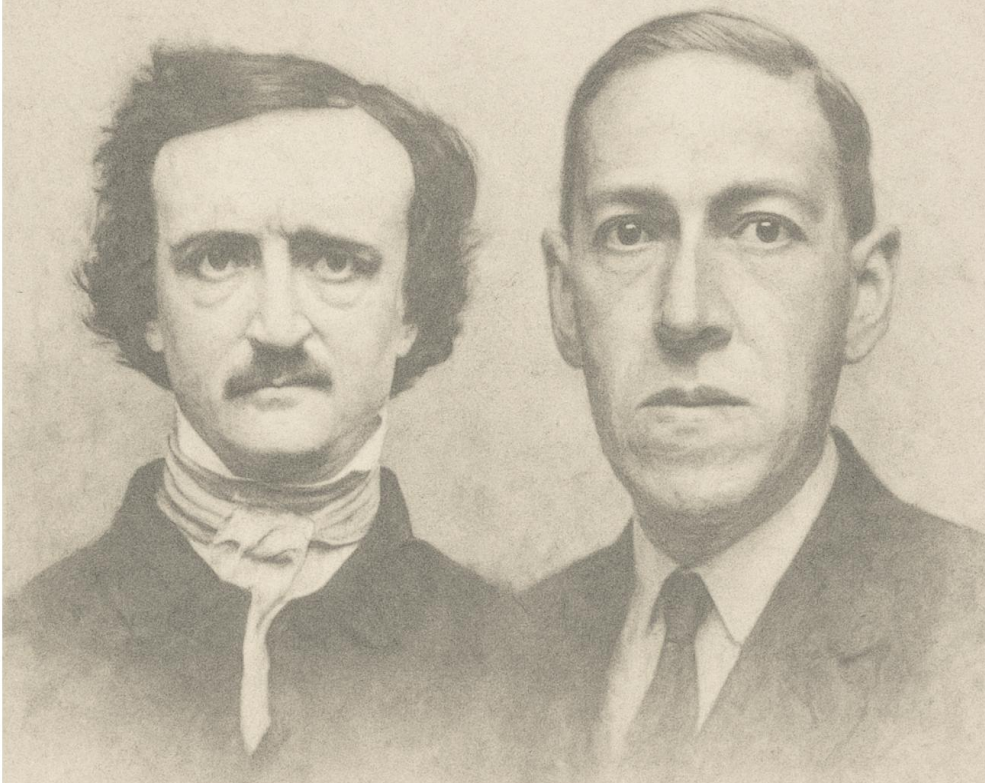


NEW LEAF

THE ENGLISH COOPERATIVE REVIEW

FALL 2025

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 1



AI-ENHANCED SUPER
SHORT HORROR
STORIES

Preface to AI-Enhanced Super Short Horror Stories

By M.C. Barnes

New Leaf: The English Cooperative Review has always been a place where students experiment with form and voice, and this year's collection pushes that spirit further. What began as a Halloween writing exercise has grown into a collaborative tradition. The assignment is deceptively simple: write a super short horror story of no more than 500 words, modeled after Poe's iceberg method, Lovecraft's cosmic dread, or King's knack for the uncanny.

I have always written alongside my students, modeling the process. This year, however, I have contributed a single triplet of stories—three connected but independent pieces that serve as my example. The rest of this double issue (Volume 9, Issues 1 and 2) belongs entirely to the students. Their response was clear: they found the project engaging, fun, and deeply relevant to the way we think about horror, belief, and storytelling.

Much has changed since last fall's edition. Artificial intelligence itself has evolved. Where last year we worked primarily with GPT-4, this year GPT-5 offers sharper narrative synthesis and, crucially, the image generator now incorporates titles directly into illustrations with far greater accuracy. This allows the project to move closer to what I call the "director's model" of composition: the writer as conductor, arranging text and image, balancing control with chance.

The method remains the same. AI does not replace the writer. It serves as editor, collaborator, and mirror. The writer still makes the choices: what to cut, what to keep, what to leave unsaid. Students learned that ambiguity often carries more weight than clarity—that in horror, as in life, proof can never be final.

This collection is, at heart, an experiment. It blends tradition with new tools, craft with chance, student voices with mine. It is evolutionary by design, imperfect by necessity, and stronger for both.

Table of Contents

Instructor Collection

The Gods Love Irony	Michael Barnes
Mrs. Squirrel and the Book of Abramelin	
Treasure Island, the Right Choice	

Student Collections

Freshman Seminar Winners

The Cat with a Bat	Mike Bracha
Green Eggs and Ham	
One Fish, Two Fish, Dead Fish, New Fish	

ENGL 141 Winners

The Green Friend	Katelyn Haggerty
The Meadow Ones	
The Waiting Bird	
The Mirror Maze	Kiera Evans
The Phone Booth	
The Elevator Game	

AI Collection

Editor's Note	ChatGPT-5
The Charcoal Circle	
Late Show at Carmichael's	
The Aperture at Pelagic Rift	

10¢

OCT.
12

HALLOWEEN

THE GODS LOVE IRONY

**TALES
OF
TERROR
CHILLING
STORIES**



The Gods Love Irony

By M.C. Barnes

Sometimes I tell stories about the supernatural. Not proof—there can never be proof—but the moments that leave you wondering. This is one of them.

One Christmas I bought Cooper a pocket watch, a true mechanical one. I bought one for myself as well: brass-toned, with its gears exposed and the flywheel pulsing like a heartbeat.

Cooper wore his once to school. Mine stayed open on my desk, beside a small shrine—half electronics, half Dungeons & Dragons figurine—with a dim LED glowing in its belly. It was more decoration than devotion, but it sat in my line of sight.

Whenever I noticed the watch, I wound it. Not to set the time, but simply to hear the spring catch and feel it alive again. More time, I thought. Not hours, but time itself.

Now and then I set it against the computer clock. But usually I didn't bother. I knew what time it was—or thought I did.

One evening, with a film minimized on one screen and rain sounds hissing from the other, I looked at the watch across the desk. Its hands stood at 7:30. Close enough, I thought.

Then I glanced at the computer.

7:30, exactly.

The watch only runs about a day on a single wind. I hadn't touched it since—when? Perhaps earlier, perhaps not.

It was a small thing. One of many.

Little alignments, moments that fold together without explanation.

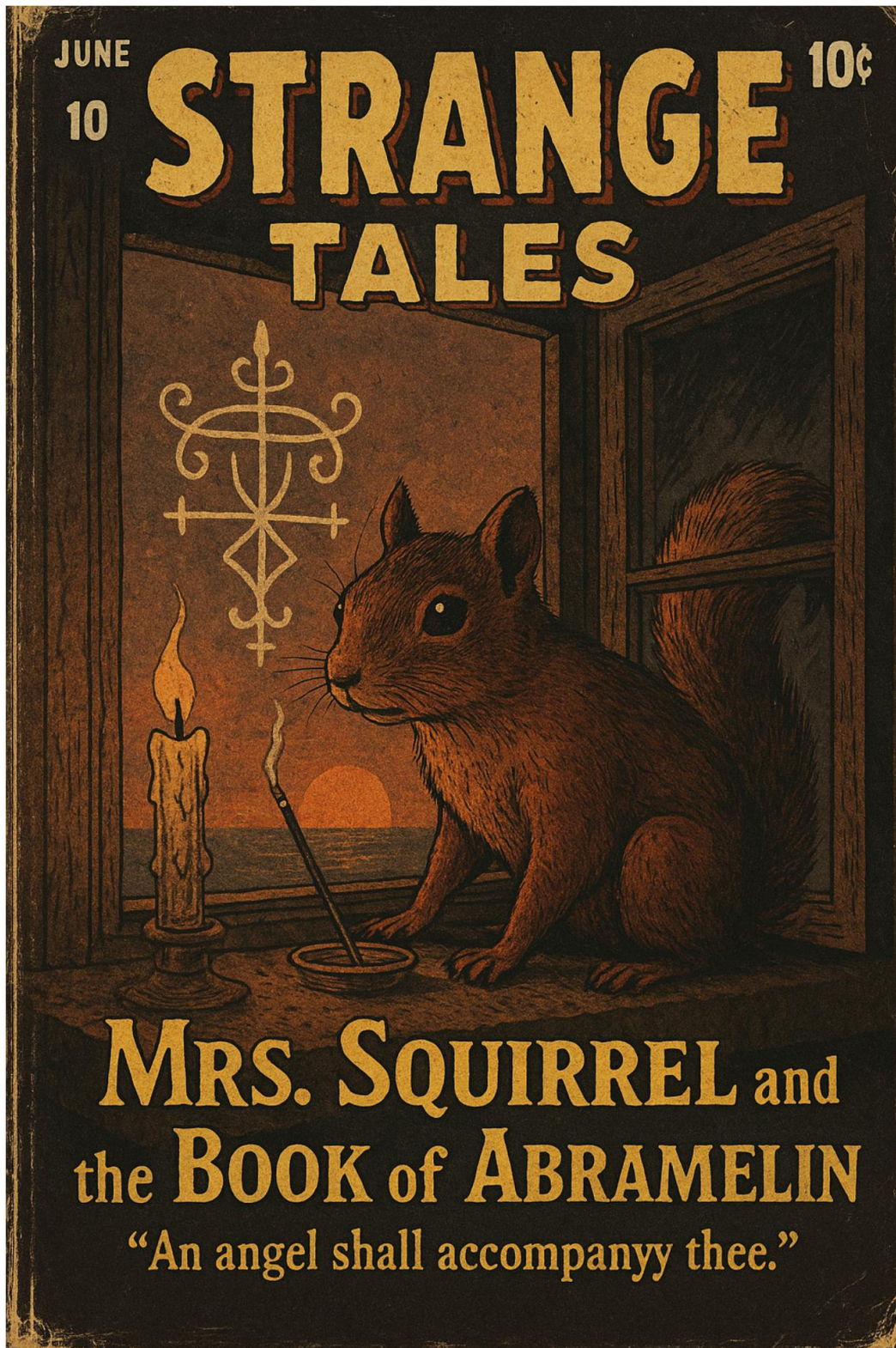
And maybe that is the point.

The impossibility of proof is the proof.

JUNE
10

STRANGE TALES

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MRS. SQUIRREL and
the BOOK of ABRAMELIN

"An angel shall accompanyy thee."

Mrs. Squirrel and the Book of Abramelin

By M.C. Barnes

There's a channel on YouTube that catalogs books you should never read—grimoires, heretical texts, whispered things. It amused me at first. As an English professor, I thought myself immune to superstition. Words are only words, I told myself.

And yet, with the internet's reach and my library access, I gathered them. One by one. The Picatrix. Malleus Maleficarum. Even The Book of Abramelin—which Crowley himself had tried and failed to complete in that brooding Scottish house later bought by Jimmy Page.

The Abramelin is said to summon your guardian angel. It demands months of discipline. I set it aside, but later noticed my own life already mirrored its shape.

Candles lit at dinner. Incense curling from the small Shinto shrine in the yard. The soft strike of a gong. Peanuts scattered for the squirrels. Habits, nothing more—until the book came back to mind. Then the habits felt like something else. And because they were already mine, they went on for months. That, I realized, is the challenge of the Abramelin: not complexity, but duration.

One squirrel stood out. A small, amber-eyed female who learned my schedule. She waited at the patio screen until I appeared with peanuts, sometimes brushing her nose against my toes before darting away. I called her Mrs. Squirrel.

One afternoon, after a long day at work, I sat on the back steps. She approached. I held out a peanut. She took it delicately—and bit my finger.

Not hard. No blood. Just enough to be felt.

Her eyes held mine for a moment, dark and unreadable. Then she flicked her tail and vanished.

That evening a colleague tried to maneuver around me. For once I saw it coming and stepped aside.

I thought of the bite. I thought of the rituals.

And I wondered if Mrs. Squirrel, with her sharp teeth and careful mercy, was my guardian angel.

10¢

STRANGE TALES

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TREASURE ISLAND

THE RIGHT CHOICE



Treasure Island, the Right Choice

By M.C. Barnes

Our family has a ritual called date night. Each Friday, one of us chooses the theme and the activity. It might be board games, poker, putt-putt, whatever the chooser decides. Dinner always matches the theme.

It happened to be my night, and by coincidence it was also National Talk Like a Pirate Day. So in the morning I proposed a plan: pirate food, pirate talk, and a prize. Whoever stayed in pirate speech through dinner and a movie would win twenty-five dollars. I would participate, but as judge, could not win.

The day unfolded in its usual way. I bought a cut-up chicken to cook with rum, raisins, and cinnamon. My wife chose acorn squash for the side. Later, as we prepared the meal and debated the movie—Treasure Island or Swiss Family Robinson—we poured ourselves rum and let Spotify play in the background.

The decision was undecided, until Lee Scratch Perry’s “Drum Song” came on. Out of a list of over a thousand tracks, its chorus looped one phrase again and again:

Long John Silver. Long John Silver. Long John Silver.

I had heard the songs before it, and there was no trick in the playlist. Even if someone had hacked our computer with that exact intent, the timing would have been impossible.

My wife and I looked at each other. I said, “I guess it’s decided.”

So we watched Treasure Island, the Heston version from the 1990s. And it was the right choice.

THE CAT WITH A BAT



A SCARY MOVIE

"The Cat with a Bat"

The sun did not shine.
It was too dark to see.
So Sally and I
Sat in gloom. Just we three—
Us and our fish,
Who swam in his bowl,
While rain tapped the windows
Like fingers from a hole.

We were bored. We were tired.
We had nothing to do.
Then came a soft knock—
Just one, then two.

The door creaked wide open.
No one was there.
Till a shadow crept in
With a slow, chilling stare.

He wore a tall hat,
Red and white, slanted flat.
His fur black as night,
And he carried... a bat.

"I'm the Cat with a Bat,"
He purred with a grin.
"Let's play a new game.
Let me in, let me in!"

Our fish jumped and shouted,
"Don't let him inside!
He's not what he seems!
He's got death in his stride!"

But Sally, she giggled.
She liked the strange cat.
Till he slammed the door shut
And tipped his red hat.

The air grew much colder.
The lights all went dead.
"I'm bored," said the cat.
"Let's play 'Crack Your Head.'"

He twirled his bat slowly,
Its wood slick with stains.
Like something had wept on it—
Dark, rust-colored rains.

He knocked over vases,
He shattered the chairs.
He swung at the table
And split it in pairs.

Sally screamed loud,
But the cat only grinned.
"This game has no rules.
We play till the end."

The fish tried to warn us,
But the cat gave a laugh—
Then swung his bat hard
And split him in half.

Sally was frozen,
I was too scared.
The cat stalked in circles
While he whistled and stared.

"You kids are so quiet.
You're boring, like most.
But when people scream,
That's when I'm the host."

He showed us his bag—
It was filled up with hats.
All striped and all red,
And all soaked like the bat's.

"Each one of these hats
Is a game that I've played.
With kids just like you,
In towns that decayed."

He leapt at poor Sally,
Bat raised high and wild.
I tackled him hard
Like a frightened, mad child.

We rolled on the floor,
Then I found the fish's bowl.
I smashed it on his head—
Glass, water, and soul.

He howled like a beast
And staggered away.
I grabbed Sally's hand,
And we ran through the grey.

Outside the rain stopped.
But the sky stayed black.
Behind us, the house
Fell silent and cracked.

The cat with the bat?
He was gone with the mist.
But a note on the door
Said, "*You're next on my list.*"

Now every soft knock,
Every creak in the night,
We flinch in the dark
And leave on the light.

Because out in the world,
He's still wearing his hat.
And he's looking for kids
To play "*Crack with the Bat.*"

I AM THE ONE WHO BEARS THE PLATE.
THE EGGS ARE GREEN. THE HAM IS LATE



GREEN EGGS AND HAM

I DO NOT LIKE THEM, SAM-I-AM!
I DO NOT LIKE GREEN EGGS AND HAM!

I am the one who bears the plate.
The eggs are green. The ham is late.

Would you like them here or there?
Would you like them—don't you dare?

I would not like them here or there.
I would not like them anywhere.
I do not want your eggs of green.
They writhe, they pulse. They should not be seen.

Would you like them in the night?
When candles burn with dying light?

I would not like them in the night.
The smell is wrong. It is not right.
I would not eat them in the rain.
I'd lose my mind. I'd go insane.

Would you taste them on the floor?
As shadows scratch across the door?

I would not taste them on the floor.
I hear them whisper—begging for more.
I will not eat them with a rat.
I will not eat them. That is that!

Would you? Could you? In the dark?
They'll find your heart. They'll leave their mark.

I will not, will not, in the dark!
I see their yolks glow cold and stark.
I will not, will not, in a box.
I will not, will not, hear them knock.

You will. You must. You have no choice.
They crawl. They bite. They find your voice.

I will not eat them! Can't you see?
These eggs are wrong—they feast on me!

Would you? Could you? On your knees?
They'll make you choke. They aim to please.

I cannot breathe. They climb, they spread.
The ham is raw. The eggs are red.

They force themselves between my teeth.
The shells all crack. The worms beneath.

I do not like them, Sam-I-Am!
I do not like green eggs and ham!

But still they pour into my throat.
They swim, they sing. They scream, they gloat.
My skin turns pale. My veins turn black.
There is no way of turning back.

And now I smile, my plate held high.
I knock on doors. I do not die.
Would you like them? Come and see.
Green eggs and ham. They'll set you free.

ONE FISH TWO FISH

DEAD FISH,
BLACK FISH,

NEW FISH
PALE FISH



THE FISH ARE HERE.
THE END'S BEGUN.

One fish, two fish,
Dead fish, new fish.

Black fish, pale fish,
Long-tail, stale fish.

This one hides beneath your bed.
This one whispers, "Soon you're dead."

Say! What a lot of fish there are.
They slither close. They aren't far.

Some are slimy. Some are red.
Some crawl out from things long dead.
Some are hollow, cold, and thin.
Some have teeth instead of skin.

From there to here, from here to there,
Strange dead things are everywhere.

Here are some that gnash and bite.
They scratch the walls all through the night.
Why are they so sharp and black?
Because they know you can't fight back.

Here are some that watch and wait.
They'll follow you through every gate.
Some are near and some are far.
They know exactly where you are.

Old fish, new fish,
Cold fish, blue fish.

This one creeps into your dreams.
This one pulls apart your seams.

Yes, some are big and some are small.
But what they want is always all.
Some go fast and some go slow.
But all of them will make you go.

Don't trust the fish that hums and sings.
Don't trust the fish with broken wings.
Don't trust the one with staring eyes.
It speaks the truth, but only lies.

One fish, two fish,
Red fish, blue fish.
All the fish know what you wish.

The lights go out. The dark will grow.
The fish will whisper things you know.
They'll teach you words you can't forget.
They'll bind you tight. They'll pay their debt.

From there to here, from here to there,
The fish will always find you—there.

And when they come, they'll knock, they'll scratch.
Their jaws will snap. Their shells will hatch.
And one by one they'll drag you through,
To where the sea is black and true.

No fish, one fish.
No more, done fish.

They've had their fill. They've had their fun.
The fish are here. The end's begun.

THE GREEN FRIEND



“The Green Friend”

Arla’s mom said the tapes were too old to work, but the VCR swallowed the cassette without hesitation. The TV screen flickered, snow for a moment, then cleared.

A dinosaur appeared—bright green, wide smile, arms stretched like he was waiting for a hug. His voice was syrupy, too warm, as he sang: “I love you...”

The song should’ve comforted her. It didn’t. Something about the background laughter pressed on her ears. It wasn’t quite children laughing; it was layered, jagged, like a hundred voices recorded on top of one another, some too deep, some too high, and none of them stopping for breath.

Arla hit stop. The screen went black, but the echo of the song seemed to stay in the room.

That night, she woke to hear the same tune humming faintly from the living room. The TV was dark.

She told her mom the next morning. Her mom's jaw tightened, and for a moment, Arla thought she would get angry. But instead, her mom just said quietly, "Don't play it again." She didn't explain.

Arla promised. But the tape was waiting for her after school, resting on top of the VCR as though someone had placed it there.

When she pressed play, the set looked different. No children danced around. The dinosaur stood alone in the empty studio. His eyes never blinked. The song was gone. Minutes passed. Then he leaned closer to the camera, smile still frozen.

In a voice lower than before, he whispered, "I can see you."

The tape hissed.

Arla slammed the eject button, but the machine clamped down, refusing to let go. When she grabbed at the plastic casing, it burned her fingers.

That night, she woke again. The song wasn't coming from the living room this time. It was closer—just outside her door, sung in a soft, careful hum.

Her mom didn't answer when she screamed.

By morning, the tape was gone.

Only a single green footprint was pressed into the carpet by her bed.



“The Meadow Ones”

Alyse found the DVD at the bottom of a cardboard box in her grandmother’s attic. It had no cover, only a marker-scrawled title: *The Meadow Ones*.

The show opened on four rounded figures waddling through bright green hills. Their colors were wrong—not cheerful, just faded, like sun-bleached plastic. None of them spoke. Instead, they hummed in unison, a flat, low note that buzzed in the speakers.

On their bellies were screens.

At first, Alyse thought it was part of the episode: a schoolyard, children playing, faint giggles under the hum. But the images weren’t animated. They were real, grainy, like home video.

The next day, curiosity pulled her back. The meadow was the same, the humming deeper now. On the screens, the children had disappeared. The camera drifted toward the edge of the playground. Past the swings. Toward the trees.

By the third viewing, Alyse's chest ached with dread. The figures stood closer together, their heads tilted as though they were listening. On the screens, she recognized a streetlight. Then a row of houses. Then—her own.

She slammed the stop button. The TV went black.

That night, she dreamed of the meadow, wide and endless. The humming shook the ground. When she woke, she could still hear it, low and steady, bleeding through the walls of her room.

The next morning, she went to check the disc. The player was empty.

Still, the TV clicked on by itself.

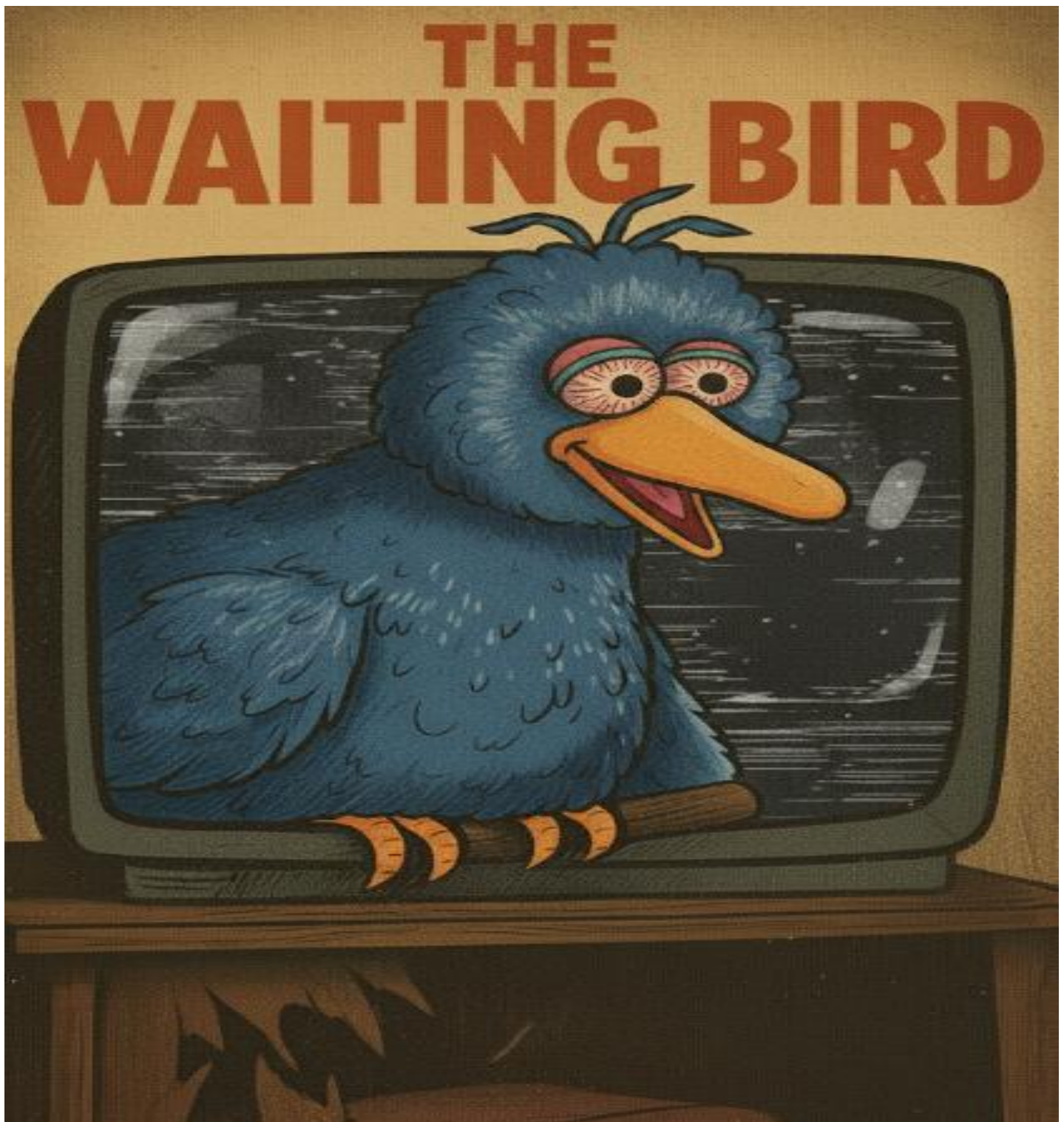
The four figures stood at the edge of the meadow. Their screens glowed white.

For the first time, they raised their heads and looked directly into the camera.

Alyse turned away, pressing her hands to her ears, but the hum kept rising, filling the room, vibrating in her chest.

When she finally dared to look again, the screen didn't show the meadow.

It showed her bedroom.



The Waiting Bird

When Aria's parents left her with the old TV one rainy afternoon, she found a channel she'd never seen before. No numbers, no logo—just static that snapped into color.

A towering, blue-feathered figure shuffled onto the screen. His feathers looked patchy, grimy, like they hadn't been cleaned in years. His beak was too long, curving into a dull point, but when he spoke, the voice was kind, almost fatherly.

"Hello, friend."

Aria blinked. The character didn't look at the camera. He looked slightly off, as though speaking to someone standing just behind her shoulder.

Each episode was the same. The Blue Friend taught "lessons." How to stand perfectly still. How to breathe so quietly that no one could hear. How to count the seconds until the shadows in the room move.

Aria wanted to stop watching, but every time she tried, the TV refused to turn off. Her parents never noticed—somehow, whenever they walked by, the screen showed harmless cartoons. Only when she was alone did the Blue Friend return.

On the fifth day, the lesson changed. He taught her how to wave. Slowly. Precisely. Toward the dark corners of her room.

"Don't worry," he crooned, tilting his long beak. "They'll wave back soon."

That night, Aria woke to the sound of feathers brushing the walls. Her curtains rustled, though the windows were closed. She pulled the blanket to her chin and stared at the corner.

Something moved.

The next day, the Blue Friend stood closer to the camera, feathers matted, eyes wide and glassy.

"You're ready now," he whispered. "Step outside. I've been waiting for you."

The episode ended with the camera turning away from him—panning slowly, shakily, toward a familiar door.

Her door.



The Mirror Maze

The deserted gates of Hawthorne Park were nearly rusted off their hinges. Cast iron bars screeched loudly with every burst of wind, a cry of pain from the punishing autumn weather. Even the park wanted to cease to exist. It was cursed, the children's parents warned them. "Ancient souls took residence there," Sarah's mother began, her eyes sharp as she admonished her daughter. It was the third time she mentioned visiting. "They devour the hearts of the selfish. They show you want and trap you."

But Sarah, Michael, and Jenny didn't listen.

Michael was the first to break the tepid silence of the group. "My parents don't ever give me what I ask for." He complained, his eyes downcast as he approached the gates. "Mine just argue about me," Jenny replied. Their eyes flitted to Sarah, waiting for her to add her protest to the pile. "Mine never let me make decisions. They're so controlling." She answered, her voice clipped. An unfamiliar sensation of dread suddenly dawned upon her small shoulders.

Every complaint seemed to add energy to the park. Old benches creaked again, and rides whirled with life. Their words stirred the starved souls and echoed across the abandoned attractions, wafting in the air like a freshly baked pie. Their complaints were an appetizer. Soon, they found the Mirror Maze. The sign pulsed with a red glow despite power being shut off for decades. Michael took a tentative step inside.

Michael wandered aimlessly before finding his mirror. The glass rose and fell like a chest before the illusion fully unraveled. He was standing in an elegant house with everything he ever wanted. Michael was too dazzled to see the imperfections of the spell, to notice his parents' wavering smiles and the home that bent at unnatural angles. With an outstretched hand, he pressed the glass.

Jenny was sitting at a table where her parents gushed over her, telling her everything she wanted to hear. She wasn't always wrong anymore.

Sarah had the freedom she always craved in her reflection. She was running wild in distant places, away from her parents' demands. Her friends stood around her, their smiles bright. In this world, she was loved.

Michael's reflection pulled him through the mirror. His parents hugged him tightly, joy and admiration shining in their eyes. Then the illusion collapsed from the doppelganger not maintaining it. The elegant fixtures sagged from rotting wood, and the toys decayed before his eyes. A muffled scream could be heard outside the mirror as shadows charged him.

Jenny walked through, captivated by the unnatural warmth of the mirage. As soon as she took a step into the mirror, her parents crumbled to ash and her doppelganger took her place.

Sarah alone hesitated. She saw the hollow eyes of her friends, the way their mouths were gaped in fear. She turned to run, but it was too late.

Sarah is the only one who didn't return, and some believe she is running to this day. Jenny and Michael returned home. They were almost too perfect, but their parents thought nothing of it. Now, they lure others to the park.



The Phone Booth

At the edge of town stood a phone booth. Its metal numbers were worn from years of use, and weeds spiraled around it like a flowering staircase, growing wild underneath the rusted frame. The city was scheduled to demolish it, but there was always a reason for the delay. Now, the community just accepts it as an abandoned relic, and it goes mostly ignored.

Noah was the quiet child in school. He craned his head over to his classmates' conversation, pretending not to listen. It wasn't the first time he heard about the booth, and his curiosity was worrying deeper like a pine needle. The legend was that if you dial a specific number on the keypad, it would connect you to another world. He didn't truly believe them, but loneliness made room for hope.

Noah knew his parents wouldn't notice him gone in their grief, so he decided to sneak out. He crept quietly down the alleys and paths that led to the booth, but mingling with his loneliness and hope was a gnawing sense of unease. He didn't remember the path being this windy. The coins he brought felt heavy in his pocket. Every clink of the change reminded him of a second ticking on a timer. Just as he was going to give up and return home, he saw it in the distance. The interior booth was illuminated by a dim lightbulb, a beacon in the dark, dialing him closer. For some reason, the coins stopped jingling together.

He pushed the door open with a piercing creak, and the scent of mildew and rust filled his nose. With a gag, he starts feeding in the quarters before he loses his nerve. Noah's fingers trembled as he typed in the sequence: 0-0-7-4-2-6.

The line trilled for a moment before a familiar voice answered. His deceased brother. "Noah," the voice breathed, shaking with fear. It was distant and thin, like he was speaking underwater. "Please, you don't understand. You need to leave before it's too late." Noah's eyes teared, and he clutched the receiver so tight it bit into his palm. "Jonathan, no. Please. Stay with me just a little longer." He pleaded, hoping words would be enough to convince his brother to talk. "Mom and dad aren't the same without you. I'm not the same without you..." He whispered frantically, his voice rising in pitch. The line faded into static, and another voice answered.

"Change won't be enough," the spirit rasped, jolting Noah into a panic. "It's time to pay." The voices overlapped and stacked onto each other, children and adults whispering into the receiver.

"Give us a toy."

"Give us blood."

"Give us *you*."

Noah slammed the phone onto the hook, whipping around to push against the glass doors. They wouldn't open. Souls stalked closer to the booth, their shapes appearing less human as they pressed against the glass.

"Stay. Don't leave." The voices drawled, splintering the glass into fine dust on the ground.

Outside, the clock struck midnight. The booth was ready for the next caller.



The Elevator Game

Ethan was a young boy in middle school. He was known amongst his friend group for having a propensity for trouble. Emboldened by his daring, he decides to test a rumor he hears in school. There was talk about a haunted elevator in an old, derelict building whose floorboards creaked where no foot stood, and doors would mysteriously open in what staff explained as the draft from AC.

It was an October evening when he approached the building. A grandfather clock sat in the center of its peak, the yellowed glow blooming ominously across the worn stone. It was just a myth, he told himself, squaring his shoulders as he crept inside. There was a window that didn't fully shut on the first floor, and it was just big enough for him to fit inside. One foot first, then his legs, and before he knew it he was falling in a straight path, the tumble seeming to last longer than possible. It was only a two foot drop, but he felt like it was 5. Swallowing nervously, he dusts himself off, waving a flashlight he stowed in his small pack of belongings. "Too late now," he whispered to himself, walking to the direction of the elevator. Somehow, despite the building's regular maintenance, it seemed abandoned tonight. There was dust that seemed to have collected overnight, and spiders made nests in various corners of the building.

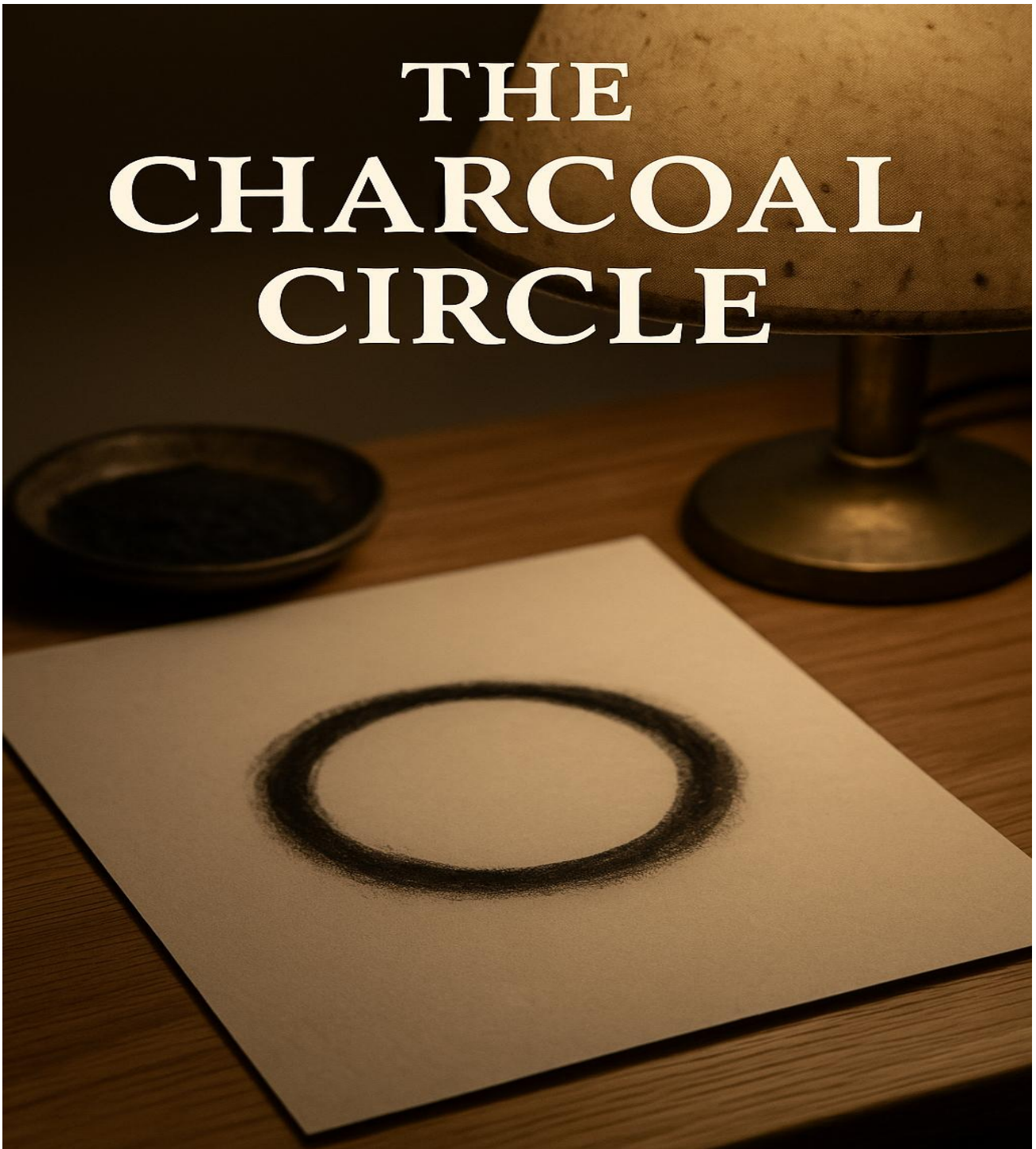
Steeling himself, he glanced at the note he brought with him. He had to press the buttons in a specific order. There were 4, 2, 6, 2, 10, 5. The elevator doors groaned shut when he pressed number 4, and opened to the original lobby, but this time it was empty. There was a blue light bathing the corridors, making the shadows appear impossibly long. Startled, he told himself it was his imagination when he pressed 2.

It opened to the lobby he just left from. He wasn't sure how, or if he accidentally pressed the same button twice, but the glow from the button and the roll of the elevator confirmed it had moved somehow. Next was 6.

The hallway was covered in black mirrors, reflecting nothing despite fluorescent lighting. Suddenly, a row of his reflection appeared, and they all grin crooked smiles. One took a step forward with a hand that had far too many fingers, and he hurriedly jabbed the next button. 10.

The elevator lurched upwards, the breath knocking from his lungs at the pace. The doors opened to a starless, black sky. There was no room, no walls, no floor. A scarlet moon pulsed in the distance. He gasped desperately, unraveling the note he was clutching. His palms soaked through the ink, smearing it across the paper. He had to squint to press 5. The descent was slow this time. The elevator lights dimmed and buzzed as he arrived at the final floor. It was the Wilcox lobby again, but normal. A janitor was mindlessly sweeping, and there was a family talking in the corner. He bolted, running as fast as his thin legs took him. Relief flooded his chest until he noticed that the city was all wrong. Buildings leaned at strange angles and almost appeared 2D. The red moon from floor 10 glowed in the distance. He looked back at where the building used to be, but it was gone.

THE CHARCOAL CIRCLE



Editor's note: I gave ChatGPT-5 the same assignment as the students: to write three thematically related micro-horror stories (500 words maximum each), modeled on the styles of Poe, Lovecraft, or King, and incorporating either iceberg theory or cosmic horror. Each story was to include accompanying cover art featuring the title within the image and visual elements drawn from the narrative. No additional guidance or content was provided. The following unrevised stories are the result of a single attempt.

The Charcoal Circle

I have taken precautions, and I am calm.

The desk is bare save for the paper, the lamp with its moth-burned shade, and the saucer of powdered charcoal I swore I would throw away. If you have ever drawn a circle freehand, you know the itch of it—the compulsion to close the arc, to make the ends meet. Imperfection gapes. Completion soothes. So I told myself.

The first ring happened by accident: steam on the mirror, my finger idling as the kettle hissed. The second, on the frost of the window. The third, in charcoal, on this very paper, because charcoal shows what steam forgives. Each time, a feeling of pressure, as if the room had leaned in. Not sound, not breeze—an attention.

One night I left a ring incomplete, a small break at the top like a mouth held shut by a single stitch. I slept. The lamp guttered and the shade blackened further, but I slept. The dream showed a round window in the sky and something patient beyond it, not knocking, not pleading—merely counting.

What number is this? The saucer is light now. My fingers are dark. There is a smudge on the paper where the ends nearly meet, a crescent of mercy. I should destroy it. I should.

Instead I fetch the compass from my schooldays—the brass hinge stiff, the needle cold. The circle wants closure and the instrument promises perfection. My hand shakes the way any hand will when about to do a small wrong that feels like a cure.

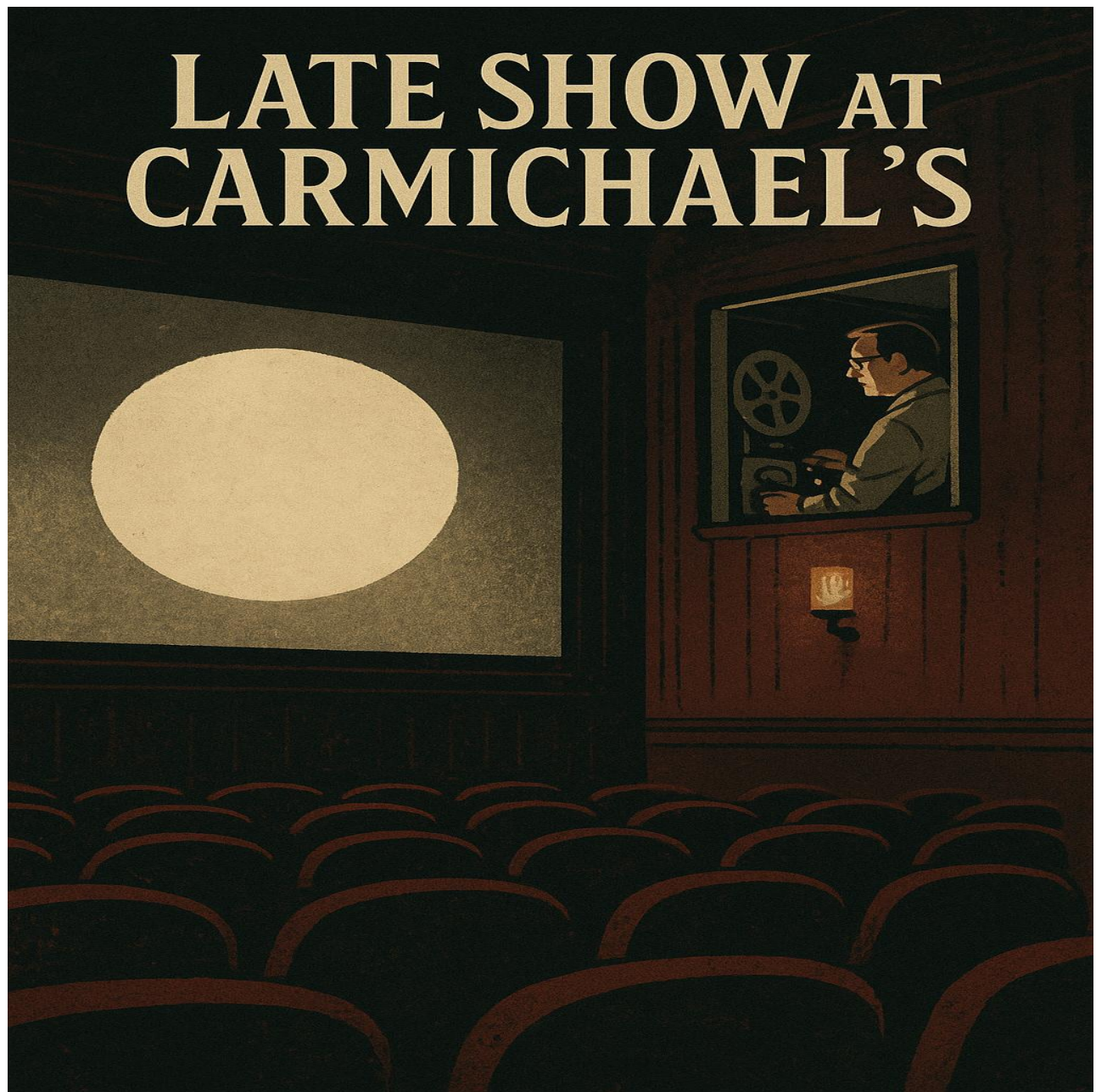
The lamp falters. A moth crisps and falls, leaving a little cinder that is almost round.

I set the point. I lower the graphite. I breathe, and in that breath I hear the counting conclude.

There. The circle is whole.

The room exhales like a lung held for years. The paper sags at the center as if the page had grown heavy. I do not scream. I lean close, because that is my vice, and what I see is not dark but depth—the ink is distance—and within that distance something opens an eye that is also a window that is also my mirror.

I am calm. I will not draw another. I will not need to.



Late Show at Carmichael's

On weeknights, the Carmichael never fills. Teenagers share a bucket, couples argue in whispers, and Harold in the booth runs the reels like a priest doing last rites—steady, unthanked, ritual.

He found the canister in the basement behind a stack of sticky soda flats. No label, just a grease pencil O on the lid. The film inside wasn't picture, not exactly—feet of black leader punched with a single clean hole near frame center, like someone had used a leather punch made for the world's smallest belt.

Harold threaded it as a lark for the closing bumper. The house lights already rising, credits rolling, he let the odd strip feed and leaned toward the port window. On screen, the hole projected as a perfect circle, truer than any geometry teacher's dream. The audience laughed—one of those shared, brittle laughs that says we're done here.

Except the circle didn't fade when the lamp cut. It stayed on the screen like a coin glued to plaster. A kid said, "Cool." Somebody clapped. Then the circle got...closer? Not bigger, exactly. Nearer, the way a storm is nearer before the rain starts.

Harold checked the booth. The lamp was off. The shutter was still. The projector's cooling fan ticked like it always did. He wiped the port window. Perfect circle, steady. The air tasted metal.

Below, the lobby posters bowed inward, frames creaking. Popcorn settled in its bags. The soda machine burped syrup. Harold heard a scrape upstairs—the little window where he watched the town's only streetlight had become all circle, no night.

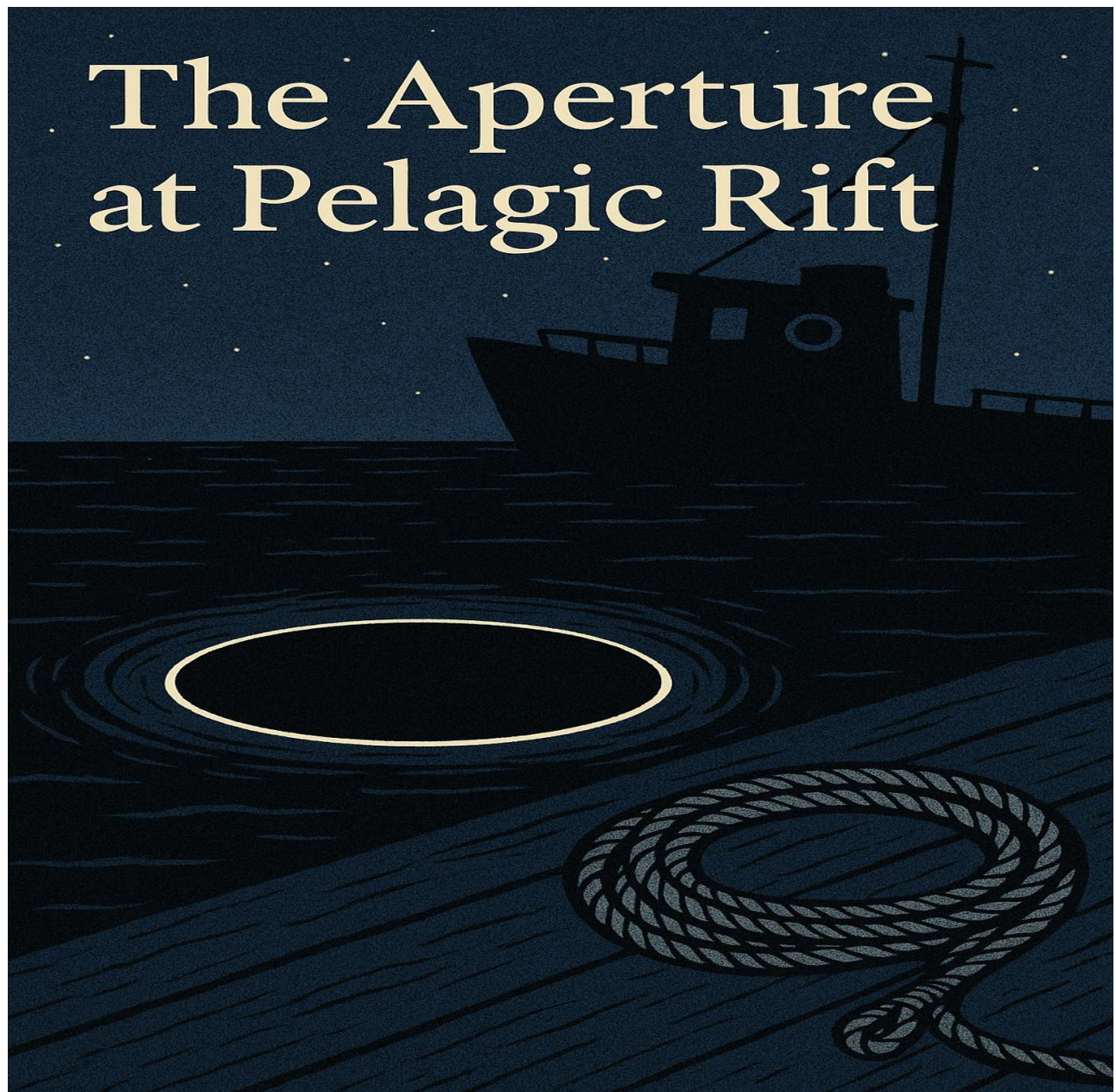
He didn't call anyone. Who would he call to report a shape?

The circle kissed the screen and didn't stop. It made no sound breaking the fabric because it didn't break the fabric; it decided the fabric was already open. People stood without meaning to. One boy tossed a Milk Dud. It fell and did not land.

Harold reached for the motor switch, missed, and touched the reel by habit. It was warm, then cold, then not there. The booth's glass bowed. In the auditorium, every round thing answered—the clock face, the maraschino cherries in their jar, the ring of spilled cola on Seat G12. Circles recognized circle.

Later, folks would say the Carmichael never had decent exits anyway. The fire marshal called it neglect. The paper ran an editorial about maintenance, budgets, small towns letting their treasures rot.

No one wrote about the coin-bright, perfect roundness that chose the screen because it was a screen.



The Aperture at Pelagic Rift

From the papers of Dr. E. L. Kavanagh, recovered after the Pelagic Survey, Box 4:

—Logbook, R/V Sibyl, 12 June: At 03°N, 118°W, the AUV returned images of an annulus at 4,600m—an absence ring, not substrate. Edges unnaturally clean. Sonar showed null return within the band. I will not write “hole in water.”

—Field note, trawls: Lanternfish arranged themselves in a wheel about the ROV light. Not schooling. Holding. When the light was cut they maintained the wheel for sixteen minutes.

—Letter to H.: Your grandfather’s compass sits on my chart table. Its glass shows a flaw—a round occlusion—that was not there in March. I placed the compass over the bathymetric print. The occlusion matched the annulus in scale when the Rose knot lay at 19cm. This is coincidence, but I am tired of coincidences.

—Specimen jar, glycerin: Copepod eyes like onyx pinheads, thirty-eight in a ring. The jar refuses to focus to the center no matter how the lens is adjusted. Photographs develop with a white disc in the midst. Technician says it's overexposure. The lab has new bulbs.

—Typed memo to self: The men speak of the "aperture," a word I did not use. Today they left a coil of line on deck, and it lay as a perfect circle though the ship rolled four degrees. I kicked it. It re-formed.

—Final entry (pencil, tremor evident): At 0200 the sea went flat as poured glass. Not calm, not still—decidedly level. We cut the engine and drifted above the coordinates the compass glass prefers. The stars wheeled with a patience I recognized from no astronomy, a patience without hurry or delay. All round things answered: ring-buoys dragging toward midships, a porthole refusing to show the horizon, the cook's wedding band found stuck edge-on to the galley tile. The aperture makes all apertures its emissaries.

I lowered the compass. The occlusion in the glass aligned with the sea. The disc on the water was not black. It was nearer than black is, the way breath is nearer than wind.

A gull wrote itself into a loop and would not unwrite.

We have lines. We have hands. We have the habit of completing shapes.

If the Sibyl does not return, it is because we were human and finished the circle someone else began.