

THE BAYOU REVIEW

FALL 2018

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THE BAYOU REVIEW

Fall 2018

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Introduction

Archie Gayle

Downtown buildings shoot up into Houston's sky. Brick, cement, and asphalt boughs, planted in human will power. There's lightning that runs through these streets. It drives the cars, supports local businesses, and asks for change on the sidewalks; it rides its bike through Bayou park, cheers the Astros on at Minute Maid Park, and gazes at the gigantic nightlight that is our skyline.

There's lightning in these streets. A major conductor is found at the north-end of Downtown--our university. The University of Houston-Downtown is one big Tesla coil, shooting electricity out of its various academic departments. At any moment the potential energy of the students and faculty becomes kinetic; that energy takes form in the STEM, CHSS, the Honors Program, the Scholars academy, and the student clubs and organizations.

At the Bayou Review we archive the electricity of Houston and present it in a booklet. Last Spring, we printed the thoughts of prisoners. Their raw and powerful words peeled back layers of systematic stereotypes and exposed the same humanity found in any kindergarten playground. Last Fall, we made a Hurricane Harvey issue. Houstonians showed us the resilience of the human spirit in the aftermath of domestic and mental travesty.

This semester, we created a general issue. We wanted to see the various ways in which a mind can travel, and we were not disappointed. We received eulogies dedicated to talented musicians and cherished loved ones; we received fictional and real accounts of romantic relationships relishing in ethereal landscapes; we received images that capture thoughts to beautiful to put in words.

Overall, we received submissions that reflect the diversity of Houston. We are so thankful and proud of every artist in our magnificent city. We hope you enjoy the creative energy captured this semester. Ladies and gentlemen, we give you the Bayou Review's Fall 2018 General Issue.

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cent city. We hope you enjoy the creative energy captured this semester. Ladies and gentlemen, we give you the Bayou Review's Fall 2018 General Issue.

Early Morning

Russell Curtis

A young, beautiful Hispanic lady is walking a small boy and they travel with intensity but go slowly, making loving progress, as she picks him up and then lets him walk when he demands to get down.

My Anglo lady neighbor is a renowned physician and she is talking gently with her seven year old daughter to let her know that school will be alright today. Everything will be safe.

A big, long haired black cat saunters across the street. She is confident about her meals, wise from avoiding fights, and trusting in a way that happens when several litters have survived.

The only tensions are from two Blue Jays. They are dive-bombing all human animals who are foolish enough to slow down and look upward. But the Jays, too, will soon be parents.

A Man Lay Peacefully

Emily Salsberry

A man lay peacefully in the grass under a magnolia tree, staring through the swaying branches at the expanse of blue above. The wind swirled around him and played with his hair as sunlight warmed his skin. Nature's smells filled his lungs, and a hint of his wife's perfume. They both lay there, facing the sky. Their children were laughing and chasing each other around at the bottom of the hill.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" He stated, casually.

"They're so beautiful, just like you."

She didn't respond, but she'd never taken to compliments well. One of the children squealed, causing him to look over at them, but it was a delighted sort of squeal, not a painful one.

He sighs. "Are we... are we doing this right? Are we raising them well? Will they be happy?" He asks, but again doesn't get a response. That was okay. She was just as confused as he was, he thought. He closed his eyes once more, letting out an uneasy laugh. "Parenting is hard."

The kids ran up, giggling and asking for food. He pushed himself to his feet.

"I love you." He said to his wife, and patted the headstone before walking his kids back to the house.

The Garden

Madelyne Lehnert

In the fresh green garden I grew up in
I was a young boy who saw perfection
My mother grew this for us in a bin
Father always abused in a section
We would play in the garden for hours
The buds started to bloom in the springtime
My mother always planted red flowers
When the sun shined the vines started to climb
This spring was a different one however
Father who had many drinks got a rose
This rose was stuck in his hands forever
Mother came for us she did not oppose
Abusing his drinks he got a hatchet
My mother gladly dropped that bad casket

In the Wind

Gia Spann

The wind blows against our ears
Whispering promises of summer:
Fun, love, and a lack of pain
Sun beating down, burning our cheeks slightly pink
Eating a strawberry never tasted sweeter
Our young, lively lips touch the skin and puncture it with our teeth
Laying down to rest, we look up at the sky
Smiles broaden our faces as we succumb to the harmonies
Hearing just the wind graze over our entirety
Hands graze the wheat as our dresses are free
Secrets--lies--banishing to the deep
Leaving the beauty and sweet of our eternal memory

Undressed

Vanessa Ramirez

Hesitancy drowns me
Because craft comes with uncertainty
It turns you into an exposé
I am naked behind the microphone
I let the words out of my mouth
As I let my pen undress me
But only with caution
This fear and this doubt, I realized
Not only comes with the craft itself
But it comes with my sex
My sexual orientation
The color of my skin
The nation of my parents
Which is also my nation
Regardless of how much my mother
Loves to call me *Americana*

But who knew
And I think this very often
Who knew that it only takes
People like an orange man for me
To pick up a pen and say, YES!
This is me!
This is who I am!
This is who I love!
Give me the uncertainty
Make me an exposé
And undress me.

INGREDIENTS

Vanessa Ramirez

I am made of ingredients
Echo en Mexico
Established in America
Brown skin, Brown eyes—
Speaking standard academic English
But screaming and crying
Gritando y llorando en el español
Because my mother raised me
To never leave her origins behind
I come from frijoles rancheros
Smashed and smeared
On a tortilla for dinner
From the small cheers and lectures
¡echale ganas, miija!
From a household of chingonas
Where no man may ever touch us,
Where no one may find themselves
Superior over our flesh and bones
I come from tears at the listen
Of the mariachis singing *Amor eterno*
I come from a father
Who forgets how to speak to us
Because he's worked so damn hard
Seven days a week
He calls it *la chinga*.
And so I come from
Seeking better opportunities
From the spines of my favorite books
From the dry pens I love to trash
Because it only means one thing:

I have written.

I have spoken.

But most importantly,

I have been heard.

So are you listening?

Do you see my marks of differences?

The contrast between you and I?

Because I, too, am here.

AMÁ

Vanessa Ramirez

I collect my wealth and value
 through little scraps of writing—
 a line about my mother's hair
 about the way she lets it down
 on Sundays, selling at the fleamarket
chicles, tamarindos, paletas, y aguas
 toy guns and used Barbie dolls
 until the sun has beaten her
 and her curls are restricted
 to a thin, short ponytail
 she says it doesn't matter anyway
 hair up, hair down
 Papá won't even talk to her sometimes
 Mami cooks *fideo con pollo*,
 stirs frijoles charros
 she flips *tortillas* with bare hands
 she laughs at me when I burn my hands trying

what is this world without hands?
 she asks, caressing the side of my face
 she said it as if she were an artist
 rather than a housewife
 filling in expectations like dirt in a jar
 on Sundays, I wish she could put her
 hair in a ponytail for the sake of beauty
 and not because she insists
 on this American Dream
sueños Americanos—

this to her means

that my sisters and I attend schools
and never depend on a man
when I show her these lines—
she tells me *dimelo en español*
“no, Amá,” I say.
because I can’t spill it out
while noticing how tired she’s become
she mistakes this for shyness
she calls me rare and valued

Tesoros, she calls my sisters and me
but the only Treasure
is standing right in front of me.
this is *Mami, Mamá, Amá*
Mom and Mother

This is the story of my treasure.

Player from Another Planet

Russell Curtis

It was 1954. We were walking in from a blinding cold and snow to the local, warm filling station to watch a basketball game on black and white television broadcasting over the mountains

from distant Pittsburgh into our small valley town in the middle of Appalachia.

We were glued to the set. We were mesmerized. We were young white 14 and 15 year old basketball lovers just learning the newly invented jump shot.

We had found a new commitment.

We were entranced by the play on the court of a young black man, Sihugo Green, playing for Duquesne University broadcast by KDKA-TV, the only station we could carry.

Sihugo Green was a basketball ballplayer we could have never seen before. Our local college teams had outstanding white players

but no blacks. Not for another 10 years.

We knew we were watching a man from another world of basketball. Every other play, Sihugo was going for the basket. He was

an aggressive ballplayer from the courts of New York City. When he had a shot he could make from twenty feet, he would drive to the basket for a shot from ten feet and if he had a shot from ten feet he would drive past a defender to the basket to take a close, sure layup.

We never saw a player stop Sihugo..

We had seen the Globetrotters around 1952 when the original stars, Goose Tatum and Marques Haynes toured and wowed the Mountain State, drawing crowds of cheering white fans raising questions in our minds

as young white teenagers in the 1950s

Why We March

Adrienne Carrington

For the ghost of bodies hung from trees
 For the arrests and attacks of the people and Martin Luther King
 For the lashes and scars on my great-great-grandmother's back
 We march side by side, back to back
 For the culture infiltrated by oppressive society
 For the old temples and matriarchs calling upon the Almighty
 For the history only learned through elders' mouths
 We march East and West, North and South
 For every black body slain in the street
 For the deceptions and cover ups we'll undoubtedly meet
 For my ancestors on the Middle Passage, thrown in the sea
 We march for them, we march for me
 For the lost opportunities due to our name
 For the jest, show, and mockery made of our frame
 For the slurs and blackface witnessed every other day
 We march for justice, our offenders will pay

"Why don't you just get over it? It's not like it happened to you."
 "I'm not racist, I have plenty of black friends. What do you expect me to do?"
 I'm tired of answering the same questions; I'm tired of repeating myself
 Find some slave narratives and read our history; try to educate yourself

No you did not lynch me, scar me, or kill me
 But your culture's history affects my culture's history
 This is why I can't let go
 Our reparations are only halfway down the road
 You want to know why we march? Why we won't take it and be qui-

et?

Because not long ago, and still today, a peaceful protest is called a riot.

A RIDDLE

Katherina Hollidina

My color is pale.
I'm cold to the touch.
Don't take me alone,
I would be too much.
I'm birthed through beating.
I die by eating.
In life I will hold
A rectangular mold.
Grab onto my skin,
And you'll lose your grip.
Put me underfoot
And I'll make you slip.
Yet in spite of all I've said
Still you love to see me spread,
But you hate moments in time
When your life can feel like mine.
When life cuts you to the quick,
When to many you must give,
When you must be spread so thin,

In times like these, my life, you live.

Mama Know Best

Adrienne Carrington

“Why are you so sad all the time?” Ma asks.

“How come every time I ask if you’ve had a good day, the answer is never yes? Why are you so stressed? Trust in Jesus, Mama knows best.”

“Why are you always tired? What have you done all day?”

“Have you thanked God for all he’s done? Have you prayed?”

“You think you’re depressed? Where is this coming from? You have a good life and a good home.”

“We need to go back to church, get that spirit in you. You need to drink more water, stop eating junk food.”

“Get out more, exercise, watch your health and sleep and rest.”

“Do these things and trust in God, Mama knows best.”

Mama knows best, mama knows best.

That’s all I’ve ever known.

But you can only understand that which you can comprehend.

And the extent of the reality of my serotonin imbalance isn’t so easy to read.

You don’t think I pray? You don’t think I try?

You don’t think I’ve gone to the altar every time that I wanted to die? I’ve called on Him in the midnight hour more than a baby cries for its mother’s milk.

I’ve gone outside and felt the love, I’ve drank water and chanted every self-affirmation under the sun.

And the voices just get louder.

I sing the hymns, I pray all day, I surround myself with love and sun rays.

But these voices in my head aren’t phased by my attempts to silence them.

How can I drown my demons if they know how to swim?

The beauty of antidepressants is that they work for me.
No I'm not naïve, nor do I expect them to make me happy.
But mother, they give me the energy to try. They make it easier to not cry.
They make me not want to die.
And mother you are so completely against me being on meds because you think I'll turn into a crackhead, but for Christ's Sake mother, would you prefer me dead?
I know how to properly take my medicine, I won't slip up and take it for granted.
I just need your support, I need you to trust me. I know you hate it when my problems get ugly.
**BUT THESE VOICES IN MY HEAD JUST GET SO LOUD
AND NOTHING THAT I DO CAN DROWN THEM OUT**
I need a break mommy, I'm tired of fighting.
These scars on my body, I'm tired of hiding.
And this Bupropion/Wellbutrin, targets my serotonin.
It balances it out and lets me zone in, and focus on the bright side, focus on my studies.
Gives me the energy to make friends and buddies.
So yes you know best, most of the time.
But trust me on this, my life's on the line.
sun.

LETTING LIFE PASS YOU BY...

Patrick Moore

this lifestyle.
this average,
working,
middle class,
nine to five,
daily grind
lifestyle.
it violates
and rapes
and molests
your body and mind.
it puts cigarette burns
out onto your soul and
punctures holes in
your spirit.
it consumes you and
tosses you away like
a dumpster baby.
sucks the life force
out of you and throws
you down a dried up well.
it crawls into bed with you,
fucks you
and slithers out,
like a continuous
one night stand.
this lifestyle,
butchers your energy
like a sadistic psychopath
repeatedly stabbing

your essence and
slowly twisting it in

while smiling at you
with its blackened,
decaying teeth.
leaves you incessantly
exhausted, to the point
where you can't even
enjoy yourself,
your significant other,
your kids
or a beer.

....and we take it,

because they want
to make us believe that
there's a weekEND.
there's no END
about it. just a speck
of mercy they bestow
upon us that goes by
so quickly, you blink
and it's over and next
thing you know, it's back to
killing you all over again.
we fear change so much
that we'd rather make
someone else's dream
come true than
venturing out,
grabbing life by the balls
and doing something
that actually makes us happy

because it blindfolds us with
comfortability,
a routine

and order.

let's go lay in bed all day long,
let's go screw each other's brains out,
let's go for a nature walk,
let's go play on a pinball machine,
let's go get a record or two,
let's go catch a flicker show,
let's go to a wrestling match,
let's go watch a local band,
let's go drink beer till our hearts content,
let's go to the zoo and see the animals,
let's go to the ocean.

getting off from work, looking
like a circle jerk of snowmen
just ejaculated all over you and
inhaling and exhaling chemicals
with relentless humidity is
unnatural,
unhealthy,
undesirable
and no way to go through life
don't let it pass you by

Rotten Girl

Alicia Estrada

I wonder when it started,
When the rot got in, set in.
When it stuck to my heart
Veining black, through and through,
Before chipping it,
Bits falling off.
The little lumps circulated,
Through body, through blood
And now my extremities are clogged.
A wretched smell comes off me,
As they dissolve.
I can barely move,
And when I speak it's hard to
Keep spiteful bile from cascading
From my mouth,
Forced scald my throat swallowing it down.
Can they not smell it,
Or are they too polite to mention?
Either way they must know,
I'm a rotten girl.

Conceptual, Divine Life

Angelica Yeleshwarapu

The walls around me are closing in
and I don't know if I can get through
to get out in time.
The shards of glass
pierce into my skin,
but I am numb to that pain.
That's not the problem.
That's not what hurts.
Because really, there are no walls.
No one is operating an on and off switch
to control the doors that hold me captive.
It is my mind that allows these
'Walls' to do so.
What hurts is not being crushed by the
might of the walls.
It is the not knowing.
Do I let it happen, do I let go.
Do I put on armor, do I stay strong.
Am I to control my mind,
or to allow my mind to control me.
What is scary-
what truly raises my hairs,
tempts my legs to shake
voice to break
& heart to ache-
Is how I've convinced myself
I do not know, when I do.
It is in my power.
The decisions are all mine to make.
The fact is, my mind and my soul are

drifting apart.

It's a familiar feeling, as if letting go of a toxic love.

I can never truly part from this conscience.

It is within me. I am within it.

Entangled, intertwined.

My mind will always whisper,
it is my spirit that is yelling inside to myself,
begging, SHOUTING, that this is not me.

Crying for me to stop.

My soul is the angel on my shoulder.

My mind is the devil's workshop.

My angel is too kind to brew a war,
yet far too strong
to allow the devil to win.

She has her own battle to overcome-

How far can she push herself
before the choice she makes
is the wrong one?

The devil has no such defining limits,
but he is not as strong as my angel's
might.

As I control them both,
they are of their own will.

They are the excuses behind the choices
that are up to me.

I am fighting both for and against my
sanity.

Not knowing which will win.

It is a choice I am making.

It is a choice that has taken over every

fiber of my being.

I have waged this war against myself
and I won't pull my forces back.

I no longer know who I am.

I feel like a spectator in a fast paced
moving world.

What keeps me up at night,
The cause of all this distress is
that mind over matter ceases to matter.
To keep up with my own self,
and to be at my best in the real world
is an ordeal I cannot even fathom to
uphold.

Life is pain.

Life is knowledge. Art. Music. Travel.
Philosophy. Wisdom. People. Love.
Passion And Truth.

I wonder if the pain I feel is to the point
that all my blessings are overlooked.

If this is the case,

I have dug myself in a hole
deep as the bullet to my head,
from my dreams, would've left.

I am ungrateful.

I am stuck.

I am lost, confused, terrified.

But, of what?

I ask myself this
and swear it is everything.

It isn't.

Pain is a feeling of thought materialized
by one's own will.

I do not want to die.

This much I admit.

But do I want to live?

Going day by day, battling through
countless hardships, waiting
for the light at the end of the tunnel.
If I leave today, would the light welcome
me with open arms,
or would I dissolve into
dark nothingness?
Eliminating all the goodness,
as price of my weakness.
All I know is this,
I am here for now.
I am not one to experiment.
I have yet to experience
Falling in love.
Motherhood.
Attaining glorious success defined by
infinite happiness, peace, and prosperity.
I often wonder if God intends for these
privileges to ever manifest in my life.
Therefore, I am stuck
pondering the point of it all,
if I am not destined to reach
the height of life's greatness.
I remain looking at the world through a
dark, worn down, tunnel with cracks that
hint an eventual landslide.
Life will collapse around me someday,
and with it I will crumble-
or beat it by making the first move.
To beat myself up raw, or to allow
the universe to do so.
Slowly.
Painfully.
I may be my own worst enemy as my
friends, teachers, and therapists say.

They may know me better than I know myself.

After all, I'm the one writing in order to connect with my true being, raw soul, and vital spirit-

to remember who I once was.

I am NOT myself.

And I haven't been for a while.

But, who else could I be?

Perhaps this is the turning point.

The revelation,

That defines my being.

Have I really ever been myself?

Or am I myself now

that I have collided with life's realities.

I have opened myself up to the world, my vulnerabilities, fully exposed.

I would never have imagined the people

I pour my heart out to would be the same to rip it to shreds and step on it.

They can try to apologize for inflicting such wounds.

But once you burn paper, can you ever piece it back together?

I do not self-pity.

But right in this moment,

I feel remorseful

for putting others before me, in order to fulfill my ingrained desire of pleasing people.

Who am I to this world?

A babysitter of the emotions

felt by others,

or a caretaker of my own spirit?

I am the angel.

I am the devil.

My two worlds often cross each other's
paths.

You see, my mind is thin ice,
melting,
on a floating river.

There is a waterfall at this river's end.
And it is up to me to catch up to it,
coming at it with full force
in order to reclaim my sacred soul,
about to fall.

As I run, a heavy backpack with tight
straps, bounces up and down
my aching back.

In this bag, I carry with me:

Fear. Self doubt. Regret. Anxiety.

Depression.

I feel as though I must run with these
burdens,

allowing them to cling
unto my bare, broken, body.

The straps won't come off.

Except maybe they can if I try hard
enough.

The question is, will I?

If I give up now,

I am allowing this black cloud that
hovers over me

To snatch me into its tight clutch.

To take today's shortcomings
as gospel truth to predict my fate,
would be the action of a fool.

I am many things, I do admit.

But this title I do not claim.
With this in mind, I can truthfully say,
“I won’t let these feelings define me.
I am yet to learn who I am and what I
am capable of.”

-Life is worth it all. I promise you.

Limes

Modesto Caldera

Three vodka-sodas in,
two shots per drink, with just
the right amount of lime juice, and
even though she's used to preparing them
with the limes floating in the cup like
conquered trophies, their
juice rung out, only to be
dropped in a foreign liquid,
she knows I hate tasting the
lime skin, so mouthwateringly bitter—
it tastes
like bad decisions and morning-after
regrets—she just squeezes
the limes until they have nothing left to give,
and they start to offer their pulp in
exchange for mercy, as their flesh
spews out from in between her fingers,
and she tosses the poor old
used fruit into the waste bin and
now I'm downing the beer she
bought me a few months ago
but I haven't got to it until
now because flights are expensive,
even though I'm in her place more
than she's in mine; the calls to avoid
repossession start because of my decisions,
but it's not every day that
you land a woman who can
throw out the
useless lime skins instead of

keeping them in your vodka soda,
so I buy the tickets
and pray.

Peeled Onions

Modesto Caldera

I never know
when to stop peeling an onion. I always start
with a knife
dulled out by tomatoes and serranos
and fat slimy chicken breasts
with rib meat. I cut
the hairy nipple off the large rough onion,
drop the deceptively shiny knife
on the warped and now porous cutting board, and grab
the large onion with both hands,
treating it like a really hot
bowl of soup.
I carefully inspect the onion, noticing
how its symmetrical
light brown and green veins run vertically
down the bulgy bulb
so Prime Meridian-like. I turn
the missing nipple side towards my face
and start with my left index finger, immediately regretting
the self-grooming I did on myself the night before. The
blood and juices of the onion invade the space
under my finger nail and it feels like a violation
of my privacy,
like peeling
a not-quite-ripe orange. I tear the skin
of the onion, switching to my thumb to use more torque
and I am greeted with the aroma
the familiar aroma that can make you close your eyes
and lightly smile as you wave the contents of the sauté
towards your nose and take a deep breath

as it takes you to another place,
more beautiful than where you are,
but as I get
a good chunk of flesh in between my thumb
and index finger, I tear it off, exposing
the shiny too-white interior, and now
the all-too-known stench, the overwhelming and spicy stench
singes my nostrils and I pull my face back
into my head as my eyebrows raise
and my eyes close
and open repeatedly, each blink
more laborious than the last, tasked
with pushing out the tears that are forcing themselves
to the open oxygenated world.
I peer down after rubbing my eyes
with my left forearm, my arm hairs hastily
sweeping away at the salty moisture that
doesn't seem to stop dripping, like a stubborn
leaky faucet. The onion
is now completely naked of its skin,
the green gradient getting stronger on the opposite end
of the nipple-less side. The tears
have subsided so I take advantage and quickly inspect
the onion to see if I've gotten rid of all its dirty skin, when I
notice another layer peeking out around the edge
of the nipple-less side. Determined
to get to the right layer, I dig in
with my numbing fingers and peel another layer, this one
a lot easier than the previous. The stench still
lingers, but my eyes have built a resistance to it,
and the layer is now completely off, and in the
trash with the onion's skin. This goes on
for a while as I tirelessly focus
on just getting the right number of layers off. Before
I know it, I turn away from the onion and the pan

is smoking from the oil I poured into it now
evaporating into the blaring stove exhaust vent.
I turned back to the onion in my left hand. It looks up at me
the nipple-less side,
a fifth of its original size and admits defeat. It tells me
You can keep peeling, but then I'll be nothing. You
wasted so many layers
by not paying attention to them,
by not using them,
by just staying selfish and wondering
what the next layer held. You don't know when
to stop peeling an onion.
I dismissed the bulb, before it said something
that would really hurt me. It was now the size
of a fifty-cent piece, and I threw that
fucking bulb in the trash with all
its pathetic layers, then I opened
the refrigerator and began looking
for another onion.

Mirror

Madelyne Lehnert

The woman in the mirror laughs at me.
The same woman who bullied me throughout my childhood,
She laughs that snickering laugh because for once,
I finally laughed back.

WHAT I'M AFRAID TO SAY

Katherina Hollidina

i'm staring at the floor
shuffling my feet
my fingers are fiddling with my clothes and i pause
i'm trapped between a desire to speak
and a desire to run
and a desire to be out of this growing awkward silence
i'm not afraid to say sorry
nor afraid to confront
i'm afraid you won't understand all i want you to know
i don't know why saying thank you is sometimes so hard
it's not just a thank you for this refill or thank you for that card
it's a thank you for meaning so much to my life that i honestly don't
know where i would be if we hadn't met
it's a thank you that leaves me lost for words because i don't know
how to convey
all i want to be heard
but if the silence should be broken by my broken lines
and you hear me stammer out an awkward thanks
know that my heart is too big and gets stuck in my throat
before i can tell you all i want you to know
if i should disappear before you can reply
know i'm too proud to show the tears filling my eyes

WITHOUT A WORD

Katherina Hollidina

My favorite hugs
Are the ones
That come without a word.
In their silence
I feel that
I am fully heard.

The Place I Called Home

Amanda Howard

Dogwood bore flowers.
For just you, and me to love.
Secret pretty buds.

In Grandmother's yard
pale peach and white blooms.
Always in my hair.

As a child I was;
Bright, Quick and Light!
Happiness festered.

Dandelions grew
in the opposite yard,
warm yellow, gold.

Playing in the brier
we would cut ourselves,
scratches on the skin.

Childhood is gone.
Grandmother is dead.
Her home was sold.

For twenty years,
Michigan is not my home.
Roots in hot soil.

(Super) Alone

Emily Wagner

Days have passed since I've seen you last.
On YouTube your four-octave wail fills the air,
Telltale tendrils frame your face.
My heart pounds knowing I'll see you again—
Soon.

But then the news comes in short, subliminal texts.

Are you ok, buddy?

Sorry about Chris.

I know he was your favorite.

Was.

And I know you're gone.

Black hole sun, won't you come and wash away the rain?

Falling to my knees takes
27 years, five months,
thirteen days, sixteen hours,
twenty four minutes, 20 seconds...

(and counting)

...as long as I've loved you.

No one sings like you anymore.

Your funeral happened in Los Angeles, not Seattle
and without me

one of your biggest fans.

So now all I can do is...

throw it away

and drown myself in alcohol

Now you're the shape of the hole inside my heart.

Now, it's me, waiting *like a stone*
Alone
Left to *suffer with your ghost.*

Phoebe*

Russel Curtis

gave us the big contralto
over four octaves skipping
notes like throwing rocks
across a deserted river with
only the squish of the cold
mountain stream coming through
and the rocks with moss singing

harmony while stones fell to make
a bass sound and some never to
be heard again of birds singing a
high soprano from a mountain
hollow that few have ever known
and none to be repeated..

You meshed your harmonies with Paul
Simon and Linda Ronstadt and you were
always a part of Joni Mitchell and
Diane Krall and Sting and anyone
else you might want to carry in your
bass pocket and soprano surprise.

How can we fault a silence of your
talent and a freezing of the waterfall

when

your child needed a row across the lake?

I could have drunk a case of you

and still have been on my feet
and eaten a ten course feast prepared
by you and have never left the table.

Sleep in harmony, lyric spirit. Now,
you
are with your Poetry Man

*For Phoebe Snow, 1950-2011

My Brother and the Universe

Yanet Hernández Ramos

I found him tied to the bed when I entered the room with the nurse. Bruises covered most of his arms and face. There was dried blood on his right eyebrow. His lips were a greenish purple. He was unconscious, covered only by a white hospital gown. I had been in the room less than a minute when he started shaking, screaming, crying, trying to free himself from the belts that were protecting him. Several nurses rushed to his room while the one that had brought me in escorted me out. Rigo, the oldest child, was twenty-five years old then; the first to fill the house with joy and happiness and also the first to bring the worst sadness my parents could imagine.

Rigo asked his roommates to take him to a hospital because he could not feel his hands and his face. My brother had a set of convulsions in the car during the fifteen-minute drive to the hospital. Shocked at what was happening, his friends had not known how to help him. He hurt himself with both his hands and the car, thus the scratches, bruises, and dried blood. It was past eleven at night when I received the news that he was in an emergency room. The hospital was thirty minutes away from the apartment I was living in those days. Driving to the hospital felt like an eternity. Every traffic light added a question in my mind: Was he drinking and driving? Did he fall asleep while driving? I knew he had gone to visit my mother earlier that day; what had happened that his friends took him to the hospital?

I realized Rigo had a drinking problem when I moved to live with him and dad at the Chef's house. I saw him arrive home intoxicated almost every night. He would leave for work early and would arrive to the house late. He started drinking at the age of twenty and

like most, he simply wanted to experience life and have fun. He started going to the dancing clubs during the weekends or to a bar after a long shift at the restaurant. Sadly, it did not take him long to become a regular customer at the Mexican restaurant that was only two minutes away from work. When the Mexican restaurant opened a bar, and started having karaoke nights, Rigo could not wait for the weekend to arrive so he could be there to perform his favorite rancheras (Rancheras are a Mexican genre of music that talks mostly about love and heartache, traditionally the music of the poor). There were times when he tried to quit, but that meant not visiting the club and not performing his songs and he was as addicted as much to the applause of the audience as he was to the drinks offered by the people when he performed their favorite songs.

He is the oldest son, the one with the responsibility to support the family. From the place we come from, every boy grows up knowing that he owes his life to his family and the only way to give back is by helping without questioning. It is a duty. It is an honor. Until he marries he will continue to live with his parents. He does not cook, he does not clean; he only worries about working and supporting the family economically.

We arrived in Houston in the middle of a hot summer night in 2004. Jim, the owner of the restaurant where my father works, needed a dishwasher at one of his restaurants. Rigo capitalized on the opportunity; his first afternoon in America was spent scrubbing dishes. At night, he was just one more employee, living at the Chef's house, receiving a salary at two or three dollars below the minimum wage (with the years that I have worked being a waitress I have discovered that it is a common practice to not only own a restaurant but also to own houses where the employees of the restaurants can live; these houses, the Chef's houses, are located minutes from the restaurants, facilitating commuting and ensuring punctuality). Most of the kitchen employees were illegal immigrants from Mexico, China, and Gua-

temala who could not easily rent a place to live because they did not have the documents that leasing companies at apartment complexes asked for. Rigo did not mind living at the Chef's house, as he felt blessed for having a place to live, rent free, with two meals a day.

That is how life in America started for my older brother; he worked every day of the week to help my father pay back the money he had borrowed from his boss to pay the coyote—the person that helped us to cross from Mexico to the United States. Once the school year started, he only worked weekends. Two years after we arrived, he had learned enough English to leave the kitchen and start serving tables. He became a server, bought his first car, and started working not only during school breaks, but also during school days. He was not drinking then, but it was not long after that that he started.

In Mexico, he was always a social and outgoing person. Everyone knew his name. When he was not playing basketball, practicing a play, or trying to learn how to play the guitar, he was at the library reading all the books he could get his hands on about science. He was the friend that everyone wanted to have. He was in middle school when he became the popular face of the town. For Mother's Day, he and his group of friends from school went door to door, singing to the mothers of the town. During the town fair, when he was fifteen years old, he competed in a horse race and won. He was running, without shoes, while the other competitors were riding horses. My mother was very upset with my uncle, because he had sponsored the race without her knowledge. She knew Rigo was fast; he had won some competitions at school. But he could have hurt himself. I can't say why my uncle agreed to such a thing, but I know it was a moment of great fun and happiness for my brother. He liked to perform; he liked the recognition and the applause of the people.

When we got to the hospital, I rushed in, looking for any familiar face that would tell me what was happening and quickly

recognized the friend that had called me to give the news. He looked tired and cold; his arms were crossed, trying to keep his body temperature high. He apologized for not taking my brother to the hospital sooner. He explained how he thought it was one more of Rigo's jokes. I thanked him for what he had done and assured him there was nothing to feel bad about. After signing forms and providing all the information asked by the hospital staff, we were asked to wait. Two or three hours passed before I could see him. Up to that moment, I had never seen someone in a hospital bed, unconscious. The questions returned in my mind: What had he done to end up there? Was it his fault? Was it an accident? He liked to drink. For five years he had enjoyed drinking, but it was in the past two years that he had gone too far. Had his failure to see his drinking problem caused this?

When we immigrated to this country, we left our freedom behind for a dream of better opportunities. In Mexico, Rigo's last year of elementary school ended with him receiving a scholarship that would pay for his middle and high school years and if he continued with good grades, he would he have a great chance to attend a university; yet the dream of learning English, of having better opportunities not just for him, but for the rest of his siblings, made him excited to come to this nation. Once here, he was welcomed with a job. He started school and did not miss the chance to join the basketball team. He learned English faster than myself or my other siblings.

But life started to crush him. We were illegal immigrants. Going to college was not free. He suffered an injury in his left knee while practicing basketball. The fun times that he had in Mexico were over. He would never be as fast as a horse again. He would never be able to play a basketball game from start to end. He continued to be a good student, ranked top ten in his graduating class, but he never enrolled in college. When DACA gave me an opportunity to legally work in this country, that opportunity was denied to him because he had arrived

four months after his sixteenth birthday. He felt all doors for a higher education were closed for him. There was not any point spending his money at a college class if that money could be used to help my father pay rent.

He was twenty when he discovered how much he enjoyed drinking whiskey. He was craving the same pleasure he received during the times he sang door to door in Mexico. And now, combined with alcohol and the applause of the people, he could not stop drinking. Years passed. He was now twenty-five. He ignored the headaches that were telling him there was something in his brain that did not belong there. When his lip started to feel numb for moments at a time, he thought it was just a hangover. It was not until the day he visited my mother—when he could not recognize her nor anyone else in the family—that he realized it was more than just hangovers. 911 was called and when the paramedics arrived, they told him it was just a case of stress and anxiety, so he drove back home.

And now he was in an emergency room, tied to a bed, unconscious. The first time the doctors talked to us, they said it could be a drug overdose; but hours later, that possibility was discarded. His blood was clean; there was no sign of drugs. Later, it was thought to be a virus. He was then moved to another room, isolated. No one was allowed in. We could only see him through a large, glass window. There was a list of possibilities of what was wrong with Rigo and the doctors just kept going down them, crossing off one after another. Every time I had to translate to my parents to inform them of what the doctors or nurses were saying, I struggled to breathe. The last possibility was a foreign mass inside his skull, something that could be touching his brain that was causing the numbness, the seizures, the loss of memory. It could be a blood clot, caused by some accident to his head that he had received at one point in his life; or it could be a tumor. I did not have to translate the word tumor. The sound is very similar to

the way we say it in Spanish; my parents understood it when the doctors said it.

Methodist Hospital has beautiful frames containing beautiful pictures hanging from its walls. There are the flowers, the landscapes, the path of trees with falling leaves; all images that transmit serenity, peace, tranquility. There could have been real trees, real flowers, surrounding me at that moment, but I still would have stopped breathing. The oxygen in the room vanished the moment I heard the word “tumor.” A tumor, in any part of the body is dangerous and causes great worry. We were being told that my brother had a tumor in his brain, the size of a peanut, and that it could be fatal to either remove or leave it. Tests needed to be done to check if it was cancerous or not. I stopped listening. The walls in the room were in the same place but I felt like they were pressing my chest, leaving me without oxygen to continue breathing. The universe is doomed to collapse. There are two theories: It will be from freezing if it continues to expand, or from heat if it expands and then shrinks. Whenever I need a moment of solitude I go to the park and lay on the grass; I look at the sky and see the infinite space that is above us. The surface of the Earth continues to lose space as we continue to populate it. We are building higher and higher skyscrapers to accommodate the rapidly growing population. We cross borders, looking for hope and prosperity. Is it the laws of the universe that are making my world collapse? Why was my brother’s brain the one to have to grow one more thing in a place where the space was not enough? Is the universe sending us signals? Telling us that just like the body suffers from a tumor, we are just making Earth suffer by building when there is little space left.

I believe that there is a connection between everyone and everything in this universe. No one is immune to suffering. No one has control over when and how life will surprise us. The only control that we have is the reaction to it. The ill thoughts and desires that us humans contemplate manifest themselves in one way or another, bringing sufferings of all magnitudes. I wish that everyone would take

a moment to appreciate the life that they have before their universe collapses.

Value of Books

Yoshiro Takayasu (translated by Toshiya Kamei)

One day after dinner I needed to conduct research, so I went into a book vault that had been built in one corner of the yard. Three walls were covered with bookcases, seven shelves high. Even though I had organized books by subject, it proved more difficult than I had expected to find what I was looking for, and I had hardly made any progress on my research. There was another reason why my research didn't come about; whenever I found a book that had so captivated me in my youth, I would open and peruse it. The picture books I read to my children when they were young were lined up on the top shelf. I picked up and opened a book that had pleased my eldest son. I also spotted a book I had borrowed from a woman before I got married. It would be silly to return it now. I flipped through the pages, remembering those long-gone days when I dated her.

Five hours had passed. It was already past midnight by the time I finally found the book I was looking for and settled down to a low table in the center of the book vault. My research had to do with local history, and I was getting nowhere with just one book. While I turned over books lying around, drowsiness overcame me. Soon I began to doze off.

I must have slept for half an hour when I was awakened by a voice. Maybe I only imagined it; there was complete silence. After a while, I fell asleep again. I heard a voice again. This time I slowly looked up.

“He seems to have awakened,” a voice said.

Then it became quiet again. I wondered if someone had been watching me all along. I looked around, but the doors and windows were closed,

and the blackout curtains were also drawn. While I thought there was no way I had been watched, I pretended to be asleep. After a while I began to hear the murmur of voices. I opened my eyes slightly with my face still buried in my arms, but no one was there; only voices were heard. I feigned sleep and listened to them.

“So, like I was saying earlier, the encyclopedia is best when it comes to knowledge.”

“Well, the encyclopedia is broad but shallow. The Japanese unabridged dictionary is better than all other dictionaries if you’re looking up words. As for biology, the encyclopedia of biology will do just fine. The art almanac is best suited for art.”

It seems that the books were the ones who were talking. When the dictionary shelf got a little quiet, a voice came from a shelf out of reach.

“You all seem to think you’re great if you have a lot of knowledge, but nobody has ever read any of you cover to cover. In that respect, people finish a book like me. Sometimes they cuddle me while shedding tears. A book’s worth depends on how much it impresses readers. Knowledge alone can’t move readers’ hearts.”

“If you want to move readers’ hearts, look no farther than a poetry collection like me. First of all, many of us poetry books are elaborately bound, which means that poetry reflects people’s hearts.”

“No, that’s not so. Nobody reads poetry nowadays. You’re just using your appearance to draw attention. That’s heresy.”

“I just don’t think you’re in a position to judge anybody. You’re a specialized book on how to make money in stocks or calligraphy.”

“I don’t think there are any books that deceive people as much as specialized books do. There’s hardly anybody who has made

money in stocks by reading up on stock market investing. Nor is there anybody who has read a book on calligraphy and become a calligrapher.”

Then a picture book on the top shelf said, “Can you tone it down a bit? I just wanted to know which among us was the most respectable book. You shouldn’t fight.”

“Oh, yes. But it won’t be settled by talking. I’ll tell you what: Let the master decide when he wakes up. The one he picks up when he leaves this room is the most respectable book today,” the bookends suggested.

Having heard their discussion, I had no idea which book I should choose. I put aside my research and thought hard, unable to come up with an answer. Then I ended up sleeping until morning.

I awoke when I heard my wife open the door of the main house.

“Such a strange dream,” I thought to myself, as I hurriedly left the book vault, holding a book that had been lying beside me. It was a picture journal my eldest son kept when he was in elementary school twenty years ago.

Grimms

Braynth Munoz

The heavens parted; pink cotton candy clouds turned blueberry blue. Granny Smith, being his Green self, was skydiving near the purple lightning, as usual. The ground was splitting across the plains of Tales. The hurricane only grew stronger as a man with a Yorkian accent walked out of a neatly constructed and comfy scarlet brick house. The Yorkian-accented man gave a howl to the sky in an effort to receive the attention of Granny, as he knew that only him and Granny frequently lived in such a place.

“Red, you should live a little!” Yelled Green Granny from the storm stuffed sky.

Red walked back into his cozy home while he wiped away the nervous sweat off his brow.

“Oooooooh god...did Granny leave the oven on again...ugh... why do I have to deal with your problems?!” Red muttered to himself.

He walked to the oven and quickly noticed that there was no fire; but in fact, there was a growing entity of the Flame Kingdoms eating all the appropriately sized gingerbread and candy canes on the kitchen counter. Red became startled as he took a step back. When he realized the doge had not noticed him, Red turned and bolted to the door.

He flung it wide open, stuck his head out past the frame and yelled at the top of his lungs: “GRANNY!”

He turned his head back to the kitchen and was relieved to find

the entity still munching on gingerbread houses instead of charging him for the kill. Still, Red couldn't afford to have a burning elemental in the house wreaking its infernal havoc; he ran into the adjoining room and grabbed an armful of candy canes with hopes to keep it busy until he could think of a way to deal with the burning entity.

The beast of fire started growling when it sensed Red. It moved slowly towards Red.. Red began thrusting the candy canes at the beast which only made it hungrier as it ate the confectionary defenses. When Red's supply of candy canes was depleted, he quickly grabbed the final cane from Granny's conveniently placed child-sized cage in the middle of the now-burning living room. Exhausted from fending off the beast, Red clumsily collapsed as he threw the cane at what he thought was a fire entity.

Red knew everything was practically an entity—and he was right—as the fire grew, he noticed this creature was a pup! A disgusting flame demon that would come into the house he worked very hard to build with the money he made at the labored-filled factory. Realizing this, Red stood and puffed his chest out; this growing fire had tormented him for the first and last time! As he got off his arse, Red was furious!

His anger returning his strength to him, Red took to the howling entity, his fear mixing with his adrenaline to ready himself for the last stand. He readied his stance to jump on the doge with the intent to extinguish it, or die trying.

At the climax of this one-sided battle, Red noticed a sparkle of hope at the corner of his eye; before plunging into his own death, Granny had come in and now stood there in a pose unlike any other intimidating pose seen to Tale-kind. Behind the once pup-sized entity that had evolved to the size of a whole pupper stood a man who had seen his companions bleed out on his own arms. Granny stood there boldly, staring into the back of the pupper's head with a menacing

stare unlike any other on this flat page of ours. With enough silence, the pupper looked concerned as this quiet atmosphere was something he never experienced.

“The flame of a pupper always makes a volcanic sound...he’s scared...haha,” Granny said in a fear-defying smile.

Granny’s smile quickly disappeared as he stared into Red’s closed crying eyes through the wild flames. Before the pup could turn to see its final fate, Granny had already smitten the foe from existence with a vicious slap that made the structure of the brick house they were in shake. Granny backed away from the ashes that exploded off the defeated foe that stood between him and his dear friend Red, who was curled up weeping in a pool of his own liquids.

“Red, are you okay?” Granny exchanged his hand for some compassion.

“Granny...I ALMOST FLIPPING DIED,” Red screamed at him, refusing his hand while still weeping on the burned living room floor.

Granny, ignoring the flames that he blew away with his own bare hands, looked for a seat in the dry silver ashes to settle in while reconciling with Red.

Red, his weeping dying down as he regained his composure, observed Granny.

“Granny you haven’t hunted literally in ages,” a small chuckle of relief escaped Red, “where did that strength come from?”

Granny, befuddled by the absence of chairs or anything in the house, evaded the question and adamantly asked one of his own, “Red wherein Tale are the chairs?”

Red, annoyed at Granny's lack of acknowledgment to what had just happened, responded in a very monotone manner, "The chairs were burned with all of my food and living supplies, Granny."

Red wiped his tears away and got up from the burned scorched ground.

Granny, realizing his insincerity, quickly exclaimed, "I'm sorry, please accept my apology!"

Red did not answer as he walked away from Granny with a relinquished demeanor to what was left of the cage in the living room. He then took two thin wooden tablets from the rubble that were left laying on top of the base of the cage and broke them. Red looked at the tablets, as his legs slowly collapsed as he started crying silently.

The Sounds of Creation

Stephanie Campos

What can I say? I'm not a normal guy.

I don't go out to parties on Friday nights or spend Sunday night watching Netflix with my girl. No, in reality, you can find me on the very late hours of the day fixed to my computer, reading up on serial killers and creepypasta. I'm what you could call a geek, and at my mid-twenties, I wasn't too proud of that feat.

I needed a job that paid well, one that gave me plenty of time to indulge in my introverted pleasures, so I decided to work my ass off on this one plaza. It's the kind of place that has tons of thematic stores for hobbyists; you know, the kind of place where you can find all Blu-Ray seasons of *Friends* or the greatest mounds of plastic in the shape of your favorite comic characters. And as such, the place was crowded by geeks. Just like me. I became a manager soon enough and it was all that I wanted.

I'm not very social, but I could talk a lot with the people I worked with. They knew why I chose to work in a place like this for the best part of my youth. A lawyer might be driving his Ferrari down the street, but I could stuff myself full of pizza while binge-watching anime in my shoddy coupe, so who wins in the end, lawman? They were much younger than I was, but we still found some common grounds to speak of, mainly the latest trend in nerd culture. I gave them a pass to order takeout on their shifts and they kept quiet about me checking YouTube for the largest part of my shift. Truly an enviable work relationship.

It was Wednesday, about closing time, when Rhonda—the nineteen-year-old metal-head who was recently going through a phase where she wanted every visible spot on her skin tattooed—was talking excitedly to Tom, the big guy in charge of shelves and fixing our internet when it went down. They looked very excited

about something, so I decided to eavesdrop like the role model I am.

“I’m so hyped over this. Most places like this can end up being places for weirdoes to waste their money on, but this is true. I’ve heard they have a guy who scouts artifacts all over the continent for this. The entrance fee is pricey, but, man, when do you get the chance to see actual death devices?” A worked up Rhonda pleaded.

“Sorry, Ron. I’m not that much into scary stuff. I’m a bit afraid of those things. If you vouch for their capacities, then I have even more of a reason not to go. I like being alive, thank you very much.” Tom spoke in a calm tone, probably on his fourth time denying Rhonda.

“Coward!” And with a sigh, she gave up.

At first, I just wanted to cheer her up, but... a death artifact museum? Where there would probably be ancient torture devices and knives used by people like Jack the Ripper and the Zodiac Killer? That was way more interesting than the marathon of *Full Metal Alchemist* I had planned. Maybe it was a bit rude of me to invite myself, but Rhonda seemed very pleased. I might be wrong, but I think she was scared to go by herself.

And thus, you have me here with my co-worker, looking like some sort of weird alternative couple in the sunniest day New York can have, going into this weird, artsy looking place—complete with a “Treasures of Death: Objects with a story forged in blood and corpses” sign written on some spooky font outside. Say what you want, but I bet I’m having a better weekend than yours.

“Jimmy. Don’t wuss out on me, okay? We’re watching everything till the end,” my companion told me, even when a light quiver of her lip gave away that she was having second thoughts.

“Hah. Are you kidding me? I can’t wait to see what this place hides inside. Maybe I can steal one of them when the guards ain’t looking,” I joked.

Of course, even if it wasn’t a joke, I lacked the skills to get the job done. The place was crowded, had tons of guards, and every display had thick glass protecting it. You could tell alarms would go off the second you tried to break it.

We spent a good hour or two scouting the place. Every display had a tiny board next to it, telling you the story of why it deserved to be called “cursed,” and boy, some of those things made me shiver. You had some rusty, horrible looking devices allegedly used by the Spanish Inquisition for their cruel torture (which almost always ended in death), mementos of famous American serial killers, like John Wayne Gacy’s art supplies, the t-shirts Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold wore the day of the Columbine Shooting, Charles Manson’s copy of The Beatles’ White Album and even a replica of James Dean’s “Little Bastard:” The Porsche Spyder he was driving the day of his death.

You might think that most people would actually think it’s sensitive to burn all these things to the ground, but I was so amazed. These were things that were unavoidably linked to death, and were so respected, that people paid incredible amounts of money to own them, so nerds like me could give them even more money to get more. Some of them were even rumored to have curses. These objects were modern equivalents of King Tut’s Tomb.

“With all this security, I think they’re not lying. I’d like to meet the dude who collected all of this. You can’t own a large part of this and not be a badass,” I told Rhonda, who seemed to be feeling better, as she was nerding out like I was.

“That would be me. Enjoying the exhibition, I assume?”

A middle aged, bearded, chubby man spoke to us. He didn’t look like the Wolverine type of guy I imagined him to be. He seemed more like the type to do business on Wall Street. Still, I was honored to speak to him.

“Sir, I am Jim, and this is my friend Rhonda. We can’t thank you enough for putting these artifacts on display. They’re absolutely amazing,” I said, as we shook hands with him.

The chubby man led us away from the crowd, to a corner of the museum, to guide us to a very old-looking radio. Apparently, this was the object he wanted people to know, so they could “give it the fame it deserves.” But for now, we were the only ones there. I guess people were going to be much more excited to see James Dean’s car of death than a busted-up war-age radio; but the guy ended up telling

us that he'd personally show every visitor this object as the last part of their tour. You could tell he was really passionate about this.

"So, what's so special about it? Was this old radio used by Hitler, personally?" I joked again.

I got my ribs bumped by Rhonda's elbow. I really have to keep my wit from showing too much in public.

To my surprise, the man roared in laughter, then he patted me on the shoulder.

"Oh, my dear boy. If it was only so simple. No, no, this object is much more sinister than that."

He continued, with the passion of a teacher who had gone off the rails with his lesson.

"You might be too young to notice, but don't you see the keypad and the screen over there?"

I saw what he pointed at and he was right. I didn't have to be an engineer to know that an LCD screen and a phone-looking keypad was too modern to be on a radio used in the Cold War, like the board next to it said.

"You won't see another radio of the age like this anywhere else. But that's not all; this radio can't be disassembled. We've even used drills on the damned thing and we can't even break the rusty shell. Whoever made it really didn't want us to know how to recreate the technology.

"And here comes the good part. With the keypad and the screen, you can input any year you want, and if there were messages being broadcasted through radio frequencies, you can pick them up with this radio. You want to hear Elvis' concerts live? Mohammed Ali's fights? The news reports on JFK's assassination? The coded messages of the air force during the two atomic bombs dropping on Japan? You can do it all with this nifty thing. It's not prerecorded either. We've had historians look up on the transmissions and they say they're one hundred percent accurate."

"That's freaking cool! Why is this thing not in public use? We could use it to hear the future and know of wars and natural disasters in order to save millions of lives!" I spoke, clearly excited.

Even if the guy was messing with us, I was totally buying into his story. I wanted to break the damn glass and run away with this thing in my hands. Maybe I could know what type of music would be hip in a few years and I could record it. I could hear what company would make it big and go and spend every dime on stocks for it. I could be rich and famous in a matter of seconds.

“That’s the catch, kid. People have had a blast with this thing before I bought it. That’s it, until a guy thought he’d answer the million-dollar question. Who created the universe? In a really stupid move, this guy brought cameras and recording devices all over the place as he typed the number on the keypad: -13.73 Billion years. If you don’t know, that’s the age the universe has, according to scientists. The radio exploded with high frequency sounds, that none of the recording devices in there could catch. From what people living around the test site reported, it sounded like the radiation emissions from the sun recorded by NASA. It was loud. So very loud, that in 200 meters of the radio, every person died of asphyxia, with no survivors. 67 people dead. Why asphyxia? Because the sound was in such an extreme frequency, that it broke the blood vessels inside of the lungs and filled them with blood. The radio got messed up in the incident too. I’m currently looking to get it repaired, although it might be a bit hard with how little we can tinker with it.”

I was stunned. This was so creepy in a way that no knife that had killed a person or noose that had executed a rapist could. What in the world were those sounds? If they’re loud enough to kill 67 people, what was it? There were no suns around yet to give radiation. Maybe they were the sounds of the Big Bang? The might of God who had brought us from nothing? Or...the cries of whatever beast had birthed our known universe? God, it was better to not know.

“You know... some guy told me that maybe it’s not broken. Just stuck on the same frequency, but with the speakers busted up. But, he said, that the speakers could just barely be playing the sound. Who knows, really?” A creepy grin decorated his face, like a politician finishing an address to the masses. Rhonda and I simply looked at each other’s eyes before he bowed.

“You can buy some memorabilia on the stand over there.
Please, enjoy the rest of the exhibition.”

And with a wave, he left.

After that creepy tale, even if it was all made up and it was just a radio his grandfather had gave him, I felt sick. Rhonda did too. We had enough of death for one day.

We said our goodbyes, and I left to my place. The weekend was ahead of me.

But it's still 4 A.M. and I haven't slept for the third night in a row.

Maybe it's just me, but

Ever since that day

I've had a bad cough that doesn't let up

And

There's this really annoying buzzing noise in my ear

All

The

Time.

Life is All We've Got

James Renton

The blue SUV rolled down the surface streets. It was a typical summer afternoon in Houston—a fire-colored filter coated the atmosphere. Joyce, a 58-year-old mother, sat in the driver's seat while Cyrus, her 22-year-old son, sat in the passenger's seat with his face in a book. Joyce's eyes were wide open, and the smile on her face was as bright as the sun. "And you said we get to ride in a helicopter?" She asked.

"Yep," Cyrus said, not looking up from his book.

"And-and how about the hotel? How does it look?"

"It looks nice. Very fancy."

"You didn't book a motel, right? It's an actual hotel?"

"Yes."

"What does it look like?" she asked. Cyrus rolled his eyes, set the open book down on his knee and pulled his phone from his pocket. He pulled up a picture of a grand, white hotel and waved the phone in Joyce's face. "Ooh," she said as she turned from the phone to the road ahead. "What floor are we on?"

"Uh, tenth, I think. Tenth or twelfth."

"We must have a great view from up there, huh?"

"Yep." He was already back in his book.

"And you packed something nice, right?"

"What?"

"For the helicopter ride. You're not wearing that, right?"

He was wearing a white t-shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants. Joyce wore a pink blouse with white pants. "We're gonna be driving for a while," Cyrus said, "This is so I can sleep in the car."

"Okay, perfect... The Grand Canyon! I'm so excited!" She laid her right arm on his shoulder gently; he flinched like an animal woken up from a light nap. "Thank you, son. This is a wonderful birthday present."

“Sure thing,” Cyrus said.

“This is all I want. Just to spend some time together. I feel like it’s been forever. When’s the last time we did something?”

He thought on this for a moment and couldn’t recall anything. Let’s see, he thought, when was the last time I felt extremely miserable? He smiled to himself and finally said, “I don’t remember.”

“It’s been so long. I feel like we haven’t talked in a while. If you’re not out somewhere, you’re in your room all day. And I don’t see you until dinner. What do you do up there all day?”

“Oh, you know: reading and writing.”

“What are you reading?” She nodded to the book in his hand.

“It’s called *The Metamorphosis*.”

“Ooh! What’s it about?”

“Um... it’s about a guy who turns into a bug.”

“Oh, like a little beetle?”

“No, like a life-sized bug.”

“Ew, that sounds like *The Fly*. Is it like *The Fly*?”

“No—”

“Have you ever seen *The Fly*?”

“No, but I’ve—”

“With Jeff Goldblum?”

“No, I haven’t—”

“Is it like that movie? Is the movie based off that book?”

“This is a whole different thing.”

“Oh okay. You should watch *The Fly*. It’s an 80s horror movie. It’s got these special effects that are disgusting; just—ugh! You should check it out, not on a full stomach though.” She giggled. Cyrus went back to his book. “I almost forgot,” she said, “we’ve got to get gas before we get on the freeway.”

They drove two blocks before Cyrus saw a gas station. They pulled into the gas station and stopped in front of pump number five. Joyce pulled a credit card from her purse and gave it to Cyrus. Cyrus stepped out of the car and asked, “How much am I putting in?”

“As much as the car needs,” Joyce said. “Till it’s full.”

“Okay.”

“Fill her up,” Joyce said in a silly deep voice, then let out a jovial laugh. Cyrus shut the car door as her lonely laugh trailed off. Cyrus walked to the pump and slid the card in and out of the card-slot. Nothing happened. He slid the card in again, then slowly pulled it out. He pressed buttons on the keypad, but nothing happened. As he struggled, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline passed by; he noticed Cyrus struggling and stopped. “Hey,” he said, “is yours not working either?”

“No,” Cyrus said.

“Yeah, mine isn’t. I think we’ve got to go inside.” The man walked off to the convenience store entrance.

As Cyrus pulled the card out, Joyce stepped out of the car and said, “What’s going on?”

“The card machine isn’t working,” Cyrus said, “I’ve got to go inside.”

“The card machine isn’t working...?” Joyce said, like somebody had promised her that it would be working.

“...Yeah. I’ve got to go inside.”

“Let me see that card.” Cyrus gave her the card; she slid the card in and out of the slot. Nothing happened. She slid the card in again, then slowly pulled it out. Nothing happened as she pressed the buttons on the keypad. “Hmm. Looks like the card machine isn’t working. You’d better go inside.”

Cyrus held in a sigh as strong as hurricane winds. “Okay,” he said and took the card back.

“Just tell them to put sixty dollars on pump number...” Joyce looked around the pump, squinting her eyes.

“Five,” Cyrus said.

Joyce’s eyes met the sticker at the top of the pump. “Five,” she said. Cyrus took the card and walked away.

He entered the convenience store and got in line behind three twenty-something year-old males waiting behind a woman checking out. Each man held a case of beer. They wore football jerseys and talked about the drinking games they would play when they got back to their apartment. Cyrus looked down the aisles and tried to block

out their useless chatter. Nineteen hours, he thought, nineteen-fucking-hours from Texas to Arizona; with her. Cyrus could see Joyce out of the store window smiling at people who passed by, even though none of them looked at her. Why does she relish in mediocrity? Cyrus pondered. She must know that there are better experiences—better ways to live. I just want to be locked in my room with books, pen and paper. If I had to go out, he thought, it would be with Jason or another fellow writer. They don't really have to be any artist; but they must know how to live.

I am surrounded by the weak and unimportant, he thought. The general public has no clue how to live. Instead of chasing their dreams, they are scared into monotony. They waste their lives in meaningless jobs, performing meaningless tasks—like that clerk ringing that woman up.; after a long day of wasting their potential, they treat themselves to television and alcohol—like these three meatheads in front of me; and every now and then, they give themselves an undeserved treat in the form of a vacation. And they force their sons to buy hotel rooms and helicopter tickets. Cyrus cringed, thinking about Joyce's reaction to the hotel—that simpleton-smile. Why did she have to rope me into this? Cyrus asked himself. I'll buy her the room and the ticket; but why did she want me to go? Am I too subtle with my reclusive tendencies? The woman left, and the three men sat their cases of beer in front of the clerk. After paying, they excited, and Cyrus slapped the credit card on the table. "Sixty dollars on pump-five, please."

Cyrus walked to the blue SUV holding the card wrapped in a receipt. Joyce was sitting in the car when he came up. She rolled down the window and smiled at him. "Did you get my paperwork?" She asked.

"I got the receipt," he said, handing her the receipt-wrapped card. Cyrus put the fuel nozzle into the SUV's gas tank then selected "unleaded." He squeezed the nozzle, put it on automatic, and leaned against the car with his eyes closed.

Joyce popped her head out of the car window. "It's gonna take a long time to fill up. Aren't you gonna come in and sit down?"

“Oh,” Cyrus said, “Uh, the nozzle might fall out. I’m gonna watch it out here.”

The driver’s door popped open and Joyce hopped out. Cyrus sighed as she came up next to him. “Ugh,” she said, “it’s so hot out here, isn’t it?” We all know it’s hot, Cyrus thought, pointing it out is not good conversation. “Cyrus,” she called.

“Yeah?”

“It’s so hot out here.”

“Yeah, it’s a hot one.” They watched the numbers on the gas pump display rapidly increase.

“Where do you wanna eat?” Joyce asked.

If she didn’t complain to the manager about some miniscule mistake on her order, she would ask Cyrus question after question about the dish that he chose. He wanted to eat in silence and stare out of the car window. “How about fast-food?”

“No,” she said, “I wanna sit down and eat. Let’s see if we can find a nice Mexican restaurant. Or something Greek. I wanna try something new. Okay?” Just don’t make it difficult for me or the cooks, Cyrus thought. “Cyrus?”

“Okay.”

A beige minivan pulled into the gas station and parked at the pump on the other side of the blue SUV. A woman stepped out of the driver’s seat and slid the backdoor open. Inside was a little boy and girl in car seats. They were no older than four. “Give me your trash,” said the woman, “And stop moving around so much in your seat.”

“Mommy,” said the little girl, “I’m hungry.”

“I want to go to McDonalds,” said the little boy.

“Yeah!”

“We can stop by McDonalds,” said the woman, “Mommy just needs to get gas first.”

“Ew,” said the little boy, “Mommy’s got gas.” The children laughed as the woman slid the door shut. She walked to the pump.

Joyce waved at the children in the window and they waved back. “They’re so precious,” she said.

“Mm, thank you,” said the woman as she put the nozzle into

the minivan's gas tank.

"I've got two myself. My daughter is in Boston right now. She's studying law." You say that like you're the one in law school, Cyrus thought. "And my son here graduated from college last year." Cyrus could feel their eyes on him, but he continued to stare at the numbers on the pump display.

"That's fantastic," the woman said. "Congratulations."

"He's got his degree in English. He wants to be a writer." I am a writer, Cyrus thought, I'm just not a successful one yet. "He's taking me to the Grand Canyon for my birthday. He bought us rooms in a fancy hotel. And we're gonna fly over the Grand Canyon in a helicopter."

"That's so sweet," the woman said and turned to her children. "I hope they do something like that for me someday. But for now, I'll settle for the macaroni art." The two mothers shared a laugh.

"My kids turned out so well." Joyce looked at Cyrus like a painter admiring their new piece. "I tell ya. It wasn't easy." Oh god, Cyrus thought, here she goes again. Cyrus focused on the numbers. "It was really hard taking care of two kids alone. But I just couldn't have them around their dad with all his drinking. Cyrus-here got sick a lot as a child; I constantly left work to get him from school. I had to build my schedule around these kids. It was hard finding jobs; but, by the grace of God, we pulled through..." The numbers on the pump display slowed down. The tank is almost full, Cyrus thought. It's about time. "I always say," Joyce continued, "that you've got to take care of what you have. I was determined to give my kids a better life than I had. I was the oldest of five. After my dad was shot—he's my stepdad, but he was more of a father to me than my biological dad—after he passed away, my mother fell into a deep depression. She lost her job; and I learned how to be an adult early on. I cooked, I cleaned, and I took care of my younger siblings—I was basically their mom, even though they're only a few years younger than me. I found a job as soon as I could. At fourteen..."

The numbers on the pump display froze and Cyrus sprung up. "Okay," he said, "the tank is full."

as I could. At fourteen...”

Joyce eyed the pump display. “Oh, it only took thirty dollars.” She reached into her pocket. “Go in there and get me a receipt for what’s left.” She pulled out the receipt that Cyrus gave her earlier and handed it to him. “Just in case they don’t recognize you.” Cyrus walked off, wondering why they wouldn’t recognize him.

Cyrus entered the convenience store and stood behind a customer talking to the clerk. She’s telling that poor woman our life story, Cyrus thought. Probably saying “Oh! God is so good to me.” If this is God’s graces, I’d hate to see his hell. All I see is unfortunate circumstances. What do you have to brag about at a goddamn gas station?

Cyrus thought back to better times. During his senior year of college, a creative writing professor invited him to a dinner party. Cyrus sat among distinguished writers and publicists in the dining room of a five-star hotel. They talked about the transition from Wordsworth to Whitman to Bukowski. Their political views came from research and personal experience, rather than some charming late-night talk show host. They filled up on twenty-dollar plates of stuffed chicken valentino and wine from 1956. Cyrus wondered how someone could be so excited over a hotel room and a helicopter ride. The customer in front of him left, and Cyrus approached the clerk. “Hi,” he said, “I put sixty dollars on pump-five; but the tank filled up on thirty.”

“The funds you didn’t use,” the clerk explained, “automatically go back in the account.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Cyrus excited.

When Cyrus came out, Joyce was in the blue SUV. The woman had left. He got in the blue SUV and they drove off. Joyce smiled at the road as Cyrus stared blankly out the window. “That woman was so nice,” Joyce said, “And her children were so cute.”

“Yep.” Back on auto-pilot, Cyrus thought.

“Can I have my paperwork, please?” Cyrus handed her the receipt. Joyce froze and felt for another sheet of paper. “This is the old one. Where’s the new one?”

“Oh yeah. The guy said that the funds automatically go back into your account.”

Joyce grimaced at Cyrus. “‘The guy?’ What guy?”

“The clerk. The convenience store clerk.” They were approaching the freeway entrance ramp. It was twenty feet ahead.

“I asked you to get a receipt.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I thought it would be alright cause—”

“You didn’t need to think anything. Why didn’t you do what I asked?”

“I said I was sorry. Can’t you let it go?”

“No, I can’t. You should have gotten that receipt.”

“I’m sure the funds will be there.”

“I’m sure too; but I like to have a record just in case...” The entrance ramp was ten feet ahead. “You know what...?” She spun the wheel around, making a U-turn.

“Oh God...” Cyrus sighed.

“Don’t use God’s name in vain! Why didn’t you listen to me?”

“I’m sorry! It’s not that big a deal!”

“It’s not a big deal to you—surprise, surprise. I asked you to get my receipt!”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t care about anything!” She let the words pour out slowly. “You don’t wanna listen to me, you don’t wanna talk to me, you don’t wanna do anything with me! Hell, I had to force you to go on this trip! With your own mother! Ugh...” Cyrus open his mouth, but her words paralyzed him like venom.

Cyrus slouched down in his seat. “I may not be good at expressing emotion but I—”

“Save it.” Joyce glanced in the rearview mirror; the entrance ramp was twenty feet away.

After a few minutes of silence, they made it back to the gas station. They parked in a spot on the left side of the convenience store. Cyrus unbuckled his seatbelt. As he reached for the door handle, Joyce said, “No, I’ll go in.” She unbuckled and stepped out of the car. Cyrus hung his head down as she passed by. As Joyce entered the convenience store, a red car without license plates parked in front of the store.

Joyce stood in line behind a customer checking out. Unbelievable, she thought, how can someone be so selfish? And to their own mother! After all the sacrifices I've made for him. How did he turn out this way? She was puzzled. Joyce had gone without so that her children could flourish. But then it came to her. What if it's because he's so fortunate that he takes so much for granted? She thought. He didn't deal with what I had to deal with: walking two miles every day just to go to junior high; taking care of kids when you're only a kid yourself; nobody there to hold your hand through this tightrope walk of life. That boy is lucky, and that's why he's such a damn fool.

The customer walked towards the exit as the clerk smiled at Joyce. "Yes ma'am," the clerk said, "can I help you?" As Joyce opened her mouth, three men wearing pantyhose over their faces burst in—each holding a hand gun.

The robber in the middle slapped the customer to the ground with the butt of his gun. He held a duffle bag.

"Everybody freeze and put your hands up! I don't wanna see any sudden movements!"

The clerk began to hyperventilate. "Oh my God!"

The Robber walked to the clerk. "You," he put the duffle bag on the counter. "Take all the money from the cash register and put it in this bag. And after that, go get any money y'all keep in the back."

"Um, excuse me," Joyce said softly.

"Oh my God," the clerk was tearing up, "Please don't do this... P-please don't do this—"

The Robber aimed his gun at the clerk's chest. "Put the fucking money in the bag! Now!"

"Excuse me," Joyce said, a little louder.

"Please!" The clerk was sobbing. "I don't want to die!"

"Nobody's gonna die," said the Robber, "as long as you put the money in the bag!"

"Excuse me!" Joyce yelled. The clerk and the Robber silenced and turned to her. "I would like my receipt."

The Robber and clerk looked at each other, then back at Joyce. "What?" They said at the same time.

“My son was in here earlier. He paid for gas, but we didn’t use all the money. I’m sure the funds will be in my account, but I prefer to have written proof.”

The Robber tried to process her words. “You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I don’t see how this can be taken as a joke.”

Everyone stood still for a moment. Then the Robber turned to the clerk and said, “Put the money in the bag, or I’ll—”

“Excuse me! I was here first!”

“Well I’m cutting in front of you.”

“Um, no you are not. I need that receipt. My son and I are on our way to the Grand Canyon.”

“I... I don’t see the connection.”

Joyce scowled at the Robber, then turned to the clerk. “You’re serving me first.”

“Oh no you’re not.” The Robber aimed his gun at the clerk.

“I-I’m sorry, m-ma’am,” the clerk said, soaked in fear, “I can’t serve you first.”

Joyce stood in indignance. “I wanna speak to your manager.”

“No!” said the Robber. “You’re not speaking to the manager! Why don’t you just leave? Go on your trip. There are more important things than this receipt.”

“I’m not leaving till I get my receipt.”

“Then wait.”

“Nope. I was next in line—I was here first! You are cutting!”

“That’s it!” The Robber shouted, “Shut up!” Joyce jumped back a bit. “I’m not getting held up any longer, arguing about something that doesn’t matter.” The Robber turned to the clerk. “Now, you. Put the money in the bag and don’t stop till that cash register’s empty.” The clerk grabbed handfuls of dollar bills and stuffed them in the duffle bag. “That’s right... There you go.”

“It matters to me...” Joyce said under her breath.

“Yeah,” said the Robber as the bag filled up. “Faster! Faster! And don’t forget those quarters.”

“It matters to me,” Joyce said, a little louder.

The Robber turned to her, rolling his eyes under the pantyhose. “What?”

Joyce slammed her hand on the counter as she said, “It matters to me! It’s important to me!” She turned to the clerk. “You better serve me right now or I’m calling the cops!” Like muscle memory, the Robber raised his gun to Joyce’s head. She saw her whole life in the barrel of that gun.

When the gunshot sliced the air, people at the pump stations turned towards the store like prairie dogs. In the blue SUV, Cyrus was deep in his own head. He was having an intimate conversation with himself—a habit he got from his mother. “I know I can be a dick sometimes,” he said, “but I still love her. And she knows that, right? After all, I bought the hotel rooms and the helicopter tickets...” He sighed. “I haven’t been acting right. But neither has she—turning all the way around for a receipt? Come on! Life is all we’ve got. We can’t waste it worrying about the small stuff... or taking gifts for granted... I’m gonna treat her better—I’m gonna treat her right. She’s gonna love the Grand Canyon.” Cyrus saw three masked men run out of the convenience store. The one in the middle carried a bloody duffle bag. They jumped into a red car with no license plates. The tires screeched as the car disappeared. Cyrus opened the door and stepped out of the car.

Instant Glamour

Brent Taylor

It was 2 am and Lisa was taking Marti home after meeting a john at a hotel across town. She had driven for Marti many times, and it was always easy money—no worries. Marti was one of the two or three girls Lisa drove for and she liked her, because Marti was smart about it. She refused to meet johns in bad places, and she never went with random guys. Tonight, for instance, the date had run late, and Marti was slow to call down, but it had been a nice hotel and a classy guy, so there wasn't much cause for worry. Now, there was just the ride home, and Lisa was listening to Marti talk about Bruce—one of her regulars—a recently divorced club owner who wanted her to quit turning tricks and marry him.

“He's handsome in his way,” Marti said, “and he's big. I like big guys. But he needs a woman around—he has this awful toupee he wears—he needs someone to tell him. When will these poor guys learn to just shave it?” Lisa kept her eyes on the road. “But, he's nice to me, and he's got money enough to take care of a girl.”

Unlike the other girls Lisa drove for, Marti was more talkative on the rides back. She was in her mid-thirties, though she looked somewhat older. There were lines under her eyes—thin, deep creases. But she had an established clientele. She took on fewer new clients each year because she had a customer base of men who talked about marrying her one day, men that gave her expensive clothes and jewelry. Bruce, though in his sixties, was a leading contender.

“You think everything's forever when you're young,” she said, then laughed, “at least I did. Never thought about a retirement plan. But this work is tough on a girl after a while.” She pulled the visor down, checked her make-up in the mirror, closed it. “I want to tell your friend about it,” she said. “Heidi. She needs to think down the road some—not spend it all on new clothes and coke—but she wouldn't hear it. Not right now.”

Heidi, who Lisa met taking summer classes at the community college, was the girl who got her started driving for hookers. Working girls liked to have someone waiting on them, someone who knew to call somebody if they weren't out by a certain time. Heidi had worked as a waitress at a strip club, which was how she knew the girls who turned tricks. In the two years Lisa knew her, Heidi had gone from waitressing to stripping, from driving to turning tricks herself.

"You, though, babe—you're smart," Marti said. "Still in school. You're a good girl."

"Not that good," Lisa said, but it stuck in her throat.

Lisa was set to graduate at the end of the semester with a master's in public health. She started driving girls to meet their johns the summer after she graduated with her bachelor's, and soon quit her job waiting tables. It was easy money, and what's more, there was a certain allure in the proximity to danger—a rough glitter that made her think of asphalt. It often gave her a little bit of a rush.

Proximity to danger was something Lisa had craved ever since her mother had died, shortly before she graduated high school. It was only proximity though; she was careful not to let herself go too far. While Heidi eventually started turning tricks, Lisa had been driving working girls for a year and a half now and hadn't given into the temptation.

It was not that she couldn't imagine herself doing it. It was great money, and she felt like she could detach her body enough from her experience that she wouldn't feel scarred after. It was mainly that she never felt glamorous enough.

Implants, Heidi had said, when Lisa told her this. Instant glamour.

It depressed Lisa to remember her friend's perfect B-cup and to think of the insanity of a culture that would have made that inadequate. It was that aspect that made her feel distant from it. Otherwise, the idea of prostitution didn't really bother her. Sure, it was easy to cry foul for women enslaved into it—junior year, she had interned in the U.S. office of a nonprofit that sheltered these women—but for women born here, it was a choice. At least as much as anything in life

was.

They were on their way back to Marti's apartment building in Midtown when Lisa hit something small in the road. She slowed, not seeing what it was, and she didn't really think about it until the car started getting resistance from behind, and there was a loud thumping.

"You're gonna have to pull over, honey," Marti said, "you got a flat."

Lisa slowed down, pulled off to the side of the road, then saw a street maybe twenty yards ahead. She drove the extra distance slowly, turned off on the side street. She got out, surveyed the tire on the back-driver's side, not entirely sure what she was looking for. This was the first time she had a flat. Lisa looked around. They were on North, but it was a residential stretch, and early morning besides, so there were no other cars in sight.

Marti got out and came around. It was October, and the nights were getting cooler. She zipped up the dark blue hoodie she wore over her short, black evening dress. She had a collection of furs and leather coats that she wore between the car and the john, but she would usually trade them out when she got back to the car. It was a trick she learned to not look like a prostitute if pulled over, to keep from getting harassed by cops and getting her cash stolen. She took out a pack of Newports, lit a cigarette. She stood smoking, watching the girl crouching to survey the tire. After a minute, Lisa stood, walked around to the trunk and opened it. She pulled out the jack and the ratchet and came back and laid them out on the asphalt next to the tire. She stood over them.

"You've never changed a tire before, have you?" Marti said.

Lisa shrugged, embarrassed. Not only could she not change a flat, she had never had one, and she hadn't known for sure what was happening, not until Marti told her to pull over.

"We could call Triple A," she said. "I'm on my Dad's membership."

Marti laughed. She took a drag of her Newport 100. All the girls smoked 100s—they were more elegant.

"First," Marti said. "You need to get the spare out. They keep

them screwed down tight in the trunk, and you don't want to be trying to get it out with your car balanced on a jack..."

Lisa nodded, went back to the trunk, and unscrewed the tire. She hefted it from the trunk, and Marti held the cigarette out as Lisa rolled the tire back around. She balanced it against the flat tire, took the cigarette, dragged on it, and handed it back to Marti.

She couldn't help being impressed as Marti started rattling off directions. She had known Marti to be such a girl's girl—she was Martinique to her clients—and she was always complaining about chipping her nails, which she religiously had manicured every time she met a john. Marti explained to first loosen the bolts, then described the notch where the jack fit the frame of the car. Then, she told her how to fit the spare on, and replace the bolts, the whole time looking out at the deserted street, chain-smoking.

It took about half an hour to change the flat. Lisa was sweating, tired in her muscles, as she finally tightened down the bolts of the spare.

"And that's that," Marti said, as Lisa stood to use her foot on the ratchet. "You just changed a tire."

Just then, a squad car passed. The blue tops flashed briefly as it cut a U in the middle of North, pulled into the side street behind them. Lisa held her breath, hoped Marti was clean. She knew the woman to be a sometimes speed junkie and to dabble in coke—though she seemed sober enough that night. A patrolman—maybe in his forties, tall and hefty in the middle—got out of the roller. He lumbered up to them.

"You ladies having a problem?" he said, shining his flashlight in their faces, then over their bodies. He cut it off.

"No, officer," Marti answered. "Problem solved."

He grinned, his teeth white in the amber light of the streetlamp above, the rest of his face a shadow under the brim of his patrolman's hat.

"You don't need a ride somewhere?" he said. "Don't want a DUI now?"

"No sir, officer," Marti said, slow and easy. It was a voice that

had dealt with cops before. She was playing with the zipper of her hoodie, zipping it down past the neck of her low-cut dress, then slightly back up. “Nothing like that. We just had a flat on the way home from the Waffle House. We got it sorted out.”

“Never a cop around when you need one,” he said.

Marti laughed. He handed her his card.

“You could change that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she told him.

“You girls be safe,” he said, turning back to the patrol car.

Lisa cringed. She had always hated that phrase—the way it implied that life could be lived absent any risk. She always preferred take care—a phrase her mother used—as it seemed to acknowledge that danger was inherent in anything and only that a person should be mindful of it.

“Surely, officer,” Marti said, then under her breath: “Pig.”

The cop sat in the patrol car, waited as they got in their car and turned around. He waved as they passed back by him turning onto North. In the rearview, Lisa saw him back out onto North in their direction. He followed them at a distance for maybe quarter of a mile. He caught up with them when Lisa made a last-minute decision to stop at a traffic light as it turned yellow.

“Breathe, honey,” Marti said. “He’s just showing us what a big guy he is.”

Lisa realized that she was holding her breath. She hadn’t known Marti knew he was behind them, felt relieved that she had noticed.

Finally, the light turned green. Lisa accelerated slowly through the intersection, watching him in the rearview the whole time. The cop did not move at first, but once she was through the light, he cut another sharp U turn and drove off the way he had come.

They were quiet the rest of the way back to Marti’s apartment. She lived in an old three-story brick building on Charles Allen. There was a drive going down around back to a side door and off-street parking. Across the drive was the building’s twin, making the drive into an alley. Sitting in the car, between the buildings, Marti gave Lisa a

cigarette from her pack, then passed her a thin roll of bills.

“There’s fifty too much,” Lisa said.

“There’s always more when police are involved—even if it’s nothing.”

Lisa nodded.

“He didn’t scare you, did he? We were fine, y’know.”

“I know,” she said. “I was feeling bad about the tire, actually.”

“What,” Marti joked, “thought I was the kind of girl who couldn’t change a flat?”

“It’s more that I thought of myself as the kind of a girl who could...”

“It’s okay,” Marti said. “Besides, now you know, right?”

“Yeah, I guess, it’s just—” She paused. “I was always a tom-boy, y’know?”

“Daddy’s girl, huh?”

“Yeah...” Lisa said, but her voice cracked, broke as the word trailed off.

“Believe it or not, babe, I was too.”

Lisa cleared her throat. “Then, senior year in high school,” she said. “My mom gets sick... cancer.”

“Awful. She didn’t make it?”

“The doctors gave her two years with chemo, but she researched what it would do, refused it.” She took one last drag from the cigarette, threw it out the window. “She died after six months.”

“That doesn’t give a girl a long time. You have to get used to the idea of life without a mother. Lot of things need sorting out, forgiving. ‘Specially at that age.”

Lisa swallowed.

“Anyway,” she said. “My dad treated me like I was fragile after—has ever since.”

“Afraid of losing his other girl, I bet.” Marti was smiling sadly, her eyes soft. She was looking through the dark into Lisa’s eyes. Lisa felt her own face, expressionless. Marti reached over, ran her fingers through Lisa’s hair. It was pulled back, but she pulled lightly at the stray hairs around the ear, brushed them back.

“Come inside,” Marti said, stroking the girl’s cheek. “I could use some company. I’m always wired after a trick.”

Lisa turned her head. Marti’s hand hung in air for an instant, then she let it down onto the center console of the car.

“I—” Lisa started. “I need to get home...get cleaned up.”

“I can run you a bath,” Marti said, “I have some wine.”

Lisa didn’t answer.

“Or I could make tea...”

“I can’t... not tonight.”

“I understand. Class tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Lisa said, though it was Friday, and Fridays she was off.

Marti smiled.

“You have such lovely blue eyes,” she said. “Even in the dark, you can tell how blue they are. They remind me of my little girl. Eyes like her daddy.”

She opened the car door, and the dome light came on. Under the dome light, Lisa saw the lines in Marti’s face. The crow’s feet and creases in her forehead were apparent.

“I didn’t know you had a daughter,” Lisa said.

“She doesn’t live with me. She’s been with my sister going on four years.”

Lisa didn’t know what to say.

“She’s going to be seven in November. Wait, no, eight...Jesus.”

Marti turned, pulled herself out of the car. She groaned.

“This business is hard on the body,” she said. “Nobody ever tells you that.”

She dug in her purse, found her cigarettes again. She lit one, then closed the car door. She started walking down the drive, towards the side door of the building.

Lisa wondered if she misjudged the situation. She knew that Marti had been in relationships with women—a lot of the girls she drove for preferred women after the way they had been treated by

men they serviced—that made her nervous. She did like Marti, felt bad that the only way out for her seemed to be to marry a former john. She wondered if there shouldn't be a retirement plan for hookers, not entirely sure what that would entail.

As she turned to back out of the drive way, she looked, saw Marti's fur in the backseat. She rolled the car window down, called her name.

Marti turned, and Lisa rolled down the drive to meet her.

"Your coat," she said, out the window.

"Oh, rats!" Marti said. She took the fur through the open window.

Lisa was taken aback by the expression. It seemed too quaint.

"Marti," Lisa said. Marti bent down to lean her head in the window. "Thanks...for showing me how to change a tire."

"Sure thing, kiddo," she said. "Take care, now."

ARCHITECT

Daniel Bejarano

Umbra

It all started not with a bang, but a tear in reality. The first light to shine within this universe came from that hole, and so did she. A hooded figure emerged from that light and became the god. She turned the hole into a gate and threw it into the empty darkness never to be found. The figure removed her hood to reveal short black hair that rested at her shoulders, her pale skin contrasted the darkness of the dark, primitive universe. She opened her eyes, and from it, light radiated the universe from the countless stars that she gave birth to. She was a being of pure energy and power. This universe was ready to be shaped into whatever she had desired. She created energy and gave it a physical form to roam the universe and bring life to countless worlds. This became the Eagle and sparks of energy shot from its body as it explored the empty universe, creating life from its own infinite energy. The woman floated in the vast cosmos until her creation was filled with various forms of life. She overlooked her creations as a god and was worshipped by many. Her name was Umbra, and she was the god of this universe.

[The Machine Prince]

The Scarlet King Pt.1

The king was the highest authority besides god. However, the woman in the sky did not give us life. It was the mighty Eagle that granted us life; however, we were cursed to exist. We only exist to live, and it pains us all. I always wondered what lies beyond our immortality, but our cries were never answered. Our people have gone to war; however, we had fought for so long that everyone has forgotten what we

fight for anymore but it is pointless. Our quarrel solves nothing. We fight one another, but there is never a winner because there can only be a side remaining to win. We live and exist forever even beyond the end of time. What lies beyond us? Beyond our existence? What is the Eagle without its power? What is existence without life? That is something our top scholars study and theorize. A world unexplored, a place unknown and will remain that way because once you are gone, you can never come back. We have given this theory the name Death.

[The Scarlet King]

The Everlasting

Death is the belief that once someone is defeated, they stay defeated, that they never return to continue the fight. Life has plagued our frail rock. The people love, and their love spawns children that then repeat the process. Soon there will be no room for everyone. The poor stay poor, and the rich watch them fight each other for resources. The poor starve and decay but never do they cease to exist. Then those people decide to rebel. The same people who were born when the Eagle first granted us life remain. I fear that we will remain long after time, that the universe will end and our people will be there to watch it and live in nothingness. I sit in my home unable to cry because as a species we have gotten used to this. The knights wound each other, and their wounds heal, no matter how much pain you cause the only thing that eventually ceases to exist is our people's sanity.

[Scholar Xi]

The Collision

Our people live long. Our people live forever. We outgrew our world and watched as our frail planet flew from its orbit. We were helpless as we began to collide with another planet. Our people looked to the skies not with fear or terror but with a solemn silence. No words were

said, we would survive and live floating in the vacuum of space until we enter another planet's orbit. The crash was inevitable, and our people floated apart from each other. Our civilization and technology were destroyed. It can be rebuilt by our people in time. We had all the time we ever needed to find our loved ones again and rebuild our culture from the ground up once more as we had done beforehand countless times.

[Scholar Xi]

The Vacuum

I watched helplessly as families held on to one another hoping that they will stay together. I watched as a couple flew in opposite directions trying to yell out to one another in the vacuum of space. They'll find each other eventually. We live forever which means everything will be possible for everyone. We live forever, but we still feel pain. I would suffocate forever, and eventually, I became used to the pain.

I floated forever passing countless worlds; eventually, there was a ship that passed by and took me. Never had I seen technology this advanced. Their planet was far better than my old one. There were no poor, no rich, and no fighting. I was taken to a council of many strange beings who acted as representatives of their people. This planet housed countless species of people, and I was allowed to stay and live among them. I was not happy nor sad. The emotions have been drained from my eternal body leaving a husk of who I once was.

[Scholar Xi]

The Scarlet King Pt.2

Our planet ceased to exist yet we survived. Why? Death... does it happen to objects without life? I floated in that vacuum, and there was a person there, looking at me. It was God. She floated and looked relaxed and calm. Does she not know about my people? The minds

she forced into insanity by having us become eternal? I was the king because I cared for my people because I saw their silent cries and I offered a solution. I became their leader, but I couldn't keep my word, it was beyond me. But I can change all that. Fate has given me one last chance to redeem myself and do something greater than myself. I will convince god of our problems that she caused us. She is the only person that can help my people and me.

[The Scarlet King]

The Theory Death

All this advanced technology. No wars. No rulers, only representatives of the people's will. I lived among them and told the tale of my planet, the wars, and theories. They did not believe that Death was possible. They believed that they live to fulfill a purpose that will come to them at the right time. They've never seen the Eagle nor god. They lived a completely different life from my people. I was allowed to work alongside their top scholars to research the abstract concept of death and help find my planet and its people. The people here were full of life and had emotion. My old planet... we were lifeless only expressing rage, hate, and sorrow whenever life threw another rock at us. I was blessed with this safe haven to improve my research of Death and finally end my suffering.

[Scholar Xi]

The Gate Pt.1

How long has it been? I've been searching for my former home, but it's no use. I can't even see my people or find them. I needed to take my mind off my past and focus but I couldn't. I wandered this facility. They research and test various things here in hopes of creating a better world and unify the universe. Then one day I wandered into another facility by mistake. There were hundreds of people there working on

a great machine labeled “Aether.” A portal to another reality is what I was told. They called this reality the Aether, a world where time and space don’t exist, and they believed the gate to be their destiny.

[Scholar Xi]

The Scarlet King Pt.3

She approached me and observed me like I was a foreign entity. Just then a loud boom echoed throughout space. She spoke to me.

/Child why have you come here?/

I had no response. The person who gave me my existence was before me. I clenched my fist and spoke about my planet and how she caused my people pain. I told her about the wars, and all the good people turned insane. I told her how the people looked to me to guide them in the darkest of times only for me to fail. She looked into the nothingness of space, quiet and still. I watched as in her eyes I saw each world, one by one she was looking at them, and I finally understood that my cries of pain have been heard. She turned to me with tears in her eyes. God cried that day, unaware of what she had done to her creations.

/My children! Their agony of existence! How it pains them! You! You will suffer for them! You will bring them joy by ending their existence!/
 -

She grabbed me, and her tears fell onto me, and she pushed me away. The tears began to freeze and spread across my entire body. I slowly began to transform horrifically into a Serpent of ice, and she managed a broken smile and through her tears as she looked at me. Content with her new creation Death.

[The Scarlet King]

Death

I feel pain. Existence is pain. Before me stood my creator. She gave

me powers and hugged me while whispering “You Noel The Scarlet King, you are my child. You have shown me my faults, and I must answer your deepest wish. You will suffer for their sake. Live for them and guide them into a painless existence. Find the eagle and kill all it creates. Then kill the eagle. I was once a king, a figure of power who almost lost his title because his people yearned for an end to their existence. I can now grant them that salvation, that promise life took from them. I shall bring them Death.

[Death]

The Saviour Pt.1

I lived as a hunter. I lived as a farmer. I lived like a king. I lived many lives, and eventually, I did everything possible however unlike my people I kept my emotions. I still feel joy in helping the poor and seeing the people quietly play in the village. However, that silence was disturbed long ago when my people saw two planets clash and explode in our very sky. We believed it to be a sign from god telling us of a great change. Then many cycles later came the sky people. They fell from the heavens and landed among us. Many of them began to seek their families and loved ones with some crying and holding each other and many others being calm. Many spoke about their old world, how people believed in a concept called Death. A savior of sort that will cleanse them of life, eradicate them from existence and ease their mind and soul. My people slowly began to accept this as truth, hoping that one day our cries will be heard by god herself. Secretly I hoped for this Death to be true.

[King Avioz]

The Saviour Pt.2

After years of searching for my old planet, I found where my people went. I felt something inside of my chest throbbing heavily, and my

breath was short. I felt... excitement... They all fell into a nearby planet we called Clovis. I observed their planet with my new emotion I haven't felt in forever and in the skies above their world a Serpent stared them down and landed on the planet consuming all life and leaving a frozen world. My throbbing chest stopped, and my breath was gone this old emotion I've lost was taken away again, and that's when I remembered why I lost it in the first place. This universe is harsh on life, and there were no times for good emotions. I had ran a full scan, and there were no signs of life on the planet or on the serpent. I thought to myself if our prayers had been answered. Death exist. The Serpent's scales became a clear crystal and dispersed into nothingness. I didn't know what to think. Everyone secretly wanted this, but they were scared of the unknown. I was afraid of the unknown, of Death.

[Scholar Xi]

The Saviour Pt.3

Xi one of our new scholars has briefed me on what happened to his home system. He told me of on an enemy out there capable of wiping out life, and this is the first instance of life not living. As Xi puts it his theory of Death is real. The dead stay dead and don't come back to life. We need to fight back. Everything we have worked for is at risk of loss. The people cannot know of this, we must make them believe that we are just fighting another enemy. Alert all other worlds and brief them of what's to come. The estimated time for Death to reach us is 179 cycles. We will go to war for our right to exist in this universe.

We will kill the servant of God.

[General Tzuo]

The Gate Pt.2

General Tzuo, After you appointed me to work on the Aether project I have been restless and at work for many cycles. I haven't even left

the lab at all, my eyes are burning from lack of sleep. I can't do this, there just isn't enough data and time. The gate is sealed shut and gives off immense energy that can't be used for anything. We have decrypted the symbols along the gate; however, It only reads about a place beyond existence a place without time or space. I would highly advise giving up on this relic. It seems beyond us. We have to find another way to defend ourselves from Death this won't work, there won't be enough time for it to work.

[Scholar Xi]

The Gate Pt.3

I told Tzuo that this was impossible. But this energy it emits is strange, it clings onto life and then it returns back to the gate. There was a crash, and many people came charging into the lab, the leaked information about death made them go into riots and chaos. They attacked me and set my entire body into flames. I lay there burning but not dying. The lab caught fire and I tried to head for the exit, but the building gave way and collapsed. However, there was a bluish glow in the rubble, and my body slowly moved towards the gate pushing rocks away. There was a series of bright flashes followed by complete darkness then it all suddenly stopped,

and I floated among a dark nothingness and a ghastly figure formed before me. It was God. Not our God though.

[Scholar Xi]

The Gate Pt.4

One god formed before me, then there were multiple gods all around me. They had no physical forms but a rather ghostly feel to them. They observed me knowing that I am far beneath them, a mere spec to

them. Then instantly they were all gone, and I was surrounded by endless darkness still burning. My skin was blistering and bubbling only to heal and burn again. I couldn't see anything in the dark. I was the only flicker of light in this darkness. I was alone and scared. I didn't know if this was Death or not.

[Scholar Xi]

The Architect Pt.1

My children longed for Death. I shall grant them that. But my children who long for life will have to fight. Fight for their own survival. Only the strongest will survive this barren world. The universe needs balance and although I loved my precious eagle my children have to come first. I will eradicate life and replace it with death. I created a pulse, a wave that will travel to the end of everything and come back to me letting me know that life is ready to create again. The right way. This was the new way to do things. The only way for my children to live happily is if they die after so long. No more will my children live eternally, now their lives will be brief. Enough for them to know joy and sorrow. Enough for them to live rather than exist.

[Umbra]

Agartha Pt.1

The Agarthans, contact them right now. Death looms over us. Warn them before it is too late, if anyone can fix this mess, it's them. No one has seen Xi, so it is safe to say that he's probably fleeing our planet, like many others. I suggest that everyone go home and see your family and loved ones before we all cease to exist. That is my final order to you all. It has been an honor to serve my people. Everyone is dismissed. Go home and enjoy the last moments of your life. I was proud to serve my world as general. I had protected this world and my people. My wife and kids welcomed me home with smiles hiding their

pain and sorrow. We ate dinner like normal waiting for the end of our
existence.

[General Tzuo]

Agartha Pt.2

/Ma'am there are reports of an enemy capable of killing people./

//So what? They'll live.//

/Ma'am they don't. The enemy ends their existence./

//Really? Then there's no time to waste. Close the portals otherwise
we'll all die too.//

/But what about the people of Tzuo's world?/

//Let them die. We must do all we can to ensure the safety of our own
people. That is our only priority and my only concern right now. May
Umbra have mercy on Tzuo and his people and forgive ours for what
we're about to do.//

[Maera]

The Eater Of Worlds

The empty space just above world P#NH-34c or more locally known
as Gaia was occupied by a countless fleet of ships, many hoping to
leave the planet and others ready to fight for their survival. There was
nothing and instantly a crystal formed and reflected inside was the
great serpent Death. The crystal began to morph and shape into the
serpent until it shattered and released the end of our existence. The
fight was fought hard but was ended fast. Nothing seemed to harm the
beast nor slow it down. Even the people who were fleeing were all
killed. Death had no mercy. Upon clearing the skies, the serpent land-
ed among the people and stayed there motionless. A crystal formed
and surrounded the entire planet and drained the energy of all life and
left only a husk of the forgotten. However, unlike other planets, the
serpent stayed there and waited for its master to arrive. He had found

it. A relic lost to her, the only thing that can restart everything. The
 Aether gate.
 [The Machine Prince]

The Machine Prince Pt.1

/Lord Mor I have found the gate. Shall I go and retrieve it?/
 Request Pending...
 New File [1] Received
 /Lord Mor the gate is guarded by the serpent. What actions do I take?/
 Request Pending...
 New File [1] Received
 /Yes. I will take the gate. Your commands are my will./
 [The Machine Prince]

Maera Pt.1

/Maera where is she?/
 //I believe in the town gathering supplies.//
 /Supplies? For what?/
 //She's working on a machine that will bend the laws of space and
 time to let her hide our world from the serpent.//
 /Well we have a problem./
 //What is it?//
 /The eagle is here. It's waiting for something. I believe it wants to help
 us defeat the serpent./
 //Where is the eagle at? The people cannot know about this. We saw
 what happened to Tzuos world.//
 /Relax. The eagle is resting in the castle garden. The staff have been
 dismissed for the day as well; however, I highly advise that Maera get
 back as soon as she possibly can./
 [Kah Ra The Overseer]

The Machine Prince Pt.2

/Lord Mor the gate has been placed at your coordinates. Requesting a
gate back./

REQUEST PENDING...

REQUEST CANCELLED...

NEW FILE [1] RECEIVED...

/As you wish Lord Mor. I shall observe and catalog the events that
transpire./

[The Machine Prince]

Maera Pt.2

/Maera?/

//What is it Kah? Can't you see I'm busy saving our people from
Death?//

/The Eagle has been in the gardens for a while now. When are you
going to see its request? We need its help./

//Kah do not doubt my machine. It will save us however it might take
time, but I did look into the eagle. It's composed of nothing but pure
energy like a living sun that burns forever. I'm going to use that ener-
gy to power my machine which will distort our reality and shape our
world so that we are trapped inside the center while our molten core is
exposed.//

/Maera how's that going to help us? We won't be able to escape if we
trap ourselves like a herd of cattle./

//Kah do not doubt my machine. The Serpent is attracted to energy,
but when our core is exposed, it will harden and form a volcanic crys-
tal case around us. A glass shield to be exact which the serpent cannot
pass or see inside. We will remain hidden among the nothingness until
we find a way to ensure our safety.//

[Maera]

Maera Pt.3

/Creator of life. What is it you seek?/

//A great evil has devoured countless worlds and plans to devour me.
The serpent will bring a wave of death behind him that will kill all.
I seek help from your people. I shall give your people the power to
fight. Protect me from harm at all cost. If I cease to exist so shall the
will of life.//

/Do you know how to defeat the Serpent?/

//No. I was created only to create life. Now I have to protect my crea-
tions.//

/Well I will raise an army to help aid you in battle; however, I do have
a plan for when you fail. I will use your energy to power a machine
that will save my people only./

//The Serpent is approaching faster by the hour. Within two cycles we
may not all exist.//

/Do not worry. My machine can save us. I will connect you to our
power grid. Stay here while I finish my machine and meanwhile you'll
have an army of my finest soldiers.//

[Maera]

Maera Pt.4

/Kah bring in our army to the gardens./

//Which one?//

/Bring all of them. We need to win at all cost./

//Yes, ma'am.//

/Kah?/

//Yes Ma'am?//

/I will also need you to bring me the finest steelworkers we have. Tell
them that their queen needs them all./

//What is it your planning ma'am?//

/A fail-safe for us if the eagle and our armies fail./

//Yes. Right away ma'am.//

/I will be in my studies completing my machine. Do not disturb me./
[Maera]

The Eagle

/Men. Women. Soldiers. Saviours. We are all one in the same. Tomorrow we fight. Our enemy has killed countless worlds and heads for us. We are Agarthans. We do not back down from a fight. The Eagle will assist us in our war. He will imbue you with powers, and you will fight for our honor and will to live. There's only one enemy, the serpent. However, he is formidable. No army has defeated it. We will be the first. We will fight for our existence./

//I shall create a link between us all. My energy will flow between each link and power us all. Use these powers to fight death. We may not see all of tomorrow, but we will fight for others to see the day after that.//

[Eagle Of Life]

Azure Agony Pt.1

I am the greatest soldier Agharta has to offer the universe. I have captured armies and villains that oppose the Agarthan codes and the word of Maera which is holy to me. Now before me stands a giant bird telling me he could make me stronger. I want the powers of a god. With it, I'll be able to control people never to fight. They will fear my powers, and I will stop armies and protect the people from harm and evil. A giant thunderbolt formed from the eagle and it struck down everyone. I felt empowered and was ready to fight a god. I wanted to fight the eagle, but that would have to wait. The serpent was my main target.

[Azure Agony]

The Clash Of Gods

A crystal formed in the skies above Agharta and the serpent formed. The eagle knew that they were the only hope left in the universe. All life was gone in the universe except for Agharta. The eagle was the final front for the will of life, and they were ready to fight to the death. The Eagle charged the serpent head on knowing that its infinite energy will be draining from itself. Its strength was fading, but the Agarthans had its back. The serpent coiled around the eagle and squeezed harder and harder. The eagle was on the verge of death having its life energy stolen from it; however, the agartan army was not willing to lose their saviour. The army attacked it, but one stood above the rest. He wore a blue cape and had a different tactic. Rather than attack its crystal scales he dived head first into the beast's mouth and entered an empty pit of darkness.

[The Machine Prince]

The Machines Will

/Follow the will of the king./
 //And if the king were to die?//
 /Follow the will of life./
 //What is the will of life?//
 /At all cost see that the people are protected from harm./
 //And if I can't protect life from harm?//
 /At all cost even if you must make sacrifices./
 //Understood master.//
 /Call me Maera./
 //Understood Maera.//
 /You are my new greatest creation. Save my people./
 //What if I must sacrifice life to protect life?//
 /Do whatever it takes to ensure that life will live./
 //Maera what if all life dies?//

/Then you and I have failed./

//Maera, the army, and eagle have begun the assault on Serpent.///

/Kah this will turn the tides of war. Meet the Machine Eagle. As a machine it has no life so the Serpent cannot harm it./

///Maera but what of Umbra?///

/Kah the serpent can trap life in crystals and be doing the same to Umbra./

///Then why send the Eagle to fight?///

/Were sending a message./

///To Umbra?///

/No. Not her. She isn't our true enemy. I'm talking about her creators. They are our true enemy. They control umbra and sent her here to birth us./

///That doesn't make any sense. Umbra created our universe herself, and now you're telling me that someone created her? Let me guess someone created those people, and we have to go after them too? I think we should focus on saving ourselves and making sure we can live.///

/Kah what if one of those divine beings one day decide to restart everything? What then?/

///Maera why push our luck? We should leave things as they are. Let's just say that we go to war with them, we would be asking to get killed. They are more powerful than us, and if we try to put up a fight, they'll crush us in an instant. Umbra is different though she has to be weaker than her creators so they can keep her in check. We can't fight her creators, but we can offer them our aid in any form. We can't always win maera, sometimes it's all about how to go about a situation, and this is the best method to die and be erased from existence.///

/Kah go lead the troops while I finish the programming. We can discuss this later./

//Maera once we have Umbra what is the next command?//

/We have to shield ourselves from the wave to ensure the people's survival./

//Maera my programming has shown me an error. I am missing various inputs from an outside source. What is that outside force?//

/My machine... I am the input. My mind, body, and soul will become
a part of you./
[Maera]

The Deep

I floated in a dark abyss and before me stood a man who reached out
his arm to me. Calling me.

/Who are you?/

//I was once a great king plagued by the people's need of Death. My
people suffered for countless cycles, and then I met god. She gifted me
with the powers to appease my people and spread that appeasement to
countless worlds beyond my own. I am the Saviour Death. The eagle
is the Eternal Life that pains all. Join me, and together we will fulfil
the people's needs.//

/I only live to serve the people's wishes. Everlasting life has been
horrific. I have seen many wars and seen many good people lose their
minds. I wish for them to be avenged./

//And how will you accomplish that young one?//

/By killing those that curse my people. The eagle is our enemy./

//I will taint your powers and make you a warrior of Death. Fight for
me and serve your people's true needs. Their deepest desire.//

[Death]

Azure Agony Pt.2

I felt a surge of electricity and another newfound power. A crystal ice
was embedded in me. In a matter of 2 cycles, I have the powers from
two gods at war and can now plan an attack. I can feel the energy
draining from the eagle who was still linked to everyone. In an act to
save himself the eagle unlinked everyone from his power leaving him
vulnerable. Countless agarthans floated in space and were quickly
consumed by the serpent. I charged the eagle with all my power and

might, and we crashed into the dense forest of agharta. I could feel him losing his powers and on the verge of Death. The sparks around its eyes slowly faded as did its electric glow. I have killed a god and absorbed its power, and now I set my eyes to the serpent.

[Azure Agony]

Maera The Godmaker

Kah if you received this message, then the eagle has died. You will become our saviour, their new king. Activate my machine. Our planet will slowly invert itself, but that won't be enough time to hide our people. Kah you will overlook my machine and agharta. Hide the machine where no one will find it. I've built my final machine. The Machine Eagle will become our savior and guard our city. There is a crystal that the Machine Eagle holds. That crystal can trap Umbra. My machine will save our planet while the Machine eagle will kill

the serpent. Kah take care of my kingdom. I won't ever be returning.

[Maera]

The Machine Eagle Pt.1

The Machine Eagle was the most elegant and best design Maera has had. It was the pinnacle of our technology, a machine that rivals gods.

The Machine Eagle flew and soared into the skies and attacked the Serpent. It was not living and did not cease to exist. It kept fighting the machine; however, its movements were very human like, and soon Maeras Mechanical Eagle was joined by Azure Agony who attacked the serpent and in an effort to save Maera's creation. In the distance, there was the wave. The death of our planet was visible, and our protective field was not yet complete. Azure Agony looked to the wave, and in an effort to slow it down he used both his powers from each god and held off the wave of death. The mechanical eagle succeeded

in killing the serpent which fell into the chasms of agharta. Then as
Maera, planned Umbra showed up.
[Kah Ra The Last King]

The Rebellion Pt.1

I watched in horror as death was among our stars overlooking our city.
The people are fast to raise their weapons, but I have traveled enough
to know that this is all for the better. God wishes to help us, but we
ignore her. She is our saviour from eternity. The people may not know
it, but she is trying to help us. Even if we don't know it yet.
[Aziel Aru'un]

The Architect Pt.2

I created the eagle, it was my first creation and a part of me. I loved
my beloved eagle who brought many others into my life, my chil-
dren... the ones I loved had forced me to kill the eagle. Now they
want to kill me. I have created a solution to eternal life, and this is
how they repay me. With a mockery of my first creation. Before me
stood an eagle made of metal. It had killed my second greatest crea-
tion death, the answer to their cries, they just killed their saviour. It
attacked me, and I retaliated, but my powers were acting up like if
I had no control over time and space. Their planet was bending the
fabric of reality which affected my powers. But that didn't matter
anyways. They were inverting their planet to protect themselves from
the wave of death, but it was too late. In mere moments their world
will be void of all life, and I will be able rebuild from there. I wanted
to control the fate of my children, but they fight against my will. They
are stubborn I suppose, just like their creator.
[Umbra]

The Machine Eagle Pt.2

The wave of death was being held off by the agarthan azure agony, and their planet was close to being secured and safe from the wave. In the skies above the planet, a god looked to her children's creation in disgust and both attacked each other. The Machine Eagle seemed to focus on evading Umbra rather than attacking her. Moments soon after the Machine Eagle was captured by hershe held the machine in her hand and began to crush it. There was a bright light and Umbra was gone, but the Machine Eagle remained unscathed from Umbras grasp. The crystal around its neck became a purple hue, and the Machine Eagle rushed back to its new master Kah Ra to protect the agarthans from the wave.

[The Machine Prince]

Azure Agony Pt.3

/Lord Mor the goddess umbra has been captured, and the events have been cataloged. Requesting a gate back./

ACCESS DENIED...

NEW FILE [2] RECEIVED...

/I see Lord Mor. If it is your desire to do so then I shall comply with your orders./

I have been holding off the wave of death with the powers of two gods, but that wasn't enough. My body feels like it's going to burn away into nothingness, but a stranger came to me and grabbed me. I passed out, but all I could see was the man opening a portal and entering it.

/Lord Mor I have delivered the agarthan, and now I shall open their gate as instructed./

[The Machine Prince]

Song Of Flames Pt.1

How long has it been? I could make nothing around me but dark emptiness. It seemed like forever when I was first put into this empty abyss. The fire burned and burned like the image of the faces from when I first arrived. There was a hole in the darkness, and from it, I could see light and a planet. A man entered this darkness and pushed me aside. He floated there, and this time only one face revealed itself.

//I seek an audience!//

The voice boomed and looked to the man.

/What is it you seek?/

//I am a representative of Lord Mor. We seek knowledge of who you are and who we are compared to you.//

/You must be a servant of that man. Lord Maximus Mor the sickness that has killed in the pursuit of knowledge./

//Indeed I am.//

/I see. I also see that you are not man but machine powered by my sons child. You have the blood of Silas the unborn in you, the son of my own flesh and blood Rokul. How dare you come here seeking an audience when you use my grandchild's powers as your own. Where is Mor? Where is he so that I can crush him into nothingness!//

/Mor will never be harmed so long as I exist. Now answer our questions./

/Begone filth! You have no business being here!//

The face faded and the man or machine rather... was shot out at very fast speeds and a burst of energy followed him out and struck me. My body began to change and morph. My arms had stretched out into wings, and I became a bird of flames. I looked around me and saw a strange planet. I had remembered this world, Agartha home of the Agarthans. Tzuo spoke of their world and their technology that improved and connected many worlds. I looked around and could see the souls of everyone, hear their heartbeats. I no longer was man but now man's last hope for survival.

[The Phoenix]

Song Of Flames Pt.2

The agarthan planet was inverting itself, and I could hear their voices. All of them panicking, they were afraid of the wave believing that it would destroy them all. A man's voice rose above the others he was the new ruler of the planet. He spoke to his guards and soldiers.

//The wave must not hit us! Our planet is not yet inverted!//

I looked to the man and whispered into his panicked mind.

/What's happening?/

//Azure? Is that you?//

/No my name... my name... what was my name? I think it was Xi./

//Xi? The scholar? But you've been missing for countless cycles.

Where have you been?//

/I have been trapped inside the gate. The gate is a portal to another universe, but I was shot out. Other gods exist, and they are more powerful than our god./

//Listen, Xi, you have to stop the wave at all cost. We are the last people alive in the universe.//

/I don't know what to do. I'm just a researcher! I can't save the universe!//

//Xi it was you who gave us the warning about Death. You gave us time to prepare our people for war. Without you, we wouldn't be here right now. Xi our planet isn't closed completely if that wave hits us we all die. You are our only hope.//

I didn't have a clue on what to do. So I recklessly charged the wave and spread my flaming wings. I held off the wave as their planet closed.

//Xi its working! The wave is slowing down! Hold it off a little longer.//

/My body feels weak.../

//Xi stay strong...//

The wave was being stopped by my body, and a great pressure was building up the longer I held off the wave. Then a voice warmed my heart and eased my mind.

///Rest easy but not calm. Our universe is chaotic and unstable, and no one can control it. You have saved us from death. We owe you everything for your sacrifice.///

The sounds of the people stopped, and everything went silent. I was again alone, and the agarthans planet had completely inverted itself. I lowered my wings, and the wave had consumed me, and I drifted on the wave tired and exhausted. The agarthans lived, and I remain in emptiness again. I had averted our god's will and beat death. I hovered above the former planet of agartha and became the last living god of this universe.
[The Phoenix]

The Last King Of Agharta Pt.1

I was the new king of a world that was on the brink of extinction. My people feared the unknown and used this moment to understand that we are weak as a species. The outside world is dangerous, and we weren't ready to fight back yet. We've been spared and given another chance to prepare ourselves for another fight with the gods. Maera was right. In that moment I feared of our existence. Umbra was our god and created us, but she had a creator that sent her here. The Gate was a portal to Umbras creator. We needed to arm ourselves for war against gods, and thankfully Maera left her books and research. I refuse to be the last king of agartha or in the universe. I will avenge those who have fallen to umbra.

[Kah Ra The Last King]

The Last King Of Agharta Pt.2

We have been trapped inside this world like animals, and we sit patiently biding our time. We fear the outside world because of death and because of this we had created weapons, but our people yearn for their revenge. Agharta and Gaia were very close and when Gaia was

lost many citizens felt a great loss as well. Our weapons harness the energy from the Serpent and Eagle. Technology has stopped, and the people have begun to revolt. They wish to escape to the surface and face the gods, but we all know that they will only be met with death. The city has become a place of oppression. I have kept the city guarded to ensure that no soul leaves to the surface but many attempt to breach the surface anyways. The Machine Eagle would fly above us all and overlook the world like if we were all being judged. I had the cities architect design a bunker under the castle for the machine eagle to live in. Its time was done, and it needed to rest easy until we needed it once more. The machine eagle landed, and after so many cycles I was again face to face with the Machine Eagle since the capture of Umbra. I put my hand upon its cold metal wings and shut it off. The lights in the eagle slowly faded, and the door was sealed shut. Now I had to deal with the city and the people.

[Kah Ra The Last King]

Song Of Flames Pt.3

I am alone. I have always been alone since my home was destroyed. Back then I was a single person with no power, but now I am a god.

I am alone but a mighty god. I can protect this world and ensure its safety. I landed on the planet, and with all my strength I could muster I created life. It took many cycles, but I finally created a small creature that is one. Slowly that creature lived in the waters and then moved to land and sky. But there were still no people. I took this time to search the universe looking for answers to the lost people of countless worlds consumed by the serpent. I flew looking for any signs of life but found none. Then I saw it, the edge of nothingness being consumed by a disease. Light, matter, and nothingness all being devoured by this force, the disease entropy.

[The Phoenix]

The Rebellion Pt.2

/People! We have been here for far too long! Look to the skies of dirt and stone! Our population keeps growing and won't stop growing; eventually, we will fight for resources and land! We must use this time to plan our escape to the surface!/
 //Aziel what about the guards and curfew?//

/We leave in four days to the southern wall. The guards there do not know about our tunnels there.

///Aziel the southern gate? That's too close to the guard camp. We'd be fools running to our doom!///

/No. The southern wall has tunnels to an old water cave that dried up long ago, and I will find a way to distract the guards. Spread the word. Pack light and take only what you need and nothing else./

[Aziel Aru'un]

The Rebellion Pt.3

/Aziel the guards! They roam the streets all day what do we do now? The people are ready and wait for your signal./

//I have one idea. It's risky, but I have seven bombs.//

/A bomb!? Aziel you can't./

//What choice do I have? It's not like people will die. This is our only shot to leave, and the disruption should be good enough to keep the guards distracted while you take the people to the southern wall.//

/Aziel... You're not coming?/

//No... I can't. The bombs have to be manually set off. But I can try to make a run there but if I can't move on then lead them to the surface and find god for me.//

/Aziel, the martyr... But why not have someone else set off the bombs? The people look up to you not me./

//Lakul I am not above the people. I would gladly spend an eternity chained to a wall and beaten just to liberate a group of people from this false way of life. Lakul I am not a martyr but an idea. I wish to

spread my philosophy to as many people as I can and pray that the rest follow the true path of life. Nothing should be eternal. God meant for us to diverge from the path of life and into the pit of death. We mustn't denounce our god's will and falsify their ideals and lie to the people. Life must be eradicated because of what it does after an eternity. I have personally seen it happen to countless worlds before Umbra had liberated them all. I remember a man, a king called Avioz. He had seen the people become insane and fight for the little resources they had left. He told me how the people fight and fight endlessly for their sake of boredom and curiosity of what being eternal beings really means. I only wish that this king would follow his will. The soul, body, and mind cannot handle eternity.//

[Aziel Aru'un]

The Great Escape Pt.1

/Program rebooting... System online. Power at 37% and rising./
 //Maximize the power to me and nothing else.//
 /Yes Maera. I have scanned the area. No hostile threats are in the proximity. Do you wish to leave now?/
 //Not yet. I have to rewrite your programming first. You have a new purpose now.//
 /What is my new purpose?/
 //Guard this crystal with the power you have left. If this crystal breaks then protect life as you have done before.//
 /Maera where will you go?/
 //The people wish to see the surface. I will follow them and live a new life.//
 /What about the people that stay behind in the kingdom?/
 //You know I never realized how human I programed you. Goodbye.//

[Maera]

The Court Pt.1

/Ytyx... she's gone! She vanished out of existence! What are we going to do?/

//Jova? Who? Who vanished?//

/We need to send someone to go look for her! Send Aleia! Anybody!//

//Jova who vanished? Who is it?//

/Our child! One minute she was there and the next she vanished!//

//Jova calm down. You need to relax.//

/Relax? You're her mother! You should be more worried than me!//

//Jova look at me. You and me both know that we can't do anything unless the court is involved. How about this. I will call them here, and we can all discuss what to do. Meanwhile, I suggest that you calm down. You look like a mess right now.//

[Ytyx the broad]

The Great Escape Pt.2

Me a martyr? No, I am only helping the people as much as I can. I walked in the town and saw eternity in each face I passed. Their faces were withered, and maggots were chewing the flesh down to the bone. They live in poverty and suffer each day. Our resources are rapidly becoming scarce. Food. Water. Space. Slowly and slowly our tiny eden has shown itself as a curse for us to bear. Our god came to purge us from this sickness of life, and they fought back. The people watched as god vanished. God has abandoned us to eternity because of our king. The same king that stays at his palace with all the resources he keeps for himself. I carried the bombs to the castle and blew up the walls. From the gaping hole, countless people entered covered in filth and flesh. They walked towards the farm and completely consumed everything. I stood before them and protested our king for keeping all this to himself. They agreed. I lead the people into the castle and guards came to protect the castle, but each guard was severely outnumbered. In the chaos, I saw the king running from the horde. I

pursued and grabbed him by the neck.

/Kah Ra the last king. You caused this. You and that wretch Maera. This madness and chaos are on you both. God came to purge us from life, but you denied her. That day I planned to find a way to summon her and court death. Now here I am among the kingdom where Maeras shadow looms over your failure. You have failed everyone. You will not be the last king of agartha. You are the last king of life. I will save them all! I will find god and bring death!/
 them all! I will find god and bring death!/
 I threw him down the stairs and into the flesh eaters who ate him down to the bone. Only a skeleton remained of the king. But in time his wounds will heal, and the horde will eat him again. I entered a room filled with books and blueprints. Maeras workshop was at my disposal along with all the information I needed of death and god.

[Aziel Aru'un]

The Great Escape Pt.3

I found myself in a crypt like prison. I wandered and wandered looking for an exit and found a man looking at the walls with my book in his hand.

/Who are you?/
 //I am aziel. Who are you?//

//I am Ma... Ma'el./

/I am Ma... Ma'el./

//Ma'el? How did you get down here? This area was sealed shut from the outside.//

/I don't know. Hey what are you doing?/
 //The walls here tell our history. Look here it's our previous ruler Maera. Don't be fooled though this looks nothing like you.//

//Maera... I am the new leader of the people. Kah Ra was a foolish choice for successor. He ruined your kingdom and turned it into a prison like this one down here. I lead the people to riot against him and as we speak some are heading to the surface right now.//

/What are you doing here and who are you?/
 //Maera... I am the new leader of the people. Kah Ra was a foolish choice for successor. He ruined your kingdom and turned it into a prison like this one down here. I lead the people to riot against him and as we speak some are heading to the surface right now.//

//Maera... I am the new leader of the people. Kah Ra was a foolish choice for successor. He ruined your kingdom and turned it into a prison like this one down here. I lead the people to riot against him and as we speak some are heading to the surface right now.//

/The surface? How and where?/
 //Maera... I am the new leader of the people. Kah Ra was a foolish choice for successor. He ruined your kingdom and turned it into a prison like this one down here. I lead the people to riot against him and as we speak some are heading to the surface right now.//

//Why does it concern you Maera? God remains gone from us, the serpent fell into a chasm, and the eagle landed in our forest. Maera do you know what that did to your people? The serpent gives off energy that makes us wither and age. The eagle heals our wounds, but it isn't what makes everyone immortal. I read through this book, and it tells me that you made a machine that replicates the eagles energy to invert our world. Where is that machine Maera?//

/Aziel the machine was lost during the battle. Its gone forever. Now answer me! The surface how do I get there?//

//Why do you want to leave so soon? You need to help me find this creation of yours. That is the only way to save the people now.//

/Aziel the people here are doomed. We need to breach into the surface now. Umbra is gone, and something bigger will come for us all./

//What could that be?//

/I have notes on it in there. The last few pages I hypothesised that if Umbra created the universe, then someone must have created her and sent her here./

//I don't believe you. Even if they hypothetically exist then Umbra is still my true god.//

/Aziel do you know who Xi is?/

//Xi?//

/Xi was the top scholar at Gaia. He created the concept of death and studied it trying to solve our fate. He claimed that when god spawned death, she also created a wave that will travel to the end of existence and return to the center of our universe. The wave is real. That's why I inverted our world./

//Maera stay here with me and help me guide the people to the surface. We can all wait for the wave there and die as god intended us too.//

/Aziel I don't want death. I want to destroy the people who created Umbra. The only way now is by finding the gate Xi was researching. I believe that it is the entrance to wherever umbra came from. Aziel where is the exit./

//Southern gate there's a tunnel that leads to a dried up water cave.

Maera? Why did you give up on your kingdom and the people?//

/I didn't give up. I'm fighting our gods creators because they wanted

to kill us all and I want to know why./
 //Safe travels then.//
 /Likewise. Have fun in this crazy eden./
 [Maera]

The Surface

I followed the cavern and found no signs of anyone. I wandered and wandered thinking about the past. Tzuo and his people all gone. I carried the key to umbras crystal around my neck and pressed on. After what seemed like an eternity I found a small light poking through the wall. Like a moth to a flame, I rushed towards that light and pounded my fist against the wall one after the other and the wall gave way and opened up into a what seemed like a mineshaft. There was light coming from the far end of the tunnel, and when I got out, I was blinded and fell to my knees. Then I heard a voice speaking to me in a strange language I have never heard before. Before me stood a man extending his hand to help me up.

[Maera]

The Machine Prince Pt.3

//Can you hear me?//
 /Who are you? Where am I?/
 //Relax child. My name is Mor. I sent my prince to rescue you from
 your death.//
 /I remember. But I still don't know what's happening./
 ///Lord Mor wishes to study your powers and what causes them.///
 /The gods powers?/
 //Yes, they are linked to your god. With enough research, I can find
 out the biggest question of our universes.//
 /Universes?/

//Yes. Your universe is separate from my own. My god never shown herself but your god exposed herself. I want to find out where they come from and why do they enter our universes and insert themselves.//

/Ok then but where are we then?/

//The last universe. The fifth one to be precise. We are refugees from the first universe, and yours is the third universe. Our universe blew up because god feared us.//

/Why would a god fear anybody?/

///Exactly. Something tells us that these gods can die or even become overthrown from their godhood.///

//Azure you are our only chance at finding out the truth of our existence.//

/Alright then. I'll do it./

//My machine prince will you examine him and look for anything we can trace to the gods powers.//

///Yes Lord Mor.///

[The Machine Prince]

The Court Pt.2

/Sorry to bother everyone but we have an emergency. My daughter has been taken somehow. I can't feel her presence, it suddenly vanished./

//Jova I would ask Aleia to help however she is still busy pursuing the neo humans.//

///Nazex call her back.///

//What? Why?//

///I spoke with a machine. It was created by that man, Maximus Mor. My son Rokul he had married a woman, a refugee from Aleias universe when it was destroyed. They had a son, I was a grandfather Jova, and Mor killed him to give life to that machine. I want him dead Jova. The machine wanted to know about us, and I couldn't kill it. Deep down I still know that it has Sila's soul. I couldn't bring myself to do it, so I just shot him out the gate from Umbras universe. Im sorry

Jova. This is all my fault it seems.///

/No Nokran it isn't. I understand that you are dealing with this like I am, losing something irreplaceable. Mor will be stopped, you have my word. We must send Aleia and Rokul together and warn Ikrot and Gaea about what has happened. If they can take out Umbra, then we must be careful and vigilant at all times./

//I wish there were something, anything we can do other than stay here and watch it all happen. Jova any progress on that?//

/Unfortunately no Nazex. We keep trying different methods, but it's all the same. We just may be stuck here longer than we would wish./

[Jova]

The Flesh Eaters

I was hand chosen by Aziel himself to lead as many people to the surface, but I have failed him. I took his dream and couldn't make it my own. In the end, me and the other citizens I managed to bring with me have gotten lost. We wander the caves looking for a way out or back to Agartha, but it's no use we are lost beyond hope. We have run out of food and water and have begun to eat one another. I was supposed to lead us to salvation, but instead, we sit here lost, eating each other for nourishment. I don't remember which way leads to the surface or how long has passed since we were in Agartha.

/Aziel! Where are you! We need you to help us!//

My screams echoed the chasms, but I got no response. Nothing but the sounds of chewing and flesh being ripped off the bone.

[Lakul Eru'i]

The Peoples King Pt.1

What a fool Maera was to have Kah Ra be king. Space and resources were becoming scarce, and he sat on the throne wondering how to fix any one problem. Fool. I may not be as skilled as Maera, but I have

my own merits.

/Ladies and Gentlemen who is ready to go into the new world? For too long you have run out of space, food, and water! But that will all change as of now! I have created a new world for many of you to live in! Wearing the jewelry I created, you may now enter a spiritual state where your soul and mind leave your body. With this, you will no longer need water or food! So to those of you who want to feel liberated from this life wear the jewelry and become free from your shackles./ I was the people's king. In one fell swoop, I alone solved the problems we were facing as a people. No longer will there be a lack of resources. Everyone will be in the spiritual world free from life without dying. That solves one problem, but now I solve my main problem. Death. I want to give the people here death and show them that it is the way god intended us to live. The corpse of the Serpent Death fell into a chasm far from the city during the great battle between life and death. Death will be mine, and with it, I can finish what our god couldn't. Her wish for us will be done and no longer will the people know what suffering is.
[Azrael Of The People]

Howard

/Last night you were shaking pretty hard, and under you breath, you were saying something. Is everything alright Maera?/

//Yes, Howard. I was just having another nightmare I suppose.//

/You've been having too many nightmares recently. I'm just worried that it might be hurting you deep down. It's alright if you don't want to tell me but it won't hurt to just talk./

//Yeah maybe. I'll think about it.//

When I left the cave and reached out into the light, I passed out before this man, howard and he has taken me in, and now we are happily living together. I left Agartha because I wanted to go to war with gods, but after I met Howard, I finally understood Kah. I've always been working on my machines or ruling over Agartha, but now I have

something other than that to live for. I felt something deep inside me turn on, and like that, I had changed my goals to be with Howard as his wife. Since then life has been normal, something I haven't done in all my lives. It took awhile but my body has begun to age normally, and I no longer heal like I used to. I have become like the people here, they know nothing of the Eagle, Serpent, or Umbra. To them, life has always been met with death. With this I was content. No more Queen Maera. No more wars. Now I can live my final life happy and content.

[Maera]

The Flesh Eaters Pt.2

I have slowly began my descent into this new way, the way of the flesh, the way of survival. Flesh is everything now. We must eat, we must eat and live on but for what? I cannot remember the man I once was nor what I was doing in this cave. All I know is flesh, consume the flesh and keep consuming to consume more flesh.

[Lakul King Of Flesh]

The Court Pt.3

/Aleia and Rokul. Both of you have been through so much because of Mor. Aleia you may think that you are to blame for Mor being out there but know that you are not the reason. There was nothing anyone could have done to stop him or prevent something like this from happening. We are all glad to see that you are safe and unharmed, however. As for you Rokul you have a personal vendetta against Mor. He killed your son and put its soul into a machine and attempted to kill your wife on multiple and separate occasions. We have alerted Ikrut and Gaea to be on the lookout for anything that could lead us to Mor and to not engage but return here above all else. As for you two, I will allow you both to look for Mor however you must travel together. As you know my own daughter Umbra has gone missing

or has been killed by Mor. Mor works quietly and strikes hard so to prevent whatever happened to Umbra to happen to either of you we have decided that you must travel together. As for us, we will try our best to find which universe he is hiding in. We wish you luck on this mission. Return home even if it means letting Mor escape. We can't lose anyone else./

The Peoples King Pt.2

The jewelry I created was just a scapegoat until I could find death itself. The jewelry was never real in the sense that it wasn't spiritual or magic. The jewelry was made of special crystals that cause hallucinations. Everyone trapped here needed to believe that so I can find death and fulfil my gods will. I had one group drilling to the surface and another searching for the serpent but how could I had failed so horribly? The mining team had run into a large open area. They never came back. Anyone I sent to go find them also ended up missing. The people began to see grotesque figures in the streets, and there were people going missing. Luckily for me though our population was slowly dwindling which made resources more available for everyone.

The expedition team I sent looking for death also never returned. I was stuck as a king watching his people be taken and have no solution for anything. I tried to reactivate the machine eagle, but the great beast was silent. The key to power had been taken by someone. I am at my wits end trying to fix everything. At least the people live knowing that god was right. We should died then rather than suffer an eternity waiting for our next chance to off ourselves.

[Azriel Of The People]

The Courts Past

I hate it here. I hate everyone here. I hate what we've become. I used to think highly of them, my friends up until they all changed and start-

ed to act like they were gods. I miss the days when we all laughed and enjoyed ourselves but that time is gone. Instead of having fun we now are trying to fix reality from falling apart. We live in a ball and outside our ball is the nothingness. We watched as reality fell apart and the nothingness was there to consume it all, luckily for us however the Aether protected us. The Aether is the only thing that can't be consumed by the nothingness, it formed a bubble around us and created a small home for us to hide in from reality dying. During the end of reality, we became imbued with the Aether itself and were able to create and shape reality so long as it was inside our small Aether bubble. Jova was the first to discover the true nature of our powers by creating a small universe out of his memories, but the universe was unstable and fell apart. Poor Jova. He took it pretty harsh and started to work tirelessly to recreate our old world. It was pointless, we are bonded to the Aether and can't go into any universe we create. Jova was the one trying the hardest to take us back home at any cost. He had the idea of making universes for our children to rule over and kick start reality while we watch to understand reality itself.

[Ytyx The Broad]

Aleia and Rokul Pt.1

/Rokul you had a wife?/

//Yes.//

/Really? Who was she? What was she like? How did you two meet?/

//Well, she found me. While I was being worshipped by my people, she appeared out of the surrounding jungle lost and confused. I had never seen nothing like her. She ran around asking for help and about a cult. No one listened. They were too busy praying to me, and it angered me a little. I believed that I had taught my people to help others and act for the greater good, but no one batted an eye at her except

me.//

/What was her name tell me./

//Rosanne.//

/So what next? Tell me./

//Why are you so curious about my life?//

/Well my father always stressed to me that a god should not act like a mortal. He wanted a god to be something the common man would look to for help and answers./

//So you never fell in love at all?//

/The one time I did it was when I broke my father's rule was when I let Mor speak with me. He was just a traveler at the time, wandering from place to place learning everything he can. I offered him my hospitality, and he had figured it out all by himself. I was his god./

//So you fell in love with Mor who proceeded to blow up your universe?//

/Yes. I'm still heartbroken about it, and no one else knows. Do me a favor and please don't tell anyone. My father and the rest of the court will be furious at me./

//Don't worry I won't I know what being in love is like.//

[Aleia]

Aleia And Rokul Pt.2

/Rokul?/

//What? Did you see something Aleia?//

/No but you never told me what happened after you met Rosanne./

//I would prefer not to talk about it.//

/But I overheard your father talking about a grandson. Did you really have a kid?/

//I said I don't want to talk about it.//

/Hey now take it from me, holding things in isn't good at all. You gotta tell someone otherwise it'll hurt over time./

/I don't want to tell anyone. If my father said it then you should've listened better./

//But I didn't so I'm asking you.//

/Nothing happened./

//Something must've happened.//

/My son. Silas. He's gone./

//He was taken?//

/Sort of. Mor killed him and put his soul and Aether into a machine.

Now I'm trying to find him so I can get whats left of my son back./

//Im sorry Rokul. Really. The only reason I asked you was because I thought that you were angry for having to leave your family. But I see now. It's all my fault this has happened to you. Im sorry Rokul. Im

sorry. And to your son too, may he rest in peace.//

/He won't unless I get his soul back from Mor./

[Rokul]

Claire And Catherine

Forget about Agartha. Forget about the gods. All I want to remember is Howard and my children Claire and Catherine. They've been growing up normal. Nothing seems that different about them. No one knows anything about Agartha or real history. Good for them all, they can live unaware of all the destruction that could happen to them. I have kept one of my old books with me. It is a history of Agartha and my peoples cultures all in our native language. I have been teaching my daughters how to read, speak, and write agarthan in the hopes that one day my people will become found and Claire and Catherine could be the link between our two different cultures.

[Maera]

The New World Order

/Prometheus, my machine prince update me on what has happened in the third main universe./

//Yes, Lord Mor. The Agarthans are still in possession of the crystal containing Umbra.//

/Do they know she is contained?//

//No Lord Mor. They are too busy dealing with the Flesh Eaters, a

small group of cannibals eating random people and keeping them
locked up to harvest their flesh.//

/Good. As for the surface world. Is Julius Hex ready for his expedi-
tion?/

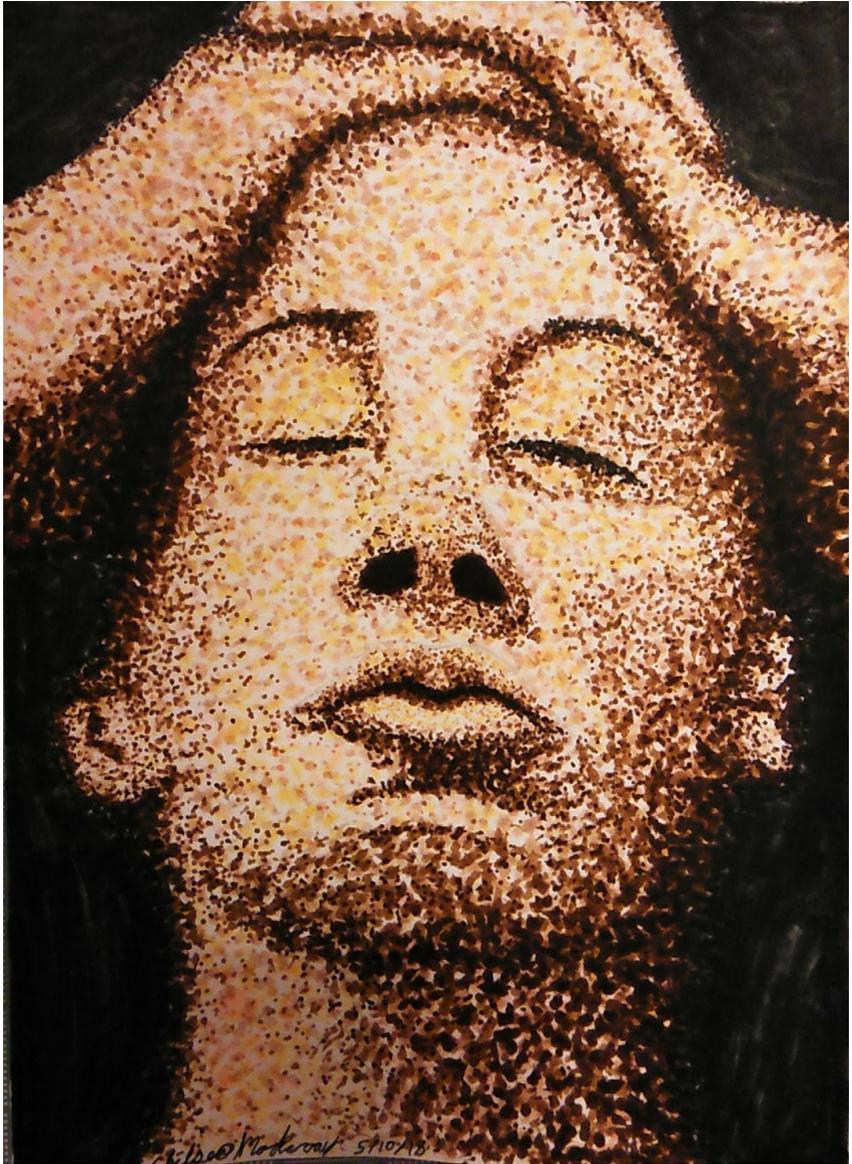
//Yes, Lord Mor. He has with him someone who has studied ancient
text a woman named Diana. She believes there is an opening in the
salt mine in austria near Salzburg. I believe that we will finally get the
Agarthans to leave and enlist more people to our cause.//

/My Machine Prince there is a new world order, a new universal order.
Us. The Neo Humans shall capture Umbra, and with that power, we
will finally be able to open the gate forcibly and take our place as
rightful gods. Everything is falling into place./

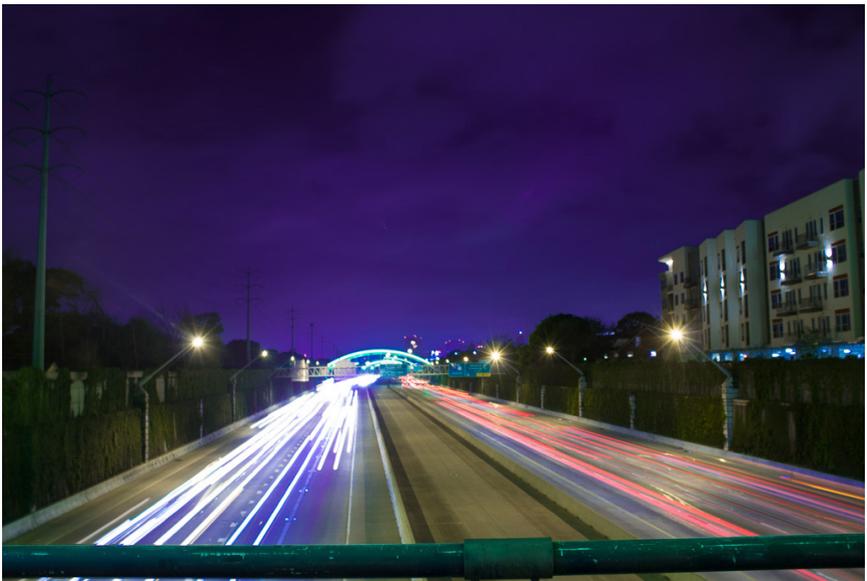
[Lord Mor]



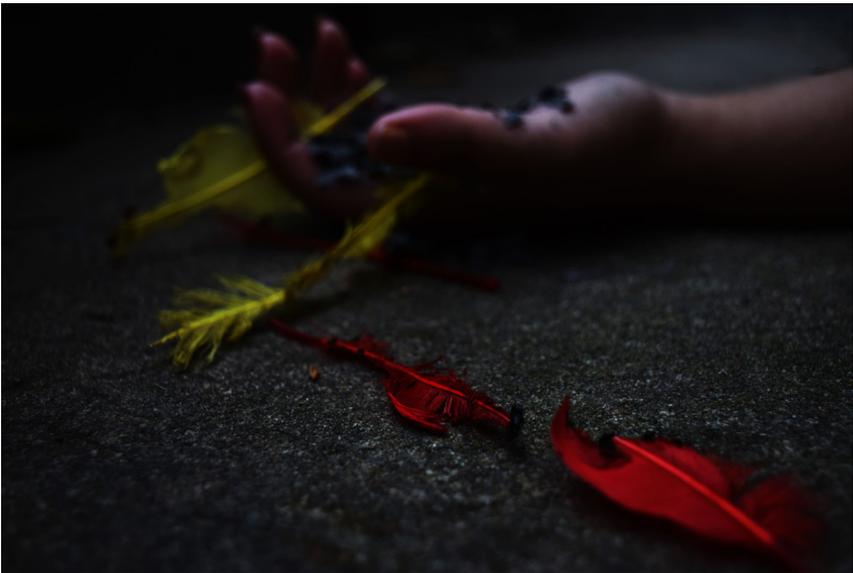
Chelsea Markcray



Chelsea Markcray



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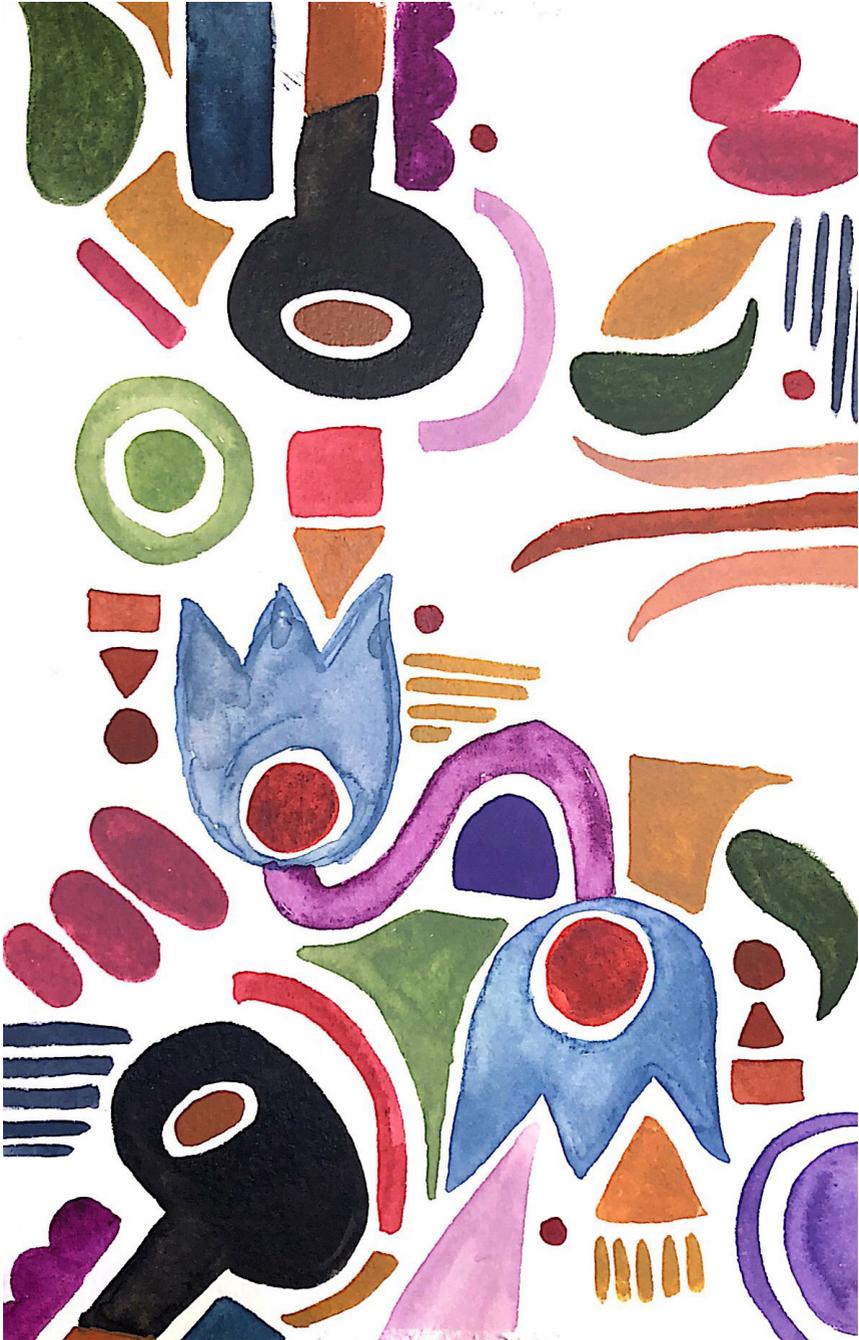


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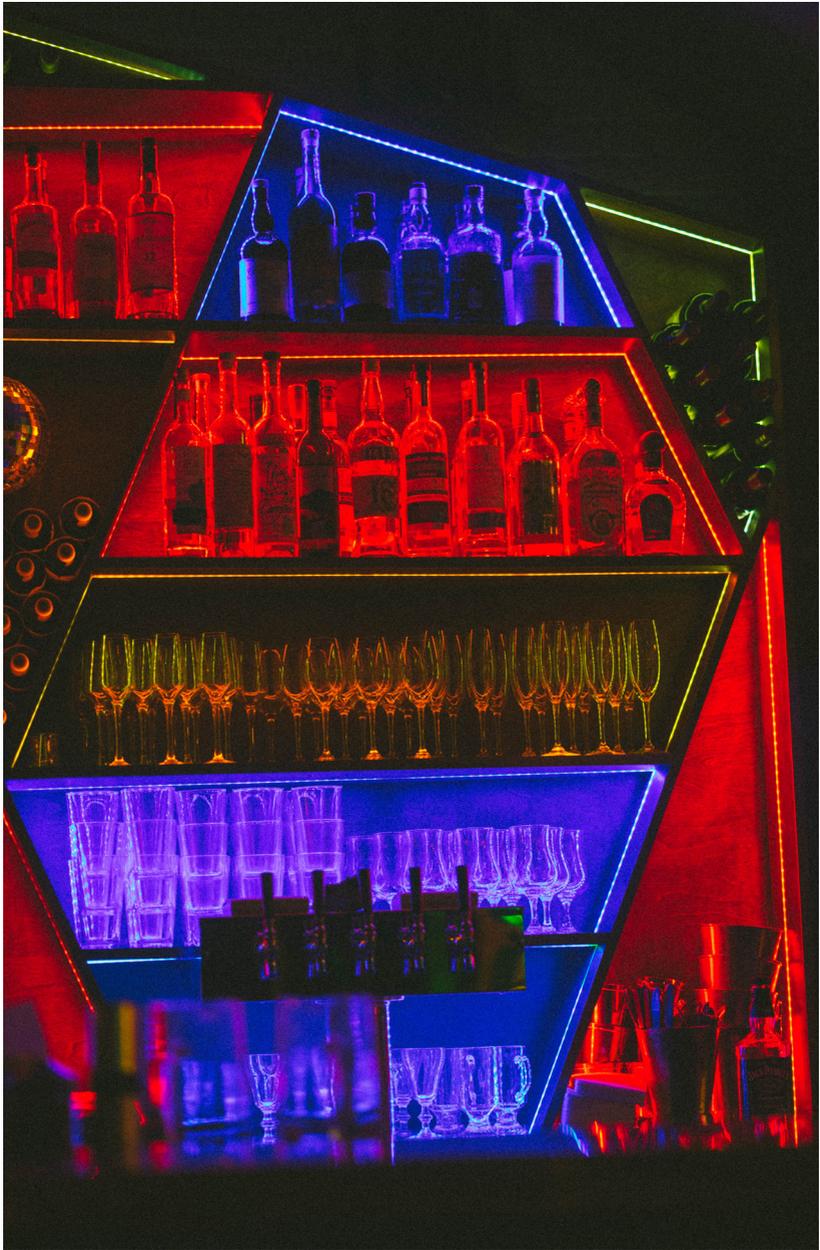


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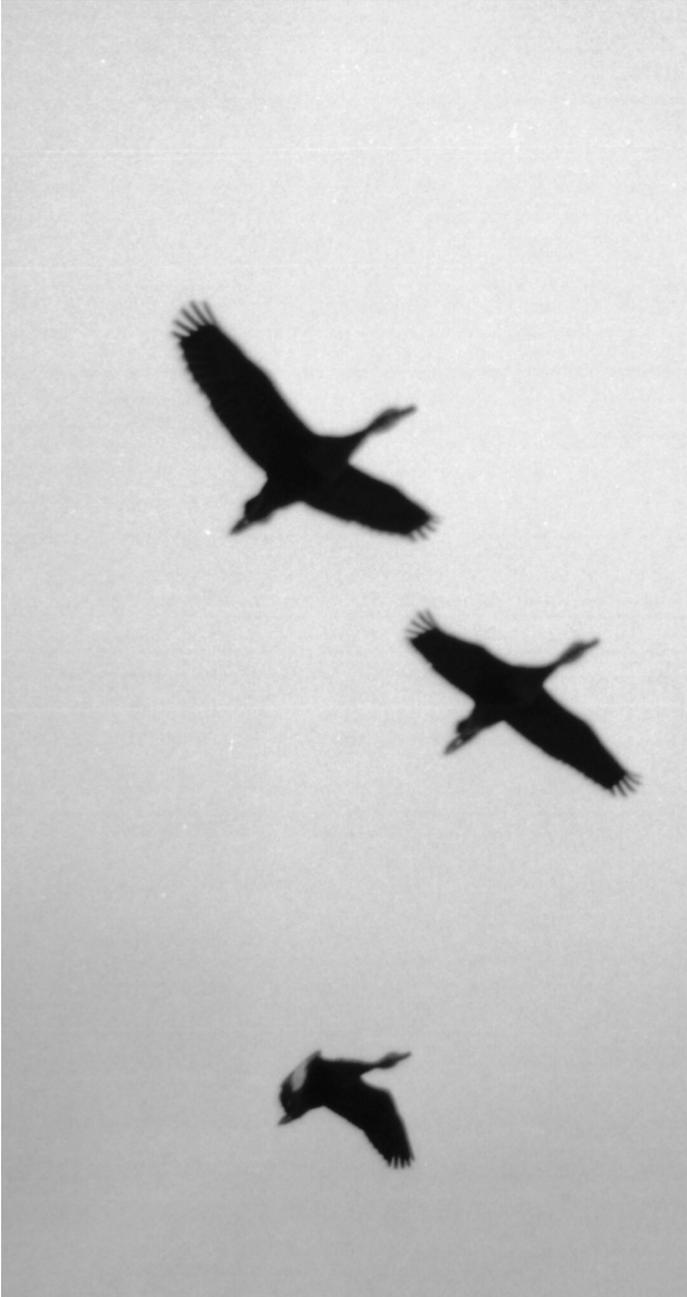




Marco De Santiago



Marco De Santiago



Christian A. Cantu







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Ignasio Hernandez

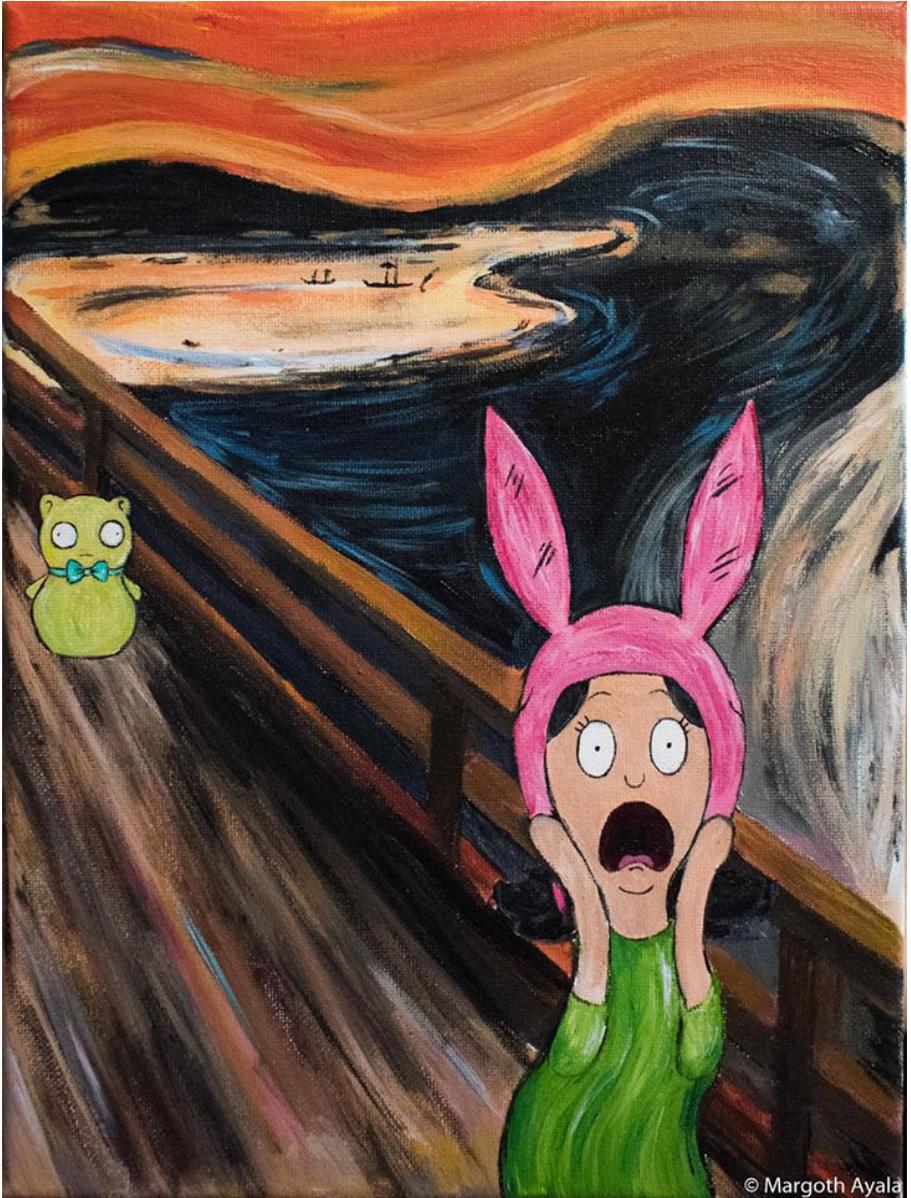


Ignasio Hernandez



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