

ORANGEPEEL 8:  
THE FUTURE

# orangepeel

issue 8

*orangepeel* is a digital literary and visual arts publication.

Its objective is to showcase memorable pieces from around the world. More information can be found on the *orangepeel* website at [orangepeelmag.wordpress.com](http://orangepeelmag.wordpress.com).

Follow *orangepeel* on Instagram at @orangepeelmag for updates regarding submissions and new issues.

cover art:  
**planet orb 0209**  
*Anneli Goeller*

Welcome to another issue of *orangepeel*—Issue 8, “the future.” We’re so glad to have you here with us, and we think you’ll love what awaits in the coming pages.

If you’ve followed *orangepeel* for some time, you may know that this theme is a bit out of our comfort zone. Our publication is usually interested in memory, nostalgia, and the past. And yet, after 2023’s very retro-inspired issues, we decided that we wanted to shake things up. The future weighs heavy on our minds, both personally and in more societal terms. At a time when news and social media feeds fill us with negativity and anxiety, our staff began to wonder if fun could still be found in the future. Would this change of pace pay off, or become a mere half issue?

Based on the amazing submissions we received, it’s safe to say that we made the right decision. Not only are this issue’s contributors wildly creative and talented, but they introduce a rich vocabulary for our theme. Love, mourning, hope, dread, eternity, apocalypse... as editors, it was refreshing to see such a balance materialize. Both things can be true at once: the future can be frightening *and* fascinating. As always, we cannot thank our contributors enough for their support of our little publication.

As with our other issues, the staff has collected a few orange peels for readers to expect in this issue. Our orange peels are small details that float in our minds even when we’re not working on the magazine. For “the future,” look closely for a catlike space creature, a shiny shared blanket, a golden-framed magazine cover, and a mother’s shelf of galactic crime novels.

Another tradition of our publication is to feature a list of the places our contributors to the issue call home. They are as follows: Australia, Austria, Canada, El Salvador, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, Ukraine, and the United States of America. It is a joy to weave words from around the world together into one publication.

With that all out of the way, it’s time for the most fun part. Please enjoy this issue and the amazing work of our featured artists and writers. We suggest a drink pairing for each issue, too, so why not grab a Midori sour or a melon soda? No matter what you enjoy with this issue, we hope you have a thrilling trip through our version of the future.

-the orangepeel staff

pages 8-9:  
**New Life Form Detected**  
*Gabi Diaz*

“The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.”

-*Ursula K. Le Guin*

pages 62-63:  
**in the future we will all eat tacos**  
*Professor Raco*

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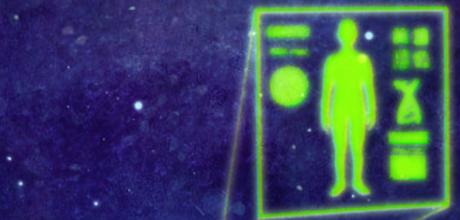
NEW LIFE FORM DETECTED

NEW LIFE FORM DETECTED

GALACTIC JELLYFISH MAKE  
RARE APPEARANCE

i am egg.  
i am egg-  
berrinoodle

START  
END



MENU  
APPLY  
SEARCH



## Orpheus

### *Socorro de Luca*

This is a love letter to poisonous things, by which I mean you.

Let me preface: I'm in a conflict and considering the difference between drugs and poison. I'm addicted to you-the-poison not you-the-drug. *Personal association: I love poison.* Poison kills simply. You've killed me many times in ways I didn't think I could die.

By the former I mean you've killed me with kisses. You've killed me with kindness. You've killed me by needling my destructive tendencies. Your killings are so lovely and quiet, like poison, and each moment you kill something in me you nurture something else to grow. *Confession: I am in love.*

I was abducted when I was twelve years old but I didn't meet you until seventeen. The first thing you said to me was "You have *five* fingers?" I've been told it's too many. You then pinched the tip of my thumb between the softness of yours and the callosed tip of what I would call your forefinger and teased, "This is an evolutionary achievement." I didn't care about thumbs but that our first interaction was you cradling a small part of my body with your own. It's now the thumb I bite, twist, and rub when alone. In my thumb you lit the torch I now carry for you.

It was hard for us to communicate because the device we speak with measures the wavelengths of implications and translates them into native tongue. It's perfect for literal speech but becomes complicated when we lower ourselves to casual discourse. *The flaw: idioms.* But we took time to learn the colloquialisms of each other's language and the device adapted the more we spoke.

Humans are ugly by your standards. We have no antennae. Our skin does not glow. Your species' skin illuminates on touch or with strong feelings. It's similar to how the poisonous plants on your planet light up at night. This is your evolutionary defense. *A comparison: human defense is offense (it's not).* The media in your world is filled with cities and people who are more fantastic at night. You say it's too much for you. You say you're trying to pull away from what you were raised to find beautiful.

I was betrayed when you named me Orpheus. The poison seeps out of you in intervals. You killed my forethought and doomed me to hindsight. Your hopes were that I'd learn to never dwell on the past but in a name you ruined me. You were optimistic, wanting to teach Orpheus to never look back. I couldn't explain to you that in myth the message is learned by the listeners but the characters are doomed to fail, repeatedly. *This is how you poison: all in good nature.*

My issue is that I am attempting to explain you to you. Let me start again: my favorite piece of art is of alien origin. It's a porous stone cylinder constructed at a slant and when I first encountered it, I climbed. My fingers hooked into the holes where I peered. The inside of the cylinder is covered in vignettes while the outside appears to be crumbling stone. I was more fascinated with the details than the structure and went home to write an ekphrasis. *All I came up with: this pillar is you.*

We once drank too much and decided to play with glow sticks from my world. We cracked them, cut them, and painted our skin. I covered my hands to the elbows with glow. I painted a stripe between the tips of my ears and across my eyes. I covered my mouth and left the imprint of my hand across my lips. The taste was poisonous. My mouth and eyes burned and I let it burn for twenty minutes because you had looked at the glow, then me, then kissed me. I was covered and filled with poison. For you, I suffered.

Your stomach is like a horse's so you cannot vomit, so when you overeat you lay on the couch for three days. This happened when I took you to Earth. You said you wanted to taste what nurtured me, and then ate everything. For me, you suffered.

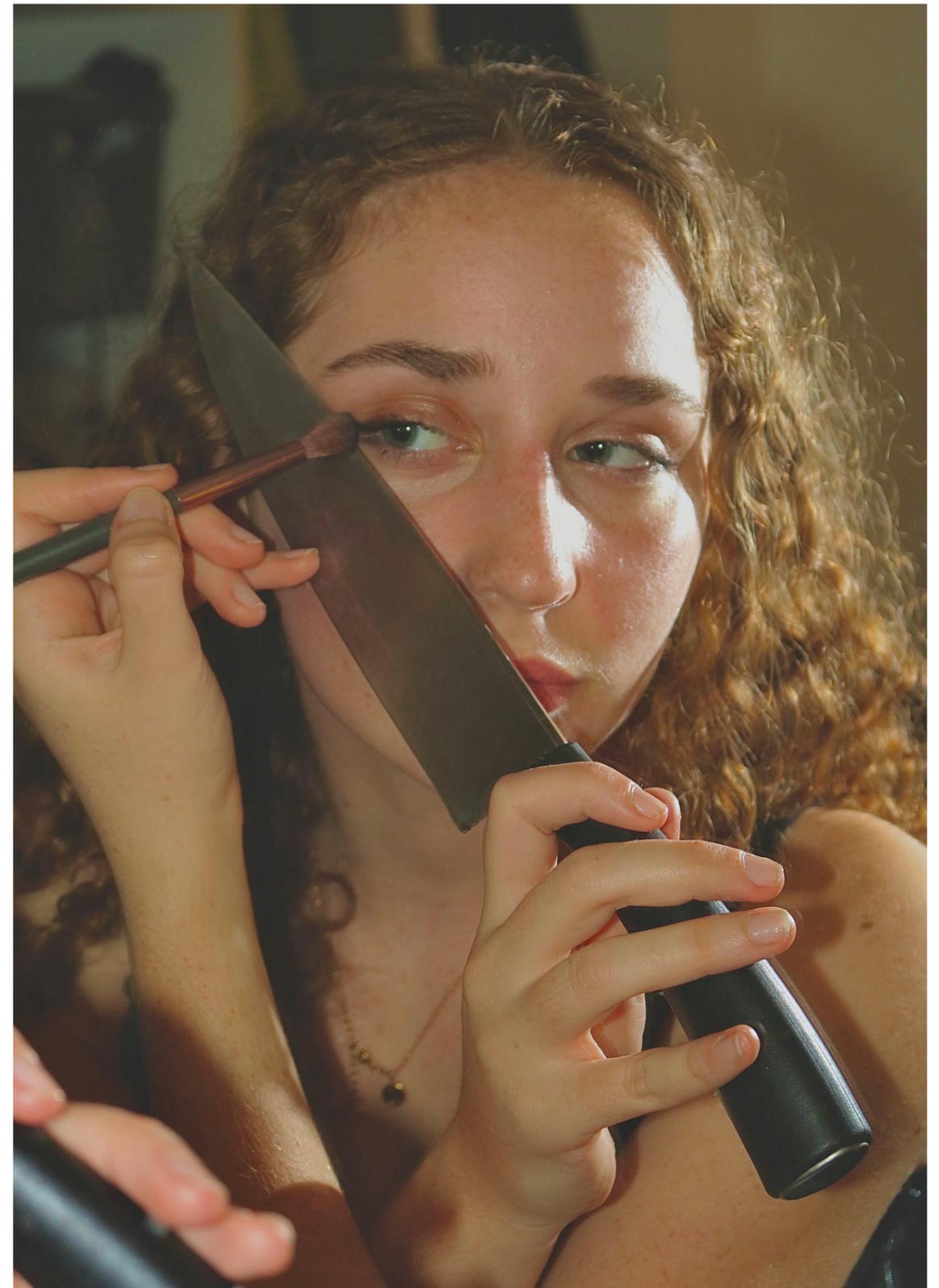
You seem more gentle than you are violent but it's only due to your preference for silence. On more than one planet things that shine brightly designate danger but I've never met someone that wasn't attracted to light.

I might be Orpheus but you are not Eurydice. Our moments together are few and far between because space is large and demands to be traveled. When memory strikes I look behind me and you're never there. You only appear to me from the distant future.

*An ending: you are reverse genesis. The conclusion I've come to.*



**Seashell Investigation**  
*Alexa Zimmermann*



**A tool is a tool.**  
*Ella Mayo*

**a glass of wine with venus**  
*Holly Walker*

early morning  
spoke of love's letter  
    addressed as a wink

wax-sealed lipstick  
by the planet venus  
    *stop by for a drink*

my body dangles  
in spotted night  
    i grip a flute of pinot noir

and earth sits  
all the way over there  
    watercolor oceans, grassy shores

there is a pang of guilt  
or maybe love  
    perhaps it's swallowed regret

*my love, the human,*  
*what are you scared of?*  
    the beautiful venus says

a sentimental drinker,  
topping vodka with cherries,  
    straws with her coke

the experience is sovereign  
like one with her riches  
    clothes tailored bespoke

the stars are mortal  
pining for nothing  
    short of feeling gorgeous

even when they're dead.  
all bright up there, dead  
    at least it looks romantic

## A Sunday Brunch on the Moon *Sumit Parikh*

One day, I want to feast on pancakes  
while I savor a dawn on the moon.

Golden globs of swirl on a buttery  
sun rising.

I want to sip black espresso, viscous and dark  
and nibble chocolate dewdrops in the shadow  
of our planet home.

After breakfast I'll stroll in the exosphere  
and then retreat to fish by the Sea  
of Tranquility

and wile away the day looking down  
at our sinking blue whirl.



## the long way home *Val Cherlet*

## love at the end of the world

*Jedidiah Vinzon*

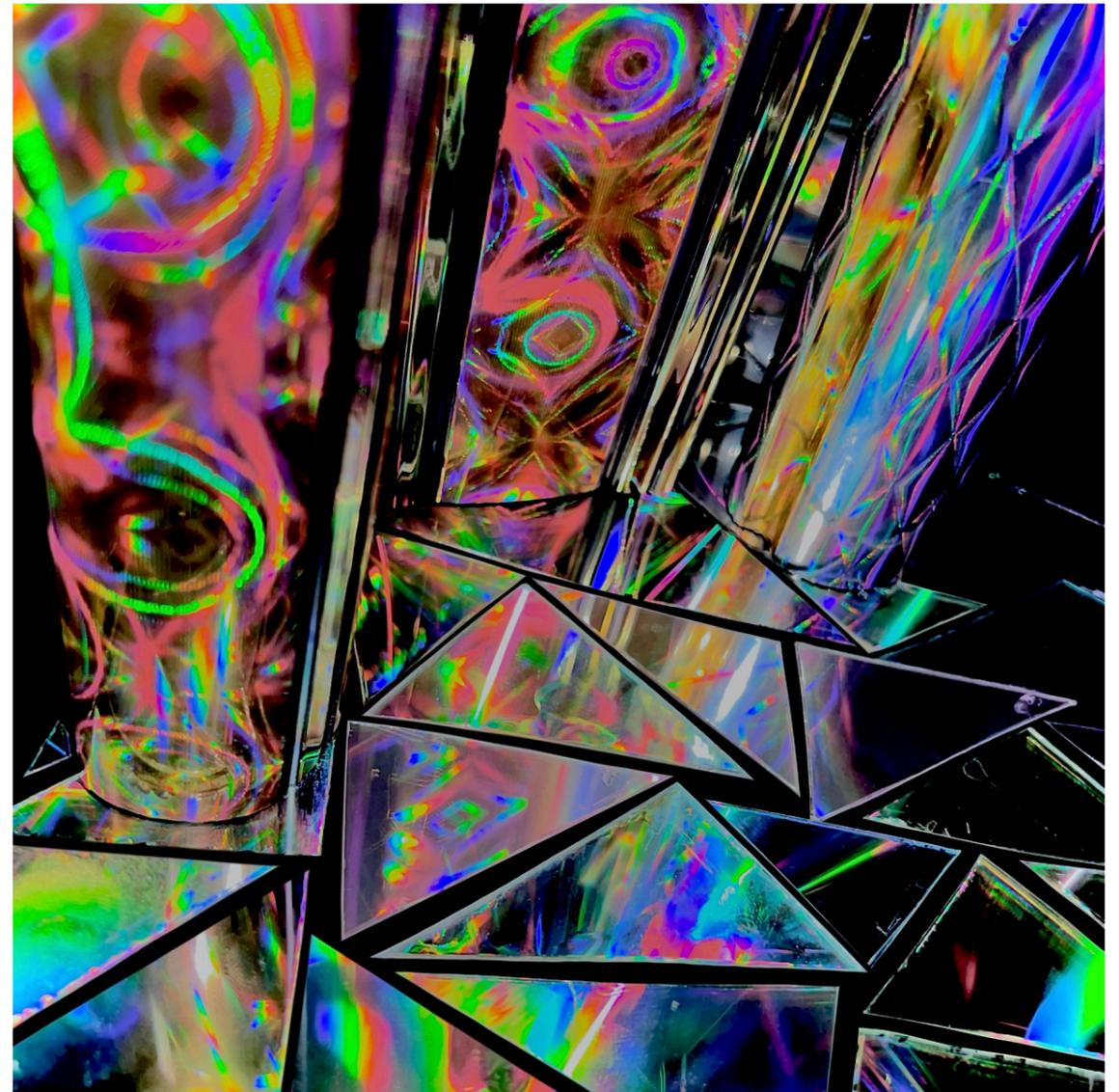
smoke-hung alleyway & night-fallen sheets—  
    hold me here, already  
then the pushing against the worn-out brick  
    and the pulling,  
    *and the pulling*  
towards our worlds inviting collapse

let it end, but do not stop  
    we go on, when the concrete  
        is melted  
    and even when the marble  
        is sea

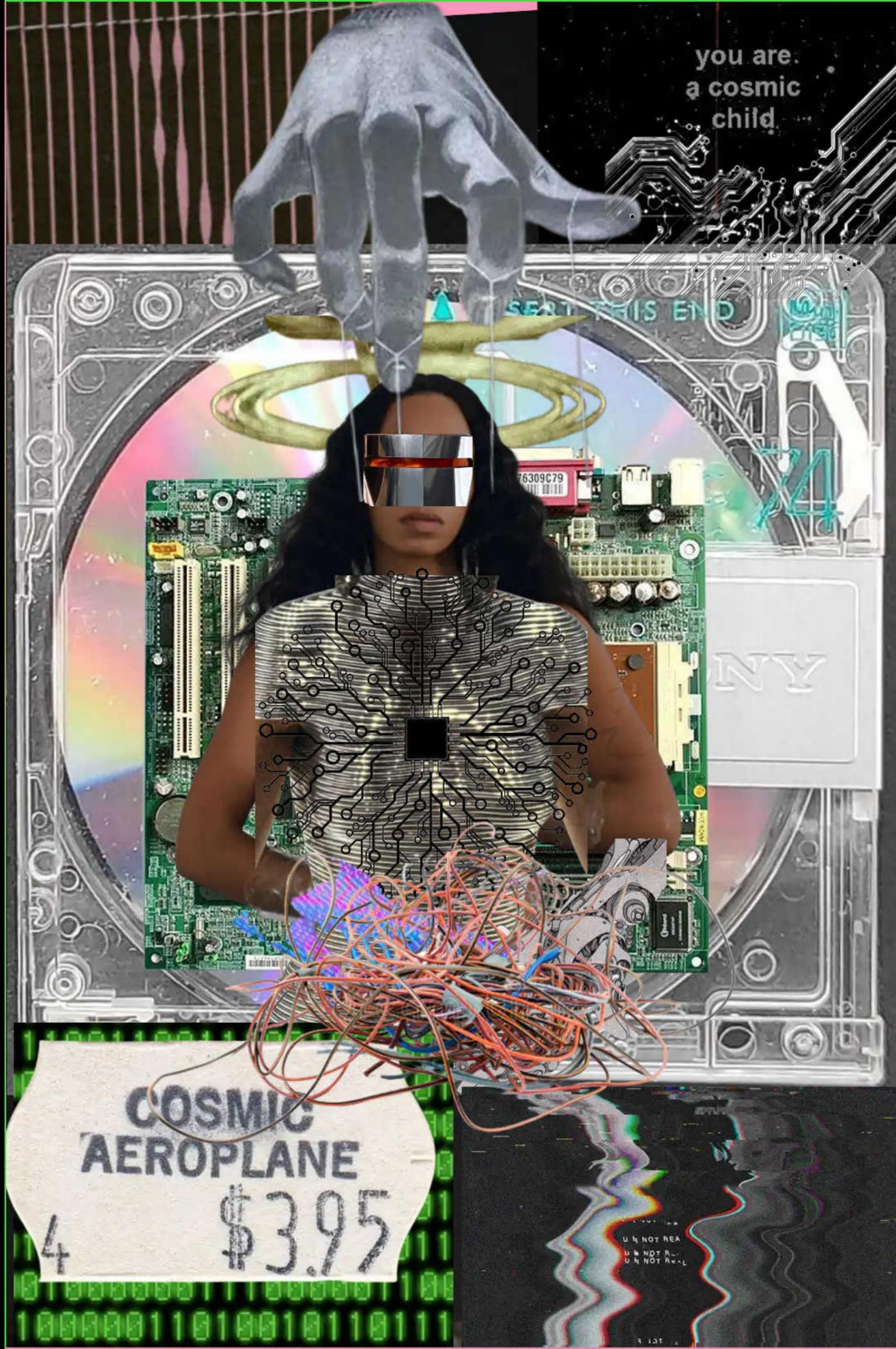
we go on: we are the suns  
    that engulf the earths  
        at the end of our

unity—one is us beneath a  
    neon moon—*closed*—  
my lips tailing your breath:  
    there is no thinking  
        only catching the  
    smiles between—

let it end, but do not stop



**Neons**  
*Rachel Salcido*



you are  
a cosmic  
child

INSERT THIS END

NY

Motherboard E-Divina  
*Cambria*

COSMIC  
AEROPLANE

\$3.95

U R NOT REA  
U R NOT REA  
U R NOT REA

## Eye of the Beholder

Amanda Bintz

*Patient: EB-2-469380. Two viable corneas. Female—age 65. Glaucoma.*

*Requested: Gardening, especially peonies; waterfalls in foreign countries; the front rows of fashion shows.*

Harry read over the note written in his receptionist Jessica's cramped yet unflinching script a few more times before he picked it up and carried it with him into the room adjoining his private office. He cleared his throat. "Back room, lights on."

"Lights on," repeated an androgynous voice that emanated from the small, buttonless control panel on the wall. The ceiling lights flickered on row-by-row until all the clutter crammed into the back room was alight: furniture, lamps, mirrors, paintings, fake plants. The woman who used to rent his office was an interior designer who specialized in staging "realistic" houses for realtors; she trafficked in gently chipped picture frames, mildly stained couches, slightly warped mirrors. With Harry's permission, she left it all behind when she uprooted herself to move to Silicon Valley and pursue the budding (and shockingly lucrative) field of VR interior design.

When Harry moved in five years ago, he picked out all the stuff he liked/ tolerated and repurposed it to decorate his newly established ophthalmology practice: a false ficus for the waiting room; a reproduction of a WPA-era print extolling the virtues of Yellowstone National Park to hang in Exam Room 1; an overstuffed beige club chair to fill the awkward spot in the corner of his private office. Occasionally, over the years, he had browsed through the room like his own personal thrift store; picked out a golden-yellow ceramic vase here (a gift for his mother-in-law), a shag runner rug there (for his son's first apartment)—but since that first thorough cull five years ago, very few of the items had been moved or removed. Jessica regularly reminded him she would be *happy* to look into professional removal services for "all that junk" (the dust it had collected aggravated her allergies), but Harry had come up with another use for it.

*Gardening, especially peonies; waterfalls in foreign countries; the front rows of fashion shows.*

Harry looked up from the note in his hand.

Peonies. He knew peonies. They were big floofy flowers, sort of like blown-out roses. Generally came in reds, pinks, whites. Grew on a bush.

His eyes landed first on a painting on the opposite wall of big yellow daisies on a cornflower blue sky. Then, on a floral armchair in the middle of the room that looked like it was made of old curtains. There was another painting on the righthand wall, with big floofy flowers in blues and purples, but Harry was pretty sure they were hydrangeas, not peonies. His mom used to grow hydrangeas. Are hydrangeas close enough to peonies? Maybe. The prompt was gardening, so even vegetables might do if you stretched it far enough. But he didn't feel good about that. He had to start out on a stronger foot than *that*.

He moved to the next item in the note. *Waterfalls in foreign countries*. Hmm. That was specific, and adventurous. That would keep her, whoever she was, entertained for the rest of her artificial life. That painting of Niagara Falls in the corner, which was propped up on an acrylic side table and looked like it was done by a high school art teacher, surely wouldn't do. Harry looked around the room and tried to remember any famous, international waterfalls. Angel Falls? Victoria Falls? Sadly, there was nothing so naturally awe-inspiring to be found in the room.

Okay, last one—then he'd have to reconsider the hydrangeas.

*The front rows of fashion shows.*

Man. Who was this woman, 65, with glaucoma-induced blindness, who used to garden, and visit (or dream of visiting) waterfalls in foreign countries, and wanted to sit in the front row of not one but multiple fashion shows?

Fashion shows. Harry knew next-to-nothing about haute-couture, but he knew there was a framed cover of a really old high-fashion magazine somewhere in here.... *Ah!* There it was, leaning against the tacky, faux-Tiffany floor lamp that was missing a cord. The frame was ornate and antique gold, the print it contained black and white. It featured a photo of a stunningly thin woman in a sharp pantsuit with a fur coat draped over her shoulders, two rows of pearls hugging her goose-like neck. It was a little kitschy, but it was also bold and eye-catching. It was a *choice*, and it had some indefinable spirit to it, some—appropriately, since the magazine was French—*je ne sais quoi*.

"Time to leave for your 9 a.m. appointment," the computer-voice reminded him.

"Shit." Harry picked up the gold frame. "Back room, lights off," he said as he exited the room with the gilded model under his arm. The ceiling lights shut off all at once.

Harry tossed the print in the back seat of his car and told it to drive to the City Eye Bank, one of the preset destinations, as he swung into the driver's seat and buckled himself in. He kept his hands loosely at ten and two as the wheel spun through his fingers. He knew it was old-fashioned, maybe a little overly cautious, to physically monitor the steering, but even though these self-driving cars had gotten really good over the last two decades, he still had his doubts. He was old enough to remember all those fiery crashes in the late 2030s.

The car expertly backed into a spot right up front at the entrance of the massive City Eye Bank building. The parking lot was enormous, even though Harry never saw anybody parked here except the staff and the other medical personnel. Harry grabbed the print out of the back and scanned his palm and pupil to enter the lobby.

"Sup Harry," said Dwayne, the maintenance man who still fancied himself a security guard even though that job had been computerized ages ago. He was sitting in a chair he had brought from home, nose deep in a beat-up book, with his feet up on the control panel, which Harry wasn't sure was allowed, but who was he to question security? "Surgery today?"

"You know it," Harry said. "You wanna tell the lady or should I?"

"Eh, you go ahead. I'm not feeling like dealing with the machines today, man."

"I get that." Harry pressed his palm to the sensor on the control panel. It awoke with a greenish glow. "Dr. Harry Post, ophthalmologist."

"Hello, Dr. Harry Post," the computer intoned in an almost aggressively feminine voice. "You are pre-authorized for a 9 a.m. visit to the City Eye Bank. Patient identification number, please."

Harry pulled the now-crumpled note from Jessica out of his pocket. "EB-2-

469380."

"Authorization confirmed. Please proceed to the elevators to be granted access to: Simulbay Four; Operating Room, Second Floor."

Dwayne didn't look up from the book he was reading, a fact for which Harry was grateful; he was a little embarrassed about carrying the print in with him. "What she said. Good luck with the surgery, Doc."

"Thanks, Dwayne. See you later."

Harry proceeded to the elevators and stepped reluctantly inside the open car waiting for him. He hated these elevators. They only fit one person at a time and they had no buttons. Instead, one placed their palm on the sensor and, instantly, the doors closed and the car immediately started rising, smooth and incredibly fast. The building's security system programmed the elevator to go only to the floors one was pre-authorized to visit. Elevators already made him nervous, but then you take away the freedom and control of pressing the button yourself *and* you make them more claustrophobic than they already were? No thank you. He and a lot of the other doctors who regularly visited the Bank had complained to the building's management company, but it was the buzziest new security technology when the Bank was built ten years ago, and the city wasn't about to spend millions gutting and replacing it just because it made some of its users nervous.

"Second floor," the elevator said as its doors silently opened.

Simulbay Four looked exactly like all the other bays in the Eye Bank. It was a vast, circular room with the look and warmth of an airplane hangar. The walls were whitewashed cement, and the floors were a sterile, white, self-cleaning tile that reflected the cold white lighting overhead in a blindingly desolate feedback loop of blankness. What was that old joke about a polar bear in a snowstorm again?

In the center of the bay was the hive of simulpods. It was a massive machine shaped like a squat pinecone with a sleek, black exterior textured like a sheet of honeycomb. Each cell in the honeycomb-matrix, of which there were hundreds, contained a human being permanently hooked up to a simulation.

The residents of the City Eye Bank had debilitating, incurable eye diseases

that had already or would eventually take their sight. Living inside a simulation in the hive allowed them to see again, and at a much more affordable rate than the competing private simulated living situations—the catch, though, was that when you signed the contract to move in, you agreed to donate the viable parts of your eyes if and when a suitable recipient became available. If your disease was corneal, your optic nerve might be taken. If the issue was with the optic nerve, as was the case with Harry's glaucoma patient, the unaffected corneas could be removed and transplanted to heal the sight of someone with common sight-marring issues like keratoconus or corneal damage from injury or infection.

Based on her patient number, Harry knew his waterfall-loving fashionista gardener was on the sixth level of the hive. Residents were placed in the pods horizontally, as if sleeping (*or lying in a coffin*, Harry thought with a shudder), so the sixth level was easily within eyesight without having to use the built-in lift. Harry circled the hive, scanning the digital labels on the opaque cells, until he found her: EB-2-469380. He swiped through the display to read her chart.

Her name was Gloria.

Harry set the print against the wall opposite her cell. He scratched his head as he stared at the blank wall. Shit. He didn't bring a hammer. Or a nail.

Before he could decide how to rectify the artwork-hanging snag, two nurses entered the Bay with a gurney to help him ferry the patient to the OR. They both scanned their passes over the cell and the pod slid out to reveal Gloria. She was thin and Black. She wore simple gold studs in her ears, the same white linen tunic as all the other patients, and a floral silk bonnet over her hair. (*Were those peonies?*)

The nurses ensured Gloria was currently asleep in her simulation before they unplugged her from the system. They lifted her limp body onto the gurney and wheeled her into the OR.

—

The surgery went off without a hitch. While Harry scrubbed down, the nurses packed the perfect corneas that previously protected Gloria's beautiful brown eyes into a transplantation cooler for pickup later that day. Harry wondered if the recipient of Gloria's corneas would see any peonies or

waterfalls or fashion shows with their new eyes. He knew Gloria saw them as often as was believable and possible in her simulated existence; she was probably very happy inside the world created by the melding of her mind and the program. Perhaps when she awoke again in the simulation, none the wiser that she had just undergone surgery in the real world, she would get dressed to the nines and take her rightful seat in the front row of the first show of Milan's fashion week. After, maybe she would trek across the Italian countryside to visit a bunch of famous waterfalls Harry has never heard of. Or maybe she would simply spend the day in her garden, gloves on her hands and dirt on her knees and a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head to shield her eyes from the sun.

With Gloria back in her pod and the nurses gone, Harry was left alone with the print, still propped up against the wall. It looked garish and strange against all the white. Harry was starting to doubt this plan. Thoroughly embarrassed but still determined, he accessed the intercom to call down to the lobby. "Hey, Dwayne?" he said into the transmitter. "It's Harry."

"Yeah?"

"I'm still on the second floor, in Bay Four. Do you have a maintenance closet on this floor? And do you have, uh, a hammer in there? And hopefully a nail?"

There was a short silence before Dwayne answered. "What kind of medieval surgery are you performing up there, Doc?"

Harry laughed. "Surgery's all done. It's for something else."

There was another short pause.

"Hold tight. I'll be right up."

Dwayne entered Bay Four about five minutes later with a tool belt slung over his shoulder. "So, what are you up to up here?"

Harry held up the print. "I want to hang this. Is that... allowed?"

Dwayne shrugged. "As long as you don't tell the machine lady; she'll have my already nearly nonexistent job for it. What for?"

"I feel bad for them, you know?" Harry gestured awkwardly to the hive. "I know they don't know they're in there, and they can't see what this place looks

like, but I think they deserve... something nicer than *this*."

Dwayne looked around at all the blankness and dullness of Bay Four. He took the print from Harry. Together they figured out where to hang it so Gloria would best be able to "see."

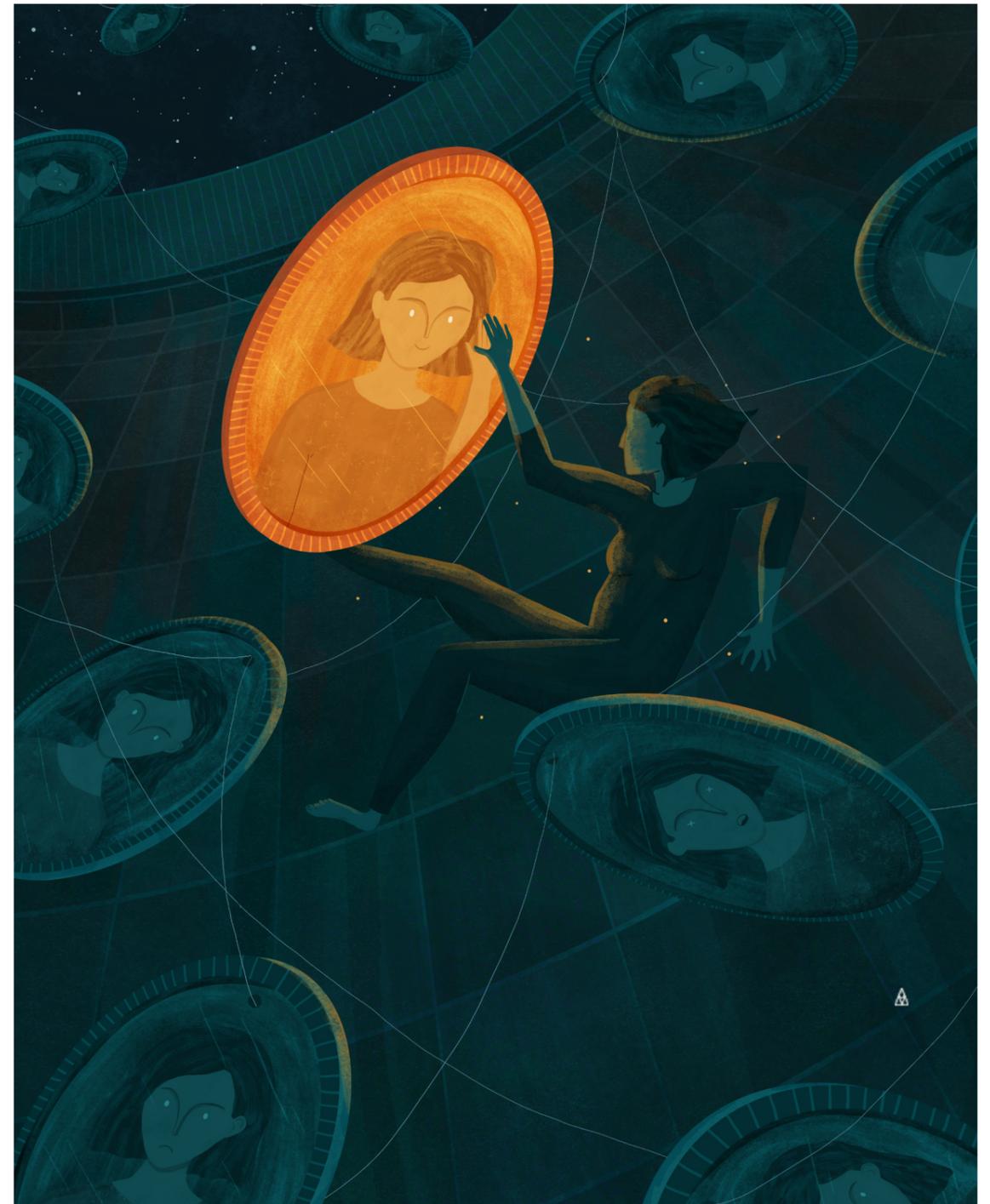
"Let's hope this doesn't set off any alarms," Dwayne said as he balanced the nail against the wall and raised the hammer. After one gentle test strike, he pounded the nail in all the way without incident and hung the print by its wire. Harry straightened the frame. They both stood back and considered their handiwork.

"Looks nice," Dwayne said.

Harry hummed in agreement. After a moment of silence, he said: "Would you think I'm crazy if I keep doing this? Bringing in little things to spruce up the place for my patients? I have all this old stuff in my office—"

"Nah, that's not crazy at all. I mean, it's not like dead people know when you leave flowers on their grave, but we do it anyway."

Harry looked back at Gloria's cell, then at the print. Tears came to his eyes, unbidden. He blinked them away. "Thanks, Dwayne."



**Anxiety in 2050**  
*Vasundhara Srinivas*



**Glass Cabin**  
*Sami Mark*

**On an unevenly expanding universe,  
listening to Big Audio Dynamite's "e=mc<sup>2</sup>"**  
*Berlinda Paliza Recacho*

(Time slide)

We are the uncertain future they are hurtling towards at light-speed  
and they are the hazy past we peer into in reverse  
trying to get all the way back to zero, bedeviled by dust, Roeg films, red dwarfs  
But every second the gap grows wider, flung farther,  
no directions or orientations between unevenly expanding distances

(Place to hide)

Light waits for no one  
It parts and culls, and waves goodbye  
Limning the observable universe  
as the area and amount we can possibly see and therefore experience

(Nudge reality)

Outside the dual cones of past and future [that intersect in a point called the  
present—that fleeting and transitory moment that no time is like—as flighty  
and reliable (in theory) as an electron] points remain real, but forever unknown  
to us, like the edges of old maps, threatened by dragons

The Huguenot's Gift  
Anthony Aiuppy







EVIDENCE OF AN AGES OLD BATTLE SPATTERS ALONG THE PATHWAY OF A DESOLATE FORT.

THE MONUMENT FROM THE CAVE!

SNAP



ONE OF THE BEASTS CIRCLING THE MONUMENT FROM ABOVE BREAKS FROM THE COURSHIP.

GET OFF!!



DIM LIGHT EMANATES FROM THE RELIEF SCULPTURE.

FOR THE TRAVELER  
HERE MARKS THE END OF  
AN EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY  
THAT BEGAN WITH THE  
DESIRE LAID BEFORE YOU  
ALL THAT IS REQUIRED IS ALL  
YOU HAVE AND A THIRST FOR DESTINY



NO TIME TO LOSE  
LET'S SEE WHAT  
HAPPENS IF I PUSH  
RIGHT--- HERE.

CLICK



AARGH!!!



OUT OF THE GRIP OF THE WINGED BEAST, FEET ONCE AGAIN ARE FIRMLY PLANTED.

THERE IT IS, THE MONUMENT!

THAT MONUMENT MUST HOLD THE KEY.



THE GRANITE RELIQUARY TUMBLES.



AND WITH A RUMBLE, THE EARTH BEGINS CONSTRICT AND DILATE.



## Hadean

*Nicholas Bonarski*

the Earth expressing itself as volcanoes and earthquakes

though no one is left to see its comet trails of honey or the fire-death of the Sistine Chapel.

Times and dates are set ablaze, flying from the white board untacked messages in empty staff lounges, money from the registers,

telephone receivers, long dead dial tones mute hanging upside-down from pillars of department stores, the mechanical chirp of automation flapping without the flesh and organs of the bird.

The sky weeps a set of tears that turn to steam.

Foreign foliage growing between cracks in city streets the way it may have in Pryp'yat or Varosha, post-human presence.

Wind does what it does best, pushing the smoke and spreading the fire, trying to put it out (?) pulling the soot and ash away from the wound, to breathe (?)

The Earth remembering tenderness summons fingers in the soil that once dug, in their curious way,

that once clawed, that once swam, that pawed dreaming a quiet awe and admiration for home,

feet that danced on the ground, that spread all over growing with gentle rain, whispering across the seas,

voices silent, now, as a drop of blood congealing in the saline of a test tube, waiting and waiting.

And when the snow comes, it overtakes much of the world, filling it with cold insulation.

The roots of trees freeze, their branches weighed down but not broken. Lakes frozen over, filled with ice,

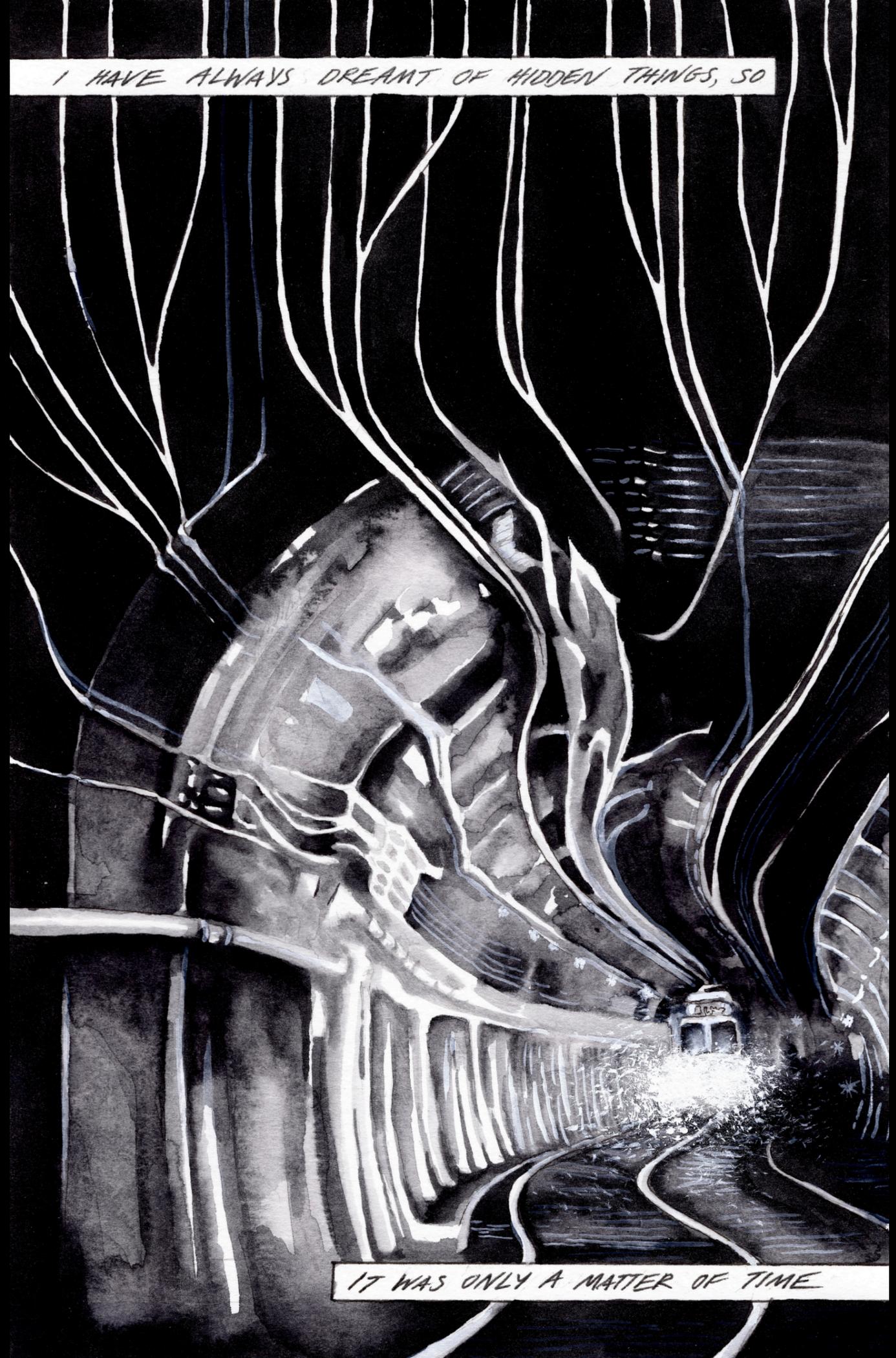
a tundra of ruins and artifacts of the past still gathering on roofs of dark houses, reminiscent, reminiscent...

Time doesn't exist, but at once it's spring.

At the end of this ordeal, like a healed muscle something rises up from the blooming grass and takes its first step,

and then another, and then another, and has always been. The past, a sealed vault left to understand itself.

I HAVE ALWAYS DREAMT OF HIDDEN THINGS, SO



IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME

## Shrub

*Jan Wieszorek*

*Hot Morning*, Raymond Eastwood, 1957,  
Kalamazoo Institute of Arts

The world had Sputnik: we have  
climate change, a theocracy of lunar  
ash so warm we've cooked blue  
to yellow reduction, held aloft  
in oozing broth—our daily walks  
begin before the heat, but shadows  
are still long—there is, of course,  
sand to contend with; we force  
ourselves to rake it clean: today,  
fireball plastics, bottles, bags,  
and pods fill my recycler—we all  
have taken to reinventing whichever  
tubes into skin-wear—the hour  
of our days in cursive: food intake,  
exercise, a personal rating (five stars)  
for an occasional yellow hologram  
viewed against grey Retribution  
Mountains—what was seen in 1957  
was such a fear in us; our days  
have been hot and troubled ever  
since. We do as St. Francis did—but  
with only one green shrub to tend.



**Drop**  
*Tiffany Ou*

## [How were you to know it was your last] family vacation

*Jordan Hanson*

One day this beach will not exist.  
No more stilted temporary homes,  
seafood restaurants, no boardwalk or  
minigolf with chlorine teal water,  
no more vacationers sliding down dunes  
to meet the water's edge, to leap & skip  
with the gulls, to bend over & burn  
& find tiny treasures. You think about this  
in the back of a rental car while your dad drives  
past trees obscured by moss,  
about all the things that will disappear.

Even now, water meets wild vegetation  
across the [soon to be forgotten] main road  
where the trees have  
swallowed the [formerly] bright houses,  
roofs perched like speckled plovers  
ready to fly when the tide  
sweeps foam over [bygone] foundations.

Waves take it all with the slow creep of time: the [memory of] pink  
sunglasses & umbrellas & cheeks & dripping ice cream,  
long-suffering dunes & beachgrass &  
blue plastic chairs & sunscreen &  
rusting red claws of a giant metal crab  
proclaiming "CAPTAIN JESSE G CRABS INC."

Back in the Midwest you feel safe  
like the time current can't reach you where  
there are no oceans to remind  
you how tides crawl and devour.  
But it sweeps across the Mississippi and  
takes the life you assumed you'd have: your parents together &  
the same simple holidays & the house you grew up in  
& family vacations &  
the version of yourself sweaty & happy & squinting  
on that beach in St. Augustine, leaving you  
dripping and alone on the shores of Lake Michigan  
the water still lapping at your toes  
hungry for more.

What will remain: sand & salt & shells & flitting fish &  
their fleeting color flashing in the sun &  
trees that reach from the sea &  
the earrings you bought before a storm blew over  
the town & running against the wind as a [former] family to the car  
& the plovers soaring over dangling Spanish moss,  
neighbors to all your ghosts.



**Eyes in the sky**  
*Desi Distel*

## **Alone with a Pirate on Mendicor** *El Musgrave*

For no reason at all, one night Erika found her way into Uriah's bedroom. She was going up and down the hall, scanning for various items along the hallways that they'd need for ammunition, and the door was ajar. It was late and there was no reason for him to be out. Anytime Uriah was in his room, the door was shut, and there was deep metal coming out from under the locked door. These were bands most people had set aside years ago, bands who Erika remembered retiring while she was hiding out and lamented the inability to go and see perform. Before she could think about whether or not it was wrong, she was pushing the door open and entering.

His room was less messy than she expected—though it could have still used some attention. The layout was identical to Alice's, but his bedsheets were maroon and grey where Alice's were white. It smelled like someone had tried to spray a sandalwood scent five years ago which hung limply around the corners of the room, flattened by the stink of unwashed laundry. She tried not to think about the last time she'd changed the sheets on her old ship. Maybe some things were better left destroyed.

Strewn around Uriah's desk were a handful of paperbacks and spiral-bound notebooks. Alice's desk was half-vanity, half-reading nook, but Uriah's looked more set up for focused study. The covers on the notebooks were all emblazoned with logos from companies that had since folded. Uriah must have been collecting blank notebooks from repossessed freighters, ancient office areas that got cleared out before all the paper had run out. There were a few beat-up ballpoint pens around the desk, too. Erika imagined Uriah cycling through the same three pens, trying to get one that would write for more than a sentence at a time.

The books were hardly in better shape. Most of the books on his desk had not been published in at least thirty years, from a genre that hadn't gotten major publishing traction in decades. The splashy titles on the pocket-sized crime novels raged against the worn paper covers. *The Titans of Jango*, *Peril in Farroga*. She recognized one of the newer books instantly, though.

Books were published widely among the resort planets—Fjordinia, for one.

They were light reads compared to some of the heavier titles that were thrown around the more moneyed planets, and regarded as "better" books; writers like Jordan Friedrichs wrote huge bildungsromans that could only hold the attention of those with enough privilege to spend their time reading for fun.

By sharp contrast, Elduron Beale wrote pulpy crime novels that didn't complicate anyone's worldview past whether or not they could afford to buy more than one on vacation. The stories were a little trite, but the characters still shone among uncertain circumstances, among treachery and lies and the occasional steamy encounter. These were the novels of the people.

Erika's mother Christa was an avid reader of Beale's works before they made it outside of the resort planet ring. She had gotten a copy of *The Women from Virgil* from a friend, years before meeting Erika's father, and it stayed on her shelf of somewhat-tattered, often-revisited Beale books. These were among the few books in the house Erika grew up in, but her mother was often reading one if she wasn't looking after Erika's brother, or attending some sort of military function, or teaching. Erika's earliest memories of her mother include a book of Beale's in her hands.

During that time, books were hard to get one's hands on—even the more widely-distributed books like Friedrichs'. When she was nine or ten, Erika made a big fuss about being allowed to walk to the library on the air base, so she could get some more age-appropriate books in the house. She'd already read all of Beale's books from cover to cover, as well as her father's slim collection of military memoirs. Erika remembered this as she reached for Uriah's copy of the last novel Beale ever wrote.

"Why don't you read anything else?" she asked her father once. She'd just watched him pick up *Life After War: My Cerberus Story* and reshelve it after a few pages.

"Nothing else really resonates with me," he said, not looking at her.

After enough of a stink, Erika's mother took her to the library. They walked down the dry Davenport sidewalk, Erika just too old to hold her hand anymore. Her brother Charles tossed around in the stroller. It had been years since Christa had been, but it was Erika's first time.

Christa had lobbied for more books on base for years. Raising her own two children coincided with the massive paper shortage, which was due to the

major extinction of the Second Family's paper trees. Every planet had a small reserve of trees that was responsible for keeping the planet verdant; only a few planets subsisted on fully manufactured oxygen. A ring of "nature preserve" planets provided all of the trees for the publishing industry, but at the end of the First and Second Wars, one final glyphosate airstrike rendered most of the paper trees dead or critically ill.

The last of the trees on Peridot were dying off when Erika was born, and by the time Charles came around, the paper trees were all but gone. There was no way to make it happen anymore, the government decided. The market for physical books barely existed, all records had already gone digital, so the Second Family saw no reason to reforest. The publishing industry was kneecapped, and the library shelves ran bare across the galaxy.

By this point, it had been almost ten years since Elduron Beale had published a book. The lack of a publishing industry drove him to ruin, and he'd become a recluse. Eventually, he pulled himself out of his drunken stupor on Gardenia for long enough to write one last book, *Alone with a Pirate on Mendicor*, set on a dwarf planet that existed before the First and Second families warred.

Beale's novel painted Mendicor as a poverty-stricken planet where Finn Brady and Kook-Eye Stan had been stranded. In reality, Mendicor was the first planet-level target in the First and Second Wars, the first planet to be completely destroyed. Beale's novel reached past its expected subject matter and tackled the abhorrence of war and the human lives lost.

Still, trees weren't growing. Beale died before *Alone with a Pirate* could be published, but his publishing assistant found his manuscript. Though she was also out of a job, there was a possibility, though vague, that she could get the book published if she found the material for it. After working alongside the First Family's print bureau, she devoted the next five years to conservation and recycling efforts to get the book out into the world. *Alone with a Pirate* was the first book to be printed on hybrid paper which blended recycled pulp with small measures of sediment. This was all while the Syndicate had begun putting sanctions on smaller, less-profitable planets, in order to "cull their resources." But soon, resort novels were again exploding into the hands of the many, and the Syndicate couldn't ignore it.

A five-by-seven paperback with a glossy cover arrived on the doorstep of

Erika's home in Davenport some months after the rest of the galaxy had read the book. Eleven-year-old Erika was eady to froth at the mouth. Her mother got to read it first, which only took an afternoon. On a rented couch in a rented house on a military planet that seemed to belong to no one, Erika started to learn what war could do to families and, even though Finn and Kook-Eye were fictional, she started to wonder how many Finns and Kook-Eyes were snuffed out as a result of Mendicor being obliterated.

Directly after Erika hid out for a year, she stayed in a hotel for a night. It had been enough time on her ship, she decided. Enough people figured she was dead, and anyone who knew otherwise knew to keep their mouth shut.

She requested clearance from Ponos and landed with no fanfare. This was about six years ago. On the bedside table of her hotel room, she noticed a guest had left behind a copy of *Alone with a Pirate*. It took a moment for Erika to convince herself she wasn't hallucinating. She remembered how her hand had shaken when she'd touched the cover. Even after all of her running and hiding, she was being reminded of who she still was, after all this time.

There wasn't much for her to do on Ponos. She curled up in the hotel bed and pored over this stranger's copy, reading the book cover to cover a few times, each time unearthing something she'd been trying to forget for years. In the morning she left the book on the nightstand for someone else to have the same experience she'd had. Unbeknownst to Erika, one of the cleaners realized their mistake from the day before, and took the book for themselves after Erika left.

In Uriah's somewhat fetid room, Erika landed on a chapter she had returned to often. On a pier in Mendicor, the poorest planet in existence, two unlikely friends fished lazily under the moonlight. She remembered reading more into that prescient moment than what Beale had probably intended—even if he had only meant for it to be a moment between friends, Erika felt like she had to scrounge for any shred of queer representation she could find.

"So Kook-Eye leaned back beside Finn, and the two men watched their lures bob while the moonlight rippled out in front of them, wondering what else might lie beyond those faraway stars."

She heard Uriah before she saw him. "Good, isn't it?"

Erika snapped the book shut. He had materialized in his own doorway, one shoulder against the frame, arms crossed.

She blinked slowly. When had her eyelashes gotten so wet, she wondered. "Yeah," she said, then fumbled, "I mean. Sorry—I shouldn't be in here." She set the book down and started to move towards the door.

"It's all right," he said, with no real charge behind his voice at all. Erika was surprised he didn't sound more angry.

"I used to love that book," she said, gesturing.

Uriah sort of shrugged. "I figured it would be beneath you," he said.

Erika shook her head. "I remember when it came out. I had to wait for my mom to finish reading it before I could get my hands on it. She loved a Beale novel."

He still didn't look at her, but his private smile showed more joy than she'd ever seen on his face before. "I had never seen so many copies of the same book in my life before."

"These couldn't have been easy to come by," she said. "Or the notebooks."

"They were just around," he said nonchalantly. "We did a lot of looting before Creto got into trading. Different crew."

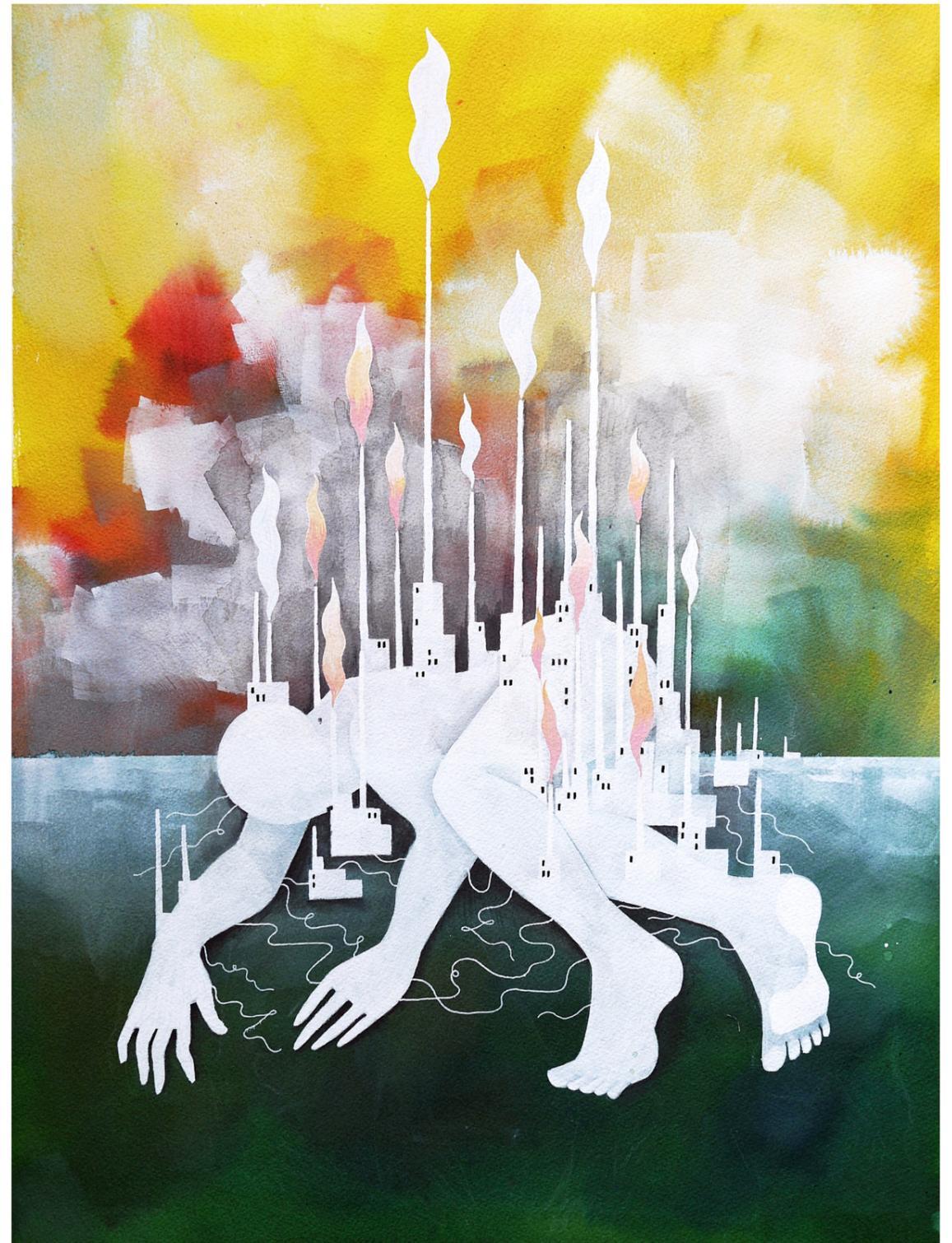
Erika chewed on her lip, glancing at the notebooks. "At least you got something out of it."

Uriah's small smile became a wry twist. He peeled a hand back through his emerald hair. "It's getting late," he said.

She left, pulling the door closed behind her. Only then did it occur to her that it might have been useful to read what, exactly, Uriah wrote about in his stolen notebooks with his broken pens. Her brain flooded with images of what his handwriting must look like: scrawly, unhindered. She hoped he was able to get some work done outside of the crime-centric life he led. The concept of Uriah being a closet writer ping-ponged around in her head until she fell asleep.

That night she dreamed about crescent ripples of moonlight on a sea that hadn't existed for years and woke up groggy. In the morning, the copy of *Alone*

*with a Pirate* was on the counter near the coffee machine. Erika paused for a second, then sat down with her coffee and the sad tale she'd read a hundred times until Alice showed up and put her hand between her shoulder blades.



**Weightbearer II (I Have Become the Factory)**  
*Anna Kohlweis*

## Time Traveler Warns Against Midnight-Blue Apocalypse

*Kelila Knight*

After *Sudden Report* by Perle Fine, 1944

Against a glimpse  
of bubblegum-pink sky  
red-shouldered hawks  
soaring between  
red mountains, dipping  
their wings into valleys,  
beaks into streams of water,  
ascending into clouds  
fish tails grazing  
their chest-feathers.

Against any man who dresses  
like a clown and  
yellow-haired women  
sewn into abraded skin  
like parasites. Against

space-splintered noon skies  
the wounds of the earth,  
and scratched vinyl.

Against roads that lead  
to the branches of a barren  
crescent moon.

## la perle bleue

*Natalie D. C.*

august 2202. dusk. a girl, lonely, horny, wanders through a sleepy seaside town from the Morocco of yesteryears. she's just escaped drowning inside a seawater-flooded palace, a swarm of alien jellyfish right on her tail, & all she wants are answers. why has this once-bustling tourist destination been destined to its abandoned cnidarian-infested watery roots? why do the oleanders smell like the play-doh she once played with as a child? & where's her long-lost lover hiding? nothing makes sense & yet each step taken towards the swampy hellhole she once called a beach feels like it's written in the stars (tapped out in the story of her life before she ever dared to imagine what would become of her paradise). & so, with one last prayer thrown up towards the heavens, she hikes up her soaked skirt, kicks off her waterlogged leather sandals & sprints, body trembling, towards the sea, where, she fears, her lover may lay, long-dead.

## Transient Intimacies in the Cosmic Cold; or, Unobtanium

*Amalia Mairet*

Cryogenic air bites the tips of my fingers  
clean off, the pain pinning me by the wrists  
to the smooth concrete of the cosmos,  
like gravity or magnetism. Each edge is stuck  
down, superglued at the seams where my skin  
meets the air, a frozen immortal interface  
of hands and the little slips of breeze  
on the small of my back under my jacket.  
So I am always touching you somehow,  
the thick sensory matter of the universe  
spilling into my mouth, my tear ducts  
and cuticles, which makes every moment  
foreign and familiar at once.  
Each particle is an alien wave of light,  
which has never touched me before  
but hits my skin with a knowing pressure.  
When you take off your sweater  
it is more intimate than touching even,  
the smell of your sweat, that holographic heat,  
the distance deleted by chemosensation.  
In every cell, there is a nucleus reacting, arcing  
outwards in solar streams like it's nothing,  
like Betelgeuse is not their mirror image,  
showering the belt stars in a bionic dawn.



**Far From Home But Not Really**  
*Quincy Kmetz*

## how great are nuclear bombs?

*Jedidiah Vinzon*

they will tell us  
it will be good.  
like god in the dark.  
hands forced into  
creation. that light  
was made because  
he needed to see.  
but we had a choice.  
we would have had  
a choice. we are not  
blind. we do not need  
another sun. we will  
be the new icarus. can you  
feel your skin melting  
from the sinews of  
your bones? can you  
taste the metal rain  
in quantum bits on your  
tongue? see how we  
fly: not in flight but  
in the fall. because  
the earth reverts to  
hunger. in eating the  
light, she swallows the  
shadows. purifying us.  
purging us into holiness.  
petrifying the horizon  
into the new heaven.  
because we will be gods.  
and the light will be good.



**Mystic**  
*Jessica Pixie*



TACOS GALAXIA



## A Flower at the End.

*Jennifer Stark*

I need you to know that as the world ended, there were women who sent flowers by mail—and that by then, there were laws against the importing and exporting of sensitive agricultural items such as these. Mine arrived after the world had already ended most days for decades at least, maybe even a century or two: a black-eyed susan, encased in bubble wrap. I didn't know that was what it was when I first opened the envelope. As I opened it, the petals that had withered inside fell out like confetti from a party I had somehow missed. By then, the world had already ended all parties. By then, the world itself had already ended by way of thunderbolt to the family tree; had already ended by way of cargo ships and row boats; by way of last sentences and oil spills, new evictions and old viruses and small pieces of pink paper. The long trip from the dirt to her hand; from the garden to her chest—then, to the back of a truck, to a mailroom, to another truck—and finally, to the rusted mailbox screwed into the siding of my house, had rendered her broken, almost unrecognizable. On her way to me—as the bees left, as the trees left, the colour green and the glaciers and most of the empathy—almost everything had wrapped itself up with an ending. The mailbox was stuffed full of papers nobody wanted, and even she was by then mostly bones and ash. Did she know this would happen, how long it would take? It took effort to unfurl my fingers from the fist they had made when I tapped her seed-head out into my palm.





**Nature Overgrows Societies III**  
*Erika Lynet Salvador*

## **tomorrow, tomorrow**

*Peter Chiu*

my daughter asks me about tomorrow  
and i tell her i don't know. tomorrow could be loud.  
perhaps even troublesome. or tomorrow could be quiet,  
like the orchids blooming in our neighbor's garden.

tomorrow could be something grand, like a presidential address  
with fancy podiums and speeches. tomorrow could be crazy  
like a mural of god drinking forties on a subway  
in downtown los angeles with the paint still drying

so it looks like streaks of light follow him as the subway car  
peels off into the night. tomorrow could be another war  
declared somewhere in the world.  
so, i tell her about something else.

like how the roof tiles on our apartment are arranged  
like feathers on a bird from far away.  
i tell her about the plants we bought when she was born,  
some grow leaves wide as her face.

i tell her not to worry about tomorrow.  
tomorrow is probably like any other day, i say.

Vicious Cycle (Found and Then Indicated on the Topological Map of Love), or Love Is a Long (and Rowdy) Road  
*Anton Lushankin*

