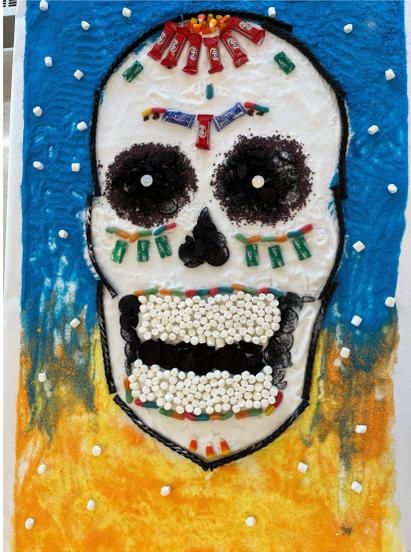


### 3rd Place: "The Peanut Farmer" by Jory Woods



The dimly lit Oval Office seemed to close in around me, and the secrecy within the room, even here, weighed heavily on my shoulders. As the intelligence community representatives began their revelation, my heart raced, expecting the benign truth of benevolent extraterrestrial beings. But what I was about to hear proved to be far more sinister and unsettling.

They meticulously explained that major religions, including Christianity, were simply tools constructed by extraterrestrial beings to control and manipulate all of humanity. My faith, my very core, was being torn asunder by

ten scared men in black suits. They revealed layers of deception I could never have fathomed.

As they continued, I somehow felt nothing and everything all at once. The knowledge that our religions were mere tools in a cosmic experiment was numbing. The belief that these beings created us, shaping our history and guiding our destiny, obliterated any true role or responsibility I held as President.

But the most harrowing part of the briefing was still yet to come. The intelligence representatives leaned in closer, their voices hushed and their expressions cold. They revealed that the extraterrestrial beings responsible for these manipulations had a message for me.

As the words were spoken, a sharp pain shot up my spine. These beings, the architects of humanity, had orders for me. I was to keep this knowledge hidden from the world, to maintain the secrecy that had veiled their existence.

In the days that followed, I was plagued by nightmarish visions and vivid dreams. I would wake in the dead of night, bathed in cold sweat, my mind haunted by unknown faces, cryptic symbols, and the deaths of millions of innocent people. It was as if they were watching me,

inspecting my thoughts, and instilling a sense of fear that was inescapable.

My nightmares soon gave way to a more sinister reality. I began to receive strange messages, encoded in symbols and patterns. They appeared in the most unexpected places – on my breakfast plate, etched into my bathroom mirror, and scrawled across the pages of classified documents. It was clearly a reminder of my obligation to stay in line. Even with their threats, I knew I needed to take action.

However, before I could even begin to think of a plan, the symbols, once mere abstractions, took on a more corporeal form. I would wake to find my body covered in intricate patterns, marked by an otherworldly force. I began seeing my own body more alike to the crop circles I saw back home than anything resembling that of a healthy human body. The pain that accompanied these markings was excruciating, a torture that left me gasping for breath each and every morning. It was a message from the beings, a painful reminder of the consequences of betraying their trust.

I became a puppet in their theater, a pawn in a game I could never comprehend. The walls of the Oval Office seemed to appear darker with each passing day, suffocating me with a truth never to be revealed.

As I write these words, I am no longer the man I once was. I am trapped in a nightmarish existence, humanity's chief prisoner. My campaign promise, to reveal the truth about UFOs, became a distant memory. Miraculously, as my hope dwindled, my body healed. The truth, as I have come to realize, is far more terrifying than I could have ever imagined, and I am to accept my new role, for anything else is certain death for who knows how many.

