worked. And you're just the beginning. If this chip works on you, we can create chips for everyone, give people a knack for playing piano or building a car. All for an outrageous price, of course. You're the future of humanity, Luke. You should be proud."

"Yeah, and you could also make chips for building nuclear bombs or becoming a dictator 101 or... Wait. What do you mean I'm the one that worked? You've done this before. Aren't you afraid people will notice whose missing?" But even as he said it, Luke wondered who would miss him. Some of the kids at the orphanage would, of course, but they would be too terrified to say anything.

"We don't borrow kids that anyone cares about, Luke. We borrow the orphans, the weak and downtrodden. Sometimes we take the adults or orphans too old for the orphanage; they're often more than willing to work for us. You probably would have died in the street like your mother if we hadn't found you. We had to make sure you reached a certain age, though; the others died before they turned 18. But not you. We thought your hacker friend Thomas was going to be it. We brought him here when he turned 18, too. But he only made it a few days. His death was regrettable; we thought we had worked out the bugs in the chip. And Thomas was so close. But then it fell to you. And here you are, still standing. You're the first of our actual experiments to survive. And the first in a new generation of mankind. The stepping stone from this age to the next."

Luke stood shocked and silent. Everything was still, but Luke felt like the whole world was spinning. This can't be happening, he thought. Someone would have noticed, right? But then, he had always wondered why coding and programming came so naturally to him. He had taken it for granted. But Mr. Oswald wasn't one to joke and he was still staring at Luke with a triumphant smirk on his face.

Then, something Mr. Oswald had said hit Luke with the force of Thor's hammer. He spoke slowly. "Thomas. You took Thomas. His death was your fault."

Mr. Oswald stared at Luke; he morphed the triumphant expression on his face into one of fake pity. "Yes, that was unfortunate. The chip in his head malfunctioned and caused a brain aneurism."

Luke couldn't say anything for a long time. He wanted to slam Mr. Oswald's face into the table. Repeatedly. Mr. Oswald continued to stare at him.

"No," Luke finally said.

"What?"

"I said no. You think you can experiment on people and expect me to go along with your plan? If you wanted me to be your little prototype, you shouldn't have left my free will intact. I may well be the future, but I sure as hell am not going to be *your* future. Or your stepping stone or whatever you want me to be. You really want to see what this chip is capable of? Then, let's find out."

Luke walked over to the nearby table, waved his hand over it, and closed his eyes, focusing on every last bit of coding knowledge he'd always wondered how he knew. He began

rapidly typing on the keyboard that appeared beside the screen. Above, the holographic image of the cube appeared and began spinning faster and faster. As Luke continued typing, the lines of code making up the cube began to unravel. Stretching out in lines, they became a spinning vortex of numbers and letters. Luke opened his eyes, focusing on the complex commands he was giving to the computer system, his brows furrowed in concentration. Suddenly, with a loud click, all the computers in the building except the one Luke was using went off. Without the hum of the computers in the next room, the only sound was Luke's fingers tapping the keys and his own and Mr. Oswald's loud breathing. Mr. Oswald had been staring dumbfounded, but when the other computers went off, he reached for Luke's arm. But Luke was fast; he moved, the keyboard moving with him, never taking his hands away from the keys. With another click, all the lights went out. The vortex of symbols and numbers kept spinning and expanding, illuminating the room like an aquarium, a rippling bluish green haze. Luke felt Mr. Oswald grab his arm from behind. He swung his elbow back as hard as he could, feeling it connect with Mr. Oswald's nose with a crunch. With a few more keystrokes, he finished; the mass of blue-green lines of code hung suspended in a slowly spinning spiral. Luke turned and ran. The whole process had taken less than a minute. He bolted out into the hall, running past all the disoriented workers and pressed the button on the one elevator he knew would work, the one he had programmed to work, and down he went. Mr. Oswald still lay on the ground holding his nose, the blood seeping through his fingers. The employees had run into the office to help him, but he motioned them to follow Luke. They reached the elevators only to realize that Luke had only programmed one elevator to work long enough to get to the lobby; it was dead now. Luke reached the lobby. It was a confused chaos of blinking security lights and disordered personnel. No one knew what had happened and they paid no attention to another guy running through the frenzy. He caught snippets of confused conversation. "So much for the state-of-the-art power system." "No. Dammit! They cut the generators, too." Luke just kept running. Finally, he made it outside, but now what?

He ran down the streets, avoiding the ones with the largest and gaudiest houses. He made his way to the gates of the Haven. The Corporation hadn't been able to send word since all their systems were down, so security wasn't paying much attention to the cars and people flowing through the gates. As he hurried past the throngs of people and ducked through deserted alleyways, Luke was thinking of his friend Thomas. He remembered the day at the orphanage

when the adults had told him that Thomas was leaving. At first, Luke had been jealous. He hadn't been sure where Thomas was going, but he figured it would be better than the orphanage. Thomas was the oldest and had been the unofficial leader of the kids at the orphanage. The kids, including Luke, had looked up to him. They had been upset when he left, and devastated when he never came back. Luke had always assumed Thomas had moved on to bigger and better things. And then Luke had been taken like Thomas. How had Haven Tech. been getting away with things like this? There must be someone somewhere who knows what they're doing up there. Luke suddenly noticed how tired he was. How long had he been walking? He had no idea where exactly he was going, but he didn't see anything else to do besides to keep walking.

In a rather unsavory downtown of a corner of the Sprawl, Luke ducked into an alleyway to avoid a gang of young men walking down the street. Standing in the shadows, he heard someone quietly say his name.

"Luke?"

He jumped and whipped around to see who it was. It was a girl named Amy he had been friends with at the orphanage. She had vanished after some Haven guys had shown up. Luke thought she had been taken as well.

"Amy? I thought you were... where have you been?"

A tired laugh containing very little humor escaped her lips. "That's a long story. You look exhausted. Why don't you come sit down for a minute? We have fresh water. We thought the folks at Haven Inc. got you."

"Who's we? And how did you know..." Luke started to question how she had known that the Haven had taken him, but she interrupted him.

"Follow me," she said.

Luke followed her down a foul-smelling alleyway into the basement of a seemingly abandoned warehouse. But it wasn't abandoned; at least, not anymore. There were dozens of people in there, people he recognized, people he thought had moved or run away or died.

"What is this?" Luke asked.

"It's those so-called businessmen up at the Haven," Amy said. "They did this to us. They took children away from their siblings and friends away from friends. All to work at that bloody corporation. Mostly orphans, occasionally kids whose parents died under 'mysterious circumstances.' All of these people have run from the Haven authorities at one time or another.

Some of us lost our friends, our siblings, our neighbors. And now we're in hiding, trying to figure out what they want us for. We thought they had taken you."

"They did."

"How did you escape? Were any others there?" A hesitant eagerness crept into her voice.

Luke squirmed. "I, I'm not sure. But I don't think there was anyone else that we know there Amy. I'm sorry." He tried to put more into those words. "Besides," he continued, "we need to move, those Haven guys will be after me."

Amy looked at him. "I doubt they think you're that important, Luke. I mean, they can always 'recruit' other kids. Besides, we can't move everybody. Not all at one time."

"Well, we should be okay for a while, anyway." Luke said. "But you don't understand. They will come after me. We'll just have to be ready when they do. I won't let them do this to me. To you. To any of us." He paused, thinking. "Do you guys have any kind of computer?"

"Yeah," Amy said. "But it's not a very good one. It runs on an old line, though, off the grid, so the Haven can't track it." Luke had already started walking toward it. "Luke, what are you doing?"

"We're going to take back what's ours and stop those conceited bastards at the Haven from ever doing this to anyone again."

"Luke," Amy protested. "What are you on about? They have the most advanced security force and technology in the world, and we have a handful of kids and a run-down old computer. I know you're upset and, believe me, we get that better than anyone, but we're like ants to them."

"I'm important to them; trust me, they'll want me back," Luke explained to Amy and the rest of the kids all that he had learned at the Haven.

"Whoa," Amy said when he finished. "So you're like, the chosen one?"

Luke couldn't help but smile. "No. We're the rebel alliance. And Haven Tech? They're the Death Star. And a run-down old computer's all we need to blow the whole damn corporation to hell from the inside out."

"Dude," said Kirk. "That was awesome."

"Yeah," I jumped in. "I can't believe you didn't want to go and then you tell a story like that."

"Thanks guys," Ian seemed reluctant to acknowledge their praise. "It's a story that's kind of been brewing in my mind for a while now."

"Hey guys! Look!" said David excitedly from the back seat. "Only forty more miles to San Diego. We're almost there."

"I can't believe we're finally going to Comic-Con," I said.

"I know," said Kirk. "I can't wait to march the floor as the best Cyberman there."

We all laughed and joked the rest of the ride. The traffic was horrendous, but we passed the time by talking about the panels and celebrities we were most excited to see. I knew this was a sort of last hurrah for us, but I was determined to wait until we were on our way home to worry about the outside world. For the next few days, nothing mattered but movies and comic books and video games and television shows.

When we finally arrived in the infinite line of cars leading to the main parking area, we were all more than ready to get out of the car. I was contemplating what I was going to buy first when I happened to look down at my shirt; it showed Spock saying "live long and prosper," but there was a purple smudge on Spock's face.

"Guys. Why did no one tell me I had a giant purple icing blob on my shirt?" I asked.

They all said they hadn't even noticed, except Kirk. "I was gonna tell you before we got out of the car," he said. "I wanted to see how long it would take you to notice. It took you a while."

I made a face at him and then sighed. "I love this shirt. Does anyone have one of those cleaning pens?"

"I think I've got one somewhere. My mom sent me some things she thought I might need. Hang on." Henry rummaged in his backpack, which was thankfully on top of the pile. "Ah. Here you go, Will."

"Thanks." I scrubbed furiously at the stain, refusing to accept defeat. Finally, the stain seemed to be gone, but now the entire front of my shirt was soaked. And we had just been directed to a parking spot. "Lovely," I muttered. We climbed out of the car, stretching our cramped limbs. "Do you wanna change shirts?" Michelle asked. "We can open the trunk."

"Nah, it's okay," I smiled. "My shirts are all planned for certain days. And I forgot to bring an extra one. It'll dry."

As we were walking to the back of the line to claim our tickets, I thought about all the stories my friends and I had told. I thought about the car ride here, purple cupcakes, and my damp shirt. Our stories, our lives, were serious and ridiculous and everything in between. Like all the best movies and TV shows. Like our trip to Comic-Con. Like life.

•••

Sitting on the Steps
By: Katherine Siebenaler

Sitting on the Spanish Steps
Tourists take photos
People relax
Others watch the people
The sun beats down
The fountain flows.

But beneath all this bustle
In the midst of Rome
History lurks.
That water in the fountain?
It flows from Roman aqueducts.
Those people all around?
They stand where great poets
Once were inspired
And wrote the Romantic rhymes
And passionate poetry put into books
Studied by people, loved by people—
The people visiting these steps.
The top of the climb?
That is the Spanish Embassy
Where world politics were perhaps played
For three hundred years
And now is surrounded by people
From all around the world
Sitting on the Spanish steps.

Comfortable
By: Mickey Woods

My heart needs to lose weight, it is entirely too heavy
Drowned by the tears of a widow, filled with the dust of a dead soul
Death row never looked so heavenly

Dark spaces never felt so warm
Dark places never looked so much like Serta mattresses
Mama warned me of sins that always feel so comfortable

Today my favorite pair of jeans felt like Hitler.

I went to the mall and Footlocker made me put myself in his shoes
I cuffed the seams of those jeans over the laces; excuse me, I mean the faces
Of every shoe; excuse me, I mean every Jew that I ever knew

Today. I feel. Like Hitler.

I bet his suicide felt like clothes that have just come out of the dryer
I bet the violent scream of his pistol woke up his sleeping conscience
Be cautious of a lazy conscience for those who let theirs sleep often, often find coffins
much faster than they find breath

Today. I feel. Like Adolf Hitler.

I might've murdered you in my mind today because of the way you looked
No matter how long it took for you to get ready
I still loaded this semi-automatic Beretta, and aimed it your feathers
Your self-esteem was as high as I'd ever seen before I shot you down

...but it felt so good
It released dopamine from my soul
You see, there's no hope for me anymore, I'm not going overseas anymore
From now on I'm killing MY PEOPLE, IN MY LAND, EVERYDAY

So now, today I feel like Pastor (you fill in the blank)
I'm selling souls and they're going fast
That's the reason my home is filled from the floor with cash

If you want to trade your seat on planet Heaven for a seat on a throne, come to Sunday
school and we can dim your light
We have two services on Sundays, so come to either one and watch me tell my people
whatever I feel like

Today. I feel. Like Adolf Hitler...and Pastor (you fill in the blank)

The problem is that they're both basically the same person
Except one would kill you for your faith and the other would kill you for your purpose
I often ask myself why hatred doesn't feel like murder

Is it because...we've gotten...too comfortable?

Samsara

By: Caleb McNeese

On the mantle sat father's urn neatly laced with golden trim
"Forever in our hearts" clichéd in elegant style
The smell of meat trays and flowers lingered in the kitchen
Mocking the hour of mourning

I saw the occasional car slow in passing
The modest gesture at the sight of a wreathed door
Their grumbling crawl won't bring him back
And that bitterness left the phone on "Silent"

The fourth-day sun began to set and still I remained hopeful
For Lazarus to come forth from the eternal void
But there was no body for me to beckon
And I was no saint to call the dead

I walked upstairs, into the old study
The walls now finished with bright, blue paint
She stood at the window, holding life in her hands,
And when she smiled, the sorrow melted away

Asr (Afternoon Prayer)

By: Caleb McNeese

I first witnessed an Islamic prayer
In a mall parking lot.
The mid-summer sun distorting
Wisps of shadow atop the asphalt.
A family of four: mother, father, son, and daughter,
Prostrate with veiled nose and forehead kissing
The hot pavement.
Several passed on with looks of scorn
At the spectacle in the sporting goods
Parking lot.
The American patriots became
Gods unto themselves, and judges of
The kneel-bent plague.
“Terrorist”... “Towel-heads”... “Sauidis”
Five times a day, I later learned,
Was a pillar of their faith and
A testament of devotion and humility,
In a world full of pride.
Going back to that place, creations of God
Praying in distant tongue.
Heritage cried out to hate them,
Misunderstand them,
But the Spirit inside was certain
That our Allah smiled that afternoon.

Guild

By: Caleb McNeese

Born in the heart of the forest.
Mahogany, Redwood, and Maple,
torn from deciduous habitation.
Left naked, but destined.

In the hands of the craftsman,
molded, shaped, and fashioned.
From the mighty timbers,
into a vessel of hallowed beauty.

Coated to shine like waters unscathed
and laced with six cords of fiber,
adorning slender neck and hollowed body
with bronze and silver stringed dowry.

The sound first struck in dismay
can be mended by gentle touch.
Changing tension, more or less,
until all six strings know their dharma.

Lowered into hardened casket, lined
with fur, soft as rest.
Sealed away with lock and key,
sheltered safe from the elements.

Resurrection by callused fingertips
resting upon fret,
holding tortoise shell pick
against her strings.

His fingers placed firmly into chord.
The pick came down like rain
as the master began to play,
giving song to the forest's heart.

To(o) Spring
By: John Crowe

Stop.
but not because you have to.
Sing.
as the birds do,
but not because you have to.
Stop and look.
towards the east the sun rises,
the birds sing,
but neither has to.

So (too)
does the warm spring air enter the cold(?)
Do you feel the warm air on your skin,
lighting up your spirit towards bliss?
The rest of the world will warm too.
Warm up yourself,
but not because you have to.

Stop.
because the air is warm.
Sing.
as the birds do,
because you have a voice.
Stop and look,
towards the east the sun rises,
the birds sing,
and you should too.

Hues of Love
By: Mike Woods II

Before you entered my life, my world was black and white
No shades of gray, nor no contrast of light to see
But soon my days became wonderful and bright
Because your smile brought color back to me.
Alas! I now can see the sky, so spacious and deeply blue
Green grass flows on the hills without a clue.
The beauty of rich yellow flowers eager and peeking through
Never will compare to my first sight of you.
But suddenly you said goodbye... so cold like the harshest winter day.
You took the gift of hope, that I thought was good as gold
All my precious colors seemed to fade away
My love is forever sold...

Stars

By: John Steadman

Black was the canvas with subtle streaks of gray, an endless sea of disarray. A chilly air of emptiness haunted the expanse with a faint whisper that seemed to say nothing. Were they a million blinking eyes of a million shining angels looking down in condemnation as they glisten in some nameless gossip? Pale and dim were those bleak blotches that speckled across that canvas, as if their light could end the darkness. But to no avail, for darkness reigns over them, making them as seashells in the sand, vastly outnumbered and hopelessly overpowered, and yet... yet something in them seems more. Whether it be in their very exclusivity or bleakness of their nature, or perhaps they appear to us as phantom, or as beacons. Whatever the case, something in their nature calls out to us and our souls respond with longing. They are a guiding light to a broken heart. They are the very twinkle in love's own eye. We long for them and thus we imagine they for us. Yet we forget they are forever barred from us by an incomprehensible darkness, an infinitude of emptiness beyond conception. By nature we can only see them in the darkness, as if they are the very beacons of death. They are the harpies of the night, singing into the eternal shadows, becoming inescapable from our eyes. In them death masquerades through our minds as beauty, drawing the eye away from the darkness, the emptiness, the infinite void. Billions of shiny lures in a pond of darkness, and they dance across our eyes. If only we were so wise as to see through the water's break.

It was a night I'll never forget. Senseless conversation filled a dimly lit chamber, where candles seemed to dance as they flickered in approval. My absent eyes joined the dancers, hopping across the tables, and then, there. There. She wore it like she was a dance that none can find the steps to. It was only a little black dress, but it might as well have been made of the night cloud the way she swept across the ballroom sky. In that instant, then and there, when I saw her, I fell speechless though never have I had more to say. That explains my tongue-tied introduction, though, while clumsy, did manage to steal a smile. We then made acquaintance and made our way out, nesting by the river's bank beneath the warm urban nightlight. She spoke in symphonies and yet our conversation never fell out of key. There may have been a moon in that sky, I can't quite remember, for I hardly ever took my eyes from hers. She had woven mystery into those dark eyes and I have always been especially fond of puzzles. They were dark, but I never lost them in the night. For as the music of our voices floated up through the night air, her eyes fell into place from my view of the universe. Her eyes were in every sense two newborn stars, the dawn of a new lifetime, yet helplessly far away from me. And as I looked at her eyes that evening across this newfound infinity that separated us, I realized something. I could stare at them forever and never begin to fathom their depths. That would require spanning the universe. And so I dove. Headfirst. Hands tied. And I feel. And there was no coming back. I sojourned through the unfathomable and realized I was not alone. There was life in the universe after all. But when I awoke, she was gone. Gone as she came, with the sun; and I had never loathed a sunrise so. And looking back she was in every sense the night: a timeless beauty that spanned far beyond my feeble understanding of the universe. And as she was, she will always be. And as she was, I will always see in every darkened sky clouded with mystery. A night I'll never forget.

Stars

The Lone Café

By: John Steadman

A little bell clinks open to welcoming coffee air
Street glass stained with pastries, colored for delight
Drawing in an untelling hunger, hoping that it might
Bring an end to want. Fulfill some thoughtless care.

A table topped with black, and a napkin folded white,
The silver of the fork matches the hoary buttered knife.
A frosty cup of sweetener, packed with pixied packets,
The oaken chair across me filled by my soggy jacket.

Silvery lined machines of arson await a button's command
To fire into tiny cups the hellfire that burns, and brands;
Grounded, careless loves boil in each diminutive cup,
And slivers down their lips and on wasted minds it sups.

Empty guilty beauty, an ivy princess crowned,
Feasting on the harvest that drinks up all her grounds.
This spectacle is madness, a wordless endless book,
A silent blaring symphony, an ace upon the rook.

Three Poems
By: Darcie DeLong

Cool in the
pool of water,
glass mask on the
ledge. Float around,
town far off.
Wind rushes, leaves
brushing neighbors.
See what Van Gogh saw
in the trees.

Blast from the past,
an idiotic phrase,
the past is not bombastic.
It wastes away
slipping from
today to
yesterday. Subtle
in color is history's
tone, variations on light
from dawn
to dusk and starlight.
The past settles into
present, like pulling
on your mother's old coat.
All is not wall
but gradation,
shifting sands.

bearing

the wait
will bear you down
try to stand
up and fall

the weight
will last too long
try to move
and stand

now bears it all

A Life too Long: The Morality of Capitalism in The Watchmen
By: Darcie DeLong

In the film *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent tells Bruce Wayne, "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain." Throughout the movie the audience sees Dent lose his morals and become the villain he once hated. In *The Watchmen* Adrian Veidt is not revealed as the villain until the climax of the story. Until then, he is painted as a hero. Morality defines superheroes and villains. The former acts on a clear idea of right and wrong whereas the latter perform acts of immorality. The Oxford English dictionary defines morality as "Moral virtue; behavior conforming to moral law or accepted moral standards," "A particular moral system or outlook; moral thought or conduct in relation to a particular form of activity," "Conformity of an idea, practice, etc., to moral law; moral goodness or rightness," and "The quality or fact of being morally right or wrong; the goodness or badness of an action." Adrian believes his actions are for the good of all mankind, but are his actions morally sound as they do not value every single life involved? To approach and answer this question, I am examining *The Watchmen* through a Marxist lens. Who really has the good of the world at heart and who is drunk with power? In *The Watchmen*, the immorality of capitalism, a product of its long life, is exemplified and vilified by the actions of Adrian Veidt.

The distinction between the base and the superstructure in *The Watchmen* is clear, but contains some exceptions. An easy way to split it would be the heroes are the superstructure and the rest of the citizens are the base. But the heroes are not all active members of the superstructure at the beginning of the novel. Adrian Veidt, Dr. Manhattan, The Comedian, and Rorschach are the only members of the Minute Men who are working as heroes at the novels start. There is a distinction within this group, however. Adrian is capitalizing on his former caped identity by selling toys and work-out plans. Dr. Manhattan is working for the government. So

was the Comedian before he was defenestrated. All three are members of the superstructure. Rorschach has no approval from anyone to be doing what he is doing, he is breaking the law. In this way, Rorschach does not belong to the superstructure. He is a member of the base who thinks he is outside the base/superstructure system.

Money is also a clear divider between the base and the superstructure in this novel. Adrian is wealthy because of his toys, TV programs, and other business plans. Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian were both supported by the government and did not have to worry about money. Rorschach is homeless and penniless. Dan and Hollis are both living simple lives in the city, just normal people. They once had a connection to the superstructure but do not anymore. Laurie begins as a member of the superstructure as she assists Dr. Manhattan, but then becomes a member of the base again when he leaves. The government comes and takes away everything she has on page 23 of chapter three. Laurie has lost her source of income and her connection to a powerful member of the superstructure. Without these things she can no longer be a part of the superstructure. She goes to stay with Dan because they "are both leftovers" (10 of chapter 5). They are both part of the base because the superstructure moved on without them. Everyone else they know and love has accepted his or her role in the system. Dr. Manhattan, Adrian, Hollis, and all the villains they know have been accepted their new role in society. Dan and Laurie seem to be the only two former vigilantes who are unhappy with their new life. They are members of the base now but long to be part of the superstructure again. They get their wish, but it comes at a cost. They must compromise on their morality.

All the other background characters like the newspaper stand man and the young kid reading the comic are members of the base. They take in all the information given to them and accept it. They only exist in their daily work, not outside of it. The newspaper man begins

uptight and uncaring. He will not lend his hat to the young man reading the comic book. He tells the boy, "I don't lend things. It's my philosophy. In this world, you shouldn't rely on anyone on help from anybody. In the end, a man stands alone" (page 18, chapter three). But a few pages later, when the man at the stand sees the newspaper headline "Russia Invades Afghanistan" he changes his tune saying, "I mean... I mean we all gotta look out for each other, don't we? I mean, that's my philosophy..." (page 25, chapter three). The opinion he once held firmly was easily altered by a startling shift in the state of world. Suddenly the repetition of his life is interrupted by the superstructure's affairs. But as a member of the base he will have no control over if America goes to war or how war will affect his life.

Rorschach has the uncanny ability of making people aware of the base they are participating in. In his sessions with Dr. Malcom Long in chapter eleven, Rorschach debunks the ambiguity of morality in his own life. He tells him stories where he did the right thing that appeared to be the wrong thing. He explains how he came to see the world in black and white. Dr. Long also begins to see the world this way and it frightens him and costs him his wife. Rorschach makes him aware of the stark black and whiteness of life. The superstructure wants to present morality as a choice, pretend it is ambiguous. But in reality morality is black and white, which is maddening. Dr. Long can no longer continue on the same way he did before, chugging away as a part of the system. He has seen the simulacrum, he cannot reenter. Whereas other characters continue to be unaware of their place in the base, Rorschach knows the truth and shares it with others.

Morality among the retired heroes is questionable and changing. Rorschach has the most black and white view of morality so he does whatever it takes to get information for what is good. On pages 15 and 16 of chapter one, Rorschach breaks the fingers of a random citizen in

order to get information about the Comedian's death. Rorschach has a sense of right and wrong that seems to be much more complicated than the other characters. He kills the man in the prison who has been harassing him which seems like an immoral thing to do. But in Rorschach's black and white world this man was a villain and killing him was the right thing to do. And when Adrian's deed has been done, Rorschach believes the right thing to do is to tell the world what has happened. He does not care about Adrian's schemes of world utopia; he knows what is good and what is bad.

Dan and Laurie, once they become heroes again, seem to have a straightforward view of morality. They want to help the members of the base on a very basic level. They do not try to convince the people they rescue from the tenement fire of anything; they merely save their lives (pages 22-26, chapter seven). They have simple and straightforward view of what is good and what is bad. By the time Dan and Laurie are confronted with the morality of Adrian's actions, they have become more involved with the superstructure. They try to see the issue in black and white as they once did, but everything is complicated by their readmission into the superstructure. They are no longer sure what is right and what is wrong. In the end they choose to overlook Adrian's actions, implicating them in the act. In their final panels, Laurie and Dan discuss their future. They decide to remain in the superstructure a bit longer, scorning the base characteristic of settling down and having children. They want to continue adventuring (page 30, chapter 12). They do not seem to be troubled by Adrian's destruction anymore, solidifying their return to an ambiguous view of morality.

Dr. Manhattan does not seem to understand morality at all. On page 14 of chapter 4, when he is thinking back on becoming a crime fighter he says, "The morality of my activities escapes me." He questions the importance of the human race at all in chapter 11, he's not sure if

they are even worth saving. His own sense of morality has been replaced by logic and science. Dr. Manhattan is outside of the base/superstructure system, but he sees everything that goes on inside. Unlike Rorschach though he does not have morals of his own. In this way Dr. Manhattan is neither a hero nor a villain. He has no emotional investment in what is right or wrong. He knows the future and the past and understands why it comes to pass, but has no emotional involvement.

Adrian chooses to orchestrate an event that will end the threat of nuclear war, but at the cost of thousands of lives. He does not see the greater good as black and white like Rorschach sees. Adrian sees dollar signs. As he watches his video screens he tells his servants what stock to buy (page 8, chapter ten). There is more money to be made in a future where the people of the world do not blow one another up. He is the one with the gumption and the cleverness to think of such a plan. Adrian is the representation of capitalism in *The Watchmen*. He lives in a dog eat dog world. He is a clever business man who knows how to work all of the angles. He profits on his own intellect by becoming a superhero, then capitalizes on the fact he was a superhero, and finally makes a decision that will kill some dogs but put him on top. Not long before Adrian sends the alien to Manhattan, he tells his servants to buy stock in "the major erotica video companies. That's short term. Also, we should negotiate controlling shares in selected baby food and maternity goods manufacturers (page 8, chapter ten). To his servants, Adrian says these stocks will go up because of the threat of war. He knows that the same stocks would go up at the threat of an alien invasion. The base will handle the fear of an alien invasion in the same way they handle war. So Adrian decides to make a profit on his own immorality, like any good capitalist would. Not only does Adrian think he will profit financially, he also believes he will have a position of power in the new world he has created. He says, "I saved the world from hell.

Next I'll help her toward Utopia" (page 20, chapter 12). He thinks he will play a key role in rebuilding the world. He also wants to profit on the idea of Utopia. In his letter to Angela Neuberger, Adrian says:

To this end, starting next year we will begin to phase out the Nostalgia line of ladies' and men's cosmetics, successful they may be, and replace them with a new line that better exemplifies the spirit of our anticipated target group. This new line is to be called the "Millennium" line. The imagery associated with it will be controversial and modern, projecting a vision of a technological Utopia, a whole new universe of sensations and pleasure that is just within reach. (end of chapter ten)

He wants to be a recognized leader in a campaign for Utopia and capitalize on it financially at the same time. This attitude of never missing a chance to make a profit is typical of capitalism. Despite Adrian's declaration of wanting to prevent hell, the images of his stunt in New York City evoke thoughts of hell. The panels opening chapter 12 are terrifying. The death and destruction is massive. Even survivors will be haunted with nightmares for years to come. That sounds like hell. But Adrian believes he has saved earth from a worse hell. But can hell be measured morally on a linear scale? Adrian's choice to kill thousands of people for the greater good cannot be accepted as he personally is profiting from the situation and misconstruing right and wrong.

To focus on a smaller aspect of Adrian's morality, consider his treatment of the people who created the alien and did all of the work. When they were done working for him, he blew them up. That was not a morally right thing to do. One can see the logic in it, he did not want anyone to find out about what he had done, but murdering innocent people who had no idea what

they were doing is morally wrong. So then, taken on the giant scale at the end of the novel, has he done the right thing? Logically, perhaps, yes. He has stopped a world war. But morally did he do right, no. He has killed thousands of people and for what purpose? Dr. Manhattan's last words of the novel are to Adrian when he says, "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (page 27, chapter 12). Dr. Manhattan is alluding to the fact that Adrian's actions have really only delayed the inevitable. The action Adrian thought was morally right is actually wrong and not helpful at all. Indeed, in the very last panel, the reader realizes what will most likely occur. The world will find out the truth of the story and things will go back to the way they were. The immoral act that Adrian committed will be discovered and undone assuring him that all the death was unnecessary and wrong.

If Adrian represents capitalism, then the message of *The Watchmen* is that capitalism has been around too long. It has lost its sense of morality and has become the villain. Adrian does everything he does with a capitalist mindset. He thinks about money and what will earn him prestige. He looks for ways for the world to function and produce better. He makes decisions for the base that he has no right to make because he believes in the illusion of his own supremacy. But in the end, he has committed an evil act that will come to nothing. It was an immoral act. And capitalism is full of immoral decision and functions. Capitalism splits the base from the superstructure so fully that there is only one man at the top left to make decisions.

Like Harvey Dent says in *The Dark Knight*, "You either die a hero or live long enough to become the villain." Adrian and capitalism have lived too long. Adrian did not take off his mask and leave it behind the way Hollis Mason did. Mason passed on his mask and his successor also put it away when it was time. Mason is killed in *The Watchmen*. It is tragic, but it agrees with Dent's statement. Mason died the same hero he was even though he had not been that man for a

long time. He died waiting to give kids candy and wish them a happy Halloween. He died a good man, with nothing on his conscience. The same cannot be said for Adrian. Though he no longer was a vigilante, he kept on the mask to sell it for a profit. And he did not give up his perception of himself as a hero. That is what led him so believe he could change the way the world was headed. His money and his confidence in his own ingeniousness led him to do an evil act. Mason, a member of the base, died doing good, as a hero. Adrian, the superstructure in the novel, and symbol of capitalism lives too long and becomes the villain. Capitalism itself has lived too long and caused too many people to do immoral acts for their own benefit.

A clue to the immorality of capitalism is the way Adrian politicizes art. He uses a famous comic book author, a team of artists, and a film director to create the alien and its back story. Ms. Manish is shown drawing the alien monster on page 11 of chapter 8. Her art has lost its aura and has been reduced to a piece of an immoral plan. The same thing is true of the other artists and writers on the island. They have been set aside, hidden to do the dirty work of a very rich man. They are merely tools for his purpose, members of the base easily discarded. Adrian views the artistic members of the base as necessary to his cause but no natural worth in them. The reader, however, sees the humanity in these people, especially in the moments leading up to the ship's explosion. Adrian's manipulation of these people is immoral but exemplifies modern capitalism. He uses the tools around him for his purpose without questioning if those people had real lives to live. This is just another example of Adrian's villainy. When art begins to be politicized for personal gain it is a clue there is corruption afoot. The newspaper *The Frontiersman* (showed on the opposite panel from Ms. Manish's drawing) is doing what Benjamin calls for at the end of his work, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction;" they are recognizing that art is being politicized and calling others out. *The Frontiersman* uses art itself in the form of a political

comic (end of chapter 10) but recognizes that it is political art. They do not try to hide it the way Adrian does.

The Watchmen is a story, in part, about the immorality of capitalism. Adrian has gone too long alone at the top of the superstructure and has lost track of morality. While he represents the villainous longevity of capitalism, Rorschach represents the heroic pursuits of morality. The latter is not always understood but is willing to die for what is right. In the end, the cycle will begin again because capitalism is still in charge. As long as there is one immoral man reigning over the rest, there will be a cycle of death, destruction, and immorality.

The Dark Knight: Syntax of Popular Culture
By: Caleb McNeese

Genre studies provide a window into the heart of the human condition, each saying unique things about culture, ideology, and history's controversial issues. The genres of fear, intrigue, and heroes each attest to certain understandings of the world and what it means to be human. Although autonomous of one another, the fields have often touched, showing that certain philosophies and ideals can unite in a way that still speaks to people. Issues emerge in fusing the genres' semantics and syntax while also providing a model that appeases the preferences of each individual audience. The evolving superhero genre, predominantly demonstrated in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises*, confirms that the popular ideals and semantics of each field can be successfully unified in a way that still maintains the integrity of each genre and its following. As a result, the superhero genre confirms that society and popular culture can be satisfied by the enduring ideas that resonate with the human condition.

The emergence of the antiquated and repressed remain a timeless, syntactical element. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, the pit provides a classic example of the antiquated space and the origin of the evils that emerge. Alfred is quoted referring to Bane, "There is a prison in a more ancient part of the world, a pit where men are thrown to suffer and die. But sometimes a man rises from the darkness. Sometimes the pit sends something back" (Nolan). Both Bane and Miranda Tate, or Talia al Ghul, represent repressed evils that emerge from an archaic origin to terrorize societal order. The pit and its role in the film can be likened to Hill House in Jackson's novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*. The manor is described, "It had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more...doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone"

(Jackson 3). Both Hill House and the pit represent two ominous examples of evil that provide an overarching presence in their respective forms, affirming that facing the antiquated space can successfully traverse beyond the gothic sphere.

The protagonist, Bruce Wayne/Batman, was also subjected to the repressed in a way very similar to Eleanor in Hill House. Both character were placed in unforgiving environments and physically/mentally "broken". However the significance lies in the outcomes. Eleanor was unable to face the pressures of Hill House, which slowly caused her to view the manor as safety rather than confinement. Her own beliefs, and the amplifications by Hill House, led to her repressed nature breaking loose in the form of insanity and ultimately, suicide (Jackson 245). Wayne was exposed to the pit and Gotham's destruction in order to break his spirit. However, he was able to use the fears as necessary fuel to escape the pit. The blind prisoner said to him, "How can you move faster than possible, fight longer than possible without the most powerful impulse of the spirit: the fear of death" (Nolan).

The dark knight triumphs in his ability to overcome the evils he faced. Confronting the repressed is one lasting impression from Gothic horror on the superhero genre. A noticeable shift has taken place where the significance is not only in facing the repressed, but also emerging victorious over it. In class lectures, it was discussed how the viewer/reader transfer fears, anxieties, and the "Other" onto the repressed in order to confront individual human struggles (Blouin). That is what makes the confrontation with the antiquated and repressed a dominant and unifiable theme in other genres like the superhero, especially in the 21st century. Fans of Gothic horror can still gain satisfaction from the confrontation with emerging forces and the appearance of semantic triggers. In addition, popular culture can

appreciate the transference of individual issues onto a place/entity that is overcome by the hero, showing that humans still have monsters and "places" that need to be confronted.

Adversarial struggle is also a motif praised across genres. Bane and Batman are similar in virtually everything but ideals. They were both trained in the League of Shadows, have a large financial reserve, and have qualities that make them "more" than human (Nolan). Bane represents a fusion of brute force and intellect, making him an iconic adversary to Batman. The genre itself countered "super" heroes by creating "super" villains as an equal opposition. Adversarial struggle was also an important motif in two of the superhero genre's predecessors: the Classic detective and Western. Both play heavily on having an antagonist that is a worthy opposition to the hero. Not only that, but having an enemy to confront in general. Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* has Holmes expressing that struggle stating, "Snap goes our third thread, and we end where we began...I tell you, Watson, this time we have got a foeman who is worthy of our steel" (Doyle 73). Sherlock Holmes was created with a perfect counter in the form of Moriarty, but even in stories that the arch-nemesis is not present, the villain of the hour (such as Stapleton) is often exalted to a tier worthy of the detective's respect and confrontation.

Even the Western expresses the significance of villains. It remains evident throughout the entirety of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* that the cowboy was destined to fight Trampas in the end. The Virginian is quoted in the middle of the standoff saying, "But if I had lived to be twenty-nine years old like I am, and with all my chances made no enemy, I'd feel myself a failure" (Wister 337). That statement fits well with several in-class discussions on the interdependency between the hero and villain, especially in the Superhero genre (Blouin). The villain is an important component in multiple genres, and the struggle with a worthy

adversary is used as a transferable motif. Genres such as action and adventure often thrust an equal antagonist into the hero's path. The film *Skyfall* has James Bond pitted against a former MI6 agent, Raoul Silva, making the antagonist a mirrored likeness to the main hero (Mendes). Oftentimes people remember what the villain represented and stood for more than the hero, so what does that say about the modern, socio-cultural understanding?

The nemesis/antagonist provides a similar function to that of the antiquated and repressed in the Gothic genre. The villains represent mystery and intrigue. It fascinates the viewer to understand what makes them tick. It has developed over the years into a borderline infatuation with the representatives of evil. Fitting perfectly with that notion, Bane said in the opening lines of the film, "No one cared who I was until I put on the mask" (Nolan). The Protagonist must also face an equal adversary to provide a human element to the otherwise god-like character. By having the hero face an extraordinary challenge, the 21st century Superhero genre satisfies the same needs as induced by the Western's standoff, the detective's battle of wits, and the societal craving for the hero to face and overcome challenges that the viewer can project personal issues onto. Also, satisfying the need and desire for an enemy that demands admiration by the inner self. Modern culture demands its heroes to be humbled by the demons projected against them, but without failing.

The recognition and disdain for corruption also resonates throughout the genres and cultural ideals. The place of law and authority is on shaky ground in genres like the Hard-boiled detective, especially in the writings of Raymond Chandler. Marlowe discusses justice with Captain Gregory when the officer says, "Being a copper, I like to see the law win. I'd like to see the flashy well-dressed mugs like Eddie Mars spoiling their manicures in the rock quarry at Folsom...Not in this town, not in any town half this size, in any part of this wide,

green and beautiful U.S.A. We just don't run our country that way" (Chandler 204). Gotham represents the stereotypical corrupt landscape. When Batman warns Talia that innocent people will die from her plans, she responds, "Innocent is a strong word to throw around Gotham, Bruce" (Nolan).

The theme of corruptness continues in the dialogue between John Blake and Commissioner Gordon. When Bane begins to publicly read the commissioner's confession letter, Gordon tells Blake, "There's a point far out there, when the structures fail you. When the rules aren't weapons anymore, they're shackles, letting the bad guy get ahead... Maybe one day, you may face such a moment of crisis. And in that moment, I hope you have a friend like I did! To plunge their hands into the filth, so that you can keep yours clean!" To which Blake replies, "Your hands look plenty filthy to me, Commissioner" (Nolan). The ideas of corrupt law enforcement, government, and societal infrastructure are themes that began in genres like the Hard-boiled detective, but have continued on into the modern Superhero genre. These recurrent themes speak to the socialist, and independent undertones each person feels internally. After all, the fires are kindled when people question whether or not they are really free from the injustices around them.

The struggle between justice and the corrupt takes a unique form in *The Dark Knight Rises*. One of the themes that falls within this motif is the confrontation between the ideals of capitalism and socialism. The film definitely seems to be employing elements of referenced propaganda through inferences such as the occupied Wall Street and stock exchange. It often excited viewers to rally behind a man that is "for the people", but in this case that person is the villain. Once Bane's plan had reached fruition, he gave a speech saying, "We take Gotham from the corrupt, the rich, the oppressors of generations who have

kept you down with myths of opportunity - and we give it back to you, the people. Gotham is yours" (Nolan). It raises a struggle within the viewer because the hero of the film is the embodiment of American capitalism. The tension has also been symbolically played out in the *Watchmen*. Adrian represents capitalism and industry, which arguably prevails in the end, and Rorschach represents a primitive cling to socialism and the desire for the people to know the truth, even if it means a world war (Gibbons). This recurrent struggle says something about modern culture. It recognizes that current society enjoys the manipulation of the struggle between capitalist and socialist ideologies because deep down citizens admire the "Robin Hood" philosophy, but also recognize foundations in capitalism that cannot be removed without catastrophic consequences.

Another struggle that remains popular throughout the genres is the conflict between masculinity and femininity. The representation of the repressed as a maternal element is often expressed in the Gothic genre. That same idea, however, is continued on into *The Dark Knight Rises* with the emergence of the true antagonist, a female. The powerful presence of the feminine is also carried out in the semantic, femme fatale. The Hard-boiled detective genre introduced the feminine deviant in seductive and deadly forms. In *The Big Sleep*, Carmen is described as "a child who likes to pull wings off flies" (Chandler 13). Also, she single-handedly violated the last sanctuary Marlowe had from the corruptness of the world and placed his life in jeopardy on several occasions (Chandler). In superhero lore, Selina Kyle or Catwoman represents one of the most iconic "fatal women" in any genre, film or novel. Throughout *The Dark Knight Rises*, she uses seductive and cunning measures to manipulate men, including Bruce Wayne, into giving her what she wants. In one particular

scene, she tips off the police about the people she's working with, beats and disarms them, and pretends to be a distraught victim, allowing her to escape without a scratch (Nolan).

Shifting from a piece of Hard-boiled precedent, the gender struggle in *The Dark Knight Rises* also draws from the Western genre; in particular, the "choice" that the protagonist must decide in the climax. Both *Stagecoach* and *The Virginian* have the cowboy facing a moral decision, brought upon by the female, forcing them into an ultimatum of leaving behind their authority/occupation or losing the significant love in their lives. Dallas made Ringo Kid choose between her or revenge, and the Virginian as well by Molly (Ford, Wister). The scene from *The Virginian* is quoted, "Before his desire could break him down from this, he was gone, and she was alone. She did not fall, or totter, but stood motionless...At that she turned and fled to her room, and flung herself face downward upon the floor" (Wister 351). The motif of masculine authority rings out in the Western drama, primarily using the "choice" scene as a quintessential component.

The superhero genre also draws from that theme, particularly in *The Dark Knight Rises*. When Batman returns to Gotham, he gives Catwoman the opportunity to escape the city. She turns and states, "Come with me. Save yourself. You don't owe these people any more. You've given them everything." She places Batman in a state of having to essentially choose Gotham or her. But as the cowboys before him, he states, "Not everything... Not yet" and leaves her there (Nolan). This is just one of the many example of the superhero genre injecting historically Western elements into popular culture. Batman asserts masculine authority by placing his needs and desires over that of a life with Selina Kyle, demonstrating the Western theme of masculinity and dominance. These themes reoccurring and being

praised in the 21st century superhero genre confirm that popular culture enjoys the struggle between masculine and feminine elements in current films and novels.

The final motif that has been adopted into the superhero genre is the character undergoing a state of absolution in the end. Each genre interprets it in different ways. The Gothic genre may have the repressed evil vanquished, but then again it may destroy the hero as seen with Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson). For Philip Marlowe and the Hard-boiled detective, one of the only forms of release from the cycle of hatred and corruptibility is death or "The Big Sleep" (Chandler). In the Western, the cowboy often "rides into the sunset". However, that entails a certain sacrifice; leaving behind a piece of themselves. For the Virginian, absolution came in the form of surrender to the feminine and nature. While on his honeymoon, the cowboy carried a dialogue with himself saying, "What gain is there in being a man?" (Wister 363). All of these heroes and protagonists either reached an impasse with their desired goals or surrendered themselves in some way to attain it. The same can be said of the dark knight when his presumed death allowed him an escape from the cycle. Batman emerged victorious but he still must have asked himself, "What gain is there in being a hero?" In the case of *The Dark Knight Rises*, and others like it, there is no end to the cycle unless the hero fades away because good is always accompanied by evil (Nolan). That is why the theme of absolution has remained popular among the genres. It allows for the heroes work to be validated, because if the hero doesn't "put up the cape", there would always be someone else standing in wait. The popularity of this motif allows an understanding that popular culture enjoys an "end to the cycle" that must be present in some form to make a plot successful. In a social context, that popularity is essentially saying that the only form of peace, and the greatest act of heroism, is the lack of good and evil.

To summarize, facing the repressed cites the gothic horror genre, affirming society's psychological and social interest in transferred evils being confronted. The hero facing worthy foes also stems from genres such as the Western and Classic detective, stating that audiences demand the hero to be challenged; by doing so, showing that audiences still desire the psychoses of fear placed on Hollywood's monsters and villains. Not only that, but recognizing that anyone passionate enough about something will have enemies and face opposition. The disdain for corruption stems from the Hard-boiled detective, attesting to political and social concerns within society. Also, demonstrating the difficulty and struggle of defining, and acting out, morality. The roles of the sexes speaks to the needs of both genders and debates what it means to be a "man" or a "woman" in today's society. Finally, absolution fulfills the audiences need for resolution from an otherwise un-ending cycle.

The popularity of the current superhero genre provides valuable insight into the hearts and ideologies of modern society. In 2012, *The Dark Knight* made a statement in both the Box Offices and pop-culture. The success testifies to certain themes and ideas from previous genres and affirms the timelessness of their messages. The Superhero genre succeeds where others have failed because it is not bound to strict semantics, but it a hybrid-genre; able to pull successful elements from each. One word to describe superhero movies and novels would be "popular", but that word means a lot more than first thought. It means that the Superhero genre has been able to satisfy the needs of individual groups of men and women, while also touching elements of the human condition.

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The Phoenix By: Megan Fontenot

Sometimes I watch the sky and I wonder what freedom feels like. I used to tell people, until I realized that my words fell on them, lost them, blinded them. They would look at me with eyes that were soulless in their captivity, and they would not understand. "You are free," they would say. But they were wrong.

I am not who I am
I have no voice
I am a slave

Or then I see a man or a woman who is free and I come alive with desire, envy for what these people possess. Anger burns me when I see the ones who do not treasure their great gift. For it is a gift. If you are free, you are you and you have a voice and no one can make you be silent. Not when you are free.

I am not free. People say things of me, things that are not true, and I am these things because they have taken away my voice.

They say I do not care.
They say I do not love.
They say I do not live.

I do not understand how it is that their words can make me become these things, when down inside I am not. Even the captives say them and when they speak, I am bound.

My chains are invisible. They are of iron.

Every day, every hour, I work at the locks, beat them, grind them, tear at them. I cannot match their strength. See, my hands bleed. They are raw, my heart is sore, my soul weary from this endless and deathless struggle. My hands hurt, and when I touch others I hurt them and I do not know why. Blood covers my hands and stains my clothes and everything I touch and I think it is my fault.

Sometimes I wish I were dead
Then I remember that I am

Often I think about this masquerade that we are living. We tell people who they are and they believe it. They become it. If I peeled away the face and the life that you put on, who would you be? What would I find in you that is really you? Would it be beautiful?

One day I stepped out of the masquerade ball for a moment. I felt life in every fiber of my being, but I looked back and I was terrified. I looked around and I saw eyes that said, "You are a fool. This is not you."

But it was.

Only their words pulled my chains and I was drawn back into the whirling, vibrating mass of play-actors. They reminded me of who they thought I was and they reminded me that they still had my voice. So I had to go back.

But in that one moment I had caught a glimpse of the sun.

I didn't forget, and I went again. And again. And each time I moved further, and I found others who were outside the masquerade. We spoke to each other, and it was then that I discovered that my voice was with me and I had not left it among the shadows.

At last, one glorious day beneath my own sun, I took off my face and stepped out of my costume. I looked upon the world with my own eyes and in that instant, like a flash of lightning, I felt what it was to be alive.

I was free.

I stared down at my mask and my disguise and I laughed and I danced in the free air of my new world. For the first time I drew my own breath into my own body and for the first time I heard with my own ears and for the first time I really truly felt. And I wondered how I could have lived beneath that face for so many years. I wondered how I had let words become my chains and I wondered if this was what it was like to be alive.

My iron chains had broken. I found myself beneath the words that others had made me become, the words that had crippled me. Then I took the words and I made them new, and vowed that I would not speak them upon captives, to make them what they were not, to enslave them. Instead, I would help them step out of the mad dance, take off their faces, and resurrect.

This is freedom.

I am free.



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