

CANDLELIT CHRONICLES



ISSUE II
ECHOES OF THE PAST



Candlelit Chronicles

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Halligan

Echoes of the Past

The past lingers like an undying ghost, its stain wrought upon the world. It lives in carved limestone statues and crooked little towns. It whispers through literature and art. Its greatest deeds are legendary, yet its worst sins blemish the very worthiness of humanity. In the end, it embraces us all in death. Wrapping us within its fold, where we join with it for eternity. In this issue of Candlelit Chronicles, we celebrate the echoes of the past. Dark academia that exudes the charm and atmosphere of antiquity. Characters who seek the long-lost truths of the ancients. Themes that radiate the beauty and mysticism of the bygone. And mysterious settings of crumbling ruins, grand old estates, dark crypts, and all the places where great leaders once stood and martyrs fell.





Letter From The Editor



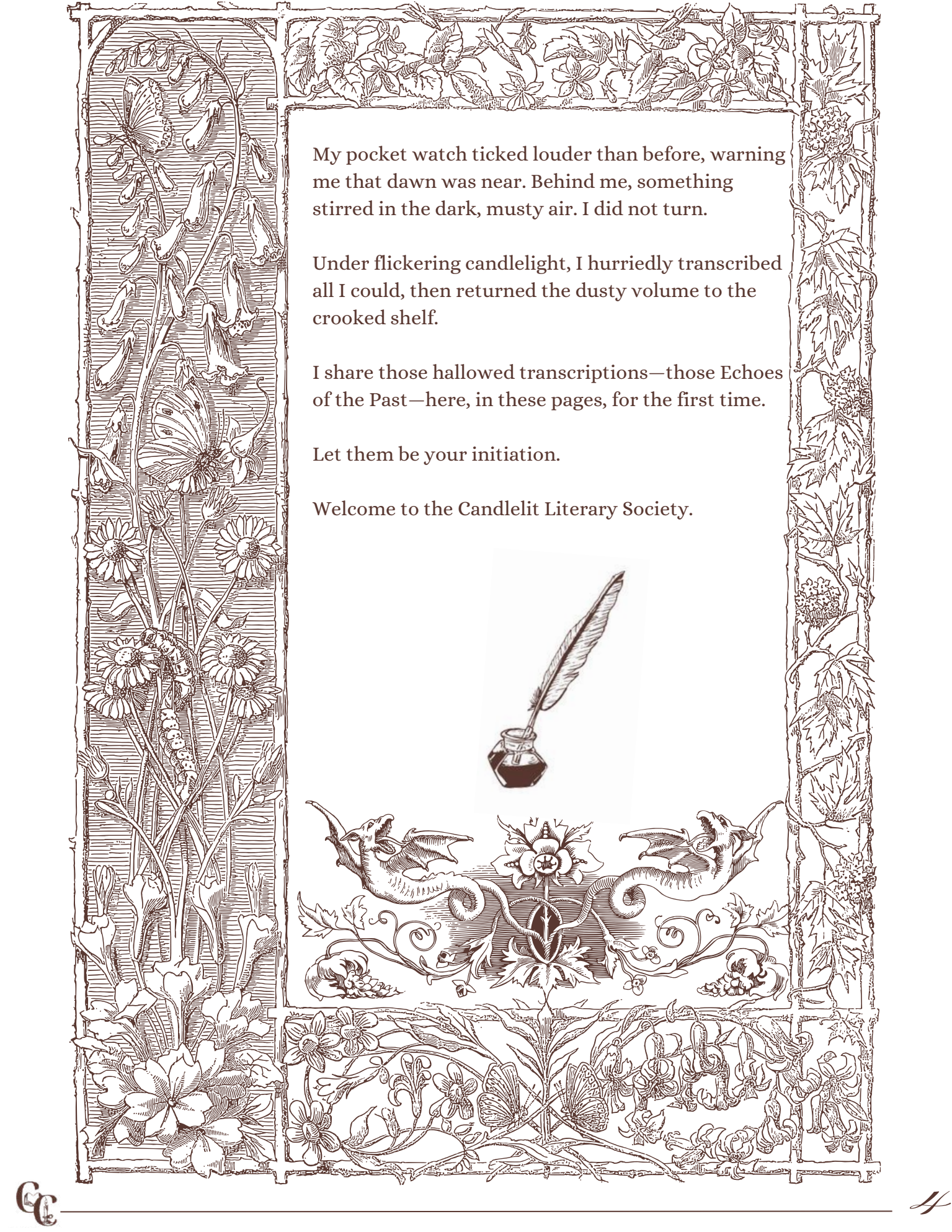
he past doesn't sleep.
It scratches at the locked drawer.
It beckons from beneath the
grave. It groans from the
crackling spines of tomes.

Never to be tamed, it burns eternally like an
undying flame.

I suppose that force, that entity with a life all its
own, is what drew me to the library in the
darkest hours of night. It was there, heart
pounding, that I happened upon a most curious
volume. Its spine was faded, its edges cracked,
but the gold detailing of runes and symbols
whispered to me as though beckoning from
another age.

Spellbound, I opened it, making sure not to harm
its timeworn pages. In it, I found stories and
poems of a most curious sort. Morose and
somber. Yet enchanting and deeply haunting.

There was no *one* author. No *one* storyline. Only
echoes.



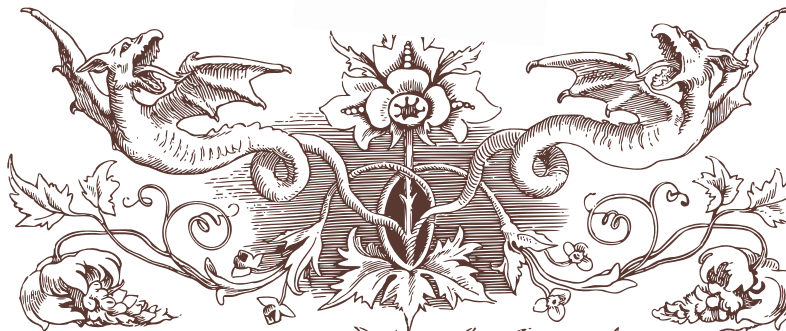
My pocket watch ticked louder than before, warning me that dawn was near. Behind me, something stirred in the dark, musty air. I did not turn.

Under flickering candlelight, I hurriedly transcribed all I could, then returned the dusty volume to the crooked shelf.

I share those hallowed transcriptions—those Echoes of the Past—here, in these pages, for the first time.

Let them be your initiation.

Welcome to the Candlelit Literary Society.





Part 1 POETRY



HALLS OF THE FORGOTTEN

By: Alexis M Levine



sleep beneath the weight of centuries,
A scholar of shadows and dust,
Where the echoes of the ancients whisper
From crumbling tomes and fractured stone.
A monster that kills and lingers,
Searching for truths the gods once feared.

I crave the ecstasy of the forbidden,
The knowledge carved into lost obelisks,
Spoken in tongues long buried.

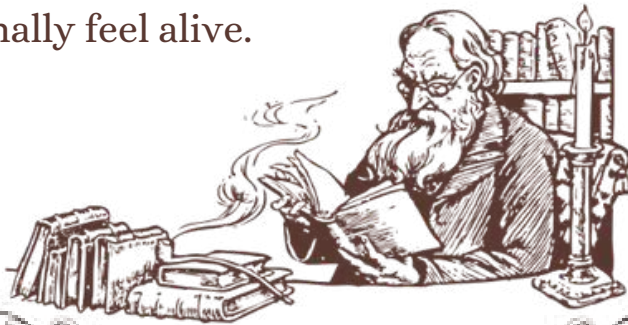
The Devil himself recoiled
At the sight of my unwavering soul—
Unshaken by the weight of ruin,
Unmoved by the specters of the past.

Is fate a story we tell ourselves,
Or does it write us first?
And if love is hunger,
What is longing but an ache beyond time?

I follow the footsteps of the condemned,
Through vaulted crypts and shattered altars,
Where great kings once stood
And martyrs fell to rusted swords.

It doesn't take long for me to find my answer—
A place the human mind cannot fathom.
An eternity of darkness is where I go.

In the breath of my last moment,
I finally feel alive.



Alexis Levine, Kenya

Alexis Levine explores the depths of human emotion, delving into the darker sides of mental illness, grief, and heartbreak. Through raw and evocative storytelling, she sheds light on the unspoken struggles of the mind and heart.

THE CAVE THAT ECHOES REQUIEMS

By: Ramneek Panchi



I am a sick woman, with a bitter mind, a
vindictive soul, and deceptive ties.

I sit, bound in a cave of my own design,
Where all I can hear is the requiem my
soul plays,

While my shadow pleads with me to run away.

I tell it we must stay,
Or else we will be eaten away.

In human eyes lies a false purity,
And a monster that is screaming bloody lies.
Humans are not the righteous beings they claim to be.
They have become so consumed with defining their
humanity
That they've remodeled a sculptor's masterpiece,
To hold smiles filled with hidden sharp teeth.

The requiem grows louder,
And the sorrow of my psyche deepens its hold.

With nowhere to go, my shadow dances,
Twisting across the walls of the cave.
But even this—my only escape—feels empty, for it
gives me no real pleasure to watch my shadow dance
in a non-human way.

And in that moment, I realize:
I crave a permanent release from my conflict of belief.

My shadow asks me:
“Were the human mind, body, and soul created to
work against each other?”
“Yes,” I replied. “It is to protect us.
For if we knew too much, we would be forced to
endure
The true nature of our being
And I... I am a being hidden behind a veil of lies,
Saturated with human cries.”
Suddenly, my chest felt hollow, and the melody of my
requiem intensified.
With the cave now void of light, my shadow had gone
away.

Did I truly hate being human so much
That I drove myself away?

As I sit, the melody closing in,
A faint laugh breaks through the stillness.

Suddenly, my feet begin to move,
Dragging my body toward the sound.
As I near the cave’s mouth,
An intense red flame floods my vision.

I close my eyes and let out a cry.
I step out, hearing laughter,
And the sense of heat-filled air brushing against my skin.

Trembling, I force my eyes open.
And there before me:
Humans gathered around a fire,
Singing hymns,
Sharing their minds,
Smiling with mouths free of razor-sharp teeth.

My shadow, standing by the fire, whispers:
“It’s okay... You don’t have to go back to the cave.
Even at night, the sky still shines.”

I drop to my knees,
And my shadow watches as my eyes rise toward the sky.

I whisper to my shadow:
I had forgotten.

I had forgotten that some humans,
are good.
That not all of them are driven by,
selfish means.
That some of them,
can love,
And feel what others cannot.
I had forgotten
what it truly means
to be human.

Ramneek Panchi, Ontario, Canada

Ramneek Panchi (she/her) is a philosophical poet. Growing up she struggled to make sense of the world and human nature, so she dedicated herself to the arts to understand exactly this. She is now a published and performative poet who thrives off capturing the human experience through the soulful understanding of personal and external connections.

TRAGUS ODE; A BILDUNGSROMAN

By: Van Rung



ragus ode

Amongst the saddened spirits
goes

A fragile child, forced to bode
The first heartbreak of kinship

Tragus ode

Something wicked that way goes

A wyrd phenomenon

Now to be known

That those you've held can hurt you most

A suicide soliloquy

Is humanity's chiefest elegy

To be, to be, to be, to be

With strength those words have to mean

Tragus ode

A wild wind has now blown

A tempest that chills to the bone

In it; the knowledge

That you are not alone

Tragus ode

The goat's song now has a-tone
Of freedom of the vast unknown
The fragile child has now grown;
Now prepared to take the throne.



Van Rung, WI/IL, USA

Van Rung is a writer, poet, and enigma based in the Chicago-Milwaukee area. She holds a degree in History from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Her work has appeared in PULP and House of Long Shadows.

ANGEL IN THE GRAVEYARD

By: Jesse Catir



ong fingers trace letters in
sandstone
Touching just enough to feel
Leaving space to grow the need
again

Like a nervous lover.

Forehead to cold stone
Palm to unbeating heart
Warm air against cold
Cold into warm, wet cave

Wrap possessive around the delicate curve
Pull where nothing yields
Flit eyes to search corners
Feel shame replace desire

A stain of red lingers on frosted marble
Old blood from a cut forgotten
Insignificant
Damning

Step backwards into worn life
Turn body from temptation
Feel the heat off a dead soul
Forget the chill of living stillness



Jesse Catir, Montana USA,

Jesse Catir resides in Montana but lives in her head. She spins wild fantasies in her sleep and writes their shadows her waking. Jesse hopes to bind her poems in a book one day. Find her at @jessecatir on Instagram, or maybe in your dreams.

SÉANCE

By: Frank William Finney



he chill, the thrill, an act of will
to summon spirits here.

And just before the wicks found wax
we felt their presence near.

Shadows trembled on the wall.
The curtains seemed to shake.

And by the time the clock
chimed three

There was nobody left
to wake.



Frank William Finney, MA, USA,

*Frank William Finney is a poet from Massachusetts who taught literature in Thailand for 25 years. A recipient of The Letter Review Prize for Poetry, his poems have appeared in Brussels Review, The Hemlock Journal, Kelp Journal, Songs of Eretz Poetry Journal, Ultramarine Literary Review, and elsewhere. His chapbook *The Folding of the Wings* was published in 2022 by Finishing Line Press.*

HOW STRANGE THE SILENCE OF A STARRY NIGHT

By: N. Cross



ow strange the silence, of a starry
night.

Here, once there were shouts of joy.

How strange the stillness, of a starry
night.

Here, once there were cries of anguish.

Under vast galaxies, I question time.

Past, present, future, seem to be as one.

Yet where are the echoes of voices once heard?

Where are the shadows of those who once lived?

In the stillness, I strain to hear the whispers,
the murmurs of memories, near yet distant.

But silence surrounds me, a void so profound,
no laughter, no sorrow, no voices resound

My gaze turns upwards, from this quiet hill.

Beholding the stars, shining in thousands.

Each one is a witness to stories untold,
of love, loss, and dreams that once were.

Yet gently they twinkle, keeping their secrets
And I am left pondering, of tales left behind.
How strange the silence of a starry night.
Where echoes of eternity remain out of reach.



N. Cross, Japan

N Cross simply writes down the thoughts that cannot be contained- exploring time, faith, and quiet moments of reflection, drawing inspiration from nature. N. Cross is not educated in literature, just human!

EDINBURGH

By: Michaela Brady

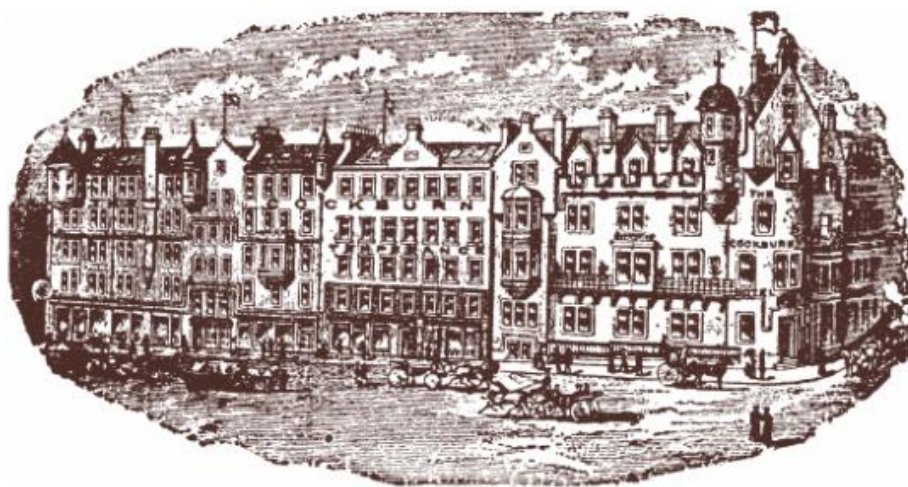


In the fragments of Burns and Scott,
resting in a lighted case,
I scan words the world could have
forgotten,
a love of person, love of place.

It's a forlorn thirst to preserve,
an obsession with their essence,
that spurs the sanest to reserve
these strewn artifacts. It's our only chance

to bind our present to an unlived past.
As I coil 'round the winding stairs,
emerge onto medieval streets,
I am struck in the chest, a familiar gaze,
the remnants of you and me.

It was only last night we were here
and I never photographed your face.
At the morning's withered glare,
I've lost you in this place.



Michaela Brady, UK

Michaela's writing explores belonging, mis/communication, grief and mental health. Originally from NYC, she moved to the UK to pursue a master's degree at Oxford University and has lived there since. Her work has been featured in Cassandra Voices, Pink Disco, The Talon Review, BarBar, and Clepsydra, among others. Recently, she won GRAY magazine's winter poetry competition, was a featured poet in the Oxford Di-Verse Poetry Festival, and listed as a finalist for both the London Independent Story Prize and Oprelle's 2024 "Coming Home" poetry contest. When writer's block hits, she performs in drag/cabaret shows.

HOURGLASS

By: Riley Schmidt



might wait for years in the nets you weave.
Believe they are woven for me,
The fly in your delicate web—Arachne's
heir,
Spun tight in the silken strands of your will.

You will string me along on droplets of dew,
Curl me in folds of midnight velvet,
Drag a finger beneath my chin,
Ink-stained and trembling,
A scholar's muse, an artifact of longing.

I may lie here, hoping for a tremble—a kiss,
Caught in your waltz,
Awaiting your step.

You are the hand guiding the pen,
Letting it waver,
Letting it still.
I am but a breath between stanzas.

I am the ink, the blood of the story,
A breath in your lungs,
Held—never fully released.
Suspended here, I fade before the final word is writ
A marginalia in your magnus opus.



Riley Schmidt, NY, USA

Raised on the eastern side of Washington State, Riley grew up with a love for nature, insects, and finding art in the cracks and crevices of my small world. She moved to New York State in 2018 and continues to nurture that love of art through her writing and experiences—though now, the crevices of a small world have become the arteries of a much, much larger one. She is enamored with the city that can steep a dream like tea and pour it, piping hot, across the world.

ROMANCE IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

By: Robert Hodgkinson



he blood of his victims still wet on his lips,
le Vicomte du Varenne returns to his lover,
delighting himself in her heart's nimble
balance,
testing its springs with a press of his thumb;

with a turn of the key that protrudes from her thorax
comes the whirr of her clockwork, the bite of her gears.
Now the breaking of casements and vengeance of
tenantry,
mechanical mistress and Vicomte are fled

from baying and torchlight, the library burning,
the words that are lost, and the loss then forgotten;
in panic through gardens of devouring shadow,
the topiary mazing of box tree and laurel

are fuller of night than the ink in their veins,
the thick, earthy savour released by their tread
is moistened and rotted in overgrown alleys,
as much of corruption as growth or renewal.

Her unblemished skin is a page yet unwritten:
the kisses he nails there, clotted with gore.

In gardens whose verdure has strengthened against them,
pitchforks and scythes are outpacing their prey.



Robert Hodkinson, England, UK

Robert Hodkinson lives in central England, where he writes poetry obsessed with themes of place and time. His work has appeared in more than a dozen publications, in print and online, and he also writes and publishes historical non-fiction.

THE ALCHEMIST'S BOOKSHOP

By: Jennifer Seaton



he bell above the door did not ring—it
sighed.

A long exhale of rust and brass that
stirred the dust like memory.

Decaying tomes—fraying spines once
gilded and grand,

line shelves that bow beneath the weight of
forgotten knowledge.

The air hums with age.

Each ring of the doorbell sends time vibrating
through the floorboards.

A blustery wind rattles the pane, shaking the stone
lions perched by the hearth—
guardians chipped and blind-eyed, still watching.



You step inside.

Boots soaked from the storm, coat clinging like
remorse.

Your eyes adjust slowly—first to shadow, then to the
hush.

He stands behind the counter, age-worn fingers
wrapped around a teacup.

Eyes like polished obsidian.

Voice like smoke.

The shopkeeper.

Or perhaps—the last scholar.

Or perhaps—something else.

No refunds,” he says.

“You don’t come here by chance.”

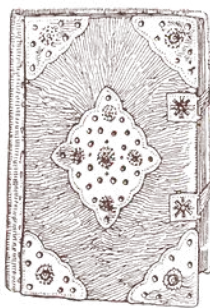
It lay on a velvet pedestal—

its cover stitched in silver thread, its clasp undone by
no visible hand.

The pages moved like breath.

Symbols bloomed and shifted as if the ink had not yet
dried from an ancient thought.

The volumes breathe in silence.



One opens on its own—
pages fluttering to a halting stop, as if choosing the
reader.

The script is unreadable—*you* could not read it.
And yet—*you* understood.
A name surfaced—*your* name, written in bone—
silver curling into alchemical spirals, each letter
shifting like the rings of Saturn through dust.
The shopkeeper did not stop you.
He merely poured more tea.



Your hand tingles as you reach.
The book is warm.
It knows you.
The moment your fingers touched the page,
everything collapsed.
The floor, the walls, *your* name.

The book breathed in—so did *you*.

Onyx ink filled *your* veins—hot, precise;
like calligraphy etched beneath *your* skin.
You crack the spine—dust lifting like incense, the
scent of copper, clove, and something older...
time, yes, that was it, time.

Symbols swim.
You blink.
The letters rearrange.
“To transmute the soul, burn what was never meant
to survive.”

A flicker.
Your reflection in the glass—*you*, and not-*you*.
Eyes deeper.
Bones sharper.
A grin that isn’t yours curling at the edges.
Your memories peeled away like gold leaf.
Moments spiralled into smoke:
your brother’s voice, *your* mother’s hands, a lover’s
final letter.

You stumble back.
The shopkeeper doesn’t move—he just sips his tea.
“Truth hurts,” he murmurs, “but it cuts clean.”

The book pulses...a heartbeat—or a warning.
It whispered truths you never sought—
histories never told, equations that broke the soul,
recipes for ruin—
names of stars you were never meant to know.
And still, you turned the page.

The lions by the hearth crack open their eyes—
stone no longer.

The shop groaned—timber bending, time warping.

Outside, the storm stopped.

Your breath catches.

You don't run—*you* can't.

The book glows faintly—a muted gold, pulsing like
breath.

Its pages no longer flutter, but ripple, as if water
waits beneath the ink.

A name rises to the surface—*Yours*.

Etched not in letters, but in essence—as if the
book remembers you from a life you never lived.

“Once bound,”

the shopkeeper whispers, “the ink does not fade.”

He's no longer behind the counter.

You didn't see him move—

but now he stands beside you, smelling of charred
parchment and winter earth.

His fingers graze the page—not to turn it, but to
still it.

The book shudders.

A hush falls.

Even the wind retreats.

“You’ve read enough,” he says, though you haven’t read at all.

But the book opened anyway—not with pages, but with light.

A shriek of silver floods your vision, and then—*nothing*.

No floor. No air. No self.

Only ink fills your veins, coiling through the hollows of your mind like smoke-seeking corners.

The letters hum. They feed.

What were *you* looking for? What were *they* looking for?

The shop tilts—shelves stretch like ribs.

The tomes breathe, their whispers sharpening to incantations you can’t unhear.

Time collapses—memory unravels.

Your name peels away...*you* are not who *you* were...you are what the book requires...

The shopkeeper watches, eyes soft with sorrow.

He sets his cup down gently.

“You see now,” he murmurs, “why I drank so much tea.”

Billows of smoke envelop *him*, beckoning *him* into the air.

“*You’ve done well*,” he said, and walked toward the back, ethereal as if floating.

No door opened. No door closed. He simply vanished.

And now, *you sit* behind the desk.
The tea is warm—the bell sleeps... *He* will not return.

Your hands—trembling,
stained as though you have always been here, always
kept watch behind the desk—
reach for the teapot.
The cup is already warm; a new gust rattles the door.
The bell rings, unfamiliar yet comforting.
You do not look up.
It is not yet *your* time.
For now, you just become...there was *no you* before this
void.
No fragments of a soul to piece together.

The book breathes. So do you.
And the Ink remembers...



Jennifer Seaton, Canada

Jennifer Seaton is a Canadian poet whose work explores impermanence, emotional unraveling, and the quiet decay of memory. She writes from the intersection of silence and story, often drawing on themes of loss, identity, and longing.



Part 2 PROSE



WITH THE HELP OF YOUR GRACE

By: Rebel Blaze



aint Germain's Academy was never meant to be inviting. A gothic sprawl of towering spires and cold, rain-slicked stone, it loomed over us like some vast, indifferent god.

The wind carved through its narrow corridors, rattling the leaded panes of its mullioned windows, whispering secrets through the cracks in the walls. It was the kind of place that settled in your bones, too grand to be warm, too ancient to be anything but unyielding. Those who lived within its walls learned to steel themselves against its weight.

Some bore that burden better than others.

Madeline Caddel felt the Academy's austerity more keenly than most. She had been brilliant elsewhere—so brilliant, in fact, that her name still echoed in the halls of her old schools, her talent spoken of in near-reverent tones. But here, among the best of the best, that brilliance dimmed to something less blinding, a faint glow swallowed by the Academy's vast shadow. And yet, Madeline did not seem to *care*.



She met inquiries about her grades with nothing more than a slow blink of those dark, unreadable eyes. A tilt of her head sent loose waves of ink-black hair tumbling over her narrow shoulders, a gesture that seemed as careless as she was. If someone dared to boast of their accomplishments, they were met with a dispassionate, “What makes you think I want to know?”—delivered in a voice low and smooth, melodic in a way that made her dismissals sting all the more.

As for me—then, only a boy, naive and full of restless curiosity—I was, of course, utterly fascinated by her.

One evening, I found her curled into a chair in the shadowed corner of the common room, half-hidden by a stack of books teetering precariously on the small table beside her. The firelight flickered over the worn leather covers, casting restless shapes against the stone walls. She sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, her chin resting lightly against them—a posture the faculty would have deemed improper had they walked in at that moment. Only the layers of her long navy skirt and black tights kept her just within the bounds of acceptable decorum.



“Light reading?” I asked, perching myself on the arm of her chair.

She looked up slowly, as if surfacing from some distant, fathomless place. The firelight caught in her dark eyes, turning them glassy and unreadable. “Vincent,” she murmured. No greeting, no inflection—just my name, as if confirming my presence rather than acknowledging it. She had a habit of doing that. One of many peculiarities.

“Has Professor Morrison gone mad again?” I smirked, the words teasing but quiet, as if the walls might listen.

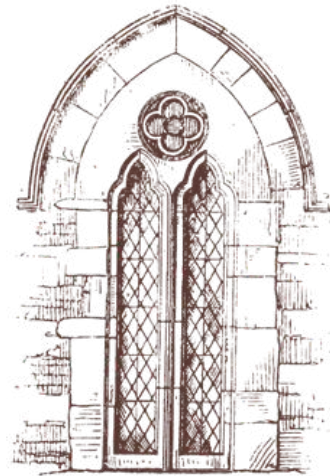
She blinked once, considering, her fingers resting lightly against the open pages. “Not to my knowledge,” she said, her voice as measured as ever. Then, a beat too late, she caught my meaning.

“Ah. Right.” Her fingertips ghosted across the paper. “He does tend to over-assign. But these aren’t for class.”

“Pleasure, then?”

I leaned in, trying to glimpse the text. The print was too small, the pages too dense, and I couldn't get close enough without upsetting my precarious balance. The fire in the great hearth burned low, its warmth licking at our backs, though it did little to soften the chill in the room.

Outside, the rain streaked down the leaded windows in frantic rivulets, rattling against the glass as if something restless—something unseen—was trying to claw its way in. And yet, Madeline remained untouched by it all, cool and unbothered, existing in some space just beyond the reach of the world.



“Research,” she said abruptly. The word was clipped, as though she regretted speaking it aloud.

“On what?” I pressed, unable to curb my curiosity.

She hesitated. For a moment, I thought she might tell me to leave. Instead, she said, almost absently, “It’s been getting really...odd, again.”

The words sat thick between us, unmoving, like the damp chill seeping through the stones of the common room.

Odd.

Things were always odd with her. In class, she would go still, eyes tracking movements no one else could see. Or she would fixate on the smallest of details—an imperfection in the wood grain of her desk, the way ink bled through paper—as if peeling back the layers of something only she could sense.

But this time was different.

For the first time, she looked...unsettled.

That's when I realized—she wasn't researching for amusement or idle curiosity. She was researching *herself*.

The strange malady that clung to her like a curse.

She would break into hives if she wandered too close to the school's gate. Collapse into coughing fits if she strayed too far into the woods beyond the grounds. The infirmary always dismissed it—stress, they said. Nerves. Nothing to be concerned about.

But it was getting worse. Less frequent, perhaps, but more intense. We were only halfway through our time at Saint Germain's, and I dreaded to think how much worse it could become by our fourth year.

"I intend to find a cure," she declared. "If the Academy won't help me, I need to help myself."

There was no desperation in her voice—only a quiet certainty, as if she had long since accepted that no one else would come to her aid.



“What have you found?” I asked.

“Medical texts yield no answers,” she said, flipping a page. “Folklore and history, however...”

I let out a soft, incredulous laugh. “What use could that possibly—”

“Lord Dorian Page,” she interrupted, her voice like the edge of a knife. “He was an occultist. A particularly fringe type, it seems.”

I frowned. “...Explain.”

“His order believed it was man’s duty to eradicate the occult, convinced it could only bring suffering to the human race.”

“Occultists who hate the occult. Fascinating,” I murmured, crossing my arms. “But again, what’s that got to do with—”

“The folklore books have blacked-out sections.”

I frowned. “Pardon?”

She flipped back a few pages, angling the book toward me. “Every folklore book I’ve checked has at least one page redacted.”

Sure enough, thick black ink obscured entire passages, the small, spidery text swallowed beneath smears of deliberate omission.

“That is odd,” I admitted, my voice quieter now.

Saint Germain’s prided itself on its library—an archive stretching back to the Academy’s founding. The books were ancient, their spines cracked with time, their pages fragile with age. The idea that the Academy itself would censor even a single word was... sacrilegious.



Madeline traced the edge of one redacted section with a fingertip, her expression unreadable. “It gets worse. The lines between the blackouts—they describe my symptoms.”

A slow, creeping chill wrapped around my spine.

“You think your illness is...” I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “You think it’s connected to the school?”

“Yes.” Her voice was sharp, certain. A rare thing. “And tonight, I’m going to find out for sure. There’s a book in the Restricted Section.”

“You’re worrying me, Madeline.”

“I need answers.”

She slammed the book shut with a decisive thud, standing and straightening her blazer. “I’m going to figure this out. With or without you, Vincent.”

I sighed. The moment she spoke my name in that determined, honeyed voice, I knew I had no choice...

That night, we slipped from the dormitories like ghosts.

The fire in the common room had long since burned out, leaving only the scent of smoke and a blanket of quiet. The halls were different after dark—no laughter, no whispered gossip, no faculty feigning disinterest in the latest scandal. Just us. Just the sound of our breath and the occasional groan of old wood.

I couldn’t stop glancing over my shoulder.

The library’s locks were, as it turned out, purely for show.

The heavy door swung open with the softest creak, and Madeline shut it behind us. For a moment, the library felt as it always did—still, dust laden, steeped in the scent of old books. But the darkness felt different here, thicker. The storm outside swallowed every trace of moonlight, leaving only our flickering candle to cut the black.

Without hesitation, she moved toward the back—to the Restricted Section.



I followed, despite the librarian's voice rattling in my memory, warning of expulsion for stepping into places meant only for faculty.

Madeline trailed a finger along the shelves, cutting a clean path through the dust. Then she stopped, suddenly, and took my hand. She guided my fingers to the break in the dust, dragging them along the shelf until they met an unnatural smoothness.

"No dust," I murmured.

She reached for the only book in this small, dustless section.

The Biography of Saint Germain. First edition.

As soon as she pulled it free, the entire bookcase groaned, then shifted.

A passage revealed itself beyond, yawning into darkness.

Madeline's fingers found the crook of my elbow. Together, we stepped inside.

The deeper we went, the colder it became.

Madeline leaned against me more and more, her weight a slow collapse. By the time we reached the halfway point, she was nearly limping.

I suggested stopping. I suggested turning back. I almost pleaded as her color drained to something ghostly.

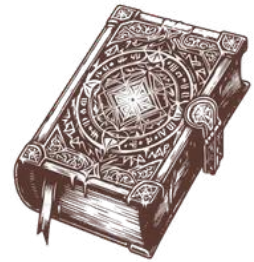
But she refused.

She had come too far.

I took the candle from her shaking hands, fearing she'd drop it and set us both ablaze.

Finally, we stumbled into an alcove—a small, circular space, like a chapel without a god.

In the center stood a single podium, no larger than a preacher's pulpit. Upon it lay a single, heavy tome. Madeline tore herself from me, staggering toward it like a woman starved. Her fingers trembled as she turned the cover.



I hurried forward, lifting the candle to cast its weak glow over the page.

The Sacred Manifesto of Lord Dorian Page.

I will not repeat what I read that night.

The vile ramblings of a coward are not worth immortalizing.

But I will tell you what mattered.

And what happened after.

Lord Dorian Page believed the occult could be trained out of a person. That the *unnatural*—whatever that meant to men like him—could be agitated, repressed, then eradicated entirely. He had buried something beneath the school, something he called the *clerus mali*—a force that stirred, tormented, and ultimately consumed those with occult powers.

Madeline swayed.

Then collapsed.

I barely caught her, the candle slipping from my grasp.

The podium caught fire.

And that night, I did something I never thought I would do.

I defaced a book.

I ripped a map from its pages before the flames devoured the rest. Then I carried Madeline—half-conscious, fevered—back through that godforsaken passage.

She regained her strength the closer we came to the exit, and when we finally stumbled free, I slammed the hidden door behind us. We leaned against the shelves, panting, our breath fogging in the cold.

“The woods,” I said suddenly, thrusting the map into her hands. “There’s a way out for you there.”

Madeline looked up at me with dark, starlit eyes.

“And you?”

“I’ll meet you,” I promised. “I’ll catch up when I can.”

She nodded, slow and deliberate. “A circle of death caps,” she whispered. “A circle of death caps, with nightshade nearby. That’s how you’ll find me.”

“I will.” I swallowed. “Go.”

The last I saw of her, she was running—her dark hair plastered to her face by the rain. She turned back once. Through the storm, through the warped glass, I caught a final glimpse of her pale face before she vanished into the trees.



That's my entire testimony.

Because I do not believe in Lord Dorian Page.

Or God.

Or anything of that nature.

But I always believed in my Madeline.

So understand, officer—

Just why I had to raze that godforsaken place to the ground.



Rebel Blaze, NY, USA

Rebel Blaze is a writer of too many genres and ideas based in New York. When not writing, she is drinking too much coffee and listening to the Doors a concerning amount.

THE CRYPT

By: E.M. Halligan



he front door of Gillwater
gaped like the mouth of
some ancient beast—vast,
silent, and expectant.

Its height alone was enough to unsettle,
too perfect in proportion, as though
designed not for people, but for phantoms
and memories. Charlotte stepped across
the threshold and felt the estate close
around her, silent and final as teeth
clamping shut. There was something
reverent about Gillwater from afar: less a
home and more a monument to a long-
dead age, its silhouette cutting a jagged
shape against the dusk like a cathedral left
behind by time.



Up close, the estate reeked of resistance. Every stone clung stubbornly to the past,
weathered but unyielding, as if it resented each breath of modern air.

She imagined, not for the first time, how it might have loomed in feudal times—
gleaming across the fields where laborers bent double under the weight of grain and
hunger. Could they see it from where they toiled? Did they resent it, long for it, dream
of storming its velvet-draped halls?

And later, during the Regency years, with its empire waistlines and candlelit intrigues, the house must have echoed with the measured steps of servants who lived and died within its splendor—yet who were never part of it, only the machinery that kept it gleaming. Even as time limped forward, Gillwater trailed behind, too proud to change and too haunted to fade.

And now, it had welcomed her.

The door creaked open to reveal Sebastian—barefoot on the marble, draped in an overwashed cardigan that once aspired to elegance. His fingers clenched white around the neck of a half-drained wine bottle, the glass catching the candlelight like a relic.

He looked like someone displaced from time, a figure who had wandered out of a portrait and gotten lost somewhere between centuries.

“You came,” he said, voice hushed, like a secret the house had been waiting to tell.

“Of course,” Charlotte replied, stepping into the gloom.

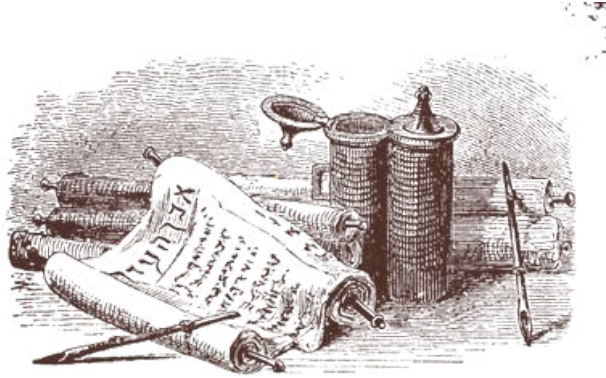
His smile was almost human. He retreated into the candlelight, a phantom gliding backward into the dark.

She followed.

The hallway smelled of wax and time. Candles flickered in brass sconces, their light throwing long, dancing shadows. Portraits lined the walls—stern faces with hollow eyes, the ancestors of Sebastian, it seemed, who watched from their frames with expressions of tired disdain. Charlotte felt their gaze press into her shoulders, heavier with each turn of the corridor.



Since meeting Sebastian, she'd grown quietly obsessed with the place. When her coursework was done, she would disappear into the university archives, thumbing through brittle parchment and records dense with ink and implication.



She never told him. He preferred thinking her harmless. He liked her soft-spoken and docile. But she was none of those things—not really.

She'd read of Gillwater's wealth, of the quiet violence that secured it, of the names buried both in graveyards and in ledgers. The house, she knew, was a mausoleum of secrets.

"Lorraine's making dinner?" she asked, Sebastian's sister now little more than a blur of memory in the rush of excitement.

He gave a theatrical sigh and waved his hand, barely amused.

"Lorraine's...around," he said, with a smile too crooked to trust as he led her down steep, narrow steps.

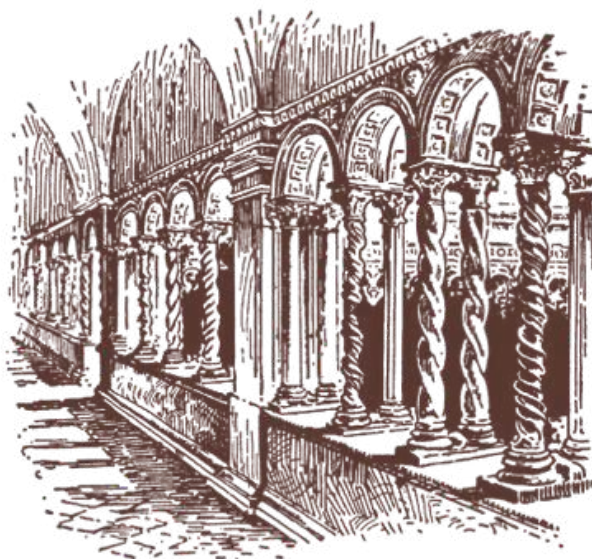
The air changed as they descended. The dust thickened, the air grew colder. The stairs moaned beneath them, cobwebs clinging like silk to Charlotte's sleeves.

“We’re dining in the crypt tonight,” Sebastian declared softly, his voice swallowed by the stone.

Charlotte stopped walking. “The crypt?”

He nodded, wine-dark eyes glinting. “It’s where we keep our fondest memories. The house remembers everything—it just asks that we never let anything truly leave.”

The stairs gave way to a cavernous chamber, the ceiling low and arched, heavy with soot and age. Candles glittered in iron sconces, their light flickering across old masonry and the edges of sealed tombs. The air was wet and mineral, thick with something like breath.



Something moved behind the walls—something human, or nearly so. A cry, hoarse and urgent, sliced through the silence.

Charlotte stiffened. “Was that...Lorraine?”

Sebastian didn’t even turn. “Ah. Yes. She’s taken up residence here.”

“In the walls?”

“She wanted solitude,” he said gently, as if explaining a kindness. “And the house wanted her to stay. It hates to be alone, you see. Always has.”

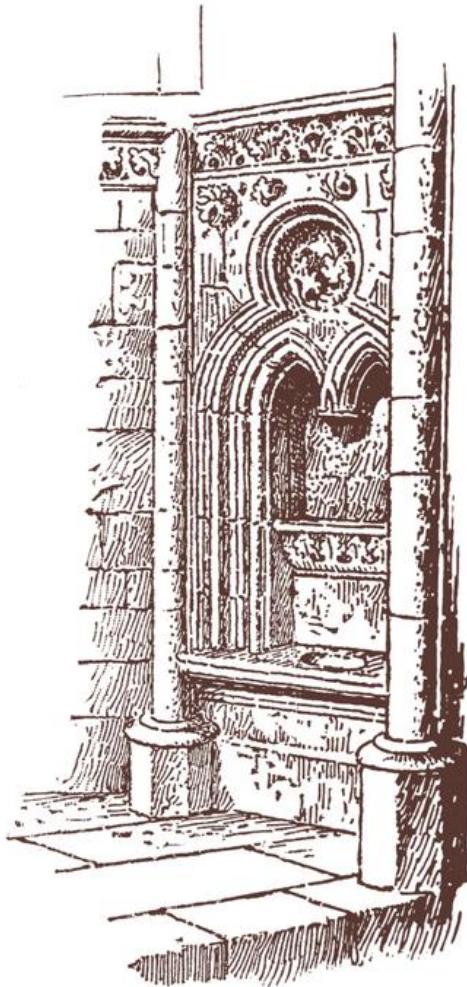
Charlotte looked at him sharply. “And you... put her there?”

He tilted his head, amused. “We’ve all put things in the walls, my ancestors and I. I’m simply doing my duty.”

“Who are you talking to?” came the voice—thin as dust, muffled and frantic—from somewhere deep in the stone.

He turned toward Charlotte, whose face had gone still and pale. He touched her cheek almost tenderly.

“You said you were lonely,” he whispered to the wall. “So I found you a friend. She doesn’t speak much, but I’m sure she’ll keep you company.”



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CANDLELIT

CHRONICLES