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Editor’s Note and Acknowledgments

We tend to underestimate the power of the written word and the power of literature. Take this magazine: within it, you will find not just short stories, poems, and works of art. Each work is the product of an individual; it had no existence a few months ago and now it appears before your eyes, as real as a slab of stone. There is life in this magazine.

So take the time to read each submission carefully, explore them deeply and cherish them. Within this magazine, you hold the creativity of a group of students willing to open their imaginations and share some of their most intimate ideas.

I have been a part of Digressions for almost four years, and I cannot begin to describe how much it has changed for the better. It has been a great joy to leave some of myself in each issue but I cannot wait to step down from my position as Editor-in-Chief to see what the next generation of staff and contributors can do.

I would like to thank all of the students who have submitted to the magazine. Without you, writers and artists, Digressions would cease to exist.

Dr. Ferriss, my praise for everything you do would take up this entire magazine. I cannot begin to describe how important you are to this magazine and to the student staff. You have invested your time and love into this magazine. It owes its success to your guidance.

Dr. Santos and the rest of the Humanities staff, thank you so much for your continued help and support. Each year you provide us students with the opportunity to express ourselves through any media we wish to use and that kind of creative freedom is incommensurable.

Joe, I couldn’t have asked for a better Managing Editor. Your assistance has been invaluable.

Lacrima and Kamila, thank you so much for all the hard work you have done with the layout. You turn a collection of folders and documents into a beautiful magazine we can all treasure.

Darlene and Alex, your advertising campaigns and ideas have improved the quality of this magazine tenfold. Thank you for all your hard work.

Editors, your commitment and dedication has made this issue one of the best yet. I know I will be leaving this magazine in very capable hands.

Most importantly, I would like to thank all of you, the readers of Digressions, for your continued support. As you read this issue keep in mind that just as a city outlives its inhabitants so, too, do words outlive their creators. That is the beauty of literature: it outlives all of us.

Christopher Garcia
Editor-in-Chief
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Park Avenue
*Sasha Strelitz*

Park Avenue—
The people walking by—blurred.
And I daydream.
And He will take my hand,
And He will lead me.
Lead me into the Park on such a crisp and foggy eve.
Adorning me with warm blankets,
He builds a crackling fire.
The warmth envelops me,
And cradles my shivering body.
Popping the cork—pop—
And spilling the wine into my grail,
He caresses me with his latte-colored arms.

There was music in the cafés at night,
And Passion in the air.
We dance in Strawberry Fields,
Our bodies twist with the music.

I feel lonely just
Watching Time creep.
My daydream is blurred.
Park Avenue.
Samir Ali couldn’t stop sweating. Even with his suit jacket off and long sleeves unbuttoned, he couldn’t stop. He turned on the faucet and started splashing his face, desperately trying to replace the sweat with the running water. They told him that it would be like this, but he never really believed that his nerves would betray him this late in the game. He checked himself in the mirror, watching the beads of water stream down his face, lost in thought for who knows how long. Yes, he was afraid. Fearful, scared, terrified, all of the above. Yet he felt relieved at the fact that his clothes were dark enough to hide his perspiration. After drying himself off, his attention then went back to his lower torso where his hands were carefully applying the finishing touches to the bomb wrapped around his waist. Yes, it was a bomb. Yes, it was real.

It was the size of a portable CD player. And according to his comrades, it had enough C-4 to blow up at least half of the 747. It wasn’t the first time Samir had been on a plane, but if everything went according to plan, it would be his last. Contrary to what Samir predicted, smuggling the components of the bomb had been the easy part. He went through the metal detectors earlier in the day dressed as a young businessman, complete with briefcase. Appearance-wise, he would often be mistaken for a Latin American rather than a citizen from his native Afghanistan. He was well spoken, his accent hardly noticeable. He was calm. He was comfortable. But now he stood inside the plane’s lavatory, uncomfortably adjusting the detonator near his rib cage.

He checked his wristwatch and thought about his options. He preferred to set it off right then and there, but he knew the plane was still too high in altitude and miles away from any worthy landmark. He then thought about waiting it out inside the lavatory until the time came, at least until the pilot made his initial descent into New York.

_That way I don’t have to see their faces, he thought. Yeah, why not?_

And just as his mind settled on the idea, a sudden knock on the lavatory door reminded him of reality.

“You need some help in there, son?” a rough, old voice asked.

Samir responded instinctively. “I’ll be right out.”

Samir buttoned up his shirt and put on his suit jacket, obstructing the custom-made explosive entirely. He took one last look in the mirror and whispered the only motivation he had left. “Allahu Akbar.”
It didn’t take Samir long to return to aisle seat 3C, but he dreaded every step of the way just the same. All he saw were their faces now. Those same little, cute faces that had occupied the other two seats next to him ever since takeoff. As he approached, he saw nine-year-old Michael sound asleep at the window with a pair of headphones on while twelve-year-old Katie sat with her book in the middle. Samir sat back down hoping Katie wouldn’t look up. Hoping she wouldn’t ask him any more questions about his nationality or favorite food; hoping that Harry Potter could entertain her long enough until his next visit to the lavatory. But …

“What took you so long?” she asked.

“Uh … I didn’t feel well.” It was the first time Samir had to think before he answered.

“I got some Dramamine in my backpack.” She reached for her backpack on the floor, but Samir quickly stopped her.

“No, I’m all right now, Katie. It’s okay—Thank you.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.”

Samir couldn’t help but crack a smile. Katie was very resourceful as well as friendly. Both kids were.

“I see Michael fell asleep,” he commented.

“You did?”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything. He just doesn’t like flying, same as me.”

“You’re afraid of flying?”

“I was. When I was a boy, just about his age.”

“But the more we fly, the crankier he gets.”

“That’s perfectly normal. Just remember to give him that CD he’s listening to and he’ll be out like a light.”

“What about you?”

“I have other copies at home. No worries.”

Katie stared at Samir for a while. Naturally, he reacted.

“What?”

“You’re a good guy, Samir.”

“Not really.”

“You are.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. I’m a real good judge of character.”

Moments later, the head flight attendant came by to check if the kids needed anything. At the same time, she informed them that it would
be another hour before they touched down in La Guardia. Katie had closed her book by then.

“Have you ever been to New York, Samir?” Katie asked.
“Once.”
“Did you like it?”
“I’m not sure.”
“What do you mean you’re not sure?”
“Well, sometimes you have to look at things more than once to get a better understanding of it. How about you, do you like it?”
“I guess. I like it because we get to see our dad.”
“That makes sense. Family is important.”
“Do you have family there?”
“Oh…I’m afraid not. They don’t travel much these days.”

This last stretch of conversation between Samir and Katie eventually reached the thirty-minute mark when the pilot’s voice came on over the intercom.

“Folks, we’re just about ready to make our first descent into the Big Apple. It should take us about another twenty minutes to reach the runway at…”

Twenty minutes. That was all Samir heard. Twenty minutes to go over his options once again. He couldn’t believe how fast the hour had gone by. Part of him wanted to blame Katie, but he knew he had the flight attendant to thank for all of this. What were the odds of him having to sit next to two good, innocent kids? The flight attendant did this, he thought. She was the one who escorted them in. She was the one who couldn’t find me a different seat before we took off.

Ten minutes to go. Michael had woken up. Samir already felt the sweat on his brow. He closed his eyes, and whether he knew it or not, tears started rolling down. Katie was the first one to notice.

“Samir, are you okay?”

Samir kept his eyes closed as if he were praying, but spoke in a soft tone to his two companions.

“I’m just trying to talk to my wife … my daughter. You remind me so much of her, Katie. She was so smart, like you. I wish they were both with me now.”

“I’m sorry,” Katie said.

“It’s okay.” Samir opened his eyes and seemed to regain his composure. “Trust me; they’re in a better place now.”

As much as he liked talking to Katie and Michael, Samir hated
that he knew too much about them, and that they knew too much about him. He hated that he sat next to two unaccompanied minors, courtesy of their recently divorced parents and their joint-custody agreement. He also hated that they knew how his family passed away, all thanks to what the marines referred to as “friendly fire.”

“Don’t worry, Samir,” Michael said. “We’ll be landing soon.”
Samir smiled back at Michael and gave him a wink. It was then that Samir made his decision.

“Yes, we will, Michael. Yes, we will.”
With the plane’s landing in progress and with no one looking, Samir slowly reached inside his shirt and tore off the miniature detonator, deactivating the bomb permanently.

All the passengers stood up as soon as the seat belt sign went off. Katie and Michael started out first while Samir stayed behind.

“You’re not coming, Samir?” Katie asked.
“Not just yet. I have another flight to catch, so I have to go through a different gate.”

“Oh.”
“You enjoy the CD, young man,” said Samir, playfully shaking Michael’s hand.

“Thank you, Samir.”
“You’re quite welcome. Take care of your sister.”
“I will.”

Out of nowhere, Katie gave Samir a long-lasting hug, catching him by surprise.

“It was nice talking to you.”
Holding on to the embrace, Samir took his time to respond.

“The pleasure was all mine.”

Katie and Michael Higgins waved their final good-byes as they exited the plane. Samir sat back in his seat and watched as the other passengers followed. Sitting there alone in silence, he contemplated if he had an afterlife to look forward to. He thought about where he should fly off to next. He knew that he couldn’t return to his homeland in Takur again, especially once they found out that flight 201 from Ft. Lauderdale had landed safe and sound. Soon they would be looking for him. Soon he would know if he had done the right thing or not. And where did Samir go when he finally got off that plane? Only Allah knows. It was a risk he had to take.
Fleeting

Christopher Garcia

Photograph
Severely dismembered into fragments of a stereotype, clichés tagged on our limbs. Processed, sold to the public, generations solely remembered as a certain type of wrong. Tightly packed, I breathe. Smells of cigarettes, cannabis, the alcohol permeating and placing words on each lip that doesn’t care to look for a source. I wanted to be something more than just a tag on the face of America, where we are suddenly known for the roundest of bellies, in debt with our own morals. I haven’t managed, and although my lungs have tasted each fume, as a second-hand smoker, and a silenced liver at the sight of alcohol alone. Gone bad from waiting, among the prime cuts that have been pumped with hormones and experience. Still mixed among each product, mass produced, ready for consumption. I have no composure, hysteria loosely tied around the edges of sanity.
There are no voices, but
the silence that beckons change,
that asks the impossible from me.
To conform to the ideas others have of me,
holding my breath as I’m processed with
the rest of my generation.

Here I am!
Hanadi Azaiza

Blood shot eyes
Repeated lies
Trembling lips
Continued tips
Feeling low
And alone
Never imagined
I’d be here
Damaged
Bella
Natalie Hernandez
Mixed Media
Bones and Roses
Natalie Hernandez
Pen & Ink
Hellen Wood lifted her head from the cold, artificial surface of her school desk to listen to the voice on the crackling intercom. The morning announcements at St. Giovanni High School, God’s noble attempt at gentrifying the surrounding poor neighborhood, rarely warranted anyone’s attention and surely never inspired the young girl to lift her apathetic face. This morning, however, she noted an uneasiness in Principal Sullivan’s voice, who, during the four years of Hellen’s attendance, had never once adjusted his monotonous pitch.

“Attention, everyone, attention. We have received word from the local police that there has been a shooting by a single male two blocks away from the school. In accordance with our safety procedures we shall proceed to lock-down all class activities until the authorities inform us that it is again safe. Pray that God will protect us from all danger. Thank you.”

St. Giovanni was a school that featured spacious paths that seamlessly flowed from stifling school corridor to secular asphalt and sidewalk. Most classrooms teased students by being so close to the outside world. Some of Hellen’s peers swore that a car drifting two or three feet off the road could, like the Second Coming, barrel through the window and in an instant take a room full of innocent teenagers to Heaven. It seemed that collection of buildings was just another part of the city born primordially and spontaneously from the crossing streets and hanging streetlights, an edifice ignorant of the marks of distinction heaped upon it: the garish school seal, the uniformity of color (drab green and yellow), the ghostly echoes of outdoor pep rallies, and, finally, the ivory statue of Christ at the entrance of the school, whose outstretched arms and permanent visage of pity commanded respect. Little wonder that a God-defying man could and would desecrate hallowed ground.

Mrs. Harvey, Hellen’s teacher, snapped her fingers with authority, directing her students wordlessly to shut off the lights, close the blinds of the windows, and tape thick construction paper over the rectangular windows of the room’s two doors. Each classroom was made to look empty, to disguise the presence of innocent humanity within its walls. Mrs. Harvey, still silent, herded all the students to one side of the classroom away from the windows and doors with expressive swipes of
her right index finger, and then, lining the palms of her hands parallel to
the ground and lowering them slowly, she bade all her students sit.

Hellen was the last to move from her desk and sit down with legs
crossed. She hadn’t stood up to help with locking down the classroom,
and it was only by the power of Mrs. Harvey’s finger that she reluctantly
took her place near the corner of the room. By God how she hated Mrs.
Harvey and that fucking finger she waved like a conducting baton. She
had on numerous occasions wanted to break it or bite it off. Mrs.
Harvey’s act of raising it sickened Hellen. Maybe, if Hellen were
fortunate enough, that gunman would blow that finger right down to the
knuckle.

The young girl stretched out her left leg in the darkness and felt a
sharp pain surge up her leg. Another girl, standing up blindly to relocate
herself by her friends, buried the tip of her toes into Hellen’s calf and fell
on her hands. The other girl—Hellen could not tell which of her peers
it was—muttered under her breath, but Hellen caught the hoarse words
stupid bitch as the other girl picked herself from the ground and dusted
her knees. Though thoroughly acquainted with such insults, Hellen
returned it only half-heartedly, subsequently receiving an exasperated
sigh from the girl and a dismissive grunt from Mrs. Harvey. She shuffled
farther away from everyone.

Bitch is such an ugly word. The unstressed vowel threatened by
two rough and domineering consonant sounds mimicked perfectly how
the word functions as a slur. The B’s and Tch’s of society, ubiquitous and
invincible, have since the inception of language preyed upon the equally
plenty I’s of the world, scurrying in fear, struggling to break their near
silence. To use the word sustained its meaning. To rearrange the letters
would paradoxically change nothing. Hellen cursed again to herself,
retracting and crossing her legs underneath her supple buttocks.

“This is really kinda stupid, right?” a boyish voice said. She felt
the owner of this voice moving closer to her. There was in this statement
the same uneasy treble Hellen noticed in the principal’s speech.

“What’s stupid?” Hellen responded, uninterested.

“Stupid that we have to hide in a classroom while a potentially
dangerous guy could easily break through a window or something. We
should be out there hunting him down before he hunts us.”

Unlike the girl before, Hellen could assign a name to this voice.
It was Wade Dalton, fellow senior, whose history with Hellen consisted of little more than askance smiles, similarly dropping faces, and mutual acknowledgment of the other’s position on the infallible social ladder. He was, in other words, another I.

“Yeah, I guess so.” She was not yielding to his conversation.

“Why do you think this guy is running around with a gun?”

“I don’t know. Why does anyone run round with one?”

“Money, greed really, is the most common of motivations,” Wade so cleverly deduced, “but there are also other drives: jealousy, depression, anger ...” His mind kneaded those words carefully, smoothing and rolling and flattening them as he listened to his own voice.

“You’re forgetting one other motivation,” Hellen responded.

“The intoxicating seat of power. I can only imagine what it feels like to hold one in your hand, to balance the ball of your finger on the trigger, to stare down the barrel and witness in a moment the sum of the world’s terror born on a single person’s face. It must be nice to have your own dignity reaffirmed on the commanding side of a gun.” Hellen brought her knees up and propped her chin on them.

“I think needing a weapon for any reason like that makes you weak.”

A silence yawned between them. Hellen clenched her right hand into a fist. Then, extending her index finger and thumb, waved her biological gun in front of Wade, who would have not seen it in the near darkness. The tip of her finger found Wade’s forehead and tapped it roughly. He recoiled.

“I’d like to have a gun. No one would mess with me,” she said, smiling.

Less audible and more striking, soft moans wafted toward Hellen’s ears. Wade had broken down into tears he tried to suppress.

“You would, wouldn’t you? Well, here then.” Hellen felt a cold steel object trust clumsily against her neck. It was, unmistakably, the barrel of a small pistol. It shook in Wade’s hands and sucked the air from Hellen’s desperate lungs. If not by a bullet, then by suffocation would she meet her end. She looked around in the dark room, begging with her eyes for someone to help her. Wade had killed all thirty of them already, she thought. Yes, the thumping sound in the room came from their collapsing bodies. And now, as the room illuminated, she could now make out faint images of her peers. Gallons of blood poured from
dozens of holes that riddled lifeless bodies sprawled across the floor and desks. Still warm and flowing, the blood collected under bodies and staining crisp, ironed uniforms. Some had their eyes and mouths fully open, looking as if a voyeuristic photographer had captured their faces in the climactic moment of private, uninhibited pleasure.

“How does it feel? That seat of power you spoke about,” his voice was nearly a whisper, and he had adjusted himself so he could speak directly in Hellen’s ear, “isn’t so great when you’re under it. I brought this to school, I’m not sure why. God, I hate this place. I wasn’t going to kill anyone. I don’t even know how to check if this thing from my dad’s drawer has any bullets in it. I was just going to ... assert myself. To end it all.”

Hellen realized no one could hear them. She had never once prayed in her life, but found herself asking something to bless her with grace and courage. “To end what?”

“To end me. The old Wade Dalton. How else can you change the world but through violence, or at least the threat of it?”

“Please, for God’s sake, don’t do this, Wade.” Hellen was quietly sobbing, fearing that too loud a sound would force Wade to pull the trigger.

Wade pulled the gun away from her neck and rested it between his legs, still holding it uneasily. With his free hand, he wiped away his tears. “You don’t know what it’s like to be me. Like being on one of those loud rides at the carnival that goes around fast in circles. You start to feel sick and nauseous, and you yell, beg the operator to stop the ride, and it’s completely within his power, but he refuses, and the force of the spinning ride is crushing your lungs. You close your eyes trying to forget where you are, and when you open your eyes there’s vomit all over your lap. Surrounded by the unyielding operator, the blurred faces, and pulsating music, all you have is that rancid vomit.”

Outside the room someone was speaking. The students, oblivious to Hellen and Wade, crowded to the room’s windows and split the closed verticals; no amount of intense finger swiping could keep them looking outside. Hellen and Wade also stood up to look at what was happening. A man dressed in black was walking in the opposite hallway, blabbering to himself like a lost, defenseless child. He waved his gun in loose circles. At the other end of the hallway, two armored officers crept behind the man. Their cemetery-like silence—Hellen, seeing the
trio, had thought of her dead mother for some reason—could not fool those instinctual chills that surge up the spine when we touch the edge of mortality. He turned quickly on his heels.

Hellen shut her eyes when she heard the two shots, so she did not see the gunman fall down, though she heard the thud of his body and the clank of the gun hitting the floor. When she opened them again she saw the two officers walking slowly toward the corpse. One of them kept his firearm pointed to the body while the other kicked away the man’s pistol. After a moment of intently scrutinizing the situation, both relaxed, and one patted the other on the shoulder jovially.

She turned to Wade, who had the same face as her imagined dead peers. Life seemed to have left his eyes, and the morning sunlight bounced off his pale, white teeth. He looked at Hellen and gave a tragic nod, then his gaze fell to the floor as he walked away from the window. The gun he held was nowhere in sight. Wondering whether she should inform Mrs. Harvey, Hellen looked up to the intercom that now broadcast Principal Sullivan’s relieved voice, informing the students that the remainder of the day’s classes would be canceled, that no one was to leave until the authorities had given them permission, and that we should thank God for His holy guidance and pray for the forgiveness of the recently departed.

Hellen averted her eyes from the now silent intercom and looked around for Wade. He was gone. The girl poked Mrs. Harvey with a finger of her own and asked where he was. “Wade? Who? Oh! Wade! I’m not sure, Hellen.” Her face was red with an embarrassed concern. Hellen opened the door and peered out and caught sight of a young man silhouetted against the ever shining sun. He walked uneasily but not without dignity, stamping each cold heel onto the ground. Though Hellen called, he did not look back. Now the figure broke into a run, running toward the city, past the statue and past the school fences, running perhaps forever, where the booming alarm of the ambulance, the rumble of the streets, and the murmur of a million people would drown her meek beckoning.
Ballad of Scales  
*Victoria Rajkumar*

My fish jumped out the window.  
Waving goodbye, he said,  
“I am headed out to sea.”  
Shocked, I replied,  
“That’s quite dangerous.”  
He shook his head at me  
And spoke of the land people  
With their incessant drudgery.  
Claiming that we look out windows,  
Vying to explore,  
Yet turn around and shut the blinds  
And say that life’s a bore.  
Underneath the surface  
Towards the ocean floor,  
Ten hundred thousand worlds lie beneath—  
Far from the balmy shore—  
Waiting to be discovered.  
“I wish I could take you,” he said to me.  
“But you would surely drown;  
Sorrow is such a heavy burden  
When you’re going down.”  
Before I could utter a word, he glanced at me once more.  
Tipped his hat  
And kindly smiled.  
Then pranced off the sand  
Into the grand  
 Depths of the shining, emerald sea.
Caught!
Grace Cox
Watercolor
Iguana
Sophia Gourgiotis
Photograph
Silvia Atra  
*Joseph Fleming*

Hail the land, my heart professes,  
The sun’s put to shame by Her flowers’ tresses,  
The pallid moon compares not to Her nivean skin,  
Her ee, the seas, flow like blossoms in the wind.

What tree, what horrid mutiny, was forged by man’s discontent?  
Her leaves have grown brown and withered; to their will Her arms are bent,  
See our scourge, seeding sorrow, dispersing, turning all lands fallow,  
All life is spent, so thus lament the blackening of the Sylvan hallow.

O mighty oak, o woodland hoax,  
O grass what grows because men spoke,  
The face soon mirrors what blood once wrote,  
What burden must young men now tote?
The Meadow of Simple  
*Katherine McInerney*

In the Meadow of Simple  
Where you and I first met,  
We joined hands in honest friendship  
And watched a simple sun set.

In the Meadow of Simple  
Where you and I were free to roam,  
Among the flowers of truth  
We made a simple home.

In the Meadow of Simple  
Where we squinted into a faithful sky,  
The clouds of sincerity darkened  
When you told a simple lie.

In the Meadow of Simple  
Where all was once so true,  
The verdant vines turned to rot  
By the simple illusion of you

In the Meadow of Simple  
Where once we resided, so contained and neat,  
That simplicity is now shattered  
By such simple deceit.
War Paint Stars
*Lacrima Nemulescu*
Acrylic
Conceal...

*Christopher Garcia*

Conceal me dark night,
So that I may rage anew,

And in pity condemn me,
To a heart as dark as you.

Night, you know no master,
You reign free of light,

Even the moon she obeys you,
And to the stars your voice gives flight,

And they become comets,
Abounding with your will,

Across the universe,
Until you wish them still.

If I had such a power,
And if the moon would obey me,

Know that she would shine,
Even when sunrise set her free,

And all would look up at the sky,
And see the sun and moon,

And think that for one night,
The dark would be immune,

To that celestial light
That lady moon procures,

So that for one night,
The darkness would be pure,

Allowing us to see
The stars for what they are,

Illuminations of love’s gone,
And sparks of broken hearts.

So darkness let me rage,
For I no longer want to conceal,

What Night and Moon,
Display as the surreal.
Come, Darkness Triumphant!

Joe Cirino

The following text was discovered at the bottom of an inkpot in recently uncovered cellars below a library in the Arabian city of Irem. Formally known as Irem of the Thousand Pillars, the city vanished into the Saharan sands without a trace sometime before 500 B.C.E. Carbon dating places the scroll, which was sealed in a thick coating of wax and unidentified blood, at a date circa 2400 B.C.E.

The account, while somewhat difficult to translate, was written very precisely in a well known dialect not common to the general Ubar region in which Irem is found. The following is the excerpt of the account I thought you would find interesting.

From the Accounts of Aram Al-Azif, Personal Scribe of Vizier Jakkam Day 249 of the 15th Year of the Sultan’s Rule:

In the past I have found these writings to be efficient ways of relieving the stress brought on by dealing with the incompetent fools in the Sultan’s palace. The matter of stress is no different now, yet its source has somewhat changed. As I have found before, it pays to lay out even the most inauspicious detail of my actions and experiences for later perusal, lest some point of knowledge and importance be omitted. This is one of the reasons I am the Personal Scribe to the Sultan’s Vizier.

On that note I shall start somewhat hurriedly on the beginning of my day today, even though it be a trivial thing. I was absorbed in my work in the Sultan’s Palatial grounds, sitting aside from the innumerable other scribes who were busy with who knows what, when one of the fools approached me. He failed to notice my busied transliteration of an earlier text to modern tongues, and thrusts a thick, yellowing tome of curious design before my eyes.

“I need help Aram! This book has shown me why my neighbor acts so strangely!” he exclaimed. His name eluded me.

I batted an eye briefly upwards, noting with disdain the tome he carried to be some drivel on the Undead and, specifically, the signs and
habits of the man-eating Ghul of the deep desert. Clearly the fool had been out in the sun for too long.

I stroked my modest beard thoughtfully as I decided what I would have for lunch.

“What is your name, sirrah?” I asked him.

He began to answer but I shushed him with a wave.

“It is no matter. What matters here is that you thought to come to me with this fantasy, while I am clearly very busy with my work.” I gave him a withering stare.

“I am sorry Agha-Azif, I was just so—”

“Ah. Not to worry. I will study the matter fully and advise a course of action. You just leave it to me.” The fool ate it up.

“Thank you Agha-Azif! Thank you! I fear for my life almost every day!”

“Yes, very well, now please leave me to my work.”

Look into it indeed. The only thing I would be looking into soon was a good kabob, and I sealed the matter by leaving that book on a stool in my quarters. Superstitious nonsense serves only to distract the mind from more awesome matters of knowledge.

I left the grounds later that day, my transliterations almost complete for the Vizier’s objectives, to pursue one of Irem’s many famous kabob houses. The smell was intoxicating.

Yet something caught my eye that night in the market, something strange and pallid aside from the grainy dust that covered the city, the streets, and my scholarly white robes. A strange figure, slim and feminine, walked through the throngs in the sectors where I made my culinary rounds.

She would wait for times at certain pillars, pale and still among the many pillars of Irem. I resolved to follow her, and, for a time, the thought of the kabob vanished. I know not what I thought as I traced her steps to the seedier sections of the sprawling city. I was never married to another, as such things are forbidden to men of the scrolls, but neither was I of the rank of eunuch. The woman enchanted me, and with some eerie movement of her silks and flesh I was held in awe and curiosity.
She disappeared abruptly, slipping quietly into a small structure of irredeemable disrepair. I followed her silently, looking about in the gathering dusk as I gently eased the door open. It was curious, to follow a woman to such a place. It is not my business, yet I could not help myself. The innards of the place were of old design, like some closed down inn or tavern. The woman had gone down to the cellar it seemed, and I was unsure if I should follow. A strange smell infused the air. A smell of rot and decay. Obviously, this was an unclean place of mold.

She could be a woman of the night, yet I had a feeling that that was an incorrect assumption. I resolved to wait for her return and quietly, knowing how to move silently from a dozen years in the silent libraries of his Majesty, set myself down behind a rather large jug of liquor or some other type of beverage. The smell was more sweet near it, and what little light coming in from the holes in the ceiling illuminated the room far from my spot, I set myself down to wait.

I remember a spell of silence then, as several pairs of feet trod out from the cellar, and I found myself witness to something bizarre and strange. They all wore cloaks of dark thread, and had apparently brought up from the cellar an altar of stone. On the altar lay that woman of pale beauty, naked and shivering in the cold of night, black tresses flowing down from the stone.

Words were exchanged, and my curiosity and dread grew as I witnessed a passing and mutual drinking of a vessel of clay which contained a dark liquid. My fears conjured an ironic memory of that fool scribes fears on the subject of the supernatural Ghul, and I almost cried out in terror.

Yet I am made of sterner stuff, and I watched with a writer’s eye as they all bowed deeply to the woman. I was unsure if this was anything more than a rich woman’s fantasy or a small pleasure cult of one of those northern deities.

My thoughts were broken as the woman began convulsing, yet I know not if it was in ecstasy or pain or fear. One of the four or so figures raised up a knife of gold then, carved with a line of text I could not make out. He brought the knife down as they all, except the woman, whispered a quick phrase. I heard a sound like a quick slicing, and he stepped back to allow me, the watcher unseen, to see. With the fading sun’s rays
catching the last areas of the house, a river of crimson flowed forth from the sighing female’s form. The man had cut her arm, and she bled as the other figures bowed deeply whilst eagerly moving back and forth on the floor. I heard the sounds of slurping and licking, and the images of the Ghul in that fool scribe’s book came back to haunt me.

I was stunned. Numb in mind and body, I could barely process the scene before me. I believe I passed out in horror.

I awoke with a start, noting it to be deep night. All was silent. I peered around the jug with dread, and noted a form laid in the stiffness of death on the altar. I approached it after noticing that the room was for the most part empty once more. The body was pale and empty of fluid. I dared not touch it. Yet, the knife lay on top of her breasts, almost alluringly, and I deigned to reach out for it. I picked it gingerly off of her chest, hefting it and noticing the writing on the blade. I could not make it out very well, and so I looked about for some brighter light from Sin (Translator’s note: Sin was the pre-Islamic God of the Moon).

I brought it up to the light shining down from the hole in the ceiling, and I wondered now what I was thinking, to follow that woman, to be here. Perhaps life had gotten too dull. Too ordered and boring.

I studied the carving, deciding to steal the knife for further study after a quiet escape. Yet as I shifted my grip on the pommel, a sharp barb built into its design pricked me deeply. I gasped with pain and surprise, dropping the knife with a thud to the planked floor. The silence had been shattered. I stood still, hoping not to have aroused the cloaked figures who were surely asleep below.

I could probably talk my way out of any theft by calling the guard on the corpse before me, whom I could claim to have spied from the street. Yet the sound I was expecting came not from the stairs nearby but from the pallid corpse on the altar. A rustling, raspy sound echoed forth from her dead throat, culling the rest of my courage. The dread word of “Ghul” and the scared fool scribe’s face drowned any thoughts of ordered sanity.

I ran then, fleeing into the night through a window, as I found the door to be locked rather well. I noted with panting breath that it was not as late as I had earlier surmised. After a time I found myself amongst the nocturnal market stalls that Irem is known for, the unsleeping merchants
hawking their wares in low voices to the drifters and shaded figures that traversed the streets. I calmed myself as I realized that I was once more surrounded by normal folk. I decided to purchase a kabob at one of the many stalls before hurrying to the palace. Surely the Vizier, if not the Sultan himself, would wish to hear of the terrible things I witnessed.

The kabob was rather juicy, laid out lengthwise on a dowel of wood for my enjoyment. Pepper and pork glistened in repeating rows, glazed in a watery sauce of butter and juice. Yet my first bite of meat would not go down, and I began to choke rather violently. I supposed the food to be tainted in some way, and made a formal complaint to the merchant I had bought it from. Rather troubled, I continued along my way back to the palace.

Yet along the way a thirst struck me unlike any I had ever felt before, and as I looked about for a water vendor I began to hear a rhythm. It was a curious, all pervading, sound. As I put my ear to the ground I could still hear it with the same intensity. As a pair of cowled men walked past me the sound grew in intensity, and it dawned on me that I heard now the beating of the many hearts of the city, alive and fresh and pure. So full of life.

My mind was foggy and estranged from its normal feeling. I recalled once more that poor scribe’s face, and the words he spoke I heard once again. The kabob did not work to sate my hunger, would water slake my thirst?

I was a man of logic and pattern, yet I was learned enough to know when a man needs a physician. I started off in the direction of the palace at a run; surely the healing arts were what I required.

I never got even halfway, doubling over in a sudden stab of pain in my belly. The heartbeats grew louder and louder and the thirst grew greater and greater. Logic! Reason! Order! These were the watchwords of the scribe. Attention to details. The barb. The knife. The blood. Oh, the blood!

I understood my dread condition, yet my pacifistic nature overruled the realization of what I may have to do. Why me, why does misfortune befall the Vizier’s scribe?

The body was found the next day by a guard in an alleyway near the kabob house. My thirst was put to rest. Like those figures in the
house, I used a weapon for the deed, falling away from the tradition of
the flesh eating Ghul’s. I could not bring myself to actually bite the flesh
of the man I had killed. The knife entered his neck too easily to be real.
He must have been an illusion in this horrid nightmare of phantasms. I
must still be asleep in my study, yet I am not waking up.

And now I face the thought of how long will I live with this new
addition to my life’s account. I must do more research. I fear discovery;
my new goal is akin to a secret and taboo hobby. Shall I go to those
figures in the house? Shall I turn myself over to the executioner’s block?
Shall I wither and die of thirst among the wet ink of a thousand black-
ened and bloody tomes?!

Perhaps not. But why did I follow that doomed woman, that
dread agent of what was to come? Why did I have to inspect the weapon?
Why must the scribe’s curiosity overtake his conscious fear? I do not
know.

All the world is shadows, and in the black I am alone. The words
on the page grow blurry, and I thirst once more for an ambrosia that is
dreadful to think on, but needed forevermore. It is needed like water for
the dying man, and soon desired like the sweet kiss of a merciful death.

I fear not the unknown future now nor the eternal march of the
ages. I am at one with my fate and it is with laughter that I say come,
darkness triumphant!
Sir Cosmos

Tyler Conti

I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe.
The sun breaking the frost on mercury’s horizon
Earth’s dimly shining speck from the ice rings of Saturn
The asteroids and comets sailing on an infinite sea

The distant worlds of unimaginable green,
The calming blue of a bulbous gas giant,
The direction and guidance of a blinding star,
The spiral of a galaxy spinning in the distance

I felt the equal warmth of two suns
And shall not forget the force of their hold
The tug between galaxies as they spill into each other
Its violent destruction to all that lies within.

I’ve forgotten the night sky and what it means to wonder
To stare wishfully at the stars and their secrets
In the comfort that I know nothing.
Opiate To The Drains
Lacrima Nemulescu
Acrylic & Charcoal
We Never Met
Rosa Benitez

Between damp mountains and
the daily summer showers,
Worn out ponchos and
boots already filled with water.

The sky was only priceless at night,
when the moon only used to love me.
The child that used to run away from her,
and look back to see her follow.

Where time was slow and simple and
at that time we didn’t seem to notice
the long days spent between trees and
hearing our mother calling our names.

A place where heat was merciful,
and the dusty roads induced asthma.
Pebbles stuck between our shoes and
the sound of the nearby creek led us home.

I never knew her the way I was meant to,
my first home and our vague memories.
From the dark color of my neighbor’s skin,
and the long roads I wasn’t allowed on.

Where my bicycle couldn’t venture,
where the devil left its jacket:
at the end of the road my mother used to say,
but we never reached the end of any road.
At a time when I didn’t know there was
more than rainforests and moonlight,
where there could be more heat than relief.
Places the mountains couldn’t cool off.
Juxtaposed to my homeland are the flat lines of each coast. And although there are things to look up to, like edifices and men in expensive suits, there are restless sighs from a past self.

The child in me was caged from our departure, and I wish I could have left her where she was free, to roam and be a child again, a place where time was kind and she didn’t have to grow up just yet.
Untitled
Renata Villar
Scratch Board
Electric Justice
Joe Cirino
Apophysis, Chaotica & Photoshop
Unspoken Layers
Alexis Yero

Its essence is love; its always love.

Its branches represent the roles that too often form one’s identity and support a clouded perception.

The roots are deep and unseen; yet they are the life!

They make the tree a tree; why are they willingly unseen?

Life is love. Love prevails, always. Love is power.

When love does not prevail, it is not the end. This is truth.

Love is truth.

Truth involves human perception, a fantastic, devastating power.

Power and truth reside in the light of every living creature. We are all alive and human.

Humans are love. Humans are power and truth.
When those men upstairs have finally had enough, they’ll flip the switch and leave us in the dark, frozen in fear of moving through unknowns. But, when they aren’t watching, we can peek over the edges of the boxes that divide us, and whisper about what fun we had, fumbling in the light.

On that day, we’ll decide to split open our old bones and from the marrow, evaluate what it meant to love: we’ll say that by extracting this, we found the exact coordinates of the light that lets us see each other.

If only that light had lasted long enough, we could have shared all the lies that led us here together in the first place, then wonder why, when our eyes had grown accustomed to the sun, we were so blind to what we had.

What is the real reason why we cleave to each other? We pretended that it was just because we held one another so close: tasted tears in salt streaks down our face.

But we both know the real reason. Once, you saw in me what lords and gods of light and thunder saw in us, and they blasted through the clouds trying to spell it out, trying to save us from the rain that followed.
Mena
Sasha Strelitz
Colored Pencil
Untitled
Sophia Gourgiotis
Photograph
Horace Evans had finally realized what it meant to be free. Freedom was not a sandy beach, nor was it a mall and a fat wallet. Freedom was being cut off from man and society, alone with nothing but the roar of a V9 turbo-steam motorcycle in your ears and not a care in the world for laws and papers. Summer vacation was a glorious fruit and Horace Evans had found its juice too sweet to taste of but once.

No more would his professors lecture and drone on and on until the clock slowed to a standstill. Out here, the hypnotizing, arrow-straight road occupied his vision and gave him peace from all the chaos of law school.

The asphalt went on ahead of Horace, curving not once and straying never from its singular direction. The roar of his motorcycle, a Harley Demon Model IV, must have been heard for miles around. The sun slowly hit the horizon behind him as the cold New Mexico air rushed past, and in that moment Horace felt truly free.

Of course, leaving a life of torts and contracts and stuffy rooms with ailing witnesses and geriatric judges was preferable to what was about to happen, yet the budding lawyer did not know this. The desert rang with his fun, an unnatural sound, as deserts are meant by their definition to be quiet.

The bump in the road was sudden and jolting. One minute it was a smooth ride across perfect black, and the next Horace’s world has turned upside down. He felt more than heard a crunch as his body hit the road, the dust kicked up by the capsizing motorcycle blinding him as his leather ripped and tore in his streaking slide.

With time, Horace regained consciousness enough to find the sun no lower than it had been previously, his motorcycle a twisted wreck a ways down the road from him.

As Horace attempted to rise to his feet, he slipped and fell to the pavement, beads of sweat dropping from his bald brow. He looked down in horror to the realization that his right leg was no more: torn, ripped, and warped flesh and muscle were all that shone through the crumpled
leather of his riding pants. A pale Citroen logo hung down over the worst of the abrasion, and as he wondered over the absence of pain, he collapsed to his back.

As he screamed in agony to the empty space of the world, that New Mexico desert where no man walks, Horace’s back arched and the feeling of fleshy loss echoed through his form. His life fluid drained out onto the pavement, and a curious being came closer. Horace held out his hand as if to grasp the road for support as he cried out wordless dirges in the deafening cacophony of a dying man.

The thing drew closer, a small detachment of the road itself, its hide was black and peppered with redness as if it wept bloody tears for the man. Out in the desert and empty space, the sun was setting on Horace’s life, a shining orb looking down mercilessly on the burning sands and glorious desolation.

The watcher unseen slithered closer, and licked the man’s fluids. Ascertaining his condition, it raised its head to confer with the sun. Screams and yells of all the world’s agonies and sorrows met its questioning stare. The sun cast a silent glare upon the scene as it sunk below the horizon fully.

So the asp relented, and bore down on the man’s flesh. And the screams stopped. And the desert was quiet once more, as all deserts should be.
Tempus Fugit
Lacrima Nemulescu
Mixed Media
Soul
Natalie Hernandez
Digital Photography
Mayan Calendar
*Sasha Strelitz*

We were dancing ‘round the pyramid,
In the light of a full, Blue moon—
We prayed for Signs.
Seven days later—
We saw It.
In the mouth of a dead snake—
A goblet made of silver.
Which was not rare,
But this silver was etched with strange designs.
The Man studied them,
And babbled about ancient myths.

The Woman, ensorcelled—
Suddenly said:

“This is desired by men beyond the horizon—
Beyond this sacred husk of land.
They will come for it; they obsess.
Beware!
For rage burns brightest in their eyes—
A vehement passion.

“The Gods—they revere it.
It is a magic unknown to them.
Beware.

“On the next Blue moon,
Amidst the setting Sun,
Lay it in the Earth.
And allow yourself.
Consume the Spirit of the Vine,
Purge."
Your Perception Is Lying
Victoria Rajkumar

Little birds sit on barbed wire fences.
Children scratch their troubles away
With broken sticks of faded yellow chalk.
Chiseling their dreams
Onto the stained sidewalk.
Police say it’s just a step closer to graffiti
And to wash the filth away.
But everyone’s a child waiting for playtime
And there ain’t enough liquid
To drown out integrity.

Consume the Caapi colors.
You will breathe the Universe,
You will speak tongues
From other worlds.
Eat nothing
Until the next Sun sets.”
Moth
*Natalie Hernandez*
Charcoal
Quattour Horae

Joseph Fleming

Decido

My present dreams would I sate,
With those around the bend,
But now, with no more days from Fate,
Never shall I dream again,
Ever I’ll dream again.

Frango

Thus life frays along the seams,
And so I dream,
Of better days.

Spero

Can you see,
What lies beyond the veil?
I hope that it is glorious.
And may it hail,
A death victorious.

Relinquo

Free the skies for my arrival,
With all the verve left in my feeble body,
I wish it still, that no one join me,
On my return.
“We have to go back tonight,” whispers Rex. His apple red hair sticks to his forehead with sweat as we wait to go into the auditorium for the annual assembly meeting. I smooth my own hair down, hoping I don’t look as disheveled as him. He had convinced me to sneak into the Control Room with him this morning, but we had to leave before we could break in.

“Are you kidding?” I raise my eyebrow at him. “We were this close to being seen by the patrol! Do you know how much trouble we could be in right now?” I look around to make sure no one in front of us overheard. “You have to forget about this, Rex.”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Julian . . . are you telling me you are not the least bit curious to see what is in there?” The intense shine in his eyes scares me. He puts his arm around my shoulder in his usual way of begging, but I shrug it off.

“Oh why should I be curious? It’s just the dumb Control Room. There’s probably nothing in there but a bunch of electrical stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I want to see for myself,” he says resolutely. Next year Rex and I will be 15, and we will be graduating into Job Training for Habitat 1. I know Rex wants to become a Pilot, but as for me, I prefer something with a little less adventure.

Finally the doors to the auditorium slide open, and the line starts to move. As we file into the room, each person bows respectfully to two GIF portraits glowing next to the doors. The first GIF shows the great Xavier Bloom in his presidential red and gold scrubs. He was the first Martian, born on one of the first human voyages from Earth. His mother was a Russian Cosmonaut, and his father, a Chinese one. After he was born, everyone wanted to have their child on Mars. There was a huge baby boom and a rush to create the Habitats.

I remember when Xavier Bloom died. I was only four years old in Earth years (we still count in Earth years on Mars), but I remember the nannies bringing all of us children into the Playcare room to view the announcements. The man on the screen was the same one we bowed to once a year at the assembly. I had never seen him in person. Nanny MARIO was cried hysterically in the corner of the room while the other nannies patted his back and wiped away tears of their own. Xavier Bloom
had been the President of Habitat 1 for 128 years. They were scared of a future without him.

The next day we were driven into the room for another announcement. The other four-year-olds and I watched as a new face came onto the screen: Viqi Moreno. She introduced herself as our new president, but no one had ever heard of her before.

Rex and I bow to the second portrait where President Moreno smiles back at us. Rex sticks his tongue out toward the hologram, but I push him toward the doors. He keeps getting more and more reckless. Sometimes I am afraid of what he might do next. He is my best friend, but sometimes even I don’t know what he is thinking.

The assembly is boring. The only good thing about it is that we get to skip classes for a day. I notice a pretty girl named Aimée whispering with her friends a few rows in front of me. Her smooth dark hair shines in the fluorescent lights like the tail of a black stallion. She is a natural beauty, with sharp black eyes and full pink lips. My hands start to sweat, and I wipe them on my scrubs, trying to turn my attention back to the fiery blue hologram.

The hologram has no hair or defining features. Rex has gotten into many long arguments with some of the other guys about whether the hologram is male or female, but I don’t bother to argue with them about it. It’s obvious that the creator made it neither. It is to neither give nor take away power from any one group of people. There must be complete equality on Mars or we will end up just like the people on earth: dead.

During each assembly the Hologram reminds us about how the people of Earth bombed one another for reasons of greed and hatred. How they were so consumed with discrimination that they killed without reason. And how large groups of people were repressed, eventually retaliating in a force that destroyed all human life on earth. Had there not already been humans living on Mars when that happened the human race would be extinct right now.

“. . . and, eventually, they used these atomic bombs to eradicate the entire human race on earth . . .,” the Hologram drones on.

I yawn. I have heard this speech so many times I could recite it in my sleep. I look at Rex, and I am shocked to see him paying rapt attention. I sit up a little straighter and nudge him.
“What are you looking at?” I ask.

He glances at me.

“Huh?” He turns his gaze back to the hologram, clearly interested in what it is saying. I look at the hologram, too. Maybe I missed something. Was this not the same speech I had heard time and time again?

Rex turns to me and says incredulously, “Are you hearing this?”

“What? No. I mean not really . . . Isn’t it the same thing it always says?” I look at him questioningly.

“I never understood before . . . ,” he says.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “It’s not a mystery . . . it’s just history.”

Rex looks back up at the hologram thoughtfully.

“I don’t know,” he says seriously. “It just seems strange to me . . . how could they all be dead? Don’t you ever wonder if some of them survived?” He looks at me and then lowers his eyes to his hands, and for the first time I notice the dark circles under my friend’s eyes. I don’t know what to think about his new attitude, but I hope he gets over it soon.

At midday we get a break for lunch. Rex and I troop off to the mess hall with the other students.

“Yes! Tofu burgers!” says Beni, one of the youngest boys in our class. I hear a few more cheers as the news of today’s lunch item echoes through the line behind me. Tofu burgers are one of the tastiest things on the menu in Habitat 1. Rex told me once that earthlings ate burgers made out of animal flesh, but I didn’t believe him. He likes to say shocking things like that, but none of it is true. I close my eyes and let the juices from my burger seep into the crevices of my mouth. It is so good!

I look at Rex to see if he is enjoying the burger as much as I am. I expect to see him stuffing his face, but he has barely touched his food. It’s so unlike him. Rex is usually the first person to finish his food, but today he is nibbling slowly with a faraway look on his face. I wonder if it has something to do with the way he was looking at the Hologram earlier, but I don’t want to think about it.

“Dude, what’s wrong with Rex? Is he sick or something?” Beni asks, looking concerned.
“Um . . . he was up late finishing that paper for Smith,” I lie. I shift in my seat and try to change the subject.

“So are you ready to hear about why you should recycle?” I ask. For the second half of the day, the Hologram talks about the principles that Habitat 1 was founded on: sustainability, recycling, and resourcefulness.

“Do I have a choice?” laughs Beni. He turns to talk to someone else, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

When the bell rings signaling the end of our lunch period, Rex grabs my arm.

“Julian, we have to go now,” he whispers.

“Where?” I ask, but in my head I think, Oh, no! Not this again.

“Back to the Control Room. We have to go while everyone else is in the assembly.” His clear blue eyes stare into my black ones, begging me to come with him. He is scared to go alone.

“Okay, I’ll go with you, but this is the last time, Rex!”

“Oh!” he puts his hands up defensively, but I can see he is relieved.

I follow Rex as we place our trays in the wash bin. We try to blend in with the crowd as we make our way into the main corridor, a hard task for Rex. His hair makes him stand out like the cherry on the top of a chocolate sundae. We dawdle until we are the last people who haven’t entered the auditorium again, and then he pushes me into a sprint down the hallway. Thanks to our vegetarian diet and physical endurance classes, neither of us is very much out of breath by the time we reach the Control Room.

If Rex hadn’t shown it to me this morning, I would have walked straight past the room without ever noticing. There are no doors or signs, only a small glowing rectangle on the floor. Rex taps the rectangle lightly with his foot, and a large glowing panel with a keyboard appears on the wall in front of us. In an instant Rex is quick at work, furiously typing codes and passwords to hack into the room.

I look around us. I think it’s strange that there are no cameras in this part of the corridor, but I suppose people don’t usually come down this far.

“Rex . . . How did you know the Control Room was down here?” I ask. He shoots a glance over his shoulder, obviously not wanting to be distracted.
“Someone told me it would be here,” he says. Well, that piques my interest.

“Who?”

“Don’t worry about it, Julian,” he says. “Will you just make sure no one is coming? I’m almost done here.”

“Well, excuse me for asking,” I mutter. I roll my eyes, and look down the hallway again. There is a small shadow flickering around the corner of the hallway, and I squint at it. *Maybe it is just my imagination,* I think. Nevertheless, my heartbeat quickens, and I start to hear a sound like *swish, swish, swish.*

Then I panic. I grab Rex’s arm and shake him, whispering urgently, “Rex! Hurry up, man. It’s the patrol! We’re going to get caught!” I don’t know what our punishment will be, but I really don’t want to find out.

“Hold on! I’ve almost got it,” says Rex through gritted teeth. An instant later I am being shoved through the wall, and the corridor vanishes from my sight.

I find myself in a room filled with hundreds of whirring machines with little blinking dots of red and green sparkling across them. I reach out to find Rex, but he is not next to me. There is nothing but a smooth metallic wall behind me.

*What if Rex was caught by the patrol?* I think. No one I know of has ever done anything this risky before. I bang my fists against the wall, and it echoes throughout the room.

“Rex!” I call.

I place my ear against the cold metal to see if I can hear him on the other side, but I hear nothing except the sound of my own breath. All I want is to get out of here, find my friend, and go back to my dormitory. There is a door on the other side of the room. I make my way towards it when suddenly one of the machines starts buzzing. I hear a faint computerized voice coming from the machine, saying, “Warning! Warning! Area 5: breached . . . Sending back up . . . Locating satellite images . . . Warning!”

I walk toward the screens where the images are loading. It takes me a few seconds to realize what I am seeing. There are people running all over the place, people being beaten, women crying over dead bodies,
people who look more like skeletons than people. I don’t know what to think. These must be images from Earth before the bombs. I frown. They never showed this stuff to us in school. It makes me sick.

The computerized voice starts speaking again. “Warning! Uprising in Area 126 . . . Preparing retaliation forces . . .” New images download onto the screens in front of me. Today’s date shines in the corner of each screen with a description underneath.

23. Los Angeles, United States. Riot, Presidential Residence, 73 radicals killed. 17 captured and held for questioning. Investigation, ongoing.

London? Beijing? Wait, I think. Is this happening right now? I hear a low chuckle coming from behind the second door, and without thinking I throw myself behind a large desk.

The door slides open, and I hear a deep voice say, “Lars, check the log, and tell me how many events today . . .” A brief silence, and the same voice exclaims, “Lars! Come look at this! These poor bastards in L.A. are getting exterminated! Pow! Pow! Pow!” His laugh booms around the room. “Almost makes you wish you were a part of the action, eh?”

I cover my mouth to muffle the sounds of my own breath. I know that cruel voice will hear it and come find me any second now.

“There have been twenty-three instances today, sir,” says Lars. “Good! That’s less than yesterday, isn’t it?” booms the first voice. “Maybe these radicals are getting the message . . . maybe we won’t have to bomb them again after all, eh, buddy?”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Bomb them again? We bombed them? Rex was right. Everything I had ever known was a lie. The Hologram, the assembly; it was all a big fat lie! There are survivors on Earth. They didn’t kill one another. We bombed them. The thought sent me reeling, and I grab the side of the desk for support.

How did Rex know this? My best friend . . . who had told him? He said he wanted to see the Control Room for himself. Had someone told him what he would see on the screens? I am snapped back to reality
when the first voice says something else.

“You know they finally caught that red headed kid that’s been snooping around,” the first man starts. “Right outside this room, too. Did he really think he could hide with a head of hair like that? We would have had a hard time explaining that one to Moreno, eh, buddy?” The man chuckles at the thought.

I want to scream.

Finally the voice says, “Well, we better go give Moreno the update before she calls me again. We don’t want to get on her bad side!” I hear the screech of something metal against concrete and the squeak of rubber on the floor as the two men leave the room.

When I am sure they are gone, I emerge from my hiding place. I still can’t believe Rex has been caught. What will they do to him? Where will they take him? Will he simply disappear into the night like a sunset? Surely someone will notice. What excuse will they give as to why he is missing?

I know I can’t stay here any longer, so I go back to the wall where I entered the room. I run my hand over the cold surface, and I look down noticing something I hadn’t before: A small rectangle on the ground in front of the wall. I tap it lightly with my foot, hoping that I won’t need a code, and my wish is granted. I guess whoever built the place was only worried about people getting inside, not about getting out.

Then I am in the hallway again, half expecting to see Rex waiting for me. I shake my head. *That was a stupid thought.* I slowly make my way back to the dormitories, trying to make myself inconspicuous. The rest of my group is washing up for dinner when I enter the room.

“Hey, Julian!” says Beni. He looks at me with big brown eyes and a grin. “What’s wrong?”

I look at him. I want to tell someone what I have just seen, but I can’t bring myself to tell Beni. He wouldn’t understand. Rex was the only one who would have understood, but he is not here. I look around at the other boys. Did one of them send Rex to the Control Room? Or was it someone else? I don’t know . . . I look down at my hands. All I know is that I have to save my best friend, and to do that I will have to find out who sent him to the Control Room in the first place.