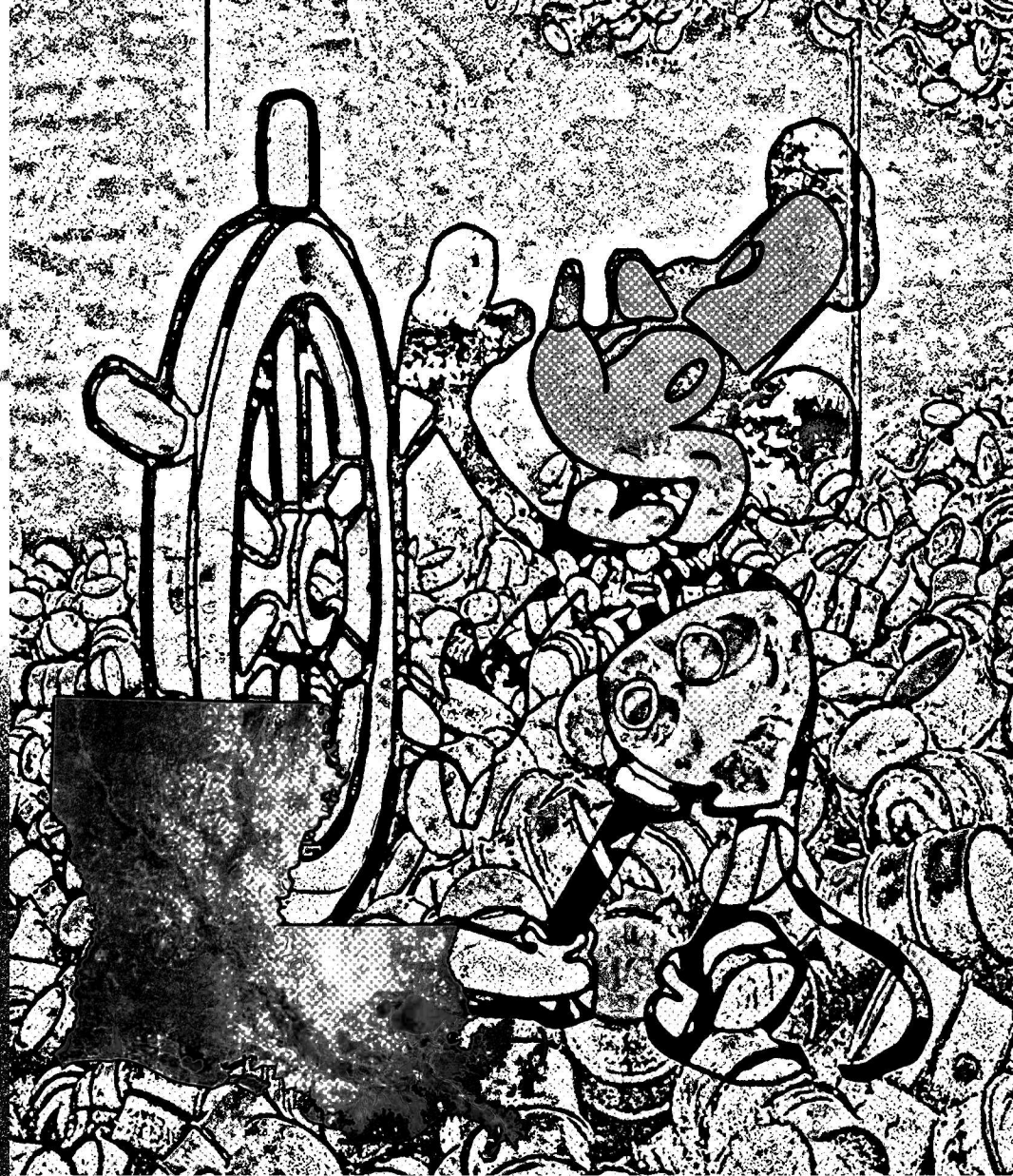




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HOUDINI



SACRIFICE ZONE

ART, MUSINGS & POETRY BY ERIK HOUDINI



THE FLAGELLATOR

The blood flowed as I whipped,
Whipped, and whipped again.
Each sting, each strike—a remorse,
The burden that those carried,
For what's sown must be reaped.

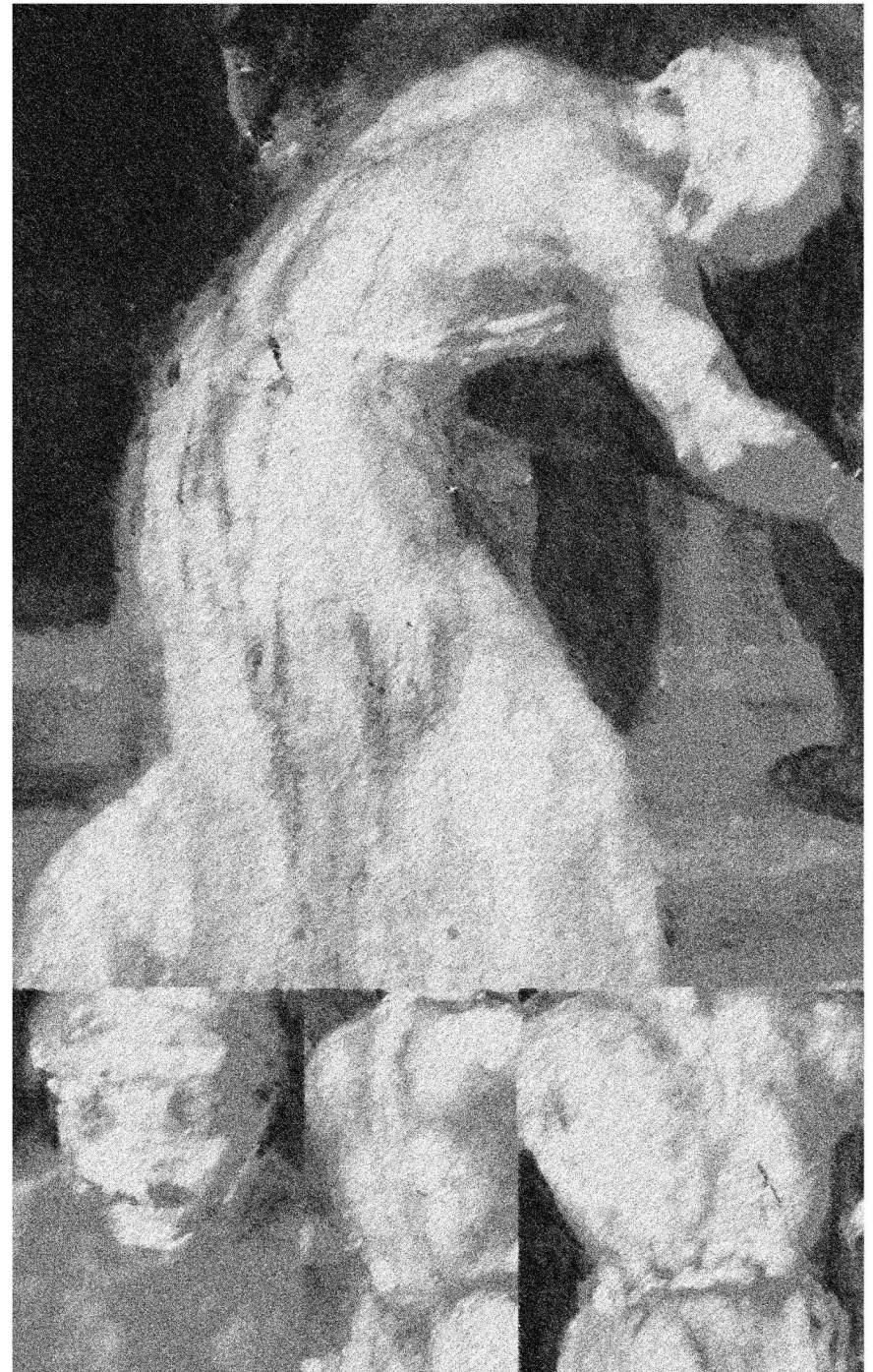
The blood flowed, rivers once great,
Each sting, each strike,
muscular quivers create.

Atop this tower, worn and grand,
Wasteland view of loss and pain.
Story told of man's great hand,
World of radiance, now stained.
From green to sand, the wasteland expands,
War by man, on lamb, is won—in vain.

Exposed, the ropey sinew, bared,
I whipped again, the air was snared.
Each sting, each strike, a species lost,
The whip, the pain, the heavy cost.
No pain compares to sin ordained,
They're gone, yet we remain, unstained.

The blood flowed, like rivers once great,
Each sting, each strike,
skeletal shivers create.

Each sting, each strike, apologies bear,
To what was stripped, to what was bare.
Salvation sought for days of sin,
Charon's river overflows its brim.
Hades' waiting room, in ecological bloom.





THE CALIGARI SPIRAL

A DXM JOURNEY INTO THE ABYSS

As I lay there on the couch, entrapped in the syrupy grip of DXM—three bottles of Delsym to be exact—my mind was a battleground of sensory input and existential musings. DXM, it's not your run-of-the-mill hallucinogen. It isn't LSD's colorful, fractal dream, or psilocybin's earthy transcendence, or even ketamine's disorienting wobble. The robotrip, is a distinct disruption of the connection between self and psyche, an experience that defies full articulation and can only truly be known in the visceral realm of personal exposure. To put it simply, you can't just write about it; you have to live it.

The room was awash with the lingering scent of sticky cannabis, and the atmospheric sounds of Sleep's "Dopesmoker," those hymns to the cannabis abyss, washed over me. I've always had a soft spot for silent films, especially when I can pair them with my own choice of soundtrack. They become this malleable canvas for a multisensory experience. This time, it was the ageless frames of Robert Wiene's 1920 horror classic "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" flickering on the screen. As I lay on that worn-out couch, fully surrendered to the disorienting rhythms of the Orange flavored, syrupy-slurry and the undulating riffs of "Dopesmoker," the spirals in "Caligari" revealed themselves in all their intricate mystery.

As I gazed into the mesmerizing swirl of the spiral, its raw, mysterious power became evident. It wasn't just a mere pattern; it was an experience, an idea, a journey that captured my imagination, leading it into familiar and yet uncharted territories. My profound connection with this motif was amplified in this introspective space, as I found myself captivated by the uncanny atmosphere of this cinematic landmark. This film, with its distorted sets and stark shadows, has one particular scene that strikes at the very heart of the spiral's enigma—Caesar walks through a doorway, its arches adorned with those haunting spirals. That doorway Caesar walks through—decorated with spirals that seemed to me like atlantian whirlpools, it stood out with an intensity I could never have imagined.

Although "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" is often cited for its visual influence, my belief is that the spiral's significance goes far deeper, transcending mere visual representation. The scene, despite its antiquity, struck me as brutal, especially under such conscious modification. The spirals haunted the scene; they framed it, and once you notice them, they manifest in so many more realms of filmic horror—almost as if they are a subliminal message sent from the abyss to mankind.

Those spirals aren't just mere patterns. They're an experience, an idea, a mind-bending journey. My profound connection with this motif came into stark focus during that chemically-aided introspection, one that transcended even the remarkable visual storytelling of a classic like "Caligari." What is it about the spirals that makes them so potent? It's almost as if they thumb their noses at our very human need to categorize and understand. Their power doesn't lie in any simple representation; it's rooted in their incomprehensibility, in their defiance of simple explanation. They are, like the film itself, like the experience of a robotrip, and indeed like the experience of existence, a riddle with no answer, a question that only leads to more questions.

There, on that worn, brown couch—a fixture that seemed to absorb years of neglect, a patchwork of faded material and lost nights—I found myself immobile. The apartment, with its much of its cracked walls devoid of paint, seemed almost like a scene out of a grim indie film.

The acrid tinge of chemicals lingered like an uninvited ghost in the small apartment. The unmistakable shake and bake scent, a dubious legacy from the previous renter's meth-cooking endeavors. The moonlight seeped in through dusty, '90s-era plastic blinds that had long ago lost their sheen, their color faded by years of relentless Louisiana sunlight.

But let's cut right through it: this wasn't physical restraint, it wasn't a matter of being locked in a strait jacket. This was disassociation, that unique hallmark of a DXM trip where the boundaries between mind, body, and setting blur, then disintegrate altogether. I couldn't move, not because of some physiological chain but because I was no longer solely in my body. I was also above it, outside it, hovering like a disembodied entity, like smoke rising to join other wisps in the ceiling's asbestos-laden tapestry. It was as if my physical form was tied to the couch, but my consciousness? Well, it had slipped the leash. I was in the liminal space where the concept of the spiral fractures and falters. It can't fully encapsulate the experience of gazing both inward and outward, of being both the observer and the observed.

It's an experience that defies linguistic encapsulation. How can one describe the sensation of tickling one's own brain? How can one articulate being a spectator of oneself, as if astrally projected, witnessing one's body engage with the visuals of a classic film? I was both the viewer and the viewed, and I saw the spirals on the screen from multiple angles—from my own eyes, from above, from somewhere indefinable. Don't ask me how, for I could not know; we cannot know.

The film continued its somber procession across the screen, now accompanied by the roaring doom metal anthem "Saturnine" by Electric Wizard. Yet, despite the enveloping audiovisual experience, my awareness had shifted. I found myself spiraling. Spiraling in thought, spiraling in consciousness, spiraling toward an understanding that was always just out of reach, always just around the next curve. The spirals—those ancient, omnipresent symbols—were no longer confined to the frame of the film. They had transcended celluloid and were now haunting my very psyche. What remained consistent in this shifting reality was the spiral. It whispered through the entire scenario, a reoccurring motif that seemed to deepen in meaning with each reappearance. It was as if the universe, or whatever lies beyond our material comprehension, was attempting to communicate in an arcane script—an unknowable syntax scripted in curling, sigilating lines.

Imagine smoke from a blunt curling upward, but instead of dissipating, it forms a tangible spiral, thickening and solidifying. It becomes a question mark of cosmic proportions, enticing you to grapple with its inexplicable nature. That spiral was what beckoned from beyond the veil. It was the sign language of the abyss, ineffable and unnerving. It's like stepping off a precipice and finding that you keep falling, not toward a definitive bottom, but into a void that continually redefines itself with each passing second.

I was in a state of body lock, yes, but my mind was anything but locked. It was roaming far and wide, bound not by physical limitations but only by the confines of existential questioning. The spiral and I had an uncanny dialogue, a discourse without words, bound by the spectral gravity of curiosity and wonder.

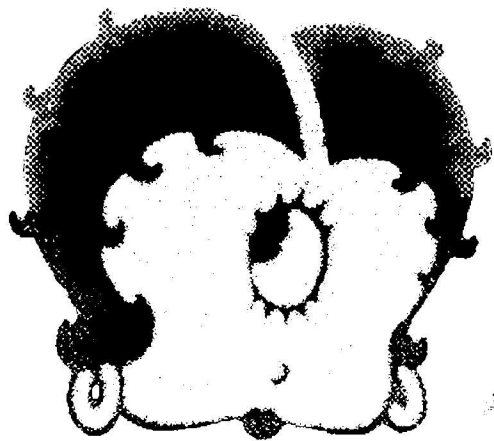
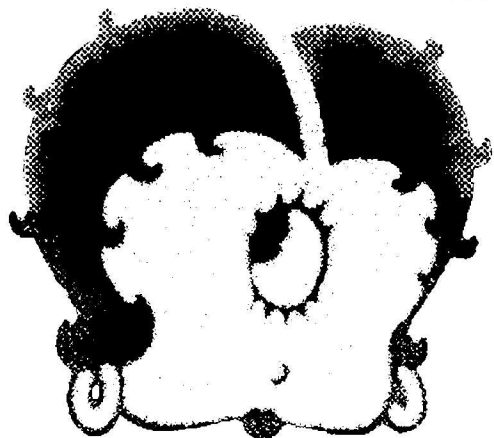
It was a dance around the unknowable, a waltz through the unfathomable. In that moment, I felt myself both disintegrate and coalesce, much like the tendrils of smoke that had wafted into my inner sanctum. I could feel the abyss, not just staring back, but whispering in a language so arcane that it could only be sensed, not heard. Its hands—effervescent and shadowy—were signing messages, cosmos provisos from beyond the veil of understanding.

To say the least, the robotrip, much like the spiral, is a pathway that leads to labyrinthine corridors of the self and the universe. It is an invitation to plunge deeper, to descend while ascending, to find meaning in paradox. There, at the 4th Plateau, at the edge of understanding, the spiral seemed to both beckon and mock, daring me to fathom its depths while coyly admitting its own unfathomable nature. It was a dialectic of horror and wonder, of apprehension and enlightenment.

So there it is—my descent and ascent, my journey through the spiral and into the beyond, all from the constraints of a worn, brown couch in a room drenched in moonlight and scented with the bitter remnants of chemical experiments gone awry. The spirals continue to haunt, but I embrace them as touchstones in a universe that is both astonishingly complex and tantalizingly elusive. It's the final question mark at the end of life's sentence, ever twisting, ever perplexing, and infinitely enigmatic. The beauty—and the horror—of the spiral is that it never really ends. It beckons you toward a center that doesn't exist, luring you ever deeper into its eldritch swirl.



HOUDINI



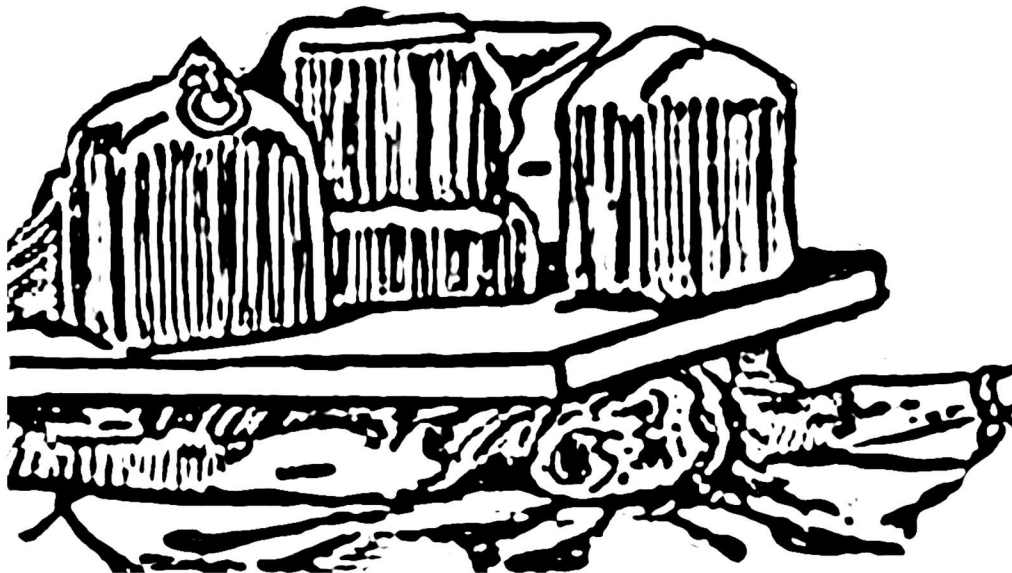
Strength to Bore

Crushing stones make for effervescent tears,
Yet under that weight — the weight
Of the abyss inside bottomless pits.
We are what we fear.

As we lug the boulder,
The light becomes clear
From the darkest recesses;
An infinite salvation near.

A burden to bury, a cross to die upon,
Strength beyond strength —
All for the ability to bear.
The boulder rolls down once more:

Will we be able to carry on?
Can we push the weight of the world away?
Accept our defeat at the end of the day?
Are we able to do what must be done
To embark upon a battle that cannot be won?



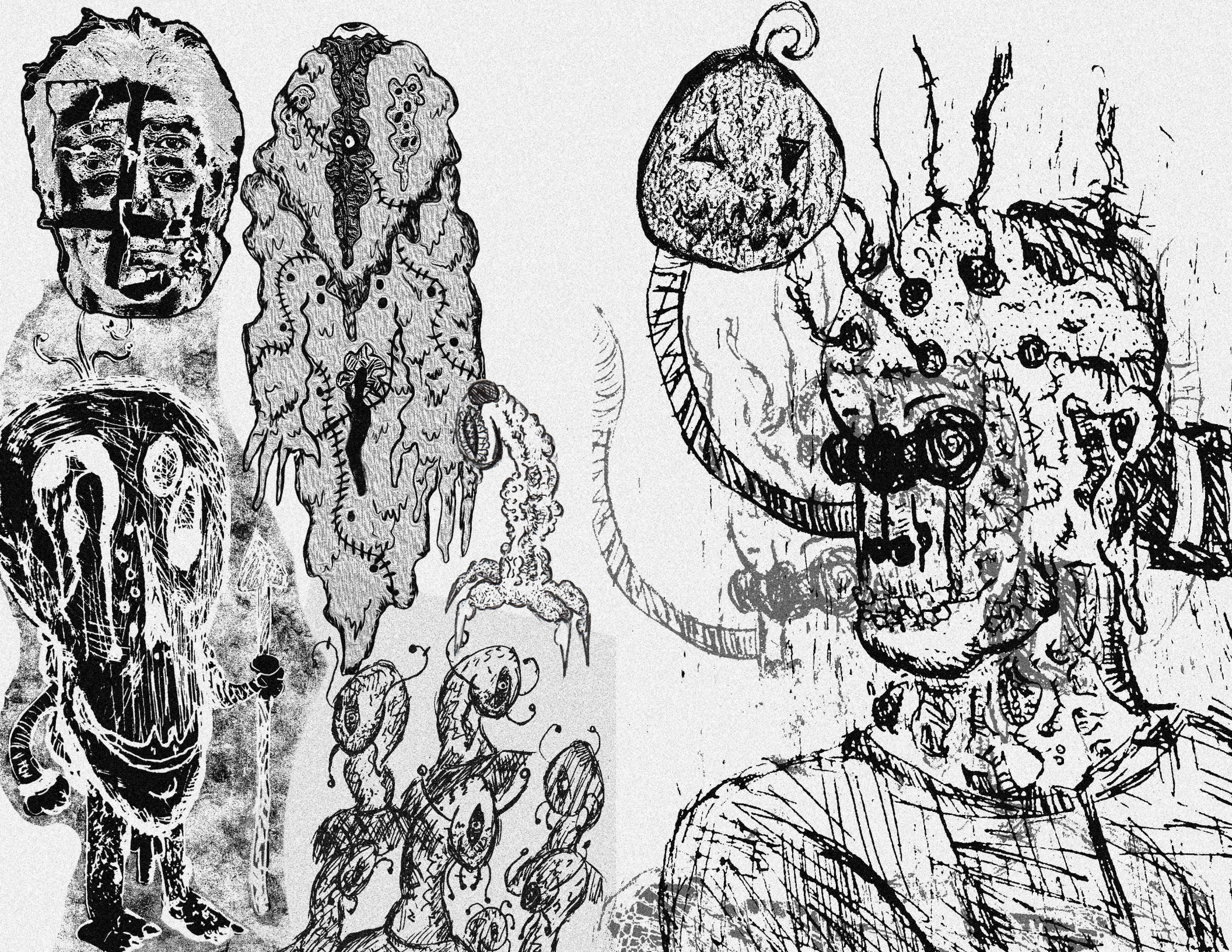
The Fall

Tendrils of Azathoth—
etched their way into his mind,
The silence,
deafening,
reverberating,
throughout his psyche—

He stood, not aloof, yet alone,
The grim task that needed to be done.
To take a life, was no small step—
A plunge into the depths.
The duskiest twilight.
Where the shadows—
whispered secrets and sins.

Bleed,
Bleed,
Bleed.
It was done.

Step into the eldritch shade—
where anguish and torment reigned,
A place that must be hell itself.
The imp of despair,
This must be its dwelling,
The land of darkness
had finally touched his soul—
Dante scorched by the Inferno





When the sharp sting of the 4 am alarm shakes my sleep away, there's an echoing dread that settles— 'Giving Plasma Today.' There's a rhythm to it, a pattern. A 4 am wakeup call leads to a 5:30 am line-up. And believe me, it's no short queue. It snakes long and weary because you must be there early; by sunrise, the place is a hive of desperation. By opening time, the long line stands testament to many like me. Our shadows, intertwined, cast a dark silhouette on the neoliberal system's façade.

The preparation ritual begins the night before. Forget about sports drinks— if you're in this line, it's the mineral taste of tap water for you. Relentless, unyielding, with a hard, metallic throat-feel; a reminder of the urban reality. Anything less than a gallon, and you might as well bid goodbye to the blood's flow, and consequently, the money's flow. You see, this game is about fluid dynamics: the swift flow of blood is directly proportional to the brisk flow of cash.

Oh, the shambling. That barren parking lot, shrouded in the early morning's shadowy embrace, was a theatre of its own. Looking around, the landscape was telling. In these areas, you'd be hard-pressed to find a park where families could relax or children could play— at least not within easy walking distance. However, two plasma clinics? They stood sentinel, right across from one another in some cases, strategically embedded in the heart of strip malls. These malls, with their vast expanses of black tar parking lots, mirrored the desolation of their surroundings.

That shambling, the melancholic shuffle of my fellow line-dwellers, resonated with the raw, haunting tune of the downtrodden. Among those advancing, many seemed caught in a far deeper quagmire than I. Over time, you begin to notice. There's no monitoring, no oversight, just a vast gray area where souls tread too often. The weight in their eyes— their pale complexions and gaunt features were telltale signs of over-donation, of desperation pushing the limits of the human body. Vulnerable and overdrawn, their stories seemed written in the weary drag of their feet.

As for me? I wasn't exempt from this grim club. My arms bore the telltale signs, the scars, the tracks. The ceaseless battle to switch arms, to reduce the marks, haunted me just as it did the rest of the shambling cohort. My unemployment, like a specter, shadowed me with every step. Plasma donation became more than a choice; it was a lifeline. Bills, like unwanted visitors, keep coming even if the paychecks don't. But let someone see those needle marks, and instantly, you're labeled. No one ever guesses, "Ah, he's just donating plasma." Each donation came with the scars—accusatory marks that took months to fade.

Inside, the ambiance hits you differently. The “clinic,” if one could even call it that, is unsettling in its sterility. Surreal. Pristine white tiles, ceilings and polished floors to match. Walls punctuated with garish stock photos—blatant propaganda. Slogans like "Donate 2 times a week for 6 weeks to get an extra \$50!" or "Be a Hero, Donate Regularly" paired with idyllic snapshots of familial bonds or valorous acts. You've got your “hero” firefighters and the suburban dads— epitomes of societal propaganda, blaring messages about the 'nobility' of donating. It's laughable. Fewer words mean less than the word "Hero" after the (still ongoing) Covid pandemic. The extraction chamber was a modern-day Frankenstein's laboratory; medieval stone walls and electrical switches replaced by a monochrome palette of polished white with splashes of stock photo pseudo-vibrancy. A commodified space where liquid gold is drawn from the desperate to line the pockets of the indifferent.

I've given blood. That's a different ballgame, rooted in altruism. But plasma? That's commerce. There's a reason schools or churches don't host plasma drives. With plasma, the transaction is transparent. The stark difference? The payment, the \$35 you clutch tightly as you exit, knowing it's a lifeline. You aren't there for lofty ideals; you're there because rent's due. This isn't about saving someone else's life; it's about saving your own.

Your smartphone becomes a sanctuary here. An escape from the unsettling hum of machines and the weight of your own thoughts. But I learned the hard way. With a dead phone and nothing but the white void and the infernal rhythm of the machines, one's mind can spiral into unsettling territories.

Mistakes were inevitable, and perhaps, even predictable given the circumstances. Picture the scene: staff, underpaid and overstressed, wrestling with responsibilities far beyond their pay grade. On inquiring, I discovered the unsettling truth: a measly \$13 an hour. This was no ordinary job, no run-of-the-mill 9-to-5. In this role, tasks tiptoed the grotesque boundary between life and commerce. The facility, perpetually awash with the desperate hum of activity, was chronically understaffed. These workers navigated a delicate balance, caught between the needs of donors in line and the machine-bound "customers" awaiting their turn. It was a harrowing symphony— blood for cash, cash for blood.

This macabre dance wasn't merely a transaction; it was a poignant illustration of a broken system. The life essence of the downtrodden, being syphoned to swell the coffers of those seated comfortably atop the socioeconomic pyramid. It was a chilling irony: the impoverished drawing from their peers, a relentless cycle of taking from those with little to give, only to enrich the already affluent. The poor were not just the donors here; they were also the very hands that facilitated the extraction.

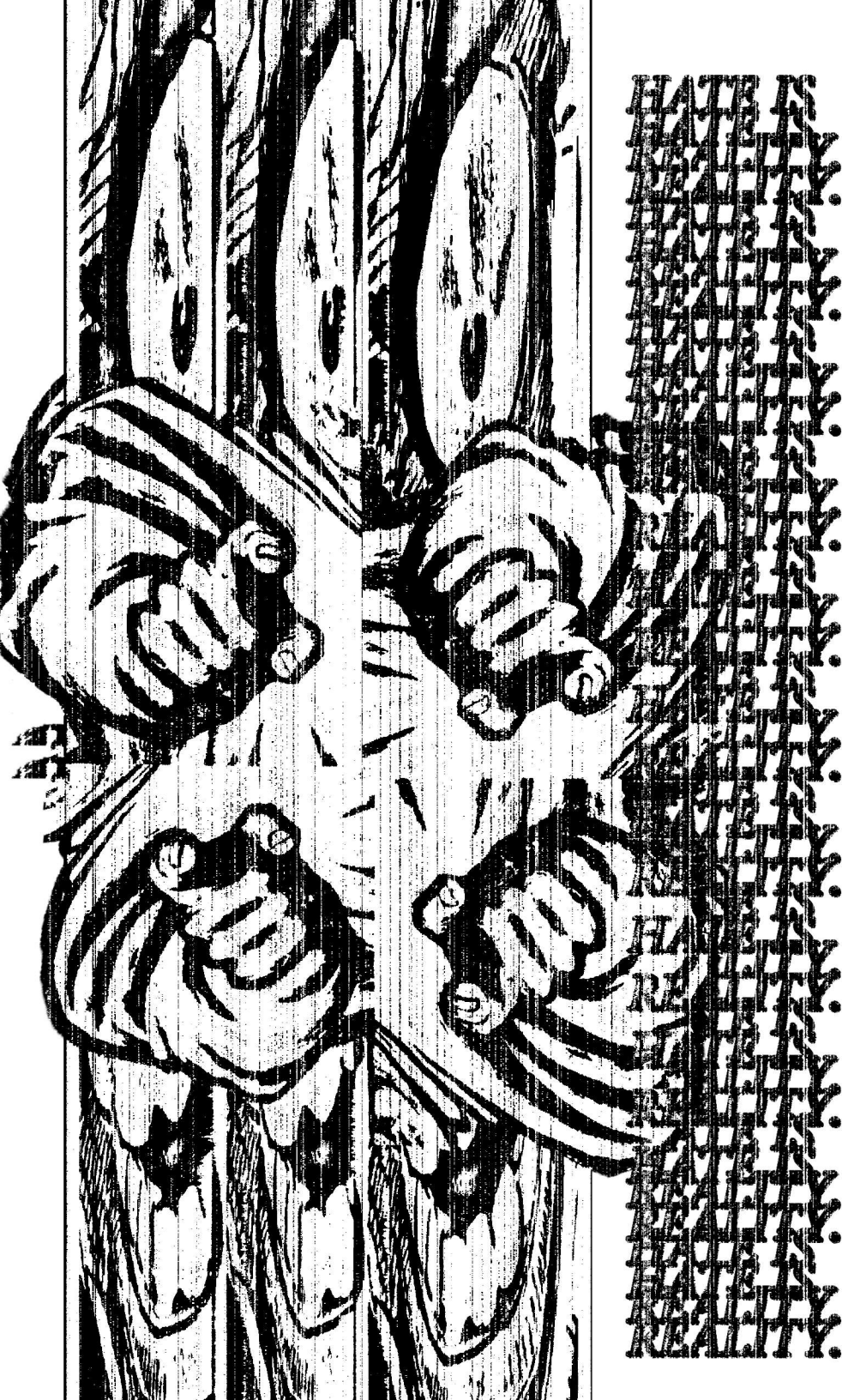
Over the weeks and months, as the routine of donation became almost second nature, a chilling insight began to take root. Observing the locations of these "donation" centers, I noticed a predatory pattern: they strategically sprouted in the more deprived areas, like wolves settling around the periphery of a wounded herd.

Those at the top reaping the benefits of this sanguineous exchange, while those at the bottom traded in plasma pints and pennies.

Recalling one episode where a mistake led to a ballooning blood pouch, I can still hear the rising murmur of panic, the stunned expressions of horrified onlookers. That chilling moment, juxtaposed against the constant hum of machinery, continues to echo in my memories— a stark reminder of the toll of such transactions. The backdrop of this theater? Those droning plasmatic extractors, ever indifferent, standing in stark contrast to the very human drama unfolding before them. It's an image that refuses to fade, a chilling reminder of the risks we took, the prices we paid.

The barren landscape of the parking lot would slowly awaken with the rising sun, but for those of us departing with bandaged arms and a slightly lighter step, the world felt a shade heavier. The \$35 would be spent at the local grocery—bread, milk, lunch meat. Basic survival. The journey from the cold vinyl bed of the clinic to the grocery store was a testament to the extreme lengths one might go to in order to simply get by.

We, the donors, the shamblers, our shuffling shadows navigating the grey-blacktop of life under capitalism, find ourselves entwined in this intricate dance, orchestrated by the neoliberal machine. Trading our very essence, drop by precious drop, for the basics to survive another day. A landscape where our desperation becomes a resource, our vitality commodified. With every exit from these centers, \$35 richer but unmistakably drained, we are compelled to reflect: Have we invited the Nosferatus into our proverbial home? In this unsettling ballet with modern-day vampires, we must continuously question our role and the price of the dance. How long until the final bow?




Oh, you have to hate, didn't you know? You gotta. It's like the membership card. If you don't hate, well, how could you possibly be part of the group? How could you even exist in this community if you're not seething about something? But don't worry, we've got options. Plenty of options.

I get it, you were excited about that thing—been looking forward to it, keeping up with all the news, just buzzing with anticipation. You would've loved it. But here's the thing: you have to hate it now. Why? Oh, because I've got this shiny Twitter screenshot that says so. See this person here? The one you've never heard of and didn't have any opinion on five seconds ago? You hate them now too. It's part of the deal.

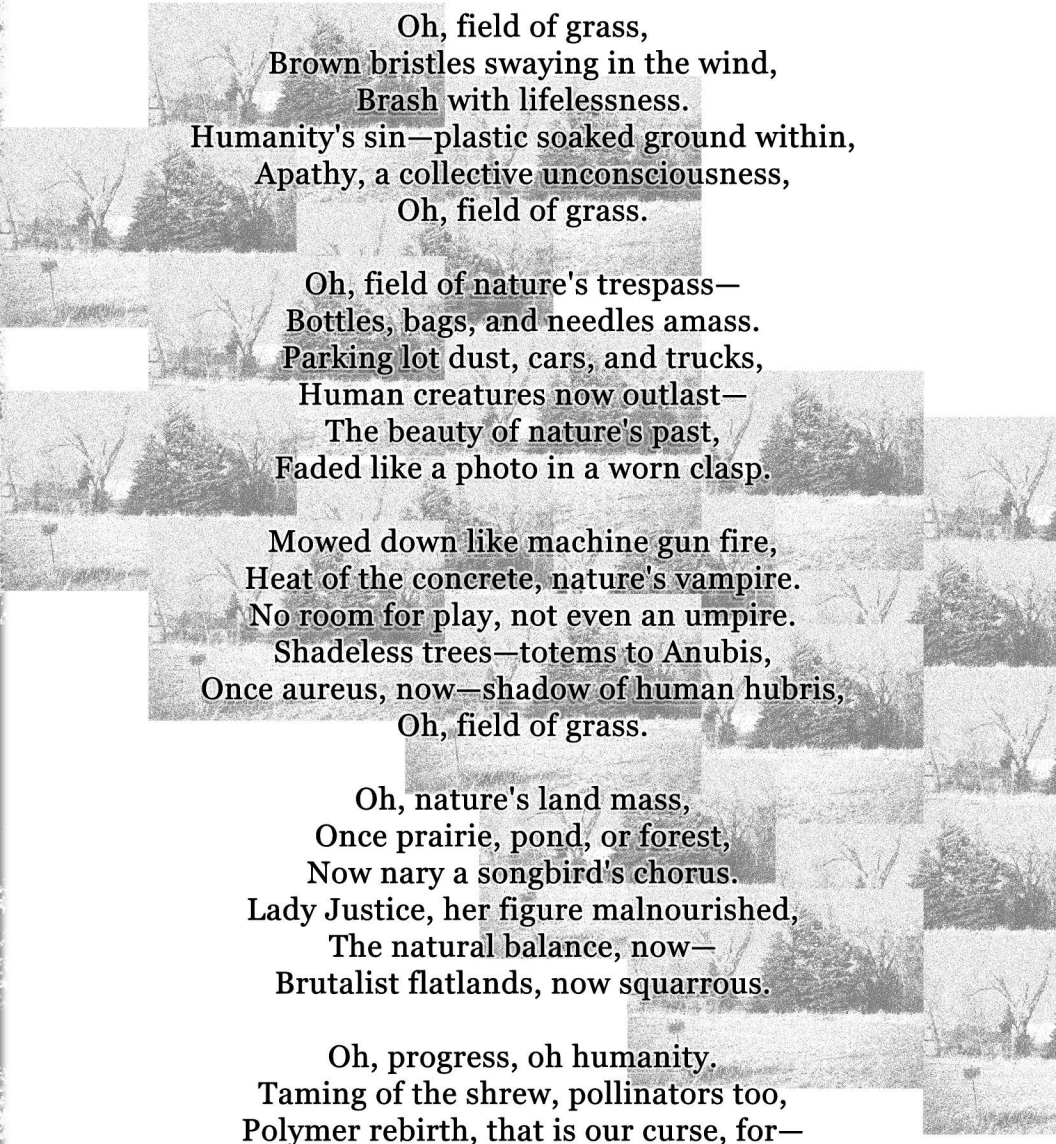
You're lonely, you're alienated, nobody really knows you in real life. What are you gonna do? Hang out with your neighbors? They're all over 60. No, you want to hang with us—the young people, the cool people, the Internet people. On this message board? On this forum? In this Discord server? You gotta hate something. There's gotta be hate in your heart. And don't worry, we'll find that hate, we'll nurture it, make it grow until it's the main part of you. Because that's what this group is about—it's about hating. We come together as a community to hate. Don't you want to hate?

Hate is reality. Don't you know God hates. What? You didn't know that? You were gonna enjoy something? You thought you could just like something? Enjoy things? No, no, no. Don't you know there are people to hate? Things to hate? You can't just enjoy something.

What's your choice? What are you gonna do? Because I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna do like everyone else on here—I'm gonna hate.



Oh, field of grass,
Ravaged by concrete catacombs,
Smothered mass, asphalt cask.
Unlike stories from ancient tomes—
Here, not even birds roam.



Oh, field of grass,
Brown bristles swaying in the wind,
Brash with lifelessness.
Humanity's sin—plastic soaked ground within,
Apathy, a collective unconsciousness,
Oh, field of grass.

Oh, field of nature's trespass—
Bottles, bags, and needles amass.
Parking lot dust, cars, and trucks,
Human creatures now outlast—
The beauty of nature's past,
Faded like a photo in a worn clasp.

Mowed down like machine gun fire,
Heat of the concrete, nature's vampire.
No room for play, not even an umpire.
Shadeless trees—totems to Anubis,
Once aureus, now—shadow of human hubris,
Oh, field of grass.

Oh, nature's land mass,
Once prairie, pond, or forest,
Now nary a songbird's chorus.
Lady Justice, her figure malnourished,
The natural balance, now—
Brutalist flatlands, now squarrous.

Oh, progress, oh humanity.
Taming of the shrew, pollinators too,
Polymer rebirth, that is our curse, for—
What was reaped, never had a choice.
What was taken, never had a voice,
Oh, field of grass.