

CHRYSALIS

A COMPANION
TO PWATEM

“Tell the rabble my name is Cabell”

—James Branch Cabell to his editor, to help people learn how to pronounce his name. Cabell used the word derogatively but we are taking it back. These pages will showcase the writing and illustrations of our rabble— the ordinary students of VCU.

Masthead

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Finn Plotkin

Truck Schachtman

Melody Vang

ILLUSTRATORS

Jesse Beck

Reese Cilley

Olivia McCabe

Kirsten Sturgill

COVER ART

Gabe Carlson



(pwa-tem)

Chrysalis

noun

1. an insect pupa
2. a transitional state

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Kirsten Sturgill



GENESIS 7 KEEPS A PROMISE TO HARJO

Michelle Ghee

All but one of the houses in Wellspring were empty, but not for war, or famine, or conquest. Death had brought in a new preacher, and Easter had cemented his place.

He stood just past the open face of a hand-painted kitchen window, clean-cut and composed in his brand new suit. His voice was deep, richer than coffee, sweeter than honey, smoother than the finest of velvet. Perhaps that explained why the house was packed, filled to its brim with a sea of people breathlessly awaiting the preacher's sermon. The heat gave his face the kind of grainy distortion that might only be found on television. Finally, he spoke.

"My friends," he said, "Your time is coming. Say it for me again."

A hundred voices scrambled to answer. He raised a finger to his lips and hushed them in an instant. "I say again that your time is coming. What must you do to prepare?"

Sleeves missing buttons made their way to the air. *Pray*, they recited, *Pray for rain. Pray for victory. Pray for constancy. Pray for chari--*

This drew something quite like a growl from him. "Charity? Charity is for the idle, the indolent, the faithless. That's not you, is it?"

The house was furnished with the few comforts their money could buy and little else. It shook with the town's harmonious agreement.

"Good," he said. His smile returned. He straightened his tie and looked down to check his golden watch. The late morning sun poured in so heavy through the window that you couldn't look right at him for long. He could not be called handsome. "I would worry for you if it were."

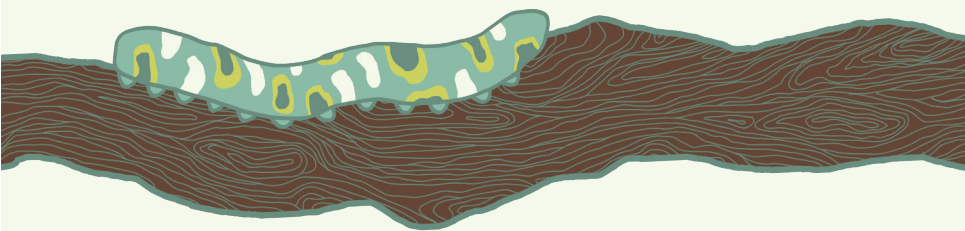
Here he began to pace, laying bare the wash of green behind him. A breeze blew in to kiss their faces. The peaches on Mrs. Mabry's tree were overripe.

Soon after, he broke for offering. A dinner plate was piled high with hope and passed through the window, where its contents then lined his breastpocket. In went heirlooms, went savings, went cries out to God. In a heartbeat, he was off with them all.

Then came silence. Mrs. Mabry stood and closed the window, cut on the lights overhead. Wellspring blinked in the absence of something it had lost the word for.

The town left in handfuls, neat skirts and pressed slacks dividing them each by the household. Cars drove them back to driveways where prayer had yet to bring white picket fences. At something like home, they settled into shop-window vignettes of modernity: Ms. Davis' yams on her own counter. Mrs. Campbell's peach cobbler in her own fridge.

Another breeze yawned over the town's green carpeting, bringing with it the citrusy scent of clean upholstery. It was spring and the world felt new again, like Noah's flood had still yet to claim it.

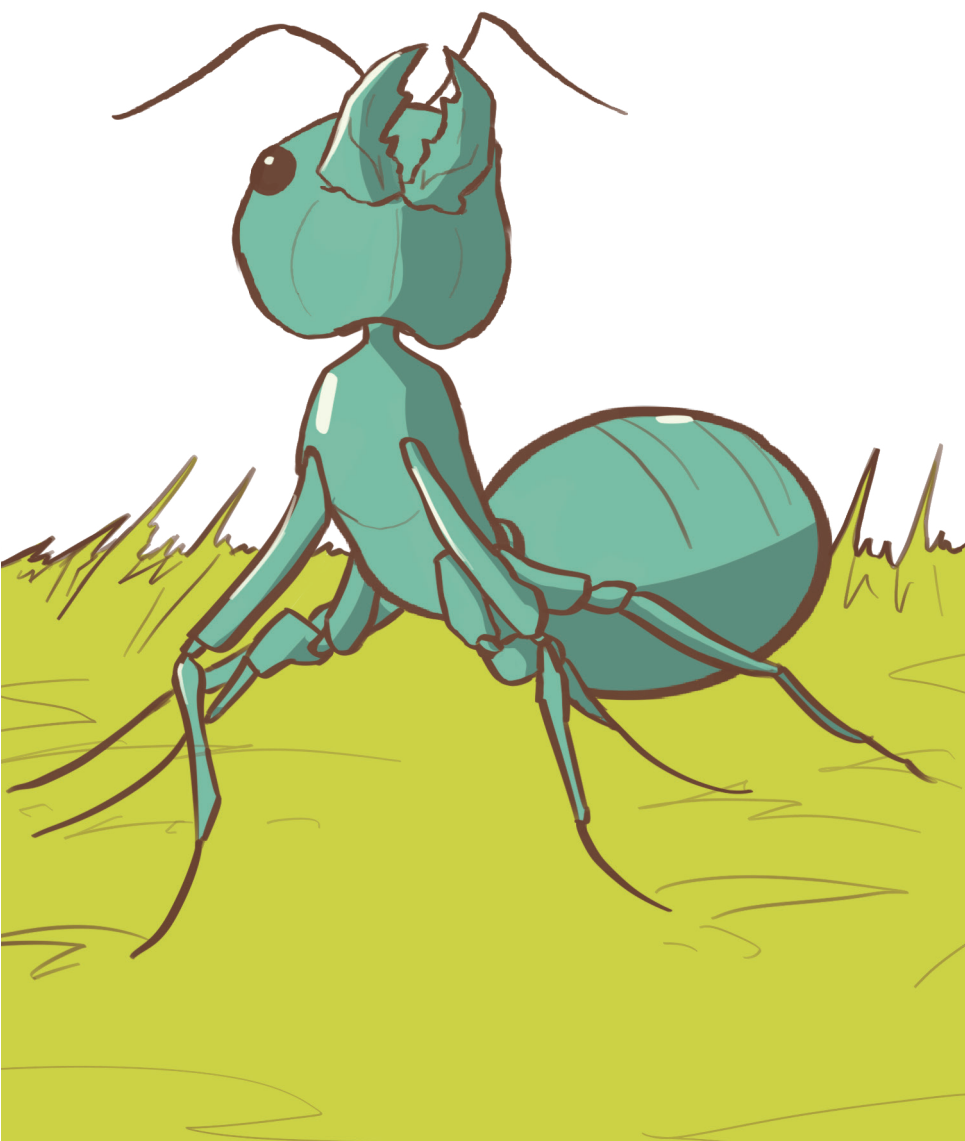


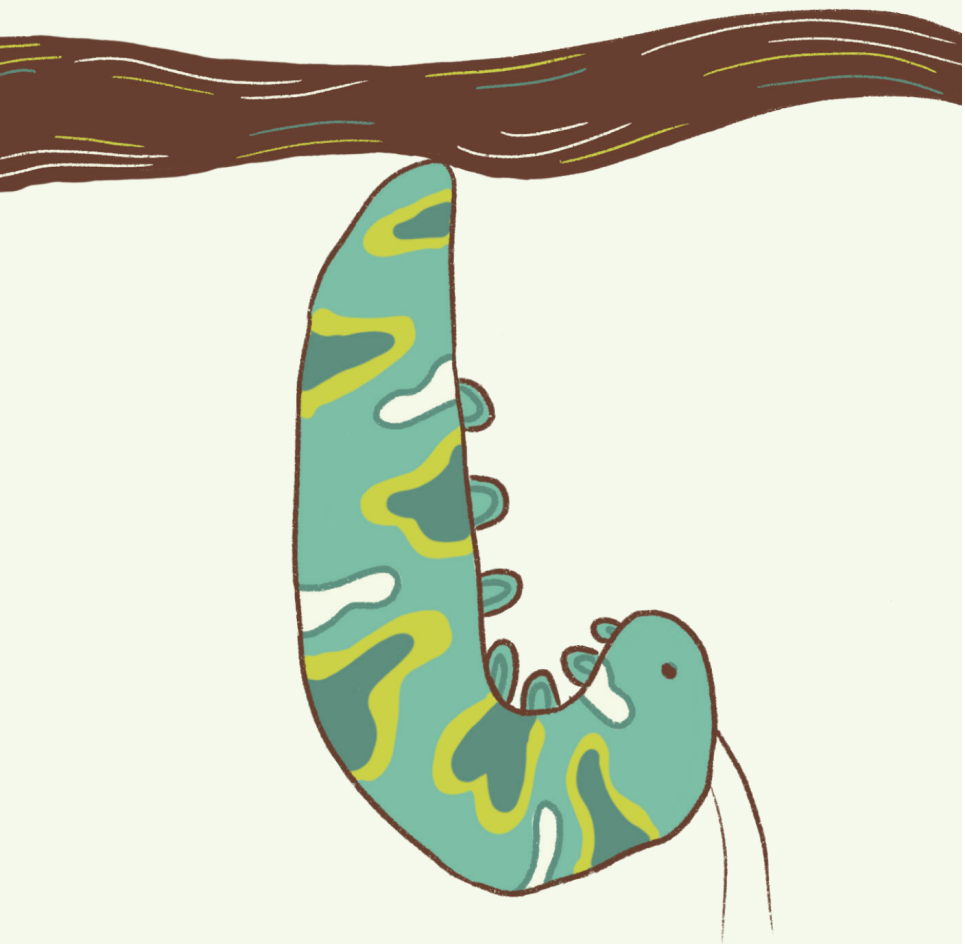
Jesse Beck

ANT HILL

Reese Cilley

I am simply an ant
A tiny body with tiny legs
Able to be crushed in an instant
As an ant, I must stay in a colony.
Able to be protected
As one dies, ten survive
Another falls
And another
As an ant, I must flee.
Away from harm
Away from the feet and the floods
Away, away, away, away, away.
An ant leaves the colony.
Abused too much
Admired too little
Alone an ant roams
Away, away, away, away.
A little too far an ant roams
An ant looks back
A colony does not wait.
Away, away, away
An ant stops
Away, away
Alone.





Reese Cilley

Satan's Golden Shovel

Emma Palmer

Bleating goats, suddenly possessed by a sinister silence. What
lives in the shadowed corners God won't touch. I have
Blessed every room with smoking sage, but Your
entity remains, untamed and vile. I've done
what it's asked. The things it whispered to
me as the abyss of night fell onto the barn. It's
Forked tongue and red glowing eyes
Murdering my sanctity. A human sacrifice. He
Spoke of a trade; a virgin soul in exchange for immortality. Hastily
I lay the infant on the hay before his
hooved feet. He rose, standing erect. The hellish Father's
lips creep into a malevolent smile. Knowing what's next, I shield my eyes

Illustration on next page

Kirsten Sturgill





Kirsten Sturgill

THE CAT FROM DOWNTOWN

Jess Soffian

The cat from downtown followed Esther home every day and every day she gave it some of her dinner. At first she gave it merely scraps—a dollop of cream, a bit of leftover fish skin, the fatty bits of meat cuts that she did not care to eat herself—but as the weeks passed and Esther and the cat grew more familiar, she began to feed it more generously. A bowl of cream, or a cut off the meat, or a whole anchovy plated carefully on the doorstep. She brought her own dinner into the entryway and sat on the floor with it balanced on her lap, and she ate in pleasant company. Her pantry grew empty quicker and her back ached from sitting on the floor but at least she was not lonely.

“My husband died,” she confided to the cat one day. “He went into town and never came back. At least, I hope he died. That’s awful, isn’t it? It’s an awful thing to say. But it’s true. When your husband is like mine was and he disappears one day you hope it’s because he’s dead. There’s lots of beautiful women in the city, you know. Not like me.”

She took a bite of her food glumly into her mouth and chewed it. The cat from downtown flicked an ear and licked his paw.

“He never told me I was beautiful,” Esther added. “Not even once. Not even when we were married. But he brought me such gifts, sometimes. Like he was saying sorry. It almost makes me miss him. Anyway, that’s why I like you so much. It’s good to have some company.”

As the weeks passed, the nights grew colder, and taking her dinner on the doorstep became less and less comfortable. But Esther did not mind very much, because after that day the cat began to bring her gifts.

First it was a scrap of fine cloth, fraying at the edges but woven of gold and ruby silk. Esther did not see the cat carrying it on her way home but when she brought their dinner out to the



doorstep, there it dangled from his mouth. "What have you got there?" she asked, and the cat gently dropped it into her lap.

Esther took it and held it to her chest and smiled wider than she'd smiled in years. That night she washed it with care and pinned it to the wall above her bed.

The next day, the cat from downtown brought her a silver teaspoon. "Now, where on earth did you get that?" asked Esther as she took it from him. The cat's tail twitched, back and forth, and he blinked at her, slowly, and that was all. Esther felt silly at herself for expecting some sort of answer.

And so it continued. Day by day, Esther fed the cat from downtown, and day by day it

brought her little gifts. Gold coins and jewelry and glass beads and silverware. Scraps of fine

cloth, little wooden statues, the bright feathers from some exotic bird. Esther began to look for

the cat when she went into town, thinking she might see where he was finding the trinkets, but

she never spotted him until she was on her way home, and she never saw the gifts until they were on her doorstep.

"You must have some sort of magic, Joseph," said Esther to the cat as he dropped a fine

comb into her hand. "That was my husband's name—Joseph. Do you mind if I call you that? It's just that you remind me of him so terribly, what with the gifts. Joseph used to bring me such gifts."

The cat curled himself against her legs, rubbing his chin on her knees and purring like an engine. Esther smiled and bent to pet him, laughing as his back arched under her touch. "Perhaps you're lonely too," she said. "Silly thing. Is this your way of bringing me a dowry?"

The cat meowed and sidled over to the plate on the doorstep to eat his dinner. Esther sat with her legs folded under her and did the same.

The next day, the cat did not follow her home from downtown. Esther looked and looked and walked slower than usual but she did not see him. She put his plate on the doorstep and

sat there for hours waiting, but he did not come. When she awoke there in the morning, slumped against the doorframe, chilled through and stiff all over, the cat's plate was untouched. Feeling strangely hollowed out inside, she cleared it, throwing away the food and scrubbing the dish clean, keeping one eye out the window.

Then it was time for her to go into town, and so, dutifully, she tugged on her boots and went. She spent the whole day distracted and dragged her feet again on the walk home, but still the cat did not come. He did not come the next day, or the next, or the next.

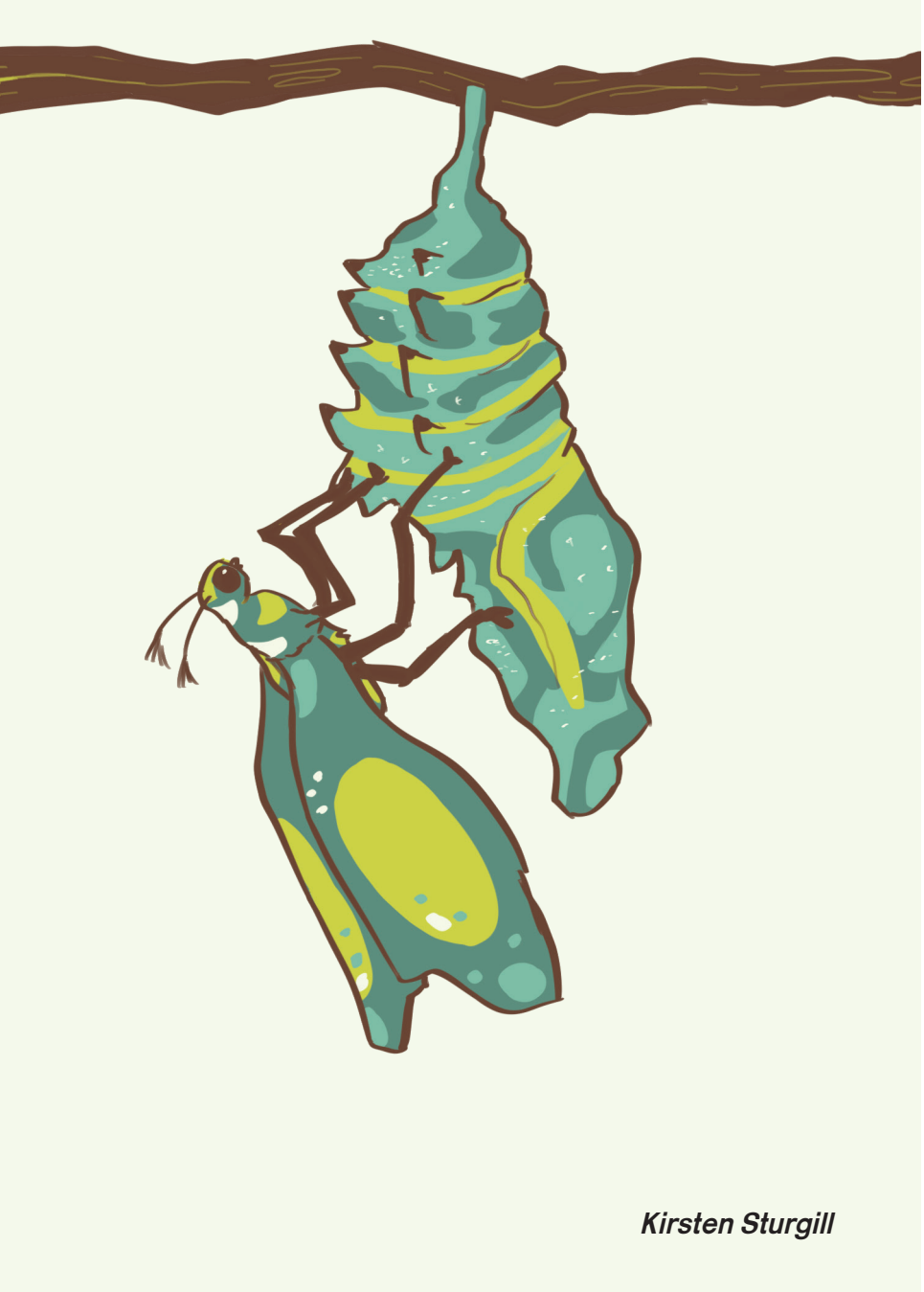
A week passed before she saw him again and when she did, Esther nearly wept from joy. "Joseph!" she cried. "You awful thing! Where have you been?"

The cat, of course, did not reply, instead bounding down the road towards her home. Esther ran after him, huffing and puffing the whole way. She was red in the face by the time she caught up and saw the cat sitting daintily on her doorstep with his tail curled around his paws and something glinting gold in his mouth.

"That gift had better be worth it," scolded Esther, "if it took you so long to find. You have a whole week to make up for, you know. I didn't have anyone to talk to."

She held out her hand expectantly and into it the cat dropped Joseph's wedding ring.





Kirsten Sturgill

THE REMEDY TO IGNORANCE

Tilden Culver

The gunshot was sudden.

I only began to ponder it as I lay in a pool of my own blood. It was a surreal calm that had washed over me— a calm unlike any other. Overpowering, it was; an all-consuming decrescendo. And, as I thought about my ailing future, hemorrhaging from the hole in my chest, I was simply, utterly serene.

It wasn't the idea of death that so rattled me. My fate, blood-soaked and sealed, was not hard for me to digest. No; it was, instead, the futility of it all that ravaged my mind with such malice. If I were to die, would it matter? Would anyone truly care? Of course, there would be a funeral. There would be memorials of my life and, perhaps, even a vigil. There would be tears— many of them— and a tirade of social media posts made in my name. I could already see visions of photos— myself from the most unflattering of angles— dance around my head in grayscale, captioned with stale, recycled, superficial condolences. But what would ever come of it? Would my legacy be nothing more than the words of those I once held dear?

My fate was a brutal one. It was a brutality, indeed, met by far too many. Each man, woman and child who lost their lives to the cold metal of a bullet told the same, unfortunate tale: apathy. Perhaps, if they were luckily unlucky enough, people would take to the streets as they chanted their names, brandishing signs with their faces and demanding a solution for this gunpowdered plague. Their stories would rouse a national, sympathetic rage. The world could scream all it wanted, though; after all, screaming to a wall brings nothing more than a sore

throat. While the country was alive with contempt and dismay, there was no one to listen to its cries. Just as there was no one to listen to mine.

I would not die alone, though; no, my fall was witnessed by many. Every one of them heard my shuddering breath, feasting upon each heave and whimper like a ravenous predator to its prey. Some bore faces of perturbation, of distress, the blood

draining from their faces as my own congealed upon the concrete. The paramedic that knelt by my side heard my fading heart, analyzing it, scrutinizing it, begging it to beat louder. He heard my lungs struggle, my chest fight to rise and fall, my throat choke on the thinning air around me.

Yes. I was heard by many.

But they would not listen to me.

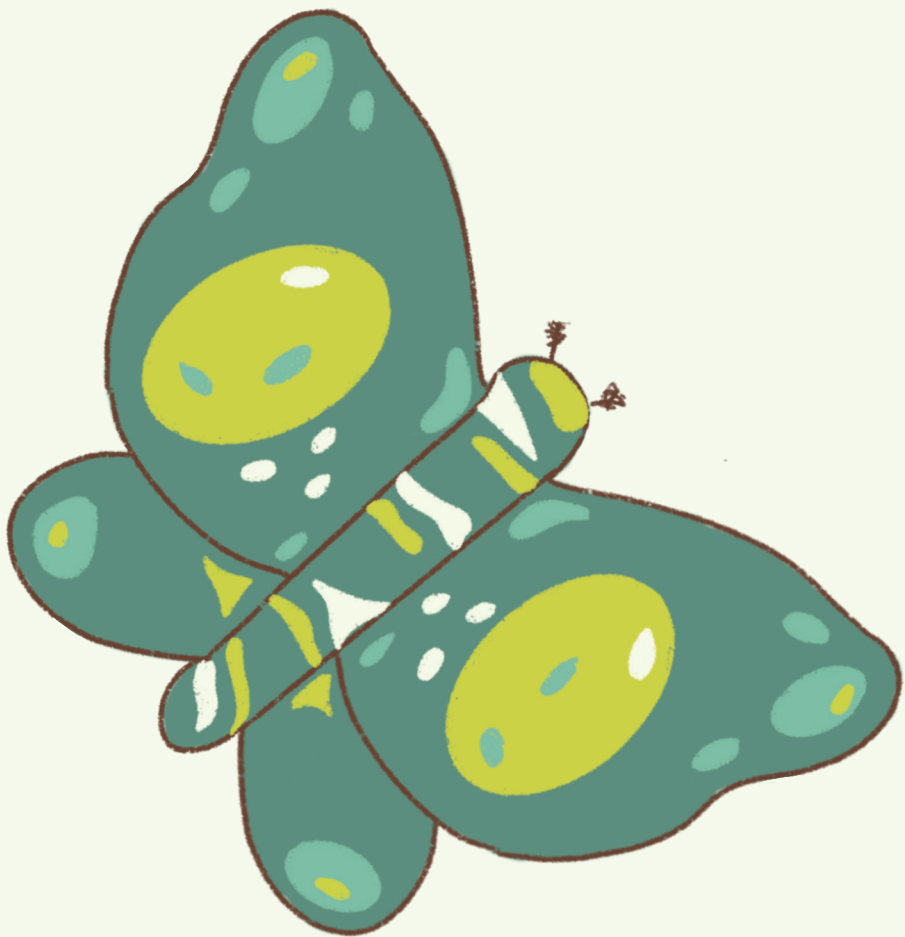
For every shallow breath that escaped my body, my brain was delving deeper into thoughts it had never before conceived. The thoughts were loud— louder than any thud of my heart ever was. They were inquisitive, yet, at the same time, deeply understanding. I understood my reality, my future, and the future reality of the world I was soon to leave behind. While my spectators gazed down upon me with stares of great pity, it was I who pitied them far more. Their eyes and ears reflected back only an observation. They failed to comprehend anything beyond the grit and gore before them— they refused to listen. Though I could no longer speak, the act of my undoing was a speech far greater than anything I could have ever mustered with my voice.

My audience was much too oblivious to heed it, however.

And that ignorance would breed only more ignorance. So, too, would it breed tragedy. That ignorance would be the catalyst to generations more of wasted, wordless speeches, just as it had been for generations prior. The world's screams were simply not loud enough to shake that ignorance from its clutches. Words— screams— were silent compared to actions. Whether those actions be someone's undoing, or the systematic undoing of undoings, it was exclusively actions that would be the remedy to ignorance.

I was ignorant once, too, after all.





Reese Cilley

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