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Cloudscapes

Oil paint on glass animation

The concept of immortality has been fodder for imaginations since ancient times, with religions across the world from Christianity to Babylonian Mythology covering the topic through realms of gods and legendary methods to attain the grail that confounds all other mortals. While recent technological advancements such as regenerative biotechnology and mind uploading have brought humanity closer than ever before to achieving the state once relegated to merely stories, the universal intrigue behind eternal life that has brought humanity to that point has an undeniable foundation in the metaphors and metaphysics of fiction. However, as with all subjects of the unknown, the more that there is answered, the more there is to ask.

In the summer of freshman year, I too found myself fascinated by the questions posed by eternal life, and decided to contemplate them through a short story that I wrote about a love between an immortal painter of the sky and a mortal woman. The story felt incomplete, though I remained attached to the premise in hopes that I would find the proper way to present it one day. Therefore, the prospect of trying a different medium for Final Project led me to pursue the story once again, this time through painting-on-glass animation.

After various changes in my vision affected by the constraints of time and technology, I eventually settled on making it reminiscent of a children's book, with a simple color scheme and text accompaniments that represent the wonder and understated melancholy of their love. This, along with changing the story to take place in the cycle of a day, gave a sense of abbreviated time common in discussions of relativity outside of human perception. Overall, this piece serves as an homage to the ephemeral beauty of life and the stories of immortality antedating my own musings.

The Gravity of Eternity



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I. Immortality

In the domain of theoretical physics, there is a room with three entities: an apparatus, a human, and a nuclear bomb. Inside the apparatus is a quark. The quark spins, the apparatus records the motion, until it halts at a fateful measurement. The first iteration has begun. A gamble with a precisely even chance of two outcomes is rolled by the universe, resulting in no change to the bomb or the human thus. The cycle continues until the infinite measurement is taken, at which point the human has achieved immortality. The lucky one stands in the shadow of infinite selves, each a coin flip's worth less fortunate and hence incinerated alive. *Infinite life at the cost of infinite lives*— a postulate by the name of Quantum Suicide.

Quantum immortality is an experiment that has never been tested nor ever will be. Its application exists solely in theory with its parent's, the many-worlds interpretation. Popularized through narratives of alternate dimensions and universes splitting off at every decisive moment, imaginations captured by the concept butterfly across as many paths as the phenomenon itself. Infinite worlds lend themselves to infinite possibilities, which even in a state of superposition hold an air of endless ideas for the thinkers of the world that we live in.

These thinkers are led by life and limited by death; the same life and death in their minds as in the world of quantum theory and the universe, with the Big Bang and its looming future. The notion that there is a beginning and an end to everything seems to function as an irrefutable law in this universe. However, upon breaking other edicts of life on Earth with the power of their minds, humans have set forth for generations to break the latter part of the entrenched rule and be set free from the boundaries of time by finding the key to immortality.

Legions of minds from countless regions and beliefs have all strived for the elusive grail of eternal life since the start of our species, though it has always turned out to be a Sisyphean task

for those who try. They dedicate their lives to having more life, only to waste the meager amount that they were allotted. Some have claimed to achieve it, but their words are mired by a lack of proof to their success. Alas, their only hope is the pages of past relics and the strides of future science; a hope that is reduced to the realms of fantasy and science fiction by the masses. However, perhaps it is only through the lens of the fantastical that we would find the key, if ever we could.

II. The Fantastical

As infinity lies on the line of future times, its negative counterpart serves as its syzygial complement, allowing the lore of past ages to ricochet off of one another's influence. Such a luxury was of no concern to beliefs germinating in the Paleolithic era, which formed concepts as concepts became objectively feasible. The unimaginable remained unimaginable in the period before its prime, leaving the primitive people to only their own fingers as countable sums of the lives they would have in the afterlife. Before infinity was born, it was seven.

In the thousands of years succeeding, the integer grew to become a snake. The snake contorted itself into a ring, its tail devoured perpetually by its head in commencement of a ceaseless cycle. Thenceforth the creature birthed one of the first symbols of eternity, with the name of Ouroboros bestowed upon it. Dwelling on the golden walls of the Enigmatic Book of the Netherworld, it went by the sobriquet of "Mehen" in Egyptian times. A snake-god that shielded Ra from danger in his passages through the underworld, its presence etched into the riches of Pharaoh Tutenkhamen's tomb guided the remaining spirits of the new cadaver to Duat, where eternal life awaited him after judgment.

The snake was accompanied by a mirror in the shape of an ankh. Encased in golden glyphs before it vanished, the piece reflected myth into a world of mortals. Serving as an aperture between

the earth, the heavens, and the Field of Reeds, it was the “breath of life” that encompassed all stages of spirits, from ka to akh.

Soon to be adorned with a kingdom’s adoration, the ankh uncovered the coffer of the breathless, wherein rivers, sands, and skies alike were immured in an inanimate abyss of the unthought. Until the “key to life” turned they laid waiting, when eventually its terminal click presented personification as a gift. The blessing of being imbued both objects and concepts with ageless anatomies and souls, forging the forces of reality into immortal deities. Through Duat and divinity, afterlife and animism allowed an attainable state of eternal life for those in the realm of reflections.

Abandoned by the dead, the surviving souls hold the mirror still. They trace the glints of light that weigh down their faces after years of worship, praying as they shrivel further for the gods they wagered on with their chance of eternity to be all as they hoped for.

One prays for Heaven.

Another prays for Jannah.

A third prays for Gan Eden.

The others join the latter in reminiscence of paradise. Lamentations fog the mirror of life and revert to a reflection of long ago in the haze. There, a man and woman sat alone, surrounded by a garden of vernal beauty akin to their own bodies. Fashioned by God, the land was a paragon of nature, though even it could not canopy over the nature of the human condition. Temptation had already coiled around the roots of the Tree of Life, perching its eyes on the young woman. As a charmer entrances a snake by a song it cannot hear, the snake entranced the woman by a fruit she could not taste. The pungency of dulcet desire painted the grass in her mind’s eye with a viridity only visible through her envisaging: a color of verdure more vivid than even the garden of God could

muster. She stepped forth, hypnotized by the serpent's song of defiance, and reached her hand out to a low-hanging branch. She twisted the stem sixfold, and watched the pith be stripped from its source of perennial life— *Infinite life at the cost of infinite life*. Holding the fruit delicately to her budding lips, she parted them and bit into it. In the moment before her mandible lifted, she witnessed visions of the savor dancing in tandem with her tongue to the rhythm of permanence, whispering to her senses the secret to enlightenment. It was solely after the genesis of sin that her epiphany had arisen: the only life that the bite revealed to be greener than Eden was herself.

Exiled to a world of death and all woes with it, the consequences from the couple's crime of curiosity brought forth the first banes to humanity's existence. Man was sentenced to suffer through sweat, woman through tears, and their offspring through blood, spilt by another of theirs in sin.

The man lived a millennium from the day that he was molded of clay, returning to the earth from whence he came. The mantle of survival cascaded down his descendancy, until they too corroded in the wake of each other's influence.

Above the dissolution, the king Ubara-Tutu sits on his throne in a palace for eighteen thousand years. His son Shuruppak shoulders integrity on a sharpened reed as he chisels morals onto clay, as man was once made. The cuneiform resides in the form of Utnapashtim, a son compelled to construct the "Preserver of Life" by the god Enki. In embarking, he and his wife watch the waters wash away mankind in one fell wave, drowning knowledge with the dead. The flood subsides, and Utnapashtim stares forward in the last direction left to look. Enki stands at the shore fringing the sea of adversity, and grants the anchored couple immortality— *infinite life at the cost of kingdoms*.

Unnumbered years passed as Utnapashtim and his spouse settled in an abode across the sea in peaceful privacy. Upon a short saunter by the dock one day, he saw a ship moored with a man adjacent. The figure introduced himself as Gilgamesh, a mortal desiring the gift of his ancestor that stood before him, to which the immortal offered counsel of a conquest over slumber. The hero obliged, only to sleep through seven ticks with molding loaves of bread as accompaniment. In recompense, Utnapashtim bestowed upon him a gift of knowledge in the form of divulgence, sharing the story of a boxthorn at the bottom of the waters that restored youth to those pricked by it. Eagerly, Gilgamesh shared his gratitude and departed for the sea with stones tied to his soles as shoes. Diving down to the depths as directed by the ageless man, he resurfaced with a bundle of the boxthorn grasped in his bleeding hand. While resting on his returning journey, though, a serpent stole the plant and slithered off, leaving only a layer of skin it had sloughed from its newfound youth.

Heartbroken, the hero approached his home with an empty hand. However, as he walked closer, the walls that demarcated the city revealed a story of mortals in each brick laid. Otherwise lost in the annals of time, the eyes of callow boys and wizened men emanated through every crevice from constructions preceding, tenacious in their last grips of legacy. For each crack, a finger slipped off until they would fall into their imminent fate, and man would continue to sweat further. Oblivion never occurred to the omnipotent as it did to the obsolete. Brushing the tips of his fingers across the evidence of their existence, the hero tapered his touch at the texture of erosion that rippled from the perimeter to the parapets. Dropping to the earth, he sifted through the surrounding specks of sand, smiling to himself. A pearl of catharsis welled in his eye, to be absorbed by the grains on which it would fall. Balance was a beauty unbeknownst to him before, but with the pieces brought together as a blend of one whole, he finally felt harmony within the world.

Generations pass, and the wall cedes into ruin. In the hourglass of desert time, a ziggurat sprouts from the dunes of sand that buried builders. Their forefathers lost to artesian springs of sweat, the descendants dream of building to the heights of the heavens. They speak in homogeneity as they seek salvation through their own means, making a name for themselves lest God scatter their memory. As they grow closer to the clouds, the deity starts to fear humanity's ability to reach new apogees. He stirs a concoction of confusion through muddled syllables and consonants, pouring them over the people of the land. Condemned to the aquifers of the forgotten where men of old lay, they fall from their pedestal of knowledge once more, never to understand each other again. The brook of broken dreams babbles on, whisking away their lives and language with it. Only their creator remains in the rubble of Babylon, conqueror of his humans' right to wisdom.

As the river of the vanquished raced, a baby was dipped into the waters by its heel. Wailing as it was pulled back into its mother's embrace, the child was named Achilles, a warrior of legend prophesied to be undefeated in all battles undertaken. Raised with a mortal by the name of Patroclus, the tempest of the boy's unbridled temper was calmed by the other's compassion, resulting in a balance between the two souls. As they matured together, balance bloomed into romance, and the duo found a desire deeper than any victory or spoils in war for each other. It was through their devotion, though, that Achilles' true heel was revealed. Donning his partner's armor, the good Patroclus was impaled by the spear of Hector of Troy, which sealed a fate of the prince's desecration by the wrath of the grief-stricken warrior.

Keeled over the corpse of his lost lover, Achilles keened for weeks without food or drink. Fed ambrosia, nourishment of the gods, his flesh lived on as a vessel of redress. With its sword unsheathed, the shell dragged the body of the prince across the land by the heels in a vengeful stupor until struck in the heel itself, in an act of inadvertent mercy by the arrow of the Trojan's

brother. In its last minute of life, it wept in bliss at its mortality. Returning to the river Styx from whence it was once dipped, the fractal of Achilles' soul saw a figure at the end of the tunnel. The eyes of one reeled in the other's, until the vacancy left from a death ago was filled with passion anew to either soul— *infinite love at the cost of infinite life*.

Meanwhile, the life of another Trojan prince rests alone in a room with a bed. In youth, the man was known as Tithonus, a handsome lover of the goddess of the dawn, Eos. In their infatuation, the goddess begged Zeus to bestow immortality upon her lover, so that they could live their eternal lives out in each other's company. However, the blessing was unveiled to be a curse, as the goddess watched her prince's once-sightly face begin to furrow at the herald of age. The horror of her wish befell poor Tithonus, who lost his mind and body to the brink of their natural longevity. Eventually, the cusp of her endurance was reached, and unable to bear any more witness to her mistake, she locked her lover behind closed doors, never to open them again. The only motion left in the prison is of his thinned lips muttering musings over death— *infinite life at the cost of insanity*.

“When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more...”

She watched as the Ithacan king rose from slumber on an island secluded past the Ionian Sea. In a dwelling on the isle, the nymph Calypso looked on from her chambers as her love of seven years dressed and left to prepare for his journey home. She, wearing a silken shawl and subdued expression, rested her shoulders on the door jamb in observation as four days and one score of felled logs passed by. Eos remained for as long as the sun touched the horizon in fascination with the man constructing his ship. Adoration had afflicted her fellow immortal, and in promise that the man would stay with her for eternity, Calypso guaranteed him perpetuity. However, the mortal declined the gift of life that had confounded humanity in an austere hope of

returning to his home. Eos did not know if it was a budding sense of envy or derived deliverance that struck her grief-ridden soul, or perhaps some other amalgam of emotion. Whatever the feeling may have been, though, it did not set with the sun that she raised with the rooster's crow. It did not wane with the moon's lunar luster. Neither her brother Helios nor sister Selene had seen such a sentiment from their aerial chariots as they revolved through the last eve.

Eos returned to Calypso on the fifth and final daybreak, helping with an early-morning light as the nymph passed on to the sailor her finest parting gifts. After the wines and meats were boarded, she called upon a gale to set him asea peacefully, and stood back as he took the hull. As the waves carried his silhouette farther away, Calypso envisioned herself as Eurodyce behind her husband Orpheus. Closing her lids to see the lights of the upper world flooding Hades' gates, she waited for his fated glance, but as she opened her eyes no such moment came. Once the dot vanished, her hold onto hope was let go, and her tear ducts turned sodden. Seeing Calypso sob helplessly as she once did, Eos came to hold her in a rosy-tinctured embrace, reaping the fruits of her formerly fallowed grief. The two swayed in solidarity with the cyprus trees, until the last hues in the sky all turned to the noon's cerulean blue. *Infinite passion at the cost of an infinite passion.*

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