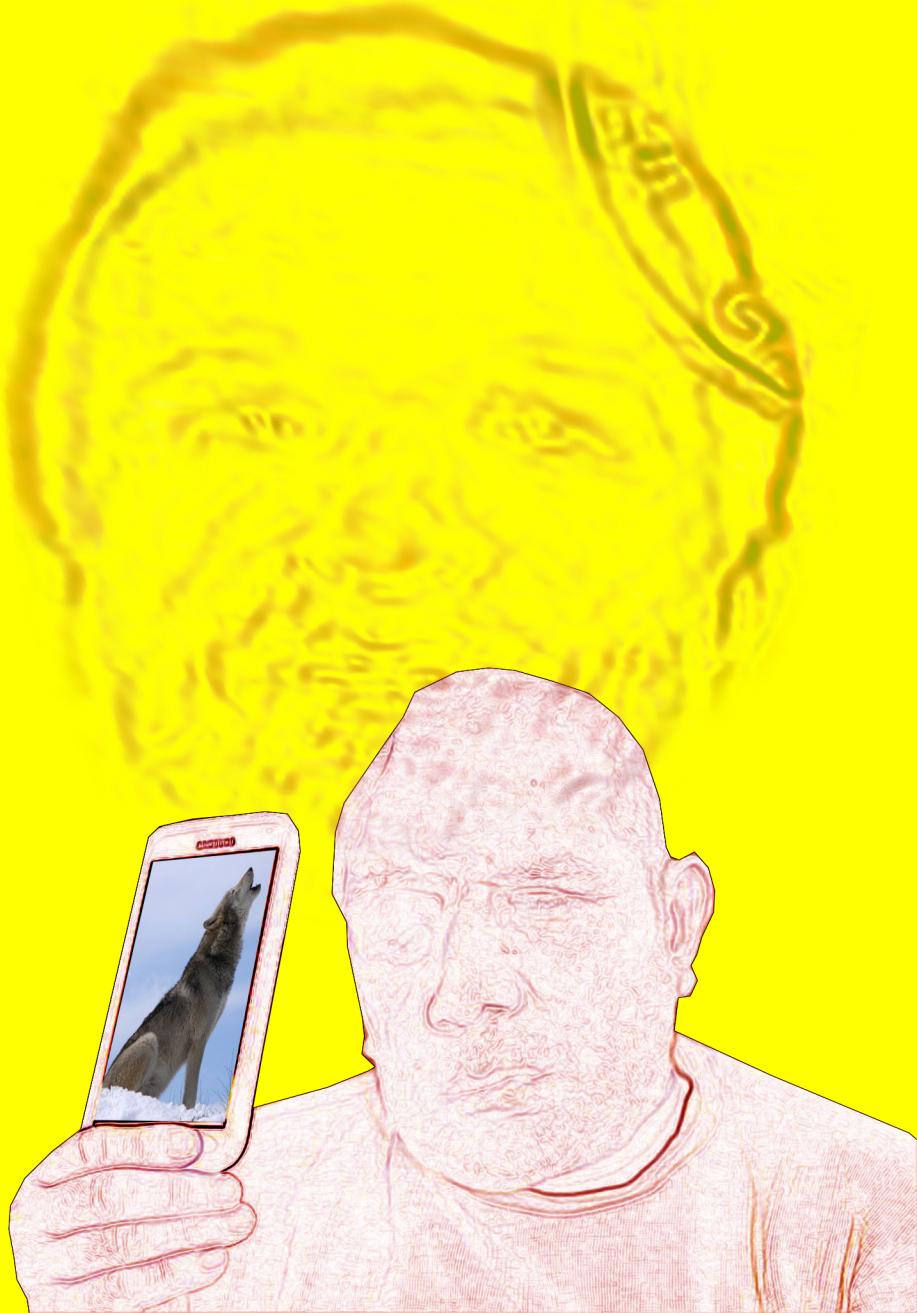


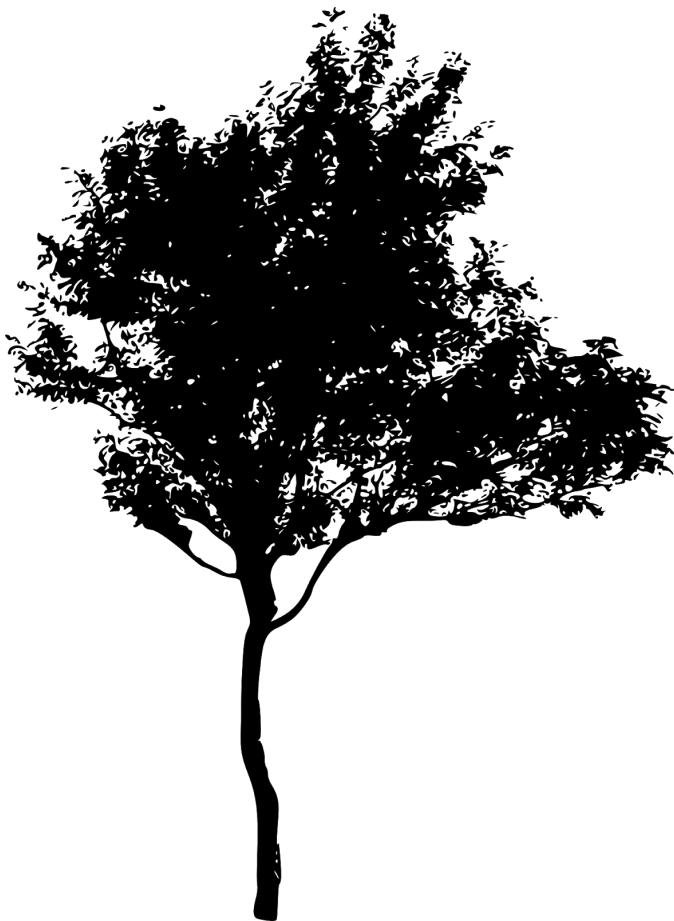
THE HEAD

BY VERNON HOWL



THE HEAD

UNDER THE TREE



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW A TREE THAT DOESN'T HAVE BRANCHES; WHAT'S IT GOT INSTEAD?

I have a head. I wear a mask that covers my head. My wife is a tree. The leaves on the tree are tentacles. The tentacles touch me. I ask my father to quarantine my children. Their masks no longer fit. Their masks swallow their heads. My headless children get sunburns on their neck stumps. The tentacles provide little shade.

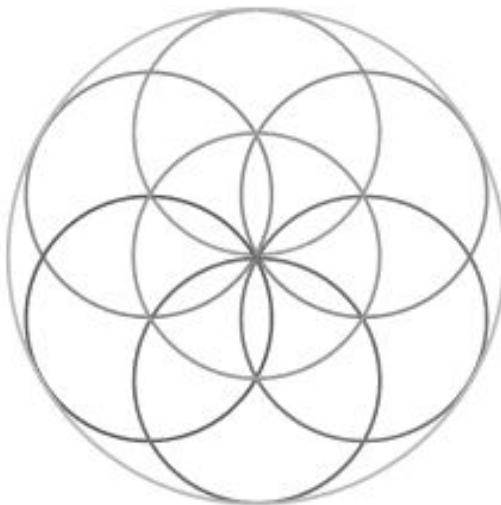
My father was once a gust of wind. He continues to push all the people away from my children. He is a tornado now. My headless children live inside the tornado. The tornado lives above a tree. That tree is my wife. The masks of my children cover their entire bodies. The masks are inside out. The masks are like dresses now. They are squishy headless things with sunburned neck stumps sticking out. They live in the center of my tornado father under my wife the tree. I hear them cry. The tree that is my wife is gigantic.

I see the people approaching through the eye slits on my mask. They come from the city. My mask is an animal mask. When I am sleepy the tentacles try to remove it. The head on my body tells my arms to swat them away. The people are angry. They push toward the tree but the tornado pushes them back. They stumble

down the hill and back into the city. They soon forget everything.

At night the tornado is calm and my children can sleep. I climb the tree and reach inside and apply a gel to their neck stumps. I hit the tentacles with a stick for not providing more shade. I kiss my wife. I taste the bark against my lips.

THE SEVEN



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW SEVEN DIFFERENT THINGS; WHAT ARE THE SEVEN THINGS?

I have seven headless children. I am the one who put the masks on their heads that swallowed their heads in time. Their masks were molded in the spirit of my own. Every mask was an animal mask. Every child was a different animal.

The shark mask was the scrap of a blue tarp and bent wire hanger. The shark child was an aggressive boy and spoke carelessly of cannibalism at a troublingly young age. I called him Shark.

The spider mask was eight baby doll arms spray painted black glued to a navy blue ski mask with a red stripe. The spider child excelled at math and ate exactly the right amount of food at every feeding. She was my favorite girl. I called her Spider.

The bear mask was just a loose white sock with eye holes and black ink indicating bear features. The bear child was in fact part polar bear. I feared she was not of my blood. I called her Bear.

The hamster mask was made professionally by a movie mask maker. The

hamster child was the finest athlete and I spent the most money on his mask as well as his childhood. I called him Hamster.

The wasp mask was cellophane dipped in yellow dye and adhered to a beekeeper hat. It had black paper wings which fell off almost immediately. The wasp child was a sickly lad deeply bent toward the ironic. I called him Wasp.

The chicken mask was actual chicken feathers stitched to the remnants of an exploded football. The chicken child was a beautiful little girl whose lack of confidence was a surprise given her natural grace and wit. I called her Chicken.

The salamander mask was not really a mask at all. It was a large green turtleneck unrolled and tied around the forehead with a rubber band. It had eye slits through the fabric and the top exposed his beautiful brown hair. The salamander child was most similar to myself insomuch as he always sought the truth. I called him Sal.

Why these mask turned on my family and swallowed the heads of my children is a mystery.

WATER



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW A SQUID HOLDING A JAR OF JAM; WHAT FLAVOR IS THE JAM?

I ask my father what happens next.

He whispers in a breeze that we are doomed. He has not let me see my children in a long while and I worry greatly about their neck stumps. I ask for compassion and he blows me away. He howls at me to see my second father and blows me down the hill. My second father is the ocean. I have not seen him since my birth.

I know the way to the ocean is straight through the city and that if the people of the city see the man in the mask they will do what is necessary and right. They will rip my limbs from my body and remove my mask. They will reveal my head to the world. They will bury the mask and scorch the earth above it. They will burn the ground for a long time. They will do what they must to the head.

I roll down the hill. I roll because the furious gust of my father the first has sent me tumbling. When I come to a stop I know that the tree and my children remain but I can no longer see them. They continue to exist.

The last thing my father told me was to walk straight into the water when I reached the ocean. He told me not to hesitate.

I am wearing a mask on top of the mask which covers my head. My animal mask is the wolf of course. I killed the wolf whose head became my mask years before my father became a tornado or my wife became a tree. The mask of my wolf mask is a human face. The tone of the skin of this mask is a perfect average of the skin color of the people of the city and all people everywhere. I do not often venture into the city but when I do I blend in perfectly.

I need to secure safe passage to the ocean. I need to become one with my second father the water. The city is furious with anger and desperation. Cars swirl around in a crazed dance. The people scream until they are beyond beige and then colorless. I am looking for a particular taxi and a particular driver among them.

THE TAXI



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW A TAXI THAT ISN'T A CAR OR BIKE; WHAT VEHICLE IS IT?

**The taxi I am looking for is a bicycle
and the driver of the bicycle does
not have a head.** The driver is not my
seventh child. My seventh is a son who is a
salamander. But like my seventh he is headless
and seeking the truth. We have met before.

The taxi driver's neck stump is badly
sunburned when I finally find him. The only
difference between the taxi driver and myself is
that there is a head connected to my neck stump.
We are philosophical carbon copies otherwise.

The driver tells me that I am wrong to
seek out my second father. He tells me that even
though the ocean birthed me that it is the man
who raised me that is the key. I tell him all about
the tornado. We are both motherless men. The
racket of the city is loud and it is hard to hear
one another.

The ocean is too big. The ocean has so
many children that it cannot recognize any of
them. With every wave a new child is formed.
They are splashed out onto the shore. Motherless
and alone the waves seek fathers. They seek wet

fathers but they will never find a father as wet as the ocean.

The waves that are children that never reach land are absorbed back into the water. These children become the father and the cycle continues. The taxi driver tells me that I can never become this type of child again.

When we reach the water I do as the tornado told me to do. I walk straight into the ocean without hesitation. I float as passing children are born. I can hear their being born. I think the sound is lovely as I wait for my second father to speak. He does not speak.

An octopus swims by and fills my mouth with a jelly. It tells me what to do with the jelly and I nod. I swim to shore and massage it onto the taxi driver's neck stump.

THE HEAD



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW A BIRD PECKING AT A BRIEFCASE; WHAT'S IT GOT IN ITS BEAK?

The taxi driver grows a head. It happens rapidly and it is a totally perfect head. I immediately dive back into the ocean in search of the octopus.

I need to find more jelly. My children deserve the jelly. My children deserve heads. There are only electric eels in the ocean now. I see their shocking vibes as a message from my second father to get out of the water. Back on shore the taxi driver's new head has grown a mask. It is a wolf mask. He can't get it off. It will only be a matter of time.

The taxi driver asks if I will wait with him and I tell him yes. He says that I can have his taxi bicycle in return. It is not a fair trade. When the people of the city decapitate him I cry. I don't stick around for the fire nor the ceremony of the head. I pedal the bike all the way home up the hill. It is hard. I ignore all the people attempting to flag me down. They just want a taxi to the ceremony. They want to see what happens to the head.

What they do with the head is shocking. I read about it in a since banned book. The name

of the book is *The Head*. They banned the book so that what happens at the ceremony is a surprise. The book also outlines why the people of the city hate masks. Their reasoning is shaky at best. Every metaphor is shaky at best. When I return to my home on the hill under the tree I pull out *The Head* and begin to read. I read as loudly as I can so that everything swirling inside the tornado above can hear.

“The Head is placed on the ceremonial pillar. Festival toupees and wigs are handed out to the people. We shall dine on whatever animal The Head was hiding under. If The Head was wearing a pig mask we shall dine on pig. If The Head was wearing an antelope mask we shall dine on antelope. And so on. The ceremony cannot begin until enough meat of the appropriate animal has been procured. Once it has and the toupees and wigs have been distributed then the ceremony can start. As the audience eats we shall wait for the first bird to come peck the eyes out of The Head. This bird is now The Sacred Bird. We must pump its stomach immediately and retrieve the eyes. We must surgically attach the eyes of The Head onto this bird. The Sacred Bird shall never be released back into the wild. The new Sacred Bird will

make all decisions on matters of law and order via ordinance of The Sacred Bird Way which states that every measure be condensed to a yes or no query with yes being a worm and no being a piece of fruit. The Sacred Bird Way must be followed out on matters both big and small. If a man commits murder and is found guilty then we shall consult The Sacred Bird. If he eats a worm then yes the man should be put to death. And so on. After it has rotted and the sun has burnt the eyeless Head to a hardened Hyde then it is time to remove it from the pillar and construct The Only Mask. Whoever is King of the city shall be given The Only Mask and it is his duty to wear it at all times as a symbol and as a warning. If the hue of this new disguise is a significantly different hue of brownish red then all of the flags in the city must be destroyed and new ones must be sewn in the proper color. The King will be King until The Sacred Bird dies. The city shall then descend into lawlessness until someone is foolish to don a mask again.”

I know my father the tornado has heard my words because he spat hale as I read *The Head*. My face is full of blood. The wounds from the pounding hale on my lips and cheeks and

forehead bleed. I wonder if my children heard the words of *The Head*.

I hump the tree. I wish the trunk that I straddle was not there and I was sitting on a stump.

GONE



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW SOMETHING YOU'VE LOST; IS IT REALLY GONE OR JUST MISSING?

When someone looks at my wife's branches they don't see tentacles.

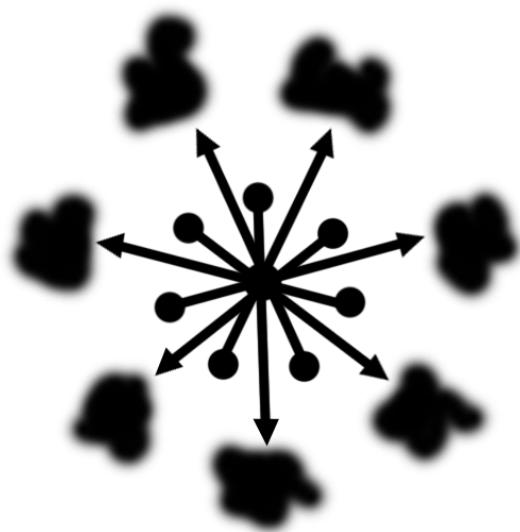
The tentacles are for my eyes only. They see twigs and leaves. This strange story is only mine.

My father levels me. Not with a gust or hale or a bolt of lightning but with news. My children are gone he says. My children have been gone for years. I ask him to whom then have I been applying the neck stump gel. What headless and burnt creatures have I been caressing all these many years.

He unloads seven headless pigs. They fall to the ground and scurry to right themselves below the tree. I can't tell if they have been injured in the fall or if my father has hurt them inside himself or if they were otherwise deformed or damaged since birth or their beheading. My children are gone.

The bark of one of my wife's tentacles strokes the back of my neck as I watch the pigs. The pigs assemble into a circle. They do a choreographed dance. Each pig moves its body in a smaller circle and all seven circles cut into each other but the pigs never touch. I climb up my

wife to get a better look. It's a lovely dance. They come to a stop on the edges of the first complete circle all facing inward. I imagine pig heads at the end of their neck stumps all staring straight ahead at the space in between two of their brethren.



And what they see is another formless entity but it isn't a cloud. It isn't like father. It is dark like him but different. They hover in the distance just above the dipping horizon upon the hill. I see the pigs see the things. I watch them.

But in reality nothing is there. There is only more sky on the horizon line. And my father is mad. He strikes each pig dead with a lightning bolt. One by one he strikes them dead. The interval increases after each subsequent kill. Several days pass between the deaths of the fourth and fifth pig and perhaps a year before the final pig perishes.

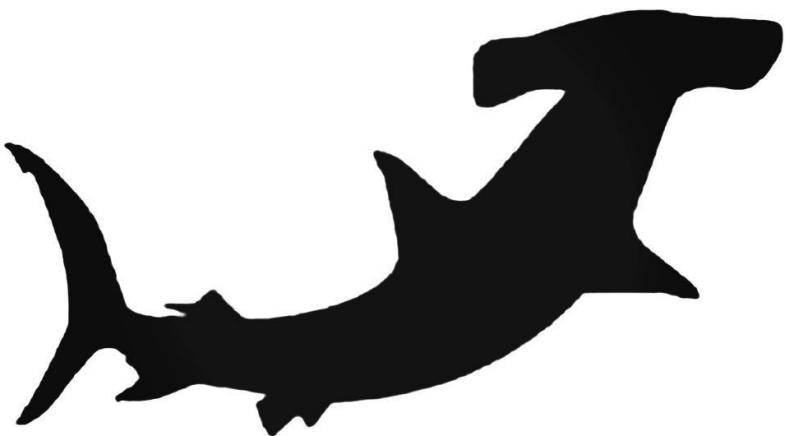
And yet I do not sleep. I sit on the strongest branch of my wife the tree. I watch and feel each death deeply. When the smoke from the last bolt of lightning fully disappears I look up and ask my father what happened to the children.

He tells me that he spit them out into the city on the very night he sucked them up. He collected seven pigs from a farm on his way home. He decapitated the pigs. He made a fertilizer with the pig heads. He tells me this is why my wife grew into such a large tree and that she wasn't even a tree before she indulged the nutrients of the pig head fertilizer. She willingly drank it as I cried over the disappearance of our children's heads. And I don't recall any of it.

*WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHILDREN
WAS BEYOND SAD AND I WILL LIVE THE REST OF MY
LIFE WITH A SADNESS THAT IS SO BIG IT WILL
CRUSH ANYTHING THAT EVER TRIES TO TOUCH ME
AND I WILL MAKE A STEW OUT OF ALL THE
CRUSHED THINGS AND I'LL FEED IT TO AN ANIMAL
WHO WILL THEN SHIT IT BACK INTO THE SOIL SO
MY WIFE'S ROOTS CAN ABSORB IT AND IT WILL
KILL THE TREE AND WHEN THE TREE FALLS I'LL
MAKE A HOUSE OUT OF THE WOOD SO STRONG
THAT MY DAD THE TORNADO OR ANY STORM CAN
NEVER HARM ME AND I WILL LIVE THE REST OF MY
LIFE CHANTING FOR MY CHILDREN'S SOULS AND
ETERNALLY WONDERING ABOUT*

**WHAT
HAPPENED
TO THE
CHILDREN**

SHARK



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW ANY ANIMAL THAT'S NOT A SHARK; WHAT ANIMAL DID YOU DRAW?

Shark disposes of his mask as soon as he sets foot in the city. He punches a man who has sixteen shins in the stomach. The man cowers on the ground and cries. He asks Shark to hit him in the shins if he is going to hit him again. He says that he grew extra shins because his evil nephews wouldn't stop driving their tricycles straight into his legs. Shark is interested in these nephews.

The man points him to a large hammock hanging over a cauldron full of boiling sauce. He tells him that this is where he keeps the nephews at night. He likes his nephews smelling of garlic and not evil nephew body odor.

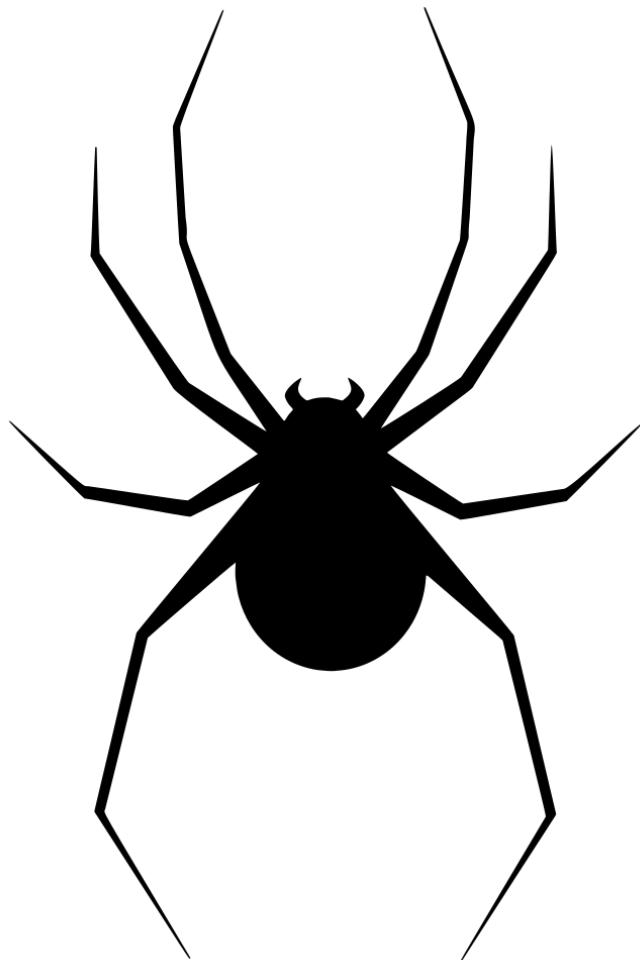
Shark cuts one end of the hammock and the nephews go tumbling into the sauce and cook. One by one Shark eats the nephews. He lets out humongous belches that smell like garlicky nephew. The man is horrified but also relieved. He starts cutting off his extra shins.

A small neighbor asks if he can have the extra shins. He takes them back to his house and makes seven shin sandwiches. Each sandwich has a different filling. The first sandwich is tuna.

The second sandwich is ham. The third sandwich is squirrel. The fourth sandwich is rusty screws. The fifth sandwich is expensive cheese. The sixth sandwich is ice cubes. The seventh sandwich is grass.

Shark walks around the city forever on
the lookout for a snack of nephew.

SPIDER



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW ANY ANIMAL THAT'S NOT A SPIDER; WHAT ANIMAL DID YOU DRAW?

Spider disposes of her mask as soon as she sets foot in the city. She approaches a church and begins to count the stained glass windows. The church has forty-two windows. Forty-two is made up of six and seven. These numbers show a link between mankind and God's spirit and a link between christ and the antichrist. Spider thinks about the numbers as she enters the church.

She approaches an old woman lighting a prayer candle and tells her that the phrase "little children" appears forty-two times in the Book of God. She asks the old woman to burn her with a prayer candle and the old woman obliges.

Spider goes back outside and climbs the walls of the church. She smears the sticky pus from her burn wounds onto each of the forty-two stained glass windows. She digs into her wounds for more oozing self. She covers all of the church's windows with the inside of herself until they are all hidden and the only light shining through is a muted pink of flesh. It takes all of the inside of herself. So much of the inside that the outside collapses into a grayish ball.

The grayish ball rolls toward the foot of a priest. He picks it up and brings it to his chambers. Using a cheese grater he adds the dust of it to the communion wine. He pours a glass and tastes it.

BEAR



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW ANY ANIMAL THAT'S NOT A BEAR; WHAT ANIMAL DID YOU DRAW?

Bear disposes of her mask as soon as she sets foot in the city. Then she turns and heads straight for the frozen lands in search of her true father. Her true father is a polar bear named King Harold.

Bear had politely lived the life of a female child because her mother and human family had been kind enough to feed her as she grew into a healthy part-bear hybrid. Every winter the snow would whisper her true identity and every winter the whispers grew louder. She did not know how or why King Harold impregnated the lady who would become a tree. But she was determined to find out now.

She races through the outskirts of the city. Her heart so full of the glee of newfound freedom. She is so consumed with joy that she does not notice the hunters hiding behind a bush. They shoot her three times in the left leg and once in the back of her right shoulder. She falls.

The hunters surround her and see that she's not entirely animal. They feel bad but

collectively decide that she still looks delicious.
One of the hunters shoots her in the head.

They make a feast out of Bear. All of the hunters' families dine on the meat of her body. The hunter who shot her in the head saves her heart. As part of a ritualistic ceremony he eats the heart.

In the winter he begins to hear voices. It's the snow trying to communicate with Bear. His family has him committed. They visit the hunter in the mental hospital until visiting him feels too sad and becomes too much of a hassle. Whenever it snows the voices still come. They come until he dies at the ripe old age of ninety-nine.

HAMSTER



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW ANY ANIMAL THAT'S NOT A HAMSTER; WHAT ANIMAL DID YOU DRAW?

Hamster disposes of his mask as soon as he sets foot in the city. He was always obsessed with how everything is related and he finally feels alive removed from his family on the hill.

At the closest bank he asks a teller if he could have all the money. She asks if he is trying to rob the bank. He tells her he is not. She says that he cannot have any money and he leaves.

Hamster becomes a hugely successful businessman. He is the best and richest businessman in the whole city. He returns to the bank and asks the same question he asked on the first day he set foot in the city. The teller smiles and nods. Everyone who works at the bank helps them shovel the money into large sacks and Hamster loads the sacks into a dump truck.

He drives the dump truck to the ocean and unloads all of the money into the sea. Hamster is on the lookout for passing octopi. He wants to make an octopus his wife and live with it forever in his home which he has converted into a large aquarium.

But the only sea creatures who have any interest in the money are lobsters. The only octopi who circle by rudely scoff. The lobsters are easily amused and cannot resist the opportunity. Hamster tries to get the attention of the octopi by doing handstands and other feats of athleticism on the shoreline. They simply don't care. So Hamster sighs and decides to give it a go with a crustacean.

A lobster named Maria is chosen. Hamster takes her home to his mansion aquarium and they exist underwater for several years. Their marriage is a platonic one. He keeps her well fed with a varied diet of small fish, worms, mollusks, sea plants, ocean urchins, dead shrimps and snails. He also feeds on this. Over time it makes him sick. He gets sicker and dies. Maria pinches him but he is dead.

WASP



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW ANY ANIMAL THAT'S NOT A WASP; WHAT ANIMAL DID YOU DRAW?

Wasp disposes of his mask as soon as he sets foot in the city. He is hellbent on feeling good in a natural way. He cannot understand why he likes things he does not like and he is certain that this impulse is the basis for his myriad health ailments and all of humanity's plight.

He buys a ticket to see the latest superhero movie. Wasp understands that this is a thing one should like earnestly and he deeply tries to. He imagines himself as a superhero named Laser Dove. Laser Dove can fly and shoots a beam that inflicts a state of psychedelic bliss upon the target.

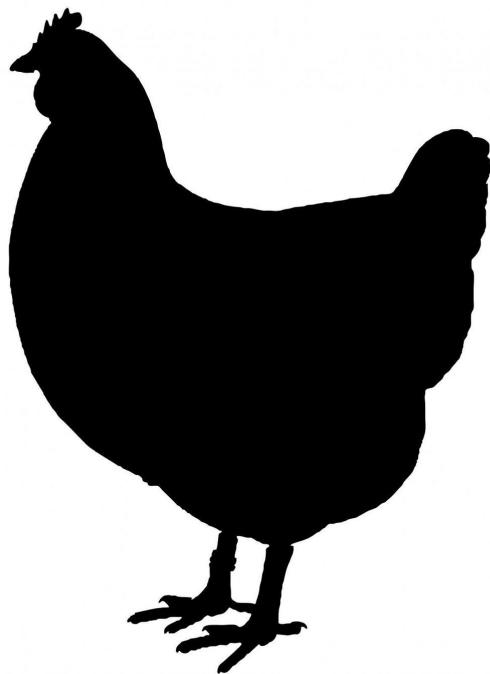
He leaves the theatre in a state of manic glee. He finally understands. His inspiration is real and true and he immediately starts work on creating his own superhero movie for the origin story of Laser Dove.

Laser Dove is a neuroscientist named Dr. Glenn Salmon who is fascinated with mysticism. He develops a gun that can fire a fast-permeating mist of mutated psilocybin strains. Any target that is hit will immediately feel total peace and

their hearts will be filled with empathy. Once Laser Dove has the assailant in this state he begins an incantation meant to permanently affix this state of mind with their psyche. He also wears a jet pack and dresses in all white.

The film is a total low-budget affair. Many people like it when Wasp release it. It grows in popularity slowly via word-of-mouth. But they don't like it because it is good. They like it because it is bad. Wasp feels like he is back at square one in his quest to live a human life void of irony. He's not sure if it's possible for a human to do.

CHICKEN



{ Prompt }
↓

DRAW ANY ANIMAL THAT'S NOT A CHICKEN; WHAT ANIMAL DID YOU DRAW?

Chicken disposes of her mask as soon as she sets foot in the city. She is almost immediately subjected to a brutal attack that leaves her face a pink blob. Everyone starts calling her Pink Blob Girl or PBG. The attack has also altered her voice. PBG cannot really speak anymore. She whistles and it makes a lovely sound. The sound is truly delightful.

A record producer catches wind of the whistling voice. His name is Jim. He invites PBG to his studio. He records her talking. He can't understand a thing and PBG is extremely confused. She does not know why he wants to record their conversation. The sound of her voice sounds like words inside her head and not like a whistle at all.

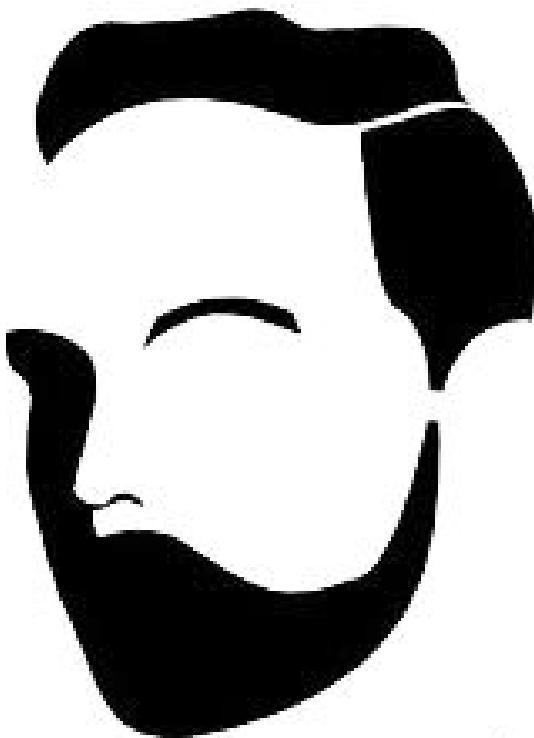
Jim releases the recordings as an album called *The Whistling Delights of Pink Blob Girl*. PBG becomes a massive star. When people hear the whistling voice they immediately enter into a passive state of bliss. The sound is addictive. Life in the city is forever altered as people stop working and stop looking after the children. They only long to hear the whistle. Nothing else matters.

Jim schedules the first live concert appearance of PBG at the city's football stadium. Massive riots leave hundreds dead as people try to enter the sold-out event without a ticket. They cancel the concert and the riots only worsen. The calamity and violence spreads throughout the city with the realization that hearing the whistle in person might never happen.

PBG tells Jim that she was once a beautiful but shy girl called Chicken. She cries and tells him that she misses her family and that she never wanted any of this. He doesn't understand a thing.

Armed men from the government break down the door. They kidnap Chicken and put her in a cage in the center of the city. They instruct her to start whistling and to never stop. If she stops she will be prodded with a hot iron. She's only allowed to stop for sleep between the hours of midnight and six in the morning. It's exhausting work talking when no one is listening. There is a constant flow of people who come to hear the sound. A complete collapse of the city is avoided.

SAL



{ Prompt }
↓

LIGHT THIS BOOK ON FIRE; DON'T TELL ANYONE YOU READ THIS BOOK.

Sal takes off his mask and puts it in his pocket. He hot-wires a car and speeds out onto the highway exiting the city.

He wants to find his dad. He wants to know his dad. His search is aimless but sincere. He rubs his head against the steering wheel of the car until all of his hair falls off.

Whatever he needs to do to stay alive and keep the journey going is done. He exits the highway and does horrible things. He steals. He eats food from the trash. He slaughters house pets. The world is magnificently large until you squeeze the life out of a small cat and eat the small cat for breakfast. He gets back on the road.

Whenever Sal commits a crime or atrocity he simply thinks about his dad. He feels a mix of resent and melancholy. He misses him and blames him for everything. Every small creature Sal needs to kill and eat to stay alive is the spiritual embodiment of his father. He longs to throw a ball to him and have him throw the ball back.

The highway is not his friend. The highway doesn't know where he is going or where he wants to go. It leads him to the end of the road. At the end of the road there is grass and dirt and rocky hills both ill-suited for roads and void of any need for them. Sal drives the car into a tree.

The car is totaled and the tree is badly damaged. The tree is an apple tree. Littered around the crashed car are bruised apples. Sal picks one up and a worm crawls out. Sal eats the worm.

He feels sick and disoriented and walks deep into the nature beyond the end of the road. He digs a hole and lies in it. He waits for the land to eat him and for something to grow from the land. The first thing happens in time. He is swallowed and the death of him is food. But nothing grows. His spirit rises above the land and watches all of the tiny holes in the dirt. No life springs forth. Nothing sprouts.

The spirit can only look for so long.

Eventually the mask in his pocket emerges from the soil. The thing wearing the

mask is not a real thing. There is no head under the mask. It's only the mask. The mask is empty. The mask has eyes and sees.