

## Appendix: Still Life

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## Appendix: Still Life

by [Sixteenthdays](#)

### Summary

**[CLEO]**

Well, this is familiar. (*Short, nervous laugh*) No hard feelings, right?

**[GRIAN]**

I wouldn't say *that*. Pearl's out getting lunch, though, so you're probably safe.

### Notes

set after the full main story of [from the archives!](#) [pinioning](#) is important context, as are the other cleo and grian statements (the statue garden, ornithology).

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

[Click]

**[CLEO]**

Well, this is familiar. (*Short, nervous laugh*) No hard feelings, right?

**[GRIAN]**

I wouldn't say *that*. Pearl's out getting lunch, though, so you're probably safe.

**[CLEO]**

Right. Would you stop *staring* at me?

**[GRIAN]**

No. I like the eyes. (*Rustling*) Less enthused about whatever you did to the bones in my feet, by the way. No thanks for that. Uh. (*Quickly*) Nope, that was not an invitation, statement of *put those pliers away, what is your problem-* regarding a pair of transformations. Statement recorded direct from subject, January 14th, 2023. Statement begins.

**[CLEO]**

(*Fabric shifts*) Fine.

I don't scare easily. I never have, but especially these days, with the nature of my work- well, I wouldn't be much of an artist if my own art frightened me, let alone if I couldn't even collect my materials. I run in some particularly unpleasant circles. *And* Joe has a habit of forgetting items from his collection on my coffee table.

So really, the funniest bit of this whole thing is that until you started bleeding all over me, I'd never had a problem with blood.

I was going to try modifying your voicebox, if you were wondering. I'd mostly finished with the rest of you, and I'd originally intended to leave it there, but you were the first- I'd never let a statue *move*, before I released you the first time. It fascinated me. I remember watching the feathers on your neck shift as you spoke, and thinking how much more I could do with a multimedia installation.

What if a statue of a bird could *sound* like a bird, too?

Obviously I tried it on one of the test bodies first. It was all perfectly clean: I cut in, fiddled with the vocal chords to my liking, sewed the seams shut. No blood. Unfortunately, no voice either, because when I released its head to speak it was completely catatonic, but I had a feeling that wouldn't be the case with the bird. I knew it would go differently. Call it an artist's intuition.

So I cleaned my scalpel and tried it on the bird. Took me a minute or two to get the angle right for a clean cut, given the feathers and all, but the blade cut a steady incision across its neck, just as planned, just as I'd done a thousand times at that point. Steady and clean. I was focused enough that I didn't notice the blood until I was pulling the scalpel away.

It was welling from the cut, thick and red, *gushing* in a way I'd forgotten blood could do. I dropped the scalpel. My hands were already covered in the stuff, and your shirt, and the floor of my studio. You get used to a certain sort of stillness, when you do the work I do. Natural processes become unnerving.

Then you opened your eyes. The hundreds tucked into the wings, first, in all their unexpected variety, and then the two on your face, last. I'd never closed them. But they'd been blank, dead, unseeing. A statue's eyes. They opened, and saw me.

I don't know if you've ever been hit by a gust of wind out of nowhere?

That's what it was like. Nothing, and then pressure, and then fear. You were looking at me. Then something else was- the other statues.

It was dark. I don't know if the studio fluorescents had gone out, or if they'd just never gone on, but all I could see was the statues' eyes, if they had any, and their shadowed forms, shapeless and

distorted in the dark. They dragged themselves towards me, not still, torsos crawling, half-complete feet tapping.

I don't know if I'd had this nightmare before. I've had it since, plenty of times.

By the time I remembered to speak, they were nearly on top of me, stitched-on skin a muddy, unnatural warmth as they pressed in, eyes glinting. I don't know what I said. It wasn't *hold still*. Their webbed and scaled and sculpted hands grabbed my neck and, together, crushed.

I came back to myself with my back pressed against the wall, not breathing, gasping. The statues hadn't moved. You were still looking at me.

I fled out the door.

**[GRIAN]**

I'm not sure I remember this.

**[CLEO]**

*(Long pause)*

I went outside to my statue garden. My finished statues were as still as they ever are, unmoving things, and the sight of them in the sun calmed me down. For awhile, I just let myself breathe.

And then I started to think. *(Rueful laugh)* Well, a little. I didn't get anywhere interesting until Joe came over for game night a few days later. When I told him what had happened to me- and, when he insisted, let him pull the sheet I'd thrown over you off and get an eyeful of nightmares himself- he told me one of his acquaintances in the world of supernatural items had also had some interesting stories for him recently.

I told him I hadn't known he had friends. He told me he had plenty of friends, I was just too off-putting for them, although he phrased it as being too "uniquely Cleo." *(Grumbling)* I'll show him off-putting.

Well, this acquaintance of his had apparently recently been in the vicinity of some people who were very supernatural. More supernatural than I was, which if someone had said to me before the bird incident I would have laughed at. By any metric, I'd say my work is about as supernatural as it gets. But the way Joe described it, he seemed to believe that there was some sort of dividing line between people like he and I, who play with the supernatural, and people who just *are* supernatural, like, well, you.

And he seemed pretty convinced that that dividing line was death.

Which was very convenient for him, considering his own *arrangement*, but I remembered the blood gushing down your neck, red, staining my hands. I'd severed an artery. You *should* have died there. I could feel my own pulse, quick and alive.

A few weeks later, that friend of yours, the night sky one, came by to-

**[GRIAN]**

Pearl.

**[CLEO]**

Hm?

**[GRIAN]**

Her name's Pearl. You met her before, when you gave your last statement.

**[CLEO]**

Huh. Was that before she died?

**[GRIAN]**

Before she even started dreaming... Anyway. *(Static)* Go on.

**[CLEO]**

When Pearl came to collect the bird, I tried to stop her, obviously. But it didn't take. My words just *slid off* her, like trying to catch the moon in a bug net. It made me feel like a statue must, while it can still think. Like a speck of dust, floating without direction. It was horrible. And I was remembering the way you looked at me, eyes free of my power, and her standing there too big for it, so of course I let her take you. I didn't want you anyway. It was impossible to get work done with you around, showing me fears I didn't even know I had.

She fixed me with another absent, starry stare as she bundled you out the door, and it felt like I was brushing shoulders with infinity.

That was all the proof I needed that Joe was right. And if Joe was right, then I had to figure out how to die.

**[GRIAN]**

Just like that?

**[CLEO]**

I explained to you last time I was here how I feel about artists who don't put everything of themselves into their work. *(Pause)* And, well, I was afraid. I don't like being powerless, and here was a way to ensure I would always be on a level with any... supernatural person who came to bother me. Sure, it could also end with me just another artist killed in pursuit of their art, but by the time I thought of that, I'd already decided I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't take the risk.

I did have to work myself up to it, though. I've done some fairly extensive modifications on myself before, of course, but they were all basically surface-level. This would be different. If this went right, this would turn me into more of a corpse than any of my statues were.

It'll be fine, I told myself. I repeated myself until I believed it, standing in my studio, surrounded by my projects. And then I got to it.

I cut into my chest, one incision down and around the left ribs. My hand wavered once, but it was a clean cut otherwise, and once the skin was flapping loose I reached up underneath my ribs, felt around my lungs for my heart, told my blood to still, and snapped my arteries one by one between my fingernails. It hurt, obviously. Like hell. Careful as I could, I pulled my heart out of my chest.

I know just about everything there is to know about the human heart, but somehow, my own was still smaller than I expected it to be, the size of a clenched fist, red and fragile. And it was beating, a quick, horribly alive little rhythm, like a cornered animal. It was that uncontrollable bodily response pressing against my palms, insistent, that made me realize I was terrified. I hadn't even considered that I might be, but I was.

I think that must have been when I realized I was afraid of dying.

I stared at it for a minute, my living heart, as blackness crept in at the edges of my vision and my

hands started to shake. I'm not sure whether I was breathing. I know for sure that it was still beating. I stood there, and stared at it.

And then I crushed it between my fingers.

When I tell you blood got everywhere, I mean it got *everywhere*. I'm *still* cleaning it out of nooks and crannies in the studio, and I hadn't bothered to cover most of my works in progress, so I'm sure you can imagine the mess. (*Scoffs*)

For a moment, blood dripping down my arms, a crumpled mess of cooling flesh held between my fingers, I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life. I waited to die. My chest was empty, and silent, and still.

I'm not sure how long I stood there dripping blood onto the floor. A few seconds, maybe. Not more than a minute. When it was all said and done, it really didn't take that long to die, or not die, or come back to life.

My heart, in my hands, didn't beat. I gasped in a breath, and realized I wasn't dead.

And then I started laughing.

The heart dropped out of my hands and after another breath I followed it to the floor, shaking, laughing. I'm sure I sounded more than a little hysterical. I felt it, at least, as the adrenaline crash hit.

Impulsively, I released the stillness on my blood. It spilled out of my open chest onto the floor, waterfaling out of my arteries, drenching the apron hanging off my waist. I didn't die. I just felt... lighter.

Everything feels lighter, these days. More precise. You'd think being a corpse would make you heavier, more prone to bloating and decay, but I've found it to be the opposite. Every bit of me is frozen how it was when I cut my heart out, and I have pinpoint control over all of it, better than I've ever had over the statues. My body *responds* to me.

**[GRIAN]**

That... does explain why your movement looks so unnatural. Uncanny. You're consciously controlling it all?

**[CLEO]**

It's amazing, isn't it?

(*Laughs*)

I'm a finished piece, now. Can't you see? I finally pushed my medium as far as I could. If I did drop dead here, now, I could die satisfied with my body of work.

I'm not going to stop, though. I don't think I could even if I wanted to. I've been so *inspired* lately- it's like my first experiments with the book all over again, all the wonder of it. When I'm working, I feel more alive than I ever have.

You understand. The hunger, the fullness.

(*Pause*)

**[GRIAN]**

I do.

*(Pause)*

**[CLEO]**

Well, there you have it.

**[GRIAN]**

I... guess I should say congratulations? Or good luck? Thank you for the statement, either way.

*(Pleased with himself)* It was delicious.

**[CLEO]**

I owed you one. *(Fabric shifts)* And I *did* want to see how the wings moved. Can you really see out of all those eyes?

**[GRIAN]**

In all sorts of weird colors, too. I think there's some bee eyes in the mix? Bird eyes? Snake eyes? Gives me migraines sometimes, honestly, but I'm getting better at managing it. Especially because I can fix most things wrong with me by taking a statement or two now.

**[CLEO]**

Glad to hear it. *(Surprised)* Huh, I actually mean that. Want to come over for game night sometime? Joe's got, uh, Parcheesi, Snakes and Ladders acrophobia edition, some other stuff.

*(Pause)* And haunted Boggle.

**[GRIAN]**

*(Fascinated)* Haunted- *(Suspiciously)* Are you trying to get me into your studio again?

**[CLEO]**

You're a complete work, don't be ridiculous. Most I'd do is adjust a few feathers. And replace the bent ones I can see- take better *care* of my hard work, Archivist.

Oh, hey. I heard you on the phone with Jev. If you come over, you can finally ask him all those questions he won't answer.

**[GRIAN]**

Fine, *maybe*. *(Muttered)* If I can ever pull that trick off on purpose. Target practice, I guess.

*(Aloud)* I'll be bringing Pearl, though.

**[CLEO]**

I can live with that. Next Saturday?

[Click]

## End Notes

this one was written by cowriter zeph!! they did an AMAZING job.

this and other works labeled 'appendix' are canon to the main story and take place some amount of time after the ending! mostly they'll serve to provide closure or clarify

circumstances on characters who didn't get fully resolved in the main story.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!