

Asteroids

According to NASA, an asteroid the size of a building is going to come “within about 17,000 miles of our planet” in four hours. I heard it on NPR. This kind of information is so much more salient when you are impacted deep within the bowels of a two story, \$30 motel, next to an outdoor swimming pool full of slushy, snowy soup. An asteroid, on a near collision course with my planet. What could I do? What could anyone be expected to do with this knowledge?

I contemplated astrophysics in my smoking room next to a gray haired woman who left her cooler outside in the frigid February air. On top was a half-gallon of milk. I presumed it was for her cat: a gray, long haired, *prima donna* who sniffed the bottom of my door whenever I wasn't in the room. Those two sat in their \$30 motel room, moving at the edges of the curtains, peeking out. Watching the cars come and go from the snowy parking lot. Maybe their eyes, like mine, human and feline, were raised toward the sky with expectation.

The rest of the motel guests were mostly couriers or construction workers. The owners were a large Indian family who occupied the rear of the motel. Their suite had a large, darkened window with an array of kids shoes from preschool to elementary to middle, at least fourteen shoes, paired and neatly lined up, seven sets of toes pointing out from behind the tinted glass.

I hoped one of them, maybe a grandparent who remembered the old country, would come in to clean my room and see my smiling statue of lord Buddha sitting on the heater alongside a bell and a candle. Maybe they would be filled with joy and loving kindness as we shared jasmine tea from my metal thermos.

The lobby was filled with blacks and staffed by blacks. When entered, the room became uncomfortable and frigid, like a family court in Detroit's winter months. An OG with a drooped Astros stalker was uncomfortably lounging on the the creaking and stained furniture with an appropriate combination of defiance and disdain. The mismatched furniture appeared (like my pillows and towels) to be second hand but the cigarette burns and coffee stains paired well with mismatched sob stories, Ebonic elocutions formed of dialects meandering about the gulf coast, deep south, the bayous, the swamps, plantations and slums of the sparkling cities.

Its all the same now, in the north and the south—neighborhoods sliced up by race, class and heritage; guarded by fearful memories of sixties Detroit and nineties L.A.—ringed by interstates that pulsed underclass grinders from strip mall to ghetto to urban periphery. In the middle was the gooey nougat center of tall, glittering buildings manned by self-congratulating bankers, who stared out of their towering, mirrored windows: plotting conquest from the citadel.

I wondered if the blacks wanted to smoke with me. After I walked in it was immediately obvious that their caste, vice, and mistress were zombie, dragon, cobra; respectively. Mine was only a pussy cat, peering through the curtains of a \$30 motel room at a bottle of frigid, delicious milk. Waiting for a celestial collision. Waiting for a nap. Stretching my claws out as wide as their tiny webs would allow and then sitting back on my rear legs with my butt in the air and tail straight up towards the ceiling or the sky. Waiting for a kind gray haired lady to scratch the junction of my tail and spine.

I stalked around the motel until I became conspicuous and then fled back to my room to feast on white cheddar cheese, kalamatas and feta in oil, store mix bran muffins, deli noodle salad, and Italian bread dipped in olive oil and red wine vinegar. For a moment, I was a Macedonian king atop a war elephant invading the Indian family's subcontinent for conquest and plunder.

Obviously, I had been smoking since I bought a glass one hitter at the roadside porn shop. For the last 5 hours, I had been getting tore up and now I was adding port wine to the Sour Diesel tumult. With pink cheeks and bloody red eyes I curled up alone but for the bed bugs and fleas who patiently waited for their dinner to doze.

I felt the steady, reassuring squi-ish, squi-ish, squi-ish of my heart beating and I thought about urban planning on post asteroid Earth. I thought about real world entertainment options in the surrounding motel labyrinth. I felt the warmth of food and drink in my belly. I mindfully gathered up all of the bliss and pity and angst and excitement that I could find within and drunkenly sprung up to looked for my shoes.

I stumbled out on foot seeking neon, only to find a dancing girl bar where the clothes stayed on so it felt less like prostitution. I drank two beers, the first while watching basketball on television and the second while watching girls pull fluorescing wedgies out of their butts from beneath black lights as we were serenaded by computers that sang like humans. The spawn of Andre 3000 and H.A.L. 9000 was a bastard persona which should have been unplugged sometime before Elephunk. I chortled into my second beer.

I tipped the girls as they slunk across the bar on all fours, with soft bodies and mangled faces, like half-tamed city cats often have. They were on their elbows with butts in the air, stretching expectantly, their voices softly exhaling from below their customer's earlobes. I payed them to rub their cheeks on my neck, marking me with soft scents. I payed them to purr near my temple. They were wily and determined as can only be felines and women.

As the sirens called, my mast sat next to me, his face reflected directly toward mine from the back bar mirror. I had been watching him covertly since he had walked in behind me. Strip club etiquette discourages eye contact between men so it was easy to be a spy.

He had been silently and thoughtfully twirling a ring between the bottom two knuckles of his left ring finger and staring at a draft beer. He was wearing a double-breasted capitalist suit and greasy hair pushed back behind his ears like a commodities trader from the nineteen eighties. I watched his face, from between bottles of Jack Daniels and Wild Turkey, in the bar mirror. He softly bent his lower lip around his lower teeth and bit, his eyes squinted from the bottom and his nostrils opened and quivered. He didn't start to cry before I left.

It was Valentine's day and we were filling a Go-Go dancing club in the middle of this pre-asteroid hell scape. I was dressed for the occasion with a ridiculously iridescent pink, purple and orange dress shirt, collar peeking up from underneath a beautiful Italian holiday sweater. I was soft and striped in dark reds, oranges, purples and black posing as a much more confident station of the pride. I was wearing black corduroy pants that were unbelievably soft; both with and against the grain, on the inside and out.

A future Earth species will find my body, preserved in some astral dust rock deep within the crater below the Earth's crust tens of millions of years from tonight. I will be dressed like a playboy tiger, surrounded by half naked women during our prime time cultural love holiday. Not too shabby, gentlemen. It should at least warrant a peer reviewed journal article. Maybe my curious copse might even deserve a full exhibit in a third rate natural history museum of the future.

Some dancers tried to ignore the circumstance, that we were watching them slither and gyrate on the committed lover's holiday. They too should be home with their significant others and children or housework and homework. Customers who did their own math would find astronomically high odds of finding a desperate Valentine's Day/Asteroid Armageddon date. We could probably even find one—like these girls in their neon underwear—who was willing to stay clothed and have drinks bought for them.

That made the circumstance even more surreal. We were all there: men, women, tigers and kittens; inhabiting fantasy worlds that were less morose than our actual existence. We were pretending not to be indifferent toward our lives and each other. We all pretended that a fiery celestial crash could measurably diminish life on little blue dot full of sad little people.

Other performers were open and honest about the holiday, asking about special plans, dinners, massages, always as if the club were a precursor to a glorious night out on the town and not just the only establishment nearby the motels that was open at this hour on this holiday.

The man in the mirror pressed his thumb and forefinger at the corners of his eyes and ordered a shot of bourbon to go with another beer. His face was eerie, backward, lit by club lights, black lights and the cell phone which he held close to his face—like a much older man—every few minutes, before slipping it back into the inside pocket of his dapper, greedy, defeated suit.

I left after an hour and twenty minutes and two beers having spent eight dollars each for tips and beer. As more lonely single men streamed into the bar I felt more and more claustrophobic. There were twenty-two customers and six dancers. I had seen the entire repertoire once. I was tracking my expenses, time, miles, gallons, food with receipts to match. Its something to do when I'm manic like this.

I had already spent \$60 dollars on Greek food and those herbal energy pills at the yuppie-magnificent big box grocery store next to the sad failing mall across the intersection from the shiny new mall. OTC stimulants have always been my preferred bag from the nineties ephedrine boom and onward and upward toward a more socially appropriate freshly ground mass of Arabica, nearly overflowing out of a single cup filter perched atop an oversized coffee cup. This concoction plus a shot of two-percent has spurred more highway miles, finished more term papers and dampened more armpits than any other in my world. In fact, coffee was so basic as to govern sleep, digestion and peristalsis: providing more 'grande-latte Enemas' than any pharmacy or back alley drug except maybe the malty-melange that made Milwaukee famous.

Regulation, standardization and Taylorisation of my sleeping and waking cycles have always been easier with uppers and downers. Without this control, there are only the twin curses of endless lucid cat naps and tooth-grinding apnea-filled REM-lessness. To the \$30 for the motel room, \$16 at the club and \$60 on refrigeration proof luxury food, I added \$30 at Target for a \$4 alarm clock (cheap motel room) and a clearance aisle battery powered video camera (impulse buy.) The latter was an inexplicable expense that didn't make a full minute out of the box before revealing itself as totally useless.

It is more dumbfounding that clearance aisle Pavlov slobbered on me with such a cheaply made video camera because my supply was flush with a DSLR, point+shoot and web cams, batteries, lenses, chargers and tripods hidden neatly underneath a second hand towel inside of a second hand particle board drawer. I visualized the furniture in its youth, tight joints and straight shelves. But over the years, water from a faucet or cloud or swimming pool had seeped in, unstuck the glue, rotted the pulp and sprouted a hearty strain of mold which imminently advanced.

Next to the cameras and receipts and incense (for my smiling happy Buddha who watched from the corner) and quarter ounce of Sour Diesel, there was a black lock box. The gray haired lady and her cat were right to be wary of the smells coming from their lone neighbor, his Grecian olive oil funk and foggy car windows. It was on the saggy dresser, under half-a-loaf of sourdough bread.

I thought of the dapper man from the club and his slippery ring finger. He left work early this Valentine's Day to beat rush hour into the suburbs. He was chipper. Every moment that he wasn't using his accounting major was a blessing but today was different. It was years in planning. He had started when they moved in together and kept at it true through the move, the new job, until they had paid off the mortgage, two advanced degrees three used and two new cars. His plan was contained within the house that he co-owned, two exits outside the interstate beltway in what was, twenty-five years ago, a newer subdivision.

The chain motels, ticky tacky pubs and strange ethnic storefronts took root in their neighborhood about a decade ago and commercial zoning, pulsing out from city center, was overwhelming more of his neighbors every year. Most of the frenzy rumbled in the east, on the other side of the freeway. But, an opulent mall made of thin glass and beige plaster had begun to gnaw at the west. He knew it was only a matter of time or eminent domain before the insatiable capitalist force enveloped his entire neighborhood.

He had planned the surprise tonight and sneaked out in the morning, two hours early. He wanted to conceal what he was wearing. He left a warm pot of coffee and a Hallmark greeting and was early enough to be first in line to the florist. He made three other stops before work. One for peanut butter fudge with dark chocolate chips, another to have his ears lowered and the third for plane tickets to Ireland, emergency exit row with extra leg room.

All day, he felt like a secret agent, spinning around corners at the bank with international plane tickets in his breast pocket. Shuffling through bundles of currency, professionally shaved, doused in Cool Water and Brylcreem. He was wearing light wool, dark black, double-breasted, pin striped suit with velvety lapels that seemed to vibrate with sound and energy in the buzzing fluorescent lights of the bank.

He daydreamed through the last hour of work while he packed and repacked the carry-on luggage in his mind's eye. Soon, the car service would arrive to whisk them off to O'Hare. The hour and a half alone in the plushiest back seat available is only the beginning of this meticulously planned Valentine's Day. He drove from work, to a surface street, to the freeway, past one exit

and through the next, on to the main surface street in his neighborhood, on to his side street and turned into his driveway. The Suburban Sisyphus parked his boulder and went into the house he co-owned and cooed for his mate.

The response was a dark, stale, sweaty and empty single level ranch style covered in dark green vinyl siding complete with authentic *faux* wood grain knots which were monthly sprayed with poison by pest-control specialists. The silence gaped back at him. He blinked at his home security system keypad. It blinked back at him. Then it started to screech and strobe. He disarmed it from the wall panel.

He had pushed digital digits of dollars from one computer screen to a different computer screen for forty hours every week, for fifty weeks every year, for more than two decades. He needed the job to pay for corporations to care for his belongings and destroy his enemies while he was at the office. He also needed a job to pay future percentages on top of market value for goods he couldn't afford yet was entitled to. There is no irony in his life, only an empty furnished maw splayed toward him.

He moved a curtain to look out the window, toward the wanderlusting interstate as it rushed over cement pillars. He looked to his western manifest destiny, a mall parking with unsteady sooty rocks and tar. With ranging eyes and a still head, he watched a car with out of state license plates stumble over the parking lot pot holes moguls. The two occupants were violently whipped from side to side.

After they found *terre firma* he watched as the driver shielded his face from the sun with his hand and crept into the horizon. The driver's horrific striped nuisance of a sweater blazed blazed orange and black and purple into the sunset.

The Levittown box shrank underneath his loneliness. He went to the kitchen and retrieved a glass, two ice cubes and liter of bourbon which was nearly three quarters full. He sat quietly and drank alone, thoughtlessly spinning his wedding ring around the smaller two knuckles of his left ring finger and waited. He watched the throbbing consumer leviathan out of his western window and thought about his plan.

I thought about the lonesome banker man, abandoned by his wife on Valentine's day. I thought about the wanderers, bouncing up and down the interstate veins, jungling on the periphery until moving on. I thought about the settled folk, the Indians' large cobbler bill and the lonely strippers' kids learning to make mac 'n cheese by themselves while their working mothers whispered and nibbled on my scapha and helix in their absurd glowing underwear.

Mostly, I thought about the black box. The fear that I would be questioned about it tomorrow. I wondered about the safety of my gusty outskirts shack. I counted and recounted my expenses and the ceiling tiles. I thought about taking a shower but running water entranced me like a raccoon frothing in the daytime. Its something I do when I'm manic like this.

Nothing has the power to save, protect or fix me; or anybody else for that matter. I counted and recounted and typed Joe Hill songs on an invisible keyboard and watched little bubbles of vinegar bob atop the olive oil. I was beginning to doubt if anything could even make me happy for a few moments. I knew getting bopped by an asteroid wasn't too much worse than losing what was inside the lock box. It definitely wasn't worse than possessing it.

It was well after dark and only other place to spend was fast food but it was closed to be remodeled. Earlier in the day, a pair of union types were flagging down cars with pamphlets from the end of the drive thru. I gave them a wide berth because my car was a hotbox but I silently vowed to return. I wondered if the asteroid cleanup and rebuilding would be subject to shop floor democracy.

Reinventing capital/labor relations in the post asteroid world was obviously as important as urban planning. Maybe we could end conflict on the post apocalyptic moon scape through egalitarian access to jobs and resources. Maybe people needed more than one fast food joint; or maybe they needed the ability to differentiate between malls based on perceived socioeconomic status; or maybe they required grocery stores that complimented their lifestyle and caste. Maybe a sense of agency is all anyone needs to make them happy. Why would I need a lock box for something so intangible.

I went outside and sat down into my parked car, turned on the engine and rolled back the seat. I wondered if the *prima donna* was outdoors and knew to start sniffing at the bottom of my

door. From inside the hotbox, I thought about a drive a few miles directly East on county high ways and narrow surface streets. The sun had been up for a few hours but it was just starting to warm the early February air. I drove through dead winter fields, past the towering, lumbering, grinding gears of the frontier. I bounced within the nexus where silos and barn ribs grind together with cogs of McMansions and mega churches like teeth zipped up through the middle of the country.

I looked out of the moon roof for the asteroid. On the other side of the planet, Vladimir Putin announced that he was prepared to use nuclear force against the asteroid if necessary. The scientific consensus was that a fragmented asteroid would spread incalculably more damage over a much greater area. Thankfully, I was just as preoccupied as Putin earlier this morning when a meteor exploded above the Ural Mountains shattering glass, triggering car alarms and injuring hundreds.

I was wandering around a highway porn shop to buy some glass. I needed to replace my McGyver rig: a thimble, a hollow brass rod from a old record player, a screen and some non-toxic modeling clay. If the piece was either inefficient or inelegant, I may have not needed to upgrade. But since it was both, it was time. As I nervously looked at the pipes in the front of the shop a worker sauntered out from some back room. She was middle aged, long blond hair, stubby and bespeckled. She was also incredibly sick, pallorous and plugged.

I made a practical selection: \$14 chillum, flat, short, thick and sturdy. A seedy looking browser was perusing DVD posteriors when I entered the store and he continued while I inspected the glassware.

"Balidin'day everythik 75% off," said stubby and bespeckled before honking her schnoz and lumping to the pile of peach colored tissues that cascaded out of a nearby garbage can. I ambled about the store and circled the other customer like musical chairs around two DVD racks.

The internet has probably destroyed the DVD business but the store's perimeter wall bolstered finances with whips and swings and all sorts of gigantic, vibrating or misshapen penises and rubber molds of blurted open vaginas and squinted shut anuses made from all colors of the rainbow. I imagine that the internet has only expanded this market sector by illustrating hyper-sex and allowing wolves into the bedrooms of the steppe.

My pallorous pal faded into to the back and conversed with an associate. Every once in a while she would vibrate phlegm from her throat with a noise that sounded like a large dog scarfing kibble. When I was sure that the sketchy drifter was going to begin a third pass over the section from whence he began (Mature—BDSM) I called for the worker and added some condoms, lube and old time licorice flavored gum (called "Big Black Sticks") to the bag. The entire encounter was cheap, direct and slathered with Purell.

I'm nearly thirty years old and have made less than ten condom related purchases. This is due to a string of long term bouts of monogamy, punctuated by short but spectacular spells of indiscriminate and unbridled virility, climaxing in a few recent years of celibacy that have been meditative, deliberate and necessary.

Back in my \$30 motel room I sat with a brown bag which could only have come from a ransom payment, drug deal, porn purchase, farmers market, hardware store or a green forty ounce glass bottle: condensation damp, disintegrating into August charcoal smoke, bocce ball thunks and cicadas. But its Valentine's Day and I'm tuned up, manic and vibrating with pills, hyper-vigilant and willfully ignorant. I am dabbling in old crafts following a long, dark, painful and probably life saving hiatus. Being one's own apothecary is thrilling but dangerous.

My inner feline—dreaming of ice cold milk and the bugs in the wall—has been replaced by a lab rat—running hot and fast even now as years of rust glow, burn and fling from the wheel. I worried it was coming back at the porn shop. I thought I felt it two nights ago. Its the reason I didn't get a third beer at the club. I can feel it a few days before it hits, a flutter in front of my left scapula and a pinch at the back of my sternum. Then last night it started in earnest: chest pains, tightness, numb limbs, light head.

I'm lying on the bed face up, listening to yelling Spanish from the wall above the head of my \$30 bed. An angry and startled tripping beat as an unseen font bumper ground on a parking lot snow bank, just outside. The beast that shakes my limbs and lamp shades has arrived. He is there in the soft flesh of my palms and soles. The imminent and abrupt halt of mortality.

It destroyed my mind and thrust me into darkness that enveloped, digested and destroyed every single atom of my social, physical and mental existence. I have never feared for my life but neither have I desired fulfillment. I would not be in this gusty shack contemplating mortality and waiting for organs to decide my fate if wasn't already back in full. It showed me that nothing has the power to save, protect or fix any of us. It showed me that there is no thing to pursue. Without it I wouldn't know when to give up. I wouldn't know about finite and tangible sparks in the black void of space. I wouldn't know what I kept under lock and key in a motel dresser.

Even though it has long since come and gone I am still waiting for its arrival. Maybe it will come after a shower, or when my vision clears up all the way. Maybe it is coated with lactic acid and tangled with your cramped pectoral muscles. Maybe after I'm done sputtering sweaty glandular secretions. Maybe I should stop waiting and take a shower and don't try to force it. I am shivering in sweated sheets.

At least Putin didn't arouse his nuclear phalli, yet. I guess in the midst of my mortality, bargaining and acceptance I had missed the asteroid all together. Or rather, we had missed each other. I peeked out of the curtains to watch my gray haired neighbor's gray haired cat walk across the hood my car, leaving tiny black wet paw prints in the road salt.

I thought of the dapper bank teller whom I had seen the night before reflected between bottles of liquor. He still cradled his aching finger in his hand like a child holding a delicate creature that is so incredibly beautiful and mysterious that he knew—even as a little boy—that he must let it go. The teller had seen tomorrow's tragedy slouched and withered inside of a mason jar. He had passionately destroyed that which he so desperately wanted to love.

With \$30 for another scuzzy night, I turned on all of the lights and let the shower run as I lay naked on the bed. The heater bounced up and down, spewing a tepid mildewy wind. The T.V. mindlessly blared news updates. Lord Buddha's bottom vibrated when the fan kicked on high and his smile broadened as the room warmed.

Each wall undulated with individual life from its their opposing side. Last night as I waited for a verdict, I had council with Dostoyevsky. I confessed my sickness, spite and ugliness. I want to tell you, gentlemen, I lay atop the fluid stained, cigarette burned top sheet—staring at lord Buddha's timeless smile—listening to unseen car bumpers scratch on the snow banks and talking to an insane dead Russian. I thought, "I am not going away because...ech! Why, it is absolutely no matter whether I am going away or not going away."

Lord Buddha gave his approval from his perch. I lay alone and listened as the shower ran in the bathroom and watched fog accumulate on the wall mirror. I to my upstairs neighbors' gratuitous humping while my heart squi-ish, squi-ish, squi-ished. I saw the man upstairs yesterday as I was prowling the grounds and marking my territory. He was in between sessions, on the balcony for a smoke break. I decided to turn my car into a hotbox so I could watch him.

He could have been me five or six years ago, cocksure, arrogant, entitled, wearing a scarf and oversized knit cap, skinny jeans and a double breasted naval wool coat—a self loathing hipster. Outside in the frigid, smoking, ashing all over the gray haired lady's cooler and the precious 2% atop it. Maybe his girlfriend was inside watching TV, showering or cruising her email. Maybe he was on the lookout for a drug hook up, or Craigslist out call.

Even here in this egalitarian and colorblind liminality between the suburbs, city and interstate, he was still reassured by his age, masculinity and whiteness. I hoped that he would never come have to know the truth of our existence. That's why I kept it so secure. He doesn't know because around him people fear sincerity. They fear the putrid irony and sticky sarcasm that resides inside of his psyche. He flicked the cigarette into a splash of glowing orange sparks, spun around and again became a faceless noise, stomping around and pumping away above my head with both his lover and an atrophying corpse beneath him.

I was out driving when the sun set, when faces turn first to caricatures and then to beasts. It was dusk at the edge of the zipper when it changed. Mega-churches and gated communities were fencing off dilapidated barns. Topless silos were being knocked over and digested by insatiable capitalist machines that spewed black smoke in the air and buried top soil deep underground.

The masters of the machines were the haughty men from the city. They sat around gnarled oak boardroom tables and divided maps and reproduced their names on deeds with notary seals

and nibs affixed to quills. Fields that had produced for generations were being buried underneath the sooty rocks and sticky asphalt, the unfinished basements and *faux* wood grain vinyl siding.

As far west as you can see from the bank teller's window, past the neighborhood diaspora and commercial development, past the mall and parking lot fields, after the suburbs have become exurbs have become bungalows and shacks, there is one square city block of mahogany brown loam that last year produced an abundant crop of the sweetest farmer's market sweet corn of the season. But gentlemen, I am glad to inform you that it will be many years until there is another crop from that particular plot of land. Because, as you can surely understand, the land's proximity to burgeoning and under-served markets makes it an ideal place for a fast food drive-thru due this summer.