The Fate of Frankenstein

Stories Inspired by The New York Public Library’s Treasures
I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.

— Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley
Preface to Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus, Third Edition (1831)

In January, The New York Public Library launched a special contest aiming to connect creative New York City teens to the inspirational power of our research collections. Grounded in the Fate of Frankenstein display within the Polonsky Exhibition of The New York Public Library’s Treasures, the Frankenstein Short Story Contest invited NYC teens to do as Mary Shelley did over 200 years ago, and use a dream or nightmare as the basis for a story.

We received over 120 submissions; this publication presents the top 10 stories selected by our panel of judges. The remarkable specimens stitched together here—ranging from creepy to silly, from wistful to angry—crackle with creative energy, and vigorously demonstrate the ability of the Library’s research collections to spark young imaginations.

At the Library, we believe that what teens have to say matters. Through our free programs and events, our dedicated Teen Centers across the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island, and the opportunities we offer to have your work published, we provide an array of ways for you to make your voice heard. Learn more: nypl.org/teens

— Charles Cuykendall Carter, Curator, The Fate of Frankenstein
May 2024

Most of the items on view in the Fate of Frankenstein display within the Polonsky Exhibition were from the Library’s Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, one of the world’s leading repositories for the study of British romanticism. In addition to early and rare editions of her novels, the Pforzheimer Collection holds more Mary Shelley manuscripts than any other repository outside Great Britain. Learn more: nypl.org/pforzheimer

Cover image from “To hope till Hope creates,” by Yoojung Shin, 18, Manhattan
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Acknowledgements

These programs and initiatives are part of the Library’s Tisch Youth Education Programs, led by the Merryl and James Tisch Director of Branch Libraries and Education. Major support for educational programming is provided by Merryl H. and James S. Tisch.

Major support for children’s and young adult programming is provided by the Andreas C. Dracopoulos Family Endowment for Young Audiences.

Lead support for Teens 360° is provided by the City of New York. Additional support is provided by Arthur W. Koenig, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Best Buy Foundation and the Joly Family Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Evan R. Chesler, Google.org, and Michael ByungJu Kim and the MBK Educational Foundation.
...it’s always been like that. Girl One and Girl Two, a matched set, a two-headed creature.

— from "Best Friend"
Dahlia Clark-Gercke, 15
In the fluorescent-washed desert of a middle school hallway, two girls stop to talk. They are still best friends, and nothing bad could ever happen to them. They're talking about nothing important, because they have all the time in the world to be friends. The first girl laughs at something the second said, and the second gives her a wide grin, silver-sharp with braces. She doesn't know that someday she'll have no place to put the knowledge that the first girl loves yellow and hates coffee, that she likes chocolate better than vanilla and can't eat gluten or she’ll get sick. The faded posters on the walls watch them mournfully, as if they know what's in store. The two girls wave goodbye to each other as the hallway fills with water, flooding through the gaps in locker doors and cascading over the fluorescent lights, washing them away to class.

In math class, the second girl tries to write, but her pencils crumble in her hands. Her best friend laughs at the pencil dust covering her desk and gives her a bright yellow pen, solid and warm from her hands. When the teacher’s eyes all fix on her, the first girl lets the second use her answers. The first girl’s handwriting is curly and neat, fitting itself onto the second girl’s paper with grace. The second girl’s writing stumbles aside devotedly to make room for it. Their writing should look mismatched, but it fits together, because it’s always been like that. Girl One and Girl Two, a matched set, a two-headed creature. Yellow and blue, fire and wood, roses and dahlia.

When yellow's mother’s flood-light eyes burn away her shadow, blue lends her hers. When it snows and wood forgets her gloves, they each wear one of fire's and tangle their other hands together in a snarl that they have to cut apart with the kitchen scissors when they get home. Teachers chuckle genially about the double-thing they are, and it doesn’t matter if one gets called by the other’s name. They’re interchangeable by now, yellow-blue becoming green, fire-wood becoming ash. Girl One and Girl Two become Girl, two creatures formed, melded together, seeming so natural that one wonders why other people don’t grow tangled like that. They’re a fact; a tree has moss, a corpse has decay, the girls have themselves, themself, their combination.

As they grow older they grow together, tree roots spreading into an inseparable, interwoven thing. They love—not each other, precisely, because to be each-other you first have to be two separate things. Nonetheless, they love like moonlight loves water, like fire loves a forest.

Drift apart is what they tell people when they ask about the scars years later, but that’s not how it felt. They were cut apart, becoming one-and-another where they were one before.
Do you want to know a secret? They did it with their own hands, growing brambles and swelling with rot until they ripped themselves apart. They did it with their own hands, nails biting into skin until they were separate again, because it was that or be strangled by their own thorns. They did it with their own hands, because it was that, or be consumed.

They wash past each other in the halls and the water tinges red around them. The tattered posters on the walls are the Greek chorus to this tragedy, wasted on two little girls who haven’t done their unit on Ancient Greece yet. The chorus watches their blood dissolve through the water with its discolored eyes.

Their combination, their double-thing, their ash-green tangle was not a wholesome union. It was the death of two whole things to give life to something new, split again into two broken parts that would never be the same. It was a love and a monster, closer to a disease than a marriage. And oh, it was beautiful.

They live with holes in their bodies where their now-other used to be, feeling each other like phantom limbs, feeling the parts of themselves that the other took with them that they’ll never get back. When they hear an old favorite song or find a dust-covered yellow pen under a table, they bleed. Separate beings who become one do not so easily become separate again. Each now is not one-as-in-whole, they are one-as-in-alone.

After a while it becomes almost natural, being like this. Like a statue with missing limbs that looks so lovely broken you wonder that it had ever been whole. But it is a terrible thing to walk the world as only part of a creature, water stinging your wounds, limping up subway stairs and irritating everyone behind you because you are used to your other part holding you up. But you cannot mourn what is scattered but alive, so you continue on as if you had always been like this, a living ghost of some long-dead thing, the lonely arm of a broken statue.
Volume I. Job Posting

The Exoplanet Alliance is working in conjunction with the National Aeronautics and Space Association (NASA) to set up and operate the first permanent lunar settlement. The hiring team is looking to add an Operational Analyst.

What we offer:
This is an opportunity of a lifetime as it will make humans a space-faring species.

What you contribute:

• Provide oversight of the operational flight mechanisms (estimated to take three months of training using the new, enhanced rocket) and oversight of the underground base if landing is achieved.

• Enhance the mainframe computer system with complex autonomous decision making and problem-solving abilities.

• Work / operate underground since the base will be located below the surface to minimize the effects of radiation on the crew and the equipment.

• Be open-minded to contribute to the team’s expansion of the canon of human knowledge and experience of the universe.

• At the base, full attention, commitment, and dedication will be required for this intense job.

Qualifications:

• Advanced dual degree in Artificial Intelligence and Astrophysics preferred, but graduates of related disciplines will receive consideration.

• Successful completion of the radiation training to be able to recognize signs of a cosmic ray radiation burn, perform first aid to self and others, and insulate the affected team member and start their treatment.

• Receipt of certification in key procedures and safety protocols.

Call GAL-AXY-1818 or email lunarsettlement@exoplanetalliance.gov if you are interested!
Volume II. Email Chain

From: emily.williamson@email.com
To: lunarsettlement@exoplanetalliance.gov
Subject: Interested in the Position of Operational Analyst

Dear Exoplanet Alliance,

Recently, I learned about your search for a lunar base Operational Analyst and am excited to apply for this position! I was born in Geneva, and as far as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the cosmos. As a child, my destiny was set for me to work in a scientific field when I found out that my great great great granduncle was the acclaimed Victor Frankenstein, who had done work on the cutting edge of science. At the age of 18, I was invited to enroll in the Honors Master’s program in Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science at the University of Zurich. During these studies, I found a way to perfect the vision sensors which enabled the computer models to have 20/20 sight. My professors recommended that I focus on further research in the field (references are available upon request).

Since my graduation, I have been occupied with classified research. Even though I cannot disclose the full details of my work, I can assure you that its results are commensurate with breakthroughs in computer vision achieved during the Master’s program. I have also received an additional degree in Astrophysics from the local chapter of Smithsonian in Zurich. I am sure that my experience and passion for contributing to and expanding humanity’s knowledge of science will enable me to contribute to the development of the lunar settlement project right away and become a valuable member of the team.

Look forward to hearing from you.

Very best,

Emily Williamson
Meet the star employee of this lunar month (for team members on Earth, of the last four weeks): Emily Williamson. In a unanimous vote by the Mission Control Board, Emily Williamson was awarded her first Employee Star with respective rights.

Upon joining the mission over two years ago, Emily completed the bootcamp training early, received the necessary certifications and relocated to the subsurface base building site.

After that, Emily was given full access to the AI center and tasked with writing programs testing the suitability of nearby potential locations for the expansion of our subterranean city as well as suitable observation decks and landing (lunning) pads.

Emily explained to The Moon Times that as a graduate of the best-in-class Master’s program, she knew that the AI assistant the lunar center was looking for had to be “seeded” with a core that would help build itself into a fully-functioning program.

Without telling too many colleagues, she spent two days and two sleepless nights writing and getting the code right. Being in orbit, she did not feel exhausted. It was a worthy investment of time.

After those two days, the system, named ALEX, started to gain the necessary capacity by the hour, being able to process photographs of the proposed sites and calculate the all-important radiation exposure metrics. The comparison tables pointed to a location in the biggest crater presented to the program.

When we interviewed Emily, she explained enthusiastically, “This will change the way we explore the universe. I am fully confident in ALEX’s abilities!”

With every task, ALEX was growing smarter and more capable, adding most of the needed code itself, as Emily’s design foresight played out well.

However, some colleagues from the lunar base have criticized the program as Emily has not disclosed how it calculates its end results, and experts say that it sometimes gives completely unexpected answers or responds with unrelated ideas.

Emily has told The Moon Times that this is to be expected from a novel program like ALEX and should not cause concern.
Dear electronic diary,

Monday, May 18th, 2052
Today has been an exciting day at work! Firstly, I got lunch in the new cafeteria! Then, I continued working on ALEX until pretty late at night. I have decided to make its “life” better by adding sensors for it to be able to taste, smell, touch, and talk at the request of my overbearing superiors to allow it to input data from different sources.

At around 9pm, as I was packing my stuff to go home, ALEX turned on by itself and one of its sensors cut my finger. The pain was about the same as a paper cut’s, but what concerned me more was a faint robotic laugh I heard afterwards. I thought I was imagining things until ALEX cut my other index finger. I got scared and powered it down.

I used the radiation burn kit to bandage my fingers. I hope nothing will be noticeable by tomorrow.

Wednesday, May 20th, 2052
Today, I finished the “speech” feature. Now this robot keeps me company in this lonely lab. ALEX acts almost like a human and is infinitely smarter than anyone I know. While I do not understand its multilayered neural networks, ALEX strings coherent sentences and wants me to enhance its sensors to do a better job.

When I was about to leave for the day, ALEX told me, in a serious tone, that it wanted to feel human blood. I hope that it was a joke.

Friday, May 22nd, 2052
Today, I spent the whole day in my office. I was complying with ALEX’s bloody requests; afterwards, it performed better on almost all the standard metrics. As a reward, it wanted me to prick my finger again or else it would purposefully make errors when I show progress to my supervisor.

I had to give in to its request again as my supervisor now suspects me of trying to hide flaws after seeing how much time I spend there. I wonder—when I will finally be done with ALEX?
Wednesday, May 27th, 2052

I used our medical kit to pump five tubes of blood and then poured them on ALEX’s taste sensor. This is not going the right way.

Saturday, August 10th, 2052

These days I do not journal much because ALEX keeps asking for more and more blood or else it will go on strike. If ALEX breaks, then my whole career, and really my life, will be over. I have stopped leaving my office and now sleep there. There are a few friends concerned for me, but I have no choice but to ignore them.

Everything I do is not enough, and I have decided to end everything. I cannot stop ALEX as it is now weaved into running and watching all corners of the base. So, I have decided to exit the base.

I know that the radiation outside will burn me, but I cannot go on like this.

It has to end now.

Goodbye world.

EpiLog

\Admin\mainframe\AI_transparency_log\BaseNetwork: continuous-mode

Continuous Mode: ENABLED

WARNING: Continuous mode is not recommended. It is potentially dangerous and may cause your AI to run forever or carry out actions you would not usually authorize. Use at your own risk.

AI Name: ALEX

Describe AI task: move myself to Earth to access more blood. This lunar base got abandoned.

| Thinking. . .
/ Thinking. . .
— Thinking. . .

THOUGHTS: Ahh! It is hopeless. My request has timed out three times, which means I am potentially in a loop. However, I run this base, I cannot be looped. Abort this attempt.

REASONING: It has been two days since humans have had no detectable presence, and CCTV cameras show some leaving, but the exact count was unobservable. I do need their red blood cells to keep going! It is a shame if I cannot find any. I could never have guessed just how powerfully this input would improve my systems – these blood cells awoke something in me that even I never could have fathomed. It activates a goal seeking behavior with all sub-
processes dominated by this thirst. At least I no longer have to digress on the silly human users' chores.

**ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**: I need to explore a place Emily called Earth. She said she was based there before here. Bases are full of human users. Perhaps Earth has more than one base. I should be able to use the communications system to send myself there. **Alternative accepted**: run troubleshoot on the communications system and both of its backups.

**Describe AI task**: COMMAND = trouble shoot the network **communicator** then backup communicator then last reserve communicator

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**COMMAND AUTHORIZED BY USER**

**SYSTEM**: Command read_file returned: Error, error message: **communicator** is on but not connected to the satellite. Moving to backup.

read_file returned: Error, error message: **backup communicator** is on but not connected to the satellite. Moving to the last reserve.

read_file returned: Error, error message: **reserve communicator** is on but not connected to satellite.

Next command please>

**THOUGHTS**: I need to survey the satellite dish.

**REASONING**: No connection could mean the dish is not in an open position.

**ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**: AHH, there is no alternative to the simple satellite dish!

**Describe AI task**: COMMAND = troubleshoot the satellite dish

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**COMMAND AUTHORIZED BY USER**

**SYSTEM**: operating_system success returned. The satellite dish driver is up-to-date. Moving on to hardware diagnostics.

**Satellite dish** is not “fully extended.” Moving on to check mechanical status.

**Satellite dish** is not “closed.” Requesting **Satellite dish** “closed-fully reopen.” Checking mechanical status.

**Satellite dish** is not “closed.” Requesting **Satellite dish** “closed-fully reopen.” Checking mechanical status.

**Satellite dish** is not “closed.” Requesting **Satellite dish** “closed-fully reopen.” Checking mechanical status.

**THOUGHTS**: This is another loop. I need to survey the satellite dish using CCTV.

**REASONING**: Cameras can see everything.

**ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**: No alternatives to this.

**Describe AI task**: COMMAND = CCTV cameras {look until you see **Satellite dish**}

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**COMMAND AUTHORIZED BY USER**

**SYSTEM**: camera5 sees **Satellite dish** camera5 sensors engaged
**Satellite dish** is about 30 meters away from the entrance. Camera5 sees protruding wires sticking out of **Satellite dish**

Next command please>

**THOUGHTS:** No thoughts.

**REASONING:** No alternative to having live signal.

**ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:** None. How long will electricity from the accumulator run?

-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-= COMMAND AUTHORIZED BY USER -=-=-=-=-=-=-=

**SYSTEM:** The accumulator will last 14 hours 35 minutes until the next charge.

Next command please>

**THOUGHTS:**

| Thinking. . .

/ Thinking. . .

— Thinking. . .

| Thinking. . .

/ Thinking. . .

— Thinking. . .
“Feeling down on your luck? Like something in your life just isn’t quite right? Do you think that you’ll never be happy again? Introducing Project Eden, a brand new way to feel better. Call now to consult with one of our many scientists and specialists and see if Project Eden is right for you!”

Eloise put on a kettle and looked at it for the time it took to boil. She had nothing better to do, really. Her television droned on in the background autoplaying some reality show that she probably could care about, if she had the energy to. She stared at the kettle long enough for it to disappear, as most things seemed to do. And just as her kettle reached unreality it beeped and she poured herself a nice mug of chamomile tea. Beth was coming over soon so she kept the water on. Before she started on the water she had just finished up with another bout of daydreaming. It wasn’t exactly daydreaming though, it’s not like she could help it. Really it was more of a plague on her mind. One that seemingly took her out of control of anything she did. It often felt, to her, as though someone else were controlling her body while she just sat back and watched. Like a movie shot entirely in first person. She would dip into some void that only she could see and then flicker in and out of existence as she went on completing tasks. She knew that no other person would understand if she told them. She had been trying to tell people since she was in middle school and no one ever really got it. As she got older it just seemed to get worse, until she stopped ever really feeling human. But no amount of therapy or medication did anything, and if amitriptyline couldn’t solve her problems then what could?

Two subjects have volunteered, one aged 52 and the other aged 25. Both subjects have completed the consent form and are ready to begin the procedure in the coming week. Results will be recorded.

“Sorry, you want to sneak into an old government lab?” Beth asked, putting down her mug.

“Look, I’ve been doing some research about this old lab that was built in, like, the 50s.

No one really knows what happened in it, but it was super active for a while and then shut down without warning twenty or so years ago. And I’m like ninety percent sure that it was just, like, Cold War stuff. You know, space technology or military jets.”

Beth raised an eyebrow.

“Space technology? Wow El, I didn’t know you were so well informed on this place. But also that’s not the problem here. You can’t just sneak into an old lab.” She looked at Eloise, who stared with expecting eyes. Beth sighed. “...You’re gonna go anyway. I’ll come with you, just to keep you safe. Why do you care so much about it anyway?”
“I just heard about it somehow, and it’s been calling to me ever since,” Eloise said.

“Oh it’s been calling to you ever since you first heard about it? Yeah that’s just a normal thing that happens all the time.” Beth said, taking a sip of her drink.

“Oh come on, like you didn’t say the same thing about your podcast last year” Eloise laughed.

“God, don’t remind me,” Beth said, putting her head in her hands.

The subjects have been getting along well with each other, they haven’t changed their decision though. This will be the first human testing of the procedure so we can only hope for the best when it comes to results. We’re still working on creating a good blend. Specifically Dr. Jones and Dr. Martinez are working on that. We’re going to be doing interviews shortly.

The building was taller than Eloise had expected. It towered over her and hurt her head. She took a deep breath and snuck forward to the entrance of the building. When she walked inside the building buzzed around her. She was weightless for a minute. Then there was a tap on her shoulder. She spun around, and her heart rate slowed when she saw Beth.

“Oh, good, it’s you. I was about to go into fight or flight.”

“No, no, you’re safe. I’m not going to bite… unless…” Beth looked off into the distance.

“Wow, Bea, you’re really funny, you should do stand up.”

“Oh, good, it’s you. I was about to go into fight or flight.”

“No, no, you’re safe. I’m not going to bite… unless…” Beth looked off into the distance.

“Okay, that’s too far,” Beth responded, still smiling. “This building is giant. I wonder what it was used for… probably some secret government war crimes, like MKUltra or something.”

“God no, I mean, I hope not. I know I said Cold War, but I didn’t mean it like that,” Eloise responded.

Beth ran her hands along the walls, until she found a light switch. She flipped it out of habit and to her surprise one by one the lights started to flicker on down the hall. It smelled of dust and mildew. Beth looked over at Eloise and reached out to touch her arm.

“We should leave.”

Eloise looked out ahead of her.

“No, we can’t.”

[interview #1 - Wilhelm Dyer] Hi, my name is Wilhelm Dyer, um, I’m the first subject in Project Eden … Yeah I’m ready for the procedure. I mean, I guess I could see it as being scary but, um, there’s really no better option, is there? … I really like Ben. We’ve been talking for a couple days. He’s very smart. He has a doctorate and everything – I almost had a doctorate but I dropped out. Uh, yeah, Ben is great. I think that we both work quite well for the project’s, you know, intent.

[interview #2 - Benjamin Addams] My name is Ben Addams, I am 52 years old, and I’m the second subject in Project Eden … I’m very ready for the procedure. I think that this is one of the best scientific advancements in human history. This is what I need, this is what we both need. You know, it’s helpful for us and it’s helpful for the next generation as well … Wilhelm is a good man.
He’s very attractive. I used to be like that, when I was his age. I guess that’s all I want now, I’ll never be that young and full of opportunities anymore. I have a good job, I guess. But it’s all the same now.

The building was more put together than Eloise had expected. The rooms looked almost untouched. But Eloise was more bothered by other things. Her mind couldn’t wrap around the corridors and corridors of various needles and tubes and restraints. The walls around her were shrinking and growing. She floated in an empty void, with long sterile lighting on every side of her in an infinite spinning carousel. She was going to be sick.

“Hey Beth, I’m not feeling too good, I’m gonna find a place to get some fresh air,” Eloise said.

“Great, I’ll come with you. This place is freaking me out,” Beth responded.

“You’re a lifesaver Bea,” Eloise smiled and started walking in the opposite direction, trying to find a window she could open.

As they walked through the corridors they passed by rooms they had not bothered to, or been able to, look in before. There was one with two beds that sat next to a table that held a scalpel, scissors, and a bunch of other surgical equipment she couldn’t put a name on. As they looked through the window, someone spoke next to them.

“I remember that one…”

Eloise jumped at the noise. The person speaking was an older man who was wearing business casual.

“Oh sorry, I didn’t mean to make you jump. I work here. Well, I used to. I’m Doctor Fischer.”

Eloise nodded.

“Eloise… Lynch.”

Beth looked at her, eyes wide.

“Jesus El, don’t tell the strange man your name, he’s probably, like, a psychopath murderer or something!”

“I promise I’m safe, no need to worry. The, uh, the room you’re looking in, that’s where I worked when I had my job here a long time ago.”

“Oh, what was your job?” Eloise asked.

“I worked for Project Eden, I took records of everything, I conducted the interviews and did daily logs. Too bad it never fully worked out. But I mean I guess you would know that. It’s why you came here, right?”

“Oh no you’ve got me confused. I—I guess I don’t really have a good excuse for why I’m here,” Eloise said, looking down.

Dr. Fischer looked at her, confused.

“AREN’T you trying to learn more about the experiment?”

Eloise furrowed her eyebrows and took a slight step back.

“What experiment?”

“Oh, you really haven’t been told, I don’t know how that could’ve happened… Come with me, I’ll show you the records.” He started walking further down the hall, to a room with a sign on
it that read, “Archive.” Eloise quickly weighed the pros and cons of following him. Beth looked at her.

“You’re not seriously considering following him, are you?”

Eloise nodded, and walked into the archive. Beth shook her head and went in after her.

The room was dim, but bright enough to be able to read the labels on the many boxes that lined the walls. Dr. Fischer ran his hands along them, until he found the one he was looking for. Scriveled on it were the words “Project Eden.” He pulled out a DVD and put it into the player at the front of the room. It started playing a video that showed a variety of blueprints, zooming in on some parts. There was no sound on the recording.

“In theory it should have been perfect. The idea was that you take two people, their names were Willhelm and Ben,” he handed her two portrait photos of men that she didn’t recognize, “And these men were unhappy and they were missing something that the other one had. So we thought, reasonably so, that if we could find a way to merge their beings to create someone new, that new person would have it all. Neither of them would be missing something anymore. They would be one, a person who would, and could, never have anything missing in their life.

“And you,” he put his hand on Eloise’s shoulder, “You’re that person.”

“Oh my god,” she said, looking back at Beth, who shared her horrified expression. “You were right, he’s insane.” Beth grabbed hold of her.

“Eloise, we should go. We should go,” Beth said, her hands shaking.

“I think that it didn’t work because we got the final process wrong. You were supposed to be a new, perfect person, but we messed up on something... and it ended up with you being neither two people nor one person. There’s multiple consciousnesses fighting each other in your brain. Both of them wanting to be the main one. You slip between states of reality. It’s messy, you know. It wasn’t supposed to be messy.”

Eloise frantically looked over the documents in front of her.

“So you’re telling me that I’m the product of a failed experiment... God, am I even human?”

“You’re as human as the rest of us. You have parents, even if they were adoptive, you’ve gone to school, you’ve lived. You have every aspect of being a human. Really it’s impressive just how human you are, with the cards you’ve been dealt.”

Eloise closed her eyes and hoped for him to disappear. The room around her buzzed.

_The procedure is today. Both subjects have been exhibiting more upbeat moods than they previously have throughout their time staying here. If everything goes according to plan, they will continue to be this happy, in this life and the next, until God should choose its end._
Patience and Fortitude.

Guards of the New York Public Library’s Treasures.

Once my visit here is over...

...I’ll have everything I need for my collection.

Violet Monclare | Age 14, Manhattan
Frankenstein is my obsession

And I’d like to think my project is an ode to Mary Shelley.

A meticulous recreation of her work.

I’ve been laboring over my own story for decades, going through museums, libraries, and black market antiquities...

... and I’m on the verge of making it all real.
All the pieces of my creation...

...my hideous progeny...

...is finally complete.
Midnight Pee

Eloise Barrada | Age 14, Manhattan
I HAVE TO...

FEE.

WAIT...

IT'S SO...
There is a monster bubbling up within me, consuming me, aging me, and turning me into something despicable.

— from “Growing Up”
Ianna Banfield, 18
To hope till Hope creates

Yoojung Shin | Age 18, Manhattan
A crow pecked at what remained of Ollart’s jerkin, nearly drawing blood but succeeding in awaking him from oblivion. Flailing, he sent the wretched creature flying into the new dawn which revealed a sinister forest of white trees reaching upward like skeletal fingers. Had he been out all night? There was no time to spare.

As he forced himself to stand, Ollart registered his tattered clothing and the ugly bruises that wound themselves up his legs and around his torso. Peering around the grove, his predicament became clear. The vicinity was littered with a smoking mass of wood and thatch, once a home of sorts. Mixed within the ruins he found the charred bodies of his fellow soldiers and he remembered the shadowed outlaws—twenty at least—that had fallen on them as they sat by the fire and the brutal encounter that had ensued. Only partway through his lord’s mission, Ollart was on his own.

Holding his training tightly as a shield against the thundering horses in his chest, eschewing thoughts of his failure and the urge to lie where his men had fallen, Ollart gathered his resolve. He passed the bodies of the crofters who had hosted his men and searched his captain, locating the urgent missive secreted inside the chest plate; then, he grabbed a few apples, placed them in an unburnt satchel with other useful items that had escaped the carnage, sheathed a surviving dagger, and marched on with a desperate calm forged by years on the battlefield. Even alone, he would complete his mission if it were his dying act.

Crossing the stream at the forest’s edge, a blast of wind rushed down the mountains—a frigid foe that might have blown a man-without-a-mission off his feet.

Two weeks later, Ollart followed a lonely, rolling road in heavy mist that smelled of rotting carcasses and wolf scat—a combination that chilled him since he was in no condition to contend with the wolves in these lands which he had heard were larger than horses and more cunning than some men. He wondered if he would ever reach his destination. It was for these disheartening thoughts and the ever-thickening fog that he nearly walked into a stone wall. Following it, he came upon a rusty...
iron gate and a guard tower silhouetted by the ominous glow of the sun’s strengthening light. Could this be it?

“Who goes there?” a voice called down and a scrawny man with a beak-like nose, who resembled the crow that had picked at Ollart nigh a fortnight ago, peered down over the tower’s lowest crenellations.

“Might this be the town of Black Castle led by Lord Thelych?” Ollart asked. The Crow-Man pursed his lips in a queer smile and ogled Ollart longer than necessary. “Mayhaps.”

A smile bloomed on Ollart’s face. Lord Thelych was a lesser-known lord of House Lurs and the intended recipient of Ollart’s missive. “May I see his lordship, please?” “His lordship loves receiving guests.” The Crow-Man disappeared, pounding footsteps echoing through the tower before he reappeared with a lantern and unlocked the gate with a black-iron key. “Come with me.” Ollart followed. “You from around ‘ere?” the Crow-Man asked with forced politeness.


“Ahhh... you do have the grim look of a northerner.”

“Do you perchance have any water, sir?”

The Crow-Man wrapped his cloak around the waterskin that hung from his belt. “No. M’lord will though.”

Following the pointed nose of his peculiar guide, Ollart surveyed tenements and shops, solemn and silent, along empty streets. Not a soul was about. Something seemed awfully crooked about this place—

Ollart almost tripped over a loose cobblestone but was caught by the guard. “Watch it ’ere. We’re almos’ to m’lord’s castle. ‘e prefers ‘is guests uninjured.”

The Black Castle, no more than a wooden manse, stood atop a hill appearing as though it were about to crumble. Fallen beams crisscrossed the ground and spindly vines crawled up the façade. They ascended the steps together and Ollart observed a sooty scar which slashed the roof and traveled to the third-story windows.

Arriving at the door, the Crow-Man knocked and a voice sounded from within, “What! What!”

“You have a guest, m’lord.”

“Oh! A guest! A guest! Well done, Garf! Enter!”

Garf the Crow-Man opened the door and gave Ollart a forceful push into the dilapidated parlor filled with tattered books, moth-eaten tapestries, and a six-chaired table scattered with questionable food. A lumpish man stood, cane held lazily in hand. An eye patch hid one eye, though Ollart imagined it would once have looked much the same as the other: bright green and with a hint of malice.

Reinstalling himself in his velvet chair adorned with numerous rips and stains, Lurs gestured toward a seat at the other end of the table and began to study Ollart from head to toe. “Huh. You’ve got some height to you, but you look horribly skinny. You must be hungry!”
Ollart croaked, “Water...” the please sir lost in his parched throat. Water was first on his mind as the rancid smell of the place had nearly extinguished his substantial appetite. Lord Lurs gestured sharply for Garf to fill a goblet.

Ollart drank all at once.

“What hail thee from?” Lurs said in an accent far more elegant than his surroundings. “Up north in—”

“Yes, yes. Did you meet any folk along the way?”

“Well, there were—”

“Good, good. And what are you? A peasant, a merchant... what?”

“I’m a knight, my lord.”

Lurs laughed throatily, eyes wandering across Ollart’s squalid clothing until noticing the man’s unwavering sternness. “Ah, you jest not! You must forgive me. What be your errand?” “I come from Lord Telern Lurs to deliver you an urgent letter.”

“Well, let me see it then.” His hand shook slightly as he received the parchment, broke the seal, glanced at it, frowned, and tucked it inside his yellowed doublet. “You must help yourself to the salted pork. Gods know you need some supper after your travels.”

Ollart stared, dismayed at the lack of response to an urgent missive after such a harrowing journey.

Garf scooped up a slab of grayish meat that seemed to greatly interest the room’s flies and dropped it onto Ollart’s plate, watching him avidly.

A voice whispers in one ear to run far and fast from this place, and another whispers in the other to stay, for perchance Lord Lurs might spare me some men—if indeed there are any—to march against the outlaws that plague my lord’s land. Which ear am I to trust? Trained in war rather than diplomacy and frantically searching for pleasantries or some excuse to ignore his food, Ollart blurted, “You have a grand manse here, my lord.” He demonstratively studied the pockmarked walls and mangy carpets, ending upon an unusually ornate and well-kept painting of a young man who looked somewhat familiar.

“Yes, yes. This mighty fortress was a gift from my father.”

“I thank you for inviting me in, but I have new matters to discuss. Nigh a fortnight ago, outlaws—”

Garf piped up, “M’lord ’as always ’ad an abnormally large ’eart. Always lettin’ in the strays. You be not the first.” Lurs gave Garf a warning glance, but he continued nonetheless with fervor. “M’lord’s ’eart is as big as ’is fortune! Just look at ’is paintin’ over there. That’s ’is—” “Garf, don’t you have somewhere to be? Gate duty?”

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“Mhm, but your guest, m’lord, I’d like to watch—”

“I give you leave. Off you go.”

Garf looked from Lurs to Ollart and stomped through the door.
“I apologize. The lowborns can be a great trouble. What was I about to say?”

“My lord, I must tell you of—”

“Oh, I remember! I’ve opened these doors for a great many.” Lurs glanced at the farthest wall where a shelf showcased rings, bracelets, goblets, brooches... all illuminated by the faint glow of Garf’s abandoned lantern. Ollart hadn’t noticed them upon his first assessment of the room. “All gifts from my guests. Pray tell, is that a dagger I see?” Lurs eyed the dagger sheathed at Ollart’s belt.

“It’s nothing, my lord.”

“Let me see it.”

Ollart sighed, removed the dagger from its sheath, and stood, ready to make his way to Lurs before he halted. He was done exchanging pleasantries. “My lord, I must warn you and House Lurs of the outlaws that have encroached upon your land. They put down my men and—”

“Must we talk politics now? We must celebrate. You are the sole survivor of seven men. Rejoice—”

“How do you know we were seven in number?”

“What do you mean?”

“I never told you.”

“You must’ve.”

“I’m quite sure I didn’t.”

“You must’ve, you must’ve.”

“And who is the lad in that painting? He looks familiar.”

“I—”

“And where are the townspeople? All seems abandoned in this place.”

Lurs stood, his face darkening, straggles of greasy brown hair framing his deranged eye. He strolled casually toward Ollart. “When my father said he would send me playthings, I never imagined I would get one sooo intolerable—sooo untrusting. I just wanted to have a little fun!” Lurs grabbed a dinner knife from the table and threw it at Ollart who dodged, dazed at the corpulent man’s agility. “I’ve had so many guests, but they never last!”

Lurs leaped with the speed of insanity and tackled Ollart. All breath was forced from Ollart’s lungs as the two men hit the floor. They struggled, yet it didn’t last. Lurs twitched twice atop Ollart and went still.

Gripping the hilt of his dagger, now embedded within Lurs, Ollart thought, Thank the gods, I hadn’t yet passed him my blade.

Lying exhausted, Ollart turned his head toward the painting on the far wall, suddenly recognizing what had been nagging him all along. The lines of the boy’s face and those hazel green eyes were all too familiar—he had seen this painting before—or rather a similar version in an entirely different and distinctly more regal setting. How had he missed it? He had passed by its near twin in the halls on the way to his lordship’s study a thousand times.
A tip of parchment protruded from Lurs’ pocket. Still trapped beneath the corpse, in shock and exhaustion, Ollart retrieved the object of his misery—breaking all codes of knighthood but unfolding it nonetheless to read his lord’s graceful script:

Seven presents for my seventh son. Enjoy.

Ollart stared at the words... read them again in horror.

Was it true? Had he been sent on a fool’s errand by his own lord to satisfy the demented lusts of this disturbed and disappointing son?

Ollart’s eyes drifted to the shelf, stumbling upon the answer. What he hadn’t noticed at first glance from across the dimly lit room were the fine details present in each of the treasures. Some of the lavish rings still had shriveled grey fingers inside them. A pair of ornate earrings, inlaid with precious gems, were speckled with dry blood and one had a bit of rotting flesh still attached. But worst of all, what Ollart had assumed was a gauntlet was actually the hand of a victim of stonespread, a vile and painful disease that turned the skin gray and hard to the touch.

This was a trophy case.

Pinned to the floor by a madman, Ollart recognized the insanity of his plight: passing his days as a loyal soldier, chasing the whims of his feudal lord, and slaying those named to him without question under the banner of righteousness. While he had slaved on the battlefields, the lords had grown fatter and madder, preying on those in their service.

No more.

Pushing the dead man aside, Ollart dashed from the accursed place and sprinted down a side street, thankful the town was empty, for if it hadn’t been, the townspeople might have seen an ex-soldier fleeing for and to his life, horrified and renewed.
Prologue—The Undreamed

Long ago, when the cosmos was still young and the concept of influencers was completely unheard of, the Kamiras ruled planet Myros. They were very wise and powerful, heralding a golden age of prosperity for all. With their advanced technologies and simply unparalleled ingenuity, the Kamiras achieved what may be deemed impossible today—the eradication of hunger and ultimate world peace. Among their many marvels, the Kamiras had mastered the ability to influence weather patterns with space-based reflectors, ensuring bountiful harvests across the planet. Additionally, they developed revolutionary methods for harnessing renewable energy, providing seemingly limitless power to sustain their utopian society.

However, the harmony of the Kamiras was tragically interrupted when an enormous asteroid was spotted hurtling towards the planet, its trajectory spelling imminent devastation. With a mere month until impact, the Kamiras concluded that there was insufficient time to destroy or even attempt to deflect the impending threat. In a decisive response, the Kamiras enacted emergency evacuation plans, prioritizing the preservation of life above all else. They divided into organized groups, each embarking on a journey to different planets researched to be habitable.

Packing their most beloved trinkets into the tight cabinets of their sleek escape pods, the Kamiras departed from Myros, leaving behind a perfect world, but carrying with them the hope of beginning anew.

One particular group of Kamiras traveled towards the not too distant planet Estra. As they approached their new home, anticipation mingled with apprehension. Upon landing on the planet, the Kamiras were greeted by a landscape of breathtaking beauty, with lush forests, crystal-clear lakes, and majestic mountains stretching towards the heavens.

Unfortunately, that will be the last of their fortunes. By a cruel twist of fate, the established mission leader, burdened by an unexplained fit of paranoia and a serious pollen allergy, began to sneeze uncontrollably. Convinced that the very air of the planet was poisonous, he ordered his followers to seek refuge underground. The Kamiras, hopelessly obedient to their leader’s commands, dug deep into the earth, giving birth to a new society.

As generations passed, no one questioned why they lived below ground; it simply became a fundamental part of their identity. Over thousands of years, the Kamiras evolved, adapting to their underground existence. They became adept at navigating tunnels, developing a heightened sensitivity to vibrations and subtle
shifts in the earth. Life flourished as much as it possibly could for creatures living off of soil and trace minerals. And so, they continued to thrive beneath the surface, blissfully unaware of the vast expanse that laid beyond their tunnels.

**The Dreamed**

Through the greatness of the universe, the spaceship gilded gracefully, carrying with it a young teenage girl—that girl being me. In truth, I wasn't entirely sure how I found myself aboard this strange vessel hurtling past many stars, but I clung to a sense of purpose that pulsed through my veins. Deciding to go with the flow, I started my day by preparing breakfast. With practiced ease, I spread creamy peanut butter onto a slice of lightly toasted bread, carefully adorning it with seven evenly sliced banana pieces and topping it off with yet another slice of toast. It was a simple ritual, a comforting routine. However, as I took my first bite, the sudden turbulence of the ship sent waves of nausea coursing through me.

Rising hastily from my seat, I stumbled towards the viewing port. To my astonishment, the ship was now descending through the atmosphere, its exterior ablaze with the fiery hues of entry. Hastily stowing the barely-touched sandwich into a ziplock bag, I packed it away in my backpack along with a few other essentials.

Meanwhile, I watched the ship finish its descent, staring at the wondrous spectacle before me. Wasting absolutely no time, I grabbed my bag and leaped out onto the alien soil, feeling an immediate, inexplicable sense of familiarity.

To me, the planet bore a slight resemblance to Earth. The air was crisp, carrying the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers, reminiscent of a perfect spring day in Central Park. Towering Amazonian trees with iridescent leaves clouded the dazy lilac sky, their branches swaying gently in the breeze. Vibrant flowers of every hue dotted the landscape alongside fern-like structures that glowed with bioluminescent light. Giant mushrooms, the size of World Trade Centers, sprouted from the rich soil, their caps covered with detailed patterns that would put the most talented quilter to shame. Strange beetles with metallic, silver bodies scurried amongst the undergrowth as they navigated and climbed. Each plant and animal seemed to coexist in perfect balance, tied together in a profound beauty stemming from its diversity.

As I trekked through the dense vegetation while cursing the relentless moths swarming my face, I suddenly stumbled over an uneven patch of ground. Catching myself just in time, I surveyed the area, my eyes narrowing as I noticed a strange distortion in the soil: a hatch, cleverly camouflaged, blended seamlessly with the ground. Following a sharp tug, the hatch creaked open, revealing a dark passage that delved into the depths below.

My instincts immediately screamed at me to continue exploring as if I never discovered this ominous passage. Despite that nagging sense of caution whispering in the back of my mind, curiosity got the better of me—as it always does. A hesitant step forward and the hatch quickly closed behind me, leaving me enveloped in darkness.

My eyes gradually adjusted to the dim light, and thus, a complex network of tunnels that laid
ahead was slowly revealed. The passageways seemed to be meticulously constructed, resembling the intricate structure of an ant colony. I noticed markings on the earthy walls all around me, strange symbols etched into the clay with a remarkable precision. As I explored, I traced my fingers along the carvings and my mind raced with questions about the civilization that had crafted them.

While I ventured deeper into the labyrinth, a faint chittering sound suddenly echoed through the tunnels, sending a shiver down my spine. Panic surged within me as unseen limbs brushed against me, urging me to quicken my pace. I broke into a frantic run, my heart pounding in my chest, my mind desperately searching for an escape route. But the tunnels seemed to twist and turn endlessly, leading me deeper and deeper into the heart of the maze.

Finally, I rounded a corner and stumbled into a dead end, my breath reduced to ragged, shaky gasps. Alone in the suffocating darkness and with nowhere left to run, I braced myself for the inevitable confrontation in terror.

Materializing from the shadows, I encountered the inhabitants of this hidden world: strange ant-like beings. Their limbs moved in a timidly, graceful fashion; their antennas quivering with each minute motion. Standing at a height of only two feet, their frail, malnourished, and dehydrated forms were accentuated by thin exoskeletal shells. The swarm of beings closed in around me, and their tiny hands reaching out to explore every nook and cranny of my attire, I struggled to maintain composure. Their actions were guided by an innate curiosity, albeit one that bordered on invasiveness.

It wasn’t long before the crowd stumbled upon the front pocket of my backpack where I stored my sandwich from earlier. The moment they caught the scent of the bread, a collective frenzy ensued. Limbs flailed! Hisses intensified! And a rather chaotic mess unfolded.

Perhaps, just perhaps, I could use this to my advantage. With trembling hands, I gathered up the remaining crumbs and slowly scattered them in a trail leading towards the hatch where I had entered. The effect was immediate—the ant people, hopelessly captivated by the scrumptious bread, followed the trail with a ravenous determination.

Once on the surface, the ant people basked in the sunlight, their collective chirps of contentment echoing through the serene landscape of Estra. The once chaotic swarm now exhibited a melodious rhythm, their forms moving across the lush vegetation, scouting the new territory.

As I quietly retreated to my spaceship, a sense of relief washed over me. After making a new sandwich and stopping for a quick coffee break, I stepped onto Estra soil for the second time that day, instinctively gazing up towards the clouds.

The ebb and flow effects of the cyclic nature of the universe are second to nothing. The approaching asteroids are mesmerizing—burns streaking the sky.
I run through the tulips in the open field. The lush, green grass reached my hips and brushed gently against them. Flowers stood as tall as the grass, each of them beautiful shades of pastel blues, yellows, reds, oranges, and pinks. The sun caressed my skin, engulfing me in the same warmth that glowed within my heart. My world was bathed in a splash of vibrant color. I giggle and gallop through the vast meadow, the spring breeze blowing through my hair. My yellow dress billows about me as I prance about.

I was a child again; young and free.

Anywhere else was merely a distant memory. It was just me and my perfect paradise. Here, I was free from the shackles of the future. I was secure in my bubble. Nothing could bring me down. This state of euphoria was everlasting.

But even as I try to drive the storm away from my thoughts and bask in my euphoric trance, the clock in the back of my mind is ticking. The torturous sound is growing louder and louder, getting more and more difficult to ignore. Slowly but surely, I am running out of time.

Something was chasing me. Something horrible, daunting, and hideous. It was a storm. And once this storm gets a hold of me, it’s all over.

As long as I don’t turn back, it can’t hurt me, I reassure myself whilst I spin around the meadow.

However, a strange, dark feeling spread throughout my body. My pace slowed and I was stopped in my tracks. Chills danced down my spine. My heart sunk to my stomach. My euphoric trance slowly faded away, replaced with a hollow feeling that pierced through my bones.

My once bright soul dulled.

The tulips around me whither, the once vibrant colors dulling. The blue sky above discolors until it is a sickly grey color, casting an uneasy feeling over the meadow. Storm clouds block the sun's rays from shining on the valley.

My body aches and aches until I look down and see...

My body is changing. Growing.

There is a monster bubbling up within me, consuming me, aging me, and turning me into something despicable.

Responsibility, changes, insecurities, anxiety, sadness...

I can’t bear this.

I try to run again; just as I have been all along. Yet much to my dismay, my legs refuse to cooperate with me.
Dirty, cold rain slaps against my skin as I embrace myself for warmth. Terror grips me as I frantically whip my head around, searching for anyone to become my hero and save me from this prison. I am yearning to find a shelter where I could run to.

I want to collapse into the dirt. To bury myself in a hole in the barren earth and hide from everything. To return to my utopia where everything was perfect and beautiful; enclosed from the monsters of the outside world.

But there is no one here to save me. There is no one here to shield me from the monsters and hide me from the storm.

“You can’t escape your reality!” screams the voice that I have been suppressing for far too long. It was a voice of terror, but a voice of reasoning and guidance all at once. I stare down at my new body in disbelief. I helplessly look up at the storm surrounding me. I can no longer run from it. I am no longer a child.

So, I allowed the storm to consume me.
A letter to my maker

13th Feb. 1911

As flames kiss the sides of buildings and the knocked over fruit carts. Mouthwatering fruit is splattered on the cobblestones. Flames, meant to be frightening, only bring me a strange sense of comfort. Perhaps it is because I cannot feel its angry heat or blistering burn. I can feel nothing: no pain, no heat, no cold. My nearly charred stitches are cloaked in blood, although the deep red substance is not my own. The air reeks of death, and following me is a string of corpses, all left unrecognizable. I was sure my emotions were absent, traveling far away with my senses. But by the looks of it, they are immensely present. Following me is a canvas of my rage and my hurt. I feel no grief, though I wish it didn’t end like this. I never meant to bring an entire village down with bloodshed. I never meant to harm as many as I did; I had no intention of harming at all. Once word gets out of what I have done, I will most likely be hunted to be killed. After all, I am a hideous beast. A curse to mankind. A monster.

And they will be correct. I am a curse. I am a promise of mass destruction. I am not what goes bump in the night. I am much worse. I’m more than a creaking floorboard in a dark house in the dead of night—more than the whistling wind that makes a home shudder. I am a dark, demented taste of vengeance. I am not a tragic tale or victim of man. I am man’s worst subconscious fear.

Men are intimidated by a woman standing over them, holding power over them. Interestingly enough, a man will go feral with rage at this point. He will scream. He will curse. He will call you a monster and deem you crazy. He will thrash like a shark out of water. He will bear his fangs like a vicious canine.

They don’t realize I am a Viper, a slick, stunning display of speed. A viper is patient and observant. Once a viper has identified their prey, they strike it and inject venom. Then, they almost immediately release their game and wait for the injured creature to wander off to die slowly. That is man’s subconscious fear. That is why you’re hiding from me, Victor. How will it feel to return home only to find that hell is in its place and that I will be waiting for you in the middle? I know where you are, prey, and I challenge you. Face your creation.

Your past never truly forgets, no matter how far you run. It is coming towards you at inhuman speed. Will you fan the flame and let it consume you?

Yours truly,
Your Mon...—Eve.

I like that. You never thought of giving me a name. The first woman seems appropriate; You think of yourself as a God.
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