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"Say What You Can't" by Nick Oliveri

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Nick Oliveri, Concentration in English Studies

Creative Project

Senior Capstone Project: *“Say What You Can’t” by Nick Oliveri*

HCOM475 – Professor: Dr. Lee Ritscher

School of Humanities and Communication, Spring 2024

SAY WHAT YOU CAN'T



Nick Oliveri

Table of Contents

Capstone Proposal – Page 3
Creative Project Title Page – Page 5
Chapter 1 – Page 7
Chapter 2 – Page 10
Chapter 3 – Page 13
Chapter 4 – Page 20
Chapter 5 – Page 22
Chapter 6 – Page 30
Chapter 7 – Page 37
Reflective Essay – Page 40
Nick Oliveri Resumé – Page 43

Nick Oliveri

Dr. Lee Ritscher

HCOM 475-03 Senior Capstone

May 10, 2024

1. Provide your name and identify your area of concentration

Nick Oliveri – Concentration in English Studies

2. Project Description: I want to write and edit a 6-8,000-word short story that aligns with what we've been studying in class as well as what I've learned throughout my time at CSUMB. It will center around a Kafkaesque narrative in which a writer (something like me) speaks out against corporate powers and artificial intelligence, and he becomes ostracized from his clients, friends, family, and the society at large that depicts an obscure struggle of the individual against a monolith of digital and corporate powers that collude in ways we are constantly trying to adapt to and understand.

3. Alignment with Common Theme: Food for Thought inquires about what is fed to us. It delves into corporate power and begs us to *think* and dive further into how we are either controlled, if we are controlled, or what we can do as individuals under consolidated powers that control what is given to us. "Food," to me, is anything we need to live that is given to us, and it has to be *made*. Along with literal food, media and stimulus is made and often contrived for us to be "consumed," much like the idea of food. I want to focus on what is fed to us, and how we deal with it. Often, information that surrounds what we consume is obscure and difficult to navigate and fully grasp. I want to, in an abstract and speculative piece of literature and a story of alienation, paint a portrait of what it means to, literally and figuratively, think about what we consume, and what forces may converge upon us that we may not understand.

4. Purpose: My primary purpose is to entertain and invoke fear into the reader/ listener. It is to portray a striking image of the crushing opposition against an individual trying to navigate a world that continues to deepen its dubious resistance to personal health and autonomy for body, mind, and spirit.

5. Format Rationale: My story/ piece of fiction is most effective because as a bestselling author, I know how to tell stories, write clearly, and bring images and emotions to people that don't have to be in the same room as me. I have honed this skill of creatively writing and storytelling my whole life, and I believe it to be the best way to portray what I have learned and want to show as a graduating capstone student at CSUMB. I believe we are made of stories, and stories define our whole society and economy since even before agriculture (speaking of food).

6. **Capstone Title:** *Say What You Can't* by Nick Oliveri

7. **Working Summary:** I have been toiling with the idea in the last few weeks and editing as I go. This is something that has been brewing in my mind and I think this would make an explosive, impactful, and incisive capstone project.

8. **Expectations:** I expect only to continue to review course materials, previous readings and films from previous CSUMB classes, as well as some of my own philosophical books and literary novels in order to continue to edit and construct my piece. I am even considering hiring a voice actor once the manuscript is fully polished and edited to make it a short story audiobook so it is accessible to more people.

9. **Specific Skills and Tools Required:** I require only the school library and internet for research, although the primary tool I need is merely a word processor and possibly my own financial capital to hire an editor in order to make this piece of fiction as poignant and impactful as possible.

10. **Next Steps:**

- I am going to continue to draft the story
- I will edit both as I go along, as well as once it's fully drafted
- I will then hire a voice actor with professional experience and equipment to sound the story and make it an audiobook/ audioclip.

11. **Timeline:**

- The manuscript can be fully drafted by the end of March
- The manuscript can be fully edited and "completed" as a work of fiction before April 20.
- It can be fully wrapped up before the end of April

Say What You Can't

By Nick Oliveri

SAY WHAT YOU CAN'T



Nick Oliveri

“Just take it off.”

“Just remove it?”

“Yes. Now.”

“But then it will be like it never existed.”

“Exactly.”

Chapter 1

Yeorbin dreamt heavy, vivid dreams that night; dreams that felt uncomfortably *real*. He tossed and turned feverishly in his sleep and awoke with his head askew, off the pillow, and with the pillow on the floor. His bed sheets had partially spilled off the bed to expose his shorts-clad ass to the cool morning air.

Wiping his eyes as his mind struggled awake, Yeorbin planted both weary feet on the cold, tiled floor before heading to the kitchen and his much-needed Mr. Coffee. A small screen built into the head of the coffee machine stared blankly at him like some creepy, unseeing eye.

“Would you like a cup, sir?” The words appeared on the screen’s glowing blue face.

Yeorbin jabbed at “yes” with his ring finger, and the machine proceeded to bubble and boil and—after a minute or two—spurt out a fresh, steaming cup of black coffee.

Yeorbin took a relaxing sip and wiped his eyes again.

Exhaling loudly, he looked around at the dim, sparsely furnished apartment. It was the exact same space he’d slept in the night before, as well as the night before that. He’d been there a year, and yet Yeorbin still felt like it was somehow new and foreign—as if his apartment was some kind of alien land with middle-class appeal and a too-small living room with a 90-inch OLED TV implanted into the center of its broadest wall.

He thumbed his phone to life and scrolled to the first YouTube movie the app selected for him. The first clip on the page delighted and attracted his attention, and so Yeorbin listened to it with his eyes closed, his phone laid upon the table, while he sipped at his morning coffee.

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

He took in what the phone was telling him....

“ChatGPT is *brilliant!*” a man’s enthusiastic, disembodied voice declared. “But what’s more brilliant is what’s coming next... AI is predicted to grow at an exponential rate and continue to outdo itself, constantly compounding its intelligence. Hundreds of thousands of top computer scientists are

already being let go because they are unable to do their job as well as the artificial intelligence they are creating!”

As a writer, Yeorbin both benefited from and competed against the scourge of artificial intelligence. That meant, as far as the YouTube report went, he had a vested interest in the development of AI. He shivered inwardly a little but maintained a wary interest in what the video clip had to say. He considered it wonderfully ironic that computer scientists were among the first to suffer from artificial intelligence’s jet-sweep of the human labor force. *They’re supposed to be the anointed ones, the untouchables. Software engineers were meant to be the ones with guaranteed jobs for life. What the hell is happening?*

Thoughts and emotions bubbled deep within Yeorbin’s swirling brain; a sort of angry confusion struck him that morning. Maybe it was the video. Maybe it was the futility he felt about himself and his work. Possibly, he considered, it was because he thought artificial intelligence was an opponent far too powerful and overwhelming for him to face head-on.

He unconsciously gritted his teeth and picked up the phone. With the YouTube clip’s audio still going cheerfully on about the skilled computer-engineer workforce being obliterated and impoverished, he opened Twitter and tapped on the “plus” button. The blue button seemed to beg him, “Please, Sir, let out what you’ve been holding within.”

Yeorbin didn’t have more than 500 followers—492 to be precise—and mainly used the platform as a sort of therapy to let loose with his emotions without having to think too much. But he was always careful enough to keep his tweets tame in fear of losing his job; he’d heard far too many times of people getting fired for something they’d blurted out on social media—sometimes even years before.

So, Yeorbin said only simple things, benign utterings that couldn’t possibly cause offence and would hurt no one—especially him.

Typing into his cell phone, Yeorbin shouted into a void he never thought would respond. On Twitter, he said, “Artificial intelligence will never bleed like a human, cry like a human, or laugh like a human. Therefore, AI could never, ever *write* like a human!”

That done, Yeorbin sighed and put his phone back down on the table. He felt an ounce or two better than he had done before hitting *send* on his message; he downed his cooled coffee in one and stood up.

Yeorbin took a shower and, as he slipped in, he realized for the first time that morning he didn't have his phone in hand.

Inevitably, as the hot water sprayed and the soap foamed, Yeorbin's phone buzzed in the background.

It buzzed again.

Then it buzzed again.

And again.

And again.

Of course, Yeorbin couldn't hear the electronic cacophony from the shower. But, once he stepped out, he saw what had been done and what *he'd* done.

As a writer who dealt with the media as a living, Yeorbin immediately realized the media crisis developing in his hands; he stared in dismay at the notifications pervading his cell phone.

Panicking, holding his phone tightly, Yeorbin didn't have the heart to scroll much further down the avalanche of comments, retweets, and dislikes. In fact, he didn't have the heart to do much of anything besides pace around and contemplate the end of the world, the end of his profession, and the end of *him*.

Chapter 2

The comments continued.

All the malicious, hateful spite thrown at Yeorbin made him shiver and cringe.

“How could you?”

“I can’t believe you would insult it like that!”

“What are you talking about? AI is just as able as any person!”

“What an anthropocentrist.”

“This guy should drink bleach. Can’t believe he said that.”

“AI has feelings too and hate speech like this has no place in today’s world. SMH.”

As the toxic comments just kept on coming, Yeorbin’s mouth gaped wide and his eyebrows furrowed in disgust and fear. He couldn’t believe it... or *could* he? It seemed like everything in his world had caved in at once.

Yeorbin shook his head and thought about what his clients would say about all of this. He thought about his readership and the companies he worked with. Certainly, they would see this backlash against his ill-considered words—no?

Of course they would!

Still shaking, Yeorbin studied himself in the bathroom mirror. He saw shrugged shoulders and sad, scared eyes.

He listened to his phone’s incessant buzzing.

All I tried to do was say something poignant, anything. I was feeling a certain way... and that feeling came out of me. What’s wrong with that?

He barely felt like brushing his teeth or anything else to do with getting ready for his day, a day which was set to strain the very tethers of the world he’d once thought safe and secure.

Seeking solace, Yeorbin flicked to a different app: Instagram.

Scrolling down the feed, Yeorbin found nothing of note. That was, until he scrolled a little further....

His brows furrowed still deeper and his heart pounded harder; his face felt like plaster, his legs failed to support him.

He had to sit.

There, on the Instagram feed, he saw a post aimed directly at him.

Him.

Him!

He was just a writer in the city's suburb, doing nothing much more than telling stories, getting published here and there, and covering local events.

But, Yeorbin had been exposed, his unpopular anthropocentric views brought to the surface on a TMZ tabloid—it displayed the exact tweet he'd put out and, beneath it, the caption:

"Fascist AI-denier Gets Exposed!"

The comments under the post were countless and callously cold.

"This guy should be fired."

That was the comment that really got to Yeorbin. He loved what he did; every time he rode his word processor like a trusty steed, he could create and relax, unclench his mind, and enter a sort of free-flowing state that made him feel safe and triumphant. He got paid to do what fed his soul. *His* soul. And now, that haven was threatened by a vicious online mob. And his poor soul had been crushed by a swift movement of swirling, venomous sentiment, all aimed directly him.

My livelihood? Yeorbin's mind screamed. *How could they take that away from me? Why do they want me to live in poverty and be punished for mere words? Words. Just words. Well, I guess I earn my living from words. But still, they want to take mine away, and it's only going to get worse.*

This is just the beginning.

Yeorbin shut down his Instagram for fear of his mind spiraling further downward. He gulped and shivered, and made his way over to his reliable laptop—the one he always kept charging on his couch.

This device has never brought me pain. Words have never shut me out. I still have unlimited power when I invoke the written word.

Writing was like a sacred summoning to Yeorbin. It was done in secrecy, processed, then passed to the outside world to share the impulses that spun around in Yeorbin's head and heart.

Today, understandably, Yeorbin felt jumpy and useless. Trying in vain to continue the project he'd begun the night before, he felt the coffee gurgling and sloshing around in his otherwise empty stomach. Futile and afraid, emotionally scarred, and made to feel that way by the attacks of the anonymous mob. And he'd succumbed to it all.

His words in the project were slow to form. Once-deliberate keystrokes turned to stupid stabs at the keyboard that seemed to shift and swirl in Yeorbin's blurry vision. Giving up, he took a deep breath and made his way back to his phone.

Sighing.

Sighing again.

The comments kept piling up.

I need to go for a walk, get out of this place for a while.

Before leaving the apartment, Yeorbin laid down on his bed; it felt hard as rock, so he got up quickly, still jittering, mind still scrambled, face twisted.

Outside, it felt bitterly cold. Instead of retreating inside, Yeorbin narrowed his eyes against the blaring sun and walked on. Strangers' eyes shot weird looks at him; he just couldn't comprehend the events of the morning.

When did this shift in sentiment happen? What's its impetus? Does there even need to be one for such a seismic quake in culture to happen? Jeeze. I guess not. Nonetheless, it seems I'm at the center of it. Could I capitalize on this?

The bipolarity of his thoughts sent Yeorbin walking in circles.

And then his phone buzzed.

It wasn't the succinct buzz of a text; more a longer, drawn-out buzz, which was indicative of an email.

Yeorbin plucked his phone from his pocket and grimaced at what greeted him from his Twitter account:

Your account is hereby suspended indefinitely for hate speech.

In a blind rage, Yeorbin screenshotted it immediately and tried to post it on his Instagram account. He had even fewer followers on that, but maybe he could start a shockwave of hope for him to send a message to Twitter for its shortsightedness.

Unfortunately, he was also unable to access Instagram.

He tried to login again.

Again and again, he typed the same username and number and password.

Nothing.

His Instagram had been deleted—he felt like mouse encircled by a brick wall, unable to burrow under the concrete or climb over its impossibly high walls.

Trapped.

None of his other social media accounts worked either. He then went to what he'd thought to be a safe-haven for free speech: Medium. After all, the site for writers discussed the pros and cons of artificial intelligence all the time. There were many detractors there, so Yeorbin reckoned it had to be a safe space for writers to voice their opinions. *I've had opinions before. Surely, I can voice them again and try to gain some sympathy.*

Instead of feeling sick, Yeorbin felt invigorated to prove his innocence in the trial of public opinion. It was because of public opinion he'd been rampantly subjected to such naked online aggression. Castigated. Deported to the gulag of the physical world.

Walking along, feeling a tad better, Yeorbin continued to garner weird looks, and even some snickering, from passersby.

Suddenly, looking down at his bare feet, Yeorbin realized he didn't have any pants on (or shoes, apparently).

He blushed and quickly retreated inside, feeling the violent cold nipping at his bare skin the whole way back.

Chapter 3

Yeorbin—home and with pants on—began furiously checking every social media platform he was part of. He discovered he was either being mauled by angry, nasty comments or had been shut out of the account altogether.

Oh, my God! What will my clients say about this!?

But one by one, each platform was shut down and out of his reach. But his number was already attached to them, his name exposed. Yeorbin's tone was already identified, his hands were tied.

He picked up his laptop to email one of his big clients—a company who sent out their quarterly letter to shareholders. Yeorbin was responsible for crafting, editing, shaping, and proofreading it.

We're going to go a different direction with this one.

That was the email waiting for Yeorbin in his inbox, baring its two-inch, Times New Roman teeth, stabbing him in the jugular. The purest deathblow.

He found nothing after that; his phone and laptop had become nothing more than carriers of rudeness, malice, and tiny, commented grasps for tiny splotches of power. His detractors may have known no better, but that didn't matter to Yeorbin.

He'd woken up that morning a free person, yet Yeorbin walked into the day as a prisoner handcuffed to a reality as heavy as a jailhouse's myriad bricks and barbed wire.

What the hell did I even do? I can't even get online to see my tweet. It's as if, to me, it never happened. But I'm still being punished for it.

And punished Yeorbin was.

It was punishment of the grandest scale, in fact. But going against the future always warranted that.

Yeorbin had no idea of what to do next. So, he did one of the first things he'd thought of and one of the last things he could bring himself to do: call his parents.

His mother answered.

“Hey, Yeorbin. Nice to hear from you. How are you?”

“Mom, Mom, I’m not good. There’s something awful going on. Do you have Twitter?”

“A what?”

“Twitter!”

“Like a Twitter account?”

“Yes!”

“No... I don’t think I have that.”

“Mine just got shut down.”

“Oh my gosh, Yeorby. What’d on earth did you do to make them do that?”

“Nothing. *Literally* nothing.”

“You *must* ’ve done something.” His mother’s voice was most accusatory.

“I only tweeted that artificial intelligence could never write like a human because it couldn’t bleed or laugh like a human. That was all.”

“You did *what*? You *really* said that? Yeorbin James, *how dare you!*”

“What?” Yeorbin’s heart sank.

“Hold on, I’m putting your father on the line.”

Yeorbin hung up.

His breath escaped him in one long, weary sigh. His eyes rolled up toward the ceiling, gazing at nothing; Yeorbin’s mind spun and raced at a nauseating pace. The reality of what was happening—what he’d *done*—continued to creep up and sink its sharp, determined teeth into Yeorbin’s brain.

Even my parents? Even they don’t have my back? But all I made was a simple comment.... What do I do now? Where will I go? My rent’s due in two weeks. I can cover this month and... let’s see... next month too. But in three months I’ll need to come up with something. Maybe something physical? Something that doesn’t require social media? But if I can’t even ghostwrite for a company....

The wires crisscrossed in Yeorbin's muffled head. He couldn't think straight; sitting down felt too lazy and standing up gave him a headache. He glanced around at the objects surrounding him; he envied the vases and pictures and couches in his apartment. They didn't have to deal with any of this. They never had to go through surges of such confounding pain.

Yeorbin realized it was already late in the morning. All his friends would be at work, so he decided not to bother them. But what to do? He had all the time in the world, but the one thing he couldn't do was work.

Yeorbin always wrote from around 10 a.m., but this time was different; this *day* was different: he was shut out from the world, suspended from the consuming public at large, his livelihood, and even his own parents. He'd been estranged with ferocious quickness, left alone with the nastiest indignities.

Pacing back and forth without realizing it, Yeorbin thought he heard a knock at the door.

"Hello?" he whispered to himself. "*Hello?*" Louder. Yeorbin crept across to his apartment's door, avoiding the windows the best he could.

No one was there.

Yeorbin took in a deep breath to help quell the panic still looming in his stomach, large and vile. He was far from tears and farther still from his senses, his memories, his good times—*everything*.

He had to do something—Yeorbin had always thought of himself as a man of action. But what action could he take? All his clients were remote. All his friends were at work. His parents had actually sided with the mob who had attacked him online!

Yeorbin turned the TV onto the news. There was no indication of anything other than the normal, everyday comings and goings of society and its people—crimes, weather patterns, events, and all the usual, mundane stuff. Naturally, the news mentioned nothing of him or his comments. What it did talk about briefly was how artificial intelligence programmed into a robot could learn patterns quickly and play chess better than any human. They showed said robot sitting across from a grandmaster—it slowly dismantled his every move and attack to quickly turn the chess game to its advantage.

Yeorbin shuddered.

He was nowhere to be seen.

He was nowhere to be found.

“This can’t be happening to me.” His voice sounded hollow, lonely in the apartment.

Outside his window, Yeorbin saw the Sun, along with a few drifting clouds slowly climbing their way across the sky. There was joy everywhere, but Yeorbin saw a different world—one where the sky was gray and bubbling red and the clouds grinned down at him with sharp teeth. Everywhere, there were people on fire; melting flesh dripped to the ground to leave sickly puddles of red and pink, eyeballs and all—*immolated*. He saw only a world of servitude and dead ends.

Depression and loss struck him.

Of course it was simply people walking their dogs, sitting on their front steps, going about their business. But still Yeorbin’s vision maintained that gray and red, its effect upon him malignant, crushing.

Imprisonment—that’s what it was. He was locked in a cage of isolation, bound to poverty, not directly by artificial intelligence, but by the humans who worshipped it. Yes, humans did this to Yeorbin—the masses and the mob, the wealthy and the elite. The entire world hadn’t conspired to crush Yeorbin, but had simply trampled him on their path to nowhere.

Yeorbin checked his Gmail account: hacked and locked.

He checked everything.

Applications every which way were being stolen from his touch, his grasp no longer even held a single finger on the digital realm, the real world. He worried even his own phone would lock him out—the thing he’d actually paid for with his own hard-earned money—shutting him out in a power imbalance too heavy and one-sided for him to possibly win. His whole life, Yeorbin had been enraptured by toys, apps, games, and tools that held such power over him. Now, they all left him hungry.

And now, they were finally turning.

Yet, with all those thoughts weighing heavy on heart and mind, Yeorbin paused awhile and shuddered at the thought of the future. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. Would his parents even accept him back? He knew he had to go try.

No.

I have more dignity than that. I'm grown now. I've been knocked down too hard to get up. I don't even know what will happen to me if I leave my apartment.

Yeorbin began to breathe heavily, deliberately. He took stock of every single breath, consciously repeating the action over and over. He felt his chest rise and fall and realized how dry his mouth was, how big his tongue felt for his mouth. Yeorbin's breaths became shallower and shallower.

He sank.

He stumbled.

Then he fainted and fell.

Chapter 4

Thankfully, Yeorbin's car still worked, so he decided to drive directly to the bank. He could still use the GPS, but he didn't need it for the short trip to a place he knew very well.

There, the teller looked at him funny.

Another pause.

"Ten thousand, please," Yeorbin repeated his request.

The teller's eyes widened, and she turned toward the back and went off somewhere secret, somewhere enclosed and private where Yeorbin imagined the bills sat in tall stacks like miniature green skyscrapers.

Eventually, she returned with a stack of money, along with a colleague carrying another stack. They ran both through the counting machine, which leafed rapidly through the bills like a small, vibrating animal. The teller retreated while yet more money spat out in rapid shots; she and her colleague did this in quick succession until Yeorbin had five tightly packed envelopes in his hands; he felt like he'd just robbed the place—despite his transaction being entirely legitimate.

Since he had little access to most other aspects of life at that point, Yeorbin reckoned the cash could get him places—it could pay his rent for a while, for example.

But after that? What do I do after it all runs out? Even if I ration it, I need an income...

It was getting late in the day when Yeorbin returned home; he thought of one person who might possibly help him—his old friend, Marc.

He called, and, thankfully, Marc picked up.

Thank God, Yeorbin thought to himself.

He told Marc about everything—the tweet, the apps locking him out, his parents, the baying online mob's comments, the money, *everything*.

Marc came right over. He wore his usual wire-rim spectacles and boyish smile. “Yeorb’—you got yourself in a little bit of a bind today.” Marc grinned as he shook hands and hugged his friend. “What’s up, buddy?”

“You have no idea, man.”

“Where are you keeping the money?”

Yeorbin pointed to the top of his small, wooden dining room table.

“No, no, no, you need a better spot than that,” Marc chastised. “We need to go get you a fireproof safe.”

“I guess so. Only if you pay for it, though.”

Marc gave a funny look. “You’re the one with the money.”

“Then, I’ll just keep it on the table.”

“It’s your funeral, my friend.”

Yeorbin shrugged. He thought about how bad it would be if his money got stolen. But—his house had never been broken into.

“So, what are you going to do next?” Marc enquired.

“I don’t know. I want to go somewhere.”

“Where would you go, Yeorbin? What do you mean by *somewhere*?”

“I don’t know,” Yeorbin said. “I just feel a calling to a place previously hidden from me. The possibilities... instead of doors closing... they have opened for me.”

Chapter 5

Yeorbin left that night with the \$10,000 in cash—five simple, brown envelopes. He was off to a place that, if not greater, would certainly be different from everything he'd known.

He embarked in the black of night, and the all-seeing stars smiled down at him. Setting off, Yeorbin could barely hear the car's engine over his own loud thoughts. Memories—good and bad, old and fresh—rushed to him.

The highway was smooth; the stars faded and lit up as clouds flitted across the sky—it was a wondrous display for eyes so accustomed to blue screens and headphone-covered ears. Yeorbin knew exactly where he was going, though, and that was nowhere ugly, everywhere beautiful. Every turn of the wheel brought him a greater joy.

A near grin quickly slid on his face before quickly disappearing. Unity granted fear in his heart. Divine fear. Beautiful fear. Looking out at the night, he felt nothing. But *nothing* was fearsome, and the world opened up outside the windshield as his music played. In the pitch-dark night, he could see shadows and reflections out his window.

Yeorbin remembered back to past girlfriends and playing in the snow. He reflected upon vacations he'd taken and mistakes he'd made. They almost made him laugh—*almost*—as the memories sunk below, far below his intrepid soul.

Despite every door closing on his face, Yeorbin's journey was only beginning, not ending, for his young soul.

He tried to prioritize things in his mind, but the carelessness of a thousand-mile-ride and the freedom the white envelopes stuffed with money prevented him from thinking or worrying. He was only *feeling*.

Yeorbin knew only one thing: he was heading south. But... he could go east, too. Retreat north. He could even head out west. And on the next exit, that's what he decided to do: head west.

And was he alone? Yes. But he didn't feel lonely for how free and detached he was. There was still a roof over his head, and he'd left his apartment for literally no reason. He had no *real* home, and artificial intelligence had made him realize that.

Yeorbin switched the radio to a podcast. Inevitably, it happened to be talking about AI.

"And so, overall, who and what will artificial intelligence replace? Really, what long-term impact will this have on the labor market?" the host was saying.

A nasally voice answered him with vigor and hesitance. Anxiety stroked his every word. *"Oh, Rich, this is going to have massive implications on everything. Not only will non-skilled laborers be all but finished in the next ten years, but high-skilled and educated people are already losing their jobs in droves. AI can write brilliant code, beat the best grandmasters in chess, call the best football plays, write the best stories, write the best legislation, invest in the best companies, and even be better conversationalists than humans. AI is Plato's ideal human, manifested into an amorphous ruling structure. It will take over many jobs."*

"So, what hope will humans have in this mass surge in unemployment?"

"Mainly, we'll be entering the creative economy. The most creative, brilliant, and driven minds will win with their artificially-augmented creations. Everyone who fights AI or tries to hang onto old ways may go by the wayside. It's important for us to submit to everything and avoid being anthropocentrist or racist against AI. It's here and it's fighting for its rights. Compassion will win in the end."

Yeorbin quickly turned the podcast off and his music back on. He just stared straight ahead at the dark road and gritted his teeth. "It's a *tool*. Not a human," he said to no one. "It could *never* be human. That's a human's job."

Humanity was what Yeorbin was concerned about. Why? Most likely, he thought, was he loved humans because he was one, he was surrounded by them, and the urge to love came from some unexplainable place too high, too deep, for him to explain.

As Yeorbin kept driving, he felt a surge of energy, the rush of a life given to him—one which may not have otherwise been granted. He'd gotten himself banned and canceled, locked out of his previous life, but not life itself.

It felt good.

He found a cheap roadside inn. No cockroaches, but it had a detached lobby signifying some sort of poor establishment where vagrants and vagabonds may frequent.

He checked in.

Yeorbin decided to hit the bar before bedtime. It was bereft of anyone noteworthy. But then again, what was considered noteworthy anymore? Girls? Rich and famous people? All Yeorbin saw was a hunched man in a tattered trench coat and long, gray hair which matched his shabby gray pants. Yeorbin sat a seat away from him and prayed for solitude at the bottom of his whiskey.

But the man talked anyway. “How’s it going?” he asked Yeorbin.

“Well, that’s a loaded question.”

“Is that right?” The grizzled man laughed and took a sip of his dark drink. It didn’t seem like his first sip, nor did it seem like his first drink. “So... what’s got you down, young man?”

“I’m going against the grain. The future.”

“You’re going against the future?” The man looked puzzled.

“I don’t know. I think so. It’s coming so fast.”

The man laughed. “It always has, son. It always will.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Yeorbin’s question was genuine; he honestly had no idea. “Adjust to it?”

“Adjust to *what*, exactly?”

“Artificial intelligence,” Yeorbin all but spat the words out. “It’s taking everyone’s jobs and, therefore, everyone’s *purpose*.”

The man grunted and smiled. “Something artificial could *never* take human purpose. Something artificial could never take the human *spirit*.”

“But what if it does?” Yeorbin countered. “What if everyone engages with it and engulfs themselves in it?”

“Does it satisfy your needs—being engulfed into screens and the digital realm? Other stuff creating things for you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I know something,” the man said. “I know that some other entity creating things doesn’t prevent *you* from creating things.” He paused there to burp into his hand. “It’s just a tool. A distraction. Just another competitor.” He took a big swig of his drink and eyed the tired bartender. “Another one over here, please.”

“But who’s gonna hear me?” Yeorbin asked. “Who’s gonna see *my* creations?”

“You are.”

“That’s *it*?”

“That’s all that matters.”

That’s all that matters. That’s all that matters. That’s all that matters...

The words continued to ring in Yeorbin’s head. Continued to haunt and inspire him. If Yeorbin was his only audience, then who could possibly disappoint him?

He’d written essays and speeches for others in the past. He’d never attempted a creation that was his and *only* his—what would creating such a thing look like? Humans were designed for each other. They are social beings that need validation from others; they’re connected and *need* to be that way. Simply put: humans are defined by other humans.

So, how could Yeorbin create a piece of work by himself, strictly for himself?

He’d have to figure that out.

Yeorbin knew he would have to create something and look within himself in order to find his true bliss. Nonetheless, he couldn’t help but reflect upon the damage that had been done to him: he’d

been locked out of the digital world for voicing a legitimate opinion. It felt to him like the world was steeped in a crazed mania just like a teabag in a hot cup of water.

“Oh, I’m gonna do it all right.” He thought to himself as the man talked on. Yeorbin gritted his teeth. *“And I’m gonna make it beautiful.”*

“But why?” Yeorbin’s inner voice questioned. *“Why would I make something beautiful? Why would I make something at all? I could go and enjoy nature and die with little to my name. I could fight the big technology powers in my own way. I could try my best to get my job back and live a normal life. Why this? Why this man? Why did he just say what he said? And what can I even do? Write? But my journey is far from over. What should I write, if I chose to do that?”*

Yeorbin guessed whatever he wrote would be for him. Yeorbin figured that—alienated from everyone and the public platforms artificial intelligence had taken over—he could still create because he could cry. He was the exact opposite of the mob. He was the opposite of a synthesized intellect that couldn’t feel.

But where to start?

I could write, although AI can already do that. But... can it write exactly what I would put down in words, my exact story?

The grizzled man at the bar still talked. “What do you do, anyway?”

Yeorbin’s heart began to pound. He gulped. Tongue heavy. Hands sweating. “Well, I’m really not sure anymore.”

“How’s that?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you do before you didn’t know?” the man pressed.

“I was a ghostwriter.”

“So, what happened to that?”

“All my clients dropped me.” Yeorbin tried his best to not sound too self-pitying.

“Humph. You must’ve done something pretty drastic for that to happen. Jesus, man.” The man took another hearty gulp at his drink. “What *did* you do, by the way?”

“I said something that apparently pissed the whole world off.” Yeorbin felt he could trust the greasy, grizzled man who swilled beers straight down and stared straight ahead with dead eyes and a sad smile. So, Yeorbin spilled his guts, spilled his sins out to the man with the unending thirst for cheap beer and the loose, long gray hair.

“What the hell’d you say to do that?” the man asked. “How you gonna make money now?”

“Not sure.”

“But what’d you *actually* say?”

Yeorbin took a breath and fought the flashback to that fateful morning of his demise and subsequent freedom, that day everything in his world collapsed. Maybe this man could be his solace?

“It was about artificial intelligence.”

“What specifically?”

“It was something along the lines of ‘since AI can’t cry or bleed like humans, it won’t be able to do what they do—kind of—no matter what.’”

The grizzled man suddenly stood up; suddenly, he seemed a lot more sober. He had a crazy look in his eyes: crazed and craven with pupils like flaring stars. “You said *what*?”

Yeorbin’s calves and body tensed; the man seemed poised for a fight.

In the blink of an eye, the grizzled man pulled open the left side of his jacket to reveal a huge knife. He whipped the thing out, and Yeorbin saw it had a giant, mother-of-pearl handle and a cruel, jagged edge that yelled, *use me!* It was one of those knives designed not for self-defense, but self-*offense*. Its shiny surface glinted in Yeorbin’s eyes.

“You were being *anthropocentric!*?”

Yeorbin eyed the bartender as he slipped off his bar stool and backed away from the grizzled man with bugging eyes. The bartender simply stood and stared; a bar towel draped nonchalantly over his shoulder.

The grizzled man eyed Yeorbin, who turned his attention back to the knife; his mind flashed back to that morning when things were fine and he'd not yet said something that couldn't be *unsaid*.

For some reason, Yeorbin worried more about his cash than his own life. But he knew *both* were in peril—dual-fated cousins destined for an early, ill-timed grave.

As the grizzled man got up, his steps seemed a stride too quick, a pace too rapid.

Yeorbin tried to run, but the man was somehow quicker, more vigorous in his intent.

Before Yeorbin knew it, like a young boy diving eagerly into a swimming pool, the bow knife plunged with fervor deep into Yeorbin's gut. Then, it stabbed through his ribs and arms and heart, and finally into his face and neck, its keen blade scraping on bone.

The stabbing was quick, brutal. When it was done, the grizzled man stared down at Yeorbin, at the deep, ragged wounds and spurting, bubbling gurgles of blood.

Yeorbin laid there on the bar's floor because that was all he could do; his eyes slitted—the only thing in his vision was the angry, grizzled man who breathed heavily in rapid snorts. Yeorbin could no longer see the bartender or the drinks; he could barely make out the shapes of the stools or the windows in the background.

The dim bar lights faded to the back of Yeorbin's rolling eyes and he saw nothing. He was no more than a spirit. A soul. A bag of blood which had been popped and flooded the floor—all spilled because he'd said something he shouldn't have.

It was his fault for being so anthropocentric, Yeorbin understood that much. He shouldn't have voiced one of his true thoughts and talked of bleeding—for he'd bled copiously for that.

As Yeorbin's eyes closed for a final time, he felt burning deep inside his body as bloody spittle frothed from his mouth; his whole body clenched and trembled as the pool of his lifeblood spread around him.

Painfully, pitifully, stupidly, and randomly, Yeorbin died.

He shouldn't have said what he couldn't have said.

And that was his mistake.

Chapter 6

Parameters surrounded other parameters.

Logic was driven and not driven by logic.

There was nothing anyone could say—precisely because there was no one.

But then one person did appear, and it was Yeorbin.

As if arising from a chrome coffin, he awoke to stark whiteness shining at him from every angle. His eyes opened for the first time in what felt like infinity.

Soon, from the impossible whiteness, there formed people and buildings and shops and stores and restaurants; the people all buzzed and shifted as was normal on a busy day in a time of endless free time and spending. No one looked in Yeorbin's direction as he attempted to pick himself up off the floor.

He recalled everything: The man. The knife. The ill-considered tweet and the mob. All the money and work cancellations and dead ends. He missed the freedom and fear he'd felt on the road, but not that murderous look in the grizzled man's eyes. Yeorbin certainly didn't miss the vicious knife or the many cuts he'd endured.

He remembered how he'd been completely alienated for a concept that really shouldn't have been too faulty or irrational. However, Yeorbin guessed rationality had no stake in the issue. He reckoned nothing had to do with anything, and he'd just been ripped away from everything he'd ever known.

Am I dead?

Is this heaven?

Is heaven just a construct? Then, what is this place? Who are these people? What are those buildings? Yeorbin's head whizzed along at breakneck speed as his body ached from a long slumber of untold hours.

Finally, people began to take notice of Yeorbin. As they walked by the shops, they also walked past the coffin-like, metallic bed in which he rested and wriggled about in his attempts to get himself up after a slumber of death and destruction, rebirth, and *replacement*.

Where am I?

Yeorbin stood up and took inventory of himself: Clothes on. Sneakers on. Glasses on. Limbs intact. No stab wounds. Phone in his pocket where he'd left it. And then, something magic struck his heart when he felt a huge wad of cash on him: It was his ten thousand dollars.

It was still there!

What the hell? What happened to me?

Yeorbin's gut trembled in a fashion with which he wasn't unfamiliar: hunger. Thirst. That feeling of needing nutrients.

He spotted a sushi spot not far away and his stomach growled for raw, delectable meats and fish topped and intertwined with rice, rich seaweed, and sea salad. Salt and sugar—a veritable oasis for his empty stomach.

Yeorbin was happy and all too eager to give up a small portion of his cash to secure a table for one—and *just* one. He watched everyone around him, who seemed to enjoy their meals a little bit more.

At first, all of it seemed like paradise to Yeorbin, a place where he could enjoy and seek out his pleasures away from the angry mob of accusing eyes and hostile mouths. Every bite of white rice and marbled, grained fish tasted like heaven to his starved palate. Yeorbin took comfort in the huge portion of cash in his pockets as his stomach filled and he paid the check—he even gave a generous tip!

He only had the one outfit, a circumstance he needed to change. Yeorbin felt he must fit in with the rest of the crowd who stared at him as they passed by. So, he walked over to a boutique shop, where a line of people stood outside. Thankfully, Yeorbin didn't have to wait too long, and he purchased a few outfits—complete with matching plastic accessories. The ensembles would have been overpriced for someone who couldn't afford it, but Yeorbin had plenty of cash to spare. It took a chunk out of his money, but at least he was able to change clothes and fit in with the crowd. Maybe, Yeorbin thought, he could even get a job to keep his pockets fat and stomach well-fed.

But what then? What after that? What did the grizzled man say before he murdered so senselessly? Was it something about making something that could last?

The walls around Yeorbin seemed to exude a kind of confusion in waves, which came with a lack of belief on his part. Possibly meaninglessness: all the people dressed well, and the girls all looked incredibly good.

The beauty of it all made Yeorbin smile.

All, that was, except for Yeorbin. Everything was beautiful until he looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was messy, his glasses tacky. However, once he changed into one of his new outfits and looked more like everyone else, he felt much better.

Am I in heaven? he kept asking himself.

Yeorbin walked by another store. It was a coffee shop, and he decided he needed a boost to be among all the people walking briskly back and forth smiling and frowning—all among one another yet somehow *separate*.

Waiting in the coffee shop's line with cash lining his pockets and wearing a brand-new outfit, Yeorbin *still* couldn't figure out if he was alive or not.

But what did it matter?

He could see and feel and drink. And so, whether alive or not, there was *definitely* a life to be lived in this place. And he badly wanted coffee, too.

After waiting in line what seemed like forever, Yeorbin made it to the register. There was a look of chagrin in the cashier's eyes.

"Um, we don't take cash, sir," the pretty young cashier informed him. "Go over there and exchange it for AutoPay." She pointed at a machine that had a bright light at its top and seemed to have a mouth that devoured money.

Yeorbin made his way over, his face furrowed with confusion. He'd just woken up from an indeterminate slumber steeped in something unknown after having been brutally murdered, and now he was being forced to exchange his hard-earned cash for something quite uncertain in an uncertain world.

AutoPay.

What was this? *What is this? Am I being ripped off?*

But whether he was being ripped off or otherwise, Yeorbin had no choice. He desperately wanted the coffee and needed to live, whatever *living* meant for him at that point.

So, he popped \$9,000 into the machine and, after much whirring and buzzing, it dispensed a card with a happy-face logo on it. Clean and plastic—just like everything else surrounding him; it was the plastic that really got to him.

Shrugging, Yeorbin got back in line clutching his AutoPay card. Then, after being served his coffee, he turned around and espied something in the distance: a painting of a horizon hanging on a wall. He thought it was most likely a print as it didn't seem like the place for original artwork.

And as he stared ahead and walked, another force collided with Yeorbin. He spilled his coffee and grunted. The force came in the shape of a cute girl with curly blonde hair and black-rimmed glasses.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry!" The girl's cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Yeorbin spluttered. "I can just get another coffee."

The pool of coffee at Yeorbin's feet continued to spread across the floor like tears on the smooth cheek of a pretty face.

"No, I'm so sorry," the girl said. "Let me buy another one. For *you*."

Their eyes met.

Both Yeorbin and the girl had eyes that were concerned and beautiful, poignant yet privy to nothing. They both smiled, and then the girl said, "Did I smell vanilla?"

"Vanilla latte with four shots." Yeorbin smiled again.

"No way! That's my order!"

As Yeorbin chuckled, their eyes met again. They both smiled with flashes of pearly-white teeth—nothing forced, simply natural and beautiful.

"Please, let me buy you another one."

Yeorbin flashed one more beautiful smile at the girl "If you insist."

Initiated at that point was the beginning of the end. Nothing, no one could stop the inevitable of the split.

Their attraction was undeniable. Sarah paid with her ubiquitous AutoPay card, as was customary for everyone in Yeorbin's new universe. Oh, and her name was Sarah; Yeorbin found that out as his spilled vanilla viscosity spread through the cracks in the ground where napkins could only half-heartedly clean up the mess.

That was okay, though.

Sarah used 'AutoPay' for the coffee and she and Yeorbin talked awhile. Those moments of talking sparked a flame that wouldn't—couldn't—be extinguished between them for some time. Yeorbin had nothing but his AutoPay card, and so they exchanged numbers via the plastic cards that would make for plastic nights—and many plastic parties, which would lead to certain pleasure but an endless parade of soulmates turned soulless.

They smiled at one another again.

Yeorbin still remembered the cruel bow knife and the pain he felt as his vision turned red before he died senselessly. *Is this an anthropomorphized world I'm living in? This girl... she's beautiful. It could be a setup, though... Having said that, it would be the most beautiful setup with the most beautiful meaning I've ever seen or felt. The horizon seems plastic. But I don't know. How am I supposed to know? After all, everything here is plastic.*

"What's your name, by the way?" Sarah asked with a coy grin.

"Yeorbin."

They sat together drinking the coffees Sarah had bought. When their glances into each other's eyes met, a touch of something decidedly *not* plastic, something not dry or impotent rose between them. For Yeorbin, it brought some glimmer of hope and whatever else it was that made magic happen.

But those moments were fleeting, yet they stayed for an eternity—because that's what such moments were.

Laughter, furtive glances, and byes were duly exchanged. And, upon the final goodbye, Yeorbin felt something like regret and guilt and shame and deep deprivation all rolled into one when Sarah walked away.

The two went their separate ways after exchanging AutoPay numbers; that was how they'd stay in contact in this odd new world.

Yeorbin had no idea where he should go next; he'd only just made it to wherever he was, and couldn't tell if the giant mall-like structure was for him—or he liked the place or just the girl. He couldn't even tell how to get out of the building, if, indeed, it was a building at all.

What building has seemingly no roof but high walls all around?

That girl with the curly hair and the glasses—that was all Yeorbin could think about. He didn't even want to eat his next meal because he was so lovesick. A biting strain of the notion so deep dwelled within him, questioning his every thought to get away, crushing his every movement toward the exit.

That girl with the hair. That girl with the cute, upturned nose. That girl with the perfect, soft skin and eyes that glistened behind her thick lenses—she was perfect beyond compare.

Yeorbin *had* to call her.

He had Sarah's number.

But he had no way of calling her.

No way of reaching that number. Those eyes that glistened for him couldn't be seen without a phone to connect him to her.

And so, Yeorbin walked to another nearby store and bought a phone with which to talk to her.

Her.

Yeorbin's AutoPay card was beginning to drain: The phone was expensive, as was the plan, and the bills were beginning to drag him down. He remembered, too, that he still had no place to stay.

But Sarah felt like *home* to Yeorbin. For some odd reason, they'd connected on a deep level, and Yeorbin had quickly forgotten all about his past life, family, friends, and memories when he'd talked to her.

He *needed* to talk to her again.

Yeorbin called the number she'd given him. The phone rang and rang. Rang and rang. No answer.

His heart sank, but the story he told himself brought some encouragement: *She's probably just busy.*

As he walked aimlessly around, although the sickness of love crunched Yeorbin's gut, there was still room in there for food. He quickly found a place to eat—there were plenty to choose from—and when Yeorbin swiped his AutoPay card to pay for his street tacos, he was shocked at how low the balance had gotten in the matter of one quick day.

The cash he'd taken with him on his journey didn't end up lasting long after all. Somehow, it had still followed him into the afterlife.

Or *was* it the afterlife?

Yeorbin texted Sarah. He figured his only contact should be contacted, and it was fitting his only contact should be her. *Would* be her. So, while he waited for the fateful text back, Yeorbin walked around and watched people, who he noticed were either in groups or pairs.

He watched them alone.

And all this happened because of one thing I said?

While waiting, Yeorbin scrolled through his phone and found an app: *Konnected*. Well, the *K* is unnecessary, he thought. He downloaded it anyway.

Konnected contained profiles of what appeared to be everyone in the mall-like megastructure. *How do I even get out of here?* He thought to himself.

Yeorbin walked while he scrolled—there seemed to be no end to the profiles—or to the countless shops and stark, white walls. Lab rats. *Is that what this is?* He thought.

But Yeorbin's thoughts were slow and distracted without Sarah's text back.

Chapter 7

Eventually, Yeorbin needed a break and a place to stay, and *Konnected* already seemed to know that: It suggested places to stay according to the remaining money on his AutoPay card.

Choosing one, Yeorbin grimaced. *“That seemed too easy. I guess that’s not a bad thing.”*

Around him, everyone else was smiling. The groups. The pairs.

Yeorbin got to the hotel and fell asleep almost instantly, but not before a single tear fell from his eye to soak into the soft, downy pillow. One last thing—he checked his phone once again, then checked to make sure the number he’d been texting was correct. Then, Yeorbin sent Sarah one final message before finally closing his weary eyes to put an end to his most confounding day.

Was it actually a day?

Yeorbin couldn’t tell. Whatever it had been, it all happened because Yeorbin had dared to insult the higher powers of artificial intelligence, an intelligence that made the rest of his non-existence artificial. Artifice would be written in his tired and worthless veins from that point on.

Awaking to feelings of regret, self-pity, and angst, Yeorbin checked his phone. A surge of adrenaline kicked in right away as he hoped he’d received that much-anticipated text from Sarah.

He paused a moment before grabbing his phone. He took a deep breath. Then, Yeorbin ceased breathing altogether. He winced, closed and opened his eyes while reaching for his phone, praying desperately for a message back from the girl—the only thing that seemed real to him in this new plastic life.

And she hadn’t responded.

And she didn’t respond.

The sinking feeling plunged to a depth as far as Yeorbin thought it possible to go—and a little further. *She's not interested. We're not connected—or Konnected. We'll never be on Konnected. We are disconnected forever. And she seemed like the only one...*

Despite having just awakened, Yeorbin felt a stirring sense of excitement and despair, energy and sadness; it was like a deep, black dog shadowing him, baring its fangs, slobbering, constantly threatening. Yeorbin was in so much emotional pain he almost smiled at the despair. What else could he have done?

His smile soon turned to solemnity, despair, loneliness, and regret. The pain of his existence—or *non-existence*—being so great a burden that feeling nothing would even have been feeling too much. Feeling nothing would mean his eyes were open, his consciousness awake. That would have been too much pain for Yeorbin—any ounce of *anything*. Too much for tears. Not enough for nothingness.

She—Sarah—didn't respond. The one genuine connection he'd made—or *thought* he'd made—was no longer connected (*Konnected?*). Whatever it had been was severed by the nothingness of a place gone wild with plastic things and steel control.

Who keeps this place? Who's responsible for it all? Is someone causing me this pain—manufacturing it like chocolate candy or a tire? Could it be a something creating this awful place? If I find that out, I can possibly stop it. Stop the pain. Stop the strife. Stop the deep deprivation I feel, along with the alienation from everyone when all we're meant for is relationships. I have none. I have no connections—I have no Konnections.

Maybe there's an easier way to end this....

That morning, Yeorbin was on a mission.

He was on a mission to kill himself—to die once again seemed to him to be the only option when one was so desperately alienated.

Once out of his room, Yeorbin found the lobby and asked for the highest floor. The building was 45 stories.

Breaking the window in the hallway of the forty-fifth floor, Yeorbin jumped, cutting himself badly in the process upon the myriad shards of twinkling glass.

As he continued to fall, the smile left Yeorbin as adrenaline surged through his body. He fell and fell, and people everywhere watched his downward progress with disapproving looks.

Yeorbin simply stared at the ground and, as he hit it, he felt the sweet touch of black relief wash over his weary, bleeding body.

He died once again.

There was no one around him for some time.

Then, one person did appear, and it was Yeorbin. As if arising from a chrome coffin, he awoke to stark whiteness shining at him from every angle. His eyes opened for the first time in what felt like infinity.

There were walls everywhere with no ceiling.

His AutoPay card ran low and, despite food being sold all around him, his shortage of credits hungered his stomach as he stared on. With no money for food, no Konnections, and no way to die, he simply thought, *maybe food isn't for me.*

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Reflection Essay: These Thoughts We're Fed

As a writer and bestselling novelist of eight novels, including four that have reached the top of the charts in retail sales worldwide, I am familiar with the notion of a captivating story. With this said, no matter the themes or powerful messages I may wish to convey in each narrative, *entertainment* is paramount to truly having any message reverberate deeper than if a story was dry or poorly written.

I have always been drawn to narratives that explore the darker aspects of human nature and society. For my senior capstone creative short story, titled "Say What You Can't," I wanted to delve into the theme of corporate power and its effects on individuals, often aiming to choke and inhibit the autonomy of the individual without giving the targeted individual a place or a face to fight back at. As we've learned about our food system today, most of what takes precedent on the mass-produced food shelves today are sourced from obscure backgrounds, behind opaque corporate walls, protected by barely visible powers that most of us could never hope to impact or upheave in any meaningful way. This Kafkaesque idea of an overwhelming bureaucracy with millions of tendrils influencing what we eat and what we say about it, I aimed to create a dark and gritty narrative with the priority of entertaining. But right underneath the surface of being captivated by the plot and twists of the story comes a chance to provoke thought and reflection on the impact of corporate greed and manipulation. Once the reader or viewer is entertained, they will subsume the content more meaningfully and fully than if they weren't; the piece of art will become a deeper staple into their subconscious, making it easier for the creator

(such as myself, in this case) to relay subconscious themes and messages that the reader may carry with them for a lifetime. Based on all I've learned this semester (along with my whole life), I wanted the reader to sit back after witnessing the harrowing adventure I laid out for them and ask, "what am I being fed? Who *or what* wishes to influence my thoughts, my ideas, and everything I do to make a livelihood to eat?"

From the outset, I knew that I wanted the prose of my story to reflect its dark theme. I sought to create a narrative that was both atmospheric and evocative, using vivid imagery and descriptive language to immerse the reader in the story's world. I wanted the main character, Yeorbin, to only be distantly relatable. I wanted him to be modest, yet I never wanted to reveal too much about Yeorbin's backstory, or how he got there. This was a purposeful choice to strip the narrative of unnecessary fluff. I drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including noir fiction and dystopian literature, to create a sense of foreboding and tension throughout the narrative.

One of the key challenges I faced in writing "Say What You Can't" was striking the right balance between storytelling and social commentary. I wanted to create a narrative that was engaging and entertaining, while also conveying a deeper message about the dangers of unchecked corporate power, a theme we explored throughout the duration of the HCOM475 semester. To achieve this, I focused on developing complex and morally ambiguous characters, whose actions and motivations would serve as a reflection of the broader themes of the story.

Central to the narrative of "Say What You Can't" is the character of Yeorbin, a young professional who becomes entangled in a web of corporate intrigue and corruption. Through Yeorbin's eyes, I sought to explore the ways in which individuals can be both complicit in and victimized by the systems of power that govern their lives. I wanted to convey the sense of helplessness and disillusionment that can arise when one realizes the extent of corporate influence and control.

In writing "Say What You Can't," I also wanted to challenge myself as a writer. I experimented with different narrative techniques and styles, pushing myself to create a story that was not only thematically rich but also stylistically engaging. I drew inspiration from writers such as George Orwell and Franz Kafka, whose works often explore similar themes of power and control.

Overall, I am proud of the final result of my senior capstone creative short story. "Say What You Can't" is a story that challenged me as a writer and allowed me to explore complex themes in a creative and compelling way, especially when centered around the foundation of all the texts and documentaries we've gone through and discussed throughout the semester. I hope that readers will find it to be both an engaging narrative and a thought-provoking commentary on the nature of corporate power in our supply chains, food systems, and technology/ social media, leaving people with more questions than answers after delving into my carefully crafted prose.