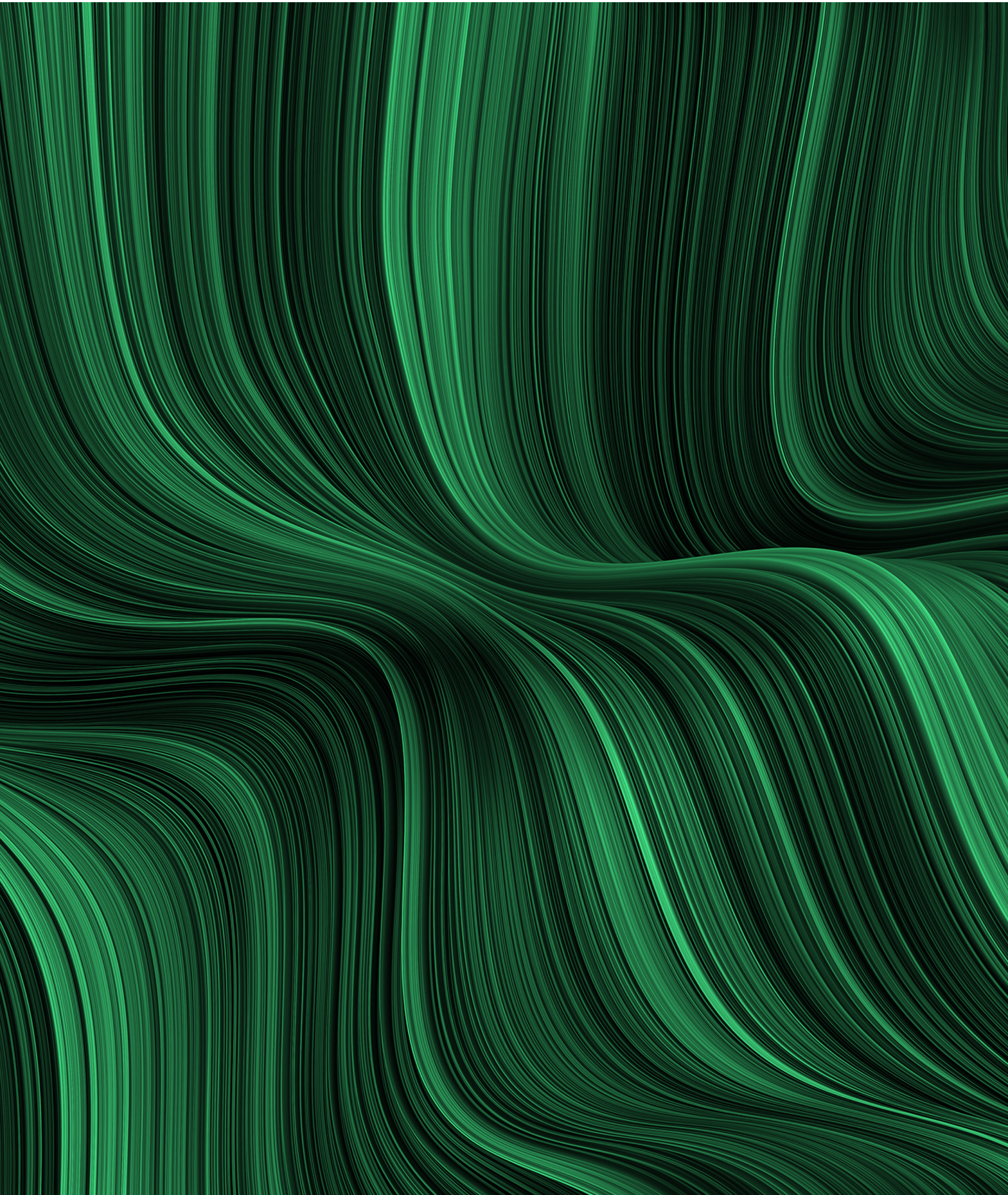


Universe-Souled Child

Daniel Prior



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Universe-Souled Child: 1

Io was beyond angry.

His parents had sent him to boarding school.

The entire school year. 1999-2000.

They had taken him by car with the suitcases and there he was, along with a group of teachers.

Io was listening to the conversation sideways. He could only understand what the one with the deepest voice was saying:

—This one has to go downstairs.

Between these ups and downs, a small group of students came to greet him.

The girl had pigtails on the sides of her in her jet black hair. She introduced herself as Karen.

—These are Marcos and Alejandro.

All of them, including Io himself, were about 8 years old.

For some reason, he was very pleased that the student body was mixed.

He was no saint.

The building was simple. There were stairs in the east wing, leading down to the basement Io had heard about.

There, too, was the boys' dormitory. About twenty.

Io put his things away and left.

In the west wing, there was the girls' dormitory, although they were half in number.

He left through a dark gray metal door, from which, looking straight ahead, one reached the dining room.

Opposite the girls' dormitory, there was a single classroom.

Io thought her parents should have left a good deal of money on it.

Damn...

A teacher, red-haired, in her thirties, who introduced herself as Sarah, told Io where to spend the night.

And she told him that classes would start the next morning.

After a somewhat mediocre dinner, the boys went upstairs to the bedroom.

There was something weird about them. Very, very rare, actually.

Grey... Grey, grey, grey. The word is grey.

Nobody spoke. No joke.

It was all so bewildering.

It was as if Karen was the only real girl in the whole place.

—Io is going down below. —A boy whispered.

There! Good. What the hell is going on here? —was his reply.

All grey. All musty. so withered...

Io put on pants and a shirt and went out determined to find answers.

He passed by the girls' dormitory... "I'd get caught", were the words that got the idea out of his head.

Just past the girls' dorm, there was something... No. Curious about falling short.

Some stairs. That went up

But the damned building had only one floor, discounting the basement.

Io couldn't explain it to him, but he had already gone too far.

He entered a large, well-lit office, predominantly red.

There he was waiting for a man in his mid-twenties. Very tall, strong.

He was sitting in a chair and there was another in front of him, in which Io should sit.

And the boy sat down:

—I know I'm hypnotized.

—Come on! If the fucking dwarf knows how to think!

Universe-Souled Child: 2

—You will have a name,— Io asked.

—That's right, my name is Theo.

At that moment Io realized that something was wrong with this man.

He had honey brown eyes, almost mirroring his own.

But... The outermost ring. It was a concentric succession of very vivid black and yellow colors.

It was as if his eyes were screaming at him that Theo was actually a very poisonous snake.

As if his life was in his hands.

Of course, Io balked at this idea:

—Yes. I do know how to think. So much so that I know you can't really hurt me.

—Let's see...— Theo continued.

Without knowing how, Io was tied by the arms to his chair.

From his forearms, larvae began to emerge.

They were gross. A dull yellow.

There were more and more and more and more.

Io was not an easy person to scare.

Not much less.

But he was scared and that was the reality.

—You're smarter than brave, Io, believe it or not,— Theo continued calmly.

»What is the etymology of my name?

Io refused to answer.

—Maybe I was wrong...

-God! Please enough. Enough already. “Theo” is Greek for “God.”

—What's cool?— Theo had a smile on his face.

—Why not... And listen, now couldn't you...?—

—Oh, that. Haha. No, look. You have to learn who's boss. For your luck or for your misfortune you are extremely resistant to punishment, so...

Theo got up and left the room.

Io was more than scared. He was still handcuffed. The maggots were eating the flesh off his forearms.

It wasn't a hallucination. He felt the pain.

Which was abandoned... Until these finally sectioned his arms a little above the wrists and he was finally able to get up from the chair.

At last he had the courage to open his eyes. He was intact.

He came out too and ran to take refuge in his bed.

The next day classes started.

The faculty introduced themselves. Sarah, whom he already knew, some Luis, plump, robust and with medium-length hair. He would take care of the wordy lessons.

For the scientific part, they had another man named Victor. Tall, with glasses.

What puzzled Io the most was that the students were no longer “grayed”.

They talked, they joked.

Karen startled him from behind:

—You don't see many eight-year-olds talking like adults...

—What the?

She laughed hysterically.

Sarah finished the exhibition.

They would have an hour and a half of letters and another hour and a half of science a day.

She would coordinate.

That day the first hour and a half ran at the hands of Luis.

—I already told you yes. —Victor cut Sarah off before leaving the classroom.

—You know why you're here, don't you?— Luis began to speak to the class.

—Because our parents don't love us— another student replied, followed by laughter.

—Besides...

—Intellectual giftedness —answered another student.

—How ugly does that sound, right?

»A euphemism?

—We fucking rock!

—There. Yes, there! And you had to be out there eating the fucking world, but...

—Are you okay? Luis asked a student who kept looking at the ceiling.

—Yeah, it's just that I pay attention like this...

Karen, came hand in hand with Hector, the kid who sat to the right of whom she kept looking at the ceiling.

She winked at Io.

—This poor thing has believed that we are gifted...

—How?

—Sure —Io continued, quickly getting the joke. Looking at the ceiling to pay attention is a clear sign of Asperger's Syndrome...

—We're autistic —Karen went on. Poor thing, having to find out like this...

Poor Hector left scared.

—Highly sensitive person?— Io asked.

—Definitely. Poor thing, he's going to be in a mess for a long time.

They laughed.

Professor Victor touched Io on the shoulder:

—I'm afraid we can't wait any longer.

Universe-Souled Child: 3

Io went hand in hand with Victor... Although the truth was that the latter was practically pushing him, to the stairs of the east wing.

The ones that would go down to the basement.

The stairs were dimly lit, and were much longer than Io could have gauged.

At last they came to a white door. Pristine.

Victor pushed him in.

There was Sarah.

—He has to get acquainted —said the coordinator.

There was a table with chairs on the sides.

It was an office table. The most comfortable seat was empty.

On the other side of the desk... There was him. Io?

Io. That was it. But it was worse than his darkest nightmare.

He had nails in her eyes. And he was... Io almost threw up when she realized it.

He was impaled. On a wooden stake.

He was. Was that alive? What was it to begin with?

Io ran away scared. They didn't try to stop him.

He knew there was only one man, or entity, or whatever the hell it was that could help him.

He ran up the stairs on the opposite side.

—What's going on?

—How do you get out?

—You have not answered me.

—You to me either. In peace? He smiled, but his eyes still warned of severe danger.

—Am I... Suffering from psychosis? —Childhood schizophrenia? Some explanation has to have this.

—Not quite. Io. No, look. Psychosis is nothing more than your mind going... Well. Shit. But yes, while she tries to heal.

—You are healing, Io. Healing, properly.

—How can I know...?

—Trusting.

—B-

—Yes, you are mistrustful —But tell me, do you have another?

Universe-Souled Child: 4

Classes went normally.

The bitches, classes, passed normally.

Christmas was near, although the boarding school was secular.

Karen and Io were up to a dangerous game.

They had made registers. They had followed all the students, the gals, rather, to find an hour alone.

And no, it wasn't normal for eight-year-olds to talk like adults.

But what happened that afternoon in the girls' dorm...

Neither was it.

And yes, they made it to the end.

Then. And only then. Io realized something. Something critical.

—Karen, *what* are you?

—A second chance. And she kissed him.

Io went up to see his advisor.

—I think I've done something wrong, Theo.

—Let's see, Io, champion. Omniscience. What part are you missing?

—I suppose you also know about Ethics —Have I done something wrong?

—Maybe you're ready —You are very fast, you know.

—I'm listening.

—None of this is real. It's not psychosis. It is not a memory.

»It's psychosis, fine. Remember. Karen is a... psychic image, you know. Someone forced you to... Rape her. At your 7 years. And no, don't bother to find out your age. I have that very well tied.

»Now... Now, lo. Now you must take revenge on whomever did this to you. And believe me, it will be unpleasant.

Universe-Souled Child: 5 Zenith!

Io went down the basement stairs hand in hand with Sarah, Victor and Luis, too.

He saw herself on the desk, in front of his tortured “Io”.

Luis put something in front of the table, the chair of authority.

Io took a seat.

It was a plate with a heart. Raw. You didn't have to be gifted to know it was a human heart.

—Won't the gentleman wait for cutlery?

—Either you are...

—The one you least expect, Io, is always the one you least expect.

He ate it determined.

The taste of a raw human heart?

Are you even serious!

Io. My name is Io. And I'm eating a raw human heart.

I... I. But something happens.

Towards the middle.

My tortured self. It disappears... It melts into light.

And so revenge is consummated.

Universe-Souled Child: 6 (Down to)

—Did I... did I get it right?

—Yes, David, yes. You have a whole life to enjoy your inner child.

—But can I lead a normal life?

—Let's see... — The psychiatrist touched her tear ducts.

—What you can't do is get out of here.

—But what about that?

—David! You hired a hitman! You ate a human heart!!

—Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. Will you extend my diet?