**Roots of Icarus**

My cousin passed away in the summer of 2019, only 28 years old. The news of this person I had walked closely with most of my life had passed. I was not surprised at the news. I had mourned his loss years before his death. It was a heroin overdose. He is the fourth in my family to die from heroin.

My fondest memories of him are from our childhood summers spent at our great-grandmother’s. She’d send us out to dig up her potatoes, and we’d bring wheelbarrows full to the cellar.

And so, I started growing potatoes.

Potatoes are incredible things. These bizarre tubers have ended famines and caused famines. They are a staple of so many culture’s diets. The 5th most important crop in the world, and it is a part of the nightshade family.

Solanine is a dormant toxin in domesticated potatoes. This toxin is there to ward off pests and prevent disease. Exposure to light triggers potatoes to produce solanine. If exposed to too much light, the potato will produce enough solanine to ultimately kill itself. When propagating potatoes above soil, the plant can root, sprout, and even flower, but it cannot grow to fruition to produce more potatoes unless it is buried. Like Icarus, too close to the sun, and the potato will die prematurely.

Over the last several months I have grown over 200 potatoes above the soil. All of which I have watched die.

Some of these potatoes I left on their own to die, but most I kept in my home. I cared for them closely every day knowing they could not go on as they were. Each morning I wake to find if they all made it through the night. Each day I find them greener than the last, signaling the ever-growing presence of solanine.

Wild potatoes in the Andes have not had the solanine in them bred into dormancy, and yet the people there still eat these extremely toxic potatoes. They are able to do this by covering the potatoes in clay to eat them. The clay absorbs the toxin and keeps it from entering the bloodstream as it passes through the body.

I wish I could have covered him in clay to keep him safe.

Now he rests under clay, but it’s too late.