Oxford Comma

It's known as the Oxford Comma before the word 'and,' but it can clarify the meaning of a sentence when the items in a list are not single words. The Oxford Comma is an optional comma before the word 'and.' It is known as the Oxford Comma because it was traditionally used by printers, readers, and editors at Oxford University Press. Not all writers and publishers use it, but it can clarify the meaning of a sentence when the items in a list are not single words. The Oxford Comma is an optional comma before the word 'and.' It is known as the Oxford Comma because it was traditionally used by printers, readers, and editors at Oxford University Press. Not all writers and publishers use it, but it can clarify the meaning of a sentence when the items in a list are not single words.
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Whittling
by Jem Burch

We used to sit on the back steps: Grandfather and I with his gnarled fingers and mine curled around our knives and whittling sticks pointed towards the chemistry of autumn. A bridge between us of one full generation wasn’t enough to keep his kind eyes out of my child’s world. And the years of autumn’s falling leaves passed—I was a young man and he grayer his sure fingers fumbling towards the knife’s safety catch. The blade snapped down broke off the last twig. The bark was stripped against a gray sky and a red leaf drifted to rest among hundreds of brown: the same color as his eyes. A tree had fallen in winter’s frosted wood and made no sound while I sat alone on the back steps whittling away the last shavings of wood from Grandfather’s life
Mythology in Meter
by Jem Burch

Meleager

Hearth-log
Burn before Fates
Beaten flames: save his life
Grow tree grow, live strong and supple
Branches

Wolves prowl
Spear and the sword
Blood on his hands: betrayal
Throw it into the fire’s rage
Fall…Burn

Atalanta

She who
Ran like the wind
Her future was defined
By these three bright golden apples
That fell before her heart
She picked them up:
He won

Prometheus

Titan
Future seeker
Champion of mankind
Hide fire in the fennel stalk
Bring it down to the people of the earth
And betray the will of the gods
Chained to the Caucasus

“Woman and the Moon” by Giselle Ambrose-Fleck
Clouds, Birds, and Blue
Clouds, birds, and blue.
Gaze up and you’ll realize it,
The polar opposites in the heavenly reflection of the sky.
Survey the contrasts change as the hours pass.
That glowing spot goes up and down,
Like clockwork, blue to black.
Epoch to eon,
Sunrise to Sunset,
Sun to moon.
The crescent of a dusty lunar day,
Airborne across the sky.
Rocket ships and a torrent of smoke.
Infinitesimal dots under a misty marsh.
Streaks of rocks penetrate the despondency of night,
The wishing bone splits.
A star for every hug,
A star for every kiss,
A star for every smile.
Look up and you’ll see it.
Those clouds, birds and blue.
A note to anyone who forgets to look up.
A note to that special person.
A note to you my love.
Piano
by Weston Janavs

My fingers zoom over a white forest
A steadfast row of the snow covered trees
All of them equal and none the shortest
Without me it is in an endless freeze

I can make the decimating wind scream
Or when the birds will formulate and sing
My fingers work as one coherent team
They leave behind an everlasting ring

This is my escape from reality
However it is not always blissful
Yet it adds to my personality
I was first frugal but became skillful

Black and white keys filled with colorful sound
Have been part of me since I’ve been around

Untitled by Ryan Vock
“Clouds” by Kate O’Carroll

“Untitled” by Ryan Vock
Pressed Up Against the Glass

by Vivi Rubanenko

“The most sophisticated people I know - inside they are all children.” – Jim Henson

O   P   C h a s s e

H

Tuuurn   Pi vot

The music blares out of the speakers but I can barely hear it over the pounding of my heart. My eyes glance between my reflection in the mirror and my teacher’s. I pick myself apart; my turns look too choppy, my arms are placed awkwardly. My teacher, Quinn, makes the moves look so easy; it looks like he is gliding through the air. My legs thump awkwardly on the ground while I attempt to pull off a complicated turn he executes effortlessly. Quinn notices that the class is struggling with the newest part of the combination, so he reviews the last few steps. My mind begins to wander. I think about how long it will take me to get home from my dance studio and all the homework I have left to complete. My body dances robotically while I zone out. My eyes shift back into focus as I become aware of my body in space. We move on to an easier song. Finally a sequence I can master.

I glance to my right, only to find a little girl – about two years old—peering into the window with awe in her eyes. She hobbles closer to the window and squishes her face against the glass. She watches our class with utmost devotion and captivation, with her eyes following our bodies like laser beams. Her parents stand behind her, giggling to themselves about how invested she is in our class. The little girl makes it seem like she is watching a group of professional ballerinas, not a class of amateurs on a Thursday night.

Located in the heart of Sherman Oaks, Blanks Studios attracts a diverse audience. Before every class, the teacher reminds us that we are in a safe place. Quinn often yells over the music, “egos are not allowed and performing the steps in a perfect manner is not necessary.” All the teachers are loving, supportive, and just want to see the class having a good time. In the past, I have struggled with dance because I was insecure about my body and the way I looked. I left studios feeling hopeless because I didn't know how to shut off my critical mind. Even though I know that I can completely be myself at Blanks Studios, I still have trouble letting go of the self-doubt that has been harbored in my mind for years.

When I was eight years old, I danced at a ballet studio in Westwood. Twice a week I would scurry into the studio, slip on my black leotard and pink tights, and leap into the room ready to dance. I would twirl around with my eyes closed and pretend that I was a prima ballerina performing on stage. As time went on, I became less excited to go to ballet class; I even began to resent it. My teacher’s instructing style was limited to harsh yelling and insults.
The walls shook from the sound of her screams. We were never good enough. Our posture was never proper, our toes were never pointed, and our arms were a lanky mess. No matter how hard we practiced, our teacher was never satisfied. Ballet class became a place where I loathed myself and my self-deprecation grew as each class met. By drilling obedience into our minds, the teacher suppressed our imaginations which is a vital part of being a child. I was forced to grow up far too fast in that class for there was no room for my age-appropriate antics or my inquisitive mind.

Quinn walks over to his computer to put on the next song. He tells us to keep moving, so I jog in place. Sweat drips down my neck and a dull pain shoots through my knee but I keep going. I chant positive mantras under my breath in hopes of tricking my body into enduring the exercise.

I can do this.
I got this.

My method seems to be working until I hear the beginning of the next song. Oh. No… *I’m So Sorry* by Imagine Dragons starts over the loudspeaker. I am not in the mood for high cardio right now. Quinn goes full out, but I do small motions because I have an aching cramp in my abdomen.

I watch a woman in my class, named Reagan, dance. It almost seems as if my face is pressed against a window looking into Reagan’s most joyful memories. She looks pure and happy as she leaps around the room. Reagan has a knee injury so she is not able to do several moves in this piece. Instead of giving up or being critical of her abilities, she performs the moves in her own silly manner. As we move through the piece, we get to a part with a perplexing move which Reagan modifies to her best ability while humorously scowling at Quinn.

With a thick head of wild curls and minuscule laughter lines around her lips, Reagan appears to be in her late thirties. I have trouble labeling her as an adult because she still carries herself with a child-like charm. She jokes around constantly and is not afraid to make mistakes. I can recall several occasions where she didn’t know the choreography we were dancing to and completely winged it. She doesn’t take herself seriously, which is what makes her so pleasant to be around. I love watching her dance because even when she doesn’t get the moves right, she has a wonderful time. Reagan embodies a youthful spirit for she has not lost the sense of wonder that courses through the veins of a child. Her eyes are always full of fascination and curiosity. Reagan is more of a child than me in that sense, because she is able to let go while she dances; while I claw at myself with my own thoughts.

As I drive down Wilshire Blvd, anti-aging billboards come at me from every corner. I stop at a red light and glance at a billboard promoting Botox. The woman in the picture stares me down with a piercing look. I challenge her to a staring contest; she wins, of course. A sea of horns erupt from behind me, announcing that the traffic light has turned green. I step on
the gas but I can’t shake the image of the sign from my mind. The eyes of the woman on the billboard are clouded with darkness and her skin is pulled up tightly.

I have found that the true meaning of youth is not physical but rather spiritual. People are considered to be young at heart when they are able to let go of their troubles and live in an unselfconsciousness state of mind. Part of growing up is being able to return to those positive attributes that are associated with being a child. I may be physically young, but my mind lacks the purity and sense of wonder that makes a person youthful.

I concentrate on my footwork as I set up for a double turn. I go up on my tiptoes and start turning to the left, but I miscalculate how far to move my right leg and end up tripping. Thousands of negative thoughts emerge in my head. I hesitantly glance over at the little girl who watches me intently from outside. The corners of her mouth turn up into a smile and she presses her hands together mimicking a clap. It seems petty to beat myself up when I have devoted audience watching me, so I breathe in and start over.

“Skittish” by Bristol Brabson
by Ryan Vock

Growing up, one tends to hear seemingly miraculous stories of success. The moral of these stories tend to be that individuals made it big due to sheer luck. Malcolm Gladwell disagrees in such a contention. In Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell’s third book, he analyzes the lives of those who he deems “successful”. These individuals include Microsoft founder Bill Gates, the Beatles, leader of the Manhattan Project J. Robert Oppenheimer, and legendary lawyer Joseph Flom. Using defining events and traits of said individual’s family and upbringing, Gladwell attempts to prove the workings of their success. In one example, Gladwell explains the seemingly bizarre phenomena of Canadian Hockey players’ birthdays. Within “any elite group of hockey players -the very best of the best- 40 percent of the players will have been born between January and March, 30 percent between April and June, 20 percent between July and September, and 10 percent between October and December.” What seems like an impossible coincidence is then explained by Gladwell. In Canadian junior hockey leagues, the cutoff birthdate for the age groups is January first. This explains the phenomena behind Canadian professional hockey players’ birthdates. Those born in the
beginning of the year have a physical advantage over those born towards the end of the year, especially during the early years when a few months can make a considerable difference in physical maturity. Those born in the beginning of the year are more likely to be more big and powerful, thus increasing their odds of being scouted and receiving the extra training involved with club hockey. This early advantage continues to the professional level, demonstrated by the data. Throughout *Outliers*, Gladwell continually provides explanation for the success of certain people: hidden advantages and opportunities allow for some to thrive while others struggle.

The deep level of research done by Malcolm Gladwell is obvious when reading the text. Gladwell does a great job of providing a surprising reasoning for the success of each of the people he studies. Along the way, the book provides an interesting abridged biography of these special individuals. *Outliers* is easy to read and great for someone just getting into nonfiction. However, some of Malcolm’s reasoning can either seem to be quite obvious, or, seem like a bit of a stretch. Once the pivotal caveat is revealed, much of the in depth analysis could have been spared. Despite this, I thoroughly enjoyed this light read and recommend it to those interested in expanding their knowledge of some of the most powerful and influential people ever.
I Am From Those Moments

by Ashley Taylor

I am from those moments
Ones that are too far to be reached
The only comfort comes from myself
Young with much to learn
Often too jaded to remember words that have a real purpose
Brown eyes that capture hopes for the future and scars from the past
Fake blonde locks to cover her roots she came from
The past has shaped her
Memory of a memory of a memory too deep to be felt
Memory of a forgotten moment she can never get back
Many people around but few she wants
She throws herself away to darkness
Up and down dark to blaze
Much more of a story to tell yet lacks the words
People always leave but few come back
A sift of lost faces

________________________

1 George Ella Lyon, Where I’m From
“Untitled” by Grace Mesenbring

“Pride” by Naomi Bortnik
“The New Day” by Anna Tutundzhyan

“Sky On Fire” by Grace Mesenbring

Hot Words
by Sophie Hood

The chair on my grandmother’s patio felt hot and uncomfortable. I never understood these metal chairs with little holes; they always burned and left deep pink indents my seven year old thighs. The discomfort I felt with my legs was fitting mirroring the discomfort I saw with my eyes: my grandmother and my mom did not get along. I had never noticed when I was younger; back then then I couldn’t understand the connotations of a glare or the significance of my mom putting jackets back on the books my grandmother stripped before reading to me. At this lunch and in this chair I finally understood. They weren’t being offensive but it felt like war. Words were dripping like blood from my grandmother’s lips to meet my mom’s fiery stare. Then battle was over as quickly as it began, because there was company, and they only fought behind closed doors and through gritted teeth smiles. The subject changed. Time for food! While serving my grandmother apologized, not to my mom, but for the selection of meat. She was sorry for surplus of dark meat chicken as “We Sterns only eat white meat.” That assertion felt hotter than the chair. I’m unsure how genuinely arbitrary or controlling that statement was -- maybe it was true, but in the moment I found my
mom’s anger begin to boil inside me. “I like dark meat,” I said with as much resolve as my little vocal cords would allow. My grandmother laughed it off, and lunch continued without a hitch. I don’t know if my mom remembers it but that was my moment, that was my battle cry for her.
OXFORD COMMA CROSSWORD

ACROSS
4 Salve! language teacher and google enthusiast, informally
5 Country from which one of the coaches hails
8 Surname of he man of many bumper stickers, also shakespearean look-alike
9 The Bell Jar author, one of Dr. Schildkraut's inspirations
10 Last name of both crime fiction author James and head of admissions
11 First name of both famous sonnet writer and junior, Stieg

DOWN
1 Ms. O'Driscoll's spiritual inspiration
2 Part-time library gatekeeper, full-time math teacher
3 Full name of future China explorer and retiree
5 Nickname of teacher with an affinity for neon tracksuits
6 Administrator and beholder of smithsonian envy (last name)
7 First name of lover of the poop emoji
“Untitled” by Taylor Rowe
Night-Time
by Dimitri Lupescu

Sunset in the deep blue.
Assess your peripheral.
Oh, that lively orange sphere.
Diminishing into the horizon.
Blue to pink, pink to orange,
Orange to red, blood red.
Bleeding out to the obscurity.
Opposite, a grey arc arrives,
Drawing out the cordiality of day,
Bringing the taciturn of night.
The luminosities of the city flicker,
The campfires kindle,
The woods turn to reticence,
The streets eerie and vacant,
Eyes close to insert a void,
Minds fill with an arbitrariness,
As your consciousness is unseen in a dream.
The clocks tick, and tick,
Hour by hour, minute by minute,
Presently to awake from a trance.
Sunrise above the urbanism.
Assess your peripheral.
Oh, that lively orange sphere.
Increasing onto your world.

“5 am Sky” by Naomi Bortnik
To Board A Train
by Jem Burch

A single station roof Out of the dust Just—
Shade in six thousand miles of sun
And that one road Tracks over the
hard parched earth. Lining the trail to
Oblivion I am lost here.
  Haze on the horizon
  A smudge of mountain
  In the distance A farmhouse
  All I have ever known
  This dust
Stars like city lights Twinkling in my eyes
At night. The silence of back-roads dust Whirling
in autumn wind. Am I ready to forgo this place?

My calloused work boots rest on wood
Waiting The dress I wear is
the only one I own. Eyes—
Pointed forever towards the tracks.
  Pocketbook
  Gloved hands
  Hat—
  To shade my face
  from the wind that blows
dust up into your eyes.

A lonesome sound Like a coyote
howling across the
vast empty plain Eyes on the track
drifting to that curled smoke —
Dragon's breath.
Tearing through the countryside
Claws scrape-scrape-scraaaping
the roots of my story, all our stories
into a new scarred shape.
To board a train is to
leave all this behind.

Screech into the station Blast
of heat. I stand: I am a tree—
supple and strong
now torn by this Wind.
  Open doors
  Stationmaster’s call—
The Night Goes Unremembered
Ode to 10
by Dimitri Lupescu

There he was, on the ground, lifeless and still under a clouded sky. My own son, my own son, my little boy. A crowd surrounded him like the rings of Saturn. I pushed through. I ran and knelt down. I ran and cried. My little boy. Dead silence is all that was heard that night. That was until I turned that barrel down my mouth. Squeezed my index finger and saw my little boy. I was with him again. My own son. Lifeless on earth. More alive than ever in the afterlife. Where I was I still don’t remember. I didn’t care. As long I was with my boy. He was all that mattered in my life. My life I didn’t ask to live. The tragedy and death of the journey I didn’t make. I didn’t ask to watch my son’s soul fly out of his body so young. I didn’t ask to die now. I didn’t know if I wanted to. All I knew was uncertainty. All I wanted was certainty. All I wanted was a better life. And all I got was an end to a life that took a turn for the worst.

*This was an ode to the man at the end of Chapter 10 of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
A Letter to My City
by Ella Willis

A quixotic and inspiring town
Where culture and race are in abundance
A past of quarrels regarding the crown
A stranger can become an acquaintance

In this underground city of tourists
Dreary rain has watered these crowded streets
We don’t want bombs in this concrete forest
Destruction is rife and tries to defeat

Despite all the hits London has absorbed
It embraces tasty immigration
Baleful motives but England will still score
Continuing the fight as a nation

This is London where as one we roam free
All united by a nice cup of tea

“Puppet” by Giselle Ambrose-Fleck
Kaleidoscope Daydreams
by Vivi Rubanenko

Spinning into view
A collection of crystals
No two the same hue
Colors change
As light passes through
A shimmering body
That is always misconstrued

Every tiny crystal
Is part of a cluster
But when by itself
It absorbs a meaning of another

Perceptions can be dangerous
and sometimes should be altered
So the shimmer of crystals
Can be seen even when the light is darker

“Enlight” by Ark Lu
I Refused to Fail
by Sam Itkin

“I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky.” (Sherman Alexie, 24)

Learning to read for me is very different than taught at most schools around the world. Most American kids learn how to read in English, and although I learned reading in English, I also mastered another language, even if we don’t usually think of it as a language. I learned how to read musical notes. Starting to play from a young age, I would see the piano as a simple instrument in which pressing the keys would produce a simple sound. I then began to learn harder pieces such Waltz No. 7 by Frederic Chopin, and by that time, I was convinced that I had mastered the art of playing piano. But after Chopin’s Waltz No. 7, I received a piece to play that would forever change the way I see this language of music.

The piece I began practicing was Dave Brubeck’s Take Five, and I simply could not make it sound like it did when other people played it for me. Frustrated, sometimes furious, but still determined: I knew there had to be more to this piece. I had been taking it apart for months and although I knew all of the notes, I knew that the problem did not lie in the notes. But as a student of piano for 8 years, I believed that simply pushing the keys to make a sound would be enough. Finally, after a tiring day at school, I was looking at this piece, frustrated, angry, and ready to quit playing the piano forever, I noticed something odd. In the right hand, the first note was 1/16 of a beat. The second note was ¼ of a beat. In the left hand, the first note was ¼ of a beat. The second note was 1/16 of a beat. Something didn’t add up. The left hand would overlap the right hand, playing at very different times. I sat down at my piano and began to play it with the beat in mind. I then realized that these simple numbers dictated the whole story Take Five was trying to produce.

Dave Brubeck taught me to read musical notes like a story. Sitting in my dark room, frustrated and furious, I could not look at this piano piece the same way anymore. But by noticing the different lengths and styles of the notes, I understood a lesson that changed my whole view on the piano. In fact, it changed my whole view on how the piano speaks.

A piano uses short sounds, long sounds, loud sounds, quiet sounds, peaceful sounds, powerful sounds, sad-sounding sounds, and happy-sounding sounds, to create a perfect harmony in the story the composer is writing. Just like a book uses different tones, and other rhetorical strategies to create a perfect harmony with the audience and the story, so does the piano. Looking at a page of musical notes, they all look the same, but in reality, all sound different and come together to form a beautiful story for the audience. So just as authors use words to build a story with a different tone throughout, composers must choose different notes to build a beautiful musical piece that tells a specific story to its audience without using any words.

But creating the perfect story originates from the idea of choice. Without choice, the piano is just an intricate mechanism that makes sounds, and the book is just a list of words. Starting from the piano itself, most Steinway grand pianos are built with 14 different types of woods in the piano itself. Henry E. Steinway, about 150
years ago, built a piano using 14 different
types of woods, each found in different
regions of the world and built in his small
workshop in Germany. He did it like this
because the way each different piece of
wood absorbs the sounds produced from the
piano makes an affect on the audience
listening. One wrong piece of wood and the
piano would sound completely different.
Then the composer has the choice of how to
write the piece, and by adding a different
tone to a different part of his piece, the
composer makes a complicated story using a
language which not many people
understand. In Chopin’s Prelude No. 15, he
begins the piece with a positive,
enlightening, happy message. But going
through the middle of the piece, Chopin
completely changes the tone to be negative
and dark. Chopin was writing this prelude
in Majorca, Spain where the weather was
beautiful and sunny, but there was a period
of heavy rain and storm, and when playing
this piece, the rain is truly depicted in the
language Chopin chooses for the dark side.
In comparison with Martin Luther King’s
Letters From Birmingham Jail, he uses many
different rhetorical devices to help him build
credibility, and drastically changes the tone
of his narrative to help him achieve his main
goal of convincing the clergy. He uses
Ethos, building a strong connection, just as
many composers do in the beginning of the
piece to attract the audience’s attention and
build a connection with them.

In simply reading Dave Brubeck’s
Take Five deeply and learning how famous
composers build connections, I was able to
learn how to read in a completely different
language. But most importantly, I realized
that doing a rhetorical analysis on an essay
is almost identical to doing a rhetorical
analysis on a musical piece. By connecting
my skills in rhetorical analysis of the piano
to what I do in English class, I understood
that I am able to read and analyze texts,
directly comparing them to pieces I have
played on the piano. I drew two very
important conclusions from this experience.
First, just as the author must give him/
herself credibility, the composer must gain
the credibility from the audience. Second,
just as the author changes tones to achieve a
specific goal or appeal to a specific audience
more, composers change the tones of music
pieces in order to write a story using a
language without any letters or syllables.
Although looking and sounding completely
different, a music piece and a book are very
similar in the way they convey their
message.
Streets in My Mind
by Sarah Hakakha

The only few minutes I have to myself
Are the very few peaceful ones
Before I roll into a restless sleep.

And when I rest my head on the thin pillow
I’ve had since birth,
I am submerged in silence.
And so I think.

And when I think,
I can’t stop myself
From wandering
Through the streets of my mind.

Some streets have broken glass
Covering the poorly paved concrete.
Others have yellow tape
Screaming, “Do not enter.”

Some streets have ruthless fistfights
Where nobody wins.
Other streets have robberies
And nobody can get to them in time.

It is hard to find a street
With happy neighbors,
And summer days.

It is hard to find a street
With the smell of burgers on the grill
And the feel of sticky sunscreen on my skin.

With music and with friends,
With kids running around with sugar on their faces
And an excited fiery look in their eyes.

So I keep wandering,
Through the streets in my mind.
“Pieces of One’s Identity” by Naomi Bortnik

Vitruvian Man
by Sarah Hakakha

Vitruvian Man with the mind of its maker
Self abuser, flagellant without faith
Metal to rust, paper weight to anchor
Maim his body, anything for an eighth

She said that all is fair in love and drugs
And with this one, there was no difference
Both demeaned him, broke him down and sent floods
No aplomb, but she built up his defense

Rationality wreaks with abandon
But all was expected from the young man
‘Cause young love is as real as a phantom
And his heart broke as soon as they began

Her name is Molly and she’s China white
And like his pills, she took away his fight
no more
by Sophie Hood

I’m lost in the middle
but I can’t help but say hello
Words sound silly
but they can’t be held back
no more
no more fighting against world together
no more fear of losing you forever
because I already have
You were held in my balance
but I found it much too easy to trip
We’re falling into pieces
but we can’t be glued back
no more
no more feeling like all do is hurt you
no more thinking you’re my only virtue

“Planted” by Taylor Rowe
“Elephant” by Emily Citron

“Lion” by Emily Citron

“Zebra” by Emily Citron
Fallen Gods
by Sam Anderson

Water erupts as ocean’s hand
To be played as that which directs man
For plains devoid of ocean’s drip
Lack tender dreams of perfection’s kiss
For whistle of wind is that which is summoned
By hell’s eternal love of the heavens
But that song is all that achieves this harmony
Where brothers may bond and create true eternity
In a world of flashes lost in the dark
Perfection gives us a name as gods
Yet we trip on the ocean’s gentle pull
For we are weak in mind and soul
As we are weak in the shaping sand
Of great rising current
Slaves of a broken land
By the broken stars in the sky
That look down upon the rose
Growing in the ocean’s nest
Of imperfection and unrest
For that rose of blooming wonder
Is god’s reckless thunder
That is him, as is all
As are all we
As fallen gods
Sonnet
by Joey Loeb

Succumbing to the music of my heart,
Strings like vines which tangle up my fingers
Words become immutable through this art,
My hands are broken and the pain lingers.

Music edifies my mind and my soul,
My head plays these instruments on repeat;
My thoughts are a stage but I am not bold
I try and write but I just read a sheet.

I am taken to a world where I think,
Every song is an opportunity;
Each time in this world I am on the brink,
My music is no longer new to me.

Separate by sound worlds come together,
Connected through clarity forever.
caN yOu hear my YOuthful strUms? CAN you Take time to see me…?

by Kelsey Gomez
Pablo Picasso’s The Guitar Player (1910)
Guitar Player
by Ashley Taylor

Dark blue like your eyes that cradle all the sadness in the world

It seems

Loneliness that was once a gift is a curse
Picked at like strings
Head held low and heavy
Making something beautiful hurts
The ultimate sacrifice
I cannot fall any further
The voices surround my head
Swelling
I give myself to my art
My art that I hope one day will mean something
Maybe

Today
by Jem Burch

Today, we’re in Boston, watching people pass by the old brownstones from our perfect vantage in the traffic jam. Rain falls, and the sky is gray, but Boston keeps moving. The rain doesn’t stop this city—it’s hardy.

Today, we’re in Boston, but my mind is still in England. England, where Mum and Dad are. England, where Liz is. England, where my university is.

England, the place I left two months ago, following the strange trail marked for me by the student I met in college. The student sitting behind the steering wheel, who stole from me my heart and who wouldn’t give it back. I pursued him from Cambridge to Cambridge, and by the time I caught up, he had melted my heart with his.

We kissed three nights ago, in the dark alley behind the pizza place, under a sliver of a crescent moon. The asphalt was slick with rain, and the air was stained with the stench of cigarettes, but nothing could’ve been more romantic. At that moment, I traded all I had loved but left behind for something I loved and could never lose.
Untitled

by Panna Gattyan

/                                                                                                        \

A giant walks atop the crown of trees
Shaking the limbs under his mountainous feet
Crimson-leather leaves showering the empty streets below.

— One leaf drifts along the riverbank
   A gentle lullaby to the eye —

A giant walks atop the crown of trees
Reaching for the moon with heaving sighs
Which push against the air and
Battle the breaths of the creatures of the night:
   The dwarf fox and striped raccoon
   The gentle fish and nervous wasp.

— The veined leaf breaks against the rush of water
   Zapping from sight
Racing the running giant toward the uncertain horizon —

The giant’s brows draw together: will he ever touch the sky?
/                                                                                                               \

The Chore by Iyanna Lawrence

Needle to thread, I work against the day’s frigid air, to notice my silence without any care.

Pupils pierced to the patchwork as my fingers grow sore, concluding my final daily chore.

A teardrop of blood stains my sewing, I pricked my palm without even knowing.

Reaching, searching, yearning for a solution to this mistake, I sit down after accepting a short break. Like my mind, the stain had disappeared to a fantastical place, white material un tarnished without a trace.

I open my eyes.

Needle to thread, I work against the day’s frigid air, to notice my silence without any care.

Pupils pierced to the patchwork as my fingers grow sore, concluding my final daily chore.

Joy escapes through a smile when I hear footsteps approach peacefully, Mother and Father’s voices diluted by the ravenous ones of the colony. I close my eyes.

Needle to thread, I work against the night’s frigid air, to notice i’m not the only one there.

Pupils pierced to the glow of the wooden door, fearful of becoming no more.

Needle to thread, I set down my work in terror, to get down on my knees in prayer.

Pupils pierced to my eyelids reassuring darkness, death’s breath heavy in starkness. I open my eyes

Needle to thread, I work against the day’s frigid air, to notice my silence without any care.

Pupils pierced to the patchwork as my fingers grow sore, concluding my final daily chore.

Mundane domestic work concludes as my thread shortens, I recall the day as one of uneventful proportions.

A single knock on the door changes that, Mother, Father, and a man in a black hat.
Token Black Girl Prologue

by Iyanna Lawrence

*Clueless, 10 things I Hate About You,* and *The Craft,* other than the obvious what do all three of these movies have in common? No, it’s not the 90’s cult classic following that has granted millennial’s the gift of everlasting aesthetically pleasing gifs accenting their Tumbler pages. No, it’s not the nostalgic but relevant outfit choices. And no, sadly it’s not the fact that I love all these movies equally. Envious of Cher’s Alaïa, waiting to be gifted an electric guitar for a band i’d never, but always wanted to, start, and being warned of the weirdos when, low and behold, I was one myself. This sadly was not the reason I purposefully chose to group these three movies together. These three classics also implicate a classic and common theme, or shall I say archetype, in each. The token, black, girl. Well, technically she isn’t just a black girl- she’s way more two dimensional than that- she is the black girl friend, that is obligatory in every girl group in a quintessential teen high school cinema. Though obligatory might sound like a wrongfully placed adjective, I present the contrary. Without these character’s the execs of the production company and the film writer’s would be questioned for their lack of diversity. See this is where it starts and also ends. A problem solved with minimum lines, vague character development, and an overall apathetic view towards their presence. In the end, it’s still representation right? How is it that I can relate to both the white protagonist and the silenced sidekick? Than that has to mean they are not so different. So then, how different would it be if Cher, Kat, or at least more than one girl from the craft, was black. Unfortunately, it would be drastically different. Though i’d like to think otherwise, I know it’s true because i’m living the life of these token black girls as I inscribe my rarely publicized journey now. The truth is, other than Dionne, we sporadically forget the names of each token whenever questioned. To be honest I had to google search both movies to find out that, Rochelle and Chasity, are the names of Gabrielle Union and Rachel True’s characters. What was just brought to my mind in the process of doing so was the fact that there is only one name to remember in both respective films and yet I faulted to even remember one. See each of these minor character’s attend a private school, with a group of friends that includes them but cares of not what they have to bring internally to the friendship. A pattern i’ve somewhat had to face in my everyday life. These girls are rarely desired by any guy for their personalities because they are barely, or never, shown. Just another relatable characteristic between my life as a token and their fictional life as a token! Though you could swap each leading female character with a black counterpart, racial struggles would change the whole dynamic of each main character. It would give Cher, Kat, and every other Craft member, a level of invisibility the normal caucasian teen is not used to in American independent schools. It would make each encounter with a boy shorter if you’re less forward than others. It would lower their overall rank in the, irrelevant in real life but relevant for the movie, high school social hierarchy. But these trials should be given a platform, along with the fact that they are still teenagers. Angsty, frustrated, and complex teenagers. Any of these girls could be equally relatable if they were just written that way. Not only towards their overall adolescent audience but very importantly towards the African American teens who see little to no representation of themselves at all. Though I scream injustice towards the representation in these 90s flicks, I holler towards the foolishly repeated crime in current media, more
specifically, successful media. Luckily there are shows that give me hope, but there has never been a book, series, or film that clearly depicts what life at a predominantly non-black school, has been for me and many young females like me. Though I know my experience is different from other black girls who go to schools similar to mine, I still find common enemies.

**Photoshoot**
(6M)
by Charlie Weingarten

Brown curls flow in the wind,
Lips pursed to perfection,
Ready for the camera,
She struts down the stairs,
Hoping for her prince charming,
To be the one who ogles at her.

Instead it’s her mom,
Squeezing her patience,
Silently torturing her
With the reckless flash of her camera.

She has no choice,
But to force a smile,
Behind the hardening curtains
of her teeth,
Playing her role to the best of her ability,
Humming a childhood song in her head,
Waiting for the last cheese.

She stands still,
Not accepting her mom’s request
To pose,
Hand on hip.
She hates this;
Feeling like she’s in a different skin,
Waiting for the terrorizing moment
to end,
Holding still,
The only thing she wants to remember,
Is the steady breath,

The only thing that’s keeping her together
She and I get out of the black car and walk through the shadows of the trees cast on the grass to get to the little playground of the L.A. High Memorial Park. I walk over to one of the metal benches painted navy blue and sit down in a slouching position, putting my elbows on my thighs and hunching over to look at my small phone's blinding screen. She sits next to me for a few minutes and we sit there in silence. We look over to our right, seeing the L.A. High School that she used to go to, covered in a yellow-ish light. We see at least six boys rolling around on their skateboards, practicing their tricks, showing off to each other, and eventually falling down, then getting back up, and trying again.

"Skateboarding is pretty cool."
"We should learn how to ride."
She gets up from the bench and tells me she is going to do some exercise. She takes her tangled pink earphones from the pocket of her dark blue zip-up hoodie and connects it to her phone, trying to pick the perfect song to step to before reaching the start of her self-designated path. I turn to my own phone to check the time. 9:36. I look over to her and she is stretching her legs, getting ready to run in the infinity loop that weaves through the tall, bushy trees a few feet further. Sometimes, I think to myself that I can’t possibly ever run alongside her, my legs being shorter — and I being unmotivated, to say the least. Sometimes, I compare myself to her. Sometimes, I feel inferior to the seemingly flawless girl I talk to every day and see once or twice a week.

As she starts to run in her tight black jeans, I get up from the bench and move into the playground, laying down on the tan slide meant for elementary school children. I wish I could go back to those times. Wondering about how I am already struggling in life, things getting too complicated, I plug my ears with white plastic earphones. I blast some music to block out all the thoughts and to just lie there, not thinking about anything, no worries, no school, no people, no stress. I am about to fall asleep when she comes to me, out of breath, and takes my hand, making my lazy self stand up and face her. We both look at each other and smile.

We go to the highest point in the park, on top of the play structure, and talk about frivolous things such as school, songs, and hair. As she lends me her ear and I lend her mine, I look out at the bright, lively road filled with rows of cars and spin around to look at the dark and lonely shadows and empty road behind us. Suddenly, the conversation takes a turn into what we wish we looked like and what we wished we had, comparing our bodies to others, comparing our talents to celebrities’, and comparing our lives to those born filthy rich. We talk about our parents’ difficulties and how we would love to grow up soon, make money, take care of our parents who do everything in the world to keep us off the streets, to keep us from taking a turn in the wrong direction. We both know our mutual friends who do drugs, who deal, who don’t appreciate life at all, but then we think, we don’t appreciate life, either. We talk about these things that make us want to not be ourselves and yet, I see a smile on her face, and she sees a smile.
on mine. I guess we are just so used to smiling on top of the pain that it has become a habit.

The dark trees watch us and shade us from the light of the moon while we stand on the play structure, looking like a sad night scene from a movie. There are no adults to tell us what to do, no adults around saying we can’t do anything, so we sing. We sing our hearts out in the dark, empty park, climbing up and down the different bars, nets, rocks, and slides. If we didn’t sing, we knew the silence would kill us both. Sing. Sing. Sing. We sing, we dance, we laugh, we run, and we say that we’re happy. We lie. We are not happy and we know each other well enough to know that we are not satisfied with the way that things are.

At school, we look bright and talk to those around us, saying we are content, saying we are happy but together we tell each other stories about the thoughts we have, the dark shadows that surround us, not leaving us anytime soon. I think we could do so much better, accomplish so much more, gain so many things, but in the end, we will never be satisfied, living the shadow consuming us called greed and until the day comes where I can shine and blow away that shadow, I know I will be living a life that is a lie.

I look at the moon, recognizing that there is the part that is shining its light on me and the other part that is hidden in the shadows. I think to myself that that moon is a reflection of everyone in this world, pretending to be bright and happy on the outside while being sad, alone, greedy, or angry on the inside. Yet, having these thoughts anger me, seeing myself as the truly pessimistic person I am.

I share these depressing thoughts with her and we sit on the green bars together, feeling the chilly wind blowing against us, feeling the silence in the other ear. We look around us, and see the red and white lights of the cars driving by, hearing a lot more honking than during the day, as if people become bolder at night when others can’t see who they are. Those people, I think, are hiding behind the shadows that cover the world after the sun has gone to sleep.

I do not trust the shadows nor do I like them but I choose to live in them, not expecting much out of the life given to me. Controlling my overthinking tendencies is not easy and for a while, I just sit back on the bench, going through many of my thoughts at the moment. I look in the dark and think about all the things that could be hiding where I can’t see, thinking about all the people who have done everything they can and have gotten their ideas, thoughts, voices stolen by others. I realize there are too many under-appreciated people whom I do not know if they are dying in the shadows or burning in the light. The nightlights of the park turn on, revealing what was invisible before.

Going to this park at night when no one can see me clearly has become a habit. Whenever I feel trapped, locked, or stuck, I go to the park and just sit on the bench by myself. I look inside my own mind and try not to reject everything that it offers. Even when I can’t solve my own problems, my friends ask me for advice for theirs and I go to this free space to let all my ideas float and then become blank for a short period of time. It is where I go to rest and let it all go. I think everyone needs something like that, whether it is an action, a person, or place.
Each person grows tired of the world and the people in it as some point. In the end, no one can understand one’s struggles for their life can not be completely written into a book. There are too many emotions that can not be expressed into words. Words are limiting.

There are layers on top of layers of history, struggles, and hardships that every person, no matter what their circumstances of life are, experience. Each person can be represented as a tree. Some grow up together and others grow alone. When you look inside of them, there are many layers and rings that represent all the struggles they have been through. All the struggles that have not existed because others could not see them. If I were a tree, I wonder how many rings I would have right now. I think I’d have 23.

Rodriguez, Luis J. “Love Poem to Los Angeles.”

The Walker Family Murder
by Michael Goldfeder

It was raining. Not the type of rain where I had to use an umbrella, it was more of a rain that I had to really focus on to feel. It was almost a mist, something I could not feel but see instead. The street glittered with prostitutes and hookers, as I walked by. The rough-looking buildings, half-chipped, looking like they were going to collapse any second, made me walk even slower. I’m not afraid of death, death by building would be way nicer than death by gun. The mist loomed in the darkness of the night. It was darker than usual, but the shine of the prostitute dresses brought a light to the darkness I didn’t care for. The scent of tobacco spread through the streets of 1940’s Florida like an angel had spread his wings over the whole city. Except there was no angel here. Only rain, murder, and smoke. The cracks in the pavement made my walk to the Walker’s’ murder site pleasurable. I enjoyed the uneasiness. I lived in it. The sound of sirens bounced off every crack in every wall of Osprey, Florida. As I slowly approached the door, I was greeted by a copper.

“Hey, only Florida Police allowed past here!”

The cracks in the pavement to the door began to feel too smooth for my liking. The flash from the forensic analysis team taking pictures inside radiated off the white walls of the house. The copper repeated his statement.

“Hey, only Florida police allowed past here, I said!”

The yellow caution tape hung loosely from one side of the door to the other. The door, marinated in blood from hinge to hinge, looked as if the Walker family had been celebrating Passover and were attempting to keep God from killing their first born. Except their first born was dead, and it was most likely his blood on the door. I smirked at the irony. Especially since I was a jew. The mist slowly turned to a light drizzle of rain. The cop reached for his baton, when suddenly Lieutenant Rogers slid through the half-opened door like a child who had just stolen cookies from his family cookie jar.

“Detective Anorak, what does me the honor?”
I pulled out a cig and slowly pressed my lighter to it. I watched the tobacco slowly burn, as the smoke entered my lungs. The faint red on the end of my cigarette butt crept through my eyes, reminding me of the murky blood smeared across the door.

“It’s Detective Walt Aronoff to you.”

I spit on the smooth pavement, making sure it was just close enough to the copper’s shoe for him to get worried. He tightened his grip on his baton.

“Whoa, slow down there, officer. Take your hand off the baton,” said Rogers. I smirked. The officer would never have used the baton; his hand had been shaking since the moment I arrived. I smiled at the copper, who peered back at me as if I had killed his dog.

“What do you want, Walt?” The lieutenant was getting impatient.

“Let’s not play games here, Rogers. You know Margaret Walker hired me to investigate.”

Margaret Walker. The name sounded like it should be the on the front of a bottle of whiskey. Margaret looked a lot like Christine Walker. Besides the fact that they were sisters, I would have guessed they were twins. I peered at my watch, the ticks on the clock kept me in reality. They reminded me that time stops for no one.

“Pretty gory stuff. You sure you can handle it?” Rogers asked.

I opened the door, stepped over the yellow tape, and walked in. I was greeted by the sight of a gat laying on the floor right next to Mr. Walker’s butchered body. At least Cliff tried to put up a fight. I surveyed the house, dodging puddles of blood left and right. I was impressed with the criminals, until i saw the bloody boot footprint, Redwing 1939 editions. F***ing idiots. “The grifters had one job,” I thought to myself, “How hard could killing someone possibly be?” I grinned at the mistake. I strolled toward the kitchen and noticed a photo of the family camping. Christine Walker’s red jacket attracted my eye. It was ugly as shit. Reminded me of Lt. Rogers’ copper face and his buzzer. I decided to take the small picture and cheese it in my coat jacket. I turned around and noticed a receipt on the countertop, just as I went to touch it.

“Don’t touch that sir.” A forensic analysis officer was taking his job seriously for a change. The man seemed to be intimidated by my 6' frame. I peered at him through the corner of my eye and blew smoke in his face from my cigarette. He looked me up-and-down and walked away. Must have not liked the fresh smell of tobacco. I surveyed the countertop… the blood spots on the murky wood made me suspicious, almost as if the family knew the hoods were in the house and retreated to the kitchen. It didn’t make sense. I took a good inhale of my cig -- it eased my mind. I stroked my hand across the smooth wooden tabletop. The blood was dry, but the Albertson’s receipt had no blood on it. Almost as if the hood put it down and forgot to grab it. I nicked it from the crime scene and kept moving. I walked down the hallway and noticed the back door wide open. The sound of rain was thundering against the back patio.

“Nice night out, huh?” Another forensic analysis officer making uninvited conversation.

“Nice indeed.”

The man laughed, assuming I was being sarcastic. I wasn’t. I enjoyed the rain, every drop of it. It was unpredictable. It could surprise you at any moment and leave whenever it wanted. I envied it. I gravitated toward the back door, where I was greeted by the site of two dead children. The forensic analysis team took a photo of the kids while talking to one another about where to get drinks afterwards. I craved the saps’ negligence, something I could never
have. The flash radiated off the white walls again, illuminating the shadowy house. I ran my hand across the white wall directly next to me. I took another good inhale from my cig while looking at a picture of the family's black lab. I wondered where the lab was. Maybe being eaten by a coyote. Not a bad a way to go.

I turned around and walked down the hallway to the front door. I put out my cig in a pile of blood next to Cliff Walker's body, just because Lt. Rogers told me not to touch anything. I grabbed the family's umbrella that was leaned up against the coat hanger. Didn't think they would need it anymore. I left the crime scene and was greeted by the crisp smell of tobacco and the cold sensation of rain. The coppers were pulling away. They had done an amazing job of doing nothing.

I walked down the smooth path to the Walker's house and unto the rough pavement of the sidewalk. I was at ease at the sensation of the cracks underneath my stompers. I took a good, last look at the house and the Chevy 1941 edition in the driveway. "Unfortunate family," I thought to myself, as I walked up the road. I decided to walk to a small pub about five miles up. It was always empty, and the food sucked, but I enjoyed the solitude. I walked for what seemed to be 45 minutes, when I noticed smoke up ahead. The rain came down harder. It seemed as if a boiler's engine had overheated. I slowly approached the car. A man was hunched over the hood.

"Everything alright?"

The man looked up at me, a sense of a panic beamed from his eyes. I could tell something was off. I repeated my question.

"Everything alright there, sir?"

The bird was a real ugly f**k. His teeth looked yellow as corn, and his head weighed more than his body. The look in his eyes made me increasingly suspicious. He was in a hurry. I was about to repeat myself for a third time when--

"Everything is fine. I was run off the road by a stray dog. Name's Perry Smith."

The man seemed to completely change his persona in a split second. The rain came down even harder, almost too hard. The smoke from the overheated engine provided a warmth to the cool night. The warmth, however, was artificial. I didn't like it.

"You were run off the road by a stray dog, you say?"

The man looked me up-and-down, as if he was trying to figure me out. He was good at hiding the fact he was nervous. "Why are you walking so far from town on a beautiful night like this?" The man asked while cracking an apprehensive smile, trying to lighten the mood I assumed. The joke was on him. I never smile. I repeated my question.

"You were run off the road by a stray dog, you said?"

"Listen Mister, what's it to you? I don't need your help."

I was apprehensive. I paused for what seemed to be an hour, but the ticks on my clock counted ten seconds.

"I'm asking because my dog recently died, and I could sure use another one."

The man smiled. He leaned up against his hood and asked for a cig. I slowly pulled one out and handed it to him. His behavior was bipolar; he reminded me of my ex-wife Carla. I didn't like the memory. As I lit the cigarette that hang loosely in his mouth, I could smell the tobacco enter his lungs. Only this smell was not as fresh as it should have been. A dim roar of thunder echoed in the background. The rain was constant.

"It was a black lab. Ran into the night."

"Ran into the night a pro-skirt?"
The man laughed a little too hard at my joke. Almost a laugh of relief. I turned to his
car and peered over the propped up hood to take a look through the front windshield. I
noticed a dirt paw print on the bottom left of the back seat. I turned to the man.
“The feet overheated your engine?”
“Engine overheated when I was run off the road. My friend Rich went ahead to phone
a friend of ours to come pick us up.”
I noticed the man was wearing a red jacket that I absolutely hated. It was thrown on
him as if he had been in a rush to leave his house. It looked like a twin to Christine Walker’s.
“Just gonna leave the car here?” I asked suspiciously. The man’s story didn’t add up,
the paw prints on the inside of his car indicated the dog had to have been inside his car at
some point.
“Just gonna leave it here for the night,” said Perry Smith, nervously. As the man
turned around to try and fix his engine, I noticed an Albertson’s bag in the front seat of his
car.
“Shop at Albertson’s a lot, huh?” I asked.
“Only when I’m driving through town!” exclaimed Perry.
The man went to fish for something in his pocket, when a deli ticket fell out. The rain
swamped the ticket the moment it touched the ground. I realized the only deli in town was
located directly across the street from the Albertson’s. The man’s story didn’t add up.
“Only when you’re in town?” I asked curiously.
“Listen mister, I’m tired of the questions. Scram!” the man yelled.
His sudden change of tone tipped me off. I stood silently, as the rain poured down, staring at
the man. The rain hit my umbrella which sounded like roscoes were being fired in the
distance.
“What brings you into town? And I’m not going to ask again.” I was starting to get
angry at the man and his tone toward me.

The man realized I wasn’t a guy who liked being yelled at. He calmed his bipolar
behavior once more. “Look, I’m sorry, mister. I’m in a hurry to get out of here. I came into
town for some car parts.” The man reached in his pocket and pulled out a piss-colored
newspaper article that had the words “Car Parts For Sale” written on it. I surveyed the paper
and immediately noticed that none of the parts matched up to the black Plymouth 1938 he
was driving.

I could see the man was staring at me through the corner of his eye, as I surveyed the
newspaper. He then pulled out a ticket exclaiming he had won a part for free. I wasn’t
impressed with the man’s story. His alibi did not add up.

“They’re giving things away for free in this economy?” I asked.
The man could see I wasn’t fooled. As he nervously fiddled with the oil circuit in his car, a
loud roar erupted from the engine. His car had started again. Without saying anything, he
turned to me and darted a scowling look. I made sure to take a good look at his plates.
“77WX76,” I memorized in my head. The man jumped in his all black Plymouth and
drove off into the night. The rain turned to hail. I continued walking toward the pub.
Inverno Rain
by Elliott Choi

RAIN has a sense of humor, amusing
my parched throat with sweetbitter nostalgia.
Each droplet a secret beat, all unique,
sing forgotten lullabies, now antique.

RAIN, unknowingly beautiful, pierces
my soul, leaves me vulnerable, weeping.
For a while, the feelings did remain,
with Hope, with fear, with freedom, with sin.

Winds calmly wait for Demeter’s sadness, solitude.
There is no fated hand when it is cold, so embrace
the comfort of the cold, the comfort of our cottage.
All trees lose their beauty, leaves, infertile daytime.

Do not take my serenity for granted, for
this gentle, this drizzle, this breeze, halcyon days,
can become a pouring calamity without intrigue’s aegis.
La tempesta di mare, il bello e il dannato.

The ceasefire of droplets, the war is over,
leaving puddles of red earth as its legacy.
Perché hai iniziato? Perché è finita?
The almighty merely gifts questions, fate is what He throws

A single petal
drowns regretfully, leaving
a ripple, that ends.
A Cough
by Oliver Pearson

On the edge of the Polaroid I watched the wheels of time roll backwards
Like a memory
Enough to live the rest of my life behind my eyes.
Many places of these end up empty at late hours of the night
I could hear the surgeon whistle
I lost track of time willfully

The gurney of youth rising upwards towards a low ceiling
He’d aged with the descent of the heavens
I caught the glimpse of the transition between them
I realized then that I was not the only man to live in this world.

Driving away hours later I carried on
Gurney cleaned and sheets bleached
By me.
I was the gatekeeper to this man’s fading shadow at dawn
Martyrdom was just suicide with an audience

I never wanted to look up into an artificial light at my last breath
Rather look directly into the sun with squinted eyes holding on to my memories
Because they will be so heavy that they will be all I carry with me
And they will be enough to occupy me for the time being

Where memories go after they fade is where I shall rest
Not in heaven nor hell nor deep asleep in bed
But in the deep dark alley of that dead man’s lost breath
Because my eyes were the last he would see
As he drifted past pneumonia into death
Part I: In which the human race ****s up. Badly.

Dr. Gregory Loman had stepped into the time machine on August 4th. Now that he had just stepped out, his first priority was to make sure nobody had just changed the date on the calendar to mess with him. Not again.

It definitely didn’t seem like weeks had passed. Then again, he thought, that was the whole point of a time machine. He looked at his watch. It said it was 3:08 on the 4th, scarcely a minute after he had stepped into the capsule. The clock on the wall read 2:42 and the calendar just below it said it was the 25th. A Monday.

Dr. Loman hated Monday. He suddenly regretted that he didn’t travel four or five days more.

He looked around the lab, but he couldn’t find anyone. Which was odd. If it was a Monday, people should’ve been at work. Actually, Loman wasn’t surprised. His assistants had always been slackers. He wandered around some more, but the lab was quiet. Empty.

Loman decided to go outside. He opened the glass doors of his lab, and found the world outside just as empty as it was. He couldn’t see a soul.

He decided he would wait around a few minutes to see if anyone showed up.

Then he remembered he had a time machine, so he didn’t need to wait at all.

He turned to head back into the lab when he saw it: a small sticky note, stuck to the outside of the door. It was clearly meant for him, which was odd, because it had probably been put in the worst possible place for him to see easily.

Dr. Loman sighed. His assistants had always been idiots.

The note was just two lines, but those words were the most life-changing thing that Dr. Loman had ever read.

*Everyone went to the future. See you in 1000 years!* And yes, we mean literally everyone. As in, every single human being.

Dr. Loman sighed. His assistants had always been idiots.

The first thought that struck him was, “How the hell did they get everyone to the future? It’s been three weeks since I invented this thing, and we weren’t even sure if it worked yet.”

The second thought that struck him was “Stop being ridiculous, Greg. There’s no way they sent everyone to the future. There’s no way they sent anyone to the future. They’re playing a joke.”

After walking around a little more, and seeing exactly as many people as Dr. Loman had had sex with, the third thought
that struck him was “Oh my god, they actually did it.”

He was thrilled, for half a second. He wouldn’t have to deal with his idiot assistants anymore! Ah, yes. He wouldn’t miss them.

But that moment quickly passed, and was replaced with another feeling of loss. Not the loss of his friends. Not the loss of his assistants, or his work, or his friends, or everyone else he could ever know. Not the loss of being the very last human being on earth.

No, he really felt the loss when he realized that if there were no more people left, there was nobody who could serve him fast food from his favorite restaurant, McGuffin’s. He would never have another French fry if he stayed here in this time.

And that was the moment that Dr. Loman decided to go into the future too.

He stood in front of his time machine: his life’s work, his magnum opus, the technology he had been developing for his entire career. It had worked, for the first time, and it had been the happiest moment of Dr. Loman’s life.

And now, it would be this technology, it would be this magnificent piece of engineering and achievement that he had wrought with his own hands, that would finally get him a goddamn French fry.

First he prepared and gathered supplies. He didn’t know what the future would hold, so he brought his earthquake survival kit. It had some canned food, a flashlight, some batteries, all the essentials. But the future could also be dangerous, he reckoned.

So he took a small pistol out of his desk and loaded it with six bullets.

It was a wonderful little gun, a revolver made in Russia by a company named Chekov. Dr. Loman had taken up shooting a few years ago, and had turned out to be an excellent marksman. This gun was his favorite. It had a gorgeous pearl handle, silver-plated barrel, and all the features you could want. Except for a safety. It didn’t have one of those. But in all other respects, Chekov’s gun was a lovely weapon. Dr. Loman was certain it would serve him well on the journey ahead.

He stepped into the machine and turned the dial to 1000 years. It had always surprised him how simple he’d been able to make it to operate the device. It seemed like a time machine would require teams of technicians, experts in physics, who all knew everything there was to know about the device and could set every detail of the mechanism to work it correctly. It seemed like a time machine would be so complex that it would be impossible to operate without several dozen people with several hundred PhDs between them. But no, it turned out that anyone who could spin a knob could travel through time.

He then pushed the inviting large red button.

Good things always happen when you press inviting large red buttons.

Part II: In which Doctor Loman travels to the future

Dr. Loman spent a few moments gathering the courage to step out into this entirely new world. There were so many questions he had to be answered, and only one way to answer them. And he really wanted French fries.

He opened the door.

He was inside of his lab. That made sense; the time machine traveled through time, but not space. But the lab was different. It was broken down. The lights were all off, and many of them seemed to have rained shattered glass onto the floor. The windows, also broken, provided just
enough light so he could see. Everything was decomposed or broken. 1000 years’ worth of dust had built up on every available surface. The walls were cracked, and one section of the roof had collapsed. Some form of unidentified mold or fungus or something grew underneath the hole.

The clock on the wall had stopped working at precisely 2:47 at some point in the prior millennium. The calendar was long gone, and the only sign that it had ever been there was a small rusty nail stuck in the wall that it had hung on.

The place was, to say the least, thoroughly squalid. It looked like ancient ruins. Which, Dr. Loman realized, it was.

And, just like that, he began to think that maybe it wasn’t a good idea for all of humanity to have abandoned their entire planet for a thousand years.

Damn. Now how was he going to get French fries?

He left the lab. On the door still hung that fateful sticky note, the one that had encouraged him to leave his home and come back a thousand years later. Underneath the writing, which had faded almost to illegibility, there was a little bit of dark red ink that spelled out “The biggest mistake we ever made”.

After looking at it for a while, Dr. Loman realized the ink was probably someone’s blood. And that it was fresh.

After looking at it for a while longer, Dr. Loman realized that someone had managed to get a sticky note to stay for a millennium. This was truly the most shocking thing he’d seen so far, and, he reasoned, would likely remain so.

And, just as he’d had thought that, the note fluttered away on the wind, carried off into the distance, fading into the horizon until it was invisible. It almost seemed as if some all-powerful creator had against all odds let it stay put for a thousand years, and then taken it away the moment that it had served its symbolic purpose. But that was obviously ridiculous.

Ignoring, or perhaps simply missing, the symbolism of the moment, Dr. Loman took a look around at the world of the future.

It looked almost exactly the world of the present, or past, or whatever you’d call it, only things were more desolate. The buildings were run down, broken, and most of them had plants growing in and over them. The paint on all of them was completely gone by now, leaving gray bricks and concrete where there had once been vibrant color. Many buildings had collapsed entirely, leaving nothing but desolate gray piles of rubble, with the occasional shrub poking through.

And, once again, Dr. Loman decided that maybe it wasn’t a good idea for all of humanity to have abandoned their entire planet for a thousand years.

“Hey! Greg!” came a voice he recognized as that of one of his assistants, Dr. Stanley Tallinn. “You finally made it!”

Loman turned to face him, and made no effort to hide his grimace at the sound of his first name. His face displayed an expression of irritability, then shock, then fury, then confusion, then bewilderment, then some combination of all of it as his face tried to translate the confused feelings of his mind.

Finally, Loman managed to craft an elegant response. “Yeah, uh… I did,”

“How are you liking the future?”

“So far, I’m kinda not.”

“Yeah, we were all disappointed too. It turns out that maybe it wasn’t a good idea for all of humanity to have abandoned their entire planet for a thousand years.”

“Yeah.”

The silence persisted for a long enough time to be awkward, but not long enough to warrant ending the conversation. Some conversation it was.
“Oh, if you’re wondering, today is Monday, August 25th.”
“I ****ing hate Mondays,” muttered Dr. Loman under his breath.
“Why is it always a ****ing Monday?” He suddenly regretted that he didn’t travel four or five days more.

Another awkward silence.
“Where is everyone?” Dr. Loman finally asked.
“Oh, um, most of them are dead. But some of us aren’t!”

Dr. Loman was definitely either very, very upset or absolutely overjoyed by the news that most of humanity was dead, but it was impossible to tell exactly which.

“How’d they die?”
“Well, the time machine only had about a 1 in 1860 success rate. The other times it just killed the person inside. I guess we should’ve tested it more before sending everyone through it.”

Dr. Loman was growing more and more irritable with every word that Tallinn said. His assistants had always been idiots.
“You made it through twice, right? That’s only a 1 in 3720 chance of survival. Either you’re very, very lucky, or you have plot armor or something.” Tallinn laughed at his own joke. Loman decided to give the finger to whatever cruel god had let this happen.

“The rest of us mostly died of starvation or disease or whatever. Apparently, in the last thousand years, the common cold has become completely fatal. One guy caught it and then everyone’s immune systems started to shut down. Crazy, right? Yeah, and there wasn’t nearly enough food to sustain the entire human population in one place, and the water’s all poisoned and stuff. So most of us get our food supply by eating the corpses, only sometimes it’ll be one of the ones with the cold and you’ll die a slow and painful death. Oh, yeah, and society’s collapsed and everyone kills each other to steal resources and basically it’s the apocalypse.”

“You’re just telling all of that to me?”
“What would you prefer?”
“You could’ve shown me or something.”
“You really want to see all that?”
A pause.
“So… why did you do any of this?” said Dr. Loman

Tallinn paused, opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again without saying anything. He looked around. “Um…” His face fell. “You know, I don’t think any of us really thought about that one…”

Dr. Loman’s bull**** limit had been exceeded. “You what? You sent every single human a thousand years into the future and you didn’t even bother to think about why?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time…”

“WHY????”
“I guess we were all excited to see how things turned out in the future, you know, all the new technology and stuff.”

“And no one stopped to think that if you sent everybody to the future, there would be nobody around to make new technology?”

“Um…” There was a long silence. This time, Dr. Loman could’ve easily ended the conversation, but he had too many questions. Besides, he always got a kick out of yelling at his assistants.

“How did you even do this? We only had one time machine, which I was already in by the way, people didn’t even know it existed, we didn’t know if it worked, I was gone three weeks and that is definitely not enough time to round up all of humanity.”

Tallinn opened his mouth, reconsidered, and then just looked confused.

It was as if he hadn’t considered the logistics
of this until just now. Which was obviously ridiculous, because something like this must've taken ages of planning and coordination. There was no way it could've just happened. It's not as if some inciting incident could change the whole world in an instant.

"Look, um, there's no point in explaining now. It's already happened, so whatever. Just suspend your disbelief. Anyway, we're all thrilled you're here! Now you can help us figure out a way to stop this!"

"No I can't. There is no way to stop this."

"We were hoping you'd be able to travel backwards in time, and stop this from happening or whatever."

"You should know that backwards time travel is impossible."

"We can go forwards, why not backwards?"

"We can't reverse the polarity on the negative temporal relativisors without introducing quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum's baryon excitation limit. We would literally tear the fabric of the universe apart." Dr. Loman sighed. He often wondered why he hired assistants who didn't understand that they couldn't reverse the polarity on the negative temporal relativisors without introducing quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum's baryon excitation limit.

"That makes literally no sense." said Tallinn.

"Yes it does, you're just too dumb to understand it." Loman's assistants had always been idiots.

"Can we just turn the dial on the time machine backwards?" asked Tallinn.

"I'm sorry, are you trying to introduce quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum's baryon excitation limit?"

"Have you ever tried setting the dial on the time machine backwards?"

"No! Because I don't want to introduce quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum's baryon excitation limit!"

"I think I'm just gonna turn the dial on the time machine backwards."

"No!" Loman shouted, but Tallinn was already walking through the doors into the lab. Loman ran after him, but couldn't stop him. They both reached the time machine and entered together.

Part IV: In which the two Doctors travel Back to the Past

A score of orchestral instruments played in the background from some unseen source. These two men were completely at odds with each other, and they would stop at nothing to see their goals achieved. The fight was not just between two people, but between two ideas. Two ways they wanted to save the world. Everything that ever happened from this point on would hinge on this.

Tallinn punched Loman in the face and turned the dial on the time machine backwards.

"Ow! What the hell was that for?"

"Weren't you going to stop at nothing to try to stop me from saving the world?"

"What?"

"You have that gun on your belt."

"Why the hell do you think I would shoot you with my Chekov gun?"

"Oh. Sorry."

There was a really, really awkward silence.

"I guess I was just expecting this to be a little more..."

"Climactic?" Loman offered.
"Yeah."

"I’m sorry to disappoint."

The silence continued, and only grew more awkward.

"Huh. I really expected that to introduce quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum’s baryon excitation limit."

"You should know better than anyone that this universe follows absolutely no consistent rules at all."

More silence for a few minutes.

"Wait, so is this the present, or the past?" Tallinn finally asked.

Dr. Loman really didn’t care, and was barely hiding his disdain for such irrelevant semantics, but answered anyway.

"I think since we’ve been to points beyond this time, it’s now the past."

The two men tried to gather the nerve to press the button and head into the past.

"But when we’re there, it’ll be the present time for us. Right?"

The two men tried to gather the nerve to press the button and head into the present.

"Maybe it’s the future for us, because we haven’t actually gone there yet."

The two men tried to gather the nerve to press the button and head into the future.

Needless to say, things in the time machine were very, very tense.

"Huh. That’s an interesting perspective. Here, let’s diagram a flowchart of all the various timelines and chain of events so that we can figure this out,“ said Tallinn.

"Let’s not. “responded Loman, pressing the large red button.

The two men tried to gather the nerve to step out into the world outside. It was Loman who finally opened the door.

They were on the inside of the lab, where the time machine had been originally. Only this time, it wasn’t ****ty!

"I brought us back to before we invented the time machine, so that we can stop ourselves from developing it."

"Okay, how are we going to do that?"

"Shhh! Here we come!"

Indeed, the two men watched versions of themselves, younger, and with terrible haircuts and no fashion sense, walked by.

"Hey, we should build a time machine!“ the young Dr. Loman said.

"Uh-huh, sure. “ said a young Dr. Tallinn.

"I think forward time travel will be pretty easy, but we probably can’t go backwards."

"Why not?"

"We can’t reverse the polarity on the negative temporal relativisors without introducing quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum’s baryon excitation limit. We would literally tear the fabric of the universe apart."

"Oh."

There was an awkward silence.

"Cool, let’s get working on it then! “ said younger Dr. Loman.

Meanwhile, the older, balding Gregory Loman quietly took his gun out of the holster on his belt. The younger men hadn’t seen them yet. They had the element of surprise.

Dr. Loman didn’t want to kill himself, of course. He didn’t want all of this to be gone. He wanted to be able to live his life as he had. He wanted to keep going. He couldn’t even imagine what sorts of devastating effects interacting with one’s past self, let alone killing them, could have on the timeline. But if he didn’t do this, if he didn’t end his own life to save the rest of
humanity, then the world would certainly end.

He closed his eyes and tried to calm his nerves. His hands were shaking. I have to do this, he thought to himself. I have to do this, I have to do this, I have to do this, I have to do this.

The older Dr. Tallinn looked at his colleague and saw him drawing his pistol. “What the hell are you doing?” He whispered.

“What are you talking about?” he hissed.

At this point, the younger versions of themselves must’ve heard them. They turned, and, confronted with versions of themselves that looked quite older, began looking rather surprised. For a tense moment, there was intolerable silence. One can only imagine what it’s like to see your own self pointing a gun at you. Knowing you were going to kill yourself, but not knowing why, not knowing what terrible mistake you had made that had to be erased from reality. And yet, somehow, the younger Dr. Loman knew that this had to happen. He understood that if his future self was doing this, he was doing it for a damn good reason. Even still, he didn’t want to die. I have to do this, he thought. I have to do this, I have to do this.

Part MNOP: In which everything goes terribly terribly wrong

All was silent. All was still. The tension was palpable.

“Wow, I really let myself go,” he finally said.

And then was a gunshot. A bang, a flash, and the younger version of Dr. Gregory Loman fell to the ground.

Blood leaked out, and pooled at the mens’ feet. Both versions of Dr. Tallinn jumped back in surprise. The bleeding man screamed, clutch ed his chest, and contorted himself into the fetal position.

“What the ****?” said the man who’d been shot.

“I’m sorry. I had to do this. I can’t let you—”

“I’m you!”

“—Can’t let myself invent the time machine.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because the instant you do, all of humanity time travels to the future and basically everyone dies. You — or I, or us, or whatever I’m supposed to say — cause the end of the world.

“Couldn’t you have just told me not to invent the machine? Did you have to shoot me?” asked his young self, speaking urgently, breathing quickly and shallowly, clearly in much pain.

“Oh.”

And, in that moment, Dr. Loman realized that all of this had been totally unnecessary. Now he was going to die a slow, painful death by blood loss, and it had been completely avoidable. All of the drama of the moment was totally unnecessary, and some would even say rather contrived.

What he felt in that moment is impossible to fully understand. It was perhaps pain, perhaps regret, perhaps loss or loneliness or simply feeling like the biggest imbecile in all of history. Whatever it was, Loman dropped to his knees, besides his younger self, and began to weep.

Meanwhile, the versions of Dr. Tallinn were attempting to distract themselves from all that nasty bleeding and crying business by having a lovely chat.

“So, do you have memories of this interaction from when I went through it, or what? Do you know what happens next?” asked the younger version.

“Well, um… Not really… It’s sort of like I have memories of it after it happens, but not before, if that makes sense. I think
the memories are sort of being created as the events happen.”

“That sounds really weird.”

“Yeah, it feels really weird too.”

“It sounds like the sort of contrived bull that an author would make up when he realized that there was a major problem in his story.”

The older Tallinn laughed. “I think most authors who write about time travel just don’t let characters interact with their past selves. It’s keeps this sort of thing from happening. You know, now that I think about it, it may not have been a good idea to interact with my past self in real life, either…”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. Does this create branching timelines or something?”

“You’re the one who invented time travel. If either of us would know, it’s you.”

“Right, right. I haven’t actually ever traveled back in time, though… We didn’t think it was possible.”

“Yeah, right. Dr. Loman always tells me that you can’t reverse the polarity on the negative temporal relativisors without introducing quantum field fluctuations that are orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum’s baryon excitation limit. You’d literally tear the fabric of the universe apart.”

“Well, clearly that didn’t happen.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think it made much sense.”

“I have absolutely no idea what this’ll do. I think it’ll make branching timelines or something. Is that a real thing? Does that make any sense?”

“You probably should’ve thought that through before doing it.”

“Yeah.”

There was a silence. Long enough to be awkward, but awkwardness was not exactly the emotion one would ascribe to the room with a sobbing man lying in his younger self’s pool of blood.

The younger version of Loman, the one dying, weakly broke the silence. “Hey, so, um, if I die here, doesn’t that cause a paradox?”

The older Tallinn made an expression halfway between fear and surprise. “Oh, because if he’s dead, he can’t have gone back to kill himself, but if he didn’t go back to kill himself, he wouldn’t be dead… Um, Greg? How does the universe handle paradoxes?”

The older Loman looked up. His face was wet. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“Well, I guess we’re all about to find out.”

The younger Loman had begun to cough up some blood. “So, we have our last few moments here until… the universe ends or something?” asked the younger Tallinn.

“I guess so.”

“Wanna have sex?”

The older Tallinn, caught quite off guard, did not seem pleased at the idea of having sex with his younger self. “…No. No, I don’t.”

“Oh.”

There was more silence, and this time it was definitely awkward.

“I just thought, you know, with the last moments of the universe and all…” said young Tallinn.

“No.”

More silence.

The older Loman bent over his dying younger self. His younger self said something, but given how much blood he had lost it was impressive he could even make his lips move, so it was completely inaudible.

“What did you say?” asked the older one. The younger one’s mouth moved the same way it had before.
“What?” He didn’t want to miss whatever wisdom his younger self had. But again, the reply was completely impossible to hear.

“I’m sorry, what?” His younger self, in spite of his face being contorted with pain, managed to display an expression of extreme annoyance. He weakly waved his hand and turned over.

The older Loman grabbed his wrist and then dropped it again, silently shaking his head. No pulse.

“So, I guess the world ends now,” said Tallinn the younger.

“We had a good run,” said Tallinn the older.

“We caused the apocalypse because everybody was too excited for the future to actually wait for it.”

“We did not have a good run.”

There was awkward silence. Dr. Loman, who didn’t want the world to end on an awkward silence, began to say something.

“Fuc—”

And, suddenly, mid-word, massive quantum field fluctuations, orders of magnitude above the space-time continuum’s baryon excitation limit, appeared without warning, and the very fabric of the universe was torn apart in an instant