



Western Washington University
Western CEDAR

WWU Honors College Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

Winter 2023

Frank Wins a Staring Contest with the Universe

Frank DePalma

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DePalma, Frank, "Frank Wins a Staring Contest with the Universe" (2023). *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 637.

https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/637

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors College Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

frank wins a staring contest with the universe.

lighthouse keeper.	1
reckless behaviors.	2
do you ever learn how to live with yourself?	4
middle distance.	6
sonia lee.	7
ozymandias.	8
heartache hayride.	9
yellow sunglasses.	10
pancake breakfast.	12
caldera.	16
better strangers.	17
palace of memory.	20
let's get a split-level in ojai.	22
hotel.	24
frank wins a staring contest with the universe.	25
eurydice.	31
talking to the walls.	34
other man.	35
never not yours.	38
poster boy.	39
knew him when.	40
man on the moon.	42
surreal life.	43
... and i'll buy myself flowers.	44

lighthouse keeper.

stop me if you've heard this one before

a man lives alone on an island
his life is rocks and salt and waves
rain pounding on his marigold slicker
nights bent over a meager wooden table
small sips from a flask of brandy
whispers in the candlelight
stories that eat themselves
only the tiny purple crabs
that cling to the windowsill can hear
aiming a bright beam of light to steer off
wayward ships and wayward souls
and chase off the winged things that creep in the rafters

and this is how he stays alone
in the broken fragments of a life
waiting out a storm that never ceases
watching the swell and the spray for a wreck he'll never see
if only one day he could turn off the lights
and leave the flask on the table
and murmur goodbye to the crabs
climb into his crimson rowboat
and paddle headlong into

reckless behaviors.

aching into the buzz
of the needle until there's
a second heart stamped on
my skin--something blooming like

my heart at twenty-one, one
thousand reckless behaviors in a
tough, sweet pulp i don't want to stop
myself from biting into cannabis

kisses and cloudy sea glass and
fogged up car windows, i am
a person, i am becoming, i refuse
to be terrified, i am so very scared

do you ever learn how to live with yourself?

you would be content to be sad if you weren't afraid it would make you look pathetic
you could be enthralled with telling lies if you didn't fear being caught in them
but lies have a way of telling themselves,
or maybe you're not as good a person as you pretend to be
a storyholder not a storyteller,
and every word has become so entangled you're no longer quite sure
what's true and what you wish was the truth

here you are, in the parlor, seated on the floor by the fire, choking down scalding, bitter

here you are, in the kitchen, hair stuck to the sweat on your brow, listening to the

here you are, in the bath, pressed to the cold porcelain as the tap runs and the unsullied

here you are, in the bedroom, smoothing the duvet over a bloodstained mattress and

here you are, in the garage, taking a wrench to an automobile that wasn't broken

here you are, in the attic, back turned toward the dusty mirror where your reflection

here you are,

coffee like some kind of baptism
simmer of another meal made to be eaten alone
water passes down the pipes
lighting a candle to burn away the copper in the air
till you decided to fix it
grins with painted lips and sharpened teeth

in the doll's house of the mind
 asking that question
 answering with a lie

middle distance.

where do i go when you're not thinking about me?

i'm not sure any more if the relentless whirling of my mind

is enough to keep me extant,

functioning, important,

alive

"this'll hurt less later"

i whisper to the crook of my arm,

haunted by a dream i never dreamt,

smoke on my skin and you on my lips

i've scrubbed my psyche so white that

it's blinding in the sun

i can't look it straight on, but then,

i've always been good at

looking around myself

i'm don't understand this to be healthy

i'm don't believe i understand very much at all

there's a place,

somewhere between the sun-bleached bricks at our feet and

the craggy mountains and ocean swell at

the bending

line

of the

horizon

keep me alive in that middle distance,

where flames burn brighter off the embers of what could have been

if i can be there, smiling softly,

poking at the ashes of our bonfire,

your best, most secret what-if

sonia lee.

when i wake there's salt under my tongue
and water in my bones
waves roll through the brittle cavities
that speckle the structure of me
and keep me pinned to the mattress

or is it the seabed?
there is so little light here
so if i gaze up out the abyss
what can i trust to stare back at me?

ozymandias.

tonight i am dreaming in armageddons

i am dreaming in the revelation of my own destruction

i have taken myself down to the pit

to my ugliest, basest part

the dirt freckles across my cheekbones

dried blood of scabs picked and repicked across universes

i am violence i do not understand

i am a tarnished golden idol

a sunken stone visage

legacy dismantled

every god cut off from his creation

volcanic ash and malformed bones

i am what is left

i am what beside remains

heartache hayride.

the moon in october
is pockmarked orange
this halloween i'm a ghost
dressed up as a living boy
going door to door
searching for something
to bring me back beautiful
break my heart better
sharpen my suffering to a point
let the smudged autumn rain
wash away layers of dirt and caramel
until there's nothing left but bone

yellow sunglasses.

i want a saturated world, a cerulean sky tinted gold
moments that can be browbeaten into metaphor
the kindness of strangers, the simplicity of being seen
the drive off into the sunset, oh, for a simple ending
where i can't take my hands off the wheel
summer lasts forever once the world turns toward apocalypse
do you think it's easier to watch the world end if
you could've saved it, or if you never stood a chance at all?
my body leaves the shape of an angel cracked in the concrete
i am surrounded by spilled lemon soda and shattered glass
dinosaur bones make for excellent conversationalists
swear the only crazy thing i ever did was repeat all the same mistakes
but now i'm stuck in this elevator and it
only goes sideways
and this all makes sense—the boy and the bones and the sand and the sunset
the wings and the wires and the cracks and the crumbling
every good ghost story is unfinished business
and i left a briefcase full of holy water under the bridge
after the credits roll i walk into the night
potential smoldering in my stomach
amber lenses and cinema daze
i can't remember what's real

pancake breakfast.

the deep irrepressible nostalgia for everything
 that never happened tastes like maple
 it sizzles in the air
 grease from the frying pan,
 the burnt caramel color of sausage fat

rings in swooping notes and vocal chops
 a pop song that played at a dance
 you didn't go to
 cuts to the bone in sharp

slashes,

every choice you didn't make and
 every choice you couldn't have
 every ember of the person you might've been
 had you been born browner-eyed,
 ten years earlier, seven thousand miles southwest
 ab instead of o negative, those attached earlobes

the other man squinting beatifically behind darker eyelashes
 icarus drowned in the syrup and the feathers are stuck now to his lips

you
 lean
 in
 to
 kiss
 them
 off
 but

sweet cream clots in your throat,
 the iron pang of blood,
 every flapping butterfly wing
 threatening to slice at the softness
 inside of you like so many delicate razors
 you could have had the love of the whole world
 then let it forget you, you could have, you could have, you could have

you write songs without sounds
 you died last february
 this was, of course, not the first time
 which might've been in march, but
 at this point, all the leaving and coming back
 resurrections by the pocketful
 who has the time to remember

who has time to mourn
 who has time for anything
 but eating mythology for breakfast

swallowing around the shape of concept
 the umami of desire, the sweetness of air
 the emptiness that kills you
 leaves you, gaunt

e
 m
 a
 c
 i
 a
 t
 e
 d

arms braced against the bathroom sink
 forehead to the mirror
 staring at a stranger from an antique land
 marked by
 tattoos he hasn't yet grown into
 and a shine to his eyes
 because you
 are what
 he thinks
 he deserves

and it all happens out of turn
 there's sand in the hotel hallways
 and jungle flowers growing out of the plumbing
 and neon signs flickering in the floodwaters
 and neon signs flickering in the rainy night
 and neon signs on a diner window on
 a night it wasn't even raining

has the universe blinked back yet?

or

are you still waiting

caldera.

the rain dries everything it touches
 didn't you love the symbolism, now lava pours out of your mouth, no,
 sand, or salt, vomit, detritus, liquid glass
 everything you shouldered or didn't
 the wreckage and the wanting maybe gasoline pooling
 in darkened hallways carve out your own caldera
 count up the mathematics of your hurt, smoke on the sweetness
 things you can't take back redemption you won't see
 the rain dries everything it touches

better strangers.

this city is senseless and strange
the harbor is empty and all the roads lead nowhere
sweet plums rot in the wild grass
the world has been rent and bound back together
but there are cracks in the catacombs
the dead never really leave, only roam the streets
spectral fingers clutching hearts wrung free of blood and air
lotus eaters chasing a phantom high
tungsten on the tongue, cohosh, and the quiet fury
that comes with knowing that you can't change anything
the cost of power is too great to bear. the wheel's been set
once the hanged man's neck snaps he becomes
something else entirely and every night
i go back to the lighthouse and i wait for the dreamer
to wake—is the waiting worse than the wanting?
you wouldn't recognize me under my invisible scars
but my body is something that has never been mine
and my heart is something that was never not yours
and we can't go back to that antimony tuesday
when the hanged man's neck snaps his face
looks more and more like my own and every night
i go back to the tower and i watch the fire

on the hill—is the watching worse than the waking?
the wildflowers withered under your touch
leaving behind nothing but disturbed earth
a funeral with no mourners, a coffin with a rusted patina
of regret left buried long before the beginning of the world
when we lock eyes at the interment
won't you tell me we made better strangers?
we stand on the backs of great gnarled beasts and the sky
is cobalt and cadmium and rains soot like a blessing
once the snapped neck's man hangs he can see
everything he wasn't looking for and every night
i go back to the mountains and i wonder

if we can never go back, would you like to know that?
sometimes i prefer a fantasy where everything can
still be undone, and a feeling might taste like bergamot,
and nothing-else.

palace of memory.

portrait of a boy drunk
on vodka lemonade
and songs about sex
possessed by a
gripping nostalgia
for everything
that never happened
and everything
he could have been
tangled, knotted up
in a web of dreams,
curled inwards on a
sangria-colored couch,
sunlight streaming
across sealed lids, his
slit throat scarring
as he swallows down
an open wound

let's get a split-level in ojai.

what i found written at the bottom of a bottle of jim bean's peach whiskey:

let's meet when we're both ready for it
 somewhere inane like the supermarket
 where i'll charm you being a little too excited over pears on sale
 you'll put me in your phone as 'safeway pear guy'
 i'll wait for your text thinking
 they haven't come up with a word to describe the color of your eyes

let's go out to see the stars
 we'll drink cheap wine and you'll
 draw the shapes of the constellations in the air and i'll
 watch them reflected in your eyes, let me
 indent your forehead with the shape of mine, let me
 swallow your laughter and kiss it back into you, let me
 hold you like we're the center of the universe

let's get married in the courthouse
 but not rush into it let's wait—years, maybe
 let's be sure, let's be simple
 and that night when the weight of what i couldn't have
 settles so heavy in my stomach, draw me closer
 and let me know you understand

let's get a split-level in ojai
 we'll have two kids with curly hair like my mother's
 who'll groan when you stop chopping vegetables
 to kiss me as i stir the pot on the stove
 let me sneak oreos into their packed lunch on fridays
 and i'll turn a blind eye when you feed the dog
 the ends of the romaine head

let me have the
sunday nights with a glass of wine
curled into each other on the couch
let me have the ridiculously in love
let me get this right
let me learn how to love you

let me trust you to love me back
let me grow into what you deserve
let me lose that self-servingly self-sacrificial asshole
devil on my shoulder, salt the earth behind me

things that aren't ghosts can still haunt you
and they shouldn't have left me alone
to dance with the dream of you
in a house i won't be able to afford
in a life i won't be able to live
where everything i'm afraid of disappears
when i roll over
and fall into you

hotel.

it feels like i love a little less now
but i'm not sure when i started being
less flesh and sinew and pumping ventricles
more cloudy marble and gold leaf
the kind of art you could hang in museums
the kind of boy who could tell you, *you're it for me forever*,
in the pouring rain in the middle of the night
make you think, everything i was
 everything i want
 everything at once

and then eat that love,
takeout and tangled white sheets in a hotel room
checked out in the morning, hair bleached by dawn

somehow this is what i've become:
i'll beg you to stay forever and always and all time
and i'll be the one who leaves before breakfast
and it's not about you, or me, or us
just whose feelings get hurt first
and it won't be mine. it won't be tonight.

frank wins a staring contest with the universe.

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical
like an afternoon spent skipping stones in the caldera
watching the way the smoke slowly bubbles under his skin

the blush of heat, the raw redness of his pores
the hiss of steam curling upwards between his toes
the scent of burning, blisters he can trick into looking golden-brown

he knows about being lonely, knows about being alone
but now he's choking on the lack of distinction
seared alive on an island of flowers

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical
like the word 'man' is a pilling sweater
that hangs too large off his osseous shoulders

gloms to his bones in the steel-cold rain
rubberizes his face, lets him pull it into amusement
bemusement, confusion, a single curated tear

dashed on the rocks as the lighthouse keeper sails away
some fool-hardy escape, some light with the lantern out
some, *hey, any sea in a storm, right?*

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical
a blank-faced nomad wandering the terra-cotta desert
conversing with the colossal carcass of an antique land

somewhere the light once spilled yellow
over the still-possible future, but when he looks ahead
it's split knuckles and jagged stone kneecaps

it's a pulse-pounding club beat, neon, liquor, and cigarettes
a city in the sand, perched over the abyss
fire and water and a stony brow drained away, long, long gone

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical
amorphous snowflakes settled in his eyelashes
the embrace of the wind and the kiss of the stars

still on this mountain as sunrise bleeds out of midnight
knocked back on black ice, counting up head wounds
torn between heat death and entropy, the future starts slow

starts with eyes blue-hot and blank, fixed onto cimmerian infinity
fingers bent backwards and head tilted at a horrible angle
reflections warped, light caught, cracks in the mirror

frank is 21 and life still feels like a hypothetical
like a staring a contest with the universe
like a man who's out of time

frank is a fractured multiverse of wish-this-were-different
frank is waiting for something he knows isn't coming
frank is something he doesn't know how to stop

frank is living life in imagined conversations
frank can handle, he promises, not blinking
frank is finding it harder to look up

eurydice.

every time,

she sinks her teeth into that ripened fruit

he can't wait long enough to kiss the poison off her lips

she only desires the crush of the train

he never stops chasing that green light

every time, every undoing

the boy always leaves the band, and the world mourns

the witch always loses her mind, and the world burns

the man can't love the monster he's made and it kills them both

we crash into the underworld, into the worst of ourselves

every time, every universe

the walls always come down, the empire falls
the people hurt, they always build the bombs
the butterfly shivers and she scrambles
to put the pieces of his head back together

every time, every choice

and i always, always look back

talking to the walls.

i'm terrified of being misunderstood or is it that i'm terrified

i've never been understood but isn't that too bold? to claim

i'm somehow unknowable or aren't we all a little unknowable

is that just something comforting to tell myself

i just want somebody to listen to what i'm saying

i just

want—

don't be selfish, i am selfish, i whip myself every time i want

i am selfless is a lie i tell other people is a lie other people tell me back

i have never (i have tried) been able to escape the wretched wretched havoc of wanting

i don't hate (could never) i say, and they murmur softly how that makes sense

how i am not a hateful person (i hate myself rather badly)

other man.

he comes to me like snow in december
 and I wear him at night as silk pajamas
 the dusk of easy sleep, slipping into a dream

he's pressed into my body,
 shapely fingers scabble across my chest
 sculpted nails bite scratches in my skin
 teeth and tongue lap up my tears
 cleave layers of flesh and bone

choke down the muscle of my heart pulpy

bloody

shredded

it could never pass his lips whole

and after,

with his face caked in my viscera

he lays on top of me, a weight so heavy

i can no longer feel whole, and when he licks

deep kisses in to the crevasses of my mouth

all i can taste is my own blood

and i lie there and i love him

and when the dawn peaks through the blinds i love him

and when he gilds me in black plastic i love him

and when he carries me to the bed of his truck i think

his arms are strong

he holds me gently

i love him

and when he drives me up to the pines i love him

and when he discards me rotting in the hills i love him

and the bloodloss i would've freely given

and he's the fucking man of my dreams

never not yours.

excuse me—my mind ran
away from me last night—
i followed it—out into
the garden, fingers seizing
in the cold—but lost it
somewhere between
—the wild grass—and
the frost-slick stones

last night—it was all
i could do to stand
on the frozen earth and
feel my bones brittle in—
the heavy chill of the rain
and—wonder—if to love
someone was to give them
the power to hurt you

last night—i dreamt i
fell through a thousand
worlds—my heart is still
tumbling through the
cavity of my chest but—
now my eyes are drier—
and there are gaps in the falling

poster boy.

i'm not there—

i was bent over the toilet bowl
communing with the porcelain
trying to expel, no, exorcize
so much i think that if i'd coughed
up my lungs they would've sat there
pink and pale and bloody in the water
and i wouldn't have noticed
and i'd have kept not breathing
tonguing at my teeth
praying to keep my wretchedness quiet
praying that i might have the dignity
to die if i couldn't bother to be loved

—and say you hate what i've become
well, take a fucking number

knew him when.

do you wish you were here
sand in your mouth
out in the desert lying with a stranger
crushed under the weight of stars

do you hold a heart to break
a future ends now
sliced clean cut at the knees
innocence and bloody hands licked clean

do you remember the bullish heart
dreaming in the darkness
cake crumbs and shattered china
bending butterfly wings so gone for the summer

feels better to fuck with the
devil you know though
and fear that reaper
dogs your steps
so you bite your
tongue you never
go home

man on the moon.

meet me in the montage
of crinkle-eyed smiles over someone else's happy ending

that grin i've perfected
that just-a-little-wiser
that *i knew you kids would figure it out*
that distance

six degrees of fucking separation

i'm coolly detached.
i know what i am
i know what's going to kill me
i'll see you at the wake

surreal life.

when i'm talking to you:

i'm talking to myself
i'm talking to no one
i'm talking to god
i'm talking to fill up
 the empty space
 the dull buzz ringing behind my ears
 the missing thrum of a heart beating

too apologetic to be sorry
too miserable to be sad
too fearful i have nothing to say

at all

... and i'll buy myself flowers.

it's that slow motion
 crowd slows to a crawl
 city fades to a hum
 and i'm there, rolling the stem
 of a softly wilting amber tulip
 between my thumb and middle finger
 it's that dawn breaks at noon
 cracks in the kingdom
 eyes squint staring in the sun
 it's that heart skips a beat
 and i can hear whole songs in the silence
 it's that real, it's that here
 denim and the linen breeze of march
 rich coffee and citrus—bergamot—all those tidy devils
 everything bound up in me
 discolored rings and thigh tattoos
 and the thrill of throwing a punch and
 how does the water know how to flow through the pipes and
 did the dinosaurs know they weren't really going to die and
 whatever happened to the lighthouse keeper
 it's that blood rush, so goddamn red
 it's that warm, feeling of falling
 cornflower blue sky and winning cowslip grin
 it's that melon soda and samosas, and
 cinema daze
 and something finite
 and something epic and,

darling,

well, you know:

when i'm ready to love him

