

WHAT AILS YOU

A FEATURE FILM

CASTING BIBLE

*"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented
in the history of the world, but then you read."*

JAMES BALDWIN · THE FIRE NEXT TIME

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BEFORE YOU AUDITION

Read this page before anything else.

This is not a movie about monsters.

Every character in this story believes they are protecting someone.

Nobody wakes up trying to become the villain.

Perform the human being first.

The horror comes afterward.

If your audition is scary, we did something wrong. If your audition is honest, the scenes will do the scaring for us. Bring truth, restraint, and specificity. Leave the 'horror voice' at home.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

WHAT AILS YOU is a horror film about what happens when a community refuses to let its dead leave.

It is about inherited violence, faith, survival, and the impossible burden placed on Black communities to continually save themselves after generations of abandonment. The monsters in this film are born from love that has curdled into possession.

I want audiences to feel like they are walking through a familiar neighborhood that slowly reveals itself to be a haunted ecosystem — where every porch remembers someone who never came home, and where protection and captivity have become the same word.

Every performance should feel emotionally truthful, even when the supernatural enters the room. Especially then.

— DEMARCO JENKINS, WRITER / DIRECTOR



THE FILM

TITLE

What Ails You

FORMAT

Feature Film + Proof of Concept short

GENREUrban Gothic Horror · Psychological Horror · Body Horror · Southern /
Midwestern Gothic**SETTING**

A close-knit Black neighborhood on Detroit's east side — present day

RUNTIME

90–100 minutes

RATING

R — violence, language, thematic intensity

WRITER / DIRECTOR

DeMarco Jenkins

Logline: After a beloved choir singer dies at a party, a producer, a coder, a dealer, and a singer are pulled into the orbit of the neighborhood's warmest elder — and the thing she keeps chained beneath her house.

TONE

This is how the film should feel.

CANDYMAN (1992)

GET OUT

THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

HIS HOUSE

SAINT MAUD

PRISONERS

THE WAILING



We do not explain these references. Sit with them. Grief-forward. Slow dread. Community as chorus. Faith as pressure. Violence that costs something every time it appears.

THE WORLD

Every house knows everyone else's business.

Every porch remembers someone who never came home.

Every grandmother has seen too much.

Faith lives beside violence.

People survive by looking away.

The neighborhood is not a backdrop. It is a character with a pulse — gas station fluorescents at dawn, church pews at noon, a mob under streetlights at night. Actors should know this place in their bodies: who they nod to, which corners they avoid, which doors they never knock on.



THEMES

INHERITANCE

COMMUNITY

FAITH

GRIEF

BLACK MASCULINITY

CYCLES

MEMORY

BODIES

PROTECTION

OWNERSHIP

Protection and Ownership are printed in red because the film lives in the space between them. Every character crosses that line at least once. Know where your character crosses it.

VISUAL LANGUAGE



ACID GREEN

contamination · the field · visions



DEEP CRIMSON

cloth · blood · devotion



BONE

spines · hymnal paper · chalk

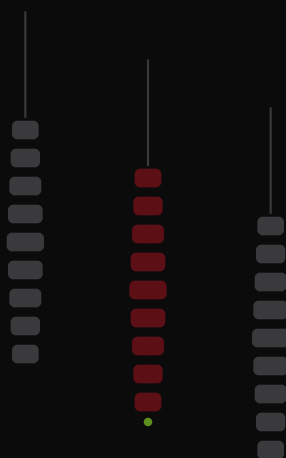


MATTE BLACK

night · basements · negative space

Acid green light · red cloth · dark wood · basements · chain · concrete · fluorescent light · old hymnals · 1970s photography · Polaroids · spinal imagery · church architecture

Chapter openers in this document use abstract motifs — a wrapped spine chime, chain links, cracked concrete — rather than literal stills. The film's frame works the same way: it withholds.



CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

All roles Black unless noted. Ages are playing ranges, not requirements.

Fifteen speaking roles, one movement role, and a neighborhood that behaves like a chorus. Detroit-area actors strongly encouraged. Lived-in authenticity will beat polish in every room.



DANIEL

22–26 · LEAD

MUSIC PRODUCER / RAPPER · COMMUNITY PROTECTOR · THE ACCUSED

A local star who made it out and keeps coming back. When Bobby Watkins dies at a party, the neighborhood decides Daniel's associations are to blame — and grief needs an address. He spends the film beaten, blamed, and still refusing to abandon anyone.

PSYCHOLOGY

Daniel carries guilt he refuses to admit — not for what he did, but for who his name attracts. Others see him as dangerous. He sees himself as necessary. He has saved Jacob's life twice and cannot understand why that debt curdled into hatred.

WANTS

To clear his name without giving anyone up. To protect Ruth and Jacob even when they turn on him.

FEARS

That loyalty to this place will kill him — or that leaving it already has, and this is the bill coming due.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Daniel rarely raises his voice. His anger should feel earned, banked, expensive.
- He doesn't perform masculinity. He survives it.
- In the mob scene, play exhaustion before fear. He has been rehearsing this trial his whole life.

RUTH

21–25 · LEAD

SINGER · SPELMAN GRADUATE · THE EMOTIONAL CENTER

The choir's leader and the neighborhood's golden ticket. Ruth moves between every faction — Daniel, Jacob, Eli, Mary Ann — because everyone trusts her. That trust is exactly what makes her the target of the film's final horror.

PSYCHOLOGY

Ruth is faithful without being naïve and strong enough to challenge everyone on screen. She refuses to become cruel, and the film tests that refusal to breaking. She survives the story's darkest hour and its ending belongs to her.

WANTS

To lift grief off people through her voice. To keep her circle of dangerous, damaged men from destroying each other.

FEARS

Being made passive. Being carried, grabbed, saved, bound — the film keeps taking her agency and she keeps taking it back.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- The audience should trust Ruth immediately. She isn't naïve. She simply refuses to become cruel.
- Never play victimhood as the baseline; play defiance under restraint.
- The final scenes require extraordinary emotional range and will be produced with full safety protocols — see Content & Safety.

ELI

25–29 · SUPPORTING LEAD

DEALER · TATTOOED · THE HONEST CYNIC

The neighborhood's dealer and, quietly, its most honest man. Eli sees the supernatural first, believes it first, and dies making sure everyone else survives long enough to believe him.

PSYCHOLOGY

Eli's humor is defensive. His confidence hides guilt — he glamorized the streets to younger boys like Lonnie and knows it. His code (clean product, no lies, protect who you know) is real, and it costs him his life.

WANTS

To keep his small circle alive in a place designed to kill them. To be believed, once, without a joke attached.

FEARS

Not death — waste. Dying for nothing, like everyone else here.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Eli is funny until he absolutely is not. Land the jokes so the sincerity lands harder.
- His last scenes are physical: play pain as annoyance, dying as unfinished business.
- Chemistry with Daniel should feel like brothers who chose each other.

JACOB

22–26 · SUPPORTING LEAD

CODER · OUTSIDER · THE COWARD'S TRAGEDY

From Holly, Michigan — not from here, and everyone knows it. Jacob locked a door on Daniel during a school shooting four years ago and has been locking doors ever since: on the truth about Bobby's party, on his fear, on himself. He dies at the one door he finally opens.

PSYCHOLOGY

Jacob is always trying to convince himself he belongs. His shame metastasizes into resentment — of Daniel's ease, of Ruth's respect for dangerous men, of a world that keeps proving he's soft. Mary Ann's whisper ('Tell her what you want to tell her') finds fertile ground.

WANTS

To be seen as brave. To keep Ruth. To rewrite one moment in a supply closet, four years too late.

FEARS

Being found out. Every lie he tells is fear management, not malice.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Jacob is not a villain — he is what fear does to a good mind. Play the self-persuasion, not the scheming.
- His breakdown (the car, the hallucinations) should feel like a dam failing, not a switch flipping.
- His final line is an act of courage. Let him have it.

MARY ANN

75–85 · LEAD ANTAGONIST

NEIGHBORHOOD ELDER · LOUISIANA-ROOTED · WARM · FUNNY · TERRIFYING

Everyone's grandmother. She makes coffee at the gas station, checks on grieving mothers, remembers every child's name — and keeps her dead son chained in a basement hung with human spines, harvesting the neighborhood to build a heaven it can never leave.

PSYCHOLOGY

Never play Mary Ann as a villain. She genuinely believes she is saving everyone. Her theology is grief with a system: the dead are stuck, love is binding, and a community that keeps killing its children deserves a mother who refuses to let go. Her warmth is not a mask. That is the horror.

WANTS

To finish the work: one final spine, one final feeding, one child to believe in — and her family free of this world.

FEARS

Letting go. It is the one thing she cannot do, and every atrocity flows from that refusal.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- The smile is real. Do not telegraph menace — the script does that for you.
- Her voice cracks exactly twice in the film. Those cracks are the whole character.
- Requires an actor who can hold folksy comedy and ritual horror in the same breath.

THOMAS

PLAYING 30s · MOVEMENT ROLE

CREATURE PERFORMER · 6'4" · POWERFUL FRAME · MINIMAL DIALOGUE

Mary Ann's dead son, brought back and bound in chains and an iron mask. Thomas is the film's creature — and its most abused victim. He does not speak. He grunts, breathes, and at the end, chooses.

PSYCHOLOGY

Thomas is not a monster. He is a prisoner — of chains, of his mother's love, of a body that was resurrected without consent. His single working eye does the acting. His final act is the film's only clean mercy.

WANTS

Water. Rest. An end.

FEARS

His mother's voice.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Every movement communicates weight, pain, and restraint — never speed, never rage for its own sake.
- Movement references: strongman, Butoh, slow industrial machinery.
- Seeking a performer with dance, mime, or movement-theater background; full prosthetics and mask work — see The Creature.

CASTING NOTE

This role will be workshopped with the movement coach and prosthetics team before final casting. Comfort with restricted-vision mask work is essential.

LONNIE

18–21 · LEAD (PROOF OF CONCEPT)

FRENZIED ENERGY · HIRED SHOOTER · THE CHILD UNDER THE BRAVADO

The proof-of-concept short lives with Lonnie: a teenager paid \$2,000 to shoot up a funeral, kidnapped into a basement of horrors, and killed slowly by men who call it justice. He starts cocky. He ends broken.

PSYCHOLOGY

Lonnie performs menace because the neighborhood pays for menace — Eli himself admits he sold these boys the fantasy. Underneath is a scared, quick-thinking kid who fights harder to survive than anyone in the film.

WANTS

The money, then just the morning. By the end he only wants someone to know he didn't want this.

FEARS

That everyone was right about him.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- The audience should fear for Lonnie even after learning what he did. That tension is the entire short.
- Play the bravado thin — it should crack visibly in the basement.
- His death scene ('I di-n't... want this') must be underplayed. No opera.

MARIAH WATKINS

40–50 · SUPPORTING

GRIEVING MOTHER · IMPOSING PRESENCE · THE MOB'S HEART

Bobby's mother — nearly six-three and carrying a grief the size of the neighborhood. She turns a funeral into a trial and a street into a courtroom, softball bat in hand.

PSYCHOLOGY

Mariah is grief without an address. She is wrong about Daniel and right about everything else: someone knows, and no one is saying. Her rage is the community's rage, concentrated.

WANTS

A name. Any name. Someone to hold accountable in a world where accountability never comes.

FEARS

That her son died for nothing, over someone else's beef, and the truth will make it worse.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Never play her as unhinged. Play her as certain — a mother conducting the justice system that failed her.
- The bat is not a prop of madness; it is the only gavel she was given.
- Her quiet final scene ('Right you are.') should chill more than her screaming.

PASTOR NILES

50–60 · SUPPORTING

SHEPHERD · WEARY · GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

The neighborhood's pastor, presiding over one child's funeral too many. His faith has become liturgy — words that still comfort others but have stopped reaching him.

PSYCHOLOGY

Niles is a good man running on ritual. He preaches light while the neighborhood burns, and he knows the gap. He is the film's portrait of institutional faith: present, sincere, and insufficient.

WANTS

To keep the flock together one more Sunday.

FEARS

That the words stopped working years ago and everyone can tell.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Find the autopilot: beautiful cadence, absent eyes.
- His attempt to stop the mob should be gentle and useless — the tragedy is he knows it.

THE SONS

30s–40s · SUPPORTING / MOVEMENT-ADJACENT

JOHN · LEONARD · EMMANUEL · MARY ANN'S ENFORCERS · MINIMAL DIALOGUE

Three brothers in baseball caps who stand too still, watch too long, and carry out their mother's harvest.

JOHN (40s): mass and fury, a shotgun and a grudge. LEONARD (30s): silent speed. EMMANUEL

(mid-30s, 6'6"+): the reluctant one — the only son who hesitates, apologizes, and mourns.

PSYCHOLOGY

They are sons first, monsters second. Each believes obedience is love. Emmanuel is the fracture line: 'I wanted different.' Cast an actor who can break your heart in four lines.

WANTS

To finish their mother's work and rest.

FEARS

Her disappointment. Nothing else on earth.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Stillness is the whole language. When they move, it should feel like weather.
- All three require strong physical presence; fight choreography experience valued.
- Emmanuel's 'Thank you, Daniel' and his tears over John's body are the roles' auditions sides for a reason.

OMAR & BOBO

18–21 · SUPPORTING (PROOF OF CONCEPT)

LONNIE'S CREW · FOLLOWERS · FIRST VICTIMS

Lonnie's boys. OMAR (18): the anxious one, who survives the park only to die of despair in the basement. BOBO (19): the loud one, first to celebrate the money, first hung from the ceiling.

PSYCHOLOGY

Neither is a killer by conviction — they are teenagers doing a job in an economy of violence. Their terror in the basement is the audience's entry point.

WANTS

The payout, then the exit.

FEARS

Exactly what happens to them.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Play them young. The horror works because they are children in a room built for judgment.
- Omar's slow shutdown (crying, head against the wall) should read as trauma, not weakness.

TEEZO

20s–30s · FEATURE ONLY

UNSEEN ANTAGONIST · THE ORDER-GIVER · VOICE / PRESENCE CASTING

The name behind the money. Teezo ordered the hit that killed Bobby and never appears on screen in the current draft — he exists in texts, payouts, and fear. Casting a voice (and possible single-scene presence) that can haunt a film from off screen.

PSYCHOLOGY

Teezo is the cycle itself: violence outsourced, consequences delegated, grief invoiced. The neighborhood says his name the way it says a diagnosis.

WANTS

Daniel's circle punished. His name feared.

FEARS

Nothing. That's the point — and the problem.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Voice work must carry menace without theatrics; think a man discussing invoices.
- This role may expand in future drafts; submissions kept on file.

NICKI

27–31 · SUPPORTING

PARTY HOST · COMIC RELIEF · KEEPER OF THE EVIDENCE

Tipsy, flirtatious, and accidentally holding the video that breaks the case open. Nicki hosts the party where Bobby dies and delivers the film's only real laughs — right before its worst reveal.

PSYCHOLOGY

Nicki's chatter is armor and hospitality at once. She is genuinely kind, genuinely messy, and sharper than anyone credits.

WANTS

A good time, a clean conscience, and for nobody to kill her vibe.

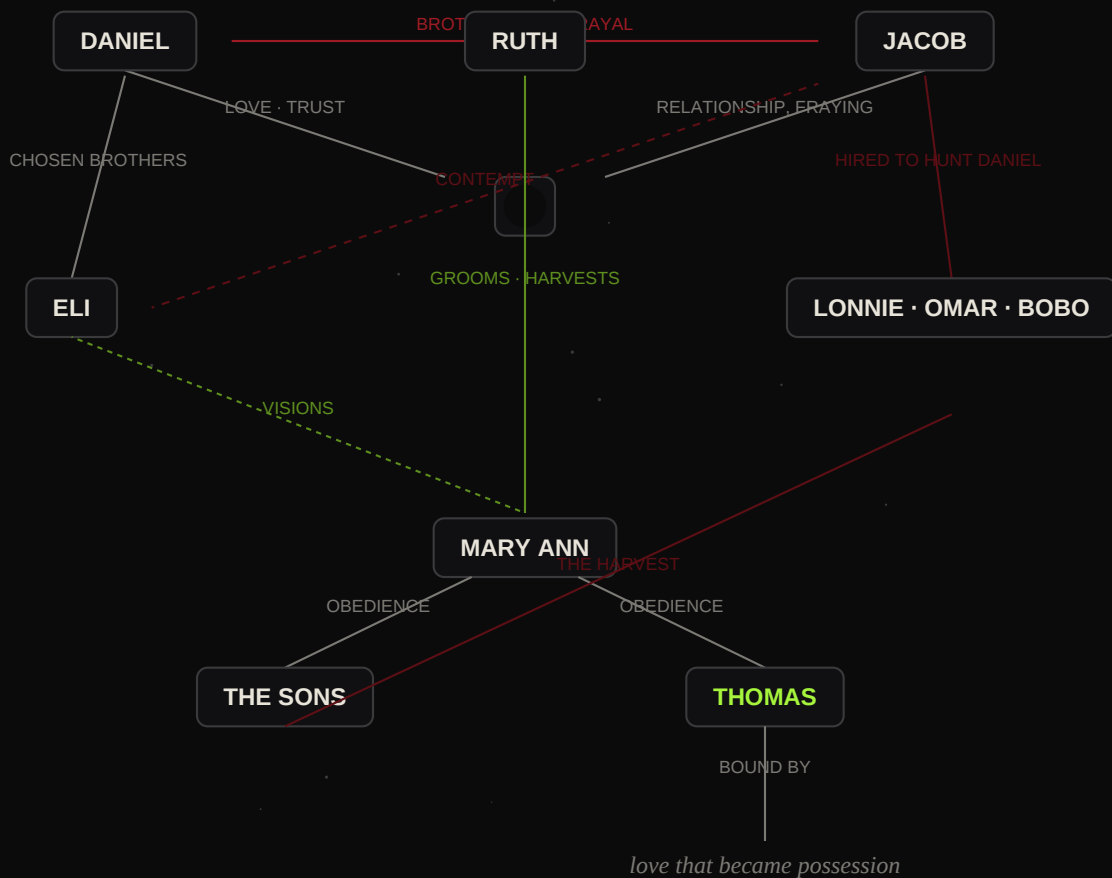
FEARS

That her party is the reason a boy is dead.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

- Comic timing is the audition. The pathos underneath ('After that, I called 911...') is the callback.
- Never play dumb. Play distracted.

CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS



Green lines are supernatural contact. Red lines are violence. Gray lines are love — the film's argument is that in this neighborhood, the three are hard to tell apart.

THE CREATURE

Thomas & practical effects

Thomas is performed practically. No CGI creature.

Heavy prosthetics. Iron welding mask. Chain straitjacket.

Movement over speed. Weight over aggression. Pain over rage.

Design details from the script: a 6'4"+ frame built large rather than sculpted; a scarred, bald head; one empty socket and one light-brown eye that carries every scene; a lipless mouth; a burn across the throat that explains the silence. Blood weeps from the mask's cut rectangle. The chains are costume, restraint rig, and instrument — their sound is scored.

For performers: expect 3–4 hour prosthetic applications, restricted vision, and choreographed load-bearing movement developed with a movement coach and stunt coordinator. The role is physically demanding and artistically singular — the closest analogues are creature-suit performances built on empathy, not menace.



CONTENT & SAFETY

What Ails You contains graphic violence (gun violence, a mob beating, ritual killing and body horror) and, in its final act, a sequence of ritualized sexual violence against Ruth that is central to the film's horror and treated without exploitation. All performers auditioning for Ruth, Thomas, and Mary Ann will receive a full scene-level content disclosure before callbacks.

- A certified intimacy coordinator will be attached for all scenes involving Ruth and Thomas, from rehearsal through wrap.
- No nudity is required for any role. Simulated content is choreographed, closed-set, and consent-documented.
- A stunt coordinator supervises all fight, mob, vehicle, and firearm sequences; all weapons are production props under armorer control.
- Actors may flag boundaries at submission with no effect on casting consideration.
- Minors will not be considered for any role in this production.

PRODUCTION

PROOF OF CONCEPT SHOOT

[Dates TBD — targeting late 2026] · 3–4 shoot days · Lonnie storyline

FEATURE SHOOT

[Dates TBD — 2027] · 24–28 shoot days

LOCATION

Detroit, Michigan and surrounding metro

COMPENSATION

[Rate structure TBD] · All roles paid · Rates disclosed with sides

TRAVEL & HOUSING

Provided for cast engaged from outside metro Detroit

MEALS

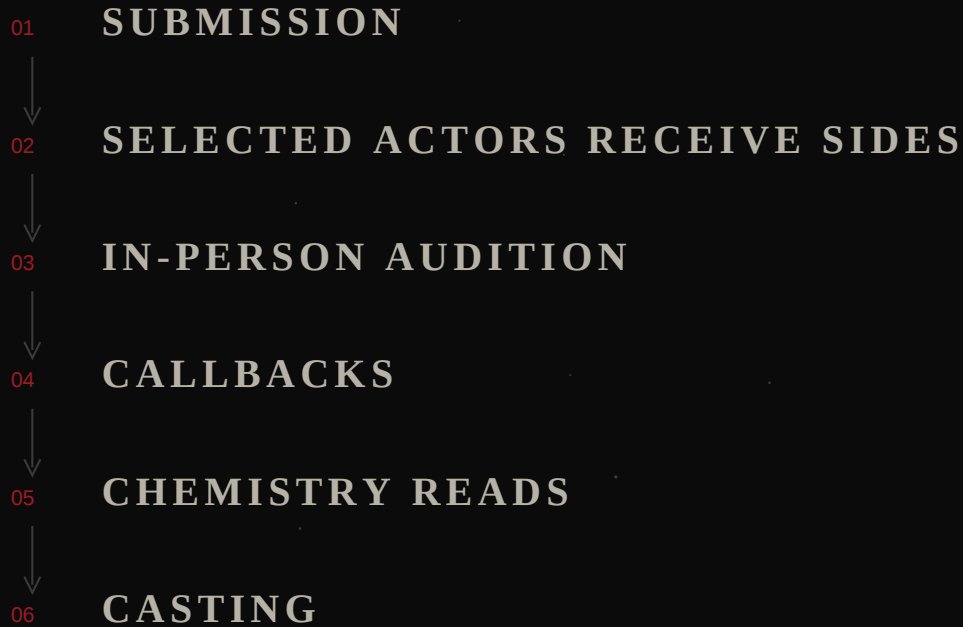
Provided all shoot days per industry standard

UNION STATUS

[TBD — anticipated SAG-AFTRA low-budget agreement for feature]

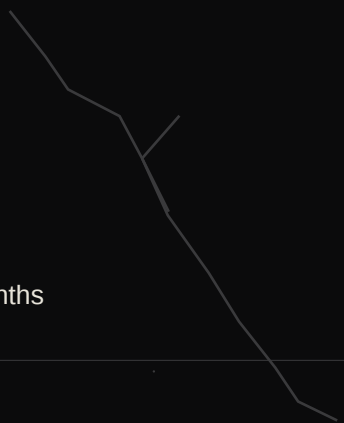
Bracketed items to be finalized by production prior to distribution.

AUDITION PROCESS



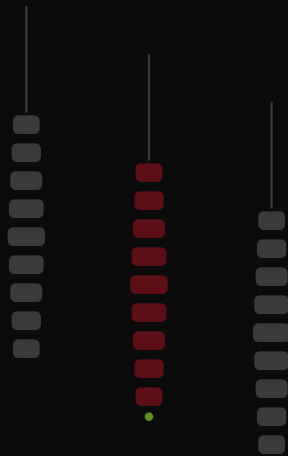
Self-tapes accepted for submission. Thomas and The Sons include an additional movement call. Chemistry reads pair Daniel/Ruth, Daniel/Jacob, Daniel/Eli, and Ruth/Mary Ann. Full content disclosure precedes all callbacks.

SUBMISSION



HEADSHOT	Current, within 12 months
RESUME	PDF preferred
DEMO REEL	Link preferred (unlisted acceptable) · slate optional
ROLE(S)	Specify role(s) of interest; multiple welcome
AVAILABILITY	Conflicts within the production windows above
MOVEMENT MATERIALS	Thomas / The Sons only — movement reel or class history
EMAIL	[casting email TBD]
DEADLINE	[TBD]

Subject line format: WAY — [ROLE] — [LAST NAME, FIRST NAME]. Incomplete submissions will still be read; we care more about the work than the paperwork.



Some legacies aren't passed down.

They're bound.

