

**Life is a Joy,
As it is a Pain.**

Alissa Liu's Creative Writing Portfolio



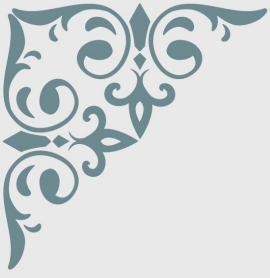
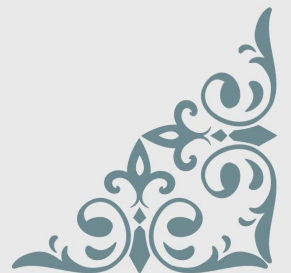
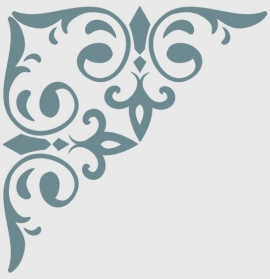


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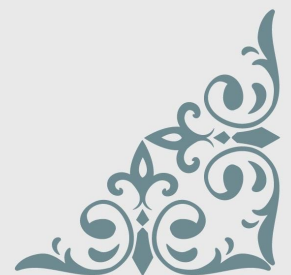
Introduction

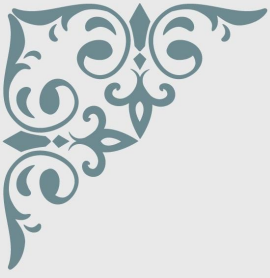
To write, at least for me, has always been to paint vivid out an experience with words. The experience can be a story, a reminder, or just an existing moment frozen in time, but it will remain there for as long as it can. Sometimes, even to the point that I'd forgotten I had written it. During my time in this creative writing class, I feel like I've actually improved in a lot of areas—especially since I usually limit myself in only writing certain genres of fiction. There was a lot of detailed feedback given to me from both my Professor and peers, in which I am forever grateful, since it really can take a new person to see if a message is clear or not in my stories.

The piece I struggled the most with in revising was definitely my creative nonfiction essay, mostly revolving around trying to cut things down. Even though I had gone over the word count, it always felt like I needed to write more, not less.

As for the poetry assignments, I definitely needed to get used to formatting response poems a little better, and I tried to make it match/resonate beyond just Adrienne Rich, the original person it was dedicated to. I think I got to hit a nice balance where you can recognize it referencing her, but also appreciate it without knowing.

Overall, I think I enjoyed editing everything a lot. It was really enjoyable to push my boundaries in what I was comfortable writing. Family, friend, or stranger, it matters not—I simply hope that you, dear reader, can enjoy and understand me a little better after reading some of my work.





Sweet Pain, Bitter Joy

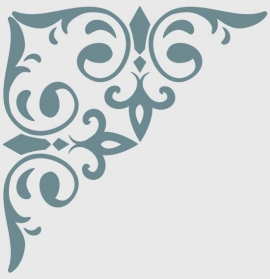
Although our society enjoys masquerading as benevolent and helpful to those most in need, I often find myself remembering what I had gone through as an undiagnosed autistic child. It seems that the helpfulness offered tends to those who need it most, especially if they're children. I could go on and on about these demographics, but I want to draw more attention to ableism and bullying in the modern day.

Bullying might seem childish in nature, and though it is, it's something I find still underestimated in terms of damage. Prolonged exposure to traumatizing events, even if the events might first seem small, can build up into decades of damage on how a person perceives... well, anything.

Masking is when an autistic person, either consciously or subconsciously, suppresses their autistic behaviors with the goal of being perceived as neurotypical. It can be why so many neurodivergent individuals remain unnoticed for so long. But there are now studies out and about discussing the 'uncanny valley' effect that neurotypicals can get when meeting even the most highly masked neurodivergent person.

The 'uncanny valley' effect is a hypothesis that humans can get a weird sensation or notice when a non-human entity appears almost perfectly human. This ends up making us seem 'off' or 'annoying' or just plain simple 'weird' to neurotypical people who may not understand why. So while I was isolated by my peers, the reasons they tried to scrounge up were always limited to one genre: I was not 'normal' enough.





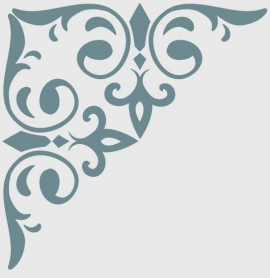
This cycle saw no end, I was not safe from even my own close family reminding me to just ‘be normal’. All the way from first grade, when I was still too small and naive to understand how to read a clock, all the way to the end of eighth grade, when I was fueled perpetually by a nihilism and self-hatred so potent I wanted to tear my own soul into shreds so that I would never have to be reborn onto this earth.

I’d masked so much, and to no avail. I was still never accepted or seen as ‘normal’. My own perception of what I was and wasn’t had become murky and confusing. Who really was I? All of the years that most children spent discovering themselves and their own identity had, for me, been filled with loathing, fictional stories, and loneliness.

It was at a stage where I questioned if I was just born a broken human being, doomed since the day of my birth to never fit in, cursed into a life where my presence would only be tolerated and never accepted. Issues it seemed nobody else quite understood fully, at least in real life. And at the end of the day, the only people that could have ever seemed to actually recognize and acknowledge me were all fictional. It wasn’t until I unintentionally received my autism diagnosis at sixteen that the boiling hatred inside of me cooled into a lingering grief which still persists to this day.

Of course, it wasn’t until this diagnosis that I understood why I felt so connected to the fictional stories I read and the characters within. Fantasy, action, romance, adventure, the genre did not matter. Authors, whether intentionally or unintentionally, tend to give their main characters autistic traits. I learned over time that while a lot of neurotypical people will adore and rave about these characters, if they met a person who actually displayed the same autistic traits in real life, they’d be weirded out or even disgusted.





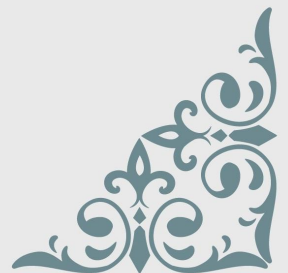
Autism, it seems, is only acceptable to neurotypicals when represented in fiction without being named.

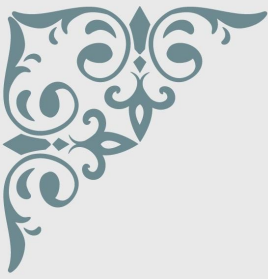
I became further attached to my collection of characters, which only seemed to grow longer as I consumed more media. One of the stories which stood out to me was not just found in an ordinary book or film though, but was delivered through the medium of a video game known as *Honkai: Star Rail*.

The game has a multitude of unique characters and worlds, giving more variety and possibilities for their writers. I began to play what had appeared to be a silly story involving a girl named Huo Huo, who is nonsensically anxious about everything. But the story panned out of an overarching plot of hunting ghost-like creatures, and instead dove into the backstory of Huo Huo and how she came to be the scared girl she is.

Huo Huo is a young girl from a long-life species resembling humanoid foxes, and as a small child stumbled upon a weak and small ball of green flames. Not knowing that these little flames were actually a heliobus, a ghost-like species which possesses and consumes hosts, she felt pity for it and picked it up to put on her tail. Her kindness backfired, and left her tail permanently possessed by this heliobus, causing it to glow and look strange to others.

Throughout this plotline in the game, Huo Huo would repeatedly blame her past stupidity for all the suffering which came after and wish that she never got stuck in the situation that she is in. She had to give everything in her past life up, but when she thought she lost Tail, she was still unhappy and began to search for him wherever she could.



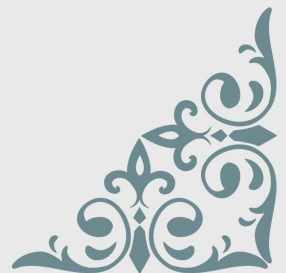


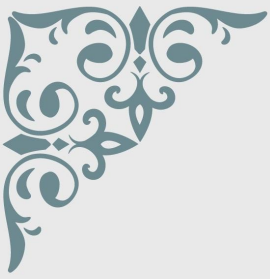
Before reuniting with Tail, Huo Huo is forced to relive some of her worst memories: Her own mother rejecting her and telling her to stay away from her siblings, before saying she and Huo Huo's father "had no choice" but to send Huo Huo away. Afterwards, Huo Huo is confronted with the classmates who tormented her in the past. When their comments inevitably get a reaction from Huo Huo, one says: "Huh? Trying to make us feel sorry for you? I can't stand people who do that!". These classmates both also abandon her, commenting that they "shouldn't be talking to a monster anyway".

Faced with both of these horrible memories, Huo Huo assumes that the real Tail is going to abandon her too once he reaches her. It isn't until after quite some effort on his part that she realizes it's the real Tail and not one forged from her worst memories. She tries to explain why she got herself into the mess that she did, searching for him, but he replies: "Forget about all that, I'm here now. But... Did everyone really leave you because of me?"

Huo Huo is given two responses: "They left, let them be." and "But at least you're back now, right?", both ultimately leading to the same conclusion: Although the past betrayals from her family and peers hurt, she doesn't *need* them back. All that matters to her now is that Tail came back, and that's all she really needs.

Why might I be detailing this one particular character's story arc so much? It seems just like a nice, wholesome story to the average person, but to me it's an allegory of how I struggled with my autism.





My autism debilitates me nearly every single day in multiple ways. I've been outcasted for multiple years by my peers due to it. My family struggled with me so much that they took my issues at face value and considered me more problematic than troubled.

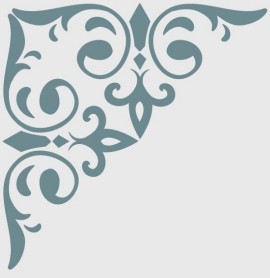
Although not directly related to my autism, I was put into a boarding school for multiple years and still rarely got to be close to my parents beforehand since they were always so busy. I can still recall the disconnect between us when they'd finally be back by my side. I was still so small when they tried to plaster over the damage left by their absence with small gifts. Any form of 'small talk' between us felt painfully forced, and it sometimes felt like I was living with strangers until I got into boarding school.

There really is no end to the list of things my autism has done to make my life harder, and yet... I don't know who I would be without it. It is a core, integral part of myself that has stuck with me since the beginning. I can hate it all I want, and I did, but I still also cannot bear the thought of not having it.

The joys of being autistic are not often mentioned in any form of media, but I'm still happy to have special interests, to stim when I feel emotion or for no reason at all, to see the world differently than my peers.

Without it, I wouldn't get to—apparently—*unnatural* levels of passion over injustices the way I do, fictional or not. I wouldn't be able to hear the electricity flowing through the walls, or enjoy a meal perfectly tuned to my tastes the way a neurotypical might. I wouldn't be able to invest myself in the delights and wonders of knowledge in subjects I only recently became attached to.





Without it, I wouldn't feel empathy for others which reach levels that concern others. I wouldn't be the type of person to disregard the structure of power meant to intimidate me. I wouldn't see the world in all the vibrance and color it was meant to be seen in by my eyes.

Without my autism, I wouldn't be me.

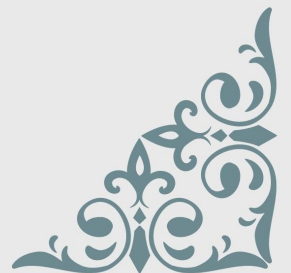
Reality is quite bittersweet during moments of realization such as that.

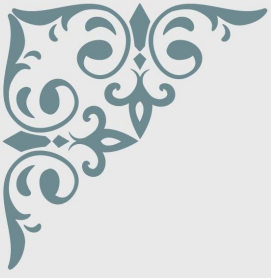
It was never the harmless different-looking Tail that Huo Huo had suddenly gotten which was the issue, and it was never the autism I was born with. It was with the people who abandoned and rejected us both, and it was with the way our society is modeled to be. If we were all taught to be more accepting of disability and a lack of rigid normalcy, I would have never had to have been treated the way I was.

I spent a good hour or so crying over that silly little game, with its silly little characters, and its silly little plotline. Over something nobody else seemed to notice, much less care about within the game's community.

Still, I couldn't shake off the idea of the parallel between Huo Huo's story and disability, whether it even was intentional or not by the writers.

It is rather difficult to encompass the experience of being neurodivergent in a society catered to neurotypicals. But then again, I will never be able to see the world the way a neurotypical does either.





Oh, what a pain it is to be autistic.
And what a joy.





The Woman

Nymosyne's Brewery was the only coffee store in the city to open so early, and Euryci was the only morning person to work there.

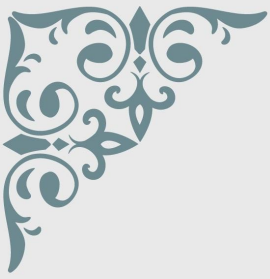
She didn't mind opening while alone, even if she was starved for conversation and the customers during these hours were students too exhausted to respond to her greetings. Working for a decade at a coffee shop meant getting some juicy details on the hottest local gossip, especially with such a prestigious academy right down the street.

Enchanters, leaders, scholars. Only the finest could get into the academy. What a dream it would be to attend.

Her own memory was rather fuzzy when it came to what her own childhood or school-life had been like, and her family was no longer around to help confirm anything, but she always found herself dreaming to be in the shoes of an Academy student as she slept.

She'd be a bright new scholar, as always. Euryci couldn't even *begin* to dream about being able to have an enchantment talent over the elements, mind, or body. Nor could she imagine herself as a leader. Being a scholar was plenty nice for her. She'd have a shiny bookmark collection, a uniform, nice leather shoes, it... It always felt so real that she could almost taste it. Making friends... Learning things... Ah, but that would only be in her wildest fantasies.





Nobody walked in this morning, even after she finally propped the door wide open. It seemed that she would have to bear being alone for a little longer. A cool morning breeze swept itself inside as she sat down on the chair behind the counter. She looked down at her work apron with a small sigh before she frowned. She had forgotten her name tag again.

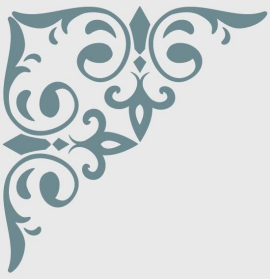
“Oh well,” she spoke out loud to herself. It wasn’t like it was important or necessary for these shifts anyways, people either already knew her or didn’t care.

Pulling her arms back and lacing her fingers lazily together, she stretched for a few long seconds before letting out a pent-up sigh. The coffee shop’s familiarity still brought her great comfort even if she was alone on slow mornings. She couldn’t imagine working anywhere else, it was such a sanctuary that one of her most vivid memories was quite literally her first day here ten years ago.

Though considering the amount of coffee she spilled during her training, perhaps it was best not to linger on such thoughts.

It was a good thing that she had a book for days like these, Euryci thought as she opened the same novel she’d read through at least a hundred times. A story of childhood lovers, separated by circumstance, never able to embrace again. Some of the interactions were so spicy that she’d been reprimanded for giggling to herself at work. She really couldn’t wait for the author to finally release the last book in the series, but it’d already been years.





Euryci took sips of her hot chocolate between quiet page flips and relaxed. The old lids used to scratch at her upper lip, but the new ones her manager had gotten were much less irritating. She flipped another page—

“Hello there,” a woman said.

Euryci jumped in her seat from surprise, and then quickly put her book down. She stood, bowing her head politely. “Welcome to Nymosyne’s Brewery! How may I help you?”

The woman quizzically tilted her head, her gaze peaceful and her posture relaxed. Her lips were in a flat, emotionless line. She looked Euryci up and down, as if to study her. It was nothing foreign to a retail worker. “I’ll have a large iced coffee,” the woman said before adding: “Black as night.”

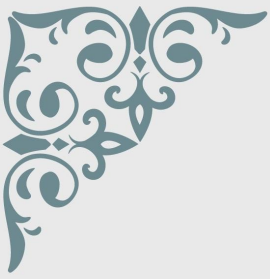
Euryci loved the sound of the woman’s voice, it felt like a warm blanket wrapping around her during a chilly evening. “Sure, can I have a name for that?”

The woman finally smiled, and Euryci’s heart skipped a beat. “I’m the only one here, dear.”

“Oh, right... Sorry, it’s become like muscle memory,” Euryci’s eyes randomly traveled down to the woman’s lips and lingered there before she laughed awkwardly and forced them to meet the woman’s eyes again. “It’ll be ten and a half units.”

“I can understand what you mean,” the woman said as she paid, tapping her hTab against a scanner. “Habits can be hard to break”





The coffee maker machinery made hissing noises after Euryci pressed a button behind the counter. “Are you also a student at the Academy? I don’t believe we’ve ever met before.”

There was a pause in the conversation, the momentary silence filled in by the sound of brewing coffee. “No, just passing by.”

“Well,” Euryci could tell that the woman was exhausted, “if you want any recommendations for sightseeing, just let me know.”

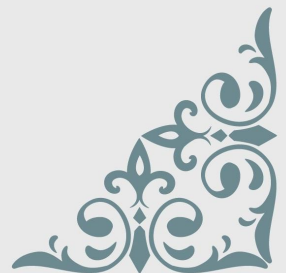
“I’m more curious about *other* things,” the woman moved to the end of the counter, leaning against the wall to watch as Euryci began to cool the coffee in a rickety, outdated machine. “If you’re willing to indulge me.”

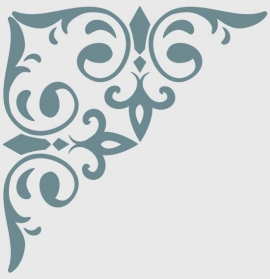
Curious about... Other *things*? Euryci was curious herself, though mostly about what the woman’s lips tasted like. Did she say *indulge*? Euryci bet they tasted bittersweet. “Hm?” She mentally gave herself a smack, trying to stay focused.

“How have you been recently?”

Euryci snapped out whatever had been tainting her thoughts and beamed at the woman. Finally, somebody who wanted to converse, she thought. “I’ve been rather splendid!”

“Really?” The woman smiled again, and Euryci felt her heart skip another beat. “That’s good to hear.”





Her face flushed. “What about you?”

“Things have been alright for me, besides the fact that my work enjoys consuming every aspect of my life.”

Euryci took a sip of her hot chocolate, her brows furrowed. “That’s no good. You have to hit the sweet spot when it comes to a work-life balance.”

“I suppose I will eventually,” she said. Her tone seemed to have become solemn.

Euryci fumbled for a response. “Do you like your work, at least?”

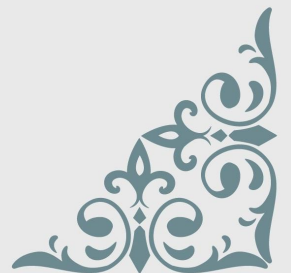
“Some days.”

“What do you do?”

The woman arched an elegant eyebrow.

Perhaps that had been too invasive, Euryci thought and then panicked. “I mean, er- you don’t have to tell me that much.”

The eyebrow went back down. “I do lots of things these days, it can range from... finances to... something like diplomacy, as an example.”





Euryci got a plastic cup, opening a panel in the wall to scoop fresh ice cubes from. “You must be quite important.”

“You can say that.” The ice cubes rattled into the cup.

Perhaps that was why she chose to get coffee at the same hour that only sleepless students wandered about, Euryci thought. “Do you have any enchantment talents? Maybe I should brag to my regulars if you do, some are still struggling to fully unlock theirs.” She looked up at the woman when there was no response.

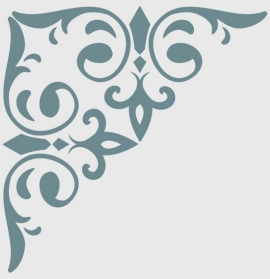
Her attention seemed to have been focused elsewhere, the counter in particular. “Your hot chocolate is going to get cold if you finish it.”

Euryci had almost forgotten about her hot chocolate. She moved back to the counter and took a hearty swig before returning swiftly. “It was still very warm, don’t worry.”

The edges of the woman’s lips lifted up again in another smile, until the old cooling machine beeped twice, indicating that it was done.

Cold, plain black coffee trickled out a tap and into the cup Euryci prepared, the last few drops taking their time before she could finally confidently put a lid onto the cup. She handed it to the woman. “Stay safe if you’re going to travel away from here! One of my coworkers said there’s been all sorts of dangerous criminals traveling around cities these days in packs.”





It was a lucky thing those criminals hadn't yet come to the Academy, Euryci thought. People using their enchantment talents for crimes would make anybody feel unsafe.

After a brief moment, the woman accepted the cup with both hands. Her skin touched and lingered against Euryci's as she spoke more softly than before. "I will be safe, I promise."

The woman's skin was so soft and warm that Euryci tried not to blush. She waved shyly as she watched the woman walking towards the door. "Come back anytime, please," she mentally kicked at herself for not saying more. Why was she feeling like this?

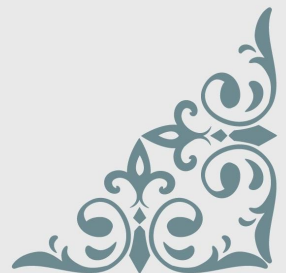
At the very last second, the woman stopped and sighed. "I'm sorry I keep doing this."

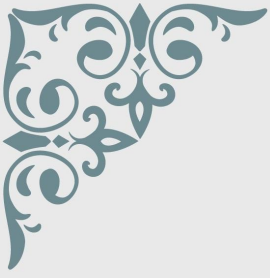
"Doing what?" Euryci tilted her head, her expression petulant at the woman's mood souring. "You haven't done anything wrong."

The woman walked back until they were face-to-face. Euryci's heart rate quickened, though not from fear, as the woman leaned in even closer. "You'll understand," she said, "one day."

And then she kissed her.

It wasn't anything like Euryci had read about in her books, when the couple finally kissed for the first time. There was no overwhelmingly unbearable heat or unrelenting desire or even tongue involved.





No, no, it was more like the kisses she saw shared between long-time couples while working. A simple, loving gesture. One that felt gentle... familiar... and bittersweet.

She found herself leaning into it more with her eyes closed.

It felt perfect. It felt *right*. She wanted to reach up and hug the woman closer, but the kiss had already been broken off. A strange part of her wanted to scream, to cry, but all she could do was watch as the woman began to leave again.

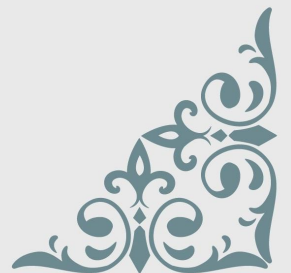
Euryci finally managed to get a single word out, her voice cracking as she pleaded. “Don’t...”

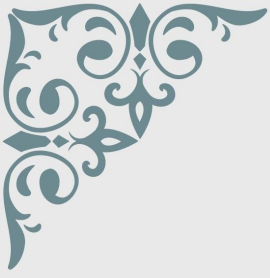
The woman turned to her. “Goodbye, Eury.”

Euryci blinked and stared at the door, propped wide open and empty. It seemed that she would have to bear being alone for a little longer.

She wasn’t used to the realization hurting this much.

A cool morning breeze swept itself inside as she sat down on the chair behind the counter. She looked down at her work apron with a small sigh before she frowned. She had forgotten her name tag again.

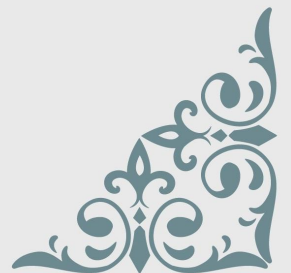


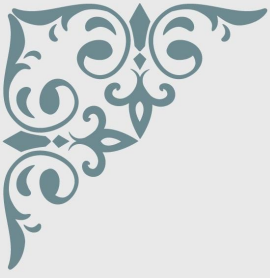


News For The Dead

I have news for the dead as I look through this glass,
not into a window, but a flickering screen outside class.
Blinking as I wipe it down over seventy-five times.
You'd think history has been clear,
but now they want to muddle it with crocodile tears.
So, the transparency's been lacking,
at least with all the propagandized news.
And as I write this message, I'm sure that some
will tell me to stop sharing my blues.

In truth, I'm nothing but red
with this rage that I feel,
at the injustice in which my government said:
"Their death-count's not real".
My eyes are most red with the blood
of dead dreams in the sand,
they're as red as the blood stains
on these Zionists' hands.

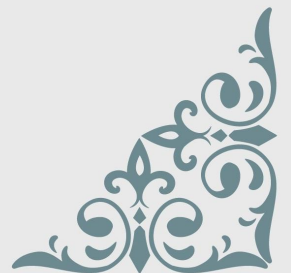


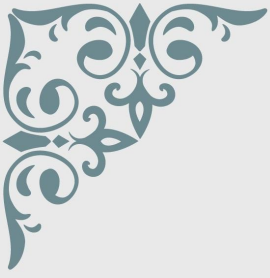


It's no fight of 'protection',
we *know* it's a fight over land.
I've read real leaked documents,
I know of their expansion plan.

The sibling roses, a western iris,
a kalanit all bloom in sync.
Flowers we know as weeds in disguise,
now don't look away, don't even blink.
For they lie and they cheat,
all to hoard their wealth.
They strangle their own,
so they can continue to bomb others
in stealth.

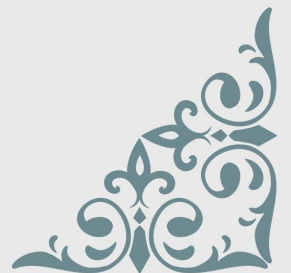
We've lost friends, children, families,
which include other writers too.
My heart squeezes itself tighter
when I wonder how they'd feel hearing these current news.





The tides are turning as the moon shifts her face
away from this carnage, away from this place.
I wonder if you and the old dead would shift away like her too.
I wonder what I could've written
to help them, if only I had the skills to, like you.

But I'm just a canary,
in their cage and locked in.
I don't know where *you* may be going,
or where you have been.
but remember my last plea, and listen
to this ballad of grief and woe.
For my name may be cursed and then forgotten
but it shall never be Genocide Joe.





Print Out Copy For Thursday

Assignment due on Thursday soon, but I
Am bad at all the things I do, this too.
My fingers bleed invisible ink, why?
Impatience tears my screen apart to blue.

I write and write, all day, all night. My heart
Beats fast, and yet these words do not appear.
It is easier to think than to start,
But I cannot care, I can only stare.

A sandwich and a cider here for me,
I rule Procrasti-Nation like a King,
Feast now, but on my words, drink not my tea,
Oh wait, I was still meant to be writing...

Something. Oh well, farewell. I say *fuck it.*
Can't write shit, but I'll cry in a bucket.

