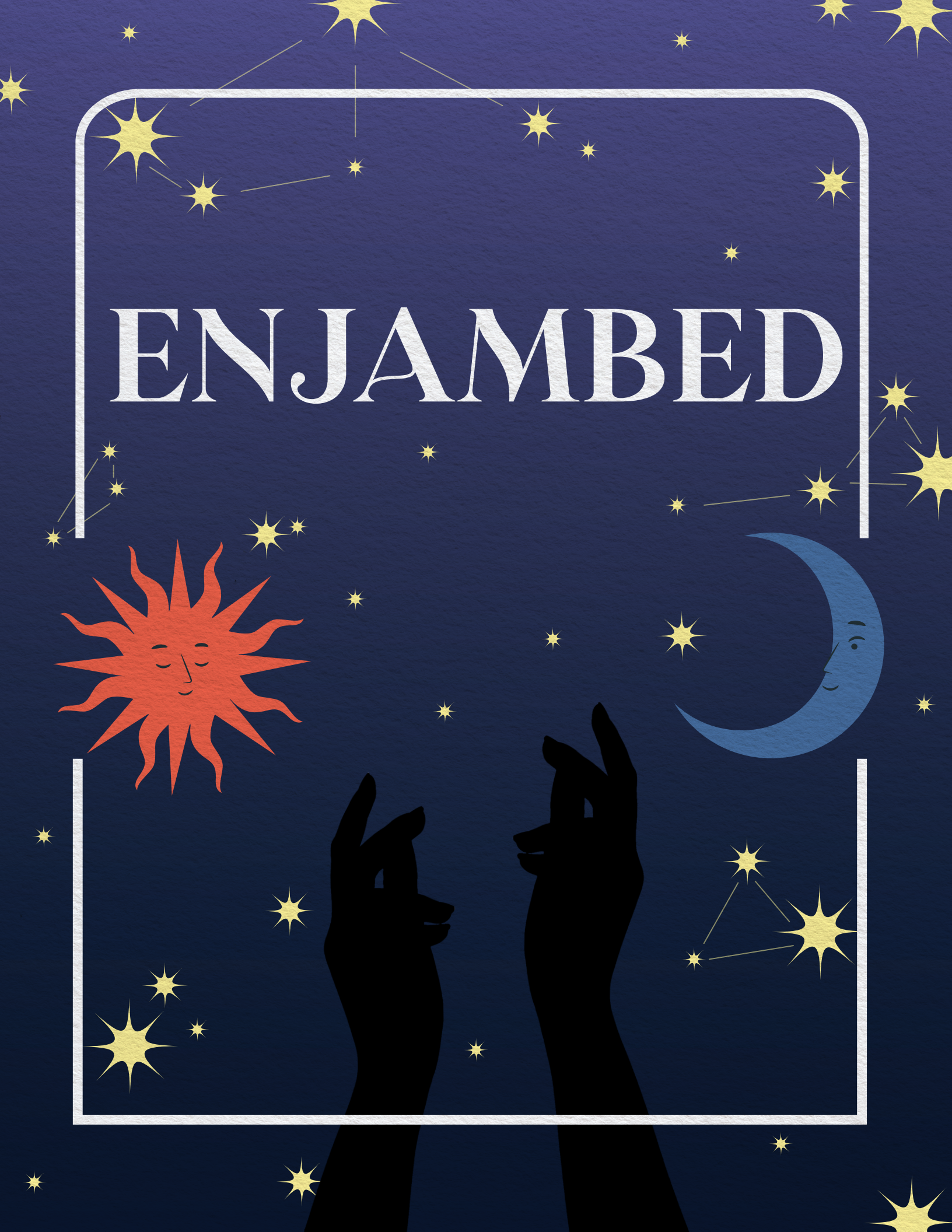


ENJAMBED



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ENJAMBED

SPRING 2023

FOR LOVE OF THE STARS

“Is that why you stare at the stars? ...Are you searching for beauty or dreaming with your eyes wide open?” -Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Gods of Jade and Shadow*

Department of English
California State University, Dominguez Hills

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your creativity!

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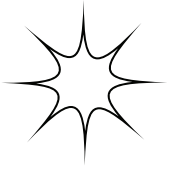
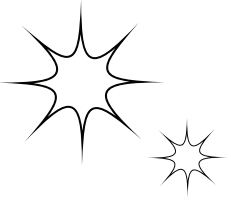
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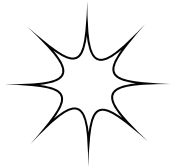
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FIRE



three generations in sagittarius

By Gabriela Villanueva-Vega



[i am] seeking to forget the fullness of my lips,
the roundedness of my face,
of my belly,
of my breasts.



circadian reminders of a cultura seldomly distant,
yet still bathed in los rios of unfamiliarity.

dearest amá-i hear her roars like cacophonous reverberations,
they populate my senses and i forget where she ends and i-
wait, where does she end?

two archers at a standstill, dead silence broken-
broken by the babbling of the rio.
one archer gazing into the reflection of its waters.
contemplations-trapped in daydreams of a third archer [one day]
a not-yet-existing essence of sueños y fe-
the entire embodiment of the moon and sun.

en las playas de veracruz

By Gabriela Villanueva-Vega

encuentro tu amor envuelto
en un mar de caldo ardiente,
te quemas la lengua
y armado con dolor regresas
-al día siguiente

escucho tu risa lejana entre bosques
en la barranca del cupatitzio,
cuando el mar de soledad todavía
no intentaba ahogarme
-ando en olas y te busco entre estrellas

espero todavía poder ver la reflexión de tus ojos
en el sol y los cazos de cobre en santa clara,
quizás la muerte también estuvo allí-sin reflejo,
sentada a tu lado en las bancas de la villa
-quizás ese día fue el fin del escorpión.



MUD

By Kaitlyn Manoogian

No matter how much he
cleaned, it seemed he
couldn't clean in the good
He couldn't scrub / serotonin
into his veins and he
would always find a way to
rip butterflies from his
flesh/ He wished for a
kingdom filled with
butterflies and he was
quite sad
so he sadly went mad/
Butterflies flew
themselves back into
caterpillars/
The caterpillars withdrew
from his veins and when he
saw his blood/ he knew it
had been purified with
mud.



Nights of a Poet

By Jovanni Cardoso

I've made it my privilege to take into account constant nightmares...
Black magic that cannot be unlearned
I wash my hands & face hoping the soap will penetrate my skull and cleanse my mind and soul...
The deeper I sleep the harder it becomes to control vividness...
I'm running out of time and yet it won't go any faster...
If I was an artist! (a good one) I'd make a living of the images constantly monologued, I'm sick of it!!!
A bad movie that keeps going with nothing to stop it...
How long does it take to burn 25 + years of film???
A flash with all rights reserved in a photographic memory....
One must distinguish good and bad pictures when emotions run wild...
I'll take my chances on a canvas....
It can't get any worse after all I'm always feeling lucky....



DESPERATE AND ALIVE (SIGH) WHAT A BIG FUCKINNG SURPRISE!

It's the same shit everywhere I go.
I'D RATHER LIVE THROUGH VIVID DREAMS, not much of a difference aside from Beatles songs, literally flying, and the occasional facial disfigurement. The fact that I can wake up at any moment but to what extent? Whether I choose to or not?? Maybe? Yeah!? Ughhh, Goodday sunshine!
What'll happen if you drop an industrial size fan into the ocean while it's plugged in? That's a serious question...
No need for death, brews with friends, or mother's apologies "the unforgiven."
Cars will crash in hopes of brawls; perhaps, it's the theme of a viral music video, or major motion picture that electroshocks the nation as if meteors were shooting though lightning hitting earth.
You guessed it, at the speed of light! So, long inhabitants...

Je-je-je-jets and Benny's electric boots, what a family guy.
What good are those items when you're stuck in shallow white concrete?
They're inherently bad like trash, thieves in classrooms robbing students at gun point, and Interpol. FUCK THOSE DUDES! A million dollars really gets my heart pumping, that's still a lot of money, right? (Chambers).
Imagine all the people, Imagine all the pain.
How about a midnight ride?
No lights because you won't be scared if you don't see what we're about to hit...
That's adrenaline! (sigh)
It races on thin ice and cracked glaciers.
If it happens to break you better hope it's an arctic submarine jeering off and not those worthless cops that laugh when a culprit has been identified...
They deserve a kick to the chest!
I used to think I loved unnecessary fights; Now I realize I hate them all!!!
hate is such a strong word...
The true definition of animal abuse and not just a few smacks in public like a bad dog... the bad egos that we carry for some reason have us thinking that it's ok to harm the innocent....



Hand held cameras circulating more pictures than loose change, three quarters which aren't even worth their value "pun intended..."

And All-around ammunition is flying, I suppose we'll need a bullet removing staple gun... ironic, isn't it? All you gotta do is hit the right spot or you might push it in further. Even if you get it out in one hit it seems pointless like custom fashion guitars marketed towards cats. I mean if it works it works the last quarter on a dollar. You don't walk up to whores with fractions. You gotta have the bills! If you don't pay dues, you might as well start a gunfight on a busy public beach. Now I'm all for breaking and entering if we don't take anything. I've told my share of lies,

even cheated a few times, it's not a game if you don't break the rules but if there's anything I hate more than liars and cheaters it's thieves...

Seriously there's no need to steal, just ask.

An indoor river, I don't know what purpose it serves in a classroom during a discussion unless of course the discussion is about getting you out of class. In which case, you will need lots of towels and extra sets of dry clothes assuming the water would be up to your neck the second you got out of your seat which is why your seats are arranged on platforms I assume, but then again, the bad teachers throw you into a river or as most would refer to in the transit system "under the bus." Along with your backpacks, electronics, laptop chargers, etc...

Thus, waking hungover and can't shake the headache, the only hope is to go to sleep where I can practice my craft and fifteen-minute jam session last forever or until the dog starts barking...

I was having such a good jam session...



Zoom in on a google map,

Now, imagine that concept except instead of focus on an area you transport without having to click on anything, It's all mind power,

One time I transported myself from the beach into the Hilton in about 6 seconds, I hadn't realized they renovated the hotel for college dorm rooms.

Other than the stuffed animal claw machine near the entrance the hallway walls were covered in posters and pictures of randomness, wrestlers, musicians, girls.

You know, all kinds of shit...

As I make my way down the hall there seemed to be more activity in & out of the rooms & more chaos, except for one room. So, I decided to open the door and wouldn't you know the lights go out and all I hear is the voice of what I'm pretty sure is a girl in an all-boys dorm.

I don't remember what she said, all I remember is that I was instantly lost in complete messiness and as I made my way towards entrances they turned into wrong exits. It was as if I was on Terminal Island back in San Pedro with no way off.

But there I was transported, that's when the tall cans and 12 pack from my moms and brother came in handy.

High school reminiscing of girls where soon after I ended up in a cafeteria serving fruit infused jell-o and brownies...

That was all I don't know how that tied in with futuristic protection suits and helmets.

We all thought it had something to do with robots like the super Nintendo.

It seems I'm going to need theater tickets to gain entrance to what some might consider a hiding spot or place.

So much for the hammer I planned on smashing my attempted murderers face in with.

The cop who managed to take my sunglasses also managed to bring me to a halt when he saw me pick up the hammer, he confiscated the hammer as well.

I'm sure if he had seen the skewer through my neck I wouldn't have had to come up with an elaborate story about the tools in my backpack.

Not that it mattered, all I wanted was revenge and what better way than to pop someone when they least expected it.

Anyways, I didn't need tickets after all I made my way up the stairs into crowded rows of velvet seats, not only did I find myself, I found myself racing a crazy 8 track for DVD prizes against contestants which I could not see considering I was in last place.

Story of my life.

Guess "it," I mean "I" turned out to be the great really unexpected performance.

"Thank You" "Thank you very much"



Love Letter
By Mason Martin



The fingerprints came back. I want to ask if you can see them through those embers in your face - those dark hearths of tender patience parading as human eyes. I want to know if the whorls and divots still press bruises into my skin or if it's only my memory pasting them there like petal paper. I want to know if your firelight eyes can expose them as well as time hides them. Watch carefully, they'll try to flicker with your blinks. Look again - can you see?

Five fingerprints, a snap, and suddenly the world is inside out; suddenly everyone is a dark secret I can never know and my parents are just as horrendously human as I am. The bruises aren't new, just the shape of the prints are. Forensic evidence of new truths, preserved in my flesh. They keep pulling.

I hid them under ratty black hoodies for the longest time. Cleaned up all the mess left in their wake. Out of sight, out of mind. It's easier to mop up the blood and pretend the floor was always clean, that knees are always red, that the clock on the wall - the one with the howling wolf, the moon, the crack in the corner - never reminded me of cool, wet linoleum against my cheek. The dead spider amid the crumbs under the dining room table. My arm scribbled across the tile like a bad crayon drawing. It doesn't hurt if I don't press on it. It doesn't hurt. It gets easier to tell myself it feels good.

Did you see them? They fade in and out with the memories. Roll up and through like goosebumps. Chicken skin. They bubble up like brands some days, stay faint like old scars on others. Their patterns hold whole universes - whole other humans leaving their marks on me like I'm some cosmic repository.

Am I? Am I supposed to hold all these fingerprints? Is my skin the sin-eater, primed to carry their deeds into the next life as though they were my own? Or am I the hand of their judgment?

The new Gundam is on. The mechs spark and shine like never before, all beam sabers and rifles and flashing comm systems. Their dynamic maneuvers flow across the screen in riotous color and sound. Screaming pilots too young to know war sweat or vomit onto the glass bubbles of their helmets. Animation has come such a long way - it makes my heart pound, but in the back of my mind I find it's missing some of the old hand-drawn charm. It's missing the nostalgic tang of imperfection. Then suddenly there is a young man smashing an absurdly beautiful garden as onlookers flinch and I feel myself flinch and I feel the smashing sounds echo in my bones down to the marrow. Artistic progression ceases to matter. The characters' fluid, lifelike movements - so different from the stiffness of their 90s counterparts - only serve to push me deeper into the past, back when those 90s pilots took me deep into vast, grainy starscapes through late night VCR therapy. Their cel-painted arms extend into skyscraper height death machines from the cockpit. My arms are naked and vulnerable; they itch. Red coils push up through the skin and stand my hair on end. Chicken skin - the pale topography of panic. I vaguely hear someone reprimand the young man on screen, but my eyes are on the fingerprints now. I watch them tremble with me. They dance to the echo of breaking glass and raised voices and the memory of warped eurobeat warbling from a tape rewound one too many times.

My internal tape stops rolling when your hand brushes over my arm. It's like you've pressed my eject button. The fingerprints disappear where you touch me. Just skin and hair left behind, clean. Just freckles, moles, faded tattoos, faint scars - no raised milky ways burning someone's phantom grip around me. No nail crescents stinging me from decades in the past. Just my arm.
Just my arm.



The fire your eyes kindle every morning is a dance of gold across my own eyes. It disintegrates my nightmares. It offers me a warm uncertainty, a softness alien and destructive; it unmakes the creature I became under my family's rickety dining table all those years ago. The flames lick through the armor of cardboard and dust that feral echo builds in the night to preserve itself. The dead spider's curled legs are singed away as you play arson in my memory-house.

I'm not afraid. It's always winter in the memory. I'm so, so cold, and you're just granting an old wish. You're always grant-

ing my darkest wishes with a reversed monkey-paw. I want my world to burn; you set fire to my old hurts.

Very clever; I never did specify which world.

When your lantern eyes snuff out in sleep, I tumble back to the kitchen floor as a wounded creature once again. It's different now, though. Now I have a golden glow breaking in through the once-blackened window of my heart. I look at myself - a separate being. Finally, a temporal break. Finally, I have aged. The creature I was cringes from the warmth I bring, slipping under the cardboard boxes ever ready for the next leaving.

"You can't hide there. We're not going anywhere."



"He won't let you stay."

"Does he need to? Do we need him to?"

"He'll hurt you either way."

"I don't care. Not this time."

I tentatively reach out to pat the head of child-me, bandage the knee, remove my busted child arm like I'm playing with a Barbie. I replace it with gunpla model pieces - all sharp plastic and epoxy.

The arm is easy enough to replace - beam sabers, buster shields, gatling guns - each multifunctional, interchangeable. I fall in love with the feeling of power in my hands. I want to glow like Gundam Unicorn. I want to carry Deathscythe's death scythe. I want a Haro for a friend, bouncing in my cockpit. I scrape and file away at the pieces to make them fit just right, to become something new, something safe, something so far from cardboard that I never know papercut armor ever again. I affix a chestplate over my heart, reinforce my legs with jets. I surround myself with beams and wings.

I change the story. I remake me.

I crown myself Gundam.

The smell of a smoldering house clings to me each morning as I shrug away the cardboard dreams. Two stories, burnt to the ground. My family's very first house with two stories. Not an apartment, not a rental - we flew across state lines to buy a house with two stories and a backyard and a gazebo. The entrance boasted elegant frosted glass and french doors. My room upstairs was large enough to be a small dance studio, with nearly the entire front-facing wall taken up by a window. Huge, pretty new house, holding all of our ugly.

I remember how my teenage angst oozed into every crack of those pretty wooden floorboards. I remember writing poems about dying in glittering snow. Waking at 3 am to soothe my squalling sibling - because who else would, in this house? Waking again at 7 to drag myself to my pretty new school. I remember the lonely dog outside we never should have adopted, the busted dresser downstairs, the apartment-sized basement only my friends and I were brave enough to enter. All the pretty packaging hiding dead spiders and broken things inside

Burn it all - my skin-smear, second story window, my tooth permanently lodged in the shower drain, my nailmark secrets gouged into the wallpaper. My bestial child ghost, still cold and bellowing in the twice flooded basement like a cursed relic. My unfinished Deathscythe Hell model scattered atop a scrapbook of pornographic cartoon characters I hid in the broken dryer we never got around to throwing out.

Let the flames swallow it all. The slow destruction feels purifying, almost holy. Controlled. The reversed monkey-paw,

disarming my self-destruct button; when I wish for death, you only kill the wish. You force me into new possibilities. How could anyone wish for a better arsonist?

If you want to burn the rest of me, I want you to do it proudly. Every fingerprint, just cinder and ash at our feet. You, holding my fresh, clean bones together under the healing blink of the stars. I trust you to do this. My god, I have been waiting for you.

mercury retrograde

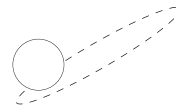
By Mason Martin

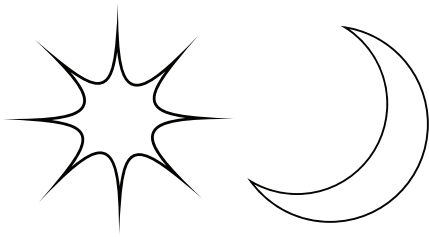
you raise a fist to the night sky
to grasp the stars, shake them like dice,
& fling them into new constellations,
new configurations - no one can count
the shipwrecks your new horoscope
will cost. when the north star spins
in the east & orion loses his belt,
virgo tips over, spills her jug
onto sagittarius. his hand slips
on the bow, the arrow splitting gemini
apart, breaking andromeda's chains
& spearing pisces onto perseus' shield.
amid the chaos, you unfurl your fortune:

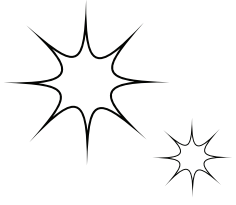
fitting rewards draw near
if you travel this year

& when you step over perseus, petrified
by a kiss from medusa's head, you steal
his ship, point it toward the dizzy sun
still reeling from your gamble - it burns
away horologium's pendulum, wrenching
the seasons out of order, reversing
the cycles of tide and planet. your fist
stays tight on the wheel, betting it all on
that constant, spinning beacon beyond

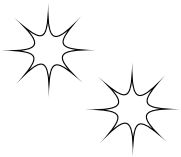
the wreckage of starlight bright bones, the
sinking ursae & coroneae, the iceberg
once called moon. you slide your ship
over the starving belly of cetus as he
salivates through the sea, searching for
andromeda, so endlessly hungry -
but she has found orion's belt. she has
lassoed distant venus & vanished, broken
shackles rattling farewell. cetus smells
her leaving. smells his brethren burning
up in the atmosphere, smells their bones
floating, smells the rest following as comets
that scream your name as they fall -
he hears he smells he feels the proof of
you, of your sins, & his fins glide silent
against the stern. he is still so hungry
& you, glistening like an offering from
the wrathful celestial gods, are deaf to his
stomach gurgling in the murky waves.







EARTH



The Old Streetlamp on First Street and Bristol

By Jasmin Cruz



I am an object. I am without life, but I can see all around me. I can't help but to see. I can't feel, have opinions, or speak aloud. I can't do these things that I see humans do. I can't talk to other objects around me. I am unable to understand constructs and conventions. I think of things as they are. I can remember. I am an old streetlamp on the corner of First Street and Bristol. Some of my neighbors are an old, battered trash can and some Box Elders that line the edge of a property and provide some shade, and a bus stop that was once clean but now bears scribbles all over. My light flickers on and off from time to time. Most of the time, it's completely off. I'm not maintained as well as I should be. My purpose is to shine light throughout the night, but, sometimes, I do not fulfill that purpose. Occasionally, a city worker will remember to replace my bulb. But, like my neighbors, the city doesn't remember to refurbish us or replace us.

I witness many things, despite my limited scope. It's a busy street. A busy corner. Lots of things run into me. A person riding a bike. Anyone who's on their phone, not paying attention. A car or two has also run into me in the past. No matter how bad the crash is, I don't falter. I don't break in half. I have scratches and dents. The cars themselves always look squished or torn in half. Sometimes, the people inside those cars crawl out, uninjured. Other times, they have to be pulled out by other people. My paint is chipped. I've been here for years or decades, I think. I was installed before old businesses started disappearing; before new buildings were erected. I think the abandoned building behind me used to be a church. I was here before the bus stop was replaced. It used to be a wire, green bench with no shade, but this new one is made of steel and has a built-in roof for some shade.

There is a man that has a habit of sleeping on the steel bench. He's been sleeping here since before the wire bench was replaced. He never slept on the wire bench, so he used to sleep under the Box Elders. Back when the ground had some grass, maybe that's why he chose to stay. When he tried to sleep on the wire bench, he tossed around and grunted. He seemed determined to sleep on the bench. He doesn't look like the people who usually pass me or the people who wait by the bus stop. He wears the same clothes over and over again and wears many shirts and sweaters on top of each other. Sometimes people will give him food, some money. Sometimes, people ignore him, run away from him. He's mostly quiet. On some days, he's very loud and disruptive. These are his bad days. His bad days are when everyone avoids him. Even the people that are nice to him. Sometimes he's skinny, sometimes he gains weight. These days, he's very skinny.

I remember when he first started showing up. He was a muscular person. His hair was cut short and had slight facial hair. His skin had less wrinkles. He appeared distressed, like how people get when they miss the bus. Yet, he hadn't missed the bus. The bus wasn't coming for a long while. He sat on the old wire bench and held his face in his hands. He was thinking hard about something. It upset him a lot. The bus came and he got on. I could see him head towards the very back, where it was empty. As the bus loaded more passengers, he looked out the window. He looked at me. At the Box Elders. At the plentiful grass beneath the trees. The next day, he didn't come back until late in the day. This wasn't unusual. I always notice people come this way multiple days in a row. He didn't sit at the bench this time. He laid down on the grass. The Box Elders shielded him. He would've stayed there the whole night, but a police officer came and made him get up and leave. I think it was freezing that night. He was wearing a large jacket. It acted as his blanket. He didn't come back for several days or weeks, I don't know how many. The next time he came back, his hair had grown wild. His clothes looked dirty. On his head was a hat covering stringy, long hair. On his face was a thick, wiry beard. He was shouting things. He was talking to someone, but he looked at no one. Everyone that was near him stepped away immediately, but he kept talking, shouting, laughing.

Today, he sits under the still hearty Box Elders on top of a small pillow. The grass is just dirt now, save for some weeds poking out on the edges of the pavement and tree roots. He wears his usual set of clothing, but today they seem to be washed. His hair and beard are trimmed. He still wears his beanie, despite the new cut. His skin looks clean. His shoes are the dirtiest thing about him. A large group of people are gathering at the bus stop. The bus must be drawing near. A girl holding plastic bags speed walks this way. The man notices her. He stares at her, longingly. She sees this happening. For a few moments, her eyes dart back and forth from him to the bus inching closer and closer. This is something people tend to do when they're uncomfortable with him around. The girl turns around and approaches him. She's going to yell at him.

"Sir, would you like some tacos?"

She didn't yell at him. The man doesn't answer. He stares at her for a long time. I forget if he knew how to speak at all now. He doesn't nod or shake his head either. He's frozen.

"It's okay if you don't want any. Just thought I would ask."

The bus is at the stoplight now. He has seconds to decide on his answer. He makes no sound and only nods when the bus starts moving. The girl moves to her plastic bags and takes out a plate that's filled with something red and greasy and protected by more plastic.

“I only have a pastor and here’s a water bottle and napkins.”

She hands him a thick wad of napkins.



“Thank you! Bless you, may God bless you, miss!” The bus approaches and people start boarding. He had been staring at her plastic bags, not her.

“No problem, you’re welcome!” She leaves with a smile and disappears into the bus. I can’t see which seat she takes. The bus is nearly overflowing with people. The man sets down his food on the ground and takes the pillow out from under him and uses it as a table. He trickles lemon all over the tacos, drizzles red salsa on some of the tacos. He picks out some pieces of meat and leaves them on the plate. He devours the food, however. He cherishes it. He eats like he’s never eaten before. I’ve noticed him eat food here before, but never with the same enthusiasm as he shows now. This might be his favorite food. This might be a new food he’s never eaten before.

The man never stays here through the night since the first couple nights he started coming around. These other two people took his place, but they never stayed through the night either. They are a man and a woman. They always come in the dead of night. They stand behind me, under the Box Elders. They whisper things. Sometimes they argue, shouting. Then they get mad at each other for being too loud. A third person will join them after a few minutes and they shake hands. Or they exchange something. It’s a different third person almost every time. Sometimes it’s a man, a woman, a girl, a boy. I don’t know. It’s strange. Secretive. It’s strange that this looks so secretive. If other people happen to walk by these two, they ignore them. They walk faster. Keep their eyes down. This type of ignoring is different from when people ignore the man who sleeps on the bench. Maybe it’s not strange after all. Maybe other people do the same things at other bus stops, beneath other trees, behind other street lamps. Maybe it’s normal to ignore them. Sometimes I hear pops in the air and I see people cower down, they run away, they hide.

Across the street is a large lawn. Some palm trees dot the abundant grass. A California Black Oak sits at the far end of the lawn. Sometimes, I can see men sleeping under the Black Oak. It’s large with plenty of shade. Children sometimes play in the grass, if they’re waiting with their guardian for the bus or if they’ve run ahead and are waiting for their parents to catch up. I mostly see a flock of pigeons that reside on the lawn. They swarm the sidewalk when it’s quiet but cover the sky when cars pile up. Every once in a while, across the street, a group of people show up holding large signs and dragging around a large speaker and singing. They sing and shout about a person named Jesus. About a person named God. Sometimes about someone named Mary. Like the man, people walking by ignore them. Very few will strike up a conversation with them. Today, after their singing and shouting, the group of people set themselves down on the lawn. One person stands behind a podium and they start talking. I can hear only snippets of their words due to a pitchy sound. They say the person named God saved them. How they made the person named God sad. I can’t see this person named God. They’re not standing up. They’re not hugging the people that say they were saved by the person named God. More people talk about the people named God, Jesus, and Mary. One after the other. Until the sun goes down.

I am a street lamp on the corner of First Street and Bristol. I see lots of things happen everyday and every night. Today, I see a large truck park in front of me. Men wearing bright orange vests step out of the vehicle and set down bright orange cones around the vehicle. One of the men comes up to me and takes out my bulb. It must have been a long while since my bulb was replaced. Though, I don’t remember it being so long ago. The men tie strands of rope around me and stand on either side of me. Another man moves to take off the bolts securing me to the ground. The men pull on the ropes when I start to fall. I’m suspended in the air. They’re removing me. The men and machines pick me up and set me down on the bed of a semi-truck. They tie me down and start moving. For the first time since I was first bolted on the corner of First Street and Bristol, I can see things beyond my limited environment. Mostly, I can only see cars zooming past me, but I catch glimpses of homes, stores, places that aren’t bus stops. I catch glimpses of what people do when they’re not waiting for the bus, when they’re not ignoring the man who sleeps on the steel bench, when they’re not crossing the street. They never stop moving. The semi-truck stops at a junkyard. It’s an open, worn down area. I could see the wooden fence perimeter rotten and broken off in some spots. The junkyard is crowded with old street lamps and green, wire benches and broken traffic lights. There are mountains of piles of other objects I’ve never seen before. They must be old fixtures from different parts of the city. I was a street lamp on the corner of First Street and Bristol. I don’t see people walking past me anymore. The occasional worker will appear out of a corner, then vanish as quickly as they came about. I don’t see the man who sleeps on the steel bench. There is no one to ignore or be ignored. My new neighbors are these old, forgotten city fixtures. The ones the city couldn’t refurbish. The city remembered to replace me.



What they never tell you

By Tori Robertson

That white-knuckled, gut-clenching feeling
Heart squeezing with a side of breath stealing
Sweaty palms and muscles taut
Bent in two, lung function lost
This is what they never tell you
It holds your body hostage too.
No choice in the matter, dear
Everything you fear is here
Mind in pieces, eyes are wide
Nobody can see inside
Sucking in air that doesn't exist
Fingernails digging into involuntary fists
Panic takes hold so quick
Attacking with a savage rib kick
Final position ends up fetal
Adrenaline up as if stuck with a needle
Then it's all over and you're spent
Anxiety asks for such high rent



r.e.f.

By Karla Sales

They say you're meant to meet every
person that comes into your life.
That sometimes,
it's just your fate.



Perhaps our names-
were always written in the stars.
Lost in space,
or close to mars.

But whatever it is or
whatever it was.
I'll hold you dear and close to my heart.
Whether we are together.

Or planets apart.

Lost & Found

By Karla Sales

I will admit I clung onto you for so long,
because my soul was not ready to cut ties.
I dug myself deeper in my thoughts-
I lost my innocence while searching for yours.
But in the end, I found myself.
Walking away never meant loneliness,
So I let you go.



Blunt Force Drama

By Tori Robertson

When I open up the hallway door
I am unsurprised when I become less focused than before
All the ideas and to-do lists come floating back inside
To the place of supposed solitude that should be my mind
I attempt to find the tenacity I had moments ago
But the ebbing has dominated my previous flow
Procrastination reigns and I end up on a guilt trip
When in reality I could have easily slipped
Much earlier in the hours I had painstakingly spent
Trying to coerce my brain into some sort of consent
I take for granted the little triumphs I make in my day
Because my negative emotions tend to get in the way
So here I am, worrying too much and concentrating less
Too often I let my distress outweigh my success.

Nocturnal

By Zimri Padilla

Like the cleaning of a house,
My sleepless nights seem almost endless.
I think of everything – the future, the mood,
The sounds that come when the fridge makes ice.
The water cooler, abruptly buzzing
To cool the water within.

Nobody keeps it dark in the room all day,
Even when the place is empty.
And when nobody walks through
The door, they keep those lights off.

It has nothing to do with energy conservation
And everything to do with the atmosphere.
This is dark side of the moon territory.
I only see the silhouettes – shapes, objects, but no faces.

Memorization of where like
The back of my bruised hand.
Maybe walking 2 paces is too much.
Visualize the light grey countertop and feel its cool edges.

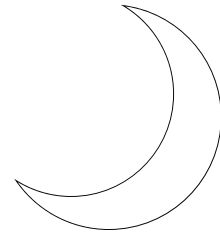
But when I stumble into the empty trash can,
Still with the smell of Febreze and Tide
I realize the mistake of being voluntarily blind.
Just a blind guy leading another blind guy.

3 paces forward, 1 pace to the left
And the shoulder brushes hard
Against the towering refrigerator.
Press on.

There is a step higher than the rest.
Step too low, stub my toe,
Step too high, look like a flamingo.
Step just right as you walk.

Here, the light must be on.
Brush my teeth. Floss.
Mouthwash. Rinse.
Turn the light off.

I stand in the doorway of the bathroom,
Thinking of the walk over.
But the lesson goes unlearned
The lights are still off and my body, ready for abuse



25 Blimps *By Maria Cavadas*

Random fun fact: there are 25 operating blimps left in the world. Yup, you can kiss another childhood memory goodbye. At least we still have ice cream trucks and toys r us stores oh wait, they're almost gone too.

Isn't it funny how time works? Literally. A universally accepted occurrence turned man made, or so they claim. What would life be without our understanding of time? Total chaotic behavior on the rise with presumptuous pricks running around- oh wait, that's already some people's daily routines.

It appears everything around the world keeps changing but us.

Our habitual need for external validation.

Our habitual need for protection.

Our habitual need for greed.

Our habitual need to misunderstand irreversibility



Not to confuse reality with pessimism- the world is quite cruel, but there's beauty to be found within the ugly. We take the little things for granted, like the taste of a freshly dipped cookie or the sound of ocean waves crashing. Time and change are forever intertwined. And yet there's us, we have the ability to move forward freely but choose to stand still, more often than not - And just like those blimps, the time will come when one day, we too, will decrease in size, lose our power, and fade into history.

The only thing left standing will be a little man made construct we once knew as time.

Quiero Cambiar el Mundo *By Daisy Aguirre*

Cuando pienso en justicia y paz
Imagino eliminar toda maldad



Siento que
Mis esfuerzos nunca valdrán
Porque
Cuando hago bien
Los malvados hacen doble el daño

Quiero cambiar el mundo

A veces llego a la madrugada
pensando
En que puedo y debo hacer
Mi ansiedad no permite que duerma
Es un dilema que he puesto en mí

No he perdido el ánimo
Ni las ganas

Tengo la paciencia y experiencia
El apoyo y determinación

Voy a cambiar el mundo



promised land

By Ashley Smith

my eyes are steady,
calculating, and even
admiring
the path set before me.
i am floating
elevating
soaring
in my element
in my purpose -
whatever that looks like.
as i am high in the clouds,
resting
in my success,
my vision becomes blurry
full of
and congested with the sights of other paths.
the blurriness of my own path,
has tempted me to look for a clear one
even if that means looking at yours.
your road is a little brighter than mines and
it looks like rain has just fallen on your lawn, and..
i've been in a bit of a drought recently.
....I feel my elevation lower a bit.
you have those sunflowers, that I love, sprouting in your
grass
how full and luscious it is
and i feel an abrupt drop,
but i'm still off the ground!
as my pathway begins to clear,
i can focus on my road,
even if it is less traveled.
i see the clouds dispersing,
there's a peace wafting by,
and i inhale it all.
the sun begins to peak over the mountains,
and i feel the hope that's been sitting in the corner of my
corneas
leaping with expectation —
there's the sun I've been waiting for!
i reach out my hand,
push
push push
keep going
a sparkle catches my eye from down below,
please keep going
push push push
pu



a sparkling heart, wrapped sweetly in a giant red bow, sits
on your walkway
oh,
I don't...I don't have love to display
and
i don't realize that I've already began falling until I see my
arms
falling beside me.
panic embraces my falling body, and
i'm
plummeting,
i'm
plunging,
i'm
descending
from the golden streets and
the abundance of peace that was
within my mind.
from the solitude
from the proximity of what was supposed to be mines.
i
i was so close, and
if i hadn't looked at you,
i'd be in my promised land.



System Shock
By Mathew Mullis

System error 214, biohazard waste segment corrupted, ejecting data.

“What have you got for me?” A large, well-built man in a grey trench coat puffed on a cheap looking cigar as he pushed open a set of double doors leading to the crime scene. Taking off his deerstalker cap his ruffled black hair speckled with grey from his thirty years of work became visible. His jade green eyes trailed to the nearest officer with a hint of impatience.

“I asked, what have you got for me?” his voice grew gruff.

The officer froze, like a deer in headlights. Another man approached, saving the officer from his hesitation, lit cigarette in his mouth.

“This way Detective Simmons, we’ve got a double-sided industrial loading dock, long ass hallway, about ten truck unloading stations on each side. All occupied, all the trucks filled with . . . as of yet unidentified piles of meat and bone. We’ve got our forensics guy checking if it’s human now.” A long trail of smoke drifted into the air, carried by his heavy sigh. His lifeless brown eyes appeared too tired to deal with any of this. He still wore his dress uniform, fresh from a press conference he was forced to attend as police chief. The uniform itself was unbelievably rumpled and in disarray, far from the picture of perfection it normally was.

“Think it’s related to the Henderson bowling alley case?” Simmons asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, when roughly a hundred people disappear from a bowling alley, they have to turn up somewhere. Not to mention all of the other large-scale vanishings since . . .” Another long trail of smoke reached for the ceiling, this time coming from both men.

“So, the first time we find any of the missing individuals, we find all of them huh? Who the hell could be causing all of this Chief Stein?”

“You’re the detective here, figure it out, fast.” The Chief huffs out in between ever more frequent puffs of smoke.

The two reached the hallway, large, sliding semi-truck doors occupied nearly the entirety of the space. Even through the closed steel doors the stench of death seeped through into the hallway. A younger man, appearing in his late 20s, rushed into the hallway from behind the two. His youthful countenance was dulled with a mixture of worry and disgust.

“Sir, forensics has confirmed all tested samples were human, they were also able to match several of the DNA samples to the Henderson database. We’ve found . . . likely all of them, or at least what’s left of them.” The young man’s face cramped, as he eyed the closed trucks with apprehension.

“Get the biohazard suit guys in here, we need to start getting through this. You should put some gear on too, Simmons.”

“What about the witness?”

“Ah, right, some poor sixteen-year-old girl working for her parent’s delivery service.” He quickly grabbed and glanced through a notebook in his pocket. “One Meridei Sumner. Although we still haven’t been able to identify the man the package was meant to go to, we may very well find him in one of these. She noticed the smell while trying to find someone who worked here. . . She’s in the rec room, trying to calm down with one of our officers. I think we’ve got some of our hazard gear in there too, if you want to talk to her first you can grab a kit while there.”

Simmons nodded “I’ll start there then, suit up on my way back. Don’t wait up for me . . .”

He cast one last look at the hallway before he split off from the two and made his way to the break room. There, he found an incredibly shaken teenager sitting at a table in the middle of the room. Her white hoodie was soaked through with sweat, her blue jean shorts doing nothing to hide the shaking of her legs. Her black hair was tied up behind her head in a messy

ponytail, and her sky-blue eyes leaped to the newcomer anxiously. They jumped away nearly as fast, darting all over the room. Her hands quivered as they held onto a flimsy disposable cup.

“Mind if I ask you some questions Meridei?” Simmons pulled a chair up beside her and leaned forward, snuffing out his cigar in an ashtray on the table.

“P-please, just call me Mary . . . A-are my parents here yet?” A scratchy voice, faint. She took a sip, the tipped cup revealing tea to the detective. He glanced at the officer in the room, a young blonde woman, seemingly here just to help keep the girl calm. The officer shook her head and tapped her watch lightly.

“Afraid not kiddo, with traffic backed up the way it is due to the cordon they might be a while” The detective took the cue. “So, if you’re comfortable enough, I’d like to talk about what you saw in those trucks, and how you found it.”

Her eyes immediately widened, as her breathing grew rapid and her shaking escalated. Her voice died in her throat, mouth drying out as a desperate panic overtook her. A rueful smile overtook Simmons’ own expression as he immediately realized that he had instantly killed any hope at conversation.

“That bad? I’m not going to get anything out of you, am I? What exactly did she see, officer?” Simmons spat out a sigh and turned towards the officer in the room.

“She opened one of the trucks to find out what was causing the smell. She’s seen what’s in them.” the officer closed her eyes. “I’d suggest you leave the poor girl alone detective; she won’t be able to help you.”

He shook his head and stood up. “Where’s the gear then?”

The officer gestured at a series of lockers in the corner. With a clang the locker opened, bright yellow hazard suits with neon green rubber boots and a visored face mask greeted him. Simmons let out his nth sigh of the day “Man, I hate these things . . .”



Simmons squeaked his way back into the loading bay. Already, dozens of hazmat suited officers trailed back and forth between now open trucks and countless body bags. Even through his thick rubber and plastic head-mask Simmons could still smell the horrid stench of death. He wearily glanced into the nearest container, a vivid Pollock painting of reds, pinks, and whites greeted him from every surface of the container. He reeled backwards, desperately fighting the urge to vomit. He clenched his fists tightly, proceeding down the hallway. Each container the same macabre sight, the work of some sadistic monster.

“Simmons! Over here!” The familiar voice of Chief Stein came out of one of the containers. Steeling himself, Simmons hesitantly entered the container, leaving thick squelching boot prints underfoot.

“What is it?” Simmons’ voice came out far harsher than intended.

“Right here Sirs” An officer struggled to pull an object out of the muck of human remains with a sickening plop. “I’ve got something . . .”

A seemingly black box nearly dyed red by the viscera covering it greeted them.

“What the hell is that?” Simmons asked.

“Let’s get it out of here and cleaned up, it’s the only solid object we’ve recovered so far.” Stein retrieved the cube, exiting the container with Simmons in tow. “We need something to clean this off with over here!” The two bitterly removed their head-gear to get a better look at the object, immediately scrunching their faces. Simmons fished for a fresh cigar from within his hazmat suit, hoping to mask the stench with the smell of tobacco. Stein held out a lighter for him as another officer came over to clean off the box. As the cube was washed off, a number of indeterminate patterns that covered the exterior were revealed.

“Well that almost looks like some kind of oversized computer chip . . .” Simmons muttered, grabbing the box and kneeling down to investigate it better.

A violent vibration shook the box, as a pulse that stirred the insides of everyone present like that of an earthquake emanated from it. Simultaneously, it began searing into Simmons flesh, leaving a horrible pattern burned into the skin of his palms.

“Simmons! Put the cube down!”

A violent screeching interrupted Chief Stein’s shout as the tin roof of the loading bay and the tops of several trucks were ripped clean off. Simmons’ pain immediately dulled, overwhelmed by the absurd amount of adrenaline his brain sent coursing through him.

“Oh, what the fuck is that . . .” Detective Simmons’ freshly lit cigar tumbled out of his gaping mouth as everyone from the biohazard team, to the police chief, and even the forensics guy, stood, staring, awestruck at the thing that towered above them. Far taller than the building, a twisted mass of trees, flesh, and bone. A large central trunk, nearly the size of a redwood composed of numerous trees served as the body. Multiple Chunky, handless, single appendage arms made of flesh, and a head made out of what could only be a massive quantity of bone in the shape of a human skull topped with a wreath of leaves. The darkness of the gaping eye sockets seemingly stared past them. They all stood frozen, praying that it couldn’t see them as human blood steadily streamed from the creature as though rain, staining the yellow hazmat suits a horrifying red.

A thick, meaty appendage smashed that miniscule hope as one of the creatures’ arms came down harshly. It instantly reduced several of the bio-hazard officers into meat paste which joined the piles. The panic of seeing their friends die sent everyone else into a frenzy as people fled in the direction of the door, pushing and tripping one another in their haste to escape the narrow confines of the trucks and hallway.

Several uniformed officers further in the building drew their guns as the roof came off around them, unleashing every bullet they had into the creature yet seemingly leaving it unfazed. Simmons watched in horror as one officer was absorbed into the arm and ground up into chunks of flesh that contributed to the behemoth’s size. He frantically kicked off the bulky rubber boots that were slowing him down as he joined the crowd rushing out of the hallway. The slight extra speed his bare feet granted him over his colleagues proved critical, as he made it past the doorway just as the creatures’ rampage truly began. The monster flailed madly, causing the walls behind Simmons to collapse, trapping dozens of people in the hallway. Simmons bit his tongue, tasting blood as he continued to flee.

The earth shook madly, unable to withstand the inhuman rage of a being that shouldn’t exist. Simmons fled for his life, watching as friends and colleagues alike ceased to exist. Sheer terror overwhelmed him, all thoughts of fighting back gone with the horrible stench carried on the wind. He dashed through the collapsing structure, desperately trying to unzip the bulky hazmat suit as he ran to no avail. A faint whimper as he darted past the break room . . . His mind turned blank.

“Shit shit shit!” Spinning on his heels he slammed his way into the break room, the officer was nowhere to be seen. But the girl was cowering under the table. “Mary! Come with me!” Simmons dashed over to the table, even as the girl flinched and cowered away from him. He bit his lip, roughly grabbed her arm and dragged her out from under the table. The stinging in his palms painfully reminded him that this was all real “Whatever you do, don’t stop running!” Simmons’ mind felt hazy, his adrenaline pushed him to keep moving even as he desperately struggled to remember where the safest exit would be.

Overriding memory stores, granting Neuron status to survivors, assigning Synapse.

It was two rights and then a left right? That was the closest emergency exit? Simmons began to panic.

Take a left at the next crossroad, followed by an immediate right towards the emergency exit.

A sudden voice jolted through Simmons, the only indication that it was real being the flinching of the girl he was still dragging. He hesitated, unsure of what to do anymore. A faint, reassuring squeeze came from the girl still clinging to his

arm. Much to his surprise, she overtook him, dragging him along down the next left, following the voice's instructions. She seemed self-assured, as though her prior panic had all been a façade. Slamming through the door, the warmth of the sun greeted the duo. They both unintentionally faltered, flinching in the sudden light and hesitating just outside of the building.

*“Objective updated: **RUN**”*

Every fiber of their beings screamed at them as the voice once again sounded out. Much to the horror of them both, a steady pool of blood streamed from above as they looked up into the gaping maw of the enormous creature. Simmons unhesitatingly threw the girl forward as the creature's mouth consumed him. A shrill scream echoed through the air as Meridei desperately fled after seeing the detective disappear before her eyes.

*“Neuron Simmons: Data Encryption status reduced from 5.6 to 2.3. Re-establishing self. Objective reminder: **RUN**”*

The world seemed to freeze before Mary's eyes as a cluster of pure white beams transitioned from the mouth of the creature to the empty air right next to her. Mouth agape as Detective Simmons' body reformed at her side. He was still mid-run, nearly falling over as she desperately righted him, the frantic flight of the two continuing.

“What the hell was that?! What the hell was that?!” Mary shrieked, coming undone as the asphalt under them cracked from the creature's furious charge.

“How the hell should I know kid?!? Keep fucking running!” The two fled onto the main road, all of the former traffic, from the pedestrians to the news vans and the police cruisers were simply gone. Simmons stared in disbelief as an out of control bus simply ceased to exist in a flash of white before it was able to collide with a nearby building.

Advisement: enter the drainage ditch to your left before - Recalculating

The two sprinted past the advised route.



“Do we go back!? Do we run back?!” Mary shouted.

“Not on your life!” Simmons forcibly pulled her forward, the creature continuing to gain on the duo.

Turn left now

With no remaining hesitation Mary yanked Simmons into a rather overgrown tree line to the left of the road.

“Aren't we being chased by a tree right now!? Why are we going into more of them!” Simmons yelled, desperately wishing he had some kind of weapon.

These trees are as of yet uncorrupted, past the tree line is a field, your destination will be straight ahead.

The two tore through the thick overgrowth, brambles and branches scratching and scraping at any and all unprotected skin as they emerged bleeding and bruised on the far side. They stood atop a rather steep hill; a dome of light covered a small set of houses in the center of the field nearby. They ran with all of their might, several hundred yards stood between them and the dome of assumed safety. With a horrific tearing noise, the trees behind them were cracked and ripped out of place, the monster towering over them. It threw out one of its appendages in the direction of the two.

Simmons reached out towards Mary – with a faint sense of weightlessness and a looming sense of dread he realized he had lost his footing. He tumbled down the hill with increasing intensity, having inadvertently dodged the attack and ending up completely unable to aid her. Mary glanced back at the monstrous fist flying at her, stumbling in terror.

“I . . . don't want to die”

Neuron Meridei: Data Manipulation authority reduced from 12.3 to 3.6, granting request

The earth around her shifted, hardening and turning into plate after plate of solid rock between her and the nearly certain approaching death. One layer, two, three, layer after layer of rock broke until finally the momentum of the behemoth wore out a few feet from her body. A faint light-headedness overwhelmed her, and she nearly fell - but Simmons was there again, grabbing her, dragging her into the dome where they both promptly collapsed.

Throwing one last desperate look behind him - blue sky as far as he could see. No field, no tree line, no hill . . . and certainly no monster. Everything faded away, as though none if it had ever existed to begin with. Simmons shook violently as a retching noise came from beside him, the near-death experience proving too much for Mary. Exhaustion overtook him, and his heavy eyelids soon closed as he collapsed to the dirt.

Neurons identified in corrupted sector 21: Granting impulse, updating Synapse.



With a jolt, the two snapped awake. Having passed out in the relative safety of the dome, the horror of what had happened was swiftly coming back as the dome above them began to dim. Simmons shot straight up; his hazmat suit violently creaked against the rapid movement. Mary continued to lie on the ground, she groaned in desperation as she watched her only safety net disappearing.

Objective updated: One of you must transfer your impulse to the next checkpoint.

Simmons rose to his feet; anger clouded his mind. "What the hell does that mean? Who are you!? Why are you doing this to us!" He screamed into the empty air.

As per the systems designation, I am your Synapse, my purpose is to guide you in containing and purging the corruption in this sector.

"W-why would we do that!? Why would we risk ourselves against more of those things-! What the hell is the system!?" Mary sat up this time, her own frustration boiling over at the unseen voice.

Unless the corruption is contained, the memory archives of everyone in this sector will be lost. All of your colleagues, friends, and family members will be deleted from the data stores where they have been archived.

"Archived . . . They . . . they aren't dead? They . . . still exist?" Simmons mumbled, eyes widening.

Correct, every individuals' memories have been stored, physical data is considered waste and turned into biohazard material. The remnants of the physical body are expelled to the corrupted region.

"So those trucks . . ." Mary choked on her own words as she raised a hand to cover her mouth.

Were a dumping ground for the 'missing' individuals who were archived prior to the corruption taking root. It is standard practice to condense and isolate them when possible to prevent contamination of the remaining minds.

"I can . . . save them then? Right? Where do you need me to go?" Simmons dug his nails into his fist, blood trickling down.

You both must enter the next region; I will provide guidance again once there.

Simmons glanced down at his tattered hazmat suit before breaking into one of the nearby houses. Mary struggled to her feet after a few more moments of shaken indecisiveness. She watched him return in a t-shirt and jeans scavenged from someone's home, a pair of ill-fitting boots forced over his bloodied feet. With a determined nod, Simmons followed the voice's direction and approached the edge of the barrier. Chewing on her lower lip, Mary approached him and lightly grabbed onto his sleeve.

"We have to do this, don't we?" She asked, her voice nearly as silent as their surroundings.

"Unless we want to give up on everyone we've ever known . . ." Simmons stared straight ahead, and together the duo took a determined step forward, past the barrier.

Immediately upon passing the rapidly fading dome of light, the scenery violently shifted before them. Sights, sounds, and smells whirled around them, as though the world was unsure of what it was supposed to be. The two staggered violently, trying to maintain their balance in this maelstrom of colors. They leaned on one another for support, as just as suddenly as it had started the shifting had stopped. An industrial wasteland sprawled before them. All cracked concrete, twisted machinery, and large cranes that looked at risk of collapsing on anyone passing by.

Location identified: regional Aokan will close in after approximately 30 seconds, begin running straight ahead now.

“What the hell is an Aokan?!” Simmons glared daggers into the sky as he immediately began sprinting with Mary in tow.

Aokan are personifications of the corruption contained within this region – such as the tree from before.

Both of them found their blood running cold at the thought of another monster like that coming after them in a matter of seconds. A twisted mass of rebar collapsed from a series of scaffolding to their left, giving them both a heart attack.

“When is that thing going to come after us?” Mary frantically asked as they raced into the complex following any directions given.

I am currently tracking the Aokan’s position – Error, positional data lost.

A massive industrial crane crashed through a cement wall, violently colliding with the two and sending them scattered throughout the air.

Neuron Simmons: Data Encryption status reduced from 2.3 to 0.0, Error, Encryption broken, Neuron Simmons: Data Integrity reduced to 78%.

Neuron Meridei: Data Encryption status reduced from 4.5 to 1.4

Once again time seemed to freeze, as the two found themselves transferred just ahead of where they would have perished. With a pained gasp, Simmons staggered forward, nearly his entire left arm gone. With a look of horror Mary continued dragging him forward, not allowing him to slow as she desperately clung to his remaining arm. Unable to resist, she found herself looking back as a titan of machinery, metal, and concrete rapidly consumed surrounding materials to expand.

“At – at least this one isn’t made of people . . .” Simmons choked out in between pained gasps. “We need to slow it down, Synapse! Slow this damn thing down!”

Neuron Simmons: Data Manipulation authority reduced from 9.3 to 0.0, partially granting request

The surrounding buildings caved inward on the behemoth as it struggled to move after them, the asphalt beneath its massive feet caved inward, but not enough to truly stop it. A mind splitting pain tore through Simmons skull as it felt like his brain was trying to force its way through his ears. He slipped through Meridei’s grasp, collapsing roughly to the ground.

“Y-you need to get up! You can’t leave me to do this alone!” She staggered backwards, desperately trying to pry him from the asphalt, even as the titan freed itself from its bindings.

“I’m too old for this kid . . . none of this makes any sense to an old guy like me. Just . . . keep running . . .” His voice grew faint as blood stained the area around his arm.

“Synapse! Help me carry him!” anger filled her eyes as she pulled him upwards with all of her might.

Neuron Meridei: Data Manipulation authority reduced from 3.6 to 1.2, granting request

With a foreign strength, she easily hoisted the detective over her shoulder before beginning a desperate run forward. She could see the beam that they were supposed to reach now. Safety was so close for the both of them . . . But the rumbling of

footsteps and sounds of buildings collapsing told her that she might not have the time needed. With a burst of desperation she rounded the final corner, the beam was there . . .

“Synapse!” She screamed with all her might as she flung Simmons towards the light.

Neuron Meridei: Data Manipulation authority reduced from 1.2 to 0.1, granting request

Simmons shot forward as though a bullet, vanishing immediately upon impact with the beam of light. A relieved smile crested her face as a metallic arm collided with her back . . . Tumbling forward, broken and bleeding into the light.

Neuron Meridei: Data Encryption status reduced from 1.4 to 0.2

Impulse delivered. Neurons have reached the designated zone. Initiating pulse now. Performing final archival procedures.

Error 578: Neuron Simmons data integrity > 100% : Unable to archive

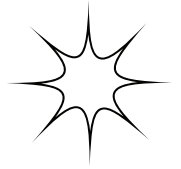
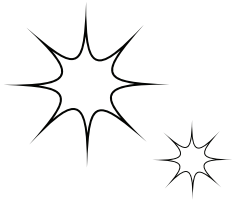
Neuron Meridei: Data integrity full, encryption intact, archiving

Preparing to purge all remaining lifeforms in sector 21

Simmons woke up, a faint beam of light around him. Meridei was nowhere to be found. Even as he watched the remaining world around him was fading. “What do I do, damn it!?! Talk to me! Where am I supposed to go! What am I supposed to do!” He screamed frantically, staring outwards as the disappearance of the world approached him. The titan collapsed just outside of the barrier, a final mournful bellow its last indication of ever having existed. Simmons lit one last cigar, growing faint. A final trail of smoke somberly flickering out of existence.

Memory storage segment 21 successfully isolated, purging safety zones now.

A metallic object hurtled through space, a myriad of blinking lights revealing the connections of each part of the supercomputer carrying the remnants of humanity. The last minds of an entire civilization. A damaged segment slowly flickered out as the satellite continued drifting lifelessly through space.



WATER





Love Notes
By Cathi Curen



“When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too.”~ Paulo Coelho

We thrive when we are supported by those we love. Yet, relationships are the thing we are often challenged by. We learn about relationships from a young age, however not always in a constructive way. We frequently learn how to get attention, feel valued, and loved based on other people’s standards. Our vocabularies continue to expand, but our communication skills are often hindered out of misunderstanding. To complicate matters, each of us live on a continuum of positive and negative attributes. Our similarities draw us together, however, when another’s unique traits show up, we can encourage conformity to authenticity.

This balance of similar and different has prompted my interest in positive psychology and applies to my interest in astrology. That is, to join in the journey with individuals from a growth and positive development perspective. In its most important function this belief is instrumental to our parenting. To understand that we all come into the world with our own unique human nature, and from an astrological perspective this follows suit with the mythological energy of the signs.

I invite you to envision others from a broader lens, and recognize that we are all acting naturally, and although possibly yet unseen, we all have more positive potential dwelling within. We wouldn’t expect a lion (Leo), fish (Pisces), or ram (Aries) to be anything different than their true nature. Therefore, let’s reconsider how we look at those with whom we live with and love. In the purpose of nurturing natural gifts, especially with our little ones, we want to encourage their unique traits, support them, and learn to manage and accept the things unlike us.

If we can view each other through the energy of the zodiac signs and the planets that rule them – it’s so much easier to accept what’s different. Astrology represents the growth process of human development and the stages of life. Coincidentally, the word zodiac comes from the Greek word zodiakos, which means “circle of little animals.” Fitting I think, as we guide and nurture our natural natures into more civilized ways of being. All of the named signs except Libra are living creatures and have their own natural motivations. I find that the most growth producing factor of astrology is in the integration of all of the signs within our psyche to gain acceptance of ourselves, resulting in more tolerance toward others...this of course can be a lifetime feat!

Each astrological energy is motivated and expressed differently, and keep in mind that there are times when those disliked behaviors may actually be useful in certain situations and can be especially noticeable to us when the universe is giving us an opportunity to incorporate them into our own ongoing development. Without endurance of the lessons each sign provides, it is understandable how these positive attributes can get in the way. And with a little imagination, how they may be construed as negative or bad. To clarify, there are not good or bad signs, we just may not yet have learned how to manage our power.

When we speak of one’s sun sign we are speaking of the astrological aspirations of their will, and highest expression for their lifetime. There of course is so much more to us, including influences of all of the signs, but I feel sharing these aspirations can help make the point.

Here is a very brief sampling of each Sun sign, their key phrase, and motivations:

The Aries key phrase is “I am here!” Aries enters the world with the need to lead and be first. They are motivated to bravely meet all challenges head on.

The Taurus key phrase is, “I have.” Taurus energy is motivated by the self, wanting to do something. They like stability, are conscious of security, and are the sensual beings.

The Gemini key phrase is, “I think.” These are versatile, logical, social beings who want to learn all that they can and then make connections to the use of information.

The Cancer key phrase is, “I feel.” Cancer wants to nurture, feels deeply, and is sensitive to the needs of others. They are imaginative and intuitive.

The Leo key phrase is, "I create." Leo is open and warm-hearted, with their most purposeful creation to be the expression of the Self.

The Virgo key phrase is, "I analyze." Virgo is the humble, service driven perfectionist who supports order in the world.

The Libra key phrase is, "I balance." Libra has a natural need to see all sides of an issue in order to treat others fairly and gracefully with sensitivity.

The Scorpio key phrase is, "I desire." These are the passionate, probing individuals who will go to the extreme of tearing things down to the ground to rebuild something more meaningful, and new.

The Sagittarius key phrase is, "I understand." Sagittarius is the great optimist. They love adventure and affirm life positively as they work towards an ideal goal.

The Capricorn key phrase is, "I use." Responsible, serious, disciplined. Capricorn will do what is necessary to achieve a practical and useful result.

The Aquarius key phrase is, "I know." Unconventional and humanitarian, the Aquarian wants to cross all boundaries to experience the new and unusual.

The Pisces key phrase is, "I believe." Pisces are the compassionate ones who want to experience the oneness of all things.

Can you imagine how differently we all see the world based on our motivations? How frustrated one might become when they are not reaching them? How much more fulfilling our lives can be by living more naturally?

My love for astrology links to the self-understanding we gain as a result of working with it. If we can accept ourselves for who we are, it will be so much easier to do the same for others. Isn't that what we all really want? To be loved for who we authentically are.

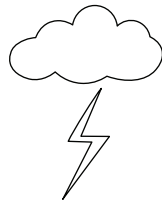
Wishing you and you and families the fullness of your expression in love!



The Storm

By Catari Martin

There's a storm coming
It's best to stay inside
Whiskey, wine and bubble bath
Aroma of Frankincense and Myrrh
Sounds of tubular bells
Ringing with emotion
Music gentle playing
Soothing body, mind and soul
Light a candle close your eyes
Baking under the covers
While raindrops beat upon the roof
Sets mind racing to explore
Wind blows stronger and the house shakes
Yet all is quiet and nothing break



La Que Siempre Llora (The One Who is Always Crying)

By Andrea Morales

Cómo brillan las estrellas
whenever they cross my mind.

No es fácil estar entre todos
especially when you're the Cancer amongst the Capricorns.

Pero ellos son ese pase
that guide me as a fallen comet.

Porque?
Why?

Aunque no sea como los demás
they still see you as their moon.

I don't know..
No se..

Sería porque les traigo las lágrimas
the tears that yearn for acceptance?

(ya se miran las lágrimas)

Esas lágrimas afectan a muchos
and I can't control that!

No se fácil ser un impacto
to those making their way up.

(ya va a llorar de nuevo...)

I can repeat myself as many times as I want
pero mis lágrimas nunca se detienen.

Is this what they call emotion?

(Nunca para de llorar!)

Then again...

Soy un Cáncer....



Lavender and Blue

By Catari Martin

Lavender and blue
Crimson and you
Sea naked and drifting
What's underneath
Still and warm
Or rough icy cold
A thundering storm
If truth be told
Calm or explosive
One never knows
That's the mystery (excitement?)
Of the charm and gaze
And looking deep inside
One can amaze
Or go against the tide
Peaceful or shocking
Only time will tell
If this is living divine
Or pure malice hell
Broken or fixed
Twisted or untouched
Lavender or black?
On another note
Red and gold
Have stories to be told
Yellow and gray glow
Sunshine and dismay
Colors of the rainbow
Display a brighter world
Blue and pink
Are for boys and girls
While apples and oranges
Peel very different lives
Fix the colors change your mind
For today will be a brighter day



retrograde

By Hannah Wonagsegid

a thin poncho of cold seeps into my skin
as i gaze up at the blotted night sky
the stars wait patiently behind their polluted veil
for a curtain call that never comes

breathe in the stars
soaking in their wine dark sea
i'll drag them out from under the covers
and bring them back to me



Sweetness

By Kaitlyn Manoogian

And I wondered how I could be happy without the ache.
When it leaves me, we will sit on our doorstep and sip
sun tea while we watch them play in the grass.
It will haunt me while it lingers in the morning dew.



I will be making pancakes, and as maple syrup drips off
my fingertips, I will press it to my tongue and taste a thick
and drenching tenderness. They will run in, tiny feet tapping
against wood floors and murmur small sounds of happiness
as it waits to drench them too.

He will walk in with mud-drenched boots and track
in the ache, but I will love him like a knock on an
unfrequented door. I will smile at the filth, then give
him a taste of syrup, and the stickiness will make us laugh
while he tries to scrape it from his boots.



We will sit down at the table with orange morning
light drenching the kitchen mantle and, maybe, we
will all hold hands and bow our heads. It will
be different, unlike the prayers that were lost, but
will it seep in through the crevices of our hands?

I will study them,
scrape it from my chest,
and fall into the stillness of the
room that is oh-so drenched in life's dew.



Error Codes from Galaxy 606

By Camryn Dorsey

I've been thinking about Orpheus, that god-struck grieving poet, for a thousand years crooning like a nightingale under the sun.

We have stood by as he wept, scoffing at his singer's hands and broken lyre-heart thinking of our own grit and gristle.
Mocking, crowing at the fool who looked back as though our eyes are always fast forward, never honeyed through nostalgia-scope,
Looking at eternity in the sky rather than dwelling on the Earth.

Worse than grief, above is a boundless book of dying stories.
Light years away, stars call out from graves, expanding,
barely reaching us through their death exhale, and in their bleating sighs we look for—
Meaning? Heroes?



We cry for order or life in the light spectrum, misconstruing the steady blink of a hundred years for forever. And I wonder what it means to be human.

I am not a star, not a forever-made being.
I am burdened to the earth with treacherous, unyielding bone and overripe flesh, carbon, and iron, sinew, and ligaments.
Time passes over me, churning my humanity.
I'm not afraid to admit that I too look back.



My old memory-sweetened friends do not breach the surface of reality.
How many times have I conjured their likeness in my mind's eye?
Dead through chronology or geography, or by a thousand knicks and cuts speckled like filtered starlight across our skin,
promises that had canines and still found no place to hold.
Our hurts remain a constellation and my friends gone are ghosts in my peripheral.
My first best friend moved away in elementary school and she is dead to my world except for when I am looking back.
Does that not make me a griever, a piteous crooning thing seeing what is not there?

What should be remembered and what should fade into stardust—
Is it intuition? Fate?

I can't remember my mom's phone number without looking but when my roommate forgets to clear the timer on the microwave, I think fondly of my mother.

And in that moment I am Orpheus and I am looking back and seeing a transposition:
my mother, outlined like Eurydice at the summit, bearing witness to the heavens.



Are they yet alive if the stars do not look back?
Do they see our busy bumblebee bodies bustling to and fro as we stumble through the viscera, our knife wound called life,
with poet's hands clasped?
Their gaseous, solar wind-whipped forms struck by our humanistic grief, and all of us will crack open to croon the old songs
of life and death, crying,
feeling in our bones all at once beautiful, and
ephemeral.



la veladoras
By Deanna Hirbawi



The night is young. There are children running around, playing with fireworks in the street. Their parents are nowhere to be seen because it is summer vacation. Knowing this, it is likely that they are home - either cooking dinner or making love in the safe haven that air conditioning provides in the sweltering summer evenings.

The heat hangs low in the air outside, but the children don't mind. Instead, they revel in the stiff hot air. They wear only their under garments and suck on dripping popsicles colored as vibrant as a box of Crayola crayons. Their cries and cheers decorate the air with a cadence of summertime joy.

I stare directly into the sparks of one street sparkler. It glows brighter and brighter until I notice the children freeze in space. Suddenly, I am gone.

The candles are portals to the afterlife.

At least, that's what my dad always told me.

"Fear la *veladoras*. They can take you away just as fast as fate. You understand me, *mija*?"

Of course I didn't understand him. I thought he was speaking in ritualistic tongues from a time that no longer exists.

Maybe he was just telling me in his own way to exist with caution.

It was another summer evening, a relatively sweltering one in Arizona. My mind was wandering as I strolled down the sidewalk. I dragged my red wagon behind me - it carried my stack of summer reading that I was working on. Every day I would head out to the park by myself and read some, and then every night I would head back home.

On my route, I would always walk past a fresh patch of *veladoras*.

This time, a bike sat next to the light post. I stared at the glass cylinders with visages of the Virgin Mary pasted to them. She seemed to stare back at me, her eyes glowing from the flame of the candles. Someone had left behind a golden rosary too, and a pile of cerulean beads.

Fear la *veladoras*, I heard my dad's voice in my head.

I kept on walking. But then, I couldn't hear my footsteps anymore. I didn't hear the one squeaking wheel on my wagon.

My heart dropped into my stomach and I felt my body fold into itself.

I was engulfed in solid darkness.

When I could see again, I was looking at a beautiful woman. She had brown hair - thick brown curls and waves that went all the way down her back. She wore a green plaid dress with a giant white apron. Her feet were bare and pale, unadorned. Her smile was soft with dimples.

"Hello little one," she said.

"Hi," I squeaked.

"How did you get here?" she asked.

"I don't know," I barely breathed.

"Well, how about I get you home then? It's getting late, and your dad misses you."

She extended her rosy palm to me. In her hand, she held the cerulean beaded rosary.

"Here."

She placed the beads around my neck. The rosary felt warm on my chest, a tiny sun.

"Close your eyes," she whispered.

I closed my eyes.

"Open."

When I opened my eyes, I was standing in front of my house. I held the handle of my red wagon, and the rosary around my neck was gone.



it gnaws*By Ashley Smith*

it gnaws,
 and it deepens the itch you have in the back of your neck.
 it suffocates the breath you are searching for while you are
 gasping loudly and your
 eyes are bulged.
 and
 your arms are flailing.
 your hands have eyes and it searches
 and searches for anything to grab.
 it stops for a second
 a second lo-
 and the gnawing
 continues
 and it deepens into the belly of darkness.
 the darkness which sits
 in the corner, inches away from just thinking about
 hope.
 you look up,
 a body of darkness
 eerily
 stares back at you.
 it inches closer,
 its breath wafting and encircling you.
 you are trapped in its grasp.
 you close your eyes and you see
 it is smiling at you.
 its whole being is snickering,
 cackling,
 pleased.
 and then,
 a glimmer of light
 sparkles
 your eyes open
 and you take the chance.
 the darkness has left,
 your breathing,
 and your body relaxes.
 you sigh
 anxiety
 it gnaws, and it
 has gnawed at you again.

Mi llano*By Yakeline Lara Aponte*

Sali un dia de mi llano
 con el corazón en mi mano
 dejando lo que yo mas ame
 por seguir un sueño anhelado

Tome rumbo lejano
 arriesgando mi vida soñada
 llena de muchas ilusiones
 arrive al continente americano



La vida no fue tan fácil
 comencé a practicar how are u
 tuve que poner el alma
 para llegar al what you do

ha pasado largo tiempo
 el amor al llano no le he borrado
 la pasión es mi esencia
 la música cura mi alma

llanera arriesgada me llaman
 Yakeline Lara Aponte es la portada
 Desafíos a los que enfrentó
 Viendo la gente sin nada

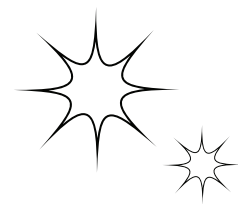


Una bella institución
 Es la que lleva mi transition
 Dominguez Hills es nueva casa
 pues la tengo en mi corazón

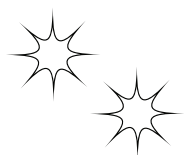
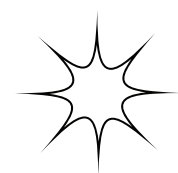
Cada dia me reta
 hacer una mejor versión
 le he apostado mi pasión
 para lograr mi graduación

Dejo mi alma en el papel
 para mostrar mi pasión
 el amor por la poesía
 lo traigo por tradició





AIR



Where I Come From

By Jana Bates

I come from bread in the refrigerator
From Blue Magic and Just for Me
And tight coils and curly strands

I come from plastic covered furniture,
free of stains and damage, squeaking
whenever I sat on the plastic cover

I come from Periwinkle,
the flower popular for the enslaved
shades of pink and blue
which brings serenity and comfort

I come from calling someone and the first words being 'Hold On'
from soul food dinners every sunday at my great grandmothers
from Essie, Barbara, and Felesha

I come from talking to the bugs before I'd kill them
informing them that they came in the wrong house today

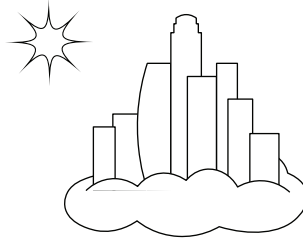
I come from 'if you like it, i love it'
And the 1st slice of bread staying in the bag
until it meets the last slice of bread

I come from resilience and fearlessness

I come from the city of angels
a melting pot of chances
candied yams and chitlins

I come from family reunions
an album filled with family reunion mementos

From Essie marrying her husband and bearing 13 children,
the family moving down to california for better living opportunities,
and the heaven above for impatiently waiting for Helen



Clouded Dove By Maria Cavadas



They say the clouds that standstill are the hidden lands of
heaven...
Tell me, are you up there, in that little halted cloud piece,
dancing with angels?



I'univers

By Briana Radilla

I sit in the cold and stare up, Listen to the stars they will not lie.
 My eyes are watery and I'm not quite sure why but the tears are in some way fulfilling because I am feeling.
 I don't try to wipe them away because I think I'd like it if my face was stained by my past.
 Stars are barely visible in the dark sky but the few ones I see scream at me things that my mind can not seem to comprehend. "You are beautiful and you are worth it, please listen."
 I wish I spoke the language the stars do, maybe then things would make more sense and I would know why it is the way it is. "You are beautiful and you are worth it, please listen..."
 Stars and galaxies surround me yet I still feel like I am taking up too much space.

La stella

By Briana Radilla

The way the stars align as I am born is what has defined me.
 The stars accompany me,
 grab me by the arm as I go through ages.
 So why do I still tend to feel so
 Alone lonely
 In the night
 When everywhere above me
 There are always
 Stars.



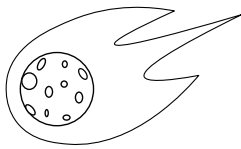
Asteroid

By Briana Radilla

"Speak to me one more time the way you did and I will"
 The voice gets trapped somewhere deep in the dark abyss of the throat
 "I will-"
 Suddenly all the conspiracies and proclamations that they
 scream into the night sky have come alive
 The simple thought of "I will" has shone light to it all an explosion of a
 star

I will **beat you**
Hit you **choke you** **slap you**
Hurt you

I will be exactly that thing that you have labeled me.



beauty's beholder

By Ashley Smith

if beauty was in my eyes then why can't I behold her,
why does she feel like she's prickly,
goopy,
and unbearable to be around?
if beauty was in my eyes, then why
do i need a prescription for my prescription
just to see that she's there?
my eyes, as blind as they are, without my glasses or my
contacts
see a fuzzy, blurred world
so why should I trust that there's a beauty
to be acquainted with,
to be in love with,
and to be assured of.
if beauty was in my eyes,
then how come she introduces herself to everyone but
me
how come she's more present in my past and that it feels
like she's already in my future
but she's distant now?
beauty, oh beauty wherefore art thou
i've tried to serenade your presence,
reach out for your presence,
mirror mirrored on the wall for your presence
but you have deserted me.
if beauty was in my eyes then why can't I behold her
was a song I've sung for many years.
beauty, oh beauty I know where you are -
you aren't above the world so far
you aren't in the diamonds,
twinkling
in the stars
but you are
in these words that I have summoned
just to find you.

Nuestras Estrellas

By Daisy Aguirre



Memories of us scattered across the violet sky
Light years away

Las estrellas nos pertenecen
Nuestro amor reencarna en elementos celestiales

Nuestra estrellas cuentan mi cariño por ti
No compara al infinito universo

Las estralles reflejan en tus ondas
Sin tin, el planeta no brinda vida

Tu eres el Mar
Yo soy la Tierra

Sin ti, no hay existencia
Sin yo, no hay luz

Nuestra estrelles siempre iluminaran los pueblos



“Good Riddance to Good Writing” - Nate Hertweck

Sent: Sunday, November 27, 2022 – 3:54 a.m.

Subject: Good Writing

Dear Nate,

I’ve come to you straight from awaking—or rather, from a restless sleep—and it occurs to me we chase a dream we don’t quite clearly remember in our conscious hours. That dream is: good writing. What is it? What makes it? How do we know it when we read it or write it? It’s a simple question with no simple answers, yet, we know answers exist. We pursue it like prey on the page, pan for it like gold in our hats, and punch and scrape as if the combination of keys we strike or black letters we scratch will uncover something new underneath the blank that was already there, something...
good.

I’m awake, and I’m curious, sir. As you are me but also not me, twins in our enigmatic Gemini way, I ask you this everything question, knowing you’ll see the craft differently: What is good writing?

Sincerely,

Nathan James Hertweck

Sent: Sunday, November 27, 2022 – 4:07 a.m.

Subject: RE: Good Writing

Dear Nathan James,

Welp. Now I’m awake, too. Thanks man. And for what? I may be groggy, but your question strikes me as pretty daft, maybe even a bit of a... joke. If you ask me... which (rude!) you just did...ask me, that is... you’re missing the point. And look here, I’m not saying it’s *you* who is being subjective and elitist. It’s the whole damn concept of *good* writing, as if some committee somewhere will weigh in and that will be that. Never gonna happen. Wouldn’t matter if it did.

And seriously, you’re bringing this up now? As a submission to your campus literary journal!? Ha!! A Hail Mary auto-epistolary?! I’ll grab my shovel and rubber gloves. The very nature and placement of your question show more about your silly and sad writerly need to pat your own back than anything resembling curiosity or craft.

How then, sir, do you expect me to define it? Good writing... is it supposed to be the, the, the mellifluous melody of word upon word? Why, noooo, that’s mere music, noise that don’t mean a thing. Is it, instead, mindful and meaningful strands of words? No, that’s all dull *episteme* and no *techne*, Cap’n Xenophonica, that’ll never do. “It’s both!” you’re thinking, I know it! But together they make only clever trickery, cute rhetoric—not anything doing anyone anything like *good*.

The term—the concept—on top of being wildly subjective, stinks of elitism, no challenging chumps allowed. Well guess what, I’d rather *live* good than write good, and so would most people, because life has no margins, no neat quill pen strokes or hammers of the Remington Gods, no grammar (gag!), and no goddamn beginning, middle, or end. What are you, five years old, your nose stuck in a phoropter? Thinking the world started with us, that we’re always at an apex, or that our lives ending means anything besides a freed-up parking spot is a mistake. So is “good writing,” sir, a mistake. It is nothing but a coincidence of privilege plus time and place, a circle jerk of scholars and burnouts both wishing they were the other while waving their tattered flags at each other across the reckless wake of youth.

Good writing? Good luck,

Nate H.

Sent: Sunday, November 27, 2022 – 8:47 a.m.

Subject: RE: RE: Good Writing

Dear Nate H.,

I see you’re upset, but I am undeterred by your little tantrum last night. Your subjectivity crutch is a cop out, and your accusation of elitism reeks of sour grapes rather than the revolution of last night’s wine, my good man. Since you’ve so far dodged the issue, I’ll bring its urgency to you on a platter. Put on some coffee, wake up, and smell it. Good writing is not only real, it’s about to stare you in the face... look alive!

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board.
—Zora Neale Hurston

There. Good writing. And do not mistake it for bumper-sticker banter or one of your pithy pull quotes. Here, I’ll give you a longer one, too, with perfect pitch and immense historic gravity:

Sails furled, flag drooping at her rounded stern, she rode the tide in from the sea. She was a strange ship, indeed, by all accounts, a frightening ship, a ship of mystery. Whether she was trader, privateer, or man-of-war no one knows. Through her bulwarks black-mouthed cannon yawned. The flag she flew was Dutch; her crew a motley. Her port of call, an English settlement, Jamestown, in the

colony of Virginia. She came, she traded, and shortly afterwards was gone. Probably no ship in modern history has carried a more portentous freight. Her cargo? Twenty slaves.

—J. Saunders Redding

Or consider the power wielded here,

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

—Frederick Douglass

Is this all too much for your modern mobile device attention span? Don't make me remind you of the original endless scroll. You listen to Katy Perry, don't you?...

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn,

—Jack Kerouac

And tell me this writing isn't good enough to get you high, I dare you!

It must be that people who read go on more macrocosmic and microcosmic trips - biblical god trips, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Ulysses, Finnegan's Wake trips. Non-readers, what do they get? (They get the munchies.)

—Maxine Hong Kingston

Hell, I always get simple joy from,
Ship and boat diverged.

—Herman Melville

But maybe the real answer to our question is expressed somewhere in here:

Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed....Its paradox is, quite literally, why I write.

—Maggie Nelson pondering Ludwig Wittgenstein (emphasis Nelson's)

Or—and this one's for you, SIR,
How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it's just words.

—David Foster Wallace

I'm not saying there's only one right answer, but your non-answer is surely wrong. What am I to do? Don't make me bring in Morrison, Sontag, Shakespeare...

You lose. Good day, sir,

NJH

Sent: Sunday, November 27, 2022 - 9:31 a.m.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: Good Writing

Dear NJH,

Good writing? A fig!

Look, mankind's failures aren't transformed into fortunes simply by writing them down. Besides, life itself crumples up your fortune cookie apologies, always will. Even mediocre sex is better than good writing. Hell, so is a good sneeze, a sip of strong coffee, a cool breeze. Good writing, ha! What is any of it but... documentation? Paperwork? You realize how much is lost, don't you? Not just meaning, truth, reality, experience, but actual time. The more you type, the more you die, right there on the page, you're bleeding out your life, your days, hours, minutes on this earth to live, you spend 'em poking a keyboard, all for what? Good writing? I say: tick tock.

-Nate

Sent: Sunday, November 27, 2022 - 11:22 a.m.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: Good Writing

Nate,

I make no apologies for mankind, be sure of that. But now, for my own benefit rather than yours (as life's higher-order pursuits don't seem to be your bag these days), I'll embark on some brief freewriting around our *question du jour*:

Good writing...

...is what isn't said but understood, an extension of good thinking and living and reading, like good music or art or food: beyond definition but you know it when you experience it, legible, not overly using adverbs, directness sans cliché, a reflection of the process of learning about life and loss and love, a non-existent layover between merely decent writing and something truly transcendent.

...requires challenging ourselves and our ideas, us to be who we are.

...allows others a glimpse into what magic and hell feel like to us.

...feels good.

One could do worse than leave a written record so posterity doesn't start over every morning. You're like Socrates—he didn't believe in writing things down, said it made people empty vessels. I bet he's glad someone else wrote down his ideas. Not that you'll read them—I bet you've got the munchies. And as for your dismissal of good writing as being worth less than a sneeze, I scold your jaded ineptitude (though re: sex, I must acquiesce and say: *touché*).

-Nathan

Sent: Monday, November 28, 2022 - 4:42 p.m.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Good Writing

Nathan,

Blah blah blah... freewriting? And French? *Really?* Don't start leaking dimestore words like "glimpse" and "magic" while writing down your nose at us scribbling hoi polloi, sir. What's next, riffing in Latin? "*En totem*, the back wheel turns ever forward, and you're an artless dreg, a *persona non grata*!" I blow my nose at you! What are you now, a lawyer? Is your plan to bore us all with legalese and fine print? *The opinions expressed in this email do not necessarily reflect the opinionzzzzzzzzzz...* Lawyers are just boring writers who make bank. I won't fault them for it, but don't come knocking on my door to serve me your summons for defining good writing. I know my rights!

And by the way, I thumbed through the copy of *Tripmaster Monkey*... you left on the nightstand... one page of that thing could choke an elephant. Those DFW doorstep novels, too. Yeesh. And what's with all the ships? The Hurston makes sense, I'll give you that. I think she knows more than us.

-NH

Sent: Tuesday, November 29, 2022 - 3:12 p.m.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Good Writing

Dear NH,

Fine. I see you're more interested in mocking my genuine attempt to define good writing than you are in mocking up any good writing of your own. My question remains, and as I am a person of integrity, I shall answer it to the best of my flawed abilities. What is good writing? Fools be damned, here's my answer, may you etch in on my tombstone with your shovel's edge when I'm dead sooner than catch me alive dodging such a serious and earnest question:

Good writing engages the mind, stimulates the heart, and pursues understanding without sacrificing simplicity or abundance of meaning

Now, sir, your fortune in this correspondence is changing, and there is only one honorable possibility to save our cordial acquaintance, which you have foolishly encircled with your choler. In order to let you think it over, a term of two hours will be granted beginning with the presentation of this note. If this proposal should be rejected, I'm ready to write you out of our heart. I command you one last time, sir, to surrender your answer: What is good writing?

-NJH

Sent: Tuesday, November 29, 2022 - 11:36 p.m.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Good Writing

NJH,

NUTS!

-NH

Sent from my iPhone

Horrorscope By Celina Lopez

“Cassie, we have to leave now if you don’t want to be late!”

Rolling her eyes, Cassie finished tying her dark hair into a high bun. “I’m coming, Mom!” she shouted in response. She glanced at her reflection once more before leaning down to grab her backpack. She swung a strap over her shoulder and made her way into the hall. Her shoes squeaked softly against the wooden floor, while her hand dug into the pocket of her jeans to pull out her cellphone. Cassie paused at the top of the stairs as she unlocked her screen and flipped to the most used app. Her phone lit up with a shower of stars and a bright tinkling of a xylophone greeted her.

“Let’s see what the stars have planned for me today,” Cassie murmured as her eyes flicked through the horoscope app. She tapped her sign and eagerly read her predictions.

Aquarius, today is a great day for love! Your heart’s desire will feel the urge to confess, so be ready with open arms! Be wary of relationships, or you may find

“Cassie!”



Cassie’s head shot up and she quickly stuffed her phone into her pocket. Her mom stood at the bottom of the stairs with a harried expression.

“Do you want to be late?” A hand went to her hip. “I’m not going to excuse your tardiness again, and I’m sure they’ll have you sit in detention if you miss your first period,” her mom said. She waved Cassie down. “Get your butt in gear and stop obsessing over your horoscope.”

Cassie frowned, but made her way down the stairs, her backpack bumping against her hip. “I’m not obsessing,” she retorted, “horoscopes can predict whether or not someone is going to have a great day versus the worst day of their life!”

Her mom scoffed as she grabbed her car keys. “Cass, don’t put too much weight into those predictions, a lot of it is just vague advice.”

Shrugging, Cassie walked past her mom toward the front door. “I believe it.” She smiled over her shoulder as she walked outside toward the car. “My prediction for the day is that my crush is going to confess.”

“Oh?” Her mom locked the front door and turned with an amused expression. She pressed a button on her key fob and unlocked the car. “Who’s the boy?”

Cassie pulled the passenger door open and sighed gustily. “Mom! I’m not going to tell you, that’s weird!” She hopped into the car, dropping her bag near her feet before pulling her seatbelt on.

The driver’s door shut as her mom took her place at the wheel. “It’s not weird, you’re my daughter, I like to know what’s going on in your life.” She pulled out of the driveway and onto the road. “I remember my first crush,” her mom said with a smile, “Henry Di-lov.” She whistled as she drove. “He was the cutest guy, with the prettiest blue eyes. Every girl in my grade had a crush on him.”

Cassie rolled her eyes and pressed her head against the window. “You’re so embarrassing,” she said with a groan.

Her mom laughed as she pulled into the drop off zone in front of Cassie’s school and parked. “Have a good day.” Cassie hopped out of the car and grabbed her bag. Her mom watched her with a smile. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Cassie said reluctantly under her breath. She pulled her backpack onto her shoulder again and shut the door. She walked toward the school so she wouldn’t have to watch her mom drive off. She glanced over her shoulder briefly before pulling her phone out of her pocket. She glanced at the time as she unlocked the screen and pulled up the horoscope app. She still had time to get to class, she just needed to finish reading her predictions for the day!

Aquarius, today is a great day for love! Your heart’s desire will feel the urge to confess, so be ready with open arms! Be wary of relationships, or you may find your closest ally stabbing you in the back! Click [here](#) for an in-depth look at your moon sign!

Cassie’s eyes widened. It seemed that her day was going to be a rollercoaster of experiences. She locked her phone and shoved it back in her pocket. She glanced down the hall and saw other students running to their classes so as not to be late. She started walking to her own class at a more leisurely pace. Her fingers traced the shape of her phone thoughtfully. Her crush was going to confess to her and a friend was going to... betray her? Most of the time her horoscope predicted a good grade on a test, or when luck was heading her way. This was so much bigger! She exhaled in excitement and smiled secretly to herself.

“Oh shit! Watch out!”

Cassie turned toward the voice and threw out her arms as a body crashed into hers. The weight of the other person dragged her down in a flurry of colors and flailing arms. She winced as she fell onto the hard concrete and had the breath knocked out of her.

The body against hers shifted. “Cassie? Crap, I’m so sorry, are you alright?” The other person hurriedly stood and held out a hand to help her up.

Cassie’s eyes followed the path of the outstretched hand to the owner’s face. She immediately felt her face flush in embarrassment at who stood before her. Josh - freaking - Hewitt, the guy she had been crushing on since elementary school. “I’m fine,” she said quickly. She took his proffered hand and felt the heat in her cheeks deepen at the warmth of his palm. “W-what happened?” she asked to distract him from the redness of her face.

“It’s my bad, I was running to class and I tripped over my shoelace,” Josh said. He flipped his shaggy hair behind an ear and

smiled crookedly at her. “Are you sure you’re alright? I took you down pretty hard.”

“I’m fine,” Cassie assured, looking at her shoes, “you should go so you’re not late to class!” She brushed off the seat of her pants and touched her hair to be sure it was still presentable. She refused to make eye contact with Josh, worried that she would blush again.

A hand on her elbow had her eyes flicking quickly to Josh’s face. He smiled again and lowered his hand. “You know, you’re cute when you’re all flustered.”

“What?!” She squeaked. Her hands flew to her cheeks. “What are you talking about?”



He laughed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” He shrugged. “I’ve always had a crush on you, I guess I finally had enough courage to confess. It only took me knocking you over to find the courage!”

Cassie’s lips parted in shock. “Y-you have a crush on me?” A bell rang and Josh’s eyes flicked up.

“Crap, now we’re both late,” he said. He started to pull away, but paused. “Can we continue this convo after school?”

She nodded, butterflies fluttering in her stomach. “Of course.” She couldn’t hold back a wide smile. “I’ll see you after.” He smiled in return and waved before leaving. Cassie lingered, watching Josh’s back as he went to class. She shook her head and felt her hand stray to touch her phone.

Her first prediction had come true. Her heart’s desire had confessed and she had literally caught him with open arms. She bit her lip. The next part of the horoscope worried her. She slowly began walking to class. Who was going to be the one to stab her in the back? Could it be someone trying to get between her and Josh? She slipped into class as the second bell rang and took a seat toward the back. She placed her backpack on her desk to hide her motions and surreptitiously pulled her phone out and unlocked it.

Her eyes flicked toward the teacher as her finger flicked open the app. She hunched her shoulders and glanced down to read her horoscope again.

Aquarius, today is a great day for love! Your heart’s desire will feel the urge to confess, so be ready with open arms! Be wary of relationships, or you may find your closest ally stabbing you in the back! Click [here](#) for an in-depth look at your moon sign!

Cassie chewed her bottom lip. If she clicked the link, it would take her to a portion of the app where she could pay for more details. Her finger hovered over the link, but before she could click, laughter from the class snapped her back to what was happening in the classroom.

“That’s an agreement if I’ve ever heard one.” The teacher said, continuing a conversation Cassie hadn’t been paying attention to. “We’ll split into groups of two for this period and you guys can interview your partner. Get enough info so you can write at least a paragraph about the other person. Break into your groups, and if you need me, just raise your hand.”

The sound of shuffling chairs filled the room as everyone rose. Conversations broke out as students paired up. Cassie pushed her phone under her backpack and hesitantly glanced around for a partner.

“Do you want to pair up?”



Cassie turned to her left and smiled in relief at seeing her friend. She straightened and nodded. “Lexi, I’m going to be honest with you, I was kind of spacing when the teacher was explaining the assignment.” She fished a pen out of her backpack and pulled out a notebook. “I have no idea what we’re doing.”

Lexi pulled a chair closer to Cassie’s desk and huffed a laugh as she sat. “No worries. We’re doing mock interviews and then writing a paragraph about the person, which will be due tomorrow.” She rolled up the sleeves of her sweater and folded her notebook onto a fresh page. “Even if we don’t finish this period, we can always text each other later if we need info.”

“Oh, good!” Cassie said. She set her notebook aside and pulled out her phone again. “I’m having a horoscope crisis and I need to get more info on what to expect today.”

Lexi cocked her head as she watched Cassie open the app. “Anything juicy?” she asked as she set aside her own materials.

Cassie scoffed, distracted. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Her eyes roved over the words again before focusing on the link within. She hummed with indecision before pursing her lips and clicking on the link.

Aquarius, for just \$1.99 you can reveal your moon sign and find out what surprises lie in store for your day!

She entered in the payment information, her leg bouncing under her desk as a little hourglass on the screen flipped. The sounds of the class became muffled as she watched the turning of the icon. A chime and a vibration finally alerted her to the success of her payment and she eagerly clicked on the next prompt.

Aquarius, your moon is Aries rising. Lunar Aries are filled with fiery passion. Aries requires an offering to ensure good fortune. Don’t let anything stand in the way of achieving your goals!

Cassie read the snippet again with a frown. What did it mean by offering? Was that another part of the app?

“Anything good?” Lexi asked as she twirled her pen.



Cassie shook her head. “I don’t know.” She refreshed the page, but the same vague words greeted her. She sighed and tapped her pen on the side of her desk as she set her phone face down. “So far, my horoscope has been very accurate. I don’t know how to feel about the next prediction though, it’s a little ominous.”

Lexi leaned forward and took Cassie's phone. "Let me see." She unlocked the phone and opened the app, deftly clicking on the appropriate links. She skimmed the horoscope before reading aloud. "Aquarius, today is a great day for love. Your heart's desire will feel the urge to confess, so be ready with open arms. Be wary of close relationships, or you may find your closest ally stabbing you in the back." Lexi looked up with disbelief. "You're telling me that Josh confessed to you?"

Cassie clasped her hands together on the desk and nodded mutely.



"No," Lexi protested. She leaned forward and shook Cassie's shoulder with a grin. "Did he really? This morning?"

"Yes!" She grabbed her phone back and locked it. "Which is why I'm concerned about the next part. You know, the betrayal? It could be anyone, and it could mean anything!" Her brows furrowed. "I don't know how to prevent something like that."

Lexi opened her mouth to reply, but the bell rang, signaling the end of class. Everyone scrambled to grab their belongings so they could move on to the next class. Cassie sighed and turned to gather her own belongings. She put her phone back in her pocket and zipped up her backpack. She and Lexi stood, moving to leave class together, as they shared the next period. Cassie started walking out when she heard the clatter of a desk behind her.

"Ouch! Marcus, pick up your stupid bag!" Lexi snapped to another student. "I almost fell on my face trying to -"

Cassie began to turn, but before she could, she felt a weight and a sharp pressure in her back as she was shoved forward. She caught herself on the wall and turned in confusion. Lexi was sprawled across a desk, her arm outstretched where she had tried to catch herself, pen still in hand. Her shoe was tangled in the straps of a backpack on the floor, Marcus stood behind her with a guilty expression.

Cassie's eyes settled on the pen in Lexi's hand and she felt her stomach clench. "You stabbed me in the back," she said softly.

Lexi's eyes widened and she pushed herself up, angrily kicking the problematic bag away from her. "Cassie, now hold on," she tried to halt Cassie's thought process.

Cassie shook her head. "I'll see you in class," she said as she fled.



She pushed through the sea of bodies as she tried to make her way to the bathroom. She just needed a second to think. It was too eerie how accurate her horoscope had been. She made it to the girl's bathroom and stood in front of the sink to look at her reflection in the dingy mirror. Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she absently pulled it out. A push notification from the horoscope app rested at the top of her screen.

Aquarius, Aries requires an offering to ensure good fortune. Don't let anything stand in the way of achieving your goals!

There was a strange ringing in her ears as she slowly set her phone on the towel dispenser and clasped the sides of the porcelain sink. She squinted her eyes and tried to focus on her face in the mirror. The dinginess of the glass warped her eyes and cast a strange shadow across her mouth. She reached out to turn on the faucet and welcomed the cool water on her heated skin. Cassie leaned forward and splashed some water on her face and exhaled heavily.

"Get a grip," she muttered. She took a calming breath and glanced back at her reflection. It looked normal; she must have been seeing things.

Her phone vibrated and she glanced at it in trepidation. She reached out and pulled her phone to her so she could see the new alert.

Aquarius! Aries requires an offering to ensure good fortune.

"What does that *mean*?" Cassie whispered to her phone.



Her phone vibrated again.

Sacrifice for the glory of Aries. Hesitation will bring the wrath of misfortune upon you!

"What the fuck." Cassie muttered. She stuck her phone in her jeans before she could read anything else. Her hands tangled in the hair near her temples as she fell into a crouch. She took a breath and closed her eyes. She needed to think about this logically. "Both predictions came true exactly as written," she said aloud. She slowly stood, her hands dropping from her hair. Her bun came undone and her dark hair pooled around her face, casting it in shadow. Cassie stared at her reflection, the ringing in her ears drowning out rational thought.

"Logically speaking," she touched the glass, her eyes warped and a manic grin turning her lips, "I should offer a sacrifice to assure my good fortune."

See you next year!
May the stars guide you back to us



Keep an eye out for our 2024 call for submissions! You can email your
work or questions to:
enjambed.submissions@gmail.com



“I have loved the stars too fondly to
be fearful of the night”

-Sarah Williams