

## VANESSA WOODS

*Divination*, 2012

Photomontage, Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 11 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## CHRISTIAN KIEFER

### The Great Black Hope

I'm embarrassed to say it now, but that's something of an understatement. Flabbergasted is a better word. Look, the thing is—and this was how it was in the beginning, you know—I mean look, we had all worked hard to get where we were, and then this Hollywood type shows up, not just for a meet-and-greet but for the whole thing, the long haul. At first I was sure it was some kind of mistake or practical joke or something like that, but it just kept going on and on, and finally I went to the chief and I asked him point-blank to explain the situation—you know, I was mission commander—and the chief told me that it was all true, and to be prepared for a barrage of questions from the media. Make no mistake, Charlie, he told me, you are to put a positive spin on this.

Jesus, Alan, how old is this guy anyway?

When he told me, I laughed. Seriously? I said.

He's in good shape, Alan said.

Good shape? I said. Then I said some things that I probably shouldn't have. I mean look, I'm not part of the program anymore, but let's just say I was pretty upset about it, and when I was done ranting, the chief only shook his head and said something like, You see, Charlie, that's exactly what I *don't* want you to say. If it weren't for him, you wouldn't be going at all. You keep that in mind.

The thing you have to remember here is that the mission was never intended to be what it turned out to be. I mean, people can't talk about it without talking about race, but that's a kind of chatter that I've never paid any attention to. If you want to become an astronaut, you put your nose to the grindstone and work hard. Was it more difficult for me because of my ethnicity? If it was, it was only because politicians and journalists keep talking about race like it's some kind of debate. I'm an astronaut. Evans and Johnson and Malcolm are all astronauts. Period. There's no debate about that.

When they first started assembling the team in Houston, the crew was going to be myself as pilot, Cornell as copilot, Ed Yu as systems engineer, Tom Wieland in communications and navigation, and Muhammad Kansanni as medical officer. I don't think I'd been told I was going to be commander yet, but that probably came soon after. Then Cornell got the flu and Wieland broke his ankle playing in his weekend soccer league. They slotted in Gabe Evans for Cornell and Robert Malcolm for Wieland,

but those decisions had nothing to do with their skin color. Cornell is one of the best engineers around, and Wieland is a great communications officer, and that's the end of that discussion. Those are solid choices, but all my peers are solid: military experience, terminal degrees, honors in our respective fields. Then they told me the office had swapped Kansanni for Frenchy Johnson. That was a little odd, but I was told that Kansanni was going to be used for a slightly later mission that was going to emphasize medical testing, so it made sense. We liked Malcolm just fine, but the timing definitely seemed off.

It was probably around then that Congressman Gillam managed to implode the funding for the Mars project. He'd been campaigning about what he called "bloated government spending" for a number of years, and I don't think anyone in the office really thought he'd get the bilateral support to actually push that kind of the thing through, but when the House majority flipped with the last election, he had all the votes he needed, and boom, just like that, the whole Mars program was closed up.

I don't know how the press finally caught wind of our mission but they did, and pretty soon there were headlines in the *New York Times*, not about the program losing its funding but rather about our specific mission being canceled. There was that famous newsbite where some acolyte of Congressman Gillam called it "The Great Black Hope," really sticking his foot in his mouth, because he meant it in the most denigrating way possible. But the press grabbed hold of it, and pretty soon the media office was just getting swamped with requests for comments about the Great Black Hope, the mission that was never to be.

I wasn't too keen on the name, to put it mildly. I felt like it just emphasized the wrong thing. I mean, these are all super-good men we're talking about. Hell, Johnson will probably win the Nobel Prize one of these days. I mean seriously. And of course there was Ed Yu. I mean, he was part of the crew all along, and his parents emigrated from China, so the whole Great Black Hope thing didn't even make sense, really. I probably would've tried to do something to nip it in the bud, but at that point we didn't think the mission was even going to happen, so I figured it didn't really matter what they called it in the end.

Then we heard that someone was willing to fund the mission. We didn't know who it was at first, but obviously

that changed everything. It wasn't until a week or two later that we learned the funder would want a seat on the mission itself. I mean this kind of thing happens sometimes—space tourism—but never as part of an official flight and never on a mission of this duration or complexity. I mean, if we were going to hit Mars just right, the math had to line up. Then there was to be a year and a half on the surface, mostly prepping the Buckys but also waiting for the planets to realign for the return trip, and then another six months back. The margins could brook no error, and we all knew there were plenty of opportunities for error, any one of which could lead to catastrophic failure.

And then along comes Samuel L. Jackson.

The whole thing really spun up into a frenzy after that. We had some meetings about it right after we first found out it was happening, but it was pretty clear there was nothing we could do. It went up past the Astronaut Office and on up the chain, way beyond anyone I could ever reach. Kind of reminds you where the collar is and where the lead goes. You know what I mean? Somewhere in there, Congressman Gillam gave that press conference where he talked about the power of free enterprise, as if the whole thing had been his idea all along. The press just ate it up like crazy. I mean every day there were stories in the papers and on television. They tracked our training and hassled our families and talked to everyone who had ever known us. People were already writing books about us, and we had barely even started to train. It was nuts. You'd turn on the TV and there'd be Bob Malcolm with all his muscles flexed, talking about how honored we all were. You know *People* magazine put him on the cover as Sexiest Man Alive. I mean—good grief—there's a limit, you know?

Yeah, I was a little irritated about the whole thing. I mean I've prided myself on never ever playing the race card—I mean never in my career—and here the whole damn country seemed to be playing it for me. All I wanted to do was get my crew to complete the mission objectives, and in the next minute the whole thing is being used as some kind of *example* in the public debate. I mean, you've seen the *Time* magazine thing, right? I was pretty conflicted about it, if you want to know the truth. I mean who wouldn't want to be on the cover of *Time*—but that headline? I just don't know. And all those journalists would ask the stupidest questions. How does it feel to be the com-

mander of an all-African-American crew? I didn't know how to answer that at all. It wasn't an all-African-American crew, for one thing, because Ed Yu was still our systems engineer. The press just acted like he didn't exist at all. But even that obscures what's really important, which was that we were tasked with a hugely important mission to Mars. Period. I didn't have anything else to say about it.

I even asked Ed once how he felt about the whole thing, being part of all this publicity about the Great Black Hope. You know what he said? He said, At least they're not calling it the Great Yellow Hope. Now *that* would be embarrassing. He's a pretty funny guy, Ed Yu.

The funny thing is that now I tend to imagine what Samuel L. Jackson might have said were he in my shoes. I mean we disagreed about everything back then, but I can totally hear his voice shouting something like, Enough is enough! in his big angry stage voice. He'd say that kind of thing during the training. Like we'd be eating in the mess and he'd do that line from *Pulp Fiction* where he goes, Mmmm...this is a tasty burger. Everyone would laugh, but that kind of thing never felt like a joke to me. These days, I'm not totally sure it was a joke to Jackson either. I didn't really figure it out at the time, but now I think that even when he was parodying himself there was something serious under the surface.

Of course, back then that kind of thing just irritated me to no end. Like once we were on the simulator, which itself is a tricky piece of equipment, and it's pretty tense because working the thing takes concentration, and out of nowhere he yells: I'm sick and tired of all these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking simulator! Boy, the guys really thought that was funny. Especially Ed Yu. He was laughing so hard I thought he was going to hyperventilate. But in the middle of all that hilarity, I just turned right around and told Jackson to get out. He ruined the whole point of the simulator, which was simulation of the real thing, you know? It's dangerous out in space. We all knew it, and here comes Samuel L. Jackson with his stupid movie quotes wrecking the whole thing for everybody. He wasn't a scientist or an engineer or a pilot, so to me he was just an extra piece of baggage to be stowed.

Anyway, Jackson looked at me with this expression that was just pathetic. You know, my mother could always tell whenever I told a lie, he said.

I'm not sure I care, I said.

But Jackson either didn't hear me or didn't choose to listen, because he just kept talking: You look at me just like she did back then, he said. Like I just told some whopper of a lie and you're disappointed as hell.

I shrugged and Samuel L. Jackson exited the simulator.

When the door was closed again it was very quiet. I expected Ed Yu to say something, but he was quietest of all. When someone finally spoke it was Gabe Evans. I'd known him for a long time, since we were in the same training class when we first came into the program. I mean I'd been over to his house and knew his wife and his kids.

Anyway, what he said to me was: Kinda harsh, Charlie.

This is worktime, gentlemen, I said. Not playtime.

I don't know if I'd piss him off, Evans said. He's the paycheck. What if he pulls out of it?

There has to be discipline, I said.

Cap's right, Malcolm said. This is training. You fools got to keep it together.

I think Malcolm was trying to help, and I had noticed that he was a little more standoffish with Jackson, maybe because Malcolm had always been the center of attention on account of his good looks and all that; but when he said that, I don't know, it just irritated me even more, so I said: Look, all of you just keep to the damn protocol. Can we do that? Is that possible?

Everyone got pretty quiet after that. Evans has a kind of droopy hound-dog look anyway, but for the rest of the day he looked extra droopy like I just broke his favorite toy. But hey, we got through the simulation fine, and the next time, when Samuel L. Jackson joined us again, everyone was right on track.

By the time we lifted off, we all knew each other as well as small crews do. They say that crews become little family units, and that was true for us, more or less. Samuel L. Jackson even seemed pretty integrated into the group. He and Ed Yu and Frenchy had become close friends—I mean you'd see the three of those guys everywhere—and I know that most of the crew went off to Jackson's place in Manhattan one weekend during the training. I'm sure it was a beautiful place and they probably had a great time. I stayed back because I was the captain and had things to do. That's what being the captain is all about. Evans brought me a little snow globe with the Statue of Liberty inside of

it, but I left it in my office in Texas. There's only so much you can take with you to Mars.

So I felt like Samuel L. Jackson was pretty much under control for most of the training, and the crew seemed to like him a lot. Like Evans kept telling me how smart the guy was, and I'd just shake my head, because smart is all well and good, but if he's not some kind of experienced physicist or electrical engineer, what can I use him for? He's taking up a slot where we could have taken Teresa Adams or Asif Khan or someone like that. I mean these are serious scientists and engineers we're talking about now. So when Gabe's telling me how smart Jackson is, I'm thinking, Yeah, sure, but what use will he be when something malfunctions? Can he calculate an escape velocity? Can he help us get to Mars? I mean beyond simply paying for it? I doubt it.

I know the rest of the crew really enjoyed him. He was like a kind of mascot for those guys, and maybe I should have just looked at him like that too, but for me there was another side to Samuel L. Jackson, a side that I don't think he really revealed to anyone else. With the guys, he'd run through whole scenes from his movies. Mostly it was with Ed Yu because, like I said, those guys got pretty close, and you could hear Jackson's voice from anywhere—I mean that guy's voice carries anyway, but in a little compartment like that it's really loud. So you'd hear Ed say something and then Jackson's voice would shout like: Yes, they deserve to die, and I hope they burn in hell! And it wouldn't just be Ed Yu or Malcolm laughing, but like everyone would crack up. It just seemed unprofessional. I mean that's the easiest way to put it. It just seemed unprofessional.

You know, there was this one time he was with Frenchy—that's what we called Johnson on account of him living in France at some point—and anyway, Frenchy was supposed to be working on the medical kit in the cargo hold, getting it all organized in case something happened, and I come passing through and there's Frenchy and Samuel L. Jackson and they're apparently acting out a scene from one of his movies. I mean really. I come floating to the edge of the cargo bay, and there's Frenchy saying I ain't climbin' into no dirty-ass trunk, man. I got a problem with small places. And then Jackson saying, I got a problem with spending ten thousand dollars to get some peanut-

head niggers out of jail, but I did it. Frenchy's a quiet guy most of the time. I mean he's not one to expend words on trivialities, and now all of the sudden he's talking like the worst stereotype of a black man I can imagine. And Samuel L. Jackson is standing there with a big grin on his face, running through his lines.

I just floated there in the entryway for a moment. The ship is tight, so there's not a lot of room, so we were all close up on each other. Those guys both fell silent right away. Then Samuel L. Jackson said, *Jackie Brown*, as if that somehow gave them the license to do whatever they wanted to do. There was another moment of silence, and then Samuel L. Jackson said, You haven't seen it?

Frenchy wouldn't even look at me. I mean this is one of the top medical guys in the world. MD and PhD both. He's the one that did that surgery on the deep space mission a few years later—the *top guy* and he's talking like that. On my ship? I don't think so. But I'm not even angry at him. I've got my eyes on Jackson. Finally, I say, Can you give us a moment?

Who? Jackson says. Me or him?

You, I say, and now Frenchy looked up sheepishly, his eyes full of guilt.

Ah, shit, man, Samuel L. Jackson says. We was just playing. Frenchy knows all the lines. I didn't even have to teach him or anything.

Give us the room, Frenchy, I said again.

I had to slide sideways to give Frenchy enough space to pass. Beyond Samuel L. Jackson, I could see stars through the window, their shapes luminous against the long blue-black of space.

I know what you're gonna say, Samuel L. Jackson said then.

Do you?

Yeah, you're gonna tell me that I need to be quiet or be more serious or some bullshit like that.

That's pretty close to it, I said.

Well, that's not happening anytime soon, Jackson said. It's just not. You can tell me what you want me to do but you can't tell me how I communicate with my fellow crew members.

I don't want you to talk about them like they're your crew members, I said. I'm pretty angry now. There's no denying it.

## VANESSA WOODS

*(In)Visible #17, 2014*

Original Cut Paper Collage, 10.25 x 13.5 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

See? Samuel L. Jackson said. That's what I'm talking about. If you have something that I need to do here, then you go on and tell me, but don't stand there like you can control every last thing. We'll be up here for two and a half months before we get to Mars, and I don't think you understand what that does to a person.

You don't think I understand? I said. I'd floated a little off ninety degrees now, so that when I tried to lean forward, to really get in Samuel L. Jackson's face, I ended up nearly pinwheeling directly into him, but I managed to stop myself. *You're* the one who doesn't seem to understand, I said. A little bubble of spit escaped my mouth and drifted off toward Samuel L. Jackson's wide, white eyes. We've been training for *years* to do this mission. *Years*. And then you show up and think you're part of the *crew*? What gives you the right?

What gives me the right? What gives me the motherfucking right? I'm Samuel L. motherfucking Jackson. That's what gives me the motherfucking right.

I was drifting slowly in a circle, but I didn't want to raise a hand, even if only to stop myself.

You like that? Samuel L. Jackson said after a moment. Like what?

That display? That's what you want, right? That way it makes it easy for you, because I'm like a comic book character, right? 'Cause I can do that shit all damn day.

I was sideways to Samuel L. Jackson now. That's what I *don't* want, I said.

You all have your thing here, and I know that, Samuel L. Jackson said. I know I'm not wanted. You made that clear from day one. And I know I got thrown at you. But listen, I'm an entertainer, Charlie. That's what I do: I entertain.

I don't recall him ever using my first name before that moment, and something about it really made me angry. And so I said the thing that I shouldn't have said—didn't say it so much as sing it in the most awful blackface accent I could muster: *Fist on de heel tap, den on de toe. Ebry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.*

I even tried to tap my heel, but the force of my motion only sent me to spin in the doorway.

Samuel L. Jackson floated there almost perfectly still with all those stars flooding out behind him. He just stared at me, goggle-eyed.

It took a moment to get myself to stop swinging in that arc, but I managed to right myself once more, to face the man who had become my antagonist, and even though I already regretted what I had said, what I had sung, I said to him: I don't need entertainment, Jackson. I need a functional crew that completes the tasks that I assign. That's all. You're getting in the way of that with your goddamn minstrel show. Am I making myself clear?

Oh, yeah, you're clear, Samuel L. Jackson said. You're crystal clear, commander.

There's just a few thousand cubic feet of living space in the whole ship, so it's not like we could separate for a day or two and cool off. We're right on top of each other all the time. We could mitigate it a little by sleeping in shifts, which was what we did from that point onward. If I was awake, I always knew that Jackson would go back to the sleeping bunks soon after, so there was never more than six or seven hours of overlap.

Some of the guys were disappointed; I could tell. I mean really, who could blame them. Even I started to wonder if we should try to rotate the sleep times around a little so that we weren't always with the same people all the time. I mean, I like Malcolm just fine, but if he's the only guy you see every day for a couple of months, it just starts to get a little stale, you know? Especially Malcolm, who, like I said, I like just fine, but the guy works out like five hours a day. You just can't keep up with that. Anyway, after about a week, you've heard all his stories, and then what do you have left to talk about? The research, and the progress of the ship, and you can go over the landing on Mars for the hundredth time, but you don't really need to do any of that. You're really just filling in the silence. The thing is, I know I set myself up for it. Silence was what I wanted, but when I got it, it seemed overwhelming. It's hard to explain. Sometimes I think Samuel L. Jackson was the only one who understood anything about how to get people to Mars. He certainly understood it better than I did, and I didn't even like the guy that much. There were times when I was just hoping he'd yell something about snakes on the spacecraft, but that didn't happen.

Two and half months in a couple-thousand-square-foot space will get to you, but we made the best of it. Played a lot of cards, mostly. Ed Yu was the best player by far,

so it became a game to see if we could figure out a way to beat him. We spent a lot of time working out on the bike and pressing against elastic straps and stuff like that, although that's always pretty awkward without gravity to push against. We could send e-mails, although they took a few weeks going and coming, so the news from home was always super-delayed. We read a lot and traded books and reread the ones we had already read. That kind of thing can get old pretty fast. That's something they don't really tell you: that most of space travel is just waiting to get to your destination. We're on the ship, mostly, in case the automatic stuff doesn't work right and something has to be done manually or someone has to go outside to fix something. But that didn't happen on this trip, although you know it's happened on many others. For us it was pretty much routine.

At some point we were shown that *Time* magazine cover with all of us standing there back in Houston in our blues, with the words "Men of the Year" across the top and "The Great Black Hope" across the bottom—the line that that congressman guy probably meant as insulting, but which the press had totally glommed onto. I mean as far as the public was concerned, that was the name of the mission, and that magazine cover just made it permanent. The magazine came out when we were almost to Mars, and Mission Control told us about it in one of their communications. We didn't actually see the cover until we were headed back to earth. I don't know if Samuel L. Jackson ever saw it. I assume he did, but we've not spoken since Mars. It was funny when it showed up, because there were all us, with Ed Yu standing out like one of those "One of these things is not like the others" pictures on *Sesame Street*. Just disgusted me to see that. I even called him about it on the phone when I saw it, and you know what he said? Just what you'd expect: Hey, man, I'm on the cover of *Time*. I'm not complaining. That's Ed for you.

After we landed at the Bradbury site we were pretty busy. We set up the new living module that was in the cargo hold and got it situated and attached to the two modules that were already there. We'd been talking that there was way more room on Mars now than there was on the spacecraft, even with the cargo hold mostly empty. I mean each one of those living modules, when we had them assembled, were eight hundred cubic feet each, not

super-huge or anything but certainly functional. We call them Buckys internally. Bucky balls, although they're only domes, not balls, obviously.

Samuel L. Jackson was pretty quiet during the whole process because there just wasn't a whole lot for him to do. We'd all been trained on how to assemble the Buckys, but I just didn't feel confident about him leaving the spacecraft in an EVA situation. Things can go wrong, and we're all trained for that possibility. Plus, ground told me to handle Samuel L. Jackson with care. So that was my decision. He stayed on the spacecraft, and we all went outside to put the Bucky together and get it attached to the other two Buckys that were already there. In some ways it was nice to have Samuel L. Jackson in the spacecraft, actually, because if he wasn't there, one of us would have to stay back. So we had constant communication, which freed us up to do the work we had come there to do.

Once the Buckys were up, we had a long wait for the planets to realign so we could return to earth. A year and a half. That's a long time to wait. Mars is 38 percent of earth's gravity, so you're pulled to the ground but you definitely feel a lot lighter. We had all the exercise equipment up and running; and Evans had the good foresight to pack a bunch of books and movies behind the Bucky in the cargo hold—so we couldn't get to them on the way in, but they were right there and easy once we got the Bucky unloaded and assembled. So we did that too—watched a lot of movies. Samuel L. Jackson sometimes talked about the actors he had worked with. Travolta and Redford and Robert Downey, Jr. and Bruce Willis. It was actually kind of interesting, although I hadn't seen very many of those movies then.

The only movie Evans had brought that actually had Samuel L. Jackson in it was *Unbreakable*. I hadn't seen it before but, sure, it was entertaining enough. Gave you something to think about, although I don't believe in superheroes. You earn what you get, is how I think of things. I was born in Los Angeles and went to USC and then Stanford, and that was because I worked my tail off. I really did. But that's not a unique story. That's all our stories, and I'm not talking black astronauts here; I'm talking astronauts in general. You work hard and you get rewarded and that's how it is.

I said something like that after we watched the movie,

and Samuel L. Jackson looked at me a little strangely, like I had just said something that didn't make any sense.

Do you have something to say?

Yeah, I have something to say, Samuel L. Jackson said. I guess you think it's easy getting to do what you do.

What? No, I don't think that at all. Just the opposite. It's not easy. That's my point. It's hard.

You work hard and you get rewarded. That's what you said, isn't it?

Yeah, that's what I said and that's what I meant. We all worked hard. This is the reward. We get to do something that's never been done before. We get to help build the first-ever human habitation module on Mars.

Huh, Samuel L. Jackson said. It was like an exhalation.

And I asked what he meant by it, and he said, You think *you* did this yourself, don't you.

What part of it?

Any part of it, he said.

I don't know why, but the man just had a way of getting under my skin. I knew what he was getting at. I'd read the dossier on him the moment it had come to my desk, so I knew about his history: that he had worked as an usher at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral; that he had known the Black Panthers; I knew all of it. But the only thing I cared about was the stuff that was relevant to the mission, and that meant, as far as Samuel L. Jackson was concerned, I didn't care about any of it at all.

Are you going to give me some kind of civil rights lecture now? I said.

One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, Samuel L. Jackson said. Do you think that *mankind* meant you?

You're goddamn right I do, I said.

He's got a point, Charlie, Malcolm said. He was sort of draped over a bunch of boxes near the outer wall of the Bucky, and he looked like some big black cat there.

And then Ed Yu—Ed Yu, of all people—nodded in agreement and said, He does.

Seriously? I said. You too, Ed?

Hey, he said, I fit the stereotype but it's still a stereotype.

I just shook my head, then said, Not interested in this subject. At all. Then I moved off toward the door, my motion a series of small ungraceful leaps. I'm going back to the ship. Radio if you need anything.

I was hot. There's no reason to deny it. I sat in the ship and looked out over the planet, that endless wasteland of bright red soil, the carbon dioxide atmosphere, the distant flat white plane of the sky. It was about sixty below zero on the surface, and we knew there would be times when ice clouds would shift overhead, but now it was clear and quiet. I kept thinking that Samuel L. Jackson was from a different era and that he didn't understand that we had entered a new age. I kept thinking that Samuel L. Jackson didn't understand me at all.

Of course, it wasn't until we were ready to leave that I realized that the problem was just the opposite.

I probably should have noticed it when we were prepping the spacecraft for the return, but I didn't. Maybe I was just too busy or maybe I just chose not to. I've thought about it a lot, and I've gone back and forth. Honestly, I don't really know, but I consider it the only real serious failing of my command, although I also kind of think he's a hero now, in a way. I mean I guess he would have done it no matter who the captain was. I just gotta be honest with you here: I wish I had understood him better then. That's what I mean by a failing of my command. I just didn't get what he was trying to do.

Like I said, I should have noticed something was amiss when we did the final walkthrough of the Buckys, but I didn't. In fact, I didn't even notice he wasn't with us until we were actually on the ship and were preparing to remove the tube. I know it sounds odd—there were only five of us to keep tabs on, after all, and the ship was tiny—but it's true. I just didn't notice he wasn't there until I did, and so we tried to radio in and got nothing, and finally I had Frenchy go back in to find out what was going on.

He says he's not coming back, Frenchy said when he returned.

What's that supposed to mean? I said.

Just that, Frenchy said. He says he's not coming back.

Holy shit, Ed Yu said. Mutiny on the Bounty.

Was he in that? I asked.

But Ed Yu only said, What?

And then I was really confused. Why'd you say that?

Because of what Frenchy said.

Then Malcolm asked Frenchy what he meant, and Frenchy said, I don't know what's confusing. He said he's not coming back to the ship. That's all.

## VANESSA WOODS

*(In)Visible #23, 2014*

Original Cut Paper Collage, 8.5 x 11 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

I probably swore like a sailor then, and Malcolm, good ol' muscle-bound Malcolm, swore right along with me. Heck, all of us were shocked. And Ed Yu was right, in a way: It was a sort of one-man mutiny, even though Jackson was never really a part of the crew in the way the rest of us were. Then again, he was also a lot more than all of us put together.

I can't even describe what went through my mind then. There's only a small window where we can launch, or we run out of fuel for the return trip. Even if we were an hour late we'd have to recalculate all the routing. The whole return would be different numbers and it's not something we can just do en route. We fly just a couple of degrees off and pretty soon we're a few thousand kilometers off course, and there's just no fuel for that kind of error. Like I said in the beginning: there's no margin for error.

So now I have Samuel L. Jackson holing up in the Buckys telling us that he's not coming back and our window is like two hours long and we still have to get the passage uncoupled from the spacecraft and get everything stowed and ready for launch. So I'm calling on the radio but it's just silence.

I sat there in the mission commander's chair staring at all the blinking lights on the instrument panel. Through the bank of windows I could see, at the edge of that flat expanse of the red planet, a kind of rainbow—an aurora of ice crystals out near the horizon. Somewhere out there was earth—my wife and my kids and my dad, who was still alive then—and there was no way I was going to wait another year and a half for another launch window to present itself.

I asked Frenchy what the timer said and was told we were at T minus one hour, fifteen minutes.

Keep prepping, I said. I'm going to go get him.

Let me go, Malcolm said, and I almost let him, but I was the commander and I felt like it was my responsibility, my direct responsibility, to keep my crew together.

I'll do it, I said. Then I turned to the rest of them and said, in my most commanding commander voice: We're leaving on schedule. That lunatic isn't going to keep us a second longer.

Frenchy looked at me like I was the one who had gone off the rails, Ed Yu continued to look shocked, and Evans just stared at me with his hound-dog eyes, but into that

weird silence Malcolm said, Go get him, Cap, and I nodded at him, and then I was up and out of the capsule and back in the connecting tube.

I wasn't sure what I'd find when I came down into the Bucky. Part of me thought I'd find that Samuel L. Jackson had gone like mental-hospital crazy, like naked and jumping around inside the dome like a lunatic. But when I found him he was just sitting in a chair, looking out the window. He had a book open in his lap. It might have been Shakespeare—I'm not really sure.

Hello, Charlie, he said. He seemed glad to see me.

What the hell are you doing? I asked him.

He set the book upon his knee. Reading, he said. Or I was. How can I help you?

You can help me by getting back on the ship. We're leaving in an hour.

Didn't Frenchy tell you?

Yeah, yeah, he told me, but you're a member of this crew and I am goddamn ordering you back on the ship.

I'm not a member of the crew, Charlie, Samuel L. Jackson said. You told me that yourself.

Jesus Christ, I said. You can't stay here.

But I can. This is the part of the mission that I know really well.

It's not ready for human habitation.

Yes, it is.

It's not ready until ground says it's ready.

It's ready, Charlie, Jackson said. You know it and I know it.

And he was right, of course. I knew it was ready. I mean we'd made it ready and we'd been living in it for a year and a half at that point and had been through lots of stuff—ice clouds and deep freezes where the temperature dropped down to one hundred sixty below zero. Everything about the Buckys worked exactly like it was supposed to.

And then I understood something I hadn't understood before. You've been planning this all along, I said.

True, Jackson said.

You son of a bitch.

Don't be like that.

I've got half a mind to bring the whole crew down here and have you tied up and brought back to the ship under arrest.

I don't think you're gonna do that, though.

And again he was right. I didn't know what to say then, so I just stood there like an idiot, watching as Samuel L. Jackson sat in the little portable chair with the book on his knee.

Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, Jackson said then. You think you've got it all figured out.

Don't patronize me.

He shook his head. Across from him, through the window, Martian sunlight cast a long faintly red stripe through the air of the Bucky. Look out there, he said, and when I didn't move he said it again: Look out there, Charlie, he said. Look out there.

I didn't know what else to do, so I took a short hop to the window. So what? I said. It was the same view we'd all been looking at for a year and a half: the same distant ridge, the same endless field of red soil, the same flat sky. The faint ice rainbow I had seen from the ship was still visible over the horizon.

You ever think about the fact that we're looking at that right now? You and me. You ever think about that fact?

Sure, I've thought about it.

I mean it, he said.

I've thought about it. Of course I've thought about it.

Niggers on Mars, Samuel L. Jackson said.

I turned to look at him. Why do you say stuff like that?

That's what they'd have called this just a few years ago. Hell, that's what some people are probably calling it right now. It would have been spelled out in the newspaper headlines just like that.

But we did it, I said. We made it here. We did. You and me and Frenchy and Johnson and Evans. All of us. Not those people saying those terrible things.

Man, Samuel L. Jackson said, you're missing my point.

What's your point then?

My point is, it's not going to be like that again. Not out here. Not on Mars.

So...what...you're like the welcoming committee?

Something like that. First human being to live on the red planet is a black man. How does that sound to you?

Sounds like I'm not going to get you back on the ship.

No, you're not, Samuel L. Jackson said.

So this is some civil rights thing for you?

One small step for man, he said, and then he sat there waiting for me to finish it, but I wouldn't take the bait.

One giant idiot move from Samuel L. Jackson, is what I said.

Think of it however you want, Jackson said. You'll understand it one day. At least I hope you will.

I don't think so, I said, and I turned to leave, to move back up the tube, to uncouple it and to begin the launch sequence that would take us all home.

Hey Charlie, Samuel L. Jackson called to me as I walked up the tube.

I stopped and turned to look at him there. He was wearing his beret again and a kind of brown turtleneck. All he needed was a roaring fire and a bearskin rug to complete the scene, but the Bucky was mostly empty inside. At the very least he'd have to live there for another year and a half, which is the soonest another ship could meet the planet's orbit. How he'd survive, alone in that space, was something I did not even want to contemplate.

One giant leap for mankind, he said. That's the line.

Motherfucking snakes on a motherfucking plane, I said. That's the line. Then I turned and walked up the rest of the tube and into the ship, and in an hour we were rocketing away from the planet toward home.

I was pretty sure I'd be court-martialed when Houston heard what had happened, but they didn't seem surprised, and later, of course, I learned that Samuel L. Jackson had informed them of his plan just seconds before the black-out period where we couldn't get any communication. So they already knew and had worked out a way to spin it. Of course they told everyone that it had been part of the plan all along, that Samuel L. Jackson had bravely decided to become the first man to live on the red planet, that his wife would follow him, and with her would come the first batch of permanent residents: engineers and biologists and chemists. I laughed when I saw that first group: white men and women, and in the center of them, the dark smiling faces of Samuel L. Jackson and his wife.

People called us the Great Black Hope. I have that issue of *Time* framed on my office wall, but that's mostly for nostalgia. You know, Malcolm's become an actor now. I still golf with Frenchy and Gabe Evans every now and then. The guy I see most of all is Ed Yu. We're both on the board of the same nonprofit. Kinda funny how these things work out. But as for that headline, there was only ever one Great Black Hope, and he's up there right now on

that distant red star, probably running lines for fun with one of those engineers.

You know, it's funny, but when I think of him up there, I think of him doing that Bible quote from *Pulp Fiction*. Yeah, I memorized it after we got home, not right away but after a few years. I watched a bunch of his movies in a row, and this one speech kind of stuck with me enough that I put it to memory.

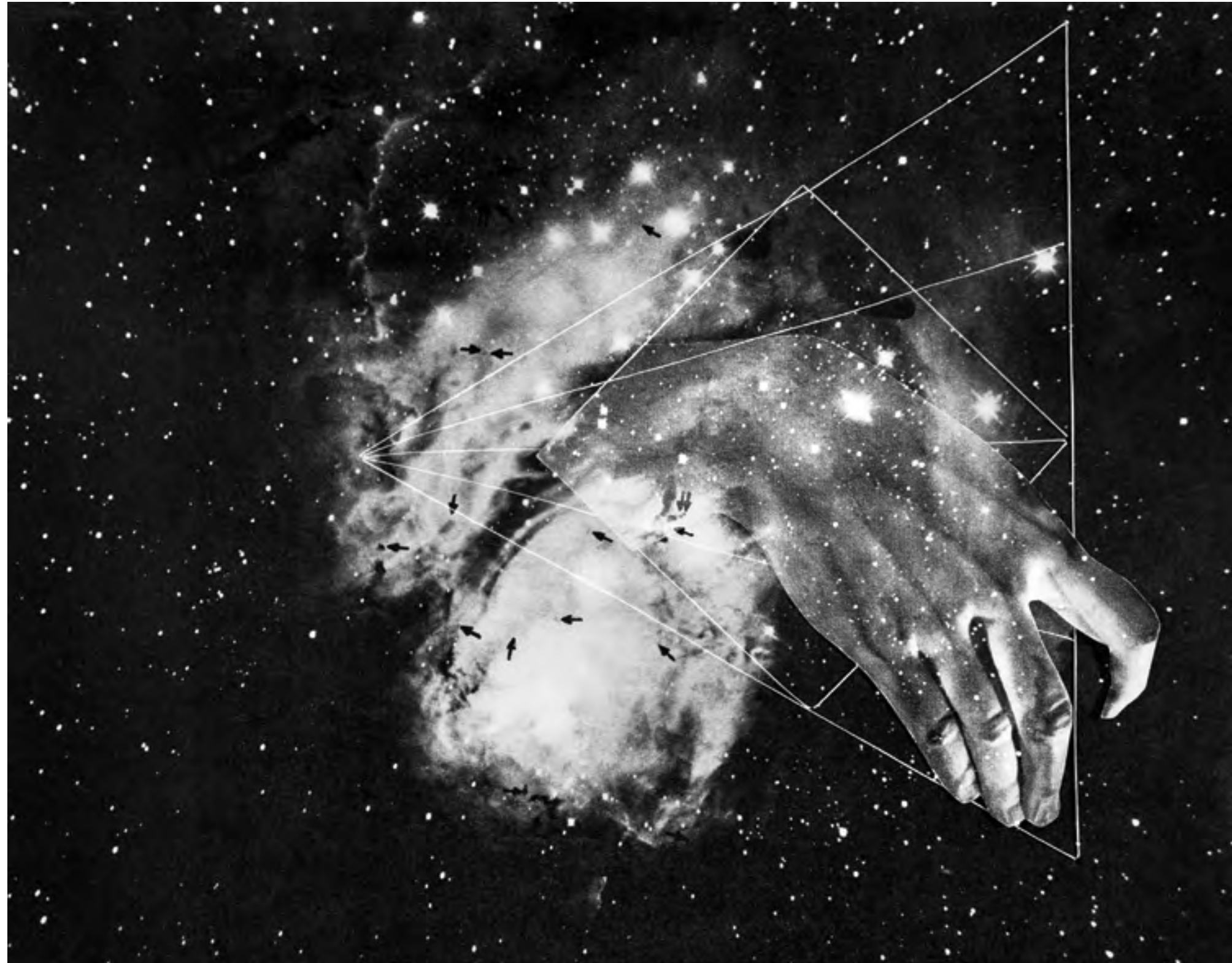
You remember that scene? It's right before he and John Travolta shoot that guy in the chair. Anyway, he says, in his big Samuel L. Jackson voice: *The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children.*

The quote goes on from there, but it's that first part that really sticks with me. I know it's gonna sound weird to say this but I'm just gonna say it anyway: I think it's safer now that Samuel L. Jackson is up there, looking down on us, shepherding the weak through the valley of darkness. That's why, when I look at the *Time* magazine cover, where it says the Great Black Hope, I feel like it's really talking about him, and we're just the crew that got him where he needed to go. Me and Evans and Malcolm and Frenchy and Ed Yu. The five guys that took Samuel L. Jackson to Mars. That's no small thing, in itself.

**Christian Kiefer** is the author of the novel *The Infinite Tides*. His second novel, *The Animals*, will be published in 2015 by Liveright. He is a member of the English faculty of American River College in Sacramento.

## VANESSA WOODS

*Celestial Cartography*, 2012  
Photomontage, Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 11 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST