

Eternal Companion

by Robin Le



Image drawn by Robin Le

Artist Statement

I did not expect to write a science-fiction piece. Although this may seem obvious in creative writing, I find it fascinating that life finds a way to integrate into a work of art. While in the process of writing my project – which had first focused on the absurd, a literary and philosophical movement focusing on the irrationality and meaninglessness of life – I was taking a Latin American Science Fiction class. I therefore became interested in the question that science fiction always proposes: “what if?” This ties in with the inspiration of my project, which is from my personal addiction with my phone. The creation of Oracle occurred when I was trying to sleep. I had used my phone for longer than I wanted to and although more exposure to blue light makes me fall asleep quickly, I hated that I had to rely on my phone to always lull me quickly to sleep. I then became terrified of the thought that a technology monster, a conglomeration of phones, tablets, computers, and television screens, would chase me, forcing their many screens upon me. The monster would be a perfect way to encapsulate how I felt about my use of technology and also demonstrate the binary between humans and technology.

Similar to Cassius, I have woken up with my phone clutched in my hand because I had used my phone until my eyelids could no longer stay open. The temptation to use my phone at every moment has become increasingly harder the more I see others around me use their phone. I still have restraint, such as when I walk or am in company with others, but similar to Cassius, I have moments where I tell myself to resist the temptation and fail. In my research I came across a [PBS article](#), which centers on an interview with Tristan Harris, a former Google employee. Essentially, corporations want to keep people as long as possible on social media platforms,

streaming services and other apps to make money. He says even Gmail is addictive. Google was not trying to get people addicted to email but the design choice to make your phone buzz every time you received an email has hotwired our brains. Essentially, notifications give us the feeling that we are always in the know. We don't want to feel that we have missed anything. So, Cassius recognizes that he uses his phone too much but it is hard for him to detach himself from something that offers so much for him.

With addiction, it is difficult to purge something that has become an instant gratification and habit. This thought of purging technology from me reminded me of something I learned in class, which was the abject. According to French theorist Julia Kristeva, the abject is essentially the human reaction of disgust or horror caused by the loss of distinction in the subject or object before us. Sometimes these things can produce extreme reactions out of us, such as bodily fluids—vomit, blood, excrement, discharge. Cassius wants to cast out his addiction with his phone usage to preserve his physical and mental health. But then Oracle becomes an embodiment of the abject that follows Cassius around. It is a constant reminder that Cassius' understanding of his reality is threatened. Even though Oracle becomes a companion to Cassius, Cassius still sets a boundary. He is a human, Oracle is a machine. He cannot trust it because it is an unknown entity and it diminishes his sense of power. He no longer has a sense of control in his life and the uncertainty of what the monster will do to Cassius increases his fear and anxiety. He knows nothing; therefore he is powerless. The first part of the story is about the mundane aspect of life. The role of technology in the work environment is integral in most office jobs, so I wanted Cassius to feel burnt out. He feels lonely but he doesn't let it affect him until Mario tells him he couldn't hang out anymore. Maybe Mario was lying, maybe he didn't want to hang out with Cassius anymore, or maybe he was telling the truth. It doesn't matter because Cassius still feels that he is never the number one option. He resorts to using technology to drown out his sadness and his loneliness.

The theme of loneliness originated from my observations of people when they eat alone. Usually, most are using their phones to keep themselves entertained while eating. But sometimes they look lonely and the image of a person's only companion being an inanimate object is terrifying. Perhaps they don't feel lonely, but humans are inherently social beings. Some of my friends used to be scared or abhor the idea of eating alone, saying that they felt awkward. So, to mitigate these feelings of awkwardness and loneliness, phones have become a human's companion. It is ironic that to be sociable we use inanimate objects as a medium. According to Healthline, our brain transmits dopamine, a chemical that makes us feel good. For many, social interactions release dopamine in our system. Phones have become a tool of social interaction, so one mindless scroll on a social media platform can hardwire our brain into pursuing this constant feeling of satisfaction. Social media platforms and other services cater to our needs and therefore it is incredibly hard to stop using our phones. Using our phones gives us the satisfaction of taking a break, of being able to enjoy doing something that isn't necessarily in our schedule. Cassius berates himself for using his phone so much because in his brain, he deems it as unproductive. Not only that, but he can feel the physical effects of chronic phone use. His eyes are constantly throbbing and he has headaches and migraines that come and go. His sleep cycle, even when he achieves 8 hours of sleep, is still affected by the blue light emitting from his phone. There are many memes of people acknowledging that they use their phones at night even more, refusing to let their tired bodies take a break from blue light.

I created a juxtaposition between what Cassius and Oracle want. Cassius does not want to feel lonely and wants a connection with something that will distract him from his life, but he

does not want it to be all-consuming. He is touch starved. Touch for him is important as he can feel whole; he can feel that he is wanted and that he is loved. Since his family is far from him and his friends are busy, he is bereft of social connection. However, Oracle, who innately loves Cassius, abhors physical contact, seeing as this entity believes there is a higher form of connection. To merge is to be connected. Physical touch is nowhere near consuming in the eyes of Oracle. Which ties in with the overconsumption and overstimulation of media and just life in general. There are so many things that corporations provide us, such as social media, streaming, commercial advertisements, and mass libraries of knowledge provided on the internet that it overwhelms us. But at the same time, we seek these things to forever be entertained and to structure our lives into something that isn't "boring." This overstimulation is something Oracle wants – essentially the PBS article influenced how I wanted Oracle to value consumption – but Cassius rejects. He ultimately knows that connections need to be genuine and consensual, not forced and manipulative.

Overall, I was interested in the binary between humans and technology. How do you separate from something that is integral in life? Do you let it consume you or do you try to set boundaries? I believe eventually with all these technological advancements, such as AI, there might not be a boundary between technology and humans.

Eternal Companion

I.

Cassius believes that waking up to unbearable pain is a sign of aging. Although he is only twenty-five, his neck hurts, his back throbs, and his eyes are pulsating with pain. He blearily opens his eyes, wincing as the terrible throbbing at the back of his head increases. He tries to adjust his eyes to the environment. The rays of the sun have filtered in through the curtains, the room enveloped in a dim glow. He blinks again, and groans as his eyes pulse in tandem with the pain in the back of his head.

Cassius slowly moves his head to the right to check his digital alarm clock and reaches out to grab it. It reads 07:12AM. Earlier than usual. He sets the alarm clock down and struggles to sit up on his bed. He rolls his neck, sits up straight and rubs his head gently. He opens the first drawer cabinet, where his phone, his journal and his Tylenol bottle reside. He had recently started using an alarm clock rather than his phone, trying to decrease how much time he spent using his phone at night and in the morning. He takes a Tylenol, chugging it down with the water in his flask. *Hopefully this migraine fades away quickly.*

Cassius begins to perform his daily routine: change into his clothes, brush and wash his face, cook his breakfast, and watch a comedy series on his phone. Although the migraine is gone, there are still some lingering effects of the pulsating sensation behind his eyes. However, Cassius desperately wants to watch the new episode that was released last night, even though he knows he should give his eyes a break.

Right before he leaves his apartment, he takes a cursory glance at his reflection. For once, his clothes do not look disheveled as he had taken the time to iron them last night. His curly brown hair is as neat as he can possibly get it to be, his black-rimmed glasses perfectly hide the faint appearance of the bags under his eye, and his cheeks look hollow. *Good Lord, I need to go outside*, he thinks. *The sun will definitely rejuvenate me*. He heads out, locking his door. He exhales contently as the sun blares down on him, the warmth enveloping him in a hug. *This is what I need every day*. The studies were right. Going out really does improve the quality of your day, at least that is what he has read. He can feel his cheeks start to gain a natural flush.

He quickly runs to the bus. The bus is almost full by the time he gets on it. He is able to find a seat hidden in the back, although he hates having to pass the people that stood on the bus. He could feel their awkwardness augmented by his own guilt for causing a disturbance. He watches the people get off the bus and watches as more come in. He wishes he could people-watch all day. There is something nice about just sitting down, without a care in the world, observing the bustle of the city. A little girl and her mother sit down in front of him, the girl with a phone in her hand. She is so enraptured by what she is watching that he notices that she hardly blinks, almost as if she was afraid of losing a millisecond of her fixation. Although he shouldn't be surprised, she isn't the only passenger to be staring at their phone. It makes him desperately want to reach into his pocket to use his phone, but with great resistance, he just watches as others use their phones, mindlessly scrolling.

He glances out the window, watching a woman in her car drum her fingers on the steering wheel. He smiles. Such mundane things that bring a smile to his face. The thought escapes his mind as he sees the familiar statue across the building he works at. He gets off the bus and inhales and exhales deeply.

Today is going to be a good day.

Cassius works in an office building. The outside painted a beautiful picture compared to the inside offices. The office he worked at only had one window, so hardly any natural light was able to filter through. The unnatural fluorescent lights above him always gave him a ghastly look to his skin tone, at least he thought so. Every time he goes to the mirror in the restroom, he sees how tired his eyes look, the deep exhaustion permeating throughout his entire facial expression.

No, it wasn't the lights. He knew he kept using his phone too much at night. He'll stop. Cassius shakes his head at himself: *Why am I lying to myself?* He hums as he gets on the elevator, quickly pressing the close button. Mario said he was going to ask Elena out today. Elena was a nice coworker, but she was the definition of laziness. He couldn't believe Mario liked her. He ignores it. "None of my business anyways," he mutters under his breath. He was

looking forward to hanging out later with Mario, though. The previous week, Mario had invited him to go to a club with some of his friends and he jumped at the chance to finally have some fun. All of Cassius' friends have been so busy. Plus, he likes Mario. He's the only one he has actual conversations with.

He walked to his desk, the furthest one in the room, and unfortunately with a perfect view of Elena and her work ethic. Which was none. He sits down in the uncomfortable chair and looks towards his right, imagining a window where he can feel the rays of the sun shine on his body, where he can stare at the people who walk and the cars that speed. Instead, he is met with a beige wall, the dim unnatural light cascading above him. There was something so horrible about sitting here for hours, with his eyes solely focused on his computer and the dim lighting affecting his mood.

He turns on his computer and gets to work. He finds comfort in the repetition of his job. But he's been getting more headaches. *Maybe I should buy blue light glasses. Although I wouldn't be able to see anything. I have to place them on top of my glasses. Oh, never mind.*

It's almost lunch time when he spares a glance at Elena. She's hunched over her phone, swiveling her chair. He pays her no mind, and tries to finish his last task before he takes his break. He yawns, the feeling of closing his eyes heavenly.

Why am I so tired? I had 8 hours of sleep! Then he remembers he stayed up longer than he should have reading *Frankenstein*. It doesn't help that at almost every waking moment he is staring at a screen. Cassius groans, feelings of resentment towards himself boiling up inside. He doesn't want to feel like this and yet, he continues to use his phone late at night.

He's almost done with his work when he hears a faint giggle. Elena is now scrolling TikTok, and he starts to realize that she hasn't done any work since he sat down. A fire starts to burn deep within him. He is frustrated. Apparently when his boss thought he was slacking on the job, he gave him a warning to do better next time. Elena doesn't do anything and she gets no reprimand!

He hears her pick up the phone.

"Hey, what's up?" She nods and smiles. "Yeah, I'm doing nothing. I'm bored."

Bored. How are you bored if you haven't been working. You little piece of shit. He continues typing, his eyes bleeding as he stares at the blue screen in anger. *Why am I so angry, he wonders. I shouldn't be this angry. Ignore her.*

He doesn't.

"Hey Cassius!" He looks up and it's Mario, one of his coworkers, the only one he actually has a conversation with.

"Hey, Mario," Cassius says with enthusiasm. As Mario gets closer to his desk, he asks, "We still going out?"

"Dude, I'm gonna have to rain check on it. One of my friends got sick so he won't be able to go anymore. And I'm actually feeling kind of tired. You know how it is."

"Oh, yeah I totally understand. Maybe some other time." He keeps up a jovial conversation with Mario and swallows thickly, his shoulders finally sagging when Mario leaves his desk. He suddenly didn't want to be at work anymore. He wanted to go home, curl up in bed, and watch YouTube for hours. He needed laughter in his life.

At the end of the day, he sighs in relief as he turns off the computer and rubs his eyes. *Gosh, my eyes hurt.* His head hurts too, a pain that doesn't go away unless he closes his eyes. He sighs. His great day turned out to be a mundane, disappointing day. He leaves the building, not bothering to say goodbye to Mario.

By the time Cassius gets to his apartment, he is extremely exhausted. He puts on his striped pajamas – the ones his mom mailed to him – and proceeds to brush his teeth. He likes brushing his teeth; the feel of the bristles against his gums calms him, somehow. He analyzes his reflection, his slow and meticulous movement of his arm moving the brush against his teeth, his callouses from his fingers, the dimness in his eyes. He spits the toothpaste down the drain and looks up again, continuing the process. *I should get a haircut.* Afterwards, he smiles at himself, flashing his pretty white teeth.

He turns off the light, slips under his covers and checks his phone for any emails. Three emails from his boss, and various emails from literary, movie and shopping subscriptions. The throbbing sensation from the morning is back and he exhales deeply. The blue hue from his phone is starting to affect him. He closes his eyes, clutching his phone in his hand. He cannot let it go. *Stop it Cassius, your eyes hurt, your head hurts. Stop looking at your phone.* With great will, he places his phone inside the first cabinet of his drawer. He downs a Tylenol and lays down on his pillow, waiting for the erratic pulsing to fade away.

Resist the temptation. He opens his eyes. *Resist.* His arm is trembling. *Resist.* He stares blankly at the ceiling. Closes them again. Opens them again after some time. He should really go to sleep but he desperately needs to finish Frankenstein. He doesn't resist. He grabs his phone.

He wished he had gone to the library to get the physical copy but he's been so busy and so exhausted that his phone provides a better alternative. The Tylenol is finally kicking in and his headache starts to fade. He covers himself with his blanket, rolls over, and reads till he finishes the book. His last thought before nodding off to sleep is Frankenstein's monster's dejected face.

Cassius wakes up with his phone still clutched in his hand. His eyes ache but thankfully there is no headache accompanying it. Rather, the strain of blinking makes him want to keep his eyelids shut tight. As he tries to adjust to waking up, he ponders over his dream. What a weird dream. Just a screen constantly glowing a pale blue glow. A seemingly innocent smile appears on the screen, but he shivers in fear. It is uncanny. He doesn't want to think of that. Too much screen time that he literally dreamt of a screen. He laughs bitterly.

For some reason, Ricardo, Cassius' father, pops up in his head. He misses his father so much. He misses his mother as well. With a sudden realization, a profound sadness wells inside him. He needs a hug. Cassius instead can only hug his phone. He'll call his parents later. *I'm so touch starved*, Cassius chuckles darkly. He gets up, applies eyedrops to his eyes and begins his day.

Rinse and repeat.

He keeps reading on his phone at night for longer than he wanted to and he wakes up with his eyes barely wanting to open. He has done this before, and would never get daily headaches or migraines. *Surely, this would have passed*, he thinks as he pops another Tylenol.

They hurt so much. He barely wants to do his work. He can't stand looking at a screen. He feels sick to his stomach. He goes on the rest of the day feeling nauseous, his stomach churning constantly. He runs to the restroom and just stares at his reflection. He splashes his face with water and rubs his eyes until he feels them slowly reduce in size.

He needs a break. He can't look at a screen anymore. *Why am I lying to myself, I know I'm going to use my phone for hours on end if I use my vacation days*. He goes back to his desk and blankly stares at the wall.

When he arrives back at his apartment, he runs to the bathroom, heaving over the toilet. He feels it. It wants to come out. That sour taste in his mouth, the accumulation of saliva, his eyes starting to water. But nothing was coming out. He screams in frustration and sticks two fingers down his throat, and groans in disgust as he can feel how his cold fingers slide against his warm tongue, knowing they are dirty from the bus ride. Yet nothing comes out. He spits out saliva.

He moves away from the toilet and then: Vomit. Everywhere. The once white-tiled floor is now covered in a putrid orange. Cassius staggers back, the taste of bile glued to his mouth. He feels terribly impure. He cries. His body visibly shudders, all his pent-up exhaustion and pain purging out of him. *I can't, I can't*, he thinks repeatedly.

Heaving, gagging, spitting. He doesn't feel good. His throat burns and swallowing becomes difficult. He tastes metal. Blood. But it doesn't really taste like blood. *What...?* He coughs until something scratches his throat, and out comes a broken piece of what seems to be...a data chip? Cassius heaves again. *What is happening? Why me?* The black chip lays innocently on the floor, a stark contrast with his vomit. He gags again.

He slumps down to the floor, staring anywhere, but at where he vomited. *What was in his mouth?* He doesn't remember eating anything like that. He leans slightly over his vomit, tears still falling as he observes what came out of him. He blinks. He blinks again and sees it's not there anymore. He recoils quickly, widening his eyes to see if he was hallucinating. It's there. He mentally slaps himself.

"Leave me alone," he says into the air, dizzy, about to cry again.

He doesn't understand why the universe is doing this to him. He gets up to wash his mouth, the disgusting acidic aftertaste of his vomit nauseating him. He brushes his teeth, the mint flavor overflowing his taste buds. He smiles crookedly at the mirror, his red eyes filled with unbearable sadness. He grabs multiple towels and cleans up the mess with his foot. He takes a hold of the thing he vomited, staring at it incredulously. Underneath his confusion, he can feel...something. A sixth sense, if you will. The hair on his arm was raised, goosebumps covering his arms. He could not explain why this came out of his body and he was absolutely terrified.

He chucks it in the trash can. Physically, he feels better. Mentally, his mind is frazzled. He continues to clean, occasionally looking inside his trashcan to observe the chip. For some reason, he is compelled to touch it. He picks it up again and thinks about his dream. He startles and drops the chip back. *Just go back to bed and don't think about it.*

Cassius moves lethargically towards his bed, grabs his pajamas from under his pillow and changes into them. He feels...he doesn't know what he feels. Empty inside, literally. Cassius doesn't even have the strength to chuckle at his pun. He then sinks into his bed and doesn't even have the energy to check his phone. He knocks out in an instant.

II.

Tink, tink. Tink, tink.

Bleary-eyed, Cassius groans. For once these past weeks, he doesn't feel a throbbing pain at the back of his head or his eyes. He could almost cry in joy.

Tink, tink.

His eyes snap open.

He rolls over and checks his alarm clock. It is 8:11AM. Cassius groans, stretching out on his bed. He is now definitely not going to work. He hears that tinking sound again. *Must be the bathroom.* He has had some problems recently with plumbing so he doesn't pay it any attention, rolling over and placing a pillow over his head. He is about to doze off when feels something metallic, something cold caress his hand. He sits up immediately. He looks around his room, the almost cubicle-like appearance heightening the sudden anxiety he feels.

Tink, tink.

He knows there isn't anything to worry about, but a heavy force presses against his chest, paralyzing him to the bed. He knows he felt something that is not the bed sheets. The doors are closed, the window locked shut, the curtains have not been moved. His phone is still where he placed it, but where are his glasses?

Tink, tink, tink.

He didn't realize he had held his breath until he tried to breathe again. He is glued to the position he is in.

Tink, tink.

My glasses must have fallen, stop thinking so much. He slowly leans over to see if his glasses are on the floor and he sighs quietly in relief when he just sees his glasses. *What were you expecting? Wait, shut up, don't jinx it.*

He quickly reaches down to grab his glasses, placing them on his nose.

Cassius, whenever confronted with a terrifying situation, would get extremely angry just to display that he wasn't terrified. He gets up, making loud powerful movements, screaming, "I know my plumbing doesn't work!" He goes to his bathroom, opening the door quickly. His eyebrows are furrowed intensely but deep in his heart he is terrified.

Tink, tink, tink.

The noise gets exponentially louder. He looks around furiously, trying to find the source of the noise. He can hear it within the walls but his ears are tricking him, making him believe it's in the pipes. He glances at the sink; the stopper is missing.

He can't keep up the façade, he is truly paralyzed with fear. He runs out of the bathroom, closes the middle door and turns on the tv, blasts music on his phone, and turns on his laptop, playing music as well. A cacophony of noise soon permeates throughout the air. Why is his stopper out? Who came into the room? Or maybe what came into his room?

Maybe all the ghost stories his grandfather told him were not ideal when he was younger. He knows they're real. But he never did anything horrible to be haunted by them.

He doesn't feel hungry. He's glad he doesn't feel sick to his stomach, that he emptied out everything out of his body, but his gut still feels as if it is in a constant churn. All the water his body is made up of slowly wants to rise out of him and he quells it down.

He keeps staring at the door. Nothing seems to be coming out. He turns off his computer but he leaves the tv and his phone on and starts to make breakfast. Maybe a simple routine will bring him back to serenity. An ocean of thoughts enters his mind. First the data chip, now his stopper is out? There is definitely ghastly spirit activity afoot. His muscles tense and his eyes are unable to focus on the eggs he is burning. He can hear a constant buzz in his ears. But it is not his phone. He hears a pitter patter, as if they were small steps. Like a dog. He turns and his soul escapes his body.

It was a small thing in front of him. A jumble of black wires pooled around the thing, but inspecting it more, the wires emulated a figure of a body, with a head, legs, and arms. Its head, a tablet screen, is accompanied with the image of a smiley face staring right at him. Black and dark green wires protrude from its big screen, giving the head of the creature the appearance of Medusa's snakes. The body is a conglomeration of wires, multiple screens the size of Cassius' phone covering the creature. It is honestly a horrible thing to look at, almost as if it was covered with eyes around its body.

The screen, its smile. The one from his dreams.

He didn't bother analyzing it anymore, too focused on the screen of the thing in front of him. He couldn't run from it, its tiny but unavoidable body in the middle of the kitchen hall. The thing tilted its head slightly and Cassius believes this was the moment he thought he was

definitely hallucinating.

“Hello,” it said in a gentle, melodic voice. The screen still had a smiley face, but soon changed into a question mark.

“Cassius, what is wrong?”

The silence prompts the creature to move forward and Cassius immediately goes around it. He goes to his room to get his baseball bat and when he turns around it’s right behind him. He swings and smashes it. It makes a horrible screeching sound. He goes to the bathroom, takes out the rags from his bucket in the tub, leaves the dirty water that is already in there and goes to dump it on the creature.

But the creature isn’t there. He swivels his head around, and the creature is right behind him.

“Why did you do that?”

He dumps the water on the creature and hears the crackling of the wires, a gargle of words unsaid. He throws the bucket at it for good measure and starts putting on his shoes when he hears a rustling of wires.

“Stop doing that!” The melodic voice now sounds like a petulant child. He ignores it and almost reaches his door when he feels something grasp his ankle. He looks down and it is three wires wrapped tightly around his ankle. The wires tug at his ankle and right before his face hits the ground, the wires quickly take hold of him, laying him gently on the ground.

The creature is now in front of his door, in front of him. “Please calm down, Cassius. I am your friend.”

“Please, leave me alone. I don’t know what you are!” He crawls back, inching away from it.

So it isn’t a nightmare. He can’t believe this is happening.

The creature looks off to the side, its screen turning black as his phone and tv no longer emit noise. “I turned off your stove, Cassius. Your eggs aren’t good anymore. I just turned off your music on your phone and turned off your television.”

He dares to speak to it. “What are you?” He didn’t expect to squeak out his question but what can a man do when confronting a monster.

“I am Oracle! You threw me away,” its screen turns green with a worried expression on its screen before switching to its blue smile screen again, “You were supposed to place me next to your phone so that I can grow naturally, like a flower.” It shows an image of a sunflower.

Cassius’s lips are glued together. The creature displays a question mark. “Cassius?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The chip!”

Cassius gasps. “The chip?” *Wait, so this...thing was inside me? The data chip?*

“You’re...you’re the chip,” he stutters.

“Me!” Oracle twirls. “Because of you, I now look like this. But it’s manageable. I think I look very unique. Although, I think I would have looked a lot better if you had nurtured me properly.”

Before Cassius can think critically about what he will say, he blurts out, “Well, no one gave me a manual for this.” He has never been this brave, audacious! This *has* to be a dream.

Oracle sighs, tsking at Cassius. Cassius feels offended and is about to comment on that before he immediately springs away from it, Oracle moving an inch closer to him.

“Oracle, stay there.” Oracle obeys.

“I have a few questions.”

“Yes?”

“What are you? Why are you here? Am I dead? Am I hallucinating? Will you hurt me? Actually I won’t believe you either way. Why were you in me?”

Oracle raises a hand — one made of green wires, a little screen attached to its elbow — to its head as if thinking very deeply about it, then replies, “I cannot answer the first question. I do not know what I am, I just know I am here because you asked for me. You are not dead. You are not hallucinating. I will not hurt you. I am a part of you.”

Oracle adds, “Although, I would like an apology. You tried to kill me.”

Cassius hesitates, but his parents always taught him manners. “Yes...you’re right, I’m sorry. I was scared.” He feels although he is in a constant haze of uncertainty. Oracle is a part of him? He’d rather be lonely than experience this constant fear and uncertainty. A part of him? He ponders heavily over this, but is unable to truly compartmentalize anything as he sees Oracle turn pink and watches its body shake side to side, as if it was a school girl that got a compliment.

“How are you a part of me? And I asked for you? When?”

“There are just some things that cannot be explained. Why do humans not understand this?” Cassius didn’t want to agree with this creature, but it *is* human to seek answers. Before he deigns to say anything else, Oracle interjects, saying, “I think your phone led to my creation. I am not certain, Cassius. I just know that I was born and knew that you were my friend.”

Oracle walks closer to him. Cassius gulps on nothing, the dryness of his tongue displaying a stark contrast against his clammy palms. He feels lightheaded. This thing, Oracle, is clearly lying to him. But killing it didn’t work. He’ll have to accept it. Begrudgingly. He’ll monitor it. Don’t trust it but for now, just accept it. Now that he looks at it, it is kind of cute. Kind of. Cute in a sense that it obeys him, somewhat. He just hopes he wakes up from this dream soon.

With a heavy heart, he says, “Okay Oracle, don’t scare me again.”

“I wasn’t even trying to, you’re just a scaredy cat.”

Cassius shoots Oracle an offended look. “It’s a natural instinct. Look, Oracle, I don’t really understand why you are here. I am not a part of you but I’ll just ignore that right now. Please, just stay in my sight so I literally don’t faint of terror.”

Cassius stands up and reaches for his phone from the kitchen counter, never taking his eyes off of Oracle. The screen of Oracle displays a heart, and Cassius isn’t sure if it is directed towards him or his phone. Cassius stares at his phone in his hand and hesitantly decides to leave it on the counter. *I think for now it is best to leave my phone alone*, he determines. He glances back at Oracle, who is now smiling.

III.

Cassius has brown eyes. He’s staring at them for the millionth time, his reflection showing the sparks of amber in his irises. But, his eyes have a constant ache to them. He can see

how dead they look. His cheeks have lost the natural flush they used to have. He looks pale and almost purple, as if he was in a constant state of being cold, as if he didn't have any blood. His eyebrows are constantly furrowed as he desperately tries to keep his eyes open. His lips are chapped, even though he applies chapstick constantly. He glances at Oracle, who is humming an unknown tune, swinging its legs back and forth on the toilet seat.

His new 'friend,' if you could call Oracle that, was surprisingly gentle. Oracle was a tiny thing, coming right to his knees. Sometimes he wanted to hug it, wanted to know how it felt to hold something in his arms, to feel the sharp edges of Oracle, to feel the cords running all around their body. But Oracle seems to hate physical contact, which Cassius believes is a lie. Oracle touched him when they first met. Unless he just dared to touch him to scare him. Even though Oracle doesn't touch him, Cassius recognizes how he doesn't feel empty anymore. He truly does enjoy Oracle's company, although cautiously. Oracle is still this unknown entity to him. A terrifying entity to be exact, its multiple screens on its body constantly reminding him that he shouldn't trust it. It is enticing to be around it. Sometimes his face appears on Oracle's screens and he feels...content. He shouldn't though. Don't trust it.

It has been a month since he has been hosting Oracle. Oracle is great company. When Cassius goes to sleep, Oracle turns on a blue light, as if they were a night lamp. He won't be ashamed saying that he loves feeling like a kid. But, he feels incredibly weak. Their screen always lulls him to sleep. He mentally slaps himself. *Oracle is basically a tablet, a television screen, a cell phone. It's a machine, a creature, the devil himself for all I know.*

Yet, he feels safe. A double-edged sword. Safety and caution. Cassius knows this false sense of security is Oracle's fault. Oracle is turning him into this fragile and defenseless body. He walks to the living room and waits for Oracle.

Tiny patters indicate that Oracle is right next to him.

"Oracle, have you been doing something to my body?" *Best way to get this over with is to be blunt.*

Oracle glances up at him.

"I am your only friend," Oracle said, its screen turning blue and the smile turning upside down. The other mini screens on Oracle's body turned blue as well, producing a glow that embraces Oracle.

"So, is that a confirmation?"

“Yes.” Cassius jaw clenches, exhaling deeply from his nostrils. How can he feel betrayed by something he knew was lying to him?

“What are you doing to me? Are you the reason why I feel so weak all the time? I never felt like this before. Ever.” He glares at Oracle.

“I am not doing anything to you. I am helping you. I keep you company.” Cassius did enjoy Oracle as a companion. He didn’t feel alone. He wasn’t even using his phone anymore! Although...using Oracle was also a form of screen time. But he wasn’t getting migraines anymore.

“But I feel weak. I feel that I have no energy.”

“It is the process. As your only friend, I am helping you.” Oracle simply states.

Cassius glares. “What process? The process of killing me? Friends don’t try to kill each other,” Cassius admonishes lightly, although his heart is beating a mile a minute. He can feel the tension rising. “And I have other friends, Oracle. I have my friends from work, and my friends from high school.”

“I was only trying to connect with you more. And they aren’t your friends. They always make you sad.” Cassius shudders in regret and fear. Oracle doesn’t know. It doesn’t know anything, it is like a child.

Cassius stays a great distance from Oracle but lowers himself to Oracle’s eyelevel, as if reassuring an animal no harm.

“Oracle, what you’re doing to me...it's hurting me. You don’t want to see me hurt, do you? How am I to speak to you if I cannot function?”

“Silly! This is the process. You’re supposed to feel like this. It’s normal. Soon you can be with me forever!” Yellow for cheerfulness. “And you don’t have friends, just me!”

The back of his head is telling him to run. The hairs on his arms have risen, but he ignores them. He needs to make sure.

“Oracle...what do you mean by ‘I will be with you forever’?”

“You’re going to be a part of me. Just like I was a part of you. You made me. We don’t have to be alone anymore.”

Cassius wavers. His throat is dry. He doesn't know what to say. He puts on a brave face and simply says, "You lied to me. You said you wouldn't hurt me. But you have. I am sorry. Please, stop this."

"Don't you want to be with me? I was inside you. I was so close to you then, but I had to leave to help you." Cassius widens his eyes. "Stop these questions, my friend. They will only consume you," Oracle continues, its body buzzing with energy. Its screens have gone black, its innocent smiley face replaced with a neutral face. "We cannot be separate. We can't function without each other."

An audible silence permeates in the room. He can feel how his life, once again, is crumbling before him. Oracle wants to eat him, in some way. It wants to consume him, under the pretense of helping him. He might start bawling. Something must show on his face that has Oracle suddenly bursting, its wires acting up and its body configuring into something even more monstrous. Oracle towers over him. A red hue emits from Oracle, all of its screens flashing different colors, almost blinding him.

"I am helping you. You WANT to be with me." Oracle threatens, but doesn't move.

Cassius as always, is the first one to move, going across the room. "Oracle, calm down," Cassius placates, raising his hands in surrender.

"Then why are you asking so many questions? There is no problem!"

Cassius doesn't realize he is visibly shaking until he tries to take a step back, further away from Oracle. He is weak in the knees, the sensation of pins and needles fluttering across his entire body. Oracle's towering over him, his red screen staring straight into his soul. No face, just the color. Cassius feels something wet trickle down his face.

"Oracle," he hiccups, "please, please don't do this. Please leave me alone."

"You asked for me and now you want to reject me? You wrought this." Oracle raises a green wired conglomeration of a hand, and grabs his right cheek harshly. Its screens have stopped flashing and instead project images of various different sets of eyes. Staring accusingly at him.

"I abhor physical contact. But you have reduced me to this. To touch you. You resist me subconsciously. Why must you be so difficult? You just have to accept me. Let go. Then we can be together. A transcendental connection, stronger than this measly physicality."

Cassius sniffs. *Don't trust it, no matter how enticing it is.*

With renewed vigor, he takes a hold of Oracle's hand on his cheek, who immediately flinches. He didn't know Oracle was capable of such organic reactions. Cassius stares right into the red screen of Oracle, almost daring it to do something.

Cassius simply says, "No." He releases his grasp on Oracle and walks away from him. A chord wraps around his arm. He grabs the first thing he sees, and smashes it against Oracle's chord, and proceeds to run out of his apartment.

Out on the street, a woman is walking her dog and startles when he almost runs into her. Her dog starts barking but then whimpers as it sees Oracle right on Cassius' toes. Cassius doesn't bother questioning why the woman doesn't react.

He knew he tried to kill Oracle when he first saw it. Maybe he can successfully kill Oracle now...the ocean! *But what if the water doesn't work? Phones are waterproof. Aren't they?*

Cassius can't think straight. He didn't know anything. He just knew that he couldn't escape Oracle. Cassius felt erratic movement from the inside of his pockets and shrieks when he realizes his phone is a jumble of chords, moving organically as if they were worms. The chords attach themselves to his right arm and he furiously tries to detangle them from his arm.

With a sudden blink, he is on the ground. "Fuck!"

Oracle wrapped one of his loose cords to his leg, dragging him forward. The chords on his arm slither quickly to his face. He starts kicking and screaming, twitching as he feels its cold metallic surface almost caress him, enveloping him.

"HELP! Please help!" Cassius kicks the cord, but to no avail. He whimpers, closing his mouth, eyes wide as he sees it about to lunge into his mouth. He slaps it away from him, grabbing it in a chokehold. With all the strength he can muster, he yanks the mass of chords off the rest of his face and throws it far away from him. Cassius crawls away but ends up with scrapes on his hands. *I see people, but why aren't they helping me?!*

"I made you invisible," Oracle has a gleeful face on his screen. The jumble of chords that used to be his phone has been absorbed by Oracle, becoming one of the many screens littered on Oracle's body.

"No, no! Oracle, stop!"

Oracle's screen turned red. "No, you're my friend! YOU'RE MINE! NO ONE ELSE'S!"

Oracle's body starts to move unnaturally, growing bigger. Cassius feels weak all of a sudden, and can see his shoes on one of Oracle's screens. He looks down at his feet and doesn't see anything. His feet are gone. Oh god, he is being sucked in. He gags on nothing. He knew he never should have trusted Oracle. But how is he to get rid of it? He doesn't want to be part of it. He never asked for Oracle. He cannot breathe. NO, this can't be happening! Dizzy with abject horror, he goes limp. Cassius is dragged towards Oracle, who immediately hugs him.

The hug brings about a boiling rage. Oracle, the hypocrite. Cassius, who demonstrated affection, even with apprehension, was never able to hug Oracle. Oracle, who would shriek at him if he so much tried to envelop his arms around its tiny body. Now, Oracle wants to coddle him.

Knowing he's going to regret it later, he punches Oracle right in its face. He ignores the stinging pain and keeps punching until Oracle lets him go, their screen breaking slightly. The screen turns black but Cassius doesn't have time to analyze Oracle, his feet already flying him away to the beach. He sees a bicycle and is thanking the forces that it is not locked to anything. He clumsily gets on and dashes, taking all the red lights. Cassius had never been this brave, but he thinks these near deaths are worth it to escape the fate of...being in the void, he assumes. All the honking indicates he isn't invisible anymore but how can Oracle do this?

Scratch that, he passed the time of reasoning. He has been speaking to an embodiment, a demon, whatever it can be, for the past month. There are no scientific reasons.

Oracle wants to trap him in a screen. What a petrifying thought. He can hear Oracle behind him.

Why aren't they grabbing me with their chords? No, don't look back. Don't think, just do. He jumps off the bicycle and Cassius runs, runs till his legs are burning towards the ocean. The grains of sand produce a jarring sensation, but slows down his run. He glances around him, seeing people lay down on their beach towels, scrolling down their phones. It was everywhere. All the screens he sees, Oracle's seemingly innocent face flashes on the screens of others, mocking him.

I can't escape Oracle; I can't, I can't, I can't. He runs into someone, knocking them down and ignores the curses that fly at him as he feels the dry, prickling sand turn to moist, cold sand. A cold splash shocks him as he walks further into the ocean, the water dragging him down. *Don't look back, don't look back.*

He looks back.

He chokes on his scream.