

## **Back When The World Was Real**

*Ravi Chandra*

Back before Facebook and Twitter, before Instagram and Tinder, before selfies and an endless stream of food porn, there was this thing called reality. Now, iPhones work 24/7 devouring the world away, along with our minds, processing them to the emptiness of code and awkward, sterile silences where we prefer to look at screens. Social media is our preferred sphere, our matrix of voluntary imprisonment. We don't have artificial intelligence yet, but we let the internet think for us. Twitter is our artificial amygdala, riling us but rarely giving us relief.

But back in the day, we had reality, and friends, before that word itself was appropriated by Mark Zuckerberg and Big Web with their addictive Venus fly trap of a scrolling blue wall, their samsara of substitute sociality. We had Locus. In 2002, I walked into the converted first floor lounge of Korea House on Post Street, and my life changed. Jane Kim was the first person I met, and her sun filled the room. I moved chairs, and learned I had something to say. Open mics followed, and then actual invited performances. Locus, led by Jane Kim, Annie Koh, Julia Kim and Sam Chanse, created a monster. A "Sexy Beast" as one Valentine's Day Asian American male spoken word performance called us. There was a South Asian reading too, and that was one of the seeds that led to my writing for *Indivisible: A South Asian American Anthology*, winner of a California Book Award.

There was tragedy too. Our dear friend Itzolin Garcia ended his life without a sign of warning to us. I remember him drawing, laughing and reading his poems infused with surreal imagery, happy and at home with us. That real world had pain, but Locus gathered us. We cried and

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held hands, shared our anger and grief, and read poetry written to Itzo. I'll never forget that night. I had to sit down to read my poem, on the verge of passing out from the shock. Itzolin is still a friend in the spirit world, I think, waiting for us in the Locus above.

Those days were filled with friendships, and some of my closest relationships even now were forged back then. Monthly events such as H(API) Hour run by Keith Kamisugi and Third Thursdays run by a tireless group of organizers allowed us to see each other, face-to-face in Japantown. The SFIAFF at the Kabuki was our peak experience, our Asian American nirvana. Post Street, end to end, from Locus at Korea House, to Romeo 5 in the Kinokinuya Mall, to the Kabuki Theater, was our 'hood. If ever there was a Modern Golden Age of Asian American San Francisco, it ran from about 2002-2007 in Japantown.

Actually, ever since I deactivated Facebook a year ago, I've felt glimmerings of a new awakening. LitQuake, CAAMFest and KSW are bringing back the real, but in the Mission. I think people are recognizing that the iWorld can't be a home. Maybe we can have another Golden Age. Maybe another group of artists, collaborating in real space and time, can create a moment. A movement.

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