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Another Apocalypse

By Jared Kohn, University of California, Davis

For a brief infinity, all was silent darkness, all were shadows layered lifelessly on top of one another, and the formless figures rattled only to breathe in the impossible abyss. There were no distinctions between woman and blanket, blanket and couch, couch and floor; light failed to reach the isolation of the living room. In fact, this living room seemed to exist before and after the passing of time, a perfect solitude that existed outside of the bells and whistles of the known gloom. The heat was heavy and the body hidden beneath layers of shadow and blanket lurched through the darkness in sweaty discomfort. But for this moment, this perfect, never-ending moment, the woman cloaked in darkness stood outside of time and space.

Time resumed when suddenly the television screen burst to life in a flourish of color, a flood of flickering lights consumed the living room, several cell phones echoed one another across the halls of the house, and the world of darkness collapsed. Marguerite fell out of her palace of isolation with a gasp and into the luminous drudgery of “reality.” Eyes opened to meet the onslaught of lights as she scrambled to fight off the voice that lingered in the recesses of her mind. His face chuckled in the shadows before flickering out of existence. Her eyes filling out his face. His blood coursing through her veins.

She waddled through a haze of confusion as the sensory symphony morphed into the simple cadence of a news reporter reading a list of all the ways she could be murdered. Great. Her cell phone flashed and the cracked screen cheerfully reminded her that it was three in the morning. For the sixth day in a row, the power had decided to come back on at the worst possible moment. She made a note to find someone’s basement to crash in when she had the chance. The air conditioner finally kicked into high gear with a friendly purr and something like fresh air wafted through her lungs. She would not survive the Southern Californian summer without these gentle breezes graciously offering relief from the ashen air outside. But now was not the time to think about that; now was the time to sleep in a bed.

With the bed in mind, Marguerite flopped out of her mess of blankets and crashed onto the floor. She took a second to stand straight and prepared to clean up the room. The television continued its somber echoes of doom as she closed the windows, tended to the blankets, and flicked off the lights. She imagined a poem about the lights surrendering to the darkness as she searched for her glasses in the blanket pile. By the time the voices from the glowing box mentioned the broadcast was provided for by a handful of sponsors, Marguerite had turned it off. With her cell phone in hand and glasses firmly on face, she wandered to bed.

The room buzzed quietly, marching to a rhythm dictated by the few lights and batteries that remained under the mantle of the evening. From the digital clock with the bright red digits to the laptop regaining its energy, the room was alive with reminders of the sleeping world. Marguerite landed on her bed with a thud and hoped that the rest of the night would pass without disruption. All the world slid away from her, but she no longer stood apart from the universe: her phone shook with reminders from a newspaper she followed, her laptop illuminated the small room, and the formless abyss surrendered to the certainty of light.
The ten o’clock alarm chirped in sync with the voice of her mom. She checked to see if the house was in order after the chaos of an evening without electricity. Marguerite only barely recognized her figure before it was gone. Phones echoed around the house, something moved outside her room, and an apparently disembodied hand placed a foreign object on her bedside. The hand whispered something about waking up soon, which Marguerite thought was weird.

The ten-fifteen alarm buzzed and accompanied the rhythm of a sister who had forgotten her plans. Marguerite heard clothes flying, curses storming, and hot water thundering down on her sister as she hastily prepared for her own day. Marguerite took a moment, attempting to consider the rumbling that accompanied the shower. Somehow it felt sinister. It shook the house and seemed bigger than it had any right to be. She decided to type out the feeling, thinking it could maybe be an interesting poem.

When the ten-thirty alarm whistled, Marguerite was forced to wonder why her arm was outstretched and when she had typed out “ojjto iugiois dkmfffffff” on the digital screen. She noticed a pile of morning texts. She could read through them later. When she turned, she found a cup of coffee. A gift from her mom and a means by which to start the day. She looked down at the bed, up at the coffee, and down at the bed once more. She sighed. The world would only be ignored for so long.

Marguerite stood outside, clad in her grey pajamas, inelegant grey hair uncombed and loose, holding her coffee mug close to her face as she watched the world burn. Well, parts of it. The hills in the distance. She didn’t really know when it had started - when the hills decided they would burst into flames. By the time she returned to her mother’s home they painted the sky bright orange and tinged the air with ash. She was told that the heat wave had begun before the sky morphed into an inverted ball of flame speckled with ash. She really couldn’t separate the two. Heat compounded with flame to rebuild the city of angels from a rolling bunch of houses and skyscrapers in the middle of the desert to a veritable hellscape. Her sister theorized that the blackouts were somehow tied to the heat. Obviously they were, but her sister liked to say things that seemed insightful.

Something about the crimson sky made her feel terrible. Made her body quiver, made her soul ache, and her mind race in circles. Despite her better judgment she couldn’t help but wonder if this was actually the end - If the world was finally going to collapse into herself. A small part of her expected to see four horsemen storming the city streets. A smaller part of her kind of hoped for it.

Some of her richer friends living in the hills had already sent her videos and pictures of the fire lurching onto their properties, half-heartedly joking that the response time of the fire departments left something to be desired. Some part of her wanted to tell them that she was anxious about the fire too, that she worried about losing everything. But her little complex, a gnarled mess of concrete in the middle of the L.A, was protected by legions of souls that waited for the flames to lick them clean. It would take a while for the fires to reach her patch of concrete from out there.

The concerns of friends who lived closer to the fire seemed distant. She wanted to offer something like support, but they were like fabulously wealthy aliens who happened to occupy the same earth. Her words felt hollow, surreal, and echoed a kind of parody of genuine concern.
She stopped responding to their little thirty-second videos, which eventually would show some firefighters challenging the inferno. The more empathetic part of her soul cheered a little; everything else wondered if it would be enough - or if it even mattered. Worrying about anything else seemed absurd in comparison. Her phone buzzed with questions from friends who worried about everything else.

“Are you ready for the party?” Jasmine was likely trying to make sure that Marguerite would be wearing something respectable. Last time she’d associated with Marguerite, Marguerite had walked into a gala for her father’s Hollywood friends wearing a grey hoodie. Jasmine wasn’t going to make that mistake again, especially since she was planning to get into the pants of this party’s host.

“We should pre-game when I get off work.” That was Pearl, always afraid to go to a party sober and determined never to face that fear. She was the kind of person who would maybe be a famous singer in she found the right producer. And writer. Maybe a couple of writers.

“Let me know if you have any plans for the day, Margot!” Emily always wanted to hang out, was always asking about her father. Marguerite figured she wanted to save her somehow. Wanted to pull Marguerite away from a gloomy past and brag about how she saved a girl from the brink. Emily was the kind of girl who knew that Marguerite only let her family call her Margot, and used it anyway.

Their voices thundered in her head. They wanted Marguerite’s attention. Even worse, some of the texts were from him. He probably wanted to see her before the festivities, take advantage of the free day to “really get to know each other.” He would say it in his half-ironic, friendly way. Maybe accompanied by an “lol,” maybe accompanied by a winking emoji.

Her hands fidgeted around her phone for a minute, awkwardly attempting to scroll through the messages and work out a witty, charming response to each of the texts. It would probably be wise to make plans with at least one of them. They seemed to know how to have fun in some abstract, objective way that was lost on Marguerite. They knew how to laugh and seem interesting at parties and a million other little things that Marguerite stole so she could trick professors into thinking they liked her without saying anything of substance. Whatever she did with them would make a hell of a Snap story. Noticing distantly that she had simply written the word hey five times on her keyboard, she decided maybe an afternoon to herself was in order. With a final sip of her coffee, she decided that she would check out the beach.

The waves pounded against one another, violently tearing each other apart before their scattered remains could make it to shore. Each wave capped with a frothy crown before it charged headlong into a competitor, where it erupted into a scattershot of whitewater that dissipated in the air. It was in this disjointed, entropic mess that the gull searched for an easy kill. As the waves thundered on, the bird gazed at the water and hunted down an appealing shadow. The feathered forager darted on the surface water for a mere moment, diving through the crimson sky before its beak sliced through a wave. In less than a moment, its body came back up, screeching horribly as it flung itself back into the tapestry of the air. The palette of the scorched air provided the silhouette a haunting highlight as a few wayward ashes loftily made their way toward the earth.
The soaked beast sulked back toward the beach with an empty mouth. It searched desperately for a wayward child who had forgotten slices of meat, or a garbage can that had not yet been claimed by one of the larger gulls. On its return to shore, it noted that the beach scene today was filled with people: legions of gawkish creatures that stared at the waves or lurched at the shallow end. Their young flung fistfuls of sands at their opponents and squealed in victory to match cries of protests. The food, the beast’s primary interest, was carefully guarded in bins of bright blue or red, its meal hidden beneath the confounding brilliance of human gadgetry.

It landed on the heated ground for a moment, examining potential weaknesses that were not already exploited by the ravenous horde of its contemporaries. They had all moved together as a ball of feathery fury. This meant the people would be on guard, fearful of the feces and meandering beaks of those squawking terrorists. Its head fidgeted in what could only be interpreted as fury; eating was not an option. As it stomped across the beach, it noticed a human woman. An odd one, one that looked at the bird as a beacon of meaning—a disembodied part of herself that hunted for fish while she hung around the hot sand pretending that passing birds were worth projecting themselves on. Unlike the others, she appeared to be alone. The bird gazed back, did she perhaps hold food?

As Marguerite imagined the bird trying to decipher the words printed on her hoodie, a tiny missile crashed against her face. A wayward clump of mud and rocks pulled her out of the imposed psychology of the bird. Her face suddenly burned with a shock and some nearby children screeched in concern. Her sudden yelp scared the bird away and it flapped its wings violently as it darted off into the darkness. The kids told her everything would be alright; they announced that their mother always knew what to do and she could maybe save her eye. Her only response was to follow the flight of the bird. She didn’t want the bird story to end; it seemed an interesting moment in the beast’s life. Mostly it was in the way that she told it, she knew that, but she thought she told it well and wished the bird good luck on its daring quest for food.

When Marguerite returned to earth, she realized that she had never told the kids to not worry about it. Now a concerned mother was sure to come by and make sure she was alright. Was she alright? What was the damage? Before the stuffy-faced and serious looking mother came sauntering by, she would have her story straight. Her old sunglasses took the brunt of the damage. One of the bits of plastic came apart and now it hung loosely off of her face. She gently pulled the spectacles from her face and tried to gingerly wipe the sand from her eye, doing her best to avoid rubbing whatever was there into her bluish pupils. Even the tiniest bit of irritation made her blue eyes mutate into puffy, veiny messes, and she didn’t really want to mess with eye drops before the party.

As the muck slid off of her face, she noted a few blood-tinged shells falling to the ground. A complication. The tiny pseudo-humans were not discerning enough with their balls of mud. She was now marked by their youthful excitement. Perfect. She looked over at the marching mother whose words she would have to meet. Clad in sunglasses and a jet-black bathing suit with a frilly patch near the bottom that gave the illusion of a dress, Marguerite realized that her warring attire was perhaps not up to the standard that the matron created. Marguerite wore an oversized green hoodie with the words “Only YOU Can Prevent Wildfires” and a bear plastered on it. A far cry from the elegance of the approaching mom. The least she could do was adjust her gaudy, oversized sunhat and act as though she were meditative and intellectual.
When the woman approached, Marguerite looked up slowly to meet her eyes. The mother introduced herself with a name that disappeared with the crash of a wave as her shadow overtook the ground Marguerite sat on. She stood well above Marguerite’s little world. The mother’s stance was proud. Her face wore its age well, and Marguerite could see a world of struggles and triumphs etched into the tiny blemishes and scars that littered her skin.

Marguerite knew the type well, perhaps even better now that they were close. As she mumbled her own name, Marguerite saw the years behind the skin. This was the woman who had done everything right, who poured herself into the ashen world that stood to collapse only a few miles away. Marguerite imagined the hours upon hours of studying, mastering economics or law or political science that consumed her waking hours. She saw the little parties she would go to, the papers about which oppressive system of governance was better than other oppressive systems of governance.

As the mother stepped closer, Marguerite noticed the tight bun she wore that refused to sway in the coastal breeze. Marguerite even knew the bun: it was not a lot of fun but proved itself to be useful for job interviews and first impressions. Politicians and lawyers were into buns for whatever reason, and Marguerite wore it like that for internships. Besides, the style worked well with Marguerite’s greyish hair.

Marguerite wondered about the mother, what sort of him was behind the ring that left a mark on her finger. It was most likely the same type that Marguerite found herself spending time with. The sort of man who had a million political opinions that happened to support what was both popular and barely left or right of center. The kind of guy who could quote a fistful of Shakespeare lines and meekly offered them in an attempt to impress the woman they supposedly loved. Reciting lines while treating the words as something cute, something to be tolerated before giving up and asking Marguerite to return to their world of laws and order. The kind of man who couldn’t tell the difference between Marvell and Brooks but could list off complete life stories, injury histories, statistics, and dating lives of anyone who had ever stepped foot on a football field. In short, Marguerite could really only imagine this woman with a bore. A man who slowly absorbed the love of living from her soul while insisting it was for the best.

The mother continued to assess her face silently for a minute, considering what it would take to silence the girl before lawyers were involved. Marguerite considered every single hour the mother poured into that world. That planet of business and laws pulled together by the gravitational pull of money. What was she looking for, putting everything she had into that collapsing, ashen mess? Was it for security? Certainty? Fulfillment? When did she realize that the molten, burning world would do nothing to accommodate her but demanded that she accommodate it in every turn? Every hour with her nose in a book transformed the mother into the being before Marguerite. The same being Marguerite was trying to turn herself into. For some reason.

“God, it looks worse up close,” she admitted after what felt like a little too long. Her worn-down face frowned as she crossed her arms, waiting for a response.

Marguerite stood up, hands in the drooping pockets of her obnoxious sweater, and grinned. “Yeah, it was a real shock. The kid should consider baseball or something, I guess,” and
began to walk to her car. The woman had already sacrificed herself to a beast that would consume her soul; she really had no intentions of adding to the burden.

Marguerite guessed she played along because she was good at that world, at playing the role of the determined student who would become a successful lawyer. After all, it was every A she got in every Political Science class she took that kept her from challenging the nonsense. Now that it seemed like the falling ash was going to submerge the world before it all blacked out into nothingness, she wondered if that excuse still stood for her. Or maybe she could get a few more As and shake hands with a few more old men in fancy offices before it all became a pile of ash-covered rubble. Her name could probably be on the last honor roll of that university before it became a desolate memory, existing only in the seared remains of a gutted world. That could be nice.

She turned her keys and the engine rumbled. Maybe she was doing it for her mother. Maybe she was hoping that if she was somehow part of the very system that had failed them, Marguerite could offer her mom the security they had lacked growing up. Maybe studying all of this could offer Mom a home instead of a handful of shifting apartments. The road sped beneath her and cars decorated either side of her as she approached the jagged skyscrapers that looked like dark teeth in the distance, mysterious dentures highlighted by a sky that changed from crimson to purple with the setting sun. Pieces of ash danced in the fading evening light, searching for the ground where they would rest. Maybe one day the family could finally stop running and stand firm in a house without the fear of waking up to an eviction notice.

Marguerite took a sip from her coffee out by the hills, quietly watching as the skyline collapsed into ethereal purple spots hidden behind a consumptive grey mass of shadow. The cloud flickered and consumed the skyline. It ushered in the promise of night and devoured the few flecks of light that Los Angeles had left. The coffee wasn’t great, but she needed something to do before the party started up. She scanned the store and very little seemed abnormal. Man-buns wafting in and out of the room, conversations chittering randomly in the distance, bright screens illuminating faces of strangers. People being people. The occasional murmuring about a family member being too close to the flames. Barely concealed discomfort that someone would bring up suffering when everyone knew someone who was affected. There was a lingering sense of dread that was awkwardly shoved into the background when someone joked about an ever-rising tide of celebrity gossip and strange statements fed to the public by online platforms. Insane outbursts made by men and women who spoke without the privilege of privacy and used to relieve fear in the face of the ashes.

Marguerite understood why people needed them - needed the discussion and the celebrities and the gossip. But she was so tired. She couldn’t listen to it anymore. Marguerite could go on a walk for half an hour. Try to clear her head before having to deal with friends. But she was dressed for the party now and walking around LA only to be watched by piercing eyes who could not fathom simultaneously wearing a dress and not wanting to be approached. She sighed and looked toward the door, hoping something would come from waiting. Hoping that inaction in the face of overwhelming action was somehow the solution.

The child walked in first. His pajama pants had dinosaurs, his socks were mismatched, and his eyes betrayed an inability to focus in the atmosphere of the café. He was followed by family: a mother who seemed frazzled and spoke quickly about getting some food and maybe a
drink. They needed a chance to relax. The older sibling was a teenager who mumbled his responses while the child did not even pretend to have an answer. The whole family was dressed in a mix between walking clothes and pajamas. Sweats, hair that went off in an assortment of directions, outfits that lacked cohesion or sense. The boy was asked some mundane question about his drink and he looked up at his mother in confusion before turning to Marguerite for a moment. He blinked, and Marguerite saw fire dancing in his eyes.

The fire must have been visible when he woke up. The room was probably too warm. It was lit up in colors that would not have made sense for the middle of the night. Mom said it would be okay, but if it was okay then what was that sound coming through his window? A siren? A megaphone? Screaming? It all seemed to blend together. Blended into the light. So many lights. His room wasn’t orange, why did it suddenly feel orange? The boy walked over to the window. Looked out to see the dance. A flicker of orange slithering like a snake across the hills. The revving of the neighbors’ engine. He needed to move. Needed to scream. Needed to move first. Was mom awake? What about Andy? Did they die? No. The fire was not here yet. The police car was saying something but the words made no sense. Just a mechanical voice that sounded fake calm. The kind of calm used when she’s scared. The kind of calm she held onto when everything happened with dad.

He ran. Screaming and crashing into everything in the hallway. He smashed and shouted: “The police! Run! Fire!” Foggy-eyed, barely clothed, and scared, they fell out of their rooms. Andy screamed foreign words filled with hatred and laced with fear. Mom shouted and commanded. She was a hero in the middle of the fight, she was not going to lose. “We need to get to the car. Hurry!” The scramble was impossible to follow. The family put on clothes and grabbed anything they could. Hands vaguely tried to pick up food, phones, memories. Anything. They had minutes to put their entire life in their car.

Seat belts were buckled with tears and words flew out randomly in the car. No one could say who said what. “Safe.” “God.” “Evacuate.” “Home.” “Food.” “Where?” “How?” “Why?” As the garage door began to open, the questions consumed their thoughts. In what felt like an instant, their entire future turned into one massive question mark that loomed over their lives. A question mark with tentacles made of orange. A question mark that turned all it touched into ash.

The kid only really started to cry when he realized that the picture was still by his bed. The one with the man who had the same eyes as him. The one that was just the two of them. A good picture. He hoped that when this was all over that the fire would just ignore the picture. Just the picture. He didn’t need the toys or the slide in the backyard or anything. Just that picture.

When the car turned away from the house to flee into the shadows, he saw them. The flames stood tall and moved like an orange beast. It did not care about the picture or the future or the questions or the family. It danced in the misery and approached the little neighborhood without a second thought. It cackled in the shadows and flung itself forward in the distance. Huge. Powerful. Violent. Consumptive. It would not end until there was nothing left to feed on. There would be nothing left. The boy shuddered as the fire danced against the darkness of the night and flooded his eyes. Burning consumption ate the boy up. Devoured his soul and spiraled into his eyes.
It stayed trapped in those eyes until Marguerite saw them. The boy may have been fire, but she was ash. And with a sigh and a long sip of her coffee, the fire escaped from his heart and faded into what little was left inside of her. Consumption that consumed itself. A bit of ashes that used to be something beautiful. Marguerite loathed to think about what those burnt out buildings really meant for people. Hated the pain that lingered after the fires pushed away all signs of life. Here was this boy, holding in all that pain and destruction. And what did it mean? She felt the urge to do something. Anything. But she could not. She was the flame that burned itself out; the maiden made of ash. No matter what she tried to do, the fire already happened. She was consumed in it and spat out into the skeleton of a world. An ashy monument to loss.

She avoided any more eye contact with the kid and went to her car. She could hide out in there until the party started.

The party was dark. The music roared, and everyone found themselves violently swaying into one another when it felt appropriate. Someone loudly exclaimed that it was their song. It belonged to them. Within the darkness small lights shifted and morphed with the music, cut through the shadows and revealed to the entire floor that everyone was just as sweaty and just as bad a dancer as you were. There was comfort in that revelation.

Dancing was preferable to speaking at these things. The flood of stimuli kept Marguerite from feeling like she owed anyone anything at a given moment. She could just drift in the rhythm. When she strategically placed herself in the middle of a group of friends, she often didn't even need to defend herself against the horn-crazed beast of man looking for a girl to shamelessly stampede over in the name of dance. She kept to that strategy for the better part of the evening, carefully keeping track of every movement as she floundered her way around the dance floor in a mass of protective women that discourage unwanted attention. Who went to dance in the middle of a dark room for attention, anyway?

The plan collapsed as the evening moved along. Every new song began with fewer and fewer of her shield-maidens defending her from the outside world. By the time some terrible music from the early two-thousands echoed through the air, she was finally exposed to some men who pretended to be mesmerized by her moves. She receded into the shadows, catching Marisol's eye in some hallway or another. Marguerite made a vague gesture toward the restroom and Marisol nodded solemnly as they walked toward the door.

The duo returned to the party with freshly-applied make-up and marched through the hallways in each other’s arms, loudly reminiscing about high school calculus. Marguerite remembered in the midst of the conversation that she was good at this: the verbal arithmetic of society that maximized self-esteem. She could look into Marisol's eye and determine the perfect moment for a joke, to embolden her and morph the conversation into an exchange of lies about how wonderful high school was and how much fun they had together. It was the kind of fable that everyone knew was fabricated but accepted as convenient for maintaining a conversation between two wayward souls until they found an excuse to part ways.

Marguerite had always liked Marisol; she was one of the few people in the little academic clique who seemed to comprehend the anxiety that the end of the month could bring, who saw these little palaces in the hills as some foreign world where the beautiful danced with the flames without a care in the world. Marisol always existed on the fringe of their little groups, minding
her poems and keeping to herself, but always agreeing to go to parties. It was her beauty that made everyone love her, and her ability to stare into the distance quietly whenever someone said something ridiculous that ensured their popularity. Marguerite always felt that Marisol could have done better, found a tribe of poets to guide into the next generation of literary brilliance. Apparently, their school failed to enroll any visionaries for their class. If Marisol couldn’t find someone who understood her, she might as well hang out with the rich girls who got good grades.

The duo was eventually pulled in by the gravitational mass of the greater high school group by the luxurious pool on a massive patio. Everyone discussed who dated whom and how successful everyone had become since they all charged off in different directions. A few of the girls who stayed local made a joke about how they bet everyone missed the weather when they were away. Marguerite calculated exactly how long the group would laugh so she could chime in about how unbelievably true that was.

The windows reflected the very flame that would probably overtake the house in a couple of days. It didn’t matter though. These words provided some comfort. They could all see the flames, they knew their world was probably going to end. It had provided for them she wondered if they were slaves or daughters to that ashen mass. She wondered how much the distinction mattered before checking her phone. Marguerite had already received the text from her sister that the power died sometime around six p.m., and that it would be better to stay for a while.

Emily and Jasmine prattled on about the particular cuteness of some boy’s butt as Pearl giggled. The host was some handsome man whose name implied his daddy could reshape the cinematic landscape with a snap of his fingers. After a minute, Pearl talked about meeting some guy or another as Emily moved to hold her hand and explain how that was the strangest thing. Marguerite couldn’t quite grasp how it was weird that some famous-adjacent guy was particularly concerned about who ate his food from the office refrigerator. It was possible Marguerite wasn’t listening very closely to the nuances of the story.

Pearl must have noticed that Marguerite’s attention was elsewhere. Hoping to engage Marguerite, she dragged the boy into the conversation—That boy who kindly wanted her attention, who offered her a ride to the party and who she was desperately hoping to avoid. The one everyone said would look cute with her. Her “creepy intellectual” aesthetic apparently matched the guy’s “boyish charm.” Everyone knew the boy had a thing for her since high school. Crush sounded too childish, love sounded too deep, and infatuation seemed too mature. Once Pearl mentioned him, Emily perked up. “Oh, that’s right. You’ve been seeing him since the break started, right? Margot that’s so exciting, you have to tell us everything.”

This was not the first him, but this one was named Justin. He was the kind of boy that was perfect in every way that the outside world understood: handsome, intelligent, had a bright future. The kind that thought the way Marguerite applied eye-liner made her seem mysterious. Like the others, this one pretended that Marguerite’s polite nods were best understood as a hidden ravenous love. Unlike most of the others, he had never shaken hands with Brad Pitt. His connections were to the lawyers who lurked in the shadows of Sacramento and San Francisco. Everyone knew that Marguerite wanted to read boring legal texts until she died, so this guy was somehow even more perfect than the others who had awkwardly held her hand at proms before.
Justin wasn't different from the others. He asked about her grey hair in a way that was supposed to be charming and wore her glasses while making a joke about how bad her vision was. Marguerite knew how to laugh and play with her hair just enough to make it seem unconscious. She made him feel funny and interesting while mentioning that sometimes hair just kind of turns grey a little early. Marguerite never really talked about what forced the change, never mentioned the sinister figure that loomed over her life. The smarter boys, like Justin, would realize quickly that the kind of thing that would make hair turn grey at sixteen was not the kind of thing a woman would want to talk about. Not the kind of thing Marguerite wanted to even think about.

She couldn't stop the thoughts. Not when she couldn't sleep in the middle of the night. But in the waking hours, she hid from the father's looming form. She thanked whatever attempted to organize life in the madness of this universe that the boys she found were never going to be like him. Like that monster. She prayed at night that he would be consumed by the flames, that his screams would play as a final melody when everything receded back into nothingness.

Nevertheless, he called her hair beautiful. He said it made her stand out in an ocean of people. Marguerite was one of a kind, and it brought out her ancient soul. Many others thought it made her look cool and mysterious. Felt that it meant she was refined and interesting, a shade different from all her contemporaries. Marguerite was beginning to feel that it just showed off her allegiance to the ashen world.

Then, as though invoked by his own name, Justin broke off from the sprawling mass of people in the distance and aimlessly meandered from group to group. She made the mistake of locking eyes with him, for a fraction of a second, and he understood it as an invitation to saunter on over. His stupid, handsome face lit up slowly in each passing moment as he made it closer. This man was the final piece of the future puzzle: her key to finally becoming the wretched priestess of that ashen world she so loathed. Another step. He made a goofy little wink that he thought was so cute. Could she live anywhere else? Her entire life was built up to be an altar to that forlorn existence—every decision she had ever made up until that moment had made dying in service to that system seem like martyrdom.

It only took a single string of words for Marguerite’s friends to dissipate into the crowd and leave her stranded with him. They giggled and wished her luck as Justin approached, smiling with a faux cheerfulness. “Let’s give these two a little bit of privacy.”

And like that, they were gone. And she stood next to him, wondering how she could make amends for refusing to respond to a text in days. She tried to keep her fidgeting hands in her pockets, avoiding his green eyes. He offered a few banal statements about the party as a gift. A way to pretend nothing happened. When Marguerite couldn’t find a response he changed tactics: “I was worried about you. Like, actually worried about you. Like, prepared to contact someone worried about you. You can’t just disappear like that. I’m a part of your life now.”

“Sometimes I need to be alone. Sometimes the distance is what keeps me sane.”

“You’re not alone anymore, Mags. Get used to letting me in. I can help.”
“You do help, but these are my demons. This is my life. You’re a part of it, yeah, b-but its mine. Y’know?” Marguerite choked on her words as they fumbled through people, reaching a dark place where Marguerite could cross her arms in peace and not be afraid of the rumors.

Justin leaned in toward her. It was quieter and he felt like he could whisper. “Let me in, Mags. Let me show you how much I love you. Help me to help you. So you can never be alone again. So your thoughts can be ours and you won’t have to live in that mental prison you build up.” He didn’t stop moving in closer. His thin lips slithered and curled into a kiss. The conversation didn’t feel over, why was this happening? Did he have the power to just end things as he pleased? Marguerite felt her world closing in as he approached; his breaths became tangled with hers. Tongues danced in each other’s mouths as hands moved to covet a body whose mind it did not care to understand.

Fires burned and ash wept from the remains of the hills as Marguerite, the ashen martyr, prepared to sacrifice her body to that dying world. She prayed. Not that her sacrifice would work, but that she could somehow keep her soul free. And hoped that would be enough to break away someday.