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2014

2014 Greenleaf Review (no. 27)

Sigma Tau Delta

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THE
GREENLEAF REVIEW

Issue No. 27



A Sigma Tau Delta Publication
of
Whittier College

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WHITTIER COLLEGE

A SIGMA TAU DELTA PUBLICATION
ISSUE NO. 27
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The Greenleaf Review
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Letter From the Editor

Dear Reader:

This year's edition of the Literary Review turns a new leaf in the publication's history. To honor Whittier College's literary heritage and add context to the Review's content, the decision was made to rename the publication after the school's namesake, poet John Greenleaf Whittier. Since 1887, Whittier's legacy has shaped the identity of the College. Under his influence, generations of Whittier College Poets have been inspired to apply the ideals of his words to their works.

Yet Whittier's connection to the College is the stuff of fiction. The poet had nothing to do with the founding of the school. He never visited the campus—or the state of California, for that matter. His presence at the College was never literal, only literary. Whittier's history is an imagined one.

But there is truth to this imagined history, for it reveals the reality of how reliant our identities are upon the narratives we tell ourselves.

Although the name of a dead poet does not contextualize the prose of a 20-year-old student, the significance of Whittier's story bears testament to the power of the language of fiction. Just as Whittier's name both identifies and gives meaning to the institution it inspired, the words we use to communicate also serve as the foundation for our existence, granting significance to the way we choose to remember both our real and imagined lives.

Through the creative work of students, *The Greenleaf Review* seeks to continue the metaphorical legacy of its namesake. No longer a *what*, the Literary Review is now a *who*, personified by the man who lent his name and his words to so many noble causes. As you read through this year's chosen submissions, keep in mind the individuals who have lent their names and their words to the creative cause. You may not know them and you may never meet them. And though their names may never become a reality to you, their voices are no less real than the fictions they articulate.

Krystal Valladares
Editor of *The Greenleaf Review*

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Annual Scholarly Writing Prizes

SCHOLARLY WRITING PRIZES

1st Place

Hallie Gayle

“The Spiritual Romance: Paradise as the Embodied Love of God”

2nd Place

Kelsey Kwong

“The Female Biological Clock is Ticking... But Don’t You Worry About a Ching, Mama”

3rd Place

Kellen Aguilar

“A Moveable Beast: from Satan to Satire”

POETRY WRITING PRIZES

1st Place

Carsen West

“flunking out of flirting”

2nd Place

Shirley Thao

“Into Worlds You Never Dare Enter Alone”

3rd Place

Alexa Pegues

“You Are My Sunshine”

Honorable Mention

Michelle Gamboa

“Ambassador”

Honorable Mention

Joseph Waugh

“Story”

FICTION WRITING PRIZES

1st Place

Robert Cristo

“A Day in the Life”

2nd Place

Carsen West

“Keeping Score is the Worst Kind of Habit”

3rd Place

Derek Blankenship

“Expectations”

They Asked Me

Aidee Campa

They asked me if I knew you
They asked me if I liked you
They asked me if I admired you
They asked me all these silly questions
And all I could do was laugh
And say:
Of course I know her
And I don't like her, I love her
And I think highly of her,
But above all, she is my friend.

And then they asked me some thing else.
They asked me if I knew myself
They asked me if I liked myself
They asked me if I admired myself
And I had to turn away,
For I could not answer those questions in truth.
I could not laugh at their absurdity
Could not say with all certainty that I not only liked myself, but delighted in myself, in the quirks and curves and oddities that distinguish me from you and you from me
I could not say that I esteemed myself
Nor could I say that I am my own friend.

And I wonder why it is that I can easily say that another woman, another man is worthy of my affection, respect, and friendship,
But I am not?

They tell us to love ourselves before we love our neighbors
To respect ourselves above all others
To know ourselves inside and out
And if this is what we should be doing, then I wonder why it is easier to respect and love others than it is to respect, love, and know ourselves?

Microwave Man

Hallie Gayle

Lena leaned against her Microwave Man, stroking those smooth, glossy buttons, tapping out something close to a rhythm.

“What can I get for you this beautiful morning, my even more beautiful Lena?”

Lena closed her eyes and rubbed her pudgy fingers over her forehead, now dewy with sweat at the sudden lust for food.

“I want...” She began, licking her thin lips with a wet, eager tongue. She could never say the words first. It was an intuitive search of the appetite. First she dreamed of a sweet sugary river dripping golden puddles over a warm, buttery field of soft bread.

“I want... waffles, with syrup, and wait...” She had to have a meat! Breakfast was never complete without the meat. “I want sausage,” she moaned, her voice thick with desire. “I want bacon, I want...”

And, usually, before Lena could finish her sentence, Microwave Man was on the job. The correct ingredients and seasonings were triggered in the hard drive. Tiny transistors and microchips fired urgent messages to his radiation chamber, while ultra-sonic radio waves shot heat and food chips to his empty, whistling belly.

As Microwave Man twitched and buzzed and turned a soft glow of orange, savory smells floated throughout Lena’s home. Microwave Man stuttered to a stop and let out a final sweet sigh. A marvelous culinary creation of golden waffles slid out on a tin tray. Microwave Man’s arms, like twisted metal coat hangers, dug into his deep plastic pockets and handed Lena an oven mitt.

“Remember to blow a few times before eating. You don’t want to burn your mouth, my dear Lena!”

Lena rarely blew to cool down her steaming food before eating her meals. She gorged her stubby hands into her fluffy waffles, stuffing together a ball of gooey high-concentrated sap, greasy pork, and soggy wheat. As a pigeon cooed in the distance and an airplane’s whine broke the dull morning silence, Lena forced her breakfast into her grimy mouth while making fussy, gasping noises.

Most people were ashamed to own a Microwave Man. These robots with their plastic Elvis Presley hair were usually sold on infomercials that came on late in the night, preying on desperate insomniacs. Talk circulated about these all-serving appliances. Margo, the anorexic, rat-faced secretary at Lena's work, always went on about how they gave her the creeps—their peculiar smile, their synthesized, unnatural voices.

Owning a Microwave Man was the equivalent embarrassment to the talking and walking iChia Pets and the vibrating, electric-heating iSnuggies. But once you owned a Microwave Man, it was hard to imagine a life without him. Lena loved to press her cheek against his warm humming belly, soothed at the sound of his kind and reassuring voice. It got so that the smells and tastes from his food made her break out in hives just from sheer excitement.

When Lena got home from work, she threw her bag at the front door and ran to Microwave Man, tears sloshing down her pimpled, bloated cheeks.

“My poor, sweet Lena! What can I get for you? I can detect that you are sad. Shall I begin baking the sweets?”

Lena dropped into her sofa and felt the large disgusting bag of flesh she was becoming. Rolls of fat jiggled under her shrinking shirt like swollen sacks of cottage cheese; thighs ballooned from her stretchy jeans like an extra layer of couch cushion.

She was always terribly depressed when returning from work. She had to sit in a confined cubical all day while listening to the whining sound of printers, fingers tapping away on keyboards, and the click of high heels from the skinny women who ate OrganicBioticGreenFix. Lena rolled her eyes at this new trendy diet that everyone was trying—some weird space food that saved the planet one aluminum packet at a time and made a body's metabolism sky-rocket. Lena tried it once; it tasted like cat food.

Lena was always so relieved to hear her Microwave Man when she got home from work. “I want...” she bawled. “I want...”

She began to search her appetite, trying to catch her breath while choking on sobs. She inhaled deeply and let her tongue rest in her mouth. It began to build up with saliva which dripped down her double chin and onto her shirt. Microwave Man pulled out a soft rag from the second shelf of his belly and began wiping away her tears, snot, and spit. Lena relaxed as she began to meditate on her next meal. She imagined a waterfall of pink strawberry ice cream and

special spoons made of French fries. Oh, and who says you can't have pot roast too! "I want...ice cream. And fries. And meat."

Even though it was very hard for Lena to articulate her imagination, Microwave Man was always one step ahead of her. His beady metallic eyes began to twinkle as he recognized and matched Lena's desperate tone of voice with her usual sweet and salty afternoon combo. Eventually, Lena stopped going to work and Microwave Man became the perfect sit-in husband and friend. His job was to cook on demand, clean on demand, and exist to please the wants of his unique human consumer. He grew more and more intelligent by listening to her appetite, recording and storing the collective needs of his Lena.

Lena liked to sit and watch her favorite television soap operas. During dramatic love scenes, Lena indulged in a chocolate cherry cake. When the commercials for technical school or Prozac came on, Lena had to chew on honey-glazed barbeque ribs.

While she would wait for more room to form in her gurgling stomach, Microwave Man bent his knobby, metal frame and squeezed into the tight space left over on the sofa. He worried for Lena, in a way that overworked appliances usually worry. His arms were all rusty from little care, and his internal circuits were beginning to burn out and fray.

The fact that Microwave man could not perform to his highest functioning level only put more stress on his ability to serve quality food. Through the long winter, Lena and Microwave Man lived in an isolated darkness. There was little sunlight leaking in through the closed blinds, and the heater moaned through the house with artificial warmth, making Lena—for whatever reason—irritable and even hungrier. One day she threw a giant bowl of spaghetti and meatballs at the wall because the sauce lacked a certain spiciness. Her moods were becoming more and more complex. While Microwave Man sensed frustration, he also sensed a deep despair that threw off his human emotion radar. It would signal the hard drive to make sweets, but would then go out on a limb and fire emergency warnings for vegetables. Lena screamed when she saw the sight of dark green broccoli next to her pan of chocolate fudge brownies. Microwave Man recorded Lena's hysterical reaction, and vegetables were never to be served again.

By February, Lena's appetite narrowed down to cookie dough and tuna fish sandwiches. But when spring rolled around, Lena had a whole new inspiration for food.

After Lena finished a red velvet wedding cake, she began falling asleep. She

basked in the grainy lights of the television, her hand still fishing around in the leftover cream frosting and scarlet breadcrumbs. “I want...” Lena would drool as she drifted into sleep. Microwave Man wiped the crusty sugar that built up around her mouth. He pulled a blanket over her loose belly that sagged from her stained shirt.

Just when his battery began to fade to sleep mode, his robot brain fired awake. Lena began bursting out food names in her sleep. “Jelly Donuts!” “Ham Omelet!” The numerous false alarms kept Microwave Man on constant edge. He kept switching from a soft blue glow to a fired up red, off and on, like a broken stop light.

When Lena shouted “Vinegar potato chips!” Microwave Man began to twitch and hiss like he was experiencing an epileptic fit. A few sparks began to sputter from his plastic smile, and smoke lingered from the hidden door of his cooking cavity. Too many demands and too many ingredients were fired at his internal hard drive. Eggs that were cracked to be stirred and fried, ran gooey rivers of yolk through the waveguide and magnetron of Microwave Man. Rising dough clogged the radiation chamber, and grease trailed down the cracks of his plastic hair, slithering from his face like sweat.

His neck hacked out and smoked until his plastic facial features melted into tears. He juttied out one final discharge of uncooked batter and raw meats, and gave a last goodbye to his beloved. “Lena. Lena. What can I make for you? Lena. Delicious. Beautiful, Len—” Lena was still fast asleep in her food coma, mumbling incoherent wants and needs.

When Lena woke up, the morning light was harsh and stale. She could still taste her dinner of steak and twice-baked potatoes in her mouth. She vomited silently on her shirt. Through the haze of her food hangover, Lena noticed Microwave Man’s head bent over in a mournful way. His arms and broad metal chest were caked with flour and unknown sticky substances. His belly was no longer radiating that beautiful orange glow.

Lena began to pant, rubbing her fingers over his buttons and then over her sweaty forehead, her greasy hair and her bulging stomach and thighs.

“I want...” She began to whimper. “I want...” But she could not figure out what it was that she wanted.

She could not go to that place in her head full of sugary rainbows and thick pools of gravy. It was a blank void. She heard only the wheezing of her breath as

her giant sad body spread itself to the edges of the sofa.

Lena had no words. It was a need too deep to be satisfied by a morning of maple syrup and chocolate chip waffles. Dead Microwave Man slouched by her side on the sofa, his little metal hand perched on her fat knee. Outside she could hear the pigeon's cooing and the grunt of the morning garbage truck moving its way through the sleepy silence.

If I Had a Clue

Noah Zeko

If I had a tongue
I could taste the savory pork ribs
Sliding off of the bone,
Melting into pure ecstasy.

If I had a nose
I could smell the barbeque chicken,
The siren scent slithering
Through my sinuses with ease.

If I had ears
I could hear the soft sizzle
As the heat chars the top
Glazing the beef with grease.

If I had eyes
I could see the tender lamb
Rip apart, strand by strand
Between my starving teeth.

If I had a brain
I could sense that this delicious meat
Screaming before me is you
And I should stop.

The Monsters Dance

Matthew Aranda

The monsters dance across his ugly face,
These red and pus-inflated drunken fiends
Whose oozing mountain bodies torture him
By stomping, quaking on his cheeks: the floor,
A deeply greasy iridescent floor,
With monstrous Jackson Pollack splatter art.
No use to pop the loaded pus volcanoes:
Building greenish muck these facial cannons
Aflame with nasty hellish good, explode!
They claw, gash his flesh and leave behind
Reminding scars. Redundantly he cleans
Those pools of toxic pus where sorrows bathe.

He wonders why. He wonders why. Why him?
Deterred from love, a melodrama plays
Inside his head. A reel of different art.
He sees himself with monsters on his face,
And other actors have a face of gods.
He believes these seeping facial beasts
Are there as his deformed antagonists.
But like the darkness in his mental theater,
He can't see past the fiction on the screen,
He doesn't notice how alike he is
To others in the theater, in the world.
He writes himself the wrong appearance role,
He locked his mind in haunting monster zits:
"A romance? Fantasy, when monsters dance."

The end is getting up and out of mind,
And walking from the theater into light.

What Was I Doing?

Joel Marin

I did not do
What I set out to do.
I did not set out
To not do it.

What did I set out to do?
I do not know.
I only know that
I didn't do it.

The Roommate

Leandro Fefer

I had taken out the Black Label. The good stuff.

Pulled it off the shelf after I walked into the apartment, over to the window, and seen Marcus out there, again. “Good night to die, Buddy?” I asked jauntily.

“You better believe it,” he had said without looking back. “Tonight’s the night.”

“Sure it is,” I said, walking back towards the kitchen table where a bottle of red label sat empty. I loosened my tie and checked the cupboard. The reserve bottle of red label was not there. So I grabbed the good stuff and walked back towards the window. I pushed the plastic frame the rest of they way open and stepped out onto the fire escape.

“So there are two men,” I said. “One is standing on the fire escape, one’s sitting on the window ledge, and both holding bottles of scotch. What’s the title of the story?”

Marcus was unresponsive, so I gave him some suggestions. “*Yupi-holics? Middle Management Blues? Four-Years for What? New York Extra-Mundane?* I mean if it was a movie, would you watch it?”

I was starting to feel the warmth of the scotch in my belly and the familiar comfort that it brought. I almost didn’t realize that Marcus was still not smiling.

I leaned forward against the handrail and swirled the open bottle in one hand. “So what’s it this time, kid?”

He didn’t answer, just leaned forward, swung his legs a bit, and held his bottle with both hands around the neck and the base between his thighs.

“Yea, that bad huh?” This was different than other nights. He wasn’t angry, he wasn’tsarcastic, this was a strangely quiet Marcus.

I wanted to throw a couple more light jabs. I wanted to get him talking and make him realize that the whole thing was stupid, whatever it was. We would sing dirty rap lyrics, we would talk about girls and he would slur out that he loved me by the time we were ready for sleep. I just wanted it to be normal.

I would convince him. He would laugh. He would cry. We would get drunk. Like usual.

Sometimes it was even funny and a couple times it had been fun. Like on the 4th of July when he had been wearing only an American flag. Way too angry to jump. He had a six-pack with him and a box of mortar shells from our last supply trip out to the nearest Rez.

“Fucking assholes,” he kept yelling. “I’m going out with a bang!” When he stood up, the flag slipped and he was naked. Junk jangling, flag waving he chugged all of his beers and threw the bottles one by one. He lit off mortars in between bottles and tossed them to explode halfway down the 19-story drop.

At first I had been alarmed until I heard the sirens and could see Marcus’s image reflected in the 50-inch plasma across the street. When I pointed out that he was on TV, he got embarrassed. “Fucking assholes,” he mumbled and came inside blushing.

We hid in Jane’s apartment across the hall and laughed raucously into her couch pillows when she lied to the cops at the door about not knowing us.

But it wasn’t like that tonight. He just sat there wordless. “Sure gunna show those assholes what’s what by just sitting there silent, aren’t you?” It came out flatter than I intended. My heart hadn’t been behind the joke and I hoped he couldn’t tell that I was getting scared.

I just wanted him to get inside and I was tired of having to worry. I was tired of having to save him. I was tired of having to make him choose life. Then I was yelling, “If you are going to fucking jump then do it you prick! I’m not going to be your therapist!” I was panting now and my knuckles were white on the handrail. He just sat there and stared down 19 stories, two hands holding the neck of his bottle.

“I opened the Black Label,” I said “If you want some, I’ll be inside. I’m calling the cops.”

After calling 911 I fell back on the couch to finish the bottle and wait. When the police showed up, I was asleep with the half-full fifth dangling off the side of the couch. Just another Friday night.

As the detective questioned me about why I had just lay there as my friend had drank himself into a stupor on the window-ledge.

As the detective questioned me about why I had just lay there as my friend had drank himself into a stupor on the window-ledge.

I thought about what I would do next weekend.

I needed to drive out to the Rez for cheap liquor and cigarettes. I could probably get myself into another Internet dating debacles. I would probably end up getting drunk and belting out dirty rap lyrics.

I would have to find another roommate.

Red

Amanda McMillan

One candle
burning in my bedroom.
Barely giving
any light,
like me.
3 a.m.
I'm not tired.
I'm exhausted,
again,
because my nightmares
don't sleep.
So instead I'm sitting
on top of my crumpled
covers drinking a glass
of milk out of an old
spaghetti sauce jar.
Red-sauce finished,
I wash the jar
with soap and hot water.
Scrub away
the memory of what
used to be
inside of it.
Rinse it out
three times,
till it smells clean.
In the weary
light of my bedroom,
my milk tastes
white and sweet and cold.
Letting the jar sweat
on my nightstand,
probably making one of those rings
my mother never
warned about,
I think about
the notion of a gut feeling
and wonder
how it's possible
I could still be thinking about
you.
Again.

It gives me

a stomach ache.

Not my glass
of two-percent,

but the
version

flickering
of myself

sitting on top
of my covers

late at night

thinking about

you,

knowing you haven't

thought about me

since the last time

I was glass

and you were red.

Flies on the Meat

Noah Zeko

He goes to bed exhausted nightly. At his stall, flies make love amid the naked thighs as he chops. His young tan wife twirls her hair, waiting for him. His experienced arm wants sleep. Her fresh lips want to wake. She whispers in his ear for the fourth time in an hour and he loudly curses back, blade flailing in the air, just missing the flies that linger around the meat. The customers look up from the stall counter and begin to depart from the arising scene and coarse Arabic words. Market air gradually becomes the sheep skin being drawn out on stretchers three stalls down. The buzz of the flies slowly fills the marketplace. Other shops roll their eyes in familiarity and sigh with inevitability as nervous crowds calmly scatter to avoid possible cleaver crossfire. After what feels like a day, his voice lowers as it shifts from angry to apologetic to seductive. The black drapes in the back, near the naked flesh are pushed aside and flies gather to the back of the shop:

Butcher's mess
Carnivorous wife
New lipstick

Expectations

Derek Blankenship

I order a simple salad with chopped almonds and strawberry dressing. I've always found strawberry dressing to be decadent. Well, maybe not decadent, but it's good, and it pairs so well with the colors of the dish. It's a glorious splash of light red among the forest green leaves and creamy white almonds. Art on a plate. That's what it is, art on a plate. And next to my art, a tall glass of refreshing iced tea, with no-calorie sweetener. This is just what I need: a delicious, healthy meal with a decadent splash of red.

Cindy arrives late. She's wearing a dress. A long, white, maxi dress with floral pique lace, a high V-neckline, and tight white straps that pull her shoulders back and constrict her torso. This is an urbane eatery, and though her attire certainly does match standards as far as quality, the message that she's sending with those straps pulling down at her shoulders is just embarrassing.

It's like she'd rather be at home, cooped up and confined. But surely this is just an oversight, so I make it clear to her what she's doing. I tell her that the floral white is a symbol of her inferiority. I tell her that the length is a method of constriction and confinement. Most importantly, I tell her that the straps yanking at her shoulders are an upset child screaming for mother's attention. Apparently, Cindy doesn't think it's a "big deal." So I let it go, because I don't judge people by what they wear.

Fortunately, I've already ordered for Cindy. The waiter daintily sets before her a bowl of spinach and lemon soup with two slices of wholesome wheat bread to accompany it. I immediately become jealous of her when I realize that what I ordered for her is even better than what I ordered for myself. Spinach and lemon is a spectacular combination, and that little sprig of parsley they put on top is just so particular. Art in a bowl. That's what I chose for my good friend, art in a bowl. But, apparently, Cindy doesn't appreciate art, because she grabs the knife and starts spreading butter all over the wholesome wheat bread. As if that wasn't bad enough, she calls the nearest waiter over and asks him to grate some cheese into her soup. I don't even attempt to explain her *faux pas* this time, because, frankly, it's pointless.

I let go of my emotions, and pick up, with practiced lightness, my silver fork outlined with gold. I look down at the beautiful work of art that is my food. It is a shining beacon amidst the storm of Cindy's inadequacy. With a tinge of

I stab the fresh lettuce leaves, bring the bite up to my mouth and smell sweet strawberry just before enjoying the spectacular crunch of those almonds. What a delight!

The experience of chewing is quaint. As I chew, I come to realize that my art is even more refined than I had anticipated. The lettuce leaves must have been prepared with truly advanced methods, because the texture is at the happy medium between crisp and wilted. They defy the eater's expectations in an eye opening way that prompts even me to question my own deservedness of eating at a restaurant with such a culturally relevant and sophisticated style. Then, in the midst of this self-reflection, the sharp and sour flavor of the strawberry dressing stings my tongue with such force that it travels past my taste buds and straight into my mind. This flash of inspiration fills me up, and I can see the constructs of society breaking down around me. Nearing tears, I grind my teeth on the uncooked, lifeless, tasteless, stale almonds that are so old they deserve an exhibit in The Smithsonian.

Then I spit out my food.

My art on a plate betrayed me. Its gilded face deceived me into consuming it, now I can feel the blackness of its true self corrupting my insides. With disappointed tongue and growling stomach, I slam down my fork and shove away my plate. In a flurry to mend my crippled self, I call for a waiter and demand a juicy, succulent, twelve ounce steak cooked red in the center.

“Cindy, I love your dress. It’s fucking beautiful.”

Galatea (An Excerpt)

Katie Clendening

CAST

DAVID, a painter.

In his spare time, he works in a museum giving tours. He is in his late 20s or early 30s.

ANASTASIA, a creation of David's.

She seems other worldly, but has an independent spirit of a girl who has just begun to

ALEJANDRO, one of David's friends.

He is quite successful and rich and is married to Felicia. He should also be more attractive and put together than David is at the beginning of the play.

RICHARD, a gallery owner.

FELICIA, Alejandro's wife.

SETTING

Present day. The play takes place entirely in David's studio apartment, which is completely one room except for the bathroom that is off downstage right. USR is a kitchen. DSR is a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table. UCS is a small kitchen table with three chairs with an easel next to it. Next to the table is the front door. Next to this USL is a large wardrobe because there is no closet. Mid SL is an armchair next to a queen bed, followed by a tall bookcase.

ACT 1

Scene 1

AT RISE we see David's cluttered loft. He is laying in his bed tangled up in the blankets. He yawns and looks at the clock. When he sees the time, he immediately jumps out of bed frantically. He is already wearing slacks and a dress shirt. He hurries across the room to his wardrobe from which he takes out a suit jacket and a tie. He puts the jacket on and flings the tie around his neck without tying it and runs out of the room. The room is empty for a moment. David rushes back in and grabs his shoes before exiting again. Lights fade to black.

Scene 2

DAVID enters with ALEJANDRO. DAVID is tipsy, while ALEJANDRO is obviously drunk. They stagger in and slump down on the couch.

DAVID

I love weddings.

ALEJANDRO

Hah. Why? I personally think they're boring as fuuuuu- *(Becoming distracted.)* Wait... where are we?

DAVID

My loft you idiot.

ALEJANDRO

Oh... where's my wife?

DAVID

At home with your kid. She left pretty early when you started dancing.

ALEJANDRO

Shit. Whatever. What were you saying?

DAVID

Free booze.

ALEJANDRO

Here! Here!

Doubling over in laughter, DAVID gets up and fills up a glass of water for ALEJANDRO.

DAVID

Please drink this. I don't want to have to clean up your puke. I thought that was over when we graduated.

ALEJANDRO

This won't be over till I'm dead!!

DAVID

Drink the water.

ALEJANDRO

Ok. Fine. *(Pause as he gulps down the water hungrily.)* If you like weddings so much, why don't you just marry one? *(Pause.)* I mean... why don't you just get married?

DAVID

Do you see any girls around here jumping at the chance to date, let alone marry, a struggling artist who can't even keep a 500 square foot apartment clean? Cuz I don't. Besides I have my art to think about.

ALEJANDRO

Oh yeah. How's that going? Are you rich yet?

DAVID

What do you think?

ALEJANDRO

Yes... no... yes... no. No. That is my final answer.

DAVID

Yeah. I'm not rich. I'm basically almost homeless.

DAVID

Yeah. I'm not rich. I'm basically almost homeless.

ALEJANDRO

At least you're not actually homeless!

DAVID

I guess... It would just be nice to not even be close to homeless. Or to sell one of my paintings for more than a hundred bucks. To see them up in a gallery instead of at some arts and crafts fair. I'm just so tired of working non-stop and getting nothing in return. When I was in school I thought I had this big bright future ahead of me. Now all I have is a pile of unsold art, my crappy museum tour job, and an impossible amount of student debt! And to top it all off, girls don't like me, so I may or may not be hideous. Do you get what I'm saying?

DAVID looks over at ALEJANDRO for an answer, but quickly realizes he has fallen asleep. DAVID chuckles and throws a blanket over his friend before falling down face first into his bed.

Scene 4

AT RISE we see DAVID sitting at his kitchen table. The loft has been cleaned, but it is obvious that it has been done haphazardly.

DAVID is in a suit and tie. To the side stands an easel with a large painting covered in a white cloth. He sits alone for a moment until there is a knock at the door. DAVID quickly stands up, knocking his chair over in the process. His nervousness should be palpable. He smooth's back his hair before answering the door with a smile.

DAVID

Hello sir. Come in.

DAVID opens the door widely. We see RICHARD, an old man with graying hair, enters the room. He surveys the room disapprovingly.

DAVID holds out his hand for a handshake. RICHARD is surprised by DAVID'S forwardness and then takes his hand.

DAVID

David...

RICHARD

Richard.

DAVID

Thank you so much for coming. I'm really excited about this painting. I would've brought it down to you, but I'm so attached to it. I couldn't even think of rolling it up right now. It's basically done. *(A beat.)* It's my best work. Of course you haven't seen any of my other work, so you wouldn't really know, but it's the best thing I've painted in years. She's quite special to me. My potentially last piece of art and she's my favorite. That would happen... Oh, I'm sorry. I'm rambling. I'm just nervous.

RICHARD

May I see the painting?

DAVID

Of course.

DAVID moves the painting and uncovers it with a flourish. It is a rich and beautiful portrait of a woman with black hair and pale skin. She sits on a subway bench looking forlorn. Her beauty is obviously juxtaposed with the disgusting setting. She wears a rich red dress that contrasts with her skin.

DAVID

I call it... Anastasia.

RICHARD

(After surveying the painting.) The inspiration?

DAVID

All the women I've ever loved.

RICHARD

Interesting.

DAVID

Do you like it?

RICHARD

Well it's certainly interesting. And beautiful. Can we sit?

DAVID

Of course.

The two move to the table and sit across from one another.

RICHARD

Your painting is a lovely piece of art.

DAVID sighs with relief.

RICHARD

The problem is, I'm not looking for beautiful. To be honest David, no one is. You show a complete mastery of technique, but unfortunately people aren't looking for technique and beauty anymore.

DAVID

You think it's *TOO* beautiful? Everyone is always telling me the same thing. Well you know what? I'm sorry I'm not a crazy person! I'm so sorry that my artwork isn't madness or genius on a canvas. I see beauty in my mind and I make it so that everyone can see it too! I don't understand.

RICHARD

David, please. I don't want you to take this personally. The art world is a difficult place.

DAVID

This is ridiculous. Do you see where I live? Do you see what I have to put up with just to hear that I'm simply too good at what I do? That's bullshit! All everyone wants is a finger painted picture or a canvas covered in a sack! That is not talent! That's not skill!

RICHARD

You have technical talent, I won't deny that, but you should consider different subjects and forms. Beauty isn't "in" anymore. I would love to make you an offer, but I can't do it in good conscience.

(A beat.) I'm sorry.

DAVID

I'm sorry that art is so stupid. So subjective! Who are you to tell me that my art isn't genius? I tell you that this woman I have created is every woman I have loved and you turn around and tell me it's not good enough! What the fuck?!

RICHARD

Now, David. I don't know you and you don't know me. But let's not jump to conclusions here.

DAVID

I'm not jumping to conclusions! You're just like everyone else out there right now. You want something that looks like shit, so you can pretend that that is what is beautiful. Well you know what? I don't think that's very beautiful. I think it's ugly.

RICHARD

You don't seem to understand me. *(A pause as DAVID breathes audibly.)* I love beauty, I do. But I love real beauty. What you've painted isn't real. It makes me think of a school boy, pining for the perfect woman. I don't see hurt or pain or anything of substance in this painting other than a pretty face. Do you understand?

DAVID

No. No I don't.

RICHARD

Have you ever been in love before?

DAVID stares and then reluctantly shakes his head.

RICHARD

Well then it's obvious why I can't take your painting. I'm sorry to disappoint you son, but when you figure out your genius, feel free to give me a call. Until then, goodnight.

RICHARD stands up and offers his hand to DAVID for a handshake. DAVID doesn't notice as he looks distraughtly down at the table. RICHARD retracts his hand and lets himself out. DAVID pushes back his chair in frustration. He sits on the floor for a moment and begins to sob. After a few seconds of this, he stands up and angrily tears the painting from the canvas and throws it on the ground. He moves to the kitchen where he retrieves a large bottle of vodka. He meticulously fills up 4 large shot glasses before

exiting into the bathroom. He soon returns with a bottle of pills, which he pours out into his hand. He begins to take the prepared shots, each with a handful of pills. When he finishes them all, he puts his hands on the counter and stares at the audience for a few seconds. He then staggers slowly to his bed where he collapses as the lights fade to black.

Scene 5

AT RISE we see DAVID still slumped over on his bed on top of the covers in his clothes from the day before. His apartment has become spotlessly clean in the blackout. In the desk chair next to DAVID'S bed sits ANASTASIA.

DAVID

(Talking in his sleep as he rolls over.) Too much. Too much. Tastes like urine. I hate vodka.

ANASTASIA clears her throat to wake him up. DAVID yawns and opens his eyes to look at her.

DAVID

(Yawning while speaking.) Good morning.

ANASTASIA

Good morning.

DAVID finally realizes there is a strange woman staring at him in his home and jumps, falling off of the opposite side of the bed.

What the fuck! Who the fuck are you! Why are you in my house?

ANASTASIA

My name is Anastasia. You painted me.

DAVID

What the hell? Is this some sick idea of a joke? I'm supposed to be dead. And now that asshole Richard sent you here to screw with me, didn't he?

ANASTASIA

Richard didn't send me here. You painted me.

DAVID

I'm not an idiot. Who are you? What do you want?

ANASTASIA

I'm here for you. I saw you yesterday and I couldn't stand it. Seeing you like that... I had to come out. I have to help you David.

DAVID

I think I'm gonna puke.

DAVID runs to the bathroom where the audience can then hear him retching. ANASTASIA gasps and runs to the bathroom to help him. The following lines are said offstage.

ANASTASIA (OFF-STAGE)

Oh my god, you didn't even get close to the toilet.

DAVID (O.S.)

Why are you helping me? Just rob my house already.

ANASTASIA (O.S)

I'm not going to rob you. Move over to the toilet. I'm going to get you different clothes.

ANASTASIA enters the main loft crosses to get clothes which she brings to DAVID in the bathroom.

ANASTASIA

(As she exits.) Here. Please change into these. Your clothes are disgusting.

DAVID

Can you please tell me what you want now? I'm done puking so you can put away the Snow White act.

ANASTASIA

Holding out the water. Drink this.

DAVID

(As he hesitantly reaches forward.) Fine.

He begins to drink until he eventually chugs the whole bottle down at once.

Thanks.

ANASTASIA

I made you eggs. They're in the toaster oven so they stay warm.

DAVID

He walks to the toaster oven. *(Whispered)* This isn't real. This isn't real. This isn't real.

ANASTASIA

I can hear you. And I am real.

DAVID turns quickly away from the toaster to face her.

DAVID

You were a painting. Paintings don't just come to life and start cooking you eggs after you try to kill yourself.

ANASTASIA

I did.

DAVID leaves the eggs on the counter and walks back to her.

DAVID

If you were my painting, how did you get out? Why would you come out? This can't be real.

ANASTASIA

Feel my hand. *(She holds out her upstage hand for him to feel.)* It's warm. It's real.

DAVID

But—

ANASTASIA

Let me explain. Paintings, works of art, if they're real enough they can leave their world and enter yours. If the painter needs them and we need them too, we can simply step out of our world and into your world. I saw you and knew. Knew that if I didn't come to save you, no one would. And you made me so real I could feel it before I even left.

The following lines are said in quick succession.

DAVID

Impossible.

ANASTASIA

Then how am I here?

DAVID

Must be fake.

ANASTASIA

Then am I crazy?

DAVID

You must be.

ANASTASIA

I swear I'm not.

DAVID

There's no way.

ANASTASIA

But there is.

DAVID

I must be crazy.

ANASTASIA

I know you're not crazy.

DAVID

I'm dead. I'm dreaming.

ANASTASIA

(Verging on frustration.) If I wasn't real how would I know about you? About everything you're going through. I saw you with Richard. I saw you take the pills. I worried I was too late.

DAVID

There's no way you could be...

ANASTASIA

But I am...

DAVID

You're not // real.

ANASTASIA

Real.

Lights fade.

Finding My Voice

Collin McDowell

I am finding my voice.

It's a tired, quiet voice
one that tells small truths.

It doesn't wail
or beat its breast
when it doesn't have to.

It's not a voice
of five-dollar words
of clever little allusions
of rhyming and iambs and a slavish devotion to meter.

It's a voice
that looks for a quiet place in your heart
to curl up for the night.

It begs for a bit of shelter
from the hard places in the world.

It's the voice that echoes in my center
where nobody can hear it
until I give it a voice
through the ink on the page.

It's a small voice
but worthwhile nonetheless.

A Day in the Life

Robert Cristo

When you die in the street, it's not like the movies. Shit, it's not even like the music. Movies have people thinking there is some great sadness, a mourning that inspires people to change their ways and live a better life or something. Music has people thinking the dead are going to live forever. When you die in the street its like a fad. I know that isn't right, but just because something isn't right doesn't mean something isn't real. Your name is in everyone's mouth, everybody swears they were your best friend and then the place where you died is the place to be. Candles and your hood or krew hit up all over, everybody standing, drinking, crying, and getting high to numb their pain. To your enemies, your death is the thing to brag about and everybody claims they had something to do with it. Your enemies may even be bold enough to kick over your candles when no one is around. Death in the streets comes and goes. A month after you're gone, people start to adapt to your absence and nobody wants to buy your Rest in Peace t-shirt. That's it. You disappear, only to be revived when someone who loved you is drunk or high and is suddenly hit with memories of you. Maybe your death will hit the media—the local news telling your story. You could be transformed into a saint who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But no one stops to think about you. Who you were, what you were, what was your place in the lives of everyone you knew? What is the real meaning of your loss?

Sometimes I wonder if God will forgive us for the things we do. The pain that we cause. I held my mother this morning. She was in tears. My little brother Adrian got in trouble again. He turned 13 and discovered he was a gangster. Now, at 15, he's growing into the title. I shouldn't judge, I remember being that age. Always had something to prove. My mother going back an' forth between tears and curses. Her last hope of a good son going down the drain. I want to be angry at him for putting my mother through this, I want to rush him, make him bleed, make him swear to change his ways. I'd be a hypocrite to do so. It wasn't too long ago when he was the one holding our sobbing mother and it was my name she was cursing. I was worse than my little brother. I was already gang banging at his age. Now I'm trying to make things right. I got a job and I'm saving up for a place for me and my baby's mom. My mother doesn't see that. I've put her through too much hell and now she is blind to my actions. She tells me that my brother got caught with a knife in school then hit the school cop and

ran. He'll get kicked out for sure. My phone rings, I tell my mother it's Lupe and she decides to call one of her friends and let them hear her pain.

Some people would call Lupe my baby's mom, but she is more than that. She is the mother of my child—I say that with pride. She's from my hood, they call her Morena. She got in when she was in middle school then her family sent her to Arizona to try and get her out of the life. That didn't work. She ran away and took a bus back to the hood. When she first came back it was love at first sight. She was homeless and I couldn't help but take care of her. Her getting pregnant made her family. That was three years ago but it's one of the things in my life I don't regret.

I lied to my mother. It wasn't Lupe who called me, it was my road dog Danger. He was living with this girl at her mom's pad over in the Valle, but her mom found out he was slanging from their pad, so now he is here at the bus station, tweaked out and waiting. When you pick up a gangster it's a comedy and a tragedy. When I mean gangster, I don't mean Scarface. I'm talking about a person who tried to be Scarface and failed just like anybody would if they lived their life trying to be Scarface. But, like, crazy people don't know they're crazy—Danger thought the world was his.

So I sit here waiting in the car watching this fucker walk on over. He's been waiting for hours but the high keeps him happy to see me. We exchange “was-sups” and now I hear it. He tells me how it was all bullshit. Apparently he wasn't slanging, he was just holding some shit for a homie that was going to turn himself in. He wouldn't slang some shit that's not his. And then he tells me. He got the shit right here in his socks. He wants me to let him use my car to make deliveries with. If you want to make money selling drugs you need a car because why would a customer go pick up when they can have it delivered to their door? Now not only does he tell me that he wants to use my car, but he would like to “barrow” my 38. A gun is *everything*. If you had a gun you were strapped, you became known, and you could change lives. Now I know if I was stupid enough to let him “barrow” my car or my strap, I would never see them again. I could help him, but is it really worth the risk? That's a gun and drugs with intent to sell, and let's top it all off with a gang enhancement. I'd be busted for a good while. So I decline. Danger tells me to stop being a bitch, but I end

the subject with a fuck you.

Back in the hood and out comes the gang member. If Danger leans out the car and throws up the hood one more time I'm going to kick his ass out my car. It's hot in the hood and the last thing I need is this idiot sticking his head out and throwing gang signs at every guy he sees.

The hood, the *varrio*. It's more than just a neighborhood, in some ways it's not even a neighborhood. The hood is the gang. You can be in a gang named after a neighborhood in one city but be banging in another state. The hood could be in any neighborhood, but I'm somewhat proud to say that I live in the original hood where it all started. Not like those idiots in Nevada who claim the same name but never been to the heart of *the* hood.

Living in the heart of a hood comes with it's price. If you live in the heart and you're in a hood of any worth, then your hood has a gang injunction which gives permission for the gang unit to regularly give you hell. Which is why I am trying to get to where I'm going as quickly as possible.

Every hood has a spot, a pad that they could all kick it at with relative safety. Our pad belonged to the homie Conejo. His Dad and Mom kept to their own, didn't say anything about the various criminals going in and out their door 24/7. Maybe they didn't notice. For all I know his Dad could have been a real gangster back in Michoacán before he came over here and he thinks his son is just a little punk playing games with his friends. We usually just chilled in his room. For having a room the size of some people's closet he was able to fit two chairs, a couch, and his bed.

When I entered the room I gave "what's ups" and "where you been ats" to all the homies and homegirls in the room. You want to tell the difference between people that are gangsters and people who think they are? The people who are most banged out, have everything right from the clean Nike Cortez to the shining bald head, they are the ones who are playing gangster. The people who are wearing dirty Nike Cortez knock offs they borrowed from the homie that they never gave back and shaved their head themselves and it's patchy, those are the gangsters. Being banged out means you're dressed like a cholo in the movies. Which makes me wonder if the movies try to imitate us or we try to imitate the movies. Banged out also meant you are open to being stopped and frisked by the

Huras. The Huras are the biggest, strongest, and deadliest gang in the city, the police.

When the drugs come out, it's no big deal because they were always there. There is no drug scenes like on TV, just people doing drugs. If the 80s was the crack generation, then we are the meth generation. Nobody calls it meth—the name changes from place to place—but we call it Gee. Whenever you hear someone is on it you're never too surprised. These little youngsters sitting around me have no shame. The OGs said they didn't want any youngsters smoking Gee. But who really follows the rules with this shit? Nothing like the smell of chemicals and a large cloud of white smoke to let you know you're doing something you shouldn't. That's the fucked up thing with Gee, it gives you the ability to see past the obvious horrors in your life and become distracted by some random drama. If I hit the pookie, which is what you use to smoke gee, I'll be up all night and then end up having to do some more Gee in the morning just to get through the next day, so I let the homies light up while I reluctantly inhale the fumes.

I hate it when I'm a fiend. I just had to do a line before I went. Couldn't escape the burn you get as poison flies up your nose and stabs your brain. It always annoys people who are addicted to the pookie when they have to take out some of the Gee to crush it up for lines. They give you that look like *what the fuck that could have been a bowl?* I have to get out of here, if I don't leave, I won't leave at all.

Just before I reach the door, Danger asks me if the little homie can get a ride to the medical shop. Nobody buys weed from the street anymore. Everyone has a medical card. My little homie Rascal is 17 and is up and coming in the hood. He's been in for a minute and now people are starting to know his name. When a youngster kicks it with a big homie like me, it is a chance for the youngster to get his name known. So now I'm forced to hear his criminal accomplishments. Rascal lets me know about how him and the homies went mobbing then came up on some guy from another hood they caught slipping. (Basically Rascal and other stupid youngsters went tagging and then robbed some gangster who was lost.) As I give him the praise he was expecting, I see what looks like two youngsters jumping some kid in front of the gas station. I bust a bitch, meaning

I do a U-turn, and come back around. Rascal is ready to jump out. I slam the breaks and Rascal is out the door. Rascal hops out the car and runs in swinging. I see one of the youngsters get clipped by Rascal, who is now following up with kicks. The youngster's friend starts socking Rascal in the back of the head, the whole episode is taking too long. I don't have time to scrap with some youngsters so I lift up my shirt and flash my strap, my hand at the ready. I hit them up, find out what gang they're from. These fucking youngsters don't even bang. They got the balls to claim some Krew. Now I could shoot these taggers right now, and by the main heads in prison I wouldn't be wrong. There is always a green light to blast taggers. But I don't want to do life, so I let them run away.

The kid the youngsters were jumping was my little brother. Adrian is from a Crew, which is like the level before actual gang banging. He's been in the car for five minutes and he is already annoying me, bragging to Rascal that he crossed out those guys' Krew right in front of them. Anything gang-related my brother does bugs me. I want to keep him out of the life but I know I can't. My little brother and the rest of his Crew are the next generation. He even calls himself "Lil Ryder," trying to take my name. I drop Rascal and "Lil Ryder" at some hole-in-the-wall bud shop. The only way you could tell it was even there was the faded green cross sign.

I pull up at my girl's job. She works at a super market bagging groceries. I wait for her by the store's entrance, got to make my presence known before any of them pretty boys that work at her job get ideas. Here she comes, looking like she should be painted on the hood of some low rider. Her long hair, juicy lips, and brown eyes. I already told her I'm going to get her face tatted. I pull her into a kiss, make sure its long, let people know just how I have her. I tease her about how she looks in her uniform, but she's proud of that job. She got sober for that job and it's kept her that way so far. She tells me she is going to drink with the homegirls at the park later. I tell her to keep trucha and I mean that. *Trucha*—to be trucha is to be *vigilante*, to watch your back. It's something you must do at all times no matter what. Those that don't, don't make it home.

When my girl gets ready, it is a rapidly slow process, meaning she is in a rush yet she still takes a long time. This particular time she is rushing because if my mother gets home when she's still at home then my mom won't watch the kid

and she can't go out. I hide her bra and then laugh when she starts to hit me because I won't tell her where it is.

I can't lie, I love looking at her back. She has the hood blasted, and for once it actually came out clean. The Old English writing and shading on her smooth brown skin—beautiful. One of the older homies tatted her up when she first got in the hood. The tat came out *firme*, meaning it's beyond good. I think sometimes she is embarrassed about it. Maybe that's why she never wears anything too revealing. Or it could be because she's just a true chola, a tomboy at heart.

For a girl who is going to end up dressed in a baggy t-shirt and jeans, she still takes forever. I don't mind, I just smoke a blunt and laugh.

I got to go to the store, my son is out of diapers again. When you get a girl pregnant and she is going to have it, you try and tell yourself you can pay for food, clothes, maybe even a couple of toys. What nobody tells you is it's the diapers that will take all your money. What sucks is you can't go cheap because those cheaper shits don't last. I'm glad I stopped hitting the pookie because I can't afford an addiction.

I'm not going to waste gas for a trip to the store, so I walk it. Halfway through my walk I see the older homie Stomper running. If it's the enemy, I'm fucked because I left my strap at home. Stomper starts yelling. *Hura! Hura!* It's too late for me. Before I can react, I hear the car pull up. It's CRASH, the gang unit. They are experts at creeping up on you. Before I know it I'm facing the wall spreading my arms and my legs. The CRASH drive in quick but walk up slowly. The gang unit isn't interested in intimidation, they prefer humiliation. After I interlock my fingers and have the cuffs put on me nice and tight, they ask me where I was going. The backup got here just in time to pull Stomper over across the street. In between the sounds of street traffic I can hear the cops laugh at Stomps and tell him he is too old to play gangster. It's dark outside, but the lights from the cop car make it seem bright as day. After searching me, they reluctantly let me go.

Stomper isn't so lucky. They found a pipe on him so he's going to the station. If we were on the same side of the street, the gang injunction would have seen to it that I went with him. Stomper is what happens when you stay gang banging for too long. Most gang members by their thirties retire to weekend gang banging,

move out the hood and dress gangster around their wife and kids. Stomper is one of those that didn't. He roams the streets living from homie's pad to homie's pad, still trying to bang with the youngsters. This is the third time he's been busted this month.

I find Danger posted by my car waiting for me. This girl he's fucking with wants an ounce of Gee but he needs a ride because she lives all the way on the other side of the city. I want to tell him no, that I don't want to go sell drugs in another gang's hood just so he can impress a girl. But if I tell him no, then he will bus it over there and if something does happen to him everyone will see it as my fault because I didn't roll with him. It's not as bad as going to an enemy hood, but just because they're not enemies don't make them friends.

When we get there, I already know it's bad. She won't come out to the car. She wants us to go up to her apartment and give it to her. I can't be the little bitch waiting in the car, so here we go up the stairs. She's fat and has a kid in her arms, but she has her own apartment, so I expect that Danger will be living there soon. On the way back down the stairs I see them walking. Three foos walking down the street right in front of me and Danger. Soon as I see them dogging us I know what's going to happen. Danger beats them to it, yelling *where you from?* We represent our hoods and quickly agree that we hate each other. It's not because of any real problem with one another, they just don't like other gangs in their hood. I immediately reach for my gun and discretely panic when I realize I don't have it. Then it hits me. I let Danger hold it so he could show it off to that girl. I look and see he already pulled it out. The foos scramble at the sign of the gun giving us time to escape. Danger sticks his head out throwing gangs signs to let them know what's up.

When violent things happen to people or when people do violent things, it makes you wonder if anything so evil and wrong can happen. Driving back to the hood, I got a call that my brother stabbed some fool at a party. He found out his girl—who calls herself Juicy—was at an event, some flyer party with a dirty name where people act out in all the wrong ways. His girl being there, drinking, Nozzing it with a hundred pretty boys hitting on her. Fools that would run from a fight will beat someone in the street if their girl was threatened. And when the foo is under the influence, well that's how shootings happen. When you inhale

Noz, that shit dentists use before they do something painful, and then you drink heavily, it allows you to go places that normal people just don't go. Adrian's girl was screaming, crying, and hitting my brother with closed fists in the back seat of my car. She smelled like a bottle of rum and her voice just cut through any song I put on the radio. Danger thinks it's funny. She screams that her and that guy were just friends. I heard on the way there that my little brother caught her half way through a lap dance.

The guy and his friends tried jumping my brother and one of them ended up with a blade in their rib cage. After ten minutes of getting his face scratched, Adrian is now seriously thinking about hitting her. If he did I wonder if it would stop her or just make her worse. I can't let Adrian do that. Too many gangsters like to beat their girl as if she was a man. Before our father got busted he used to just slug my mother when she went crazy on him. Just one punch to the jaw and that was that, unless she really hurt my father and then we would need to call the cops to stop him. My brother was in elementary, but I'm sure it left some kind of impression.

By the time we get to the park, Adrian and Juicy can't keep their hands off each other. It is funny how quickly "I hate you" turns to *I love you*. Leaving them in the car to work out their problems, I find that the hood took over some benches and everyone is there. A function as loud and gang-related as this will not last long. Somebody will break this gathering up, either an enemy or the Huras. I'm pretty sure a few hours from now those benches will be empty. Only the tagging all over the benches will show that we were ever there. And then I see her. A woman at 19, my girl is leaning against a park table drinking a beer. There are homies and homegirls all around, but I just see her. She sees me and her face lights up. Instantly she runs over to me and pulls me into a hug and a kiss. In this moment, the world isn't so crazy.

Hood gatherings are reunions, meetings, and parties all rolled into one half-ass package. Older homies try to tell the younger ones what to do and the younger ones listen respectfully as the orders go in one ear and out the other. The Veteranos who are too old to kick it decide to show up to receive respect and feel like they are still a gangster. Drugs and alcohol are always around as if all the world's vices catered the event. To an outsider this could look like a pretty intimidating sight. Then you hear the Ghetto Bird. The police helicopter is the real power in the streets. You may escape the cops but you can never escape the

Bird. When you see it and it's flying in circles around the area, you know that's where something is cracking. This could be a raid. Cop cars from three different divisions can come from every direction. Right now I think they just want to scare us out of the park. It works because we all get up and quickly leave in separate directions.

I was obligated to give my brother and his girl a ride home. She's been living with us since she told my brother she was pregnant. They have been trying to act like it's not real. They won't stay like that for that long because when it gets real, it gets real. Then we'll see how crazy my brother is. I watch Adrian carry his passed out half naked girlfriend in the house. My brother is not a saint, but he isn't a devil either. As I walk my girl into the house I look back and see Danger giving me a look like don't take long. My girl cuddles up with our sleeping son. He is her life, part of me thinks she only loves me because I gave him to her. She looks up at me and tells me she wants me to stay. I really do want to stay. I give her a kiss and tell her I'll be home soon.

When I get back to the car I can see that my girl has already texted me. She is rolling me a blunt for when I get home. I like it when she misses me. I didn't tell her I was dropping him off across town at that girl's pad. Danger took advantage on my lack of sobriety and convinced me that we had to go back there to show those fools that we don't give a fuck.

It's funny how quiet the streets are at 4 a.m. The places that during the day are full of people are empty. The street lights keep everything lit but the night sky gives the world a blue tint. I love driving through the city at night. I stop at the light and that's when I hear it. The enemy hood being shouted, shattering the silence. Then the gun shots. The cold fear penetrating my heart because I know what is happening. Time slows down as if these seconds are minutes and I can see everything. The destruction of my car, the glass shattering, and my ears filled with the infamous sounds. The sounds bang, one after another.

Into Worlds You Never Dare Enter Alone

Shirley Thao

I drove past that old corner the other day.
Several times actually.
Where the candle wax still stains the pavement—it also bleeds bright red.
The picture stapled to the telephone pole lingers as an artifact.
As evidence, proof, a reminder of what happened here.

I still don't understand what happened that day.
Why it happened. Why it happened to you.

I don't know anything!

A life for another life.
Living was the last thing we were ever concerned about.
The playground that the sidewalk leads to, never taught us that.
Who would have known that playing tag years later involved back alleys and
bullets.
knives.
Catch Me. Catch Me.
I bet you can't.

I'm so, so sorry he did.

I can't even grasp my last memory of you.
Was it third grade? Some time in high school maybe?

I drove pass that corner, into the park where we once heard laughter.
That laughter, that voice, so sweet and innocent goes on to echo
Through each tree, pushing the swings where the children still play
It was so simple then.
So pure.

Today that echo haunts me, leaves me tainted.
Today is difficult.
Today I miss you, old friend.
And today is the day I have to figure out my life,
This one.

The one that you would die to live.

I drove by that old corner today. Several times actually.
Trying to figure out what I'm doing with this life.
Taking for granted, tragically, what so many of our friends have lost.
Too many.

I don't know what's happening today. Or tomorrow.
I'm just hoping to live again.
Maybe. I'll leave an artifact too, something to echo when I'm gone.

Alaska Air First Class

Damaris Dubon

Holding glass of champagne,
First class,
smelly-ass socks
resting behind the passenger's seat,
Listening to Eiffel 65 tunes,
Headphones blocking outside ear walls,
Dough rolling my cha-ching in the overhead,
Alaska Air soaring its wings
3,000 miles above sea level.

Recent graduate in English,
But Business sought to go after me first,
Challenge accepted.

Change of clothes,
Change of voice,
And voila,
Your English degree brings you into Management.

Flipping through the stamps of my passport
Business rolls those long traveling days,
Now in the back of my mind.

Tried surfing on a glacier ice cave,
Twisted my ankle a painful 45 degrees,
Bathed nude in the sand
in the discreet canyons of Arizona,
Followed the occult army of spiny lobsters
entering Devil's Eye Cave,
They attacked me all at once
for disturbing their ritual,
Sky walked in mid-air like a good magician above all of Shanghai,
I screamed.

Slurping Danish Chinese noodles of Copenhagen,
Practiced my failing Chinese with the clients,
They were still impressed,
Held my dear life as the luchador knocked me over

the tables in front of the Mexicans,
I still owe that wrestler a black eye,
And upon return I adopted a bat named Benji.

Holding glass of champagne,
First class,
Recent graduate in English,
Business decided to come after me,
Life doesn't wait,
Business makes my amusement
go round.

Challenge accepted,
Another wild ride awaits
upon departing Alaska Air
for the business woman
on a good day.

Cheers.

Non-cents

Kelsey Kwong

Cubic zirconium

Says, "I love you"

With no added fees.

Winter and July

Nicholas Hanashiro

This is my attempt at deep. Ok “class”y people? Get it “class”y? Envision first if you will, a kiddie pool. That’s about one foot deep. I’m going get much deeper. Try three times that depth, and then add three more. That’s exactly six inches over my head. That’s how deep I’m going to get.

This is a Haiku
These punctuate a Haibun
Here’s my deep Haibun

While meditating in my rock garden under a waterfall on the moon in my dreams, I had a “zen flash.” No, not a Japanese version of our beloved comic book speedster, but the metaphorical type: an epiphany. All in the same second, I became the Buddha, fused with Brahma, and shook hands with both Jesus and Muhammad. I came out of this experience a reborn atheist. So what did I learn in my secondary infinite knowledge? My only references on courting and dating are based solely on anime, video games, and bad movies. Now understanding my short comings and that shrooms are a hell of a drug (jk on that last part). I resolved to write this Haibun not only as an assignment but as proof to myself that my life isn’t a complete joke. The solution to my conundrum was not to go on a dating rampage or something extreme like that, but to throw out the first two in my list of dating references and focus solely on movies, being the closest of the three to reality. At the end of my self-schooling on the ways of awkward love as told by Hollywood, I decided three things needed to happen for it to have been a success:

- Get a nice girlfriend
- Have first kiss with said girlfriend
- Know what true love is

(In case no one got it that was just a Haiku.) What romance movies? I don’t know. Girls, please give me some recommendations. Three should be fine.

So let me begin the story of my love life. In the 2nd grade I told this guy I had a crush on this girl. He then proceeded to tell her and my life was ruined. Oddly enough, right after that I was paired up with said girl three times on class proj-

ects. Sadly, my feelings were not reciprocated.

Note to older self
Don't tell people who you like
Hope you grow a pair

Fast-forward to freshman year in high school. I had still not grown a pair. I met this girl named "X." (The "X" is so that anyone who ever reads this in the future will know who this is.) So "X" was a nerdy, glasses-wearing, anime-watching, book-reading, nerd. And I liked her. I know she liked me too, because we would talk. I walked her to her locker and we saw stars. The stars never do shine very brightly in LA, ambient light and all, but when I saw them with her, it was different. This is where I f***** up, badly. I heard that my "friends" thought she wasn't cool, and coming from middle school where, lets just say I wasn't too popular, I just stopped. I stopped talking, I stopped walking, and I stopped stargazing.

Note to older self
Don't listen to other shits
Hope you grow a pair

Fast-forward to Senior year. I have grown maybe a third of a pair. I have enough of a pair to talk to and even FLIRT with girls, but that's it. This is where I met "July." She was a serious, studious, try-hardening, basketball scorekeeper, but she had a really cute laugh. Like your favorite song, I just wanted to hear it, so I told her jokes. And one time we even walked down from our school to the Best Buy down the hill and I talked about laptops for like 30 minutes. And she was smiling. But I didn't have any classes with her, and I would only see her when I could ditch whatever I was kinda doing at the time to go see her in the basketball court bleachers doing homework. So prom was coming up, and I was thinking on how to ask. My friend gave me a really good idea. "I-Hop"e pancakes. She liked pancakes. So the premise was that I get I-Hop pancakes and write an E on the box right after I-Hop to spell I-Hope. "I-Hope you say yes. Will you go to prom with me?" And this is where I f***** up again. Another guy asked her before me. She said—and I quote from the girls who told me this—"I'm not going to prom, it's a waste of money. I wouldn't even go if I had the money."

Note to older self
Don't listen to other girls
Hope you grow a pair

I ended up asking another girl to prom. Lets call her "Y." She was a tennis

playing, 3.8-getting, journalism-cartoon-drawing, try-hard. She liked waffles. So because I was a senior in high school who couldn't drive, I—for the first time in my life—asked my parents for help. This was my gravest f*** up ever. My dad came late, not allowing me to ready the waffles, or write the “E” on the all-important box, which I-Hop stopped using in place of bags with generic plastic containers. She said yes. In the essence of being a nice guy I won't bore you, cause the rest was pretty boring. It was something I won't forget, but it just wasn't the same. “Y” just wasn't interested in me. And thus I was left to dance by myself, except for the final slow dance, where she remarked “You're sweaty.” There was, however, one highlight, and that was a picture. I literally sweep her off her feet. I had done pushups that month. She was light as a feather.

Note to older self
Try going to the gym once
Hope you grow a pair

I'm in college now and i'm writing this god-awful Haibun, about how I'm bad at the game of life. I think I have about half a pair. I don't like the Winter months. It gets cold and rainy. I like July. It's warm, and makes me happy. July Facebook messaged me.

Note to older self
Do not f*** this up again
Hope you grow a pair

Untitled

Matthew Voegtle

The teacher leaves the radio on and I hear about the latest wildfire. 2,000 people evacuated. 100 homes lost. 17 people injured. 1 dead. It's then I see your face, lit by Fourth of July sparklers. Then you drop it at something I said. I don't remember how I made you laugh, only I did.

The girl across me starts on about how she left her house in the 2007 fires. She's trying to say just how frightening it was but the guy is distracted by her cleavage and I can't get past all the likes:

likes are dead wood
forget the house --
how great her mind burns!

A mother cries on the radio. It's her son that lies in the hospital, badly burned. He's seven. I think of when I was seven I cried when my chocolate mouse cake wasn't shaped like a moose and one girl asked me why I was so tan:

because the sun
is a generous angel
and you're stupid

I try to feel badly for the kid but I'm taken back to your face as Jamie's face catches on fire, a bright white light like the times I'd stare into the sun hoping to see God, Santa, or anyone as important. The art teacher pauses at my sketch of my backyard. The sun's too big, she says, You need perspective.

They play a familiar song. Goddamit, it's an overworked pop-song we danced to, after Jamie found shorts and we danced on the roof, leaving the fireworks to the city of Pasadena.

the heart is a scoreboard
of heartbreaks
each an ever-burning fire

Ancient History

Amanda McMillan

A hundred years ago uncle Bubba is born. Mudda's own mother won't hold him because she says he is the ugliest thing she has ever laid eyes on.

The four of us are trying to sleep on the achy beds at the farm. Lilla is sucking her thumb and twirling mom's hair in her chubby fingers. Mom tells us about her uncles. She says uncle Bubba was red-haired and doused in freckles and that he was beautiful, even with PTSD.

Mom tells us she is a dragon, poof, while we eat pulled-pork sandwiches at Abe's. She crunches her crushed ice and laughs.

Maxi, the Rottweiler mom and dad found in New York City gets sick, gets tumors. They open and fester. I help mom clean her sick parts, drip hydrogen peroxide with a spoon and bandage Max with old T-shirts. Dad says we have to put Maxi down and mom cries when we do.

A week before I turn 13 I spill boiling water down my right thigh trying to make iced tea. Lilla runs me a bath to soak in. She accidentally makes the water hot. Mom beats the ambulance home.

Mom's hazel eyes turn bright blue. Her medication stops working. For mom's 8th birthday Granddaddy tells her he got her a horse. She runs out to the pasture and trips on the rocking horse that is waiting for her on the porch. Mom switches to lithium. We all feel a little better.

Mom and dad are still married. Mom cuts her hair. Puts it in a ponytail and chops it off just before the elastic. I cry when I see it.

Mom takes us swimming at Agua Caliente, our favorite outdoor pool. It takes two hours to get there. I suck a yellow-jacket up through the straw in my apple juice and it stings my tongue. The owner and his wife help mom get the stinger out because her hands are shaking; they rub salt on my tongue with their tan wrinkled hands and throw the stinger away in a rusted trash can. On the ride home I tell mom at least there is a beautiful sunset and we all turn our heads as the sky slowly rusts.

Mom shows up to Kara's Cupcakes where Jenny works. She is wearing driving goggles, swim trunks and two different shoes. Jenny tells her to leave. Mom tells jenny to give her a cupcake or she will scream. Jenny gives her two.

We spend the month of July in Mississippi. Mom takes us out to the forgotten pasture behind the farm and one of the wild horses tramples me. Mom says not to tell Granddaddy.

Jenny drinks too much tequila with Clyde. I tell Lilla to go play at the park. Mom is an hour away getting her car fixed and I am too scared to tell her what's wrong. Turns out the van's a lemon and Jenny rides to General Hospital by herself in a wailing ambulance.

I have two loose teeth. Mom and I are playing in Golden Gate Park and I can't stop wiggling them; I twist one too much and it gets jammed between its neighbors. My mouth tastes like pennies and mom's hands are too shaky. Zoe's family lives in an old Blue-Bird school bus and is parked across the street. Zoe's dad has 9 and a half fingers and is a mechanic; he pops my tooth right back to where it should be. Zoe and her brothers spend the night at our house and mom washes their hair.

Mom's texts are mostly typos. She says she is doing great, that she is "htypomaniac". She is on a self-inflicted upswing, born from boredom and loneliness and half-dosages.

San Francisco has a heat wave in October. Driving home from Muir Beach mom has an idea. She rolls all the windows up and says, okay on the count of three... but we already know, and are holding our breath. Then, she finishes counting and the four of us scream as loud as we can.

Story

Joseph Waugh

I've missed you.
Because it's been such a long time since I've known you.
You've been gone for so long,
And the thing I remember about you most,
Is that you write.

And I swore I would not do this
But you have no idea how many times
They've run through my head,
The words of our unwritten story,
And the snapshots of our untaken pictures.
Bandages, covering the wounds.
Cut by the distances and lost years of not being with you.

And I swore I would not do this
But here we stand now.
Now that you're on the last chapter
of your long and rambling tale.
And all I'm asking for is a role.

Write me into your last page,
Pen me into your last verse,
Script something with me and you and a happy ending.

You Are My Sunshine

Alexa Pegues

He says:

“I want to be your north star, your shining beacon in the darkness,
your gleaming hope at the end of the dark tunnel!”

And I don’t want to be mean,
so I unscrew all the other light bulbs in the chandelier,
and recycle them the following Wednesday.

When company comes

I place him in the standing floor lamp in the living room,
but the conversation is hardly illuminating.

“He’s not the brightest bulb,”

the company whispers.

“He’s dim, not deaf!” I cry,

And I throw my friends out on the well-lit street.

My mother arrives early for dinner and drags me over to the shadows
(which are almost everywhere)

“Be reasonable honey,
you can hardly see a thing
when he’s around.”

“It just takes a little adjusting!” I cry.

Then I stub my toe in the darkness,
and she leaves too.

Then it was just us two,
my lone lightbulb and me,
and I couldn’t see
a goddamn thing.

Burning

Rebecca Briggs Baker

Here's a poem about the time
the neighbors were arguing
and I put too much oil in the stirfry
and burned my wrist.

When I went out the next night
I knew I did some damage
when the endless rounds
couldn't drown the burn's burning.

Then—
here's the real kicker—
when I went to therapy after
they put me at the bottom of the list
but made a big fuss when they saw
the stirfry burn.

Here's a burn about dying
and knowing you are
but because you don't cut
scarlet ribbons on your navel
to reinforce your ribcage
they don't want to listen.

Here's a burn —
I mean a poem—
Here's a poem about to burn—
Here's a—
Why do I even bother?
Nobody's listening.

A Goodnight Scare for Watchers

Damaris Dubon

INT.- We move through a long hallway in the dark. At the end of the hallway, two spotlights, blue and white, hang on opposite sides as they shine on a closed door. The walls on opposite sides start to move closer to each other, narrowing our view as we approach the closed door. We then stop in front of the door. It opens showing a large room.

The entire room is covered in black lighting with the walls glowing dark blue. Blood stains on the walls glow dark red under the black lighting.

Two ROUGHLY DISFIGURED SURGEONS (AGE 32) are performing a procedure on a FEMALE PATIENT (AGE 21). We only see the PATIENT from behind the chair with a distant view of the SURGEONS performing the surgery.

Close up shot of gloved hands covered in blood move frantically over a silver tray filled with medical instruments. One of the gloved hands picks up a needle containing a thread from the tray.

The PATIENT does not move or yell. She remains confined to her seat. We hear sounds of her face being stitched up. Close up of her hands grip tightly on the arm rests of the chair with the face blocked off from the view.

Close up shot of CHUCKLES THE CLOWN smiling, a Halloween prop.

Close up shot of GRIMMY THE REAPER, a Halloween skeleton with eye made out of blue jewels glittering in the dark.

Close up shot of a large haunted mirror. Nothing is revealed at first but then two red eyes appear in the mirror and then slowly fade away.

SURGEON 1 pulls out a nasty-looking and messy brunette wig from a cabinet. He removes the adhesive strip from the wig. Slowly, SURGEON 2 ties up the natural hair of the patient. SURGEON 1 carefully applies the wig in the place of the natural hair.

A small TV in the distance turns on automatically with static lines going over the screen. We close in on the TV. The static lines disappear. A blue screen comes on with the words "STAND BY..."

The blue screen gets replaced by a night vision shot showing a long line of excited guests waiting to enter the haunted maze.

SURGEONS 1 and 2 gently help the PATIENT get up from the chair. Her head is covered with a small towel. She is wearing a bloodied yellow apron. SURGEON 1 removes the towel from the PATIENT.

The PATIENT'S face is unveiled. Her face is filled with bloodied open holes all over penetrating through the cheeks and stitches lining across her forehead. Her hands are stained with blood.

SURGEON 2 arrives with an axe in which he places it on her hands. The two SURGEONS stand with the PATIENT in the middle. Sound of drums start beating. The three start for us and we are immediately pulled back from the shot getting away from them as quickly as possible.

We quickly get away from the room and the spotlights shine brighter making the shot fade into black.

We are given a shot of the PATIENT sitting on her chair talking directly to us—“Thank you for touring our behind-the-scenes facility. A lot of magic will be taking place in this wonderful maze tonight. Joined by my fellow crew the two SURGEONS, we are ready to welcome you and our fans as our special guests for tonight's terror. Prepare your last breath for good...”

The shot of the PATIENT is suddenly interrupted as static lines form with a pair of red eyes appearing and then fading away making the final shot turn into black.

THE END.

Lamb of Man

Samantha Woehl

The Kingdom of Gods

The Birth of Man

Man was born in the fire of the Great Red Dragon. With five heads, it knelt upon the earth and blazed man into being. In the darkness man could not see, so he asked for help. Man's first question was answered with a single flame. The dragon then disappeared into the cosmos and where he vanished, the first star was born.

Man came to understand the Earth through the Dragon's flame. He learned that the universe spoke in a balance of dichotomies. He recognized that living under a flame meant being virtuous, it meant seeking knowledge and happiness. He saw that darkness was characterized by confusion, anger, and depravity. The best of men were those who experienced both and chose illumination. As man's knowledge grew, so did the star.

Yet man grew lonesome and he wondered: If I am born in darkness, then who shall be born in light? Man's second question was answered by the birth of the moon. Under its milky rays, glaring into man's underdeveloped eyes, was woman. Man and woman were united under the illumination and the star expanded with their knowledge until it became the sun.

Man and woman built a kingdom for their gods. They mined the Earth of its most precious gems to decorate twelve golden gates. They built two marble thrones; one black and the other white.

This was the beginning of the age of man.

The Kingdom of Gods was glimmering on a plateau rising out of the Pacific Ocean. Twelve gates encircled the crest, all studded with thousands of gems: topaz, sapphire, emerald, carnelian, beryl, diamonds and amethyst. Each gem was a prism, casting a rainbow hue amidst the kingdom. All the homes were stacked four stories high carved from polished marble, granite and jasper. Golden pathways twisted around the buildings and fountains gushed with crystalline water.

A trail of people were standing on the switch backing path up the plateau. Hundreds of boats and airships were docked at the harbor. The followers were balancing on precarious ledges, clutching at bundles and compact suitcases. One

large woman in a pink t-shirt was trembling with her back pressed against the cliff. Twenty people in front of her, a man with a tangled beard was poking the shifty ground before him with a walking stick. A father was carrying his chatty daughter on his back while holding a baby. The path ended at a gate embedded with glossy pearls.

Lamb was standing under a golden gate wearing a black robe. He was welcoming the diaspora to their home—his providence. He smiled warmly with eyes yellow and flecked with orange. An elderly man hobbled up to him. His shirt was frayed around the hem and the button holes had been ripped through. Lamb put his thumb on his creased forehead. The old man was trembling and Lamb felt the reverberations of the old man’s heart palpating as fast as butterfly wings.

“You are safe here, my son.” Lamb said. The man closed his eyes under his thumb and exhaled.

“You are my home, my Lord.” Lamb expanded his powers into the man’s heart to slow his pulse to a healthy pace.

“You are brave,” Lamb said as he wiped his thumb across his brow, manipulating the skin cells like clay. *It’s harder when they’re old*, Lamb thought. *The skin isn’t as elastic*. When he withdrew his touch, an equal sign was inscribed on his forehead. In two parallel bars, one white and the other black. The elderly man bowed and tottered into the sanctuary. Lamb watched as he was welcomed by a white-robed attendant and taken into one of the villas. All the homes were stacked four stories high, carved from polished marble, granite and jasper. Lamb smiled under his frayed beard as he saw a child playing in the empty villas.

On the other side of the gate, a girl emerged from the crest of the plateau. Her blonde hair curled in the salty breeze. Her chin was lifted to reveal a strong jaw. Her cheeks were a vibrant pink, contrasting with the blue of her irises.

“Welcome, child.” Lamb said, beckoning her forward. She approached him without a word. He placed his thumb on her forehead. It was moist with sweat and he felt her shiver beneath his touch. Her weight shifted away from him.

“You are confused,” he said, lowering his hand.

“Lord, I must beg mercy on behalf of my friend,” she said as she stared at his feet. Her voice broke as she said, “Don’t let him be cremated.”

“Has he followed the words of the scriptures? Has he sought to accept the truth

of death and devote himself to the light of rebirth? Are his deeds kind and virtuous?” Lamb asked.

“You should know,” she replied, looking up at him. Lamb frowned, but before he could reply, she said “He’s a good person; he accepts your powers, but he doesn’t have faith in the rebirth.”

“The mother will come and when she does, your friend will also be reborn. His soul will come to this kingdom and answer for his transgression. It may be overlooked, if his soul is that of light.”

“But what if you’re wrong and he dies?” she cried. Lamb sensed the doubt in her. He ignited an infernal heat in his belly and drew himself up to full height. He towered over her and watched the sweat drip from her temples. His irises blazed red and his voice dropped to a tectonic rumble.

“I am God.”

The girl dropped to her knees and spread her palms over the golden ground. Her shoulders trembled as she sobbed.

“Forgive me, Lord. I have been so scared. There is so much doubt in the world.”

Lamb knelt and cupped her chin in his hand. “It is not your world any longer.” He placed his thumb on her forehead and inscribed the symbol of equality in death and rebirth. “Be not troubled. Take comfort in the balance.” The girl stood and bowed.

“Thank you,” she said as she passed by him and entered her new home.

Lamb spent the remainder of the day marking his citizens. Some were terrified when they confronted them. He saw how their knees bent as they could barely support themselves. Others ran up to him in excitement, their faces shining with anticipation. Some chatted about their spiritual journey or the miracles they had seen him perform on TV. A few, like the girl, pleaded for the mercy of their loved ones. Many entered his grace silently, too humbled to speak. At sunset, he ordered for the line of people to be admitted and sheltered. He promised to mark them all upon his return. His attendant, Paul, approached Lamb as he leaned against the gate and massaged his thumb.

“The chariot is ready,” he said. Lamb followed Paul to the landing bay outside the city. The airship was designed to look like a bird. The command center was

a curved pod protruding from a steel neck. The body was leafed gold and the wings were painted in a feather pattern. The turbines were whirling, Lamb walked to the back of the ship where the rockets sat dormant. He touched the conic engine. He expanded his consciousness into the machine. Coldness expanded over his skin. His nose stung with the smell of gasoline.

“Are you ready, Lord?” Paul asked from the ramp.

Lamb withdrew his consciousness and followed Paul into the airship. As he took his seat in the cabin, he peered out the window at his kingdom glowing in the dusk. He frowned at the silhouette of a crane looming crookedly over the stone homes.

“Have the crane removed by the time I return,” he said to Paul, who relayed the command home. Lamb quieted his irritation through meditation.

When my sister and I come home, the fate of the Kingdom of Gods will be fulfilled.

The Dragon

The Death of Man

But as fire was man's life, it shall also be his death, for man's flame shall blind him. He will suffer from the radiation of war. His leaders shall falter; drunk off the whorish lust for power. He shall slice the earth and cauterize the wound when its riches run shallow.

Before rebirth, there must be ash. Man will be murdered by a god. This god will be the Lamb of Man. His soul shall be sacrificed to destruction. Earth shall be his altar, flesh his victim, and fire his knife.

The lamb shall stand at the gate of the Kingdom of Gods and mark his citizens. They alone shall be granted mercy from the cremation.

He will rise upon the night in a flying chariot to pass judgment on the whore of man. He will find her sitting atop the Red Dragon. The Lamb will freeze the passion in her veins and he will euthanize the Red Dragon, whose powers have made him ancient and blind, like the race of man.

He shall fly his chariot to the sun. He will harness the great flame and ignite a conflagration that shall extinguish the age of man, save those sanctioned in the Kingdom of Gods.

Thus a god ends the age of man.

Chinatown's pleasure house beamed at Lamb with ten chuckling eyes. It was the tallest building in Los Angeles, a crimson totem with five dragon heads. The highest heads belched flames. Others had forked, purple tongues that whistled in the breeze. Lamb and Paul walked into the maw of the lowest dragon. The carpet was a plush tongue. It breathed heated air saturated with the aroma of chicken frying in sesame oil.

The atrium was a mob of sinners. They groped each other in the anonymity of the crowd. They gorged on buffet tables spanning the room. They were stacked with toppling piles of honey-glazed meats and sugar-whipped desserts. There were apples, raspberries, and cherries dewy with cold water and crab cakes simmering in butter. There was a chocolate cake with frosted flowers that puffed sugar dust. Fountains of wine splashed the room with sparkling ruby liquid.

Mirrors lined the lower walls of the atrium, and people gathered around them to admire their own bodies; hands traversed over their own curves, their chests, faces, and thighs. A woman with a mole on her nose gazed at herself. In her reflection, any trace of the mole was gone. Lamb caught a glimpse of himself. He looked unusual in his linen robe compared to the silky horde. His chest was noticeably broader and his pepper black beard and hair were trimmed, although he hadn't groomed in weeks. He pivoted and scoffed at the mirror for adding definition to his arms through his sleeves.

Lamb and Paul gingerly side-stepped through the throng; avoiding wandering hands and flecks of food. Many people wore masks of horned demons or opal-cheeked faces. Many had tattoos of a red flame on their foreheads. The atrium was ringing with the din of booming conversation, laughter, and moaning. One girl was cackling as she tossed creams puffs on a bald man passed out on an armchair. The frosting slid down his face and splattered onto the floor.

They reached the row of elevators and strode inside as soon as one opened. A couple shuffled in after them. The man—clad in a leather jacket—pressed the girl against the wall, kissing her as he slid his hands under her cropped shirt. Paul looked at Lamb, then glanced at the fumbling bodies. Lamb shook his head. The

man began to suck on the girl's neck. She opened her eyes and looked at them.

"Nice robes, fuckers," she sneered. Her lipstick was smeared across her face. The elevator opened. The two stumbled onto a floor with a thumping song and atmospheric lights.

The door closed and Lamb and Paul continued to the top floor in relative silence. Upon reaching their destination, they stepped into a violet room in which a red lamp cast a dim light onto a man standing behind a counter. The door on the other side of the room was covered in red fur.

"Do you have an appointment?" he asked. Paul was about to respond when a scrawny man emerged from the door. There was a vague trace of a smile on his face.

"See you next week!" The scrawny man dropped a wad of cash on the counter and walked, bow legged, to the elevator.

"Send them in. I don't mind," a woman's voice purred from beyond the door.

Lamb and Paul entered the crimson room to find Rebecca. She was reclining on a bed whose frame was carved with the five dragons of the pleasure house. She was a translucent creature with hair that was tinted red. Her lingerie was a royal purple with scarlet mesh encircling her waist. She had a beauty mark on her left cheek. Her eyes grew wide when she saw him. She stood out of bed and approached Lamb, sensuously striding on her toes to better display the shapeliness of her legs.

"My Lord," she exhaled and bowed at his feet, hair whispering over his toes. "My king has come!" She gazed up at him on all fours. She wore a cruel smile with glassy blue eyes. Her chin brushed against his robe. "How may I serve?" she purred.

"Don't speak to the King of Cremation!" Paul said as he spat on her carpet. Rebecca ignored Paul and stood. Her body was close to Lamb's.

"I serve kings every day," she said coolly. She placed her hand on Lamb's chest. He sensed the velvety heat throbbing inside her. She stood on her toes and breathed into his ear:

"My king, my god, you love us all dearly. All your energy, everything you are is expended into us. Ungrateful, ignorant. You are tired; I see it. We drain your

powers, we take, we pillage, we usurp from you.” She slid her hand up to his shoulder and clutched it. “Your veins are left weakened by us. Forgive me, offer me mercy. Let me revive you.” She kissed his neck, her lips like petals.

Lamb shuddered. The curve of her breasts rose as he put his hands on her bare shoulders, careful not to grasp her or even let his fingers twitch. Her desire licked over him like satin and crept down his skin. Lamb gritted his teeth. Paul stepped forward to stand directly behind Rebecca.

“Paul, I have seen this woman’s soul,” Lamb said. “It is of darkness. She has been blinded by a fire of lust. Her flame has burned the eyes of her suitors – the leaders of men. Her veins shall be frozen and the prophecy fulfilled.” As Lamb spoke, he drew power from his own voice. *She is nothing but a bag of flesh and blood*, he thought. His hands grew cool against her shoulder as he reduced the heat in her muscles. The contractions and expansions of her organs slowed until she became clammy. Goosebumps bubbled under his fingers. Tears expanded in the corners of her eyes.

“It’s like fire,” she croaked. She died staring at Lamb with a smirk on her mouth. Paul caught her as she fell limp. He dragged her to the bed and threw her upper body on the silky sheets. As she fell away from Lamb’s touch, he stumbled. He felt all the temperature being sucked away from him. His heart skipped and he clutched his chest.

“Lamb!” Paul cried as he came over to him.

“I’m fine,” he waved him away and cleared his throat.

“One hell of a temptress,” Paul commented.

Lamb was the first to leave the room. When Rebecca’s pimp approached the door, Lamb put his hands on the pimp’s chest and singed his arteries together. The man screamed as smoke rose from his torso. He collapsed before Lamb, grasping at the carpet. Lamb and Paul strode into the elevator and rode it back down to the atrium.

The food appeared to remain untouched, although everyone was still shoveling it down by the plateful. Lamb stopped as they passed by a wine fountain. He stuck his hand into the water and sensed the network of gurgling pipes transferring wine throughout the room. His nostrils burned as he changed the compounds in the alcohol by manipulating the undulating matter. He watched a man dip his glass into the ruby liquid and sip it with his chin jutting over the pond.

His face grew stiff with a locked jaw and his cheeks bloomed purple. He fell into the fountain, choking on the wine. The drink dyed his shirt pink. The atrium rang with sounds of choking, spluttering and tinkling glass. Lamb and Paul left them grasping at the ground.

Once they were outside, Lamb asked: "Can you arrange an airship to the Kingdom?" Paul nodded. Lamb put a hand on his shoulder. "This is where I leave for The Cremation. Thank you for your service."

"I look forward to serving you during the new age," Paul said before bowing and disappearing among the people walking the streets. Before returning to his chariot, Lamb ducked down the alley adjacent to the pleasure house. An electrical box the size of a wardrobe was protruding from the wall. He laughed aloud. *Destiny can be so easy.* He placed his hand on the metal door and fried the circuits. He looked up to see the lights in the totem dragon's eyes flicker out. The flames were extinguished. The rumble of the building died. He saw the people who hadn't drunk the wine sprinting from the building, screaming about prophecies. Lamb grinned as he walked into the panicked street and to the chariot that was awaiting him in the landing bay complex. A man, so plump that he seemed to be oozing from his bathrobe, had fallen at the edge of the dragon's tongue. He tucked his pasty legs to his chest and wrapped his arms around his knees.

"Prophecy!" he screamed, his sweat moistening into tears. "The dragon is dead! The god of our cremation shall arise on this chariot and alight the conflagration to end the age of man!"

Lamb smiled. He rounded the corner of the alley and strode over to the man. He stood over him and held out his hand. The fat pile gaped up at him. Slack jawed, he reached out to take his hand. Lamb made heat shoot through his veins and a flame unfurled from his palm. The man snatched his blistering hand away, still staring at Lamb. As soon as his eyebrows lifted in recognition, he fainted. Froth began leaking from his lips like cream.

Cremation

Lamb turned the ship around near Mercury and flipped on the thrusters to a moderate level to counter-balance the gravitational pull of the sun. He loved the feeling of the sun's solid burn push against the ship's heat-resistors. He pulled off his robe, tied a cord around his waist and placed his hands over his chest with his eyes closed. He extended his powers over himself and reorganized all

the elements in his epidermis into a lattice structure. His skin became glassy and his pigments faded until they disappeared. He became a living diamond. His cardiovascular system pulsed pink and blue under the magnification of his skin. The only sense left to him was sight; his eyeball flickered underneath the transparent eyelid. He relished in the numbness of his skin and the lack of assaults to his nose. He didn't even feel the coldness of the ship when he processed it to open the hatch. He floated outside.

His vision was white, nothing but the blinding radiation of hydrogen. It amazed him that the most awesome power in the solar system was devoid of all sound. He flung himself around to face the twinkle of Earth and wrenched his arms upward. He expanded his conscious to its full radius and retracted his powers to his palm. He pulled solar flares out of the sky like ribbons, which he compressed into one speck. His finger muscles were taut. The speck vibrated in his hand; its strength rippled through him, threatening to crack his diamond skin. He offered his palm to the altar of Earth and released the hydrogen in a beam that tunneled through space. He felt the reverberation when it impacted Earth. He felt a connection through the beam. When it encountered land, the flame shook intensively; in sea it moved sluggishly. Lamb guided the conflagration throughout all the continents and islands. He was careful to avoid his Kingdom in the Pacific.

Thus a god shall end the age of man, he thought to himself. The tendons of his mouth muscles shifted as he smiled underneath his diamond casing.

Revelation

The Rebirth

The sister of the lamb shall be the mother of a new age. She will rush to the Earth and clear the ash. She shall summon the souls lost in the fire to the Kingdom of Gods. They will stand before the marble thrones and answer for their transgressions. Those of darkness shall be turned to smoke by the lamb. Those of the light shall have their bodies returned to them by the mother. The Kingdom of Gods shall live for a thousand years in tranquility.

Thus begins the age of woman.

Lamb slouched on his throne with his palms turned up. He was emaciated. His bones were jagged beneath his skin. His hair and beard had clumped together. His cheeks had discolored to a green tinge. Sores laced his buttocks, but still he

stared at his sister's throne. His pupils had expanded to eclipse his yellow irises. His chest worked heavily to preserve his breath.

The stench of rotting flesh clotted his throat, yet he didn't have the energy to burn Paul's body; now a bundle of linen and sludged skin. The Kingdom of Gods stunk of feces, rotting food, and bodies. They had waited until the provisions were depleted and then many stayed resolutely after that.

Others had waited until they starved like Paul, who had said, "She shall not lose my faith!" every morning until he had died. Most had committed suicide by gouging into their wrists with stones they had ripped from the gates.

The sun rose, but the remaining gems were too tarnished to cast rainbows. The blonde girl emerged from the villas. She approached Lamb's throne with a pack slumped over her shoulder. Her hair was matted and she was so thin that her soiled blouse blossomed around her.

"The prophecy," Lamb groaned. "Why didn't she come?"

She didn't look at him, but glared at Paul's body. Her jaw was clenched and she clutched the strap of her pack. She said:

"Gods don't ask questions."

She retreated out of the nearest gate, descending into the fog of ash.

Lamb pulled himself straight and cleared his throat. The flies inspecting his purple feet scattered. Directly above him, the crane shifted in the breeze. The cables were taut with the weight of the claw. The metal fibers were frayed. The crane moaned in the silence. The cables had begun to snap.

Ambassador

Michelle Gamboa

In a foreign land
I filled 173 notebooks
Connected to love

Old letters collected
By soft lamplight
A certain violence

Remarkable
Ghostly presences
Scribbling notes

Epistles to sweethearts
Echoes of early Joes
Signatures signed in haste

White stillness as
Phantoms whisper
Ancient symbols

We talk
I scribble
Clock stopped
At 2 am

Space Squid

Amanda Blazey

“Ha! Like *you* have any room to talk,” said Jane, hands tightly crossed against her chest.

“Why are you such a ball of angst tonight?” Retorted her sister, Alexa. She glared as she extended her foot across the battleground that was the middle couch cushion.

“Yea, right. You are the one being so annoying right now.”

“Love you, too.”

“Are either of you going to watch this or are we all going to go to bed?” asked their mother tiredly from the La-Z-Boy chair.

Stephen hid behind his book at the dining room table, pretending he wasn't aware of the ongoing war between his daughters. He sighed, but it was inaudible below the din of the squabbling and the Academy Awards that, though highly anticipated, was being largely ignored by his family.

And then came something much louder, a crash, coming from almost directly above him. A great force shook the walls down to the very foundation of the house, altering the alignment of an abstract aqua painting.

“Woah,” said Jane, from her tangled position on top of her sister where she had been launched by the sudden shake.

“Get OFF me!” cried Alexa through Jane's auburn hair.

Alice's head whipped around the back of the La-Z-Boy and made eye contact with her husband.

“Honey, will you go check that out... please,” she said with urgency.

Her “please” was punctuated with a loud click as Leonardo DiCaprio's face was replaced by blackness.

“Aw man,” said Alexa, throwing her arms down.

“Sure, I’ll be right back,” said Stephen.

The night was completely still and Stephen took a deep breathe of the cool air. He zipped up his jacket a little higher and headed out to the garage to grab a ladder. *Something must have gone horribly wrong with the Dish*, Stephen figured.

Rung by rung he climbed up to the roof and carefully tried to find footing amongst the adobe tiles. As Stephen neared the far side of the chimney, he realized he was not alone.

Flopped down on its side was a motionless creature that shimmered of pale purple in the light lent from the moon. It was about as long as Stephen was tall. The top of the thing concluded in a point and at the bottom extended what Steven deducted to be about seven or eight appendages. All with suction cup-like circles along their inner ridges. A huge, unseeing eye stared up at Stephen from the middle of the beast.

A squid. A huge squid. On top of a house in the suburbs.

From the perfect center of the squid’s tentacles, a wire extended before snaking its way down into the house. Stephen knelt down to see if he could get a glimpse into its mouth, but the beaked opening was closed fast.

Looks like that’s the end of that Dish, Stephen thought to himself.

He circled the sea creature a couple times, noticing a burnt trail of misplaced tiles leading to its resting place. He kicked the animal lightly, afraid that it might reanimate, but the squid had passed on, having choked on his family’s source of nightly entertainment.

Not sure of what to do with the animal, Stephen decided to go back in and figure it out in the morning. As he pulled the ladder back into its place behind his Prius, Stephen braced himself to face the annoyance of the three women who would miss the Best Director’s acceptance speech.

As he neared the light permeating out of the French doors, he was greeted by the noises radiating from the living room. Yet, they were not the usual jabs, insults, and cries from hair pulling and arguing and the like. There was... laughter. Little Jane pulled open the white door separating Stephen from his family.

“Come on Daddy, play with us! You be Professor Plum and I’ll be Miss Scarlet,” She hurried him along, her hand in his.

“And I get to be Miss Peacock, I bet I already know who did it!” called Alexa, waving her blue playing piece in the air.

Alice smiled to Stephen across the cardboard mansion of the game.

“Maybe I’ll tell them later,” he thought.

Divorcing the Winter

Leandro Fefer

It was my favorite cup.
Dark forest green, mid-width ceramic, smooth, glossy.
No more than 8 ounces.
A teacup.

When she flung my favorite cup at my father,
It hit the wall behind him.
It did not shatter, only the handle broke off.
This infuriated her more than he did.

She wavered in place, shaking and sobbing under dual energysaver iridescent bulbs
He stooped, collected the pieces of my favorite cup,
And put them in the trash bin.

I retreated from my place at the doorway,
Unseen, unheard,
To my bedroom.

Later that night I returned to the kitchen.
I rescued my favorite cup from the trash bin.
Placed it, without its handle, in the white enamel cupboard,
Carefully.

She laughed about it the next night.
Swooning, red wine in hand, she dropped my favorite cup back into the bin
Unceremoniously.
She said she wanted to forget it.

Unseen, unheard,
I rescued it once again.
So she would remember,
It was my favorite cup.

Ever Ever

Amelia Pierno

The sky looked
 Bluer than usual,
and the trees seemed
 greener too
as though the air surrounding me
 carried life to everything it touched
a sweet, golden nectar seeping into existence
 I swung higher—
daring my feet
 to step upon the marshmallow clouds

As though a branch had caught me
holding my swing as close as I could get to the sky
my mind got stuck
 in those sticky, marshmallow clouds
rainbows of light tickled my senses
so I could smell the pink of the bougainvillea
taste the olive green of pine trees
and hear each blade of grass as they sang to me
I could touch each ray of light that gave birth
to this wonderful world around me

A boy came up to me
with thick-rimmed glasses
and oversized clothes
He looked at me and said,
Aren't you a little too old for that?

Never.

Virginia's Lemons

Rosalie Atkinson

Sitting on top of the television, I have a perfect view. She sits low in her leather chair, which is beige, like the carpet. The entire complex smells like sanitized medical equipment and expired lipstick. The scent wafts beneath the door jamb and fills the room. The door opens and I see glimpses of softly toned, brown walls leading guests to the elevator, surrounded by color-coded maps with stickers labeled, "You are here." Through the doorway I see grandparents, veterans, wheelchairs, and cribbage sets. Virginia sits with caved posture in navy blue slacks, perfectly pleated. Although she loses motor skills every day, the 1950's in her reigns supreme, and she pulls out the ironing board every morning. Her shirt is white and speckled with spoon-drips of red soup, possibly tomato. I watch her every day as her skin grows heavy on her bones and hangs like folds of laundry beneath her eyes. She looks at me through thick, oval glasses. She contemplates me, same as I do her. To her I am every wandering of her fleeting mind. I climb scaffoldings of possibility. In her mind, I grow lemons.

"My plant is so peculiar. I know Philodendrons don't grow fruit but every evening I see the lemons on the vine. Just yesterday, I found one in the dirt there." Virginia points to my small pot. "I've never seen anything quite like it. It really is a very special plant."

"Virginia, would you like us to tell you when you are hallucinating, or just tell your doctors later?" Debbie is Virginia's daughter-in-law. She sits nearest to the door. She is waiting for the day-nurse. Her revealing black blouse and white skirt become transparent in the sunrays streaming in from the balcony. "I know I, personally, would want to be told but I know this is all very new and sensitive so just tell us what you want." Debbie is from Texarkana and everything she says carries a heavy Southern drawl. Her voice silences the room but never offers anything of value. With each of Debbie's elongated syllables, Virginia slips further into her chair and her eyes become more empty. She searches my branches. Every other day Debbie visits along with Jim, Virginia's son, and proceeds to talk until Virginia either falls silent or asleep. Debbie insists on her own reality by denying these small moments of excitement. My lemons are one of Virginia's few pleasures, amid the frequent doctors visits and bland meals. I understand that everyone copes with Alzheimer's differently. Virginia collects lemons.

"You can't make lemonade from illusions, Gini."

“But they were here just last night. The maid must be taking them. I’ll have to have a word with her,” pleads Virginia, voice soft and breaking at the ends of her short breaths. Hands pressed into the armrests of her chair, as though she could get up and shuffle down to the front desk, to handle this issue immediately.

“Gini, there is no maid,” Debbie says with a faint grin and relentless eye contact.

The air in the room changes. Virginia’s eyes drift downward to that beige, shag carpet and her black slippers. Everything else she sees is so true. She lived 88 years as a housewife and mother. All real. All gone. She is just beginning to dream again. Now I sit here, one of the last colorful things in her day.

As the afternoon fades, I remain on the outskirts of the room, watching the world spin too quickly for Virginia to latch onto. Her son sits idly absorbed in his cell phone, playing word games. He never looks up to contribute or console his mother. His wife sits at the table, organizing bills and underlining the due dates with a brutal, neon yellow. Later that night, once the family leaves, Virginia and I sit together in the apartment. She stares at me and I sprout lemons for her, and together we dance behind closed doors.

Love Astronaut

Sam Wolfe

The starburst trails of my ship form an arrow pointing at the rest of the universe. Rainbow-hued lights flicker as I pass over a yellow-red star—they shimmer like silver rings in the distance. I reach out at one, pretending for a moment it's my mother's jewelry, knowing that both are light-years away. A meteor streaks into the atmosphere below, bursting into a flaming ribbon against the blanket of darkness.

Sitting on the rear platform, I can feel the vibrations from the engine room below. They cause a low hum to echo inside my helmet—the only thing I can hear besides my breath. There's no sound in space. It's a simple fact that makes everyone nervous when they first hear it in elementary school. I used to think about how isolating it would be, all alone out in the cold silence of space, but looking at it now, I'm not afraid. The magnets in my boots anchor me to the ship's hull. Bringing my legs to my chest, I rest my arms on my knees. This is my favorite place. Here against the backdrop of the universe, I let myself become lost in my thoughts. It's no wonder there's no sound in space, I'm speechless every time I look at it.

A sudden movement in the star I'm flying past interrupts me. The flaming orb pulsates inward and outward, slowly shrinking and losing its brightness. White-hot flames erupt from the sphere's surface, shooting out into eternity. Soon, the light that my cylindrical ship once bathed in is snuffed out, and the onboard lights come on. Usually, the death of a star is projected ahead of time, and the results are a little more explosive. Staring into the blackness, I can see a much smaller orb of light where the star once rested like a candle in the distance. Curious, I bring my ship closer to the source.

"Is that...?" I wonder aloud as my craft closes in on the light before me.

The universe is home to millions of different kinds of species. Humans, like myself, and other carbon-based life forms are only one way that life can take shape. What we didn't realize is how much our presence in the universe would affect the development, and sometimes creation, of other species. It was uncommon, but occasionally spatial anomalies reacted to an alien interaction, creating new life by copying what was around it.

The strange behavior of the star had already led me to suspect what my eyes

now confirm.

Before me floats an unconscious Asterkin, the heart of the recently extinguished star. The raging gases that fuel it glow like burning embers as they churn within the hard transparency of the Asterkin's plasma skin. A soft red light emanates from it as it begins to stir. My ship's heat shielding kicks in. Without thinking I secure myself with a towline and exit the ship, mesmerized by its radiance. I slowly drift towards the creature to bring it aboard. I wouldn't want to wake up all alone in the middle of nowhere, and I don't think an Asterkin would either.

"I'm sorry," it groans. "Did I damage your ship?"

I'm surprised. You can never tell if an Asterkin is just being born or if it's waking up from a six hundred year nap. I guess I'm relieved that this one isn't an infant. I'm not great with kids.

"No need to be sorry. My ship can handle high temperatures, so I'll be fine. I'm more worried about you..." I stammer. "For now, just try to relax."

The Asterkin's body is stabilizing, its skin now absorbing most of the heat from the inferno within. Burning gas flows through its body in a fiery current pushing outward, burning away from itself, if not redirected back by its membrane. I notice that its left hand doesn't seem as solid. It bubbles and hisses, as hot gas and fire occasionally escapes from the thin layer of plasma.

I lay the Asterkin down in the cargo hold, a little ashamed that I don't know much about Asterkin physiology. Being a race of gases trapped in a malleable plasma membrane, Asterkin can take any form they wish. Judging by the shape this one is taking, I guess I'm not the first human it's met. I lower my head to its chest to check its breathing.

"A little forward, don't you think?" it flares.

I reel back with embarrassment. "Oh man, I am so sorry. I don't really know anything about—" I stop, interrupted by its crackling laughter.

"Relax," it smiles, still laughing, "You've never met an Asterkin, have you?"

I shake my head. I've read about Asterkin, but this is my first time meeting one in the flesh... so to speak. I know they are incredibly dense, physically, but socially they can be very hard to read. An Asterkin's personality grows to be similar to what they have seen and interacted with.

“Well, for starters, gasbags like me don’t have sexes.”

“The way you speak is—”

“What? This is how guys talk, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...” I reply, dumbstruck. “I’ve never heard of a male Asterkin...”

“Well, there’s at least one. Don’t look so shocked,” he extends his right hand, helping me up, “You can call me Saul.”

“Saul... that’s a rather plain name for a creature that’s born from a star.”

“Well, it used to be Sol, but that felt a little too formal, so I changed it.”

“I guess that makes sense... Call me Astro. It’s short for astronaut, because of the suit.”

“I was about to say, I don’t think I’ve ever seen an outfit like that.”

It’s an Old Earth space suit, white and baggy with emblems on the shoulders. A large life support system on my back has been hollowed out for storage space, replaced with a modern, smaller unit. Some consider it an antique. With the helmet masking my face, I look pretty odd to most people, but there’s something I really like about the older, clunkier look.

“I’ll admit, it’s a bit old fashioned, but it lets me go outside.”

“I guess it protects you from heat too. Thanks for picking me up, Astro.”

I beam under my helmet. Nobody’s actually called me Astro before.

The following day, Saul and I spend a long time with introductions. I show him around my ship, the cosmic train, Britto Marte. I think most people would laugh at the idea of a train soaring through space, but Saul seems to take it in stride. He calls it “an outdated piece of machinery to go with my suit,” before changing the subject.

“So what invites a human to explore the stars alone?” Saul flickers quizzically.

“Well, it’s the final frontier, the last vestiges of human exploration...” I avoid.

“So you come out here on this hunk of junk? I don’t buy it.”

“Well, It might sound strange, but I’m on a personal journey of sorts right now...” I hesitate, a little embarrassed, but Saul nods for me to continue.

“I once read a ‘eulogy to love’ by a man named Aristophanes, an Athenian playwright. He believed that human beings used to have two sets of arms, legs, and even two heads, but the gods became jealous of their happiness, so they split them in two halves. He thought that the reason why lovers sometimes ‘felt whole’ when they were together was because they had found the partner they had been separated from.”

I stop to gauge Saul’s reaction, but he seems unperturbed. “Human biology doesn’t work that way. It’s a metaphor.” I clarify.

“Oh! I see.”

“He must have known how silly that idea sounded, but something he said resonated with me. Not long after that, I decided to take to the stars, searching for love in whatever forms it may take; after all, in a galaxy as diverse as ours, I couldn’t get a full picture staying at home.” I wait to hear his reaction. Most people tell me I’m wasting my time when I tell them that.

“I guess it makes sense,” he finally flares.

“It does?” I blush.

“Sure. A space age RV trip across the galaxy, looking for love. Very human,” he crackles with laughter. It takes me a second to realize, but Saul isn’t laughing at me. I’m surprised how understanding he seems to be.

When I ask him about his hand, the atmosphere changes. With downcast eyes, he curses and tells the story: some time ago Saul damaged his hand protecting another explorer from an asteroid. He used to explore planets himself, but with his hand damaged, he stopped for fear of accidentally hurting others. Most Asterkin are able to reform their plasma shells if ruptured, but Saul’s hand never stabilized, allowing heat to escape if he loses focus. In fact, the star I had found him on was the result of his hand becoming increasingly hard to form and eventually bursting, releasing the hot gasses inside and reducing him back to a solar state. Despite the danger, I welcome the company. There’s something about Saul

that draws me to him.

“Are you sure it’s alright for me to stay here like this?” Saul asks for the fifth time.

“Relax. The Britto Marte is designed for mining expeditions at a planet’s core. The loads it used to carry could be incredibly hot.”

“I think a sun is a little hotter than a planet’s core...” he smolders.

Saul has been with me for a while now and seldom leaves the ship. It must be so lonely for him to be cooped up in my ship whenever I go to fuel up or explore a planet. His hand burns anything it touches, and the heat resistant housing of the cargo hold seems like the only place he can be and not hurt someone. Thankfully, my suit keeps me safe, not that anything would save me if he were to go supernova. He asks me about the worlds I visit, trying to get a taste of the adventurous life he used to have.

From time to time, I have to perform odd jobs to maintain my ship. For my current venture, I am charged with delivering a shipment of small radar dishes to a junk vendor. I invite Saul to join me at the drop off point—a remote, moon that serves as a junkyard.

“Astro, I appreciate the offer but I don’t think—”

“It’ll be fine. It’s a small moon, barely any people. It’ll do you good to get out of the ship, if only for a little while.”

Reluctantly, he accepts my proposition, and we head for Chazer-5.

The trash moon is covered with garbage; it’s hard to find a place to land. Mountains of exhaust pipes and circuit boards litter the ground, making me wonder what color the surface of this moon is exactly, while mountains of shrapnel and ancient hulls tower in the distance. Small flocks organizing droids try to scoop up the garbage, cataloging the spare parts in a fruitless effort to find the value in the universe’s junk. Saul stays behind me, clutching his left hand nervously. I step over a box of coils, making my way towards the crude building made of rusty ship bones.

The junk man squawks at me as I approach his den. Cold reptilian eyes scour

the crate I bring up to his desk, as he clasps his talons together nervously. The smell of the underworld is pungent on this guy, as he greases back a plume of feathers atop his scaly head, and opens his beak to speak:

“Greetings my friend,” he parrots from some intergalactic business tape, “I greatly look forward to my shipment of communication dishes.”

“Communication dishes? I heard it was a request for radar dishes...”

His demeanor shifts as he slinks around me to rifle through the crate. “Some kind of mistake,” he crows, “I do not have much use for radar dishes...”

This isn’t the first time someone’s tried to cheat me out of pay. “I don’t think there’s any mistake. If it’s communication dishes you need, these can be stripped apart for parts and rebuilt into—”

“More work! More work!” the Parroclectician cries, “I am sorry my friend, but I cannot pay for what I do not need.”

“You can’t blame me for your mistaken order.”

“Perhaps we can reach an agreement. I pay for this shipment in scrap. You take what you need, yes?”

He resumes his tinkering, fiddling with an antique cuckoo clock as he tries to ignore the sounds of his droids crashing into each other outside.

“I really need the money...”

The junk man twitches, darting his head around me like a bird trying to find its way out of a cave. Then his eyes go wide. He looks back to me, and shakes his head from side to side, tweeting.

“My friend, it is like I say, I cannot pay for what I do not need. I think you’ll find I’m quite agreeable, given the damages my shipment may have received, and the danger you have put me in.”

I look over my shoulder to see what he’s staring at: Saul. He waves to us as his hand lets loose a belch of flame. I clench my fists.

“Look you slippery macaw, this mistake has nothing to do with my friend over there!”

“Perhaps you should not make friends with disasters, I think. I offer you your pay in scrap. Take what you will, and leave.”

A remote moon; I should have known it would be sketchy. Even though I know Saul hasn't done anything to damage the parts, there was no arguing this one.

I scan around the hills of trash for some useful parts. In the midst of all the tangled wires and chords, a silver cylinder reflects light directly into my eyes. An idea pops into my head as I pick up the cylindrical glove and read the engraved identification: heat resistant suit. It would only take a few days to get it into working order. It was junk to everyone else, only the left hand intact.

I find my conversations with Saul carrying on later and later each night. Maybe I've rubbed off on him a little, it seems he's become just as interested as I am in the idea of love.

“Asterkin can fall in love, same as anybody, I suppose,” he muses one night.

“Sure, but there's all kinds of love in the universe... lately I've been wondering if I'll ever find the kind I'm looking for,” I sigh.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there are two kinds of love, I think: platonic and romantic. The love you get from family and friends is different than a romantic kind of love.”

“I guess that's easier to understand from your perspective,” Saul looks away,

“Asterkin don't have families, and when you have a condition like mine, it's hard to keep friends.”

“I'm sorry Saul, I didn't mean to...”

“Don't be sorry. You're introducing me to new ideas...”

There was a long pause.

“Astro, why are you doing this? Surely there's an easier way...”

I wait for a minute and consider my words. Then look up to Saul's fiery face.

“Because it’s hard,” I say slowly. “Because it’s hard, I know I’m going to learn something.”

Saul casts a fiery smile that soon gives way to an eruption of laughter.

“Learn something, huh? That’s not bad,” he sparks. “I’m glad you picked me up, Astro.”

Saul is a great listener. He lets me babble for hours about people I’ve met, places I’ve been, and ideas I have. He makes me feel as though I can never say anything wrong. The glove I’ve fixed up for him is almost finished, and with it hopefully he’ll feel comfortable enough to visit other planets with me.

Saul is ecstatic when I present him the glove. The drop in temperature is immediate as he morphs his hand to fit inside.

“Astro, this is incredible! With this, the heat from my hand will be contained?”

“That’s the idea,” I smile.

It looks a little awkward. It turned out to be less of a glove and more of a containment device; it almost looks like Saul is stuffing his left hand in an oversized thermos. But despite the aesthetics, it works: Saul’s hand won’t pose a problem as long as he wears it.

“How long has it been since you’ve been to a city, Saul?”

“A city? With people?” he glows with euphoria as I steer the ship towards a nearby metropolis planet, “Too long!”

Saul is glued to the windows as the Britto Marte pulls into the city. The distant lights of stars are soon replaced with the neon glow of electric signs. Towering columns of life stab at the skyline; this is a planet tamed by civilization. As the ship glides into a dock, the glistening train-track trails it leaves behind it dim and fade away. The signal lights on city rooftops pulse in a flowing pattern that travels around the entire city, circling again and again.

We exit the vehicle and breathe in the world around us. It is almost impossible to tell what kind of colony this was; creatures of all shapes and sizes bustled on every street, betraying any sense of homogeneity it may have had. Clattering sounds

of arthropod-like aliens and the soft thump of mammalian footsteps give rise to the busy rhythm of the city, punctuated by sounds of industry. The streetlights and electric devices illuminate the world, but nothing is more aglow than Saul, who is overjoyed just to be around people again.

We spend the day sightseeing, traveling the endless sprawl from vista to vista, taking in how large the city really is. I'm a little nervous to be in such a big city, fearful we'll get lost, but Saul's smile keeps me comforted. As we make our way to a public park, Saul's elation breaks for a moment, and lets us decompress.

"Isn't this great, Astro? People! People from all over, coming together and making this! This is why I love people," Saul illuminates.

"It really is amazing. Planets like this usually have a lot of natural resources, making them a reliable place to live for a lot of people."

I get a little nostalgic, watching some kids walking home with their parents. A twilight orange floods the scene as we walk around the bend.

"Hey, Astro, if you don't mind me asking, why are you still wearing your suit?" Saul glimmers curiously, "This planet is safe for humans, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "You're right. I guess I'm just more comfortable in my suit than in anything else."

"Why?" he pushes.

"Because when I'm wearing my suit, I feel like I can go anywhere."

Saul stares at me for a second, "I don't get it, you don't look any different from other humans... but I guess fashion's fashion," he spits.

I take a second. I never realized that Saul could see past the tinted glass of my helmet. Who would have expected a life form so different from me to know me so well? We really must look like an odd pair.

"That's right," I laugh a little, beaming again, "fashion's fashion."

When we return to the city streets, crowded creatures coming and going; the day shift returning for the night, and the night owls just waking up. I let out a relieved sigh; happy that Saul was able to see the city lights he had missed for so long. The sounds of the city once again embrace our ears, with the addition

of one soft, ominous voice: the thermos on his hand is beeping as we walk back towards the ship.

As soon as I recognize the sound, it is too late. The canister ruptures with a large puff of smoke, and suddenly the temperature rises. Saul retracts his arm immediately, but not before accidentally brushing it past someone, almost setting their coat aflame.

“Hey! Watch it buddy!” they turn to face Saul, but their anger soon gives way to fear when he sees Saul’s hand. For a city dweller, an Asterkin might be the last thing one would expect to bump into on the street, but the danger they posed was no secret.

“Fire!” a woman shouts “Someone send help! We’re all in danger!”

Saul looks to me, then back to the crowd. People back away from him slowly, as he tries to explain, but their panic has muffled their ears. He turns to me, his flames dancing violently, gas inside billowing. I’ve never seen him so distraught.

“I... I need to get out of here,” he embers quietly, before rocketing himself upwards, back into space. The temperature drops again, as countless aliens make noise at what has just occurred.

The silence as I exit the docking bay is heavy. Saul’s impression of the larger universe must be shattered, and it’s entirely my fault. I find him in low orbit, forlorn as he looks down on the city below. His left hand flares every now and then, punctuating the noiselessness. Eventually the sky shifts back into the inky void of space that we’re both familiar with. Saul and I stare at the planet behind us, as it gets smaller and smaller in the distance.

“It’s kind of comforting, from this perspective. From out here, they’re the ones who look small,” I say indignantly.

“At least it was nice while it lasted,” he sizzles wryly. “I’m sorry about the glove...”

“Don’t worry about it... are you going to be ok?”

He doesn’t answer. The usual spark that I’ve come to expect from Saul seems to have extinguished, and he burns a low flame. I’m not sure if he was more hurt

by their reaction, or upset that he couldn't control his hand, but either way it wasn't fair. I couldn't stand to see him this way. I wanted to comfort him as he had comforted me over the past few weeks we had spent together.

"Saul, come with me, I want to show you something."

Saul looks up and walks with me to the airlock.

"This is where I go when I need to think. It's very special to me... and I think you'll like it too."

The airlock opens. It's not as cold as it usually is, I can feel Saul's heat behind me, warming me as we walk to the end of the rear platform. I sit down and look out on the swirling nebulas that paint the distance. Two vortexes are spinning thousands of light-years away, moving at a speed imperceptible to mankind. It's easy to forget that the planets move over time, and this was a shining reminder. In a thousand-thousand years, the two nebulas will collide, and planets that were once unthinkable distances apart will be neighbors. From the chaos of the collision, new life will form, and the universe will continue.

Saul sits down next to me. I can feel his warm body through the frozen gaps of space. He stares at the stars; though he has no parents, Saul is a creation of the galaxy, and his family is literally as countless as the stars. He looks down at his left hand, the source of all his problems, and lets out a long sigh. That hand is the root of a lot of pain in his life. He tried not to show how much he wanted to go down to the surface worlds with me, but I could tell—he missed the life he had before he lost control.

I'm not sure what impulse came over me, but without really thinking I reach out and close my hand. The heatproof glove of my suit starts to glow a soft orange. I can feel the blazing heat searing through as our fingers interlock, but I hold on still. Saul is surprised, I'm not sure if by my action or the sensation of feeling with his left hand. His dismay melts into a warm smile. Our eyes lock. It's hot, but I'm not burning. He opens his mouth to speak. Something about that place became even more special. There's no sound in space, but I know what he says.

Suddenly the entire ship shakes, and the moment is cut short; our course is changing. I run to the front of the ship, and freeze in fear. The swirling vortex from before, mirrored in a helix of destruction; our ship is on a collision course with a black hole. I turn to Saul who nods for me to go inside the ship.

The airlock shuts behind me as I run to the steering wheel. Sweat drenches my

hair, blurring my vision. It doesn't make any sense. There was no black hole there twenty minutes ago, it couldn't just appear out of nowhere. My heart sinks as I see the front of my ship crawl closer and closer to the maw drinking in the universe around it. This is it. Saul and I are goners, and neither of us will realize the love we've been searching for. Tears start from my eyes.

That's when I see him on the nose of my ship. Saul stands resolutely on the edge, ready to leap into the drain that will end us both. He looks to the window. Oh no. He flashes a farewell smile to me, then turns to face the tempest. I fall to my knees as Saul leaps into the vortex, leaving the rest of the universe, and me, behind him. His fireball hand shatters with a blinding force, almost as if he had been barely containing it, and a newborn sun glows from his palm, growing as he bleeds out into the void.

The heat sensors on my ship shriek at me as the ship's paneling begins to fly into the massive orb of light, gravity devouring them in a weak attempt to beat back the darkness. Then the infant sun collides with the swirling death. It sucks at it like a mosquito, funneling the starlight plasma into a whirlpool of golden despair. Saul should have known. Even as a sun, he wasn't massive enough to stop a black hole.

Then time stops.

Looking into the depths of the black hole, where the light has almost completely disappeared, I can see it. I see what Saul knew he was charging into. He had to have known, because he went through the same thing before his last sleep. Deep in the center of the dark hole, is the unmistakable glow of an Asterkin.

It fearfully clutches an appendage. It was out of control and had erupted into a black hole. Saul's light pours into it, the hyper-dense plasma flowing like melted ice cream. He flies closer and closer to his doom. The Asterkin seems to have noticed him quickly morphing into a humanoid shape, and extends its right hand. Saul nods and extends his left.

And suddenly, it's over.

The suction on my ship relents, and I bring it to a halt. I run out of the airlock and onto the rear platform. There, Saul's left hand is locked together with the right hand of the other Asterkin, who glows a soft purple. Amazed, I wave at them as they begin to float towards me. They must be communicating with each other through pulses of light—I can't see them talking, but they seem to be fast friends.

“Saul... what happened?” I ask once we’re inside.

“This Asterkin...” he begins, warmly. “Its membrane is a thick— It’s denser than I am. When it erupted it created a black hole.”

I gawk at the purple figure before me. In contrast to Saul it seems softer, gentler. It bows its head, as if to acknowledge my bewilderment.

“Can it talk?”

“Not yet. It’s never even met a human before.”

Saul looks at me expectantly. That’s when I notice: the heat shields are off. By sharing plasma, the two Asterkin are safe. Saul looks down to his hand, enveloped in a thick syrupy plasma that keeps the heat locked inside. His counterpart forms a smile. Both of them seem relieved; it’s safe now.

“Saul, this is...” I can barely speak.

“I know. We can teach this Asterkin how to talk, travel to planets together...”

Saul goes on, his voice echoing in my ears. I try to imagine it, traveling across the universe with two Asterkin. But as the picture comes into focus, I saw myself less and less. I’m happy for them, but Saul and his partner need room to grow and explore, they need more than I or my ship could offer them; I would only weigh them down.

“Saul...” I swallow hard, “You shouldn’t stay with me.”

“What do you mean?”

They need to leave. They need to take each other across the galaxy to teach and learn from each other—something they can’t do from the cargo hold of an old mining ship.

“It’s not fair to you, and it’s not fair to this Asterkin.”

The two look at each other. Saul finally recognizes what he’s found. A warm white light begins to emanate from their interlocked hands.

“Thank you so much for everything, Astro. You’ve opened my mind to a lot of new ideas.”

“Heh... Don’t mention it, Saul. Once your friend learns how to speak, you’d better come back and say hello.” I try to keep a brave face.

I’m blinking back the tears under my helmet. I’m happy for Saul, I really am. But this is a bittersweet pill. He puts an arm on my shoulder.

“You hide a whole lot under that helmet of yours, Astro, but it doesn’t block everyone out.”

With that, Saul and the Asterkin step outside the airlock, and float out towards the endless horizon. He looks back one last time and winks before shooting in a blazing stream of sunlight.

I almost try to pull Saul back, but I know it wouldn’t work. None of my machinery is stronger than the force of a black hole. This would be better for Saul, in the long run. No matter what I try to do, even though I could resist the heat, I could never cure his disability. With me, Saul would be confined to my cargo bay, waiting up at night for me to return with stories of the outside world. That’s no way to live, especially not for an ageless Asterkin.

Despite the hurt of letting him go, I fly away with newfound confidence. I haven’t found out what I was searching for, but I saw that it existed. Saul had found his other half, someone who could help him and whom he could help.

My ship skates off into the milky blackness of space, and draws a starburst arrow from me to him. Looking back I see a series of flashes from a light as bright as the sun. It’s been a while since I’ve had to interpret light signals, but I think it says:

“Love Astronaut.”

flunking out of flirting

Carsen West

i don't want to be sexy
or gorgeous, or stunning,
for f-'s sake i don't even like the word beautiful
"but damn girl, you're so hot"
perhaps it's something you'd like to be, but for me, i'd rather not
because if that's all they have to say
then it means that's all you've got

i want to be a twist in someone's plot
the grocery list you wrote down twice just in case you forgot
the laughing whisper of the net
after my own buzzer-beating free throw shot
and i don't even like basketball
but i want to be the referee's first good call
the foul ball you barely caught in a stadium of taller arms and bigger hands
all crowded in the stands but you were sitting in the right spot,
i want to be the bottle service bought with last week's rent
money you didn't have but you've already spent
and I might not know which way I'm going but I tell a good story
when it comes to where the wild things went

i want to be profound
i want to be tectonic plates shaking earthquakes
through your underground, humming a natural disaster tune
to make your deaf heartstring
composers wish they could read sounds, could read
the thrumming sirens of my fire-engine-red-lipsticked
bulldozer orchestrating your howling like an Elvis Presley dog
'cause you ain't nothin' but a hound

but enough about you
and a little more about me

i want to sea like my eyes are oceans crashing on all the
deep-dark-secret sands of someone else's undiscovered lands
i want my fingers to lick you with every
lashing of lonely broken lovers' flyaway kite words
because i don't know how many times i've heard
"don't do it again" with a "seriously" and a
"haven't you learned your lesson?" tacked on the end,
but one of my worst habits is that I tend not to listen,

and so planets quit orbiting mid-turn, trying feverishly to fashion me
some constellationed hearing aids while I spend too much time
pouring melted summer-flings-fool's-gold to glisten under my eyelids,
dialing 9-1-1 to shooting stars so that I can blame all my Prince Charmings
for each and every one of the messes I've made,
begging my dead-beat fairy godmother to dispatch her clock-strikes-twelve ambulance
with a magic spell to sew up my unhappily ever after scars because
letting my wish boned ribs break seemed a lot simpler
than guessing how much farther they could bend or how much more they could take

i want to get into the college major of studying footprints
you see, i've gotten tired of typing up essays on
all the empty things people tend to say
but if i can get some bulletpoints down on the steps they're taking
to put together a power point of where they're going
sooner or later i'll find someone who's half-drunk stumbling my same way
and i want to stay with my nose drawing circles on banned beaches
with my fingertips tracing the ghostly dips left in the tanned reaches of your skin,
in case they might be the puzzle pieces that could fit into the
unfilled spaces between my hands

i don't take compliments well
but i'll write my best impression of a self-help book
because i'm still trying to sell myself on the idea
that whoever ends up stealing my heart

doesn't have to be a crook

Ballad of Electric Summer

Samantha Woehl

The sun is bursting silver sparks.
They shatter on bristling grass.
My summer shocks through redwood roots.
I'm light as electron mass.

I stroll beside shimmering leaves
And witness crackling clouds.
My static hair electrified.
The pulse uncurls the boughs.

My Zeus is skipping rocks at the pond.
The pebble's lightening tail
Streaks across and hits the pool
It lights a flashing wail.

His kisses channel my current joy
We lovers wired in heat.
The winking bulbs of flowers dim.
My pulse is a sonar beat.

We build a home alight with stars.
The walls like spider webs.
The spindle's orange copper glow
Depend on our love's ebbs.

Our home becomes sun's early rise,
The walls are ecstatically screaming.
Our energy has blown the circuit
And the burnt-out hills are dreaming.

My Zeus retreats to tend the burns.
I lie electrocuted.
The seizures flash like strings of sky.
Our home is black and muted.

A quiet, rosy sun—it shines
On me through the door ajar.
I reach and nudge the gap aside
The sparks they flash like stars.

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