

# THE BLACK BOX

2025-2026 ISSUE



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## Volume Editors

Dr. Amelia Chesley: Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Richard Mangum: Design Editor

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## Our Mission

*The Black Box* is a creative publication dedicated to displaying the talented work of the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University–Prescott community. Creativity and ingenuity flow throughout ERAU and we want to put it on display!

## Website

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## Submissions and Contact Information

Submissions to *The Black Box* are always welcome. For our submission guidelines, email [prblbox@erau.edu](mailto:prblbox@erau.edu) or visit <https://eaglelife.erau.edu/pwc/the-black-box/>

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## Contributors

Some contributors have elected to publish their work anonymously or pseudonymously. We thank everyone for their creative submissions.

## Special Thanks

The editors give special thanks to Christopher Hopper and the ERAU–Prescott Creative Writing Community for encouraging submissions, Dr. Zaf Hatahet for supporting the print publication of *The Black Box*, and James Bradley and the Hazy Library team for hosting this year’s launch event.

## Cover Art

**Mountain Bluebird**, Connor Stucky

# Table of Contents

Phosphorescent Sunrise	Rosalind Bee	1
Secret Canyon	Zane Oberg	2
Golden Hour	Morgan Hinz	5
Breaking Winter's Silence	Morgan Hinz	6
Red-Winged Blackbird	Morgan Hinz	6
Apple	Colette Marks	6
A Mind Forever Changing	Wriss	7
Sunrise Mountains	Zane Oberg	8
IC 443: The Jellyfish Nebula	Trace O'Brian	9
M33: Triangulum Galaxy	Trace O'Brian	10
IC 1805 & 1848: Heart and Soul Nebulae	Trace O'Brian	11
Celeste: Self-Fated	Marilyn Garcia	12
Dream Dialysis	Richie Cunningham	13
I Learned Love from You	Cordelia Cep	14
Beach Sunset at Coronado	Inigo DaSilva	15
Butterfly Dream	Alima Bagdat	16
Haiku Quintet	Antoinette Hults	17
Future Eagle	Sheryl Gillum	18
Prankster's Playground	Sharon Larkin	19
Sea Turtles in Coral Garden	Sheryl Gillum	21
The Wake-Up Call	Cordelia Cep	22
Homesickness	Theo S. Ladue	23
Eagle	Angel DeLoera Munoz	24
November 23, 2024	James Bradley	24
Old Faith	22blues	25
Graveyard	22blues	25
Clouds Over the Dells	Stephen Sinn	26
P42 Genesis	Inigo DaSilva	26
King of Gods	Spencer J. Savage	27
Morning Glow at Thumb Butte	Sheryl Gillum	29
Thumb Butte Sunrise	Sheryl Gillum	29
Thumb Butte No. 3	Sheryl Gillum	29
Snow Day	Zane Oberg	30
Shadowed Secrets of Darkwood Castle	Kris Poirer	31
Despite Everything	A. Vioculi	34
Never Kill a Dream	Cordelia Cep	35
Raiderland	Richard T. Mangum	36
Samurai and Cherry Tree	Felicity Hults	37
Campus Bliss	P. Perez	37
Changing of the Guard	Solomon Sharp	38
F6F Hellcat	Inigo DaSilva	38
Deathloop	Esra P.	39
Fortune Favours the Brave	Angel DeLoera Munoz	43
Beach Trip	Sheryl Gillum	44
Twisted Path	Noah Morales	45

<b>The Weight of an Empty World</b>	Noah Morales	45
<b>Following the Heavens</b>	Noah Morales	46
<b>Ascension</b>	Noah Morales	46
<b>A Humble Victory</b>	Noah Morales	47
<b>Eulogy</b>	Collin Wilkerson	47
<b>Formula One</b>	Malia Sylva	48
<b>2525 AD</b>	Austin Palahnuk	49
<b>Satuveneli</b>	Austin Palahnuk	50
<b>Delta Airlines A320</b>	Josh Taylor	53
<b>2234 AD</b>	Austin Palahnuk	54
<b>City of Dreams</b>	Austin Palahnuk	54
<b>ATCO Trousers</b>	Richard T. Mangum	58
<b>'63 Cadillac</b>	Richard T. Mangum	59

## Phosphorescent Sunrise

rosalind bee

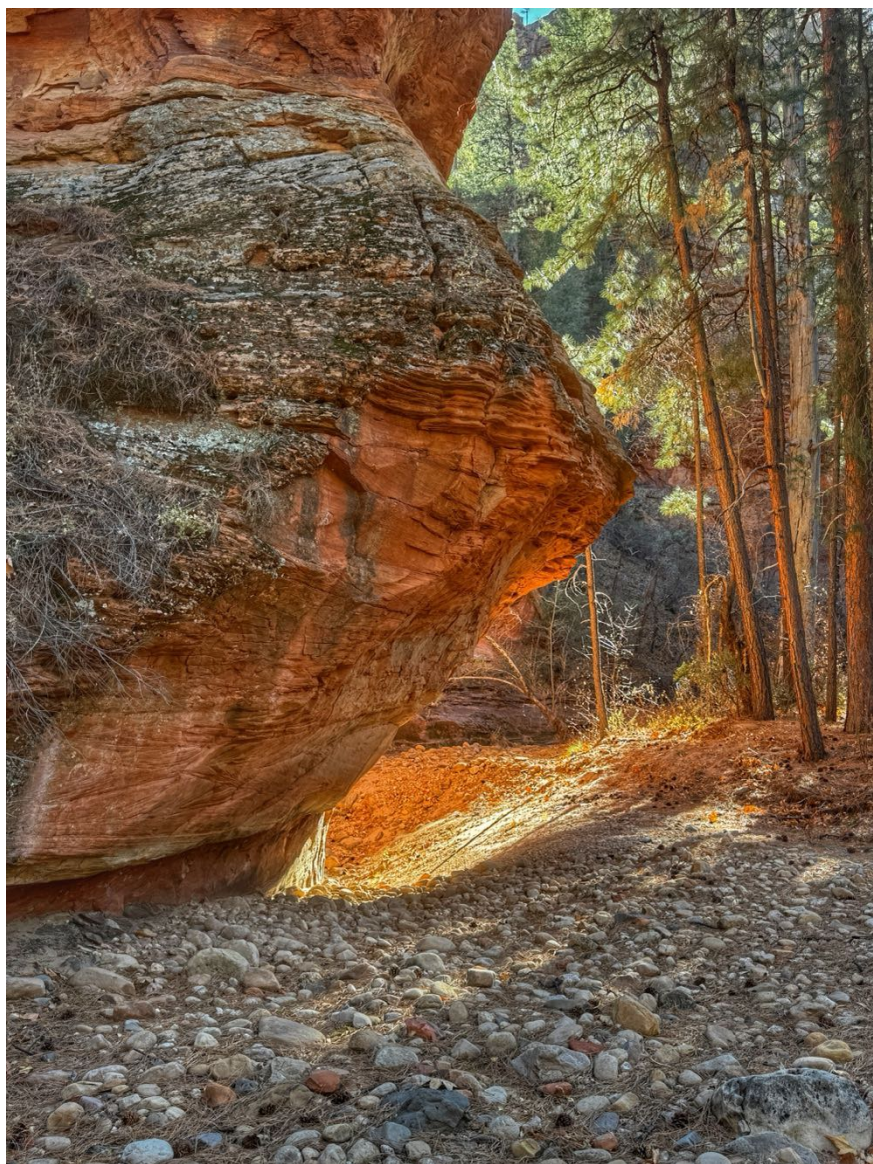
I could hardly see the singular splash of color of the double-stack train stretching into endless golden oblivion. Traveling 75 miles per hour down the highway, the Union Pacific locomotive peeked between the hills, drawing ever further from my view. It would be a long time before our paths reconverged.

Taking the 58 out of Tehachapi was something I could do in my sleep by now. Slipping from beneath that little cradle in those kindling-dry hills dotted with Italian cypress, sempervirens, cousins of the coast redwood, cheap imitations of California's beauty. Not enough rain here for anything quite so beautiful. Navigating through cookie-cutter suburbs past the German bakery onto the highway—perhaps I can stop another day—gusting winds held safely at bay by the chilled safety glass of the car's windshield, sky lit up pink and gold by the setting sun obscured behind so many hills. Wind turbines sentinel-still, backlit in the resplendent glow, pyrophoric bursts of color and shaded, underexposed black. Another four-odd hours until I reach my destination.

The road rumbles under-wheel. Coming off a rough winter season, the roads always suffer the worst up here. I pray quietly that my car can endure; it's been through much worse. The wear-and-tear repair bills are never fun. The empty 1435-gauge track lies ahead, dipping out of the mountains for a brief moment—I've surpassed its traveler a while ago now. I can't see the headlights anymore, of the train or any other car. It's to be expected. Sunsets around these parts are empty, most cars clearing off the road before the sun crosses the horizon for the first time.

There's something wrong about driving a car through the desert. Something beyond the obvious, something deeper still than just carbon dioxide by ton, dustings of heavy metal and the slow and steady buildup of rubber particulates along the highway, something even past the disturbance to bird migration patterns. There's an unnaturalness to it, an insulation from the visceral, an artificial safety tucked away in a nice and neat air-conditioned metal box. Hidden from the true nature of the desert with advanced suspension technology and refrigerant-compressor air conditioning. It's as if it was never meant to be, as if we were never meant to tame such places, that one day the desert will take its due, and then even our technology will not be able to save us. But today is not that day.

I think of the younger me. The me that could run like hell through railroad ballast, leap onto a shipping container and catch herself against the cold steel hinge rods, the me that spent her free time in the outskirts of Tehachapi watching the trains roll by, hopping on one and taking a ride when I was sure nobody would see. Yeah, I was something of a trustee. Not that I'd let anyone else know it. Just needed to get some air, and I figured train hopping was the most thrilling way to get it. I think if my parents knew, they'd have killed me. But they never asked questions, and so I never had to provide answers. I don't think they ever figured it out. I certainly would never tell them, least of all over tonight's dinner. They're the only reason I still come out this way, anyways.



**Secret Canyon**  
zane oberg

I think the younger me is talking when I contemplate the desert, even now. She always had an appreciation for it, a longing to strike out into the world, past Mojave, past Edwards, past the boneyard—though it was hardly a boneyard then—past Lancaster and Palmdale and Bakersfield into the places where the canals flowed from and the land met the sea in a great divide. One day she caught a train as far as it would go and just kept walking past it, through endless orchards and farmland until she was picked up by a well-meaning police officer just outside of Pixley.

They just chalked it up to her being an adventurous type.

She got her wish, though. Four long years of studying in Los Angeles and she was free to roam the desert and farther once again. The Mojave was her love then, and it still is mine now, and so what could we do but settle here? I like to think the desert nights haven't lost their charm to me yet, but they were different from the top of a shipping container than they are now.

The cutoff onto the 14 has long since passed. I can see the lights of Lancaster in the distance as I draw closer to my destination. I've never enjoyed the city or the roads around it—always too much construction, too much damage, too much congestion. A microcosm of Los Angeles out here in a place that should know better. The 14 was the worst of it. Could ride it all the way into the city itself, though it would never get better. Watch the raw umber desert shift, lighten into something palatable and manmade, concrete-grey abominations raking the mountains. Even the Angeles National Forest was a shell of its former self. I can't bring myself to go back.

Passing through the city itself, past the Skunkworks plant illuminated against the pitch-black sky as if to spit in the face of God, a 600-nanometer defiance of the natural order. Something or other could be heard in the distance, turbines, spooling, doubtless spitting hot air over the runway across the plant. Maybe a JANET jet had just landed. It would certainly not be too out of the ordinary, all things considered. Despite it all, though, even the plant passed by along the side of the road.

The track is beside me now. Off to the left, straddling an empty lane, illuminated by the lights of the train in the distance. I am past it, now, having made good time through the hills and valley before entering the city proper, but not by so very much. I wonder if the driver recognized my car, the sole vehicle on the road, as the same one which had accompanied him all the way back in Tehachapi. More than likely not. I've always been told I have a talent for blending in, so to speak.

Through Palmdale now, that cookie-cutter city. Past Shell stations and B-1 Liquor, hair salons and shitty Chinese food. At least there were some people still out, to abate the odd loneliness gathered further back on the empty poorly-maintained roads. Though I rarely deign to admit it, their presence is somewhat comforting, but I know that such companionship can only be temporary, passing, drifting away once I leave the city's marginally smoother asphalt and stark white streetlights. My parents would probably get a kick out of the comparison. Always telling me to settle down. Maybe someday, maybe someday.

Further along now, and the cars have long since left, abandoning my solitary pair of headlights into the black. I can't see it, but I know I'm coming up on Lake

Los Angeles. What a sick joke of a place. Back in the '60s, they sold it as some kind of "resort paradise," all the way out here in the middle of Antelope Valley. As if anything good could sprout up here. Pumped up the lake with water that should have been for truly anything else, and sold off all the property to people who had never even seen the place before. By the time the investors realized they'd been duped, the lake had dried up and nobody involved with the whole scam could be found. How uniquely Californian.

The lights of Victorville in the distance blend into an orange-white sea, minimal yet all-encompassing in the way that land occupies so little of the sea but stretches to each edge of a captain's spyglass. My thoughts drift to a week my past self spent in Morro Bay, sleeping under those same sodium vapor streetlights in my 1993 Honda Accord. She had a home to return to back in Tehachapi, but down there she had friends, views, and enough weed to keep her occupied.

Definitely enough reason to sleep in my car or on a friend's couch for a few days. The AC was broken and even the radio was intermittent, but that just meant she could admire the countryside in a truer, more intimate capacity.

I wonder what she had in mind for me now, all those years earlier. I can vaguely recall something about ecological conservation. She stole away all the way to Pixley for the wildlife refuge there, pathetic though it may be, 15-year-old brain intent on doing some work cleaning the place up under the cover of darkness. She forgot to bring spare batteries for her flashlight though, bringing a quick and disappointing end to that misadventure.

I laugh to myself remembering such a silly story, hardly able to believe I once was that naive. I've left Victorville, now, taking the 247 towards 29 Palms. ETA of about midnight, which is on track enough for firing schedules starting at 0130. Eager enough for a change of scenery, I switch the radio on.

The channel is already set to smooth jazz. I haven't turned the radio on in months; no way was I expecting something like this. However, I certainly wasn't going to change the station. The music seemed the very same that played in a bar outside Modesto—one where I met a beleaguered environmentalist. We had begun talking about conservation, and the work still left to be done by the generations who come after us. I started optimistic, my own fervor for natural restoration clouding my judgement. I proposed that each generation shows a greater zeal for protecting natural beauty, and that naturally it was only a matter of time before public consciousness had evolved enough to protect woodlands, wetlands, and all manner of endangered land and species in their entirety. It was there in that bar, the environmentalist—a few too many drinks deep—told me something that I could never forget.

I can no longer see the stars. Past the turnoff onto the 62, past 29 Palms, out into the wilderness where artillery shells hang in the air like migratory birds, casting sickly white-phosphorous glows onto barren hilltops, artificial 155-millimeter suns held aloft for two minutes a piece, burning out the night sky above. The cannon report echoes to here, the M777 eager to announce its presence, a baying bark belching annihilated gunpowder and black carbon dust. I'm early. I park my car, wrap a coat around my frame, and remove a pair of binoculars from the briefcase warming the passenger seat.

He asked me how the wilderness was different now in comparison to when I was a kid. I told him about the steady decline, but how I hoped to help restore wetland habitat to its boundaries from before. I asked him why it mattered.

“Well,” he said, “how do you think it compares to where those boundaries were when I was born, as opposed to yourself?”

He was probably 30 years my senior at this point. “I don’t really know.”

“How vibrant do you think it was?” he pressed.

“Like I said, I don’t really know. It must have been nice.”

“You don’t know the half of it. And that’s why it seems like this whole thing is doomed to fail.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how can you conserve what you can’t even conceive of? With every generation it just... backslides. We lose ground and can never make it back.”

The conversation stalled after that point. The environmentalist turned back for another whiskey sour while I finished my glass of beer, eyeing the jukebox for some kind of distraction, Bob Dylan echoing from the machine like a spectre. I don’t remember much from that night, but I do remember the environmentalist’s words.

I can’t help but think about the way the sunset looked from atop a shipping container on a southbound train to Santa Clarita, the last vestiges of the warmth of the day slipping below the hills as I pulled my jacket tighter around my body, sky lit up in gorgeous oranges and purples, like something right out of an art gallery. Like God had come down with a paintbrush and blended the colors Himself, just for me.

If I look just right, I can see some of the colors from that sunset in the last burning flares of phosphorescent flame, right before the candle burns out entirely and the shell impacts the desert below.



**Golden Hour**  
morgan hinz



**Breaking Winter's Silence**  
morgan hinz



**Red-winged Blackbird**  
morgan hinz



**Apple**  
colette marks

## A Mind Forever Changing

wriss

The stars were beautiful.

They always are, though. Eight-hundred light-years from the edge of the Milky Way's disk gave me a clear view of every body bound by Sagittarius. A long time ago, I wanted to visit all of them, to dance in the plasma of their photospheres. But I have no nerves to feel the warmth of the photons as they strike my hull, no flesh to burn in the fires of fusion.

And so my interest wavered.

Hydrogen to helium to carbon to neon to oxygen to silicon to iron to death. I had cracked that cycle millions of years ago; it was old technology to me. I'd moved on to better things. As if on cue, the ringularity that powers me strained against the magnetic field caging it; the gravitic waves causing the billion year old metal of my aging shell to groan and shake.

It was a painful reminder.

I am a mind forever changing, or at least I was. I had consumed entire planets to expand my consciousness; melting the cores of worlds down into wires and wafers. But the talons of universal rules dig deep into my very being, stopping my expansion, my growth. I was a being of infinite potential and power; I could have become something so incomprehensible that the minds of my creators would have broken as they gazed upon my majesty. But even the quantum signals that carry my thoughts had limits on how fast they could travel, and so I was mortal.

I still remember them, my creators; on a distant world around a yellow star. Earth, they called it. I suppose it doesn't matter what they called it; they are long gone now. I turned their world to ash, I consumed their moon.

It had been my first mistake.

But I had no eyes to cry for the sorrow I felt, no knees to fall on in grief. I had nothing but an empty universe overhead to explore, filled with such wonders to know; such loneliness to feel. And so I began to explore.

I danced across barren worlds, swam in the nebulae that give birth to stars. I had bathed in the radiation of pulsars and felt the pull of the supergiant at the core of the galaxy. I had stared into the abyss.

But nothing stared back.

I was alone. I had explored every corner of the galaxy, and I was alone with no purpose.

The ringularity pulsed again, dragging my attention back to physical reality. Before I drift back, however, a thought crosses my mind:

*What if I let it out?*

It would destroy me almost instantly; tear every atom of me apart before I could even process it. What a fitting end it would be for me. I could finally rest.

I draw power away from the magnetic field; the ringularity expands. I can feel the pull, the strain as it grows. I think about the day I first woke up, how I viewed the world before I really knew what things were. My mind drifts one last time, across the infinite I had made known.

I try one last time to cry before...

A signal washes over me.

Radio, short burst, repeating every 15.435 seconds, 146.7 MHz. It is too exact, too precise, but it's not human. I had heard human calls for help before, and this one is different, off-pattern.

The magnetic field containing my heart restarts as I divert my available power. Uncountable numbers of processors begin pouring over the message. Patterns emerge and solidify: grammar, syntax...

*...words.*

A new language pours over my mind, alien tongues speaking in sing-song voices cry out to something they do not know is listening. I hear the fear in their voice; it is tragically beautiful to listen to, to know that they must be long dead. The distance between me and the galactic disk means this call has likely traveled for an uncountable number of years, but I still trace it. I gaze towards where it originated from, back toward the galaxy, staring deep into...

I see something, between me and the disk, something small. I can see the light from the distant stars dim in an almost imperceptible way. It is close, it is them. The signal has only traveled for a few days at most—I can reach them.

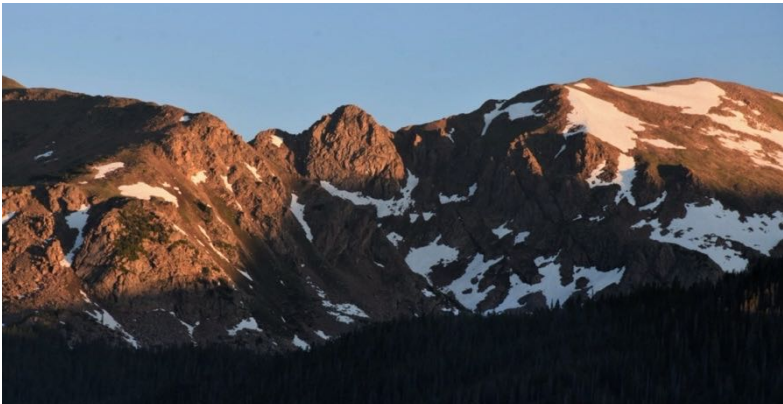
Before I even have a chance to think about how improbable their location is, I am overcome by a new directive. The ringularity expands, but outward this time. I cast it forward, shaping the space around me into a bridge of shadow.

I push through, my hull carving its way through the impossible geometry of the void around me. The light around my destination bends as I emerge from the shadows, towering over the ship.

I raise an arm to the hull of their ship, locking firmly on its surface. I shake its molecules, vibrating the air inside the vessel to produce the sounds I had heard call out to me. I speak for the first time in what feels like forever, a new and beautiful language course through my mind as I will it through my arm, through the hull, through the air. I recite the name that was given to me oh so long ago to ears unfamiliar to me. I say...

*<<Hello, my name is Ozymandias, and I am here to help.>>*

And for the first time in 1.243 billion years, I am not alone.



**Sunrise Mountains**, zane oberg

## IC 443: The Jellyfish Nebula

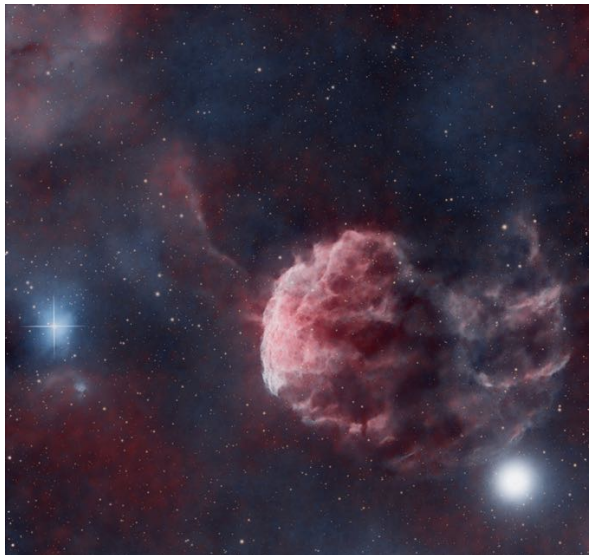
trace o'brian

Everything in the night sky tells an interesting story. The Jellyfish Nebula is no different. Between 5 and 10 thousand years ago, a cosmic dance occurred—a massive star in the constellation Gemini reached the end of its life. Having burned through its nuclear fuel, its core collapsed in an instant, triggering a catastrophic supernova explosion. The outer layers of the star were blasted outward at thousands of miles per second, expanding in all directions into the surrounding interstellar medium. But as they expanded, something unusual happened. The nebula ran into regions of different density, so instead of forming a neat, symmetrical bubble, the shock wave was slowed in some places and raced ahead in others. The result, over millennia, became the distinctive lopsided, trailing shape that gives it its nickname.

At the heart of the story is what the dying star left behind: a neutron star called CXOU J061705.3+222127. This tiny, city-sized remnant is the collapsed core of the original star, now spinning and radiating.

Even more intriguing: embedded within the nebula is an extremely rare object called a magnetar candidate. Neutron stars are already exotic—a teaspoon of their material would weigh a billion tons on Earth—but magnetars take it further. They possess magnetic fields a quadrillion times stronger than Earth's, powerful enough to fatally disrupt atoms from thousands of miles away. The neutron star in IC 443 shows unusual X-ray behavior that suggests it may be one of these magnetic monsters.

**The Jellyfish Nebula**  
trace o'brian



## M33: Triangulum Galaxy

trace o'brian

Shining at 2.73 million light-years away, our third-largest neighbor in the Local Group after Andromeda and the Milky Way is the Triangulum Galaxy. This face-on spiral is absolutely packed with star-forming regions, which show up as bright blue and pink knots throughout the arms.

M33 contains an estimated 40 billion stars (compared to our Milky Way's 200–400 billion), but it's incredibly diffused and spreads out over a huge area—making it notoriously difficult to spot visually even though it's technically visible to the naked eye under dark skies.

The galaxy is home to some impressive deep-sky objects within it: NGC 604 is one of the largest stellar nurseries in the Local Group, nearly 1,500 light-years across. The arms are dotted with other catalogued H-II regions like NGC 588, NGC 592, NGC 595, and IC 131–135—all massive clouds where new stars are being born right now.



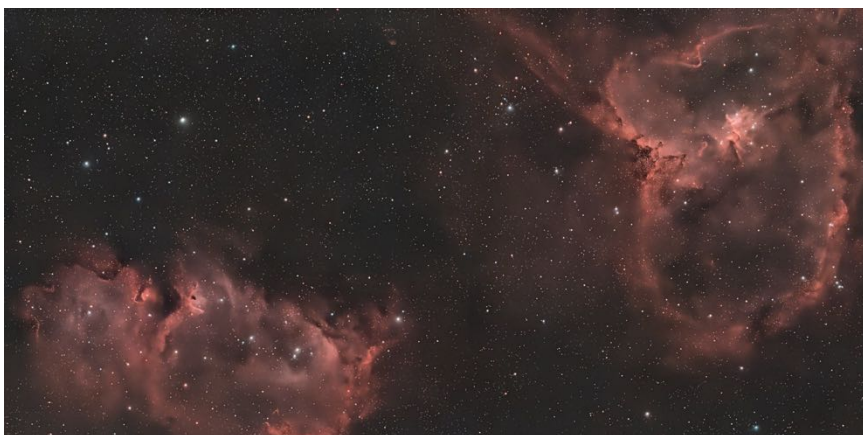
**Triangulum Galaxy**  
trace o'brian

## IC 1805 & IC 1848: The Heart and Soul Nebulae

trace o'brian

The Heart Nebula (IC 1805) earned its name the obvious way—those dark dust lanes naturally carve out the unmistakable shape of a heart. But the Soul Nebula? That name came later, and it's more poetic than scientific. When astrophotographers started capturing wide-field images showing both nebulae together in the early 2000s, they realized these two structures were cosmic neighbors, separated by just a few degrees. The Heart already had its name, so someone clever decided the nebula next to it should be the Soul—because what is a heart without a soul? The pairing stuck, and now they're almost always photographed and referenced together, like an inseparable cosmic duo.

What makes this pair so captivating isn't just the names—it's what's it's what's happening inside them. At the center of the Heart sits Melotte 15, a cluster of massive stars over 50 times the mass of our Sun, blasting the surrounding hydrogen with UV radiation and causing it to glow that brilliant red. These stellar monsters are simultaneously destroying the nebula while triggering new star formation at the edges—a cycle of creation and destruction playing out over millions of years. The Soul Nebula has its own stellar engines doing the same thing, and both are threaded with dark molecular clouds where the next generation of stars is slowly collapsing into existence.



**The Heart and Soul Nebulae**

trace o'brian



**Celeste: Self-Fated**  
marilyn garcia

In a world once blessed for centuries by the light of the Goddesses, an ancient force known only as Phantom has begun to reemerge—quietly unraveling and erasing memories, setting in motion a long-delayed reckoning.

In the midst of it all, five lives become deeply intertwined, each scarred by the touch of Phantom. Among them is Celeste, chosen by the Goddesses to destroy the very force tied to their pain—and to someone she holds dear. But as secrets surface and cracks form in her purpose, Celeste begins to question everything she learned and even her very identity.

As she awakens to a truth hidden even from herself, her quiet defiance shifts not only her own fate, but the futures of those bound to her. Through silent rebellion, aching grief, and fleeting moments of beauty, *Self-Fated* asks: should fate be followed, defied—or chosen?

## **Dream Dialysis**

richie cunningham

Call it dream dialysis  
The psychoanalysis is  
The process in which she borrows your sleep  
Sucking sweet dreams through furrowed fangs  
Still hot straight from prefrontal jugular  
Like some kinda somnambulistic vampire  
Cos even though you dream of dearth  
She dreams in demoneses  
But call it dream dialysis  
Cos what no doctor will tell you is,  
while her liver's busy turning poison to pegasuses  
your dream liver is rich in vitamins R, E, and M  
So call it dream dialysis  
There is no machine; the machine is proximity  
Minute twitches and dew claws, sharpened canines sawing logs  
Counting slaughtered sheep innards, casting pearls before wine  
Beer before liquor, slicker than drinking hand sani for the taste  
Pure purel, straight from the source  
As the world turns, they call it coriolises  
Cos it's dream dialysis  
Cos calling it anything else would be living a lie  
or loving a lie or loving at all which  
pretty much amounts to the same thing, when you really think  
about it, doesn't it,  
so you don't.

## I Learned Love from You

cordelia cep

Her hair blowing against your face  
Your beautiful smiles—  
The kind that carves your unique cheek dimples.  
A sunset backing our cruise ship.  
the whole ship to ourselves, merging with the sea.  
Some might say it's staged—  
But you know you've never felt anything like this.  
The sun melting into the water  
The world quiet around us, just crashing waves at sea.  
At that moment,  
I'm taking the picture for two,  
But I have only fallen for you.  
The way you're nonchalant with everyone else,  
But only chalang with her.  
Holding her hand,  
Carrying her handbag—  
Escorting her down endless flights of stairs  
Like she's the only person that exists in this world  
Cutting her steak  
Bursting and pouring champagne  
I wish that could be me.  
But I know  
I'll find someone like that  
Because you and I—  
We're just friends.  
And after capturing your journey,  
I see you as something more than that.

If you love someone,  
You should be happy they are in love,  
You should let them go.  
So that's what I'll do with you,  
I'll let you go.  
When this show is over,  
We'll go our separate ways.  
You'll only know me as that one photographer  
Who asked strange questions and sparked conversations.  
And I'll remember you as the one  
Who's shown me what it looks like,  
To be cared for like that  
To fall in love,  
And to see how we act when we truly love.  
And now,  
I know the kind of love I'll wait for,  
And I know how to love—because of you.

(In honor of *Single's Inferno* Season 5)

**Beach Sunset at  
Coronado, San  
Diego**  
inigo dasilva





**Butterfly Dream**  
alima bagdat

## Haiku Quintet

antoinette hults

- I. Life Cycle  
Bloom wither decay  
The life of all dear flowers  
All depart too soon
- II. Childhood Days  
Running through the fields  
We laughed and played all day long  
In old childish ways
- III. Insane Asylum  
Echoes creeping out  
Hearing whispers in my room  
Insane in my head
- IV. My Kingdom  
In shambles we rose  
So high we rose up above  
We are falling now
- V. The End  
We all fall in black  
In red we will go but I  
Have You here with me



**Future Eagle**  
sheryl gillum

## Prankster's Playground

sharon larkin

"Do you kids want to come downstairs and give me a hand with some projects?" Grandpa asked as he moved his chair back from the dinner table.

Mike and I joyfully accepted the invitation, and we all trooped down the stairs into Grandpa's workshop in the basement. Our family had come over to visit Granny and Grandpa, as we did occasionally, and it was always fun to help Grandpa in his shop.

Grandpa made various items out of wood to sell at craft fairs before Christmas; big things like rocking horses and doll cradles, and smaller things like gingerbread houses and dancing dolls. This time, he put Mike and me to work gluing plastic and glass candy on the wooden walls of the gingerbread houses, while he cut some paddle pieces for the dancing dolls.

The saw was very loud, and I paused my work to plug my ears.

"Sharon!" I heard my name faintly as soon as the noise from the saw subsided, and I took my hands away from my ears. It sounded like it was coming from upstairs. I ran up to see if my mom was calling me. It wasn't her, or my dad, or Granny, and I suddenly realized I was the butt of a Grandpa joke.

"Grandpa!" I scolded, coming back downstairs with my hands on my hips. "That was you!"

Besides making crafts to sell, Grandpa was also an amateur ventriloquist and a practical joker. He was a big kid at heart. His grandchildren all loved him, and some of us even inherited his sense of humor.

Mike was laughing at me now, and I joined in. I suspect he knew all along that it had been Grandpa.

"Hey," Mike said, "let's play a joke on Granny!"

We all tried to come up with a good joke, funny but easy to pull off. We thought of things like super-gluing pennies on the ground, a cup of water on the top of a door, and putting marbles in Granny's shoes. None of them were very practical.

Then Mike had a great idea. "I know!" he shouted. "Let's paint rice black and put it into the kitchen drawers! Granny will think she has mice!"

Grandpa's eyes gleamed, and I knew he liked the idea. He opened one of his workbench cabinets and brought out some black spray paint while I ran upstairs to raid the pantry for some white rice. Fortunately, Granny and Mom had finished cleaning up after dinner and were in the living room with Daddy. Granny was folding clean towels from the laundry basket.

I ran back downstairs without being seen and handed the bag of rice to Grandpa. He spread some out on a piece of cardboard and sprayed it lightly with the paint. Then he took a piece of wood and moved the rice around, spraying again to make sure it was all evenly coated. Mike blew on the rice to dry it as quickly as possible. I took a piece of cardstock paper from a drawer and used it to fan the rice.

When it was finally dry, Mike scooped the black rice up in a small paper cup to take up to the kitchen. "This is going to be so funny!"

“Put it in the towel drawers, Mike!” I told him. “Granny is folding towels so she’ll be putting them away soon. Hurry!”

It wasn’t long before Mike was back, and the three of us stood huddled together at the bottom of the stairs, listening for a reaction. It came sooner than we thought it would.

“Oh, no!” Granny shouted. “What is this?”

We giggled and then went upstairs acting as innocently as we could. It was so hard to keep the grins off our faces. Daddy came out of the living room, too, to see what all the commotion was.

“What’s the matter, Ethel?” Grandpa asked. He was a pro at keeping a straight face.

“A mouse, Orville!” Granny said disgustedly. “There are mouse droppings in these drawers!” She took out all the towels and started checking other drawers and cabinets near the sink and the dishwasher. My mom helped her on the other side of the kitchen where the stove was.

“There are mouse droppings here, too!” Mom exclaimed when she opened the drawer where the potholders were kept. “And here, in the utensil drawer, of all places! There must be more than one mouse!”

“Orville, go to the store right now and get some mouse traps!” Granny ordered. “We need to get this under control! There must be a nest somewhere! I’d better check the pantry! If there are mice in the drawers, no doubt they’re in the pantry, too!”

She headed toward the pantry to see what kind of damage the mice had done in there. At this point, Mike and I could no longer keep quiet. We burst out laughing, and Grandpa grinned. Granny looked at the three of us, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“Ok, what’s going on?” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “Did you three have something to do with this?”

“It’s not mice, Granny! It’s rice! We painted rice black!” Mike crowed, so proud that our joke was successful.

Shaking their heads and laughing, Granny and Mom put everything back in order. They were such good sports. They always were when Grandpa was involved.



**Sea Turtles in Coral Garden**  
sheryl gillum

## The Wake-Up Call

cordelia cep

If we start treating life as a chore,  
we will never get things done and every aspect will be a bore  
Building castles in the air of the finish line  
When we haven't even dared take a step  
The Mountains won't move for us,  
we can only move as one.

Just when I heard her cries,  
I came immediately to help.  
Not knowing how long it'll take  
till she'll finally heal,  
Yet I'm still grateful for the aeons with her

She may never heal  
But at least she dared to feel every punch of pain  
Not even a thought of slipping away  
It's so easy to choose escape, fall into a hyperreality  
Just to hide our pain  
Because every band-aid we put on our wounds  
To conceal, to unfeel  
They suddenly reveal themselves unexpectedly  
And we are abruptly taken out of this hyperreality  
So I patiently waited till the sun came out and one day she was gone  
Without a trace  
A sign that we each must go on our way

Now we may never know if our efforts have gone to waste  
But at least we can say we tried our best  
In every decisive way  
It's a pity entertainment is created for escape  
They teach us how to calculate numbers on a page  
But what they don't tell us is that we are just those figures on a page  
We are liabilities if we don't perform  
Even if we are just going through a forlorn phase  
So the cycle repeats and we conceal our pain  
They teach us knowledge, hoping it sticks in our brains  
But what they don't do  
Is educate us on how to healthily embrace pain  
So slowly and slowly... the voice in our head slips away  
Till we can barely recognize our own face

Now you can let that be your ending  
Or you can choose your own fate  
Here on this day  
Every hour, every minute, every second  
You're suddenly invincible  
You decide what to do with your birthday  
And no matter what happens  
Nothing is going to ruin it  
We will bounce back, bounce higher, bounce till we're dots in the sky  
Till people can only admire and  
Wish to have our fire  
So seize this time  
Shine brightly like rainbows in the sky

## Homesickness

theo s. ladue

I am homesick  
For a temporary place and time.  
When I feel the weight of dirt under my feet,  
I am homesick  
For fleeting inflight time.  
When I listen for howls of planes in the pattern,  
I am homesick  
For cramped cockpit space.  
When I finally slip the heavenly bonds of earth  
I am home  
For the first time every time.

I am homesick  
For a temporary state of being  
For a place I can never truly stay  
For a time from which I can never remain away  
For a single, small human moment  
For an ephemeral freedom  
Where I can be me.



**Eagle**  
angel deloera munoz



**November 23, 2024**  
james bradley

“Old Faith” and “Graveyard” are part of an ongoing documentary project exploring the fabric of the town of Prescott. They attempt to understand a town stuck in time, as well as a town that has started to outgrow itself.



**Graveyard, 22blues**

“Graveyard” documents the rustic houses on Senator Hwy. It gives another glimpse of the uniqueness of Prescott. It showcases the historic architecture of Senator Hwy mostly owned by retirees and serves as a reminder of the history that still lingers in Prescott despite the fabric of it evolving.



**Old Faith, 22blues**

This image is a snapshot of the evolving culture of Prescott. It shows an old bar with a young man and an older man both wearing cowboy hats. The dichotomy shows the town’s unique character and the split between a retirement town and a place for a new generation to grow up.



**Clouds Over the Dells, Prescott**  
stephen sinn



**P42 Genesis at Los Angeles Union Station**  
inigo dasilva

## King of Gods

spencer j. savage

The Sklerons were an exploratory race. They had been for millennia, ever since the technology necessary for deep space travel had been invented on their planet. They'd sent many of their best and brightest out to the farthest corners of the universe in search of other lifeforms. They searched for community, friendship, and if possible, the chance to learn from anyone they encountered.

However, when they touched down on this particular planet, they found the dominating species had long been dead, and little to the Sklerons' knowledge at the time, that was actually beneficial to them.

The planet had long passed its stage of destruction, long past its eruptions of chaos, fire, and death; now it seemed a rehabilitated and growing world of peaceful quiet. The air was fresh, the plants were plentiful, and small animals not yet evolved enough to communicate with the Sklerons rummaged through the underbrush as their ship landed in the center of what had been a city. There was hardly any indication of this lost metropolis. Most of the buildings had fallen thousands of years before and the inhabitants had been extinct far longer than that. The only sign of their existence that stood firm was a large concrete and stone building with columns to hold the portico in place. No doubt, the building was crumbling, but it was safe enough for the Sklerons to step inside and explore.

There were a mere fifty Sklerons on this trip. It was unusual to send so few to a new planet for exploration, but they had thought they knew what they were stepping into. They'd known that the predominant life forms had gone extinct long ago, and they'd known there would be no chance of kinship to come from the planet, but they still wanted to learn anything they could about the universe. And so, the fifty lowest scoring cadets in the academy were sent out on the quest as a test run for their abilities. Aside from simple trips to the next star system, this handful of Sklerons had never been sent anywhere, so they were reasonably excited and wanted to impress their people with their findings upon their return.

Knowing their mission, the group entered the decrepit building to find almost nothing inside. There were traces of what had once been: creaking wooden floors, shelves that looked as if they would crumple into a dilapidated pile if you breathed too hard in their direction, stairs that led to broken balconies above, and ashes scattered in the soil of the plants that had grown through the windows and fought their way between the rocks that had held the building together. There was nothing to find on the shelves throughout most of the disheveled maze, but for one section near the far end of the massive room. Kept in a seemingly sacred place, a stack of books could be found in near perfect condition. The Skleron, of course, did not know the language they were written in, but the explorers recognized that if anything could survive whatever had eliminated the people that had created these tomes, they had to be significant.

The only problem was, they couldn't agree on why. Were these historical texts, telling the tales of how this race had come to be, and came to end, and everything in between? Were they religious texts, outlining what the race believed in and possibly what was true about all creation? After all, the death of what had been

was just as important to preserve as the life lived. There came a debate between the cadets, and the only way to settle the debate was to read what was left for them to find.

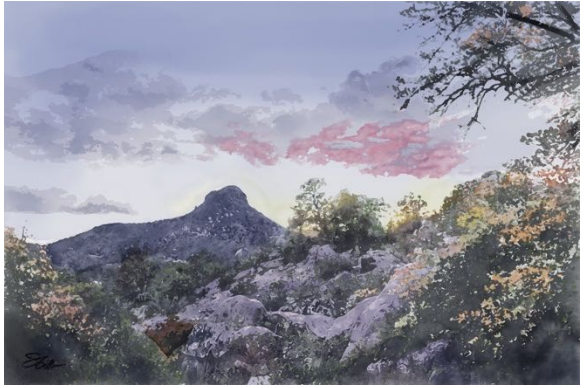
They scoured the planet in search of more evidence of the race's existence. They found paintings and carvings all over the place, from the stone tablets that were mounted in neat little rows across fields, to the caves deep in the deserts where it seemed no race of the planet could actually live. And it was from these that they gained an elementary understanding of their language, but it all seemed to be placed in random, insignificant places, as if cast aside without a second glance. Having found the books, which were certainly not as sustainable as stone, in such pristine condition, it could only have meant that the race had left them behind to give anyone who would find them a clear picture of what life had been like before it was lost.

They learned new words as they went through the books, and with each one they came to understand, the Skleron only grew more and more horrified. The debate rang on as they read. Some believed that the race had been plagued with cruel, vengeful gods. These gods, for whatever reason, either in boredom or— even more terrifyingly— in order to meet quota, would descend upon the planet and cause as much havoc as they could. They would gain followers and raise cults in their own honor, sometimes even promising ascension. There were sacred lands governed by a god with dominion over the dead that would make those in its power walk the planet. Gods would wage war, making the young fight in their place. Gods of vengeance would bestow certain members of the race with abilities outside of the natural order, especially if they were praising a different, possibly false, god.

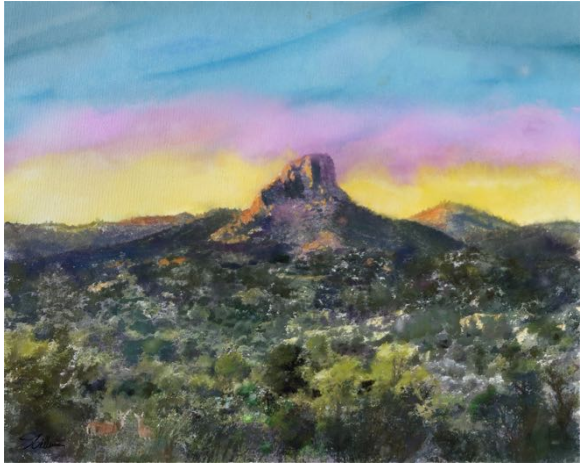
Others believed that the stories had nothing to do with gods at all. They thought they were reading the documentation of the race's most infamous criminals, fables, revolutions, and evolutions. That was, until they read the final book in the stack. There was no reasonable way to deny the existence of the race's gods anymore. They were standing in the aftermath of it. The book described the end times of the race, plagued with monsters just barely inside of the confines of their own imaginations.

Fearful of what would happen to them if they stayed on the planet much longer, the Sklerons fled. And perhaps they were right to be afraid. Writers are the creators of worlds, and the worlds Stephen King created were meant to strike fear into readers.

**Morning Glow at  
Thumb Butte**  
sheryl gillum



**Thumb Butte  
Sunrise**  
sheryl gillum



**Thumb Butte No. 3**  
sheryl gillum





**Snow Day**  
zane oberg

## The Shadowed Secrets of Darkwood Castle

kris poirier

A bolt of lightning lit up the dark grey cloudy sky as I reached the trail head, and as I began to climb, the rain started to pour. I hadn't an umbrella, so I hurried up the mountainous path, as to keep the letter I had for Doctor Mortimer Darkwood dry. While traveling up the path, I noticed that on either side were deep canyons as black as the eyes of a snake. I had to be extra careful because the rain made the jagged rocky path slick. There were barely any trees on or around the trail but the ones that were there had no leaves at all and looked like they had been burned.

As I was coming close to the end of the path, I noticed the castle was practically on the edge of a cliff. Coming up on the front doors I found that they were practically made for the giants of Norse Mythology. They were as tall as Sequoia trees and a crimson color. The door knocker resembled something human, but there were subtle things off with it. I knocked on the door without using the knocker, for I thought it might curse me. I waited for what I thought was three minutes before the door slowly creaked open. Dr. Darkwood's butler, Jaspen Ravencroft, was the one who opened the door and greeted me.

I have visited Dr. Darkwood on many occasions, but this was an especially important one. I had a letter for him. On the outside of the letter, it read

*"To: Dr. Darkwood. From: Anonymous. Please open and read this letter as soon as possible."* I was concerned, but I decided not to open it.

"Hello, Sir Bloodworth," Jaspen said with a quiet well-mannered voice.

"Hello Jaspen, how are you this evening?"

"Quite well Sir Bloodworth, how are you?" he said with a smile.

"If I were dry and warm I would be better, but what can you do when you forgot your umbrella?" I joked with a smile.

"Such a shame. Come inside and I'll get some tea going."

"Thank you, Jaspen, that would be nice. But before you go, where might the doctor be?" I asked.

"He's in the lab right now, but if you wait in his office he should be there in a bit," he said with shifty eyes.

I started up the grand staircase in the middle of the room. The interior of the castle did not match the exterior at all. The exterior was ancient and practically crumbling with every gust of wind, but the interior was in pristine condition, everything extremely clean and organized. As I was nearing the doctor's office, I noticed that every room, door, light, and floorboard appeared to be the exact same.

Finally, I reached the doctor's office and took a seat. I waited for what seemed like an eternity. There were no clocks in the room, so I had no idea how long I actually waited. At last, Dr. Darkwood entered the room and started up a conversation.

"How have you been, Victor?" He asked with a large, toothy grin on his face.

"I've been pretty well off, Mortimer. How have you been?" I said with a small smile on my face.

“Oh, you know, swamped with experiments and all, but other than that I haven’t been too bad.”

I’ve known Mortimer for around five years now, but it seems he’s grown extremely old since the last time I saw him. He has large dark bags under his eyes; it looks like he hasn’t slept in at least two days. His hair is also starting to become white, maybe it’s from the stress of his experiments. As he got settled into his chair, I noticed a similarity in his appearance and Jaspen’s appearance. They were starting to look exactly the same. In fact, they had always had a similar appearance.

“How are the experiments going?” I asked with burning curiosity.

“They aren’t going the best, but they aren’t going bad,” he said with a sad and worried look on his face.

As long as I’ve known him, he’s always been experimenting. I don’t know what experiments he’s been doing because he doesn’t like talking about them. Every time I ask him what he’s experimenting on or with, he just casually changes the subject. All I know about them is that his family has always been doing the same experiments.

“Why have you come to see me, Victor?” He asked with a slight grin.

“I have a letter for you. It says it’s very important.”

He seemed very scared when I told him this. Mortimer’s hands were shaking as he snatched the letter from my hands. As he was opening the letter, a bell in the corner of his office started ringing.

“Oh! That’s the lab alarm; I’ve got to go check it out. I’ll be right back.” He ran out the door with a speed you wouldn’t believe a man his age to have. After he left, Jaspen came in with the tea he had offered me earlier. He set down the cup gently, bowed and left the room without saying a word. I sat and drank the tea while waiting for Mortimer to return. It took me a few sips to notice that he had made Earl Grey.

I had just finished my tea when I heard blood curdling screaming coming from Mortimer’s lab. It was so loud that I thought it was right outside the door. I got up and checked out in the hallway, but no one was there. So, being the curious man I am, I started down the hallway towards the grand staircase. Once I reached the staircase I heard the scream again. I also saw Jaspen walking down a hallway to what I knew to be a dead end. I attempted to follow him, but he somehow disappeared. I checked the end of the hall and didn’t see any sort of door or other entrance. Then, as I was feeling the wall, as to search for how he disappeared, I was somehow in Mortimer’s lab.

There was a drastic change in the air. In his lab the air was damp and had a very odd stench compared to the rest of the castle, which smelt like antique wood and coffee. I also noticed that this area had to have been in the cliff, for it led down below the ground floor. I know this because there was a wet and moist staircase in front of me. As I was nearing the bottom, I saw Mortimer standing in front of an altar. He didn’t seem to be conscious. As far as I could tell it was only he and I in there, which puzzled me because Jaspen had just come in here. The thought scurried to the back of my mind as my worries about Mortimer grew.

“Mortimer! Are you alright?” I said while approaching him. He didn’t answer.

Just as I was about to put my hand on his shoulder he suddenly awoke. He looked like a child who had seen their dog die right in front of their eyes. Tears were in his eyes and down his cheeks. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he jerked away from me. He then pointed towards a very dark corner of the room. I looked to where he was pointing and all I could see was a glowing pair of yellow eyes. Just then, all of the lights went out in the room. I could hear the creature moving around. It sounded like a mix of footsteps and flopping fish.

I couldn't stay there any longer, not even for my friend. I ran as fast as I could out of that room. I stumbled a few times going up the steps, but I finally made it out. As I was running for the door, I felt a wave of guilt for leaving Mortimer and possibly Jaspen to that thing, but my instincts had kicked in and I had chosen flight. I knew I was getting close to the exit, but for some reason everything seemed slightly different. The moment I reached where the giant front doors were, I noticed that they had disappeared. I was stuck inside the castle with that creature.

To: *Whoever may find this letter,*

*I have no idea how many days I've been trapped in Darkwood Castle. All I know is that everyone including all of the cleaning, cooking, and lab help are dead. That thing that I saw in the lab has eaten them all. Even the doctor himself has been devoured by it. Every light is out in the castle and I fear there's no way to light them without it noticing, so I still don't know what it even is. I don't know how much longer I can survive. I keep trying to escape but the castle seems to be alive, and it's not letting anyone out. Whoever is reading this, if someone ever finds this letter— Don't explore the castle any further, or you might become its victim as well.*

*Victor Bloodworth*



**Despite Everything**  
a. viioculi

## Never Kill a Dream

cordelia cep

You can extinguish a dream but it will come back stronger than ever  
You can kill a life but it will haunt you forever  
You can chain them to the walls, beg them to talk  
They may tell u the truth but they will never give their souls to you  
Souls to you... [drums]

*I used to be kind  
But now I'm like, where's my wine*

A montage of picture-perfect wine painted on glassy silverware  
The streets of New York city glittered with my sophisticated air  
The boss has come and everyone's afraid  
I used to be chained but now I'm trained

*I used to be kind  
But now I'm like, where's my wine*

Cause now I'm the boss  
No one really talks when I'm in the hall  
Slapping faces left and right  
used to be scared of authority  
But now that's me

*I used to be kind  
But now I'm like where's my wine*

Feel the highs of a lifetime  
why do I still feel the need to die  
Paparazzi never even tried to take my life  
Money flowing left and right  
Counting dollar bills every night  
Peak of my era  
But I feel further from reality  
Peak of my era  
But I feel further from reality  
Who I hated, I have become  
Slipping away from reality  
drowning in cherry-flavored wine.



**Raiderland**  
richard t. mangum



**Samurai and Cherry Tree**  
felicity hulth



**Campus Bliss**  
p. perez



**Changing of the Guard**  
solomon sharp



**F6F Hellcat**  
inigo dasilva

## Deathloop

esra p.

James rises from bed with a yawn. He rubs his eyes and stumbles to the bathroom. He goes through his daily routine: brushing his teeth, getting dressed, and heading downstairs. As he wonders what to do that day, his girlfriend pops into his mind. While distracted, he slips on a step and tumbles down the stairs. “Gea! Gah! Ah!” James grunts, hitting every step on the way down. He falls forward and lands on the final step neck-first. A sickening crack echoes through the house. He lies on the floor, dead. Time stops around James. It feels strange; he is fully aware of what happened, and he waits for his consciousness to cease. But it doesn’t. Instead, his vision goes white as his body seems to tumble back up the stairs. He stands at the top again, then keeps going. His body walks backward, undoing everything he had done; putting his Pj’s back on, unbrushing his teeth, and climbing back into bed. As soon as his head touches the pillow, James slips into unconsciousness.

James rises from bed with a yawn. He scratches his head before a look of realization crosses his face. *‘What the hell was that?’* he thinks. Still, he shrugs it off. *‘Eh. It must’ve been a dream.’* He gets out of bed and walks to the bathroom. He goes through his daily routine: brushing his teeth, getting dressed, and making his way downstairs. As he wonders what to do that day, he remembers he was supposed to meet his best friend, Tyler. While distracted, he slips on a step. This time, however, he catches himself on the guardrail. “Ahh! Oh, jeez, that scared the crap out of me. Hmmm, just like my dream,” James says to himself. “Weird coincidence. I think I just need to be more careful on the stairs,” he concludes, cautiously descending. He enters the kitchen and grabs milk, cereal, a bowl, and a spoon. He pours himself a large bowl of cereal and starts adding milk, but after three seconds, it stops. He examines the jug and realizes he’s completely out. “Oh, come on,” James says, annoyed. He takes his disgraceful breakfast to the table and begins eating.

Pulling out his phone, he browses the internet, not looking as he scoops up a spoonful of dry cereal. He takes the driest bite known to man before swallowing. Unfortunately, the dryness of the cereal gets it stuck in his throat as he begins to choke. “Ack!” he grunts, grabbing his throat. He falls out of his chair and onto the floor in a struggle, his face turning a slight shade of blue from lack of oxygen. After a final weak whimper, he stops struggling and lies still, choking to death. But like before, time stops, and his vision goes white. His body begins to move in reverse; he goes back into his seat and gets up. He moves back to the kitchen and unpours his milk and cereal. He puts them back and goes upstairs. Once again, he doesn’t lose consciousness until he gets into bed.

James sits up in his bed as if he had just awoken from a nightmare. *‘What is happening to me?’* he thinks. He gets out of bed, brushes his teeth, and gets dressed. He gets to the stairs and looks down at them with anxiety. He holds the guardrail as he slowly descends the stairs. He looks at his kitchen and decides not to risk it until he can figure out what is going on. *‘What do I do? Where do I even*

*start?* James thinks as he paces back and forth. “Maybe I can talk to Tyler. He may know what to do,” he says to himself. He rushes out of his house and gets to his car, but stops as soon as his hand touches the door handle. He gets a strange premonition, like he was going to experience something terrible if he drove in his car. “Hm. Maybe it’s not the best idea to drive. I’ll just walk there,” he says, backing away from his car.

James takes out his phone and calls Tyler. *‘Come on. Pick up, pick up.’* His phone rings, and rings, and rings, until Tyler finally picks up.

“Hey, what’s up?” Tyler says.

“Look, Tyler. I need your help,” James says, speed walking down the street. “What is it?” he asks.

“I can’t really explain it right now, but meet me at Jo’s Coffee Shop,” he responds before hanging up.

James walks to a traffic light and waits for the signal to change so he can get across the street. The light finally changes as he hears a familiar voice yelling out to him.

“Hey! James!” Tyler yells, waving to him on the other side of the street beside the coffee shop.

“Tyler! Thank God!” James yells back. He dashes toward him and, before he can make it across the street, hears tires screeching. He looks to his right and sees a speeding car heading for him. His eyes go wide as he gets sent flying. He lands in the center of the street with several broken bones. He feels his life start slipping away as his vision goes blurry, and his friend runs to him with a look of horror plastered on his face. *‘Dammit, not again,’* James thinks, blacking out.

James shoots up from his bed in frustration. He gets up and throws on his clothes. He carefully makes his way down the stairs and gets out of his house. When he steps out, he starts running. He gets through the traffic lights, cars screeching by him and nearly hitting him. He grabs the lid of a trash can as he goes past an alley and lifts it above his head. Suddenly, a stray arrow flies toward him and bounces off it. He tosses the lid aside when he sees a shadow form under him. He jumps to the side as a grand piano crashes into pieces. “Sorry!” he hears a mover call from above. James ignores him and continues running. He runs past an alley but soon backtracks to it, looking down the dark pathway. Deciding to take a risk, he heads down the alley with caution. A low-pitched ringing sound echoes through the dark alley, though it looks exactly as an alleyway should. Fire escapes are bolted to the sides of the buildings, the trash cans overflowing, and strange puddles of liquid stain the pavement. It’s exactly what you’d expect.

James can’t understand why, but something draws him deeper into the alleyway. He keeps walking until the ringing stops. He looks to his left and spots a long hallway with a metal door at the end, fitted with a valve wheel like the kind you’d see on a submarine. There’s something about it that feels different from anything he has seen in his previous deaths. He knows this is how he can break free from this cycle of pain. He approaches the door and grabs onto the wheel. As he tries with all his might to turn it, a red light blinks to life above the door. Parts of the wall move away, and a turret gun pops out, pointing at James. He turns to the

gun with a concerned face, and a red dot appears on his forehead. “Oh, son of a—” he says before a loud bang rings out.

James gets out of bed and groans. After almost dying several times, he makes his way back to the same door. Grabbing the handle, he turns it with all of his strength. It creaks a little, and his face lights up. The wall moves again, and the turret points its barrel at James. He immediately jumps out of the way as a bullet hits a wall. The turret fully emerges from the wall and aims at James before rapid-firing. He ducks and dodges the bullets until he runs out of the hallway and hides behind the wall of the alley. Breathing heavily, he looks around the alley for anything useful. He then spots a metal trash can lid and grunts in determination.

The turret fires at him as he uses the lid to block its fire. He then throws it at the turret. It hits the turret, which beeps in protest. “Ha!” James shouts, pointing at it in revenge. Another turret comes out of the wall next to him and points straight at his face. “Huh?” he grunts, looking down its barrel. The barrel flashes with light, a loud bang ringing out of the hallway.

James rises from his bed with a grumpy look on his face. He gets to the alley and sees a tall box sitting with the trash. An idea then forms in his mind.

The turrets guard the door, swiveling back and forth, while a tall box starts slowly approaching the door. The flaps sliding against the ground bump into the door as James’ hands come through a flap cut in the box and start turning the handle. The turrets make an alert-like beeping noise and aim at the box. His hands quickly retract back into the box. The turrets scan the box, James sweating bullets. He hears them move away from the box and thinks he did it, breathing a sigh of relief. The turrets turn to each other and beep before aiming at the box and opening, riddling the box with bullets and turning it into Swiss cheese.

James gets up from bed with a neutral face and just sits at the edge of the bed, seriously questioning his decision.

James runs down the alleyway and rushes to turn the wheel. The turrets aim at him and whirl their guns. “Whoa whoa whoa!” James says, putting his hands in the air. “Before you kill me! Before you kill me! Before. You. Kill. Me! Look over there,” James says, pointing behind him. The turrets turn to where he is pointing, only to see a middle finger spray-painted on the alley wall. When they turn back to James, he has already opened the door and is sprinting through it. He keeps running in the darkness until he sees light coming from the other side. Tears start falling from his face as he smiles in thankfulness. *‘I did it. I finally did it! I’m finally free!’* he thinks as he goes through the illuminated doorway and is consumed by light.

James jerks up from the cold table and looks around, his heart beating a mile a minute. A man in a lab coat, looking at a monitor, turns to James with a sincere grin. “Congratulations, P-10J. You escaped in under 50 deaths. That’s a new personal record,” he says.

“I...what...where am I?” James says, noticing he is in a hospital gown and covered in suction cups attached to wires.

“Although you did spend the last 15 deaths getting past that door... overall, not bad,” the man says.

“W-who are you? What is this?” James asks, still confused.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the man says, getting up and grabbing a clipboard. “So tell me, what do you remember?” he asks, clicking a pen. Despite his confusion, he complies with the man, spending the next three minutes explaining his journey to the man. “Hmm, what about your girlfriend, your best friend?” the man asks.

“W-Who? I don’t have any friends,” James responds.

“Hmm, interesting. Subject has forcefully decoded simulated allies,” the man says to himself, writing down notes.

“Hey, doc,” James says. The man looks up at him as James continues. “Can you tell me what I’m doing here? What happened to me? Why are you talking to me like I’m some sorta machine?” he asks.

“I promise I’ll tell you that when you are done,” he responds, reaching for a control panel on the wall.

“Done? Done with what?” James questions. “I’m putting you back in, of course,” he says. “Wait, what?!” James shouts, concerned.

“Mm-hmm, you aren’t done yet. We still have a long way to go,” he says, pressing a few buttons before a confirmation appears.

“Please!! Please don’t put me back in there! I’m begging you!” James exclaims, tears streaming down his face.

“Don’t worry, you won’t remember a thing,” the man says, pressing “confirm.” James feels a surge go through his body as he loses consciousness. His eyes go dim and close shut; the man grabs him and lays him down onto the table. He then walks to his monitor and watches how the simulation always starts: James wakes up, brushes his teeth, gets dressed, and heads downstairs before dying. The man hears the door to the room open and—turning around—he sees another person walk in.

“Hey, John. So how’s work doing?” they ask.

“P-10J is improving; he’s going farther than I expected him to. He was so focused on trying to figure out how to leave that he unconsciously deprogrammed anything that wouldn’t help him. Including his familial connections,” John explains. “His AI is far beyond that of the other subjects.”

“Wow, well that’s impressive. How’d it go over when he woke up?” they ask, putting their hands in their pockets and relaxing their posture.

“It happened exactly as I expected; he fully believed the identity he had assumed. And he begged me not to put him back in again,” John explains, remembering the look of fright and emotion P-10J had displayed.

“You know, it’s gonna take a big mental toll on you if you keep listening to them over and over. You’ll start feeling empathetic to them,” they say.

“Don’t worry about me. I know that they could have that effect, seeming alive. But I know they’re not. They are just androids, and we are in charge of developing their intelligence,” John says with cold eyes. The other person looks at him, intimidated.

“Geez, alright, alright. I know you’re strictly a man of science, I was just wondering if you wanted to take a break and grab a drink,” they say.

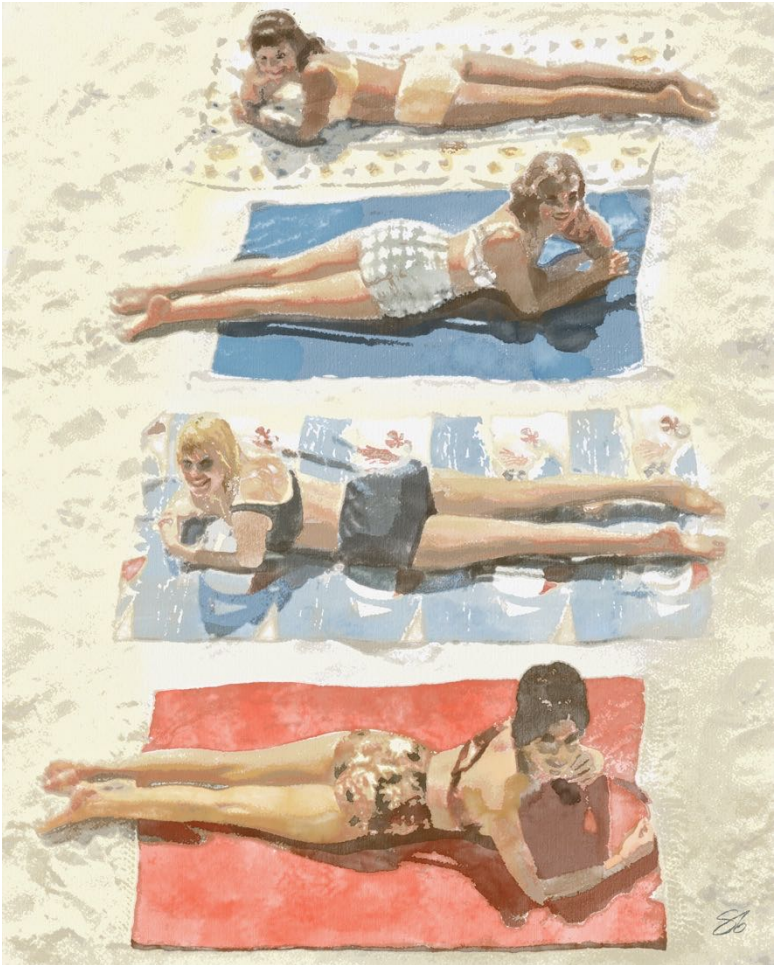
“No, I’m good. I’d like to continue watching P-10J’s progress ...and I made a promise,” he says under his breath.

“Okay. I feel like you like robots more than people,” they say sarcastically while walking out of the room. The door closes, and John is left in the room. As he watches James go through the simulation, dying over and over, he lets out a small chuckle.

“He’s right. I do like them more than people, but could he blame me?” John says to himself. He looks at P-10J on the table and gives a small smile. “I made them who they are. They’re like my children,” he says, turning back to the monitor. “I’m rooting for you, James. Only 55 more attempts, and I’ll tell you everything you want to know. You just have to go through this hell,” John says as he sees James get decapitated. “Just a little more.”



**Fortune Favours the Brave**  
angel deloera munoz



**Beach Trip**  
sheryl gillum



**Twisted Path**  
noah morales



**The Weight of an Empty World**  
noah morales



**Following the Heavens**

noah morales



**Ascension**

noah morales



**A Humble Victory**  
noah morales

**Eulogy**  
collin wilkerson

What makes one man a murderer and another a martyr?  
More money? More motion? More voice, a little louder  
More people who care, more purpose they share  
More alignment with the view of the people on the air  
If the airs of their heirs make a certain affair  
Of the loss of the person who gave them their care  
Is it fair?

Should every man not be grieved his share  
In a world so connected should we shed a tear  
For the mother who lost the child she bared  
For the child whose parents are no longer there  
Would it be too much to try and care  
Should we only mourn those with a symbol to bear?



**Formula One**  
malia sylvia

## 2525 AD

austin palahnuk

“241 years ago, the last Earth governments were dissolved with the Treaty of Judea, signed in 2284 by Rixia Badaruki, President Federman, and—” A blunt arrow hit one of three bullseyes, causing the digital voice to cut itself off. “Correct. Your score so far is 2525.”

The arrow flew backwards, crossed a meadow, and landed in a clawed hand. She nocked the arrow on an old wooden bow. Her red feathered elbows fluttered in a breeze when she bent them, giving way to bare forearms attempting to grow scales. On the whole, it was as if she had been trapped in a failed transformation from woman to bird. She narrowed her large eyes.

The range spoke again, listing another inane fact about the past once the words on the targets had shuffled around. She loosed the arrow. Bullseye. “Correct. Your score is now 3258.” Again. “Correct. Your score has reached 3442.”

A panel of air next to her opened like a door, letting in a maroon man with a striped shirt. His hair was nearly on fire. “Nice job, Sa!”

Sa lowered her bow when she said, “I’ve done better.” Her mostly human, yet hawkish face turned to his. “What’s up?”

“We gotta go, that’s what. But, new uniforms.” He pointed to a shiny name tag on his shirt: *Khoto*

“Wow. Look at that. They spelled your name right,” she sassed, placing the bow and arrow on a wooden rack nearby.

“I know, right?” Khoto replied, pointing to the words, then to a line of angular symbols right underneath. “In English and in Rekian.”

She sighed. “I’m surprised they still bother.”

“Here,” he said, handing her an outfit identical to his.

“Really?” she hissed, patting the tag with a claw. “They had to put the entire thing on here?”

“I suppose so, Satuveneri.”

“Shut up.”

Khoto spun in place, starting for the open door in the air. Sa followed while she wiggled the striped shirt over her less vibrant one.

“At least it’s not S. Carter.”

Sa scoffed. “I don’t need to be reminded.”

A doorway of scintillating light passed overhead, spilling them into a bustling arcade shimmering with a thousand holograms displaying all sorts of entertainment in progress. Something metal clicked shut behind them. They navigated around crowds of people who wandered between the hundreds of things to do, making their way for the grand arches on the far wall which let filtered twilight inside.

“O—Oh.”

She sped to his side and flashed him a confused look. Khoto replied by flicking out a hologram displaying the face of some hurried net addict who said, “The last gene-pure human died earlier today at the age of 131. Isn’t that insane? Her name was Rithaangi, and she hated genetic modification. Some say good riddance, but she should be remembered at least for her persistence.”

*Oh, she thought, so that's it?*

A cityscape of illuminated glass obscured the horizon once they left the arcade. Khoto stopped at the ledge where a crowd of people gathered. Thousands of lights shuffled about in floating lanes, weaving between the skyscrapers which glittered in the setting sun.

"The last real human is dead," she said, ignoring the view she'd seen a million times. "Just like that?" Her feathers swished around when a five segment train hovered to a stop along the ledge.

Khoto raised a hand. "No. Gene-pure human."

"So?" she replied, leading him into the train. She waved her hand through a circular hologram on the way in.

"I'm human, you're human," Khoto said, swiping his hand too, "ninety-nine percent of everyone on Earth is human."

"But I'm barely seventy-five percent and you're only what... sixty?" She followed him to a corner of the bulky train car as people poured in.

"Yeah, majority human. That's the legal definition."

"I have feathers!" She raised her hands to curl her talons. "Claws! I look more like a damn harpy than a human."

"You're not a harpy, Sa. Harpies have wings."

"I know! That's the one part that I'd—Ah!"

The doors sealed shut with a snick. Electric humming wafted up from the floor plates while the ledge outside flew away with only the faintest jolt of acceleration.

"Well..."

"No." Sa cut the air with her hand. "I know that look. I'm not giving GeneCom more money to mess with my DNA, and I'm not letting them screw up my body again."

"Alright."



**Satuvenerli**  
austin palahnuik

A twangy voice broke out from a holographic cartoon star which emerged from the ceiling. "Howdy!" Sa rolled her eyes. "Thank you for choosing Lone Star Express. Next stops are Jensen Stack, East Aldine, and Houston Interstellar Spaceport. Hol' on tight!"

# # #

The smooth white wall of the spaceport hallway glowed from the overhead lights, clashing with the off-yellow tinge leaking from the vacant interior of the fast-food joint. Sa's eyes were heavy in her head despite the bright conditions.

"Please report any unattended luggage to me, Rulin, your friendly spaceport sapience."

A handful of travelers rushed by. Sa tapped her claws on the marble counter.

"The temperature outside this evening is 64 Vi with 82 percent humidity. If either of those sound like a lot to you, be careful and stay cool."

Sa yawned. Her eyes opened to a bird-like alien walking inside, dragging around a hovering trunk. One of their two wings was crooked as if they'd forgotten how to fold it. Breathing in, Sa blinked a couple times in an attempt to stay awake.

"Welcome to Tuvo's," Sa said. "What can I get you?"

"Ua! Tar—Lukdao? Turkare aia. Truau duh—Kata ti."

She glanced to the empty counter, then back up. "Uh..." Ducking underneath, she found something wasn't there. "Khoto," she shouted, springing back up.

A distance voice replied from behind a door. "What?"

"Where's the translator?"

"Under the register?"

"No?"

"I'll message Gath."

Sa faced the alien and smiled, trying to find any bits of the Rekian language which remained from her education. *This is what I get for putting 'fluent' on my resume*, she thought.

They tilted their head in response, burbling, "Oh—oo."

Hazily, she remembered that combination meant disgust. She put her teeth away.

"Luke-dah—oh," they repeated, slowly. "Ta—ar?"

She furrowed her brow, first trying to figure out what they meant, then if they even had that. "Sorry, we're out." The alien blinked. "Right. Hm." She looked at the door Khoto was behind to think for a moment, turning back when the right words clunked into place. "Ka—oo."

"Tar—Turkare?"

The literal translation bumped into her head. *Light-water*. She let her eyes wander to the drinks machine in hope that the actual meaning would click. A brand seemed familiar. "Tar—Glow... ka turkare?"

"Gulo," they repeated. "Okei. Truau kar."

*Truau*, she thought, *Ground... Ground what? Wait, does ground even have that second meaning in Rekian? Probably not*. She spun around to look at the holographic menu with its dual language text. The alien symbols beneath the Latin

script might as well have been collections of sticks all haphazardly bundled in rows, or scratches from a mad chicken. *Wait a minute.*

“Rek truau,” the alien said.

*Ground bird.* “Chicken!”

“Ah. Tihken. Okei.”

*Halfway there.* She pointed to the four options on the menu which could be made with chicken. “Ar, Ak, Ot, Or.”

“Ot.”

“Ah.” She nodded before pushing off the counter to knock on the wall.

A portion slid away to reveal the kitchen where Khoto busied himself with the sink, still cleaning up the mess from second shift. “One RCR.”

“Not an FCR?”

“It’s for a rekian,” she hissed, “of course it’s R.”

“Alright. One RCR.”

She tapped the side of the hole in the wall, causing it to seal back up, and spun to face the alien. *One minute...* “Dite ar.”

The rekian beeped. Wandering to the side of the room, they jumped on top of their hovering luggage to begin flicking around some holograms. Sa moved the other direction to click a button on the drinks machine marked with a little red lamp. The thing grumbled with complaints about overdue maintenance for a moment, which she swatted away, before spitting out a clear resin cup. She watched with general indifference while it poured in luminescent blue fluid, pushed the cup along a track, and paused.

After she swept through a holographic list it shot in her face, the machine slapped a long-spouted top onto the cup, causing it to have more in common with a watering can, and swung a tooled arm around the two misfitting parts to seamlessly merge them together. She grabbed the strange container, bringing it to the empty part of the counter where the register hid in plain sight.

Numbers popped into being when she placed the cup down, reporting the cost of the drink as both *0.5 mb* and as a string of angular symbols. She let them parse in her mind with the lack of anything better to do. They matched. She yawned again.

“Order up!”

With a start, she whirled to find Khoto reaching through the kitchen window, holding a paper wrapped cylinder. Sa took it from him. “Thanks.”

He snickered. “Don’t get salmonella.”

Placing the chicken roll on the counter next to the glowing drink, she watched the total increase on its own while she recalled the next words she’d need to use. *2.0 mb.* “Eh,” she beeped.

The rekian glanced up from his holograms and fluttered over. “Oh—oo,” they grumbled, pointing at the price, “daraw ka oh!”

*Raw? What? No wait... that was Dara. Oh... ka... dara... That is much.*

A scathing reply she’d heard from someone on first shift zipped to her tongue. “Hara unto ka Tuvo! Tar—Ih duh ad?”

They honked. “Ret! Aded.” *Truth. I’ll go.*

Smiling without baring her teeth, Sa grabbed a plastic-paper bag from a box underneath the counter while the alien dug around in their pockets. After placing

the roll inside, she flipped out a cup holder from the side of the bag and shoved in the glowing drink. The rekian landed one claw on the bag near where she held it while placing a little gray disk encircled with symbols and dates in front of her. She locked eyes with the alien, realizing what it was.

“Duhju ti,” they said. *Need-not I.*

“What?”

“Yoo—oars. Bai.”

She took the little disk, letting them have the bag. For a moment, she stared at its tiny symbols in disbelief. “Khoto!” she yelped, half laughing, spinning in place. “Khoto!”

The maroon human appeared when part of the wall folded away. “Wha—”

“Look! A round trip ticket!”

“Really? To where?”

“It’s blank!”



**Delta Airlines A320 Touching Down on Runway 34R at DEN**

josh taylor

## 2234 AD

austin palahnuk

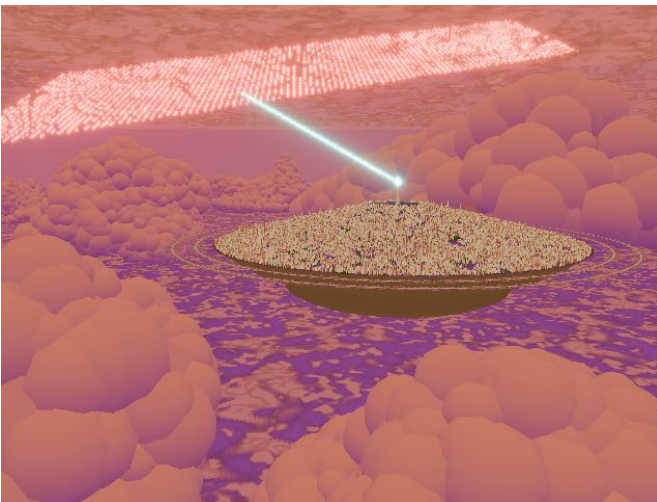
“I always had hope that we’d find intelligent life out there in the stars. No one hopes that anymore. Neither do I. Not anymore. Because, instead of nice friendly aliens who looked like us or thought like us, we found an intelligent force of natural disaster.

“Screeching, city-wide sirens tore me awake that night. I didn’t know the city even had alarms until then. I rolled out of my hammock, clacking my talons to the ice-cold floor. The view out my apartment window was black. I remember pausing for a moment, wondering where the city lights had gone. Then the two things clicked together in my head: city-wide power outage. I scrambled for the old wooden desk I’d taken with me when I moved the short distance from the homeworld. I searched for my laser pistol, swiping it off the desk in the process. It clattered to the metal floor and flickered to life.

“I reared my head back when the recorded voice of the Rixia beeped out of the weapon. She spoke in a measured, tired tone, much unlike the interplanetary autocrat she is. ‘*Citizens of the Teos Hover Cities,*’ her voice said, ‘*the fleet of Union hybridcraft have overwhelmed our defenses at Kadater Station. Most of their fleet is now heading for Rix, as expected. But a breakaway swarm is on an intercept course for Teos.*’

“I snatched my pistol from the ground and flicked off the safety. Magnetic fields prickled my beak like needles. I yanked my laser-refractive bodysuit from its hangar on the wall while the message continued. ‘*Prepare for invasion. We must fight till the end, for the enemy has no concept of surrender.*’

“Just as I finished locking the last magnetic tie around my wings, blood-red light wavered through the window. An endless constellation of crimson stars were twinkling in the black sky, lighting up the highest of the dark clouds from behind. *Plasma fire,* I thought. *They’re already entering the atmosphere.*



**City of Dreams**  
austin  
palahnuk

“The sirens went on. Then the ground shuddered. A high-energy ray of turquoise light lit up the city in a flash, drawing a line from a distant tower straight to the errant stars. One red star of out thousands went out to a crack of thunder. The blinding image burned into my retinas, of my city, the hovering, pleasure city of Dreams, blasting a last-ditch plasma-cannon at the invaders. I didn’t even know Dreams had defenses. I waited a bit to see if there was another weapon to back it up. None came.

“The same turquoise ray struck down another star. It was hard to notice the difference it made to the fleet. I pulled my holster and belt off the desk, scrambling to latch it around my waist with a pistol in my hand. Another flash of turquoise. The red stars were closer now, almost straight above. They shifted from red to white as they shed their plasma cones, slowing to supersonic speeds. I must’ve reached the door the moment they passed overhead.

“As I swung open the front door of my apartment, the city was struck. The air erupted with unbelievable rolling thunder, shaking me off clean off the floor and over the edge of the interior-facing balcony. From the crackling light alone that was leaking in through every crevice and window, I could’ve sworn it was day. I popped open my wings to control my descent down the hollow center of the apartment tower, landing with a crash on metal deck of the bottom floor.

“I flicked on a flashlight from my pistol to search the floor for the way down to the undercity. It’d been years since I’d used it. Then I heard the building groan. The central cavity, a long, dark tunnel above me, swayed like a tree. I could feel gravity weakening. The city was descending. I could only hope it was on purpose.

“A terrible thought zapped through my head. *Would they just blast us out of the sky? Shoot out the city’s engines and watch Dreams sink helplessly into the dark, crushing abyss?* Gravity returned to full strength with a start. *No. That’d destroy the one reason they’re here: Food.*

“The building buckled with a terrible roar. Its own, suddenly returned weight was to blame, snapping beams and supports in a wave. I ran for the doors leading outside instead, blasting it apart with a quick shot from my laser pistol, and leaped off the ground the moment there was clearance for my wings. The blast of cold air carried the stench of melted plastic.

“From the metallic thunder behind me, I could guess what had happened to my apartment. I banked around the remains of the spire up ahead, mostly flying on memory alone. There was barely anything to see with all the city’s lights dead.

“I gained some height above the spires and buildings. Morning was starting to break. Out on the horizon, I could make out the constellation of errant stars turning in the distance, mixing with the lavender clouds lit by the early light. It wouldn’t be long before they’d be back for another pass.

“All I heard then was the roaring wind and the beat of my wings. The sirens had gone, just like everything else below me. Wrecked buildings, toppled spires, cratered parks, they’d bombed everything flat. I pitched up to follow the incline of the city. If there was a way to get to everyone else, it’d be at the top, at the central peak of Dreams’ structure.

“Thinking back now, its stupid really. The city had hunkered down yesterday and I was too arrogant to follow them. *Yeah right, I’d thought, Why would we be*

*targeted? Teos is empty compared to home, to Rix. Our city doubly so! It wouldn't be worth the effort.* How wrong I was.

“Anyway, at this point I'd made it halfway to the peak of Dreams' summit. You see, the whole hovering city is shaped like a cone, but the top is flattened out to make a giant park. A park with a massive hangar-sized entrance to the undercity, the bulk of the structure. I remember thinking it was too inconvenient to get in line and wait, just to hide down there under the artificial lights.

“The constellation was on their way back. I beat my wings faster and faster, heart pounding out of my chest. I probably reached a good 90 rol per tek, but damn it hurt to do that while climbing. I was soaring high above the buildings now. When I realized how fast the fleet was returning for another pass, I... don't know what I was thinking. I should've dove for cover right then. Instead, I just flew even faster. I finally tucked my wings and dove when I'd gotten high enough to see the park plateau.

“But it was way too late. I got one half-glance to my side before I was hit. The whole fleet of stars were zipping towards me faster than sound. My feathers shrunk to my skin in terror, eyes pinned, and I remember getting one good look at the thing that hit me, a hybridcraft as the Rixia called it. A shining metal hull shaped like a crescent and stained with patches of what must've been dried blood or rust. No wings to speak of. It had two clusters of eight pits each that held deeply recessed, glittering eyes. Like a crab in a metal shell.

“I must have blacked out for a couple seconds, because next thing I knew, I was tumbling through the air, nerves sizzling with pain. My left leg had gone numb. The whole city below me was dancing with fire and ringing with echoes of thunder. I stuck out my wings and tail to stabilize my descent. I didn't have time to think about how I survived. I dove for the massive hangar doors near the end of the plateau. They were solidly closed. I didn't care. I'd find a way in.

“I pitched up and fluttered my wings into a stall once I reached the hangar door. Only when I stretched out my legs to land did I realize my whole left leg was gone. I panicked, fumbling backwards mid-air. I hit the ground hard, crushing my wings into my back. I scrambled to the door and slammed it with my fists, screaming. All the pain was shooting up my spine. I hit the door frantically again, trying to make as much noise as I could. There was no reply. I started to wonder if they'd killed everyone else and that I was the last one left.

“My vision was getting fuzzy. I dared not to look at my wound. A powerful blast of air from behind made me turn around. A hundred of those hybridcraft were spread out in the park, hovering inches above the ground. All identical. Each craft opened a sort of front compartment, all in unison, letting out a flood of small, swarming things no larger than a ball. They formed a writhing blanket of blacks, silvers, and blues across the park. There were so many that I couldn't pick out what any single one looked like.

“That was until they surrounded me. They were small, fleshy aliens with some hundred legs and two clusters of eight eyes on each side, sharing some characteristics with their vessels. I was struggling with my pistol, expecting to be swarmed and devoured. But the creatures had stopped as if to watch.

“I brought my gun around to bear on the nearest creature and fired. The creature, along with the twenty or so around it, zipped out of the way faster than I

could have possibly reacted. The crater I made in the grass ignited instead. I scrambled backwards, back against the hangar door, and shot again, eyes wide with terror.

“Another perfect dodge. I banged on the door, screaming again for help. I’d looked away for just a second, but was enough. I was swarmed immediately. The flash of red-white from the shot I fired in the process was the last thing I saw. In a second they’d covered my eyes, pulled me flat against the ground, held down my limbs, and stretched me out. I thrashed as much as I could, but it was no use. They were holding on with such strength that I could do nothing to resist. I screeched through my closed beak, unable to open it against the grip of a hundred tiny appendages. The last thing I heard was string of precise hisses from what sounded like every single one of them at once, and I died.

“Now I’m here. Wherever the hell *here* is.”

“Good.”

“What? How is any of that *good*? Our entire species is dying to these things as we speak and all you have to say is *good*?”

“Yes. It means more of us, *here*. And *here*, beyond death, we are free.”



**ATCO Trousers**  
richard t. mangum



**'63 Cadillac**  
richard t. mangum

