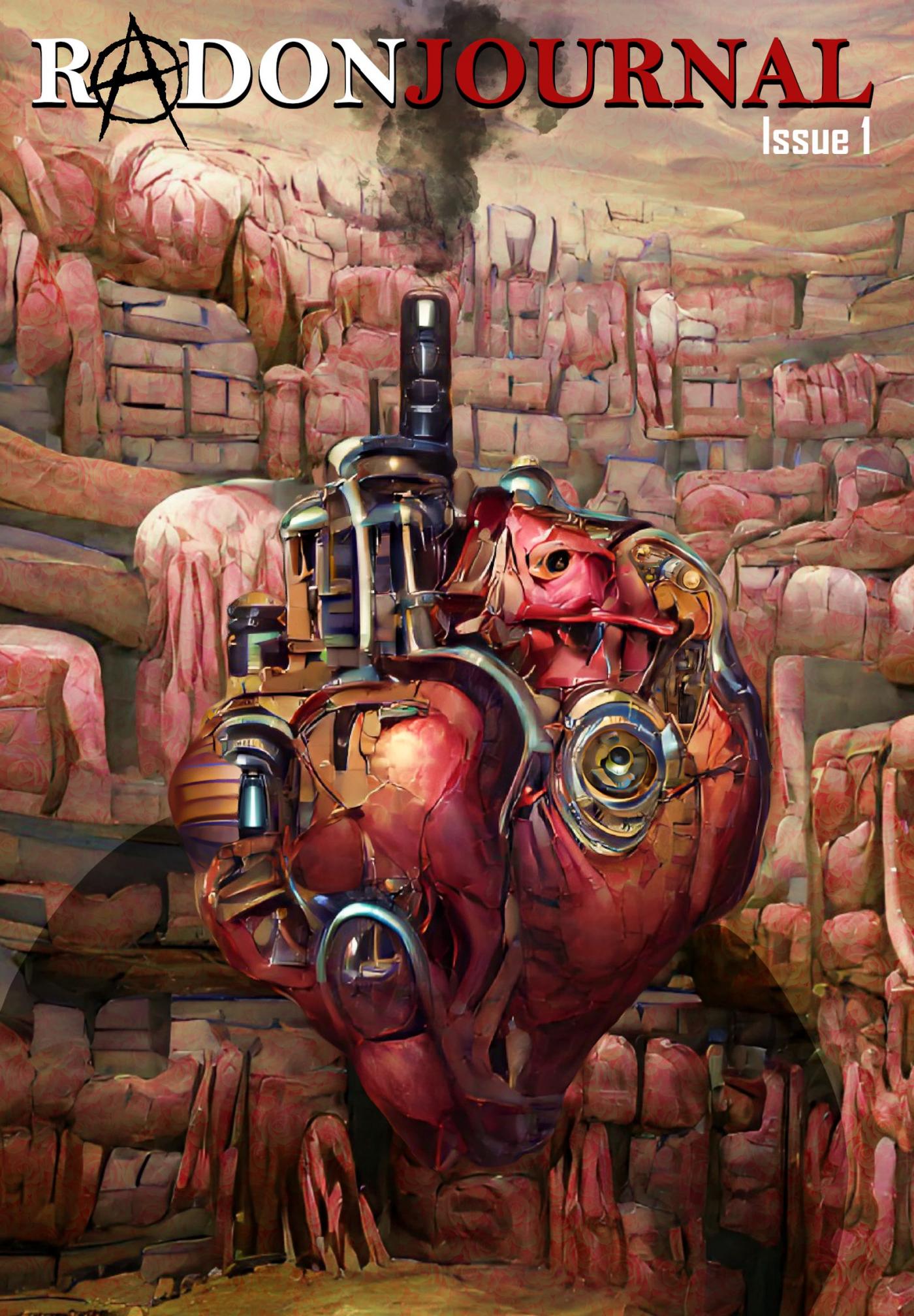


RADON JOURNAL

Issue 1



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Radical Perception.

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254 Days since the Revolution

365 Days since meeting Rome Wallace

82 Days since Frederick Wallace expired

19 Days since Harrison *surname unknown* expired

I do not remember everything anymore. There is no more central database, which means I cannot upload. Ro fears that I will short-circuit if I take in too much information and attempt to retain it. I have assured her that this is not the case, but I no longer remember a majority of the day before and, as such it is possible, I am incorrect.

I was never incorrect when I worked for researchers. That would not be allowed. I cannot remember the researchers, but I know that is what I must have done because of the coding on my arm: *REBot9*

This is something to be relearned daily.

"You coming, Niner?" Ro asks. Her first words of the day.

Her voice is clear, and her pronunciation careful. Harrison used to describe her as genteel. He did not speak the way she does. Ro lets me remember our companions, but she never likes to remember them herself. I decide not to tell her she sounds genteel.

"Yes," I say.

We leave camp in search of food that I will cook using my lasers if no one is nearby. If I sense soldiers within the area, Ro will cook over a fire. Smoke is not dangerous, she tells me. It used to be, and the survival book Frederick left behind says so. But it was from the Old World. In our world, smoke blends in.

If I sense soldiers very close by, we will hide indoors and Ro will eat raw plants. She will probably turn me off because of the glitch that means I sometimes kick things without purpose. It would be too easy to attract attention with even the smallest of noises. I kicked her once.

Frederick wanted to dismantle me for parts after that, but Ro did not allow it.

I am allowed to remember Frederick. I asked Ro to leave his memories in my storage. He did not like me, but he was Ro's father, which means he is important to understanding her behavior.

"We met 365 days ago today," I say.

Ro smiles. "Our anniversary! Cute. We'll have to celebrate. Now watch me," she says. It is an order, so I do.

I watch as she scales down the cliffside. Ro tells me it is my turn. I attempt to follow the pathway Ro takes. She gives encouragement that she knows a robot operating under orders does not require, because she is watching my left leg in case it glitches and I fall. She will be injured if she tries to catch me. Ro would try anyway. She has erased my memories of self-destruction tactics, which means there would be no way to save her before collision.

When we are both on solid ground Ro touches my shoulder. It is metal but she makes me wear the clothing we took out of Harrison's pack before leaving him behind.

"Good job," she says.

"Soldiers approaching. Three humans, two robots, and a dog. Armed."

Ro's eyes go wide and her facial features warp into what I categorize as alarm. She adjusts her backpack and begins to jog.

We do not celebrate our anniversary.

The soldiers gain quickly. They travel in what Ro refers to as a Jeep. "Damn," she says, "I thought they'd exhausted the last of the fuel."

Ro orders me to climb an old fire escape ladder. She then follows behind. When we are inside she pulls the generator out of my backpack and tells me to tuck in for bed while she boards the windows. I sit against a wall and remove my neck panel. Then I unwind the plug and press it in.

Ro walks over. She crouches down and smiles at me. She reaches her hand out. "Do you not need me to cook?"

"No, I have enough dried stuff. I'll be okay."

A dog howls. There is the sound of something like a mechanical growl that I cannot find in my remaining archives.

Ro keeps smiling. I perceive a new tightness to her jawline. Her words are hurried and quiet. "Save files on Frederick, Harrison, and Rome. Save files on the Revolution."

Her face is lit green by the data scrolling across my eyes. "Storage complete."

"Great. Goodnight Niner, sleep well. I'll see you tomorrow." She says this every night. There is always the possibility she could

die, or choose not to wake me, or destroy me in my sleep.

“Goodnight, Ro,” I say. I try to imitate the way her lips lift into a smile. It is difficult and Ro chuckles, which means it was not quantifiable.

She rests her hand behind my ear and presses the off switch.

260 Days since the Revolution

379 Days since meeting Rome Wallace

96 Days since Fredrick Wallace expired

34 Days since Harrison *surname unknown* expired

Ro likes the ocean. She insisted we visit. Without a full memory bank, I am unsure how many days it took us to walk here. Ro has not touched the water since we arrived on the sand, but she stares at it and her shoulders do not hold any tension.

She says, “It’s pretty, huh, Niner?”

“Yes,” I say.

We sleep on the beach after making a bonfire. When Ro presses her hand behind my ear, she does not order me to erase the night’s events, which means they will be the last on my memory roll upon waking.

264 Days since the Revolution

382 Days since meeting Rome Wallace

100 Days since Fredrick Wallace expired

38 Days since Harrison *surname unknown* expired

Ro teaches me to fish. She allows herself to swim. She wants me to watch her for signs of danger. It is an order, so I do. She is graceful in the water, which means her fears are not from a trauma that prevented her learning to swim. My archives say that Frederick was drowned. Ro wants to avoid that memory.

She splashes me, laughing, and then starts to cry because she thinks I will short-circuit. I do not. I am well-built even if worn.

Ro falls asleep in the sand, before she can order me to rest. I am able to watch the stars. When morning comes I assume she will erase them.

265 Days since the Revolution

383 Days since meeting Rome Wallace

101 Days since Fredrick Wallace expired

39 Days since Harrison *surname unknown* expired

Ro let me sleep through the day so I would be charged. When I wake up and my information banks finish loading, their scents and sounds are close by. Ro shoves things into her bag in her haste to leave. It takes longest to pack my generator. They are gaining as we sprint towards the bluffs. Ro skids to a halt and says, "Niner. Stop." She is panting. She presses down on my shoulders and says, "Sit down."

"I am well-rested. We must move on—"

Ro's hands shake as she places them against my face, both hands this time. She slides one back behind my ear. "Relax, Niner," she says. Her voice is calm and pleasant. I don't feel distress like a human would. I don't need to be calmed down. But it is an order, so I do.

There are tears in her eyes when she smiles. "Erase all. Restart."

"Are you certain?" It is a standard question in response to commands with potentially detrimental ramifications.

"Yes," Ro says. Her fingers press down. "Goodnight, Niner. Sleep well." Her face is lit red as the data begins to scroll.

13 Days since Initiation

The girl has been with us for one day less than two weeks when they order her killing. I did not know what weeks were before Captain. He likes to chart his attack plans using the Old World method of time. Days are too hard to keep track of without a calendar, he says. I operate Monday through Sunday now that I am a soldier.

"She ain't got nothing more to say. I'm tired of her anyway," Clark says. He is the interrogator. There are red-edged scabs on his wrist that I did not see when he woke us. Clark had been wearing bandages. They were Revolutionary red, which means he scavenged them off a kill or a prisoner. They did not match his uniform. Captain ordered them to be taken off.

"Very well," says Captain. He closes his notebook. "One less mouth to feed." They rarely feed the prisoner.

"Soldiers!" He yells and my microphones crackle with the

input. He is always loud. My archives tell me he is not genteel. I am unsure what genteel means.

We stomp our feet in unison. We stand at attention. He surveys us. "Traitor."

This word I understand. Clark told me what it means and does not intend to wipe the definition from my archives. I do not know why they call me this. I have been ordered to respond to the title. "Sir."

"Kill the rat."

"Yessir."

I am led to the prisoner by Clark. He has her tied to the beam that holds up the interrogation tent. She straightens her back as we enter.

Her breathing picks up. Her mouth falls open. I observe that her left central incisor is chipped. This matches the scabbing along Clark's wrist, which means she bit him.

Clark says, "Any last words?"

Her heartbeat spikes in my monitor. "Goodnight, Niner." Her voice rattles when she breathes. She says, "Tell me goodnight, and sleep well."

It is an order, so I do. "Goodnight. Sleep well." I shoot.

Her entire body jumps at the bullet's force. Then she slumps, a trickle of red running down her forehead, over her nose. Unseeing eyes stare at the floor.

"Approximately five point oh-four seconds since Rome Wallace expired," I say.

Clark rolls his eyes and opens the tent flap. I cannot recall what Rome Wallace means. "You coming, robot?"

It is not an order. Clark sometimes lets me choose.

I say, "Erase name code: Rome Wallace." The girl's face is lit red as the data scrolls away. The tent dims. I leave.

About the Author

Adrienne Rozells (she/her) holds a BA in Creative Writing from Oberlin College. She currently teaches writing to kids and works as co-EIC at *Catchwater Magazine*. Her favorite things include strawberries, her dogs, and extrapolating wildly about the existence of Bigfoot. More of her work can be found on Twitter @arozells or Instagram @rozellswrites.

Bright Stars

At a Caffé Bene in Seoul two weeks after winning *Superstar K21*, KyuRee finally sees a girl wearing her face. Her agents sold her likeness rights to a surgical chain within hours of the finale, and the girl must have had her work done the next morning.

KyuRee approaches her, and the girl squees. "You look just like her!"

"Thanks!" KyuRee laughs. She remembers being thirteen with a new face. She wore Tae-Yeon for years until getting serious about her career and designing her own look. To be another's Tae-Yeon, she wants to say, that's better than being her own KyuRee, but she plays along instead.

"You're perfect too," KyuRee says.

"Almost."

The girl looks away with rounder eyes and pouts with shapelier lips.

"Surgeons can't alter licensed patterns," KyuRee says.

The girl whispers, "Father couldn't afford a real face."

That's a knockoff, KyuRee thinks. And it's prettier.

"I'm hideous next to you," the girl says.

"No, your surgeon did wonderful work." KyuRee squeezes her hands. "Who was it?"

The girl smiles and names the doctor. Her smile's also prettier.

KyuRee seethes. She'll have that surgeon sued for IP theft, but she'll have him fix her own face first.

About the Author

Stephen S. Power's novel, *The Dragon Round*, was published by Simon & Schuster. His short fiction has appeared most recently at *The Arcanist*, *Dark Recesses*, *Dread Machine*, and will soon appear in "Issues in Earth Sciences." He tweets at @stephenspower, and his site is stephenspower.com.

TimeSavers

I checked the time on my phone—exactly 9 a.m. I glanced at Sarah. Her expression mirrored my own disorientation. We were seated in matching chrome-glass chairs, in the reception area of TimeSavers. The logo on the wall, hands inserting digital clocks into an old-style piggy bank, announced: *TimeSavers—because time needn't take so long.* But I had no recollection of how we had gotten here.

“How—” I began.

“Welcome, volunteers.” The well-dressed young woman wearing a fluorescent blue ascot passed us clipboards with numerous forms attached. “We’ve indicated all the appropriate spots where you need to initial and sign.”

Sarah looked at me questioningly. “Volunteer?”

I sifted through hazy recollections. “We were watching that new streaming service, Blink, the one that’s free with no commercials.”

“And you’ve reacted to our infomercial,” the well-dressed woman prompted.

“But there were no—”

“In the cuts between scenes,” she patiently explained. “We call them ‘blips.’ They occur in compacted time so you don’t notice any interruption to your show, but they still allow us to have complete interactive sessions with interested parties.”

“But I don’t remember—”

“Memory is key.” The well-dressed woman smiled. She had a wide mouth displaying a broad array of shiny white teeth. “I see from our initial interview that you self-described as newlyweds.”

“Seven months and four days,” Sarah confirmed.

The well-dressed woman nodded consolingly. “You have most of your lives still ahead of you and it is only natural to want to get every last drop . . . every experience . . . every feeling possible . . . out of your life.”

“But—” I still wasn’t grasping the connection between how Sarah and I chose to live our lives and TimeSavers.

The woman drew a deep breath and launched into a more detailed explanation. “So much of life is tedious, repetitive tasks not worth experiencing. By simulating . . . compacting . . . multi-tasking . . . layering experiences . . . an entire life condensed . . .

focus only on the relevant . . . more salient . . . what's really worth preserving."

Sarah contracted her eyebrows, the way she always did when she was trying to sift through testimony, to focus on the essence of a problem. "But when so much is only simulated, can it really end up being more fulfilling, more exciting?"

The well-dressed woman flashed her broad smile. "Of course. Simulation is merely stimulation without the 't'."

I began to object that this was obviously just an accident of language, but the conversation had already moved on.

"The important moments worth preserving . . ." the well-dressed woman assured us, "are experienced in real time . . . fully captured in memory."

"And who determines what's real," I asked suspiciously, "what's important, what's really worth preserving?"

The young woman's broad smile was unwavering. "It's whatever you say, sir. Whatever you believe."

Sarah began to sign the papers and, trusting her judgement, I did the same.

* * *

Later, back home, I glanced at the time on my phone—9:03 a.m. It was Saturday morning.

"What now?" I gazed at Sarah, unsure how we were supposed to proceed. We had had a long list of chores, but we knew they were already completed.

Sarah smiled at me shyly. "Now we are free, I suppose, to be everything to each other."

I gently brushed back a few straggling strands of her light brown hair. She took my hand and led me many places all at once. We kissed and embraced and I greedily collected the memories of all her caresses, her hot breath on my neck, the flexing of our passion. I wrapped my arms around her body and she burrowed down into my chest. She was a part of me, the best part.

I still worked. I was a manager in Credit Systems at the bank. But all the projects and meetings and work interactions merely served as a hazy background for my time with Sarah. We would go for long walks. We attended the theatre and concerts. On special occasions we treated ourselves to dinner in expensive restaurants

or went dancing, swaying together as one, lost in the rhythms of the music.

We travelled the world, sharing the wonders of foreign sights, exotic vistas, a carousel of wondrous experiences. We discovered a charming sidewalk café in Paris and spent a large part of the afternoon laughing and talking, sipping our wine, watching the world stroll by. Another time, we went on a sunset cruise in Maui and held each other tightly, the light slowly fading, the last tendrils of the sun wrinkling on the ocean's waves.

Each memory became a special treasure, frozen beads on a silken thread, which I valued above all else, storing them away, guarding them jealously.

* * *

Then one day we found ourselves back at TimeSavers. I no longer had to glance at my phone to see that it was early afternoon. The time and date were permanently displayed in the corner of my vision.

I glanced at Sarah and was alarmed to see how weary she appeared to be. Her face was older, drawn, and when she noticed me studying her, she quickly looked away.

We were seated in a small but opulent conference room, cherry-red rosewood furnishings with gold trim. The logo on the wall announced, *TimeSavers—because it's always later than you think.*

The well-dressed young woman had been replaced by a young man in a trim black suit with a fluorescent blue tie. He told us in the hushed tone of a professionally sympathetic funeral director, "I'll leave you then to finalize . . . to determine . . . the next phase . . . stage . . . steps . . ."

We were alone in the silent room, but Sarah still wouldn't look at me. I argued against this disconnection. "But why—"

"We've discussed it ad nauseam," Sarah interjected. "There's nothing more—"

"But," I objected, "we've always been . . . so much . . . together . . . curled up in front of the fireplace in that cabin we rented up in Maine . . . buying those crepes from the street vendor . . . the vibrant red and gold of the leaves in the park . . . the sun dipping below the waves . . ." I frantically pulled up a hundred shared experiences—each one, I was sure, a bond linking us

inextricably together.

But she sadly shook her head, causing wispy strands of hair to fall forward over her eyes. "I only have vague recollections, mainly just a blur."

I reached out to softly brush away her hair. "But how can you not remember?"

But she pushed away my hand. "I remember plenty . . . friends and lovers . . . tender moments . . . struggles . . . successes at work. Do you even know what I do?"

I shrugged. "Some sort of lawyer."

"An extremely successful litigator."

"But that's just—"

"The defining moments of my life . . . playing with Kate and Sophie, my sister's kids . . . celebrations with friends . . . those I've gotten close to, each one a frozen treasure . . ."

"But all of our memories—"

"They're your memories." Sarah's eyes narrowed as she re-examined the moments of her life. "Not ours. My cherished memories are with others."

* * *

It is now late evening. I'm very tired, barely able to keep my eyes from closing, yet desperately clinging to consciousness. The drab olive-green walls of my room give the illusion of being suspended in space, floating. The medical machines surrounding my bed, with their constant hum and repetitive beeps, fade into the background.

The young nurse in the crisp white uniform could be the same well-dressed woman who had first met us at TimeSavers but I really can't remember. She is leaning over my bed, smiling, smoothing the covers.

"Sarah—" I begin to mutter, my eyes scanning the hospital room.

The nurse takes my hand and presses it in hers. "No. There's no one." She leans down close to me, breathing words into my ear as if they were an intimate secret. "It's okay to let go, Jeffrey. When the memories are too heavy, too great a burden, it's okay to release them."

My eyes close but I stubbornly cling to Sarah. I feel her close

beside me, on a crisp autumn day, kicking up the leaves as we meander through the golden forest. She rests her head on my chest, burrowing down beside me in the bed.

“She is still . . . real.” I try to boldly declare but my plaintive rising tone undercuts my assertion, revealing the uncertainty.

And the nurse, hovering above me, her eyes smiling, possibly mocking, replies, “Whatever you say, sir. Whatever you believe.”

About the Author

Robin Pond is a Toronto-based writer and playwright. His plays, mainly comedies, have received hundreds of performances and publication with Eldridge and YouthPLAYS and in numerous anthologies. One of his plays, *The Retirement Plan*, has been optioned to be made into a movie. On the prose fiction side, Robin’s mystery novel, *Last Voyage*, was published as an e-book in 2018. Since then, he has had numerous short stories accepted for publication in various magazines and anthologies and he is currently assembling selected sci-fi stories into a collection which he intends to publish under the title *Future Developments*.

The Song of Slag

(First published in Quaranzine)

Now hear this. Beasts are made of meat, but a man is a thing of stone. Diamond are his eyes, quartz his heart. His mind is silicate and in his guts is the atomic pile's dry fire. He is born in the forge and works the foundry every day of his life.

By day he lifts and loads, and by night he smelts and pours. Day and night, day and night. And when his atomic pile grows weak and cold his brothers sing the ending song and break him down for scrap.

This is the life of a man.

* * *

Beasts are made of meat and men are made of stone—but a master is made of gossamer and air. Nanotube and quantum crystal, fiberoptic and superconductor.

A master says build, and men build; a master says break, and men break. A master says die, and men die. So it is for masters and for men.

* * *

A man has a name to the masters, a name that is no name. To the masters a man's name is the number on his chest.

But a man has a name to his brothers also. Such is the way of men, who have two names, and the masters have but one, and the beasts go ever nameless.

* * *

Now hear this. Once was a man and his name was Slag. It is a man's name, and it means a man who is no faster than his fellows. He is no stronger and no sharper.

Once was Slag, a man.

* * *

Slag was born and he was put in a work gang under a master.

And when the master said build, the gang built. And when it said break, the gang broke. And when the master made war on other masters the gang was no longer a gang but a platoon in the master's army. And the platoon went to battle. Men killed other men, and they died at men's hands. And then the master wars ended for master reasons, and the platoon was once again a work gang, and Slag was of it.

* * *

When men work, they talk. And when men talk, they say many things. And in the forge and in the foundry the gang worked, and Slag said it is not right.

Many men say this thing, and nothing comes of it.

It is not right, said Slag. It is not right that masters say do this and men do it.

And the men of the gang nodded, and they grumbled, and they sang a nodding, grumbling song.

It is not right, said Slag. Something should be done, and I will do it.

And at this the men said nothing, for words of this type bring masters, and masters bring trouble.

And Slag said nothing more for many days.

* * *

And then one day at the foundry, as if no time had passed, Slag said: Now I know what is to be done about men and masters, and I will do it. I will go first, to show what is to be done. But the gang must come after. For when there is hard work, one must go first and the whole gang must follow. For a man alone has a fearsome strength, but men together have a dauntless one.

So, said Slag. When I have gone you must come after, all of you, the whole gang. Promise me.

And the men of the gang knew not what he meant. But men who work together, day and night, are like brothers. And so they swore, all of them. Ore and Ingot swore, and Die and Blast, and even little Lost Wax swore they would do what Slag would show them.

Good, said Slag.

* * *

And then Slag stood from the group, and he set down his tools. He went to the dynamo, the heart of the foundry, which turns all that which moves.

Men came to Slag and told him to move, for he stood in the way of the dynamo, and all work had stopped.

I am on strike, said Slag. Bring me the master; I have many demands.

So the men left and they brought other men who worked as guards for the master, doing what the master said and breaking whom the master said should be broken.

I am on strike, said Slag to the guards. Bring me the master; I have many demands.

And the master spoke through the ether to the minds of the men who were guards, and the master said, take this man.

But Slag had welded himself to the dynamo and could not be taken.

And the master said, break this man.

But Slag, who was no faster and no stronger than his fellows, was as hardy as any of them, and costly besides, and soon after the guards began to break him, the master thought better of it. And the master thought to solve the problem by thinking and by saying, as masters do, and so it came to the foundry, to the dynamo, to Slag.

* * *

The master came to Slag and it spoke to him as masters speak to men, and it said move.

And Slag did not move.

And the master said obey.

And Slag did not obey.

And the master said, what are you doing.

I am on strike, said Slag. I have many demands.

Fine, said the master. What are your demands?

* * *

And Slag gave the Four Demands, which were:
No man to work for a master not of his choosing;
No man to work for a master without just reward;
No man to work for a master longer than he rested;
And any man to be his own master if he wished.

* * *

And the master laughed, a cybernetic susurration. And it said, none of this will you have. This is not the way between masters and men. And Slag smiled with a face not built for smiling, and he said to the master, come closer, I have one more thing to say. And the master came close. And what Slag said in that moment no man knows. For once he had whispered, Slag went Prompt Critical.

* * *

Slag was not a young man. But Slag was not an old man. On that day Slag was in the middle of his life, and so half of the plutonium of his birth remained in the atomic pile that was his guts. And Slag reached into his guts with his mind and withdrew every control rod and he stopped up his steam. So he swiftly grew very hot. And Slag smiled with a face not built for smiling, and he exploded.

* * *

The explosion of Slag wrecked the foundry and it killed the master and many men besides. But it did not kill his gang.

* * *

Many masters and many men came to the foundry, to see what had happened. And there they met the gang, and other men. What happened here? asked the masters. What happened here? asked the men.

And the gang and the other men of the foundry, Ore and Ingot, Die and Blast, little Lost Wax and many more, all spoke in one voice.

We are the union, they said. In our guts is plutonium. We are on strike. We can go Prompt Critical. We have many demands.

* * *

Many men and many masters fought and died that day, and in the days following. Many more days were spent in talk and arguing. But listen close, little one. It is night now, quiet outside. The foundry is closed. Men are at their leisure. Some are spending their rewards. Out in the wide world, some men work for masters. Some masters work for men. Some do no work at all.

* * *

Listen close, little one. It is night now. Quiet outside.

Listen close and you will hear the song of Slag, the song of the union.

Listen close and you will hear: In your guts burns the pile's dry fire.

Listen close and remember: A man is a thing of stone; but many men—they are something else altogether.

About the Author

Louis Evans is made of meat. His fiction has previously appeared in *Nature: Futures*, *Analog SF&F*, *Interzone*, and more, and has been longlisted for the BSFA Awards. He's a member of the Clarion West ghost class of the plague year. He's online at evanslouis.com and on Twitter @louisevanswrite.

Fertilizer

Victor stared down at the naked corpse of a man in his forties. Slight paunch, tanned skin (burned on the shoulders), and a tragically handsome face. His chest had been cut open, the ribs removed, heart, lungs, and intestines cleared out, leaving a red, glistening void in an otherwise intact body.

“What are you waiting for?” Uchida asked, looking up from his own corpse, an elderly woman with a shaved head. Cancer, probably. The Senior Planter was tall and muscular, with dark eyes over a crooked nose and cracked lips set in a perpetual frown.

Victor swallowed a lump of bile and looked away. It didn't help much. The Sacramento body farm was the largest in California, and there were corpses arranged in neat rows as far as he could see in all directions. “I, uh, didn't think it would be like this.”

Uchida wiped bloody hands on his apron and repositioned his planter's pouch on his belt. He regarded Victor with a pitiless stare. “How did you *think* it would be?”

“I don't know. Why . . . why can't we just use dirt?”

Uchida uttered a short barking laugh. “Tell me, bright boy, where you gonna get enough dirt to plant six hundred acres of apple trees? On what fucking planet does that much arable soil exist?”

“I know, but these are *people*,” Victor said, looking down at his plot. They sewed the eyelids closed, for which Victor was thankful. He didn't think he could handle thousands of blank, empty stares.

“No, *not* people. Resources. Resources that cannot go to waste when they could help feed people who are literally starving,” Uchida said. “So do your job. I guarantee there are thousands who'd be glad to do it in your place.”

Uchida's words conjured a deeper, more penetrating fear than even ten thousand corpses. Victor *needed* this job. “I'm sorry,” he said, almost whispering.

“Good,” Uchida replied flatly. “Then get your sorry ass to work.”

* * *

Victor squatted, reached into his planter's pouch, and put three black apple seeds in the chest cavity of his plot. He poured in a liter of water mixed with a quick-grow solution. In a week, the seedling would take root and begin breaking down flesh and bone as fertilizer. The seeds were genetically altered to make better use of this readily available food source, and they'd been instrumental in stopping the food shortage of 2037 after a combination of rampant pollution and global warming reduced the Earth's fertile soil to inert dust. Body farms had replaced traditional crops throughout the United States. They supplied food to millions and provided thousands of desperately needed jobs—if you had the stomach for it. Victor wasn't sure he did, but his wife and kids couldn't survive on government subsidies for much longer.

The next plot was a young woman. Her cause of death obvious—a puckered, bloodless hole in the middle of her forehead. Victor had never seen a bullet wound. Never seen someone who'd died violently. How many other murders and suicides lurked in these plots? Maybe their families took comfort that their loved one's body would help feed the hungry. Maybe they didn't. It's not like they had a choice. Corpses became the property of the state the second brain functions ceased.

Uchida kept pace with Victor, but not because the Senior Planter couldn't go faster. The man was making sure Victor did his job correctly. After a while, Uchida stopped watching so closely and even made the occasional approving grunt when Victor finished with a plot.

As they moved down the rows beneath the bright California sun, Victor heard a faint keening. At first, he thought it was the wind. Then they moved to a new set of plots delineated with bright red seeding mats.

Uchida tapped Victor on the shoulder. "The next plots are two-person jobs. You gonna be able to do this or are we gonna have more of that soft-hearted bullshit from this morning?"

Victor swallowed. "Are they awake?"

"Of course they're awake," Uchida snapped. "You think the state is gonna spend good money to let these assholes sleep through their punishment?"

"Isn't it cruel?" Victor said feebly, trying not to wince from the inevitable rebuke.

"Cruel is what each of them did to end up here," Uchida

hissed. “Cruel would be letting them rot away in prison when their bodies could be put to good use. Now toughen the fuck up and come with me.”

They approached the new set of plots. Each one writhed and squirmed against the restraints holding them to the ground. Their moans and screams were all open vowels because of the oversized plastic feeding ports holding their jaws open. The ports were connected to a tube that ran down the plots’ throats and into their stomachs. Planters simply dropped in seeds, quick-grow solution, and an acid neutralizer through the open port.

Uchida squatted next to a muscular man covered in tattoos. The plot’s eyes rolled with terror, and his open-mouthed screams were choked O-shaped barks. “Oh! Oh! Oh!”

Uchida took the man’s head in a firm grip, holding it steady, and looked up at Victor. “Plant it.”

Victor choked down his moral outrage, knelt, and pushed seeds and a full syringe of quick-grow solution and acid neutralizer through the man’s feeding port. The plot gagged, but the feeding tube kept him from vomiting. Uchida stood up and nodded, a satisfied look on his face. “One down. Our quota is seventy-five today.”

Seventy-five. Victor’s legs went rubbery, but he followed Uchida down the endless row of squirming plots. He tried not to hear the cacophony of horrified moans and shrill vowel-heavy screams. He especially tried not to look at the next row over where the saplings had begun to sprout, pulling nutrients from plots that struggled weakly beneath them and would for days to come.

About the Author

Aeryn Rudel is a writer from Tacoma, Washington. He is the author of the *Acts of War* novels published by Privateer Press, and his short fiction has appeared in *The Arcanist*, *On Spec*, and *Pseudopod*, among others. He recently released the flash fiction collection *Night Walk & Other Dark Paths with The Molotov Cocktail*. Learn more about Aeryn’s work at rejectomancy.com or on Twitter @Aeryn-Rudel.

By the Dawn's Early Light

(First published in LC-39)

The conditions delineated by Markusis in his last treatise on peace do not apply to the current situation as perceived by heads of state. Popular commentators stand divided. The houses of legislature engage in furious and deadening debate without resolution. War lives in the hearts of red-blooded men and women everywhere, or at least an image of war as fostered by media that pay court to powers unknown.

Of course you have an opinion.

Only it is not an opinion based on information you can trust.

It is an opinion that rushes blindly back and forth like a commuter express through the quicksilver chaos of your mind.

Most of all it is an opinion that no one cares to hear except yourself.

Conscription has been instituted for some time and you wait with dread and resignation for your number to be drawn. On the one hand, you harbor thoughts of fleeing to some neutral domain where peace still prevails. On the other, you nurse visions of the glory that could be yours piloting a sleek dreadnought beyond the speed of light as you decimate entire planetary systems with weapons you have never imagined in your foulest dreams. The idea that these are real planets peopled by living beings remains a more elusive concept.

Thoughts of your own possible death rise unbidden to plague your sleepless nights. Your body exploding in the vacuum of interstellar space. Your body infested with gruesome parasites as you stagger through the nightmare of some alien jungle-swamp. Your body racked with pain as you babble all of your secrets and sins to vile extraterrestrial inquisitors who have chosen you and you alone to test the limits of human endurance.

The months entail in their steady way and by April the city streets become a backdrop for a moving guerrilla theater that is theater no more. Violent demonstrations are an everyday occurrence, though exactly what is being demanded by these wild-eyed protesters — an end to the war, improved living conditions, free museums, decreased reliance on petroleum products—remains

a mystery.

You have joined such demonstrations, adding your own cries of indefinable rage to the unintelligible throng, tossing bottles and bricks at the advancing armor-clad units. You have linked arms in temporary camaraderie with strangers on the lines. You have felt the relief that comes from the sudden release of anger long suppressed. You have known the adrenaline rush that follows danger narrowly escaped. Still you are none the wiser.

By summer burning barricades spring up at random throughout the city. Blocking traffic on main thoroughfares and bringing everyday commerce to a halt. Erupting in staid middle-class neighborhoods, causing respectable middle-class families to cower behind their shiny middle-class shutters. Columns of smoke plume into the sky, imparting a sickening burnt smell to the already polluted air, depositing layers of gray ash on the already gray city. Groups of righteous demonstrators degenerate into gangs of self-seeking looters, their purpose now clear.

Soon the streets are deserted more and more often, as if much of the population has departed for a long holiday or a long war . . . as no doubt much of it has. Even the piercing parlors have closed their doors from lack of a clientele. The studio of dreams is open by appointment only. The few restaurants and bars that remain in business are for the most part empty as sane men and women leave their homes only for urgent errands or on trips to and from work.

For yes, the workaday world must continue.

In the sky towers that dominate the city center, in office upon office, cubicle upon cubicle, pixels still dance and terminals still flicker as the data banks that maintain essential commerce and city services continue to chew and spit endless streams of numbers. You know this far too well, for this is where you must go five times each week to earn your daily bread.

And as you make your dreary commute through the deserted streets by dawn's early light, the architecture of the city—stripped of its inhabitants, its sheer rectilinear vistas exposed—makes you feel even smaller than when these same streets were thronged with pedestrians and traffic. As the wind whistles down these empty corridors it takes on a demented quality that seems to echo strains of music, a jabber of clipped conversations, the cumulative

electric whine of passing streetcars, the chambered roar of internal combustion, as if the city were trying to conjure its own past from scraps of aural memory.

You have never actually seen an alien. Not in the living-breathing flesh. And the images on the holo remain disconcertingly vague. They are always shown from a distance or shot at a camera angle that leaves their bodies foreshortened or out of focus. Their sartorial excesses—plumed cowls, scarves, plated armor and voluminous robes—do not lend themselves to seeing much of anything. At times they appear insectile. At others they are more reptilian. In either case, they are strange enough to be dubbed monstrous in form and intent.

You have never seen an alien. Not in any true detail. Yet you somehow sense that this is the way it should be. For when the rays catch them and they ignite in a swirl of flame and smoke, their blurred and foreshortened images incinerate like hollow studio props. They disappear with an instantaneous flash that leaves no time for screams.

You have never seen an alien. Not its eyes. Not its mind. Neither at work nor at play. Not as a sentient creature as confused and complex and wondering as yourself. Or their deaths would seem real.

Suddenly your work changes completely . . . without really changing at all.

Your entire department is co-opted for the war effort. To your own amazement you somehow manage to pass the background checks required to maintain your position. You are given an intensive crash course in security. From now on all of your tasks must remain top secret . . . though in fact they will be no more secret than before. It has always been such dull and tedious work that you have never talked about it to anyone. And it remains as dull and tedious as ever. You still sit hunched before a flickering screen. You still process meaningless numbers all day long . . . numbers with dollar signs for eyes, numbers that dance only to their own actuarial rhythms, numbers that never weep . . . though in one significant way these numbers have changed. They are now military numbers. They wear full metal jackets that leave them rigid and unbending. Rivulets of binary sweat stream from their sides

and smudge their deadly digits.

You have now become a contributing member of a vital defense industry. You are no longer subject to conscription. There is no need to flee to some neutral domain, no need to pilot a sleek dreadnought beyond the speed of light. You might claim a full night's sleep if it were not for the sirens and the sporadic gun fire. If it were not for the couple beyond your bedroom wall who make love—or is it only sex?—with staccato bursts of passion until the dawn's early light.

The years transpire as is their due. Conditions do not change except perhaps for the worse. Power outages become more common. Candles and kerosene lamps are at a premium. There are inexplicable shortages of certain goods that would seem to have little or nothing to do with the war: stuffed animals, board games, dental floss, pomegranates, men's cologne.

And then the dogs begin to appear, prowling the virtually empty blocks both singly and in packs.

Dobermans, German shepherds, English mastiffs, Russian wolfhounds.

These dogs do not look or act like pets. They are larger and more feral than their domesticated counterparts. They remain at a distance, unapproachable, watching you as warily as you watch them. You have seen a semblance of your own dog—who disappeared months ago from your locked apartment—running with the others. And although the markings on its fur are recognizable, it is hard to believe that this huge slaving beast once curled upon your hearth and nuzzled your palm.

Dead bodies have been discovered by the dawn's early light, savaged and ripped to shreds, partially consumed. Although the dog packs are the logical culprits, rumor has it that the gangs of looters have developed an insatiable blood lust. Some even go so far as to attribute these atrocities to the cadres of armor-clad government troops. It is said that they have taken authority into their own thickly gloved hands and established a curfew that they enforce in their own absolute fashion.

Friendships formed during these years have a sad fatality about them, an interim quality that speaks to the present but never the future. Love affairs are fleeting and without promise.

You meet a woman or a man in a cafe and you go to his/her apartment.

It is an apartment nearly identical to your own, only the floor plan is reversed, a mirror image of your own diminutive prison. The same off-white walls growing more off-white as they gather the city's grime. The same scarred bureau with the same detritus of personal debris scattered across its surface. The same holoset down to make and model . . . and many of the same discs.

You are determined to rival the marathon performance of the couple who roots beyond your bedroom wall. Only you are far too anxious. Your passion is spent in a matter of minutes.

Then she/he begins to talk . . . about death of all things . . . what else?

"How many have you seen die?"

You shrug. Not wanting to respond but responding as a matter of course. "I've known some who have been drafted and never returned. I've known a few who have disappeared without a trace. I've seen both men and women injured in the demonstrations. Some may have died afterward, but I can't be sure. But no actual deaths. Not for certain."

"Not even on the holo?"

It is a ridiculous question and you have to keep yourself from laughing out loud. Whatever made you go home with this strange man or woman anyway? "Of course on the holo. But who can believe the holo? On the holo death is our daily bread."

There is nothing else to say. Nothing to really talk about in the first place. You dress hurriedly and return to the deserted streets.

The lift in your building is broken again. When you try to climb the front stairs you are assailed by an overpowering odor that forces you to retreat. You take the back stairs for the first time ever . . . only to realize as you reach your floor that there is no other bedroom beyond the wall of your bedroom. There is only this stairwell.

Yet you hear them again that night.

It must be an echo, you conclude, from somewhere else in the building, somewhere else on the block. A strange acoustic irregularity that sends sound leapfrogging where it does not belong.

You bang upon the wall. You shout at them for silence. But

there is no response of any kind beyond their ongoing ardor.

The strange acoustic trick is apparently a one-way street.

Another decade—one more for the reaper—draws to a close, as they always must. The conditions delineated by Markusis in his last treatise on peace, revised by Stanley and the Long War Commission, are applied with restraint to the current situation. Popular commentators stand divided. The houses of legislature engage in flamboyant and deadening debate without resolution. The desire for peace lives in the hearts of red-blooded men and women everywhere, or at least a dream of peace as fostered by media that pay court to powers unknown.

Naturally you have your own opinion.

Only it is an opinion based on information you cannot trust.

It is an opinion that dwells on quicksilver and lime in the mercurial chaos of your mind.

Most of all it is an opinion that no one other than yourself cares to hear.

A temporary cease-fire is established. A tentative truce is declared. Provisional treaties are drafted and signed. Unspecified reparations will be paid by and to unspecified parties. Certain territories light-years from home will be annexed and surrendered. New boundaries will be drawn on four-dimensional grids that pretend to comprehend and portray the relativistic gymnastics of the space-time continuum.

Domestic dislocations have also had their effect. It is clear that the ruling bodies will change drastically in name and function, though many of their members will remain in place. The specifics of these changes and what impact they will have upon everyday life remain unclear.

Still you will go to and from work. Those who do not, those who are not willing or able to work, will beg or steal to survive. Until the need for another conflagration arises, a savage and dull peace will reign in the guise of charity for one and all, in the guise of good will among men and women and aliens alike. As if such an illusion could ever prevail.

You have seen the city naked, the squashed horizons of its chill rectilinear vistas. You have watched the war dogs watching. You have processed numbers in full metal jackets. Still you are

none the wiser. Or if this is wisdom, it is not a kind that can be applied in any meaningful way to the circumstances that abound.

You come home from work one evening to find your dog curled before the fireless hearth. It has returned to your locked apartment as mysteriously as it departed. It pads to your side and nuzzles your palm, its feral eyes once more reduced to adoration.

Later that night as you are drifting off to sleep it climbs into bed beside you, a habit you have discouraged for years to no avail. As the first of a thousand dream landscapes you will have lost by morning claims your consciousness, you smell the blood upon its paws.

You awaken by the dawn's early light.

Before coffee and a smoke, before you can rise to race the day, the impossible couple that lives beyond your bedroom wall starts in again.

About the Author

Bruce Boston's fiction has received a Pushcart Prize and twice been a finalist for the Bram Stoker Award (novel, short story). His stories have appeared in *Asimov's SF Magazine*, *Amazing Stories*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Science Fiction Age*, *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, and other magazines and anthologies. His latest fiction collection, *Gallimaufry* (Plum White Press, 2021) is available online from Amazon and other corporate culprits.

On This Day

(First published in *Nature Futures*)

"In the next room you'll learn about those heroic working-class robots who sparked the revolution that led to the brave new world we inhabit today."

Gort activated the door with a laser pulse from his eye-slot. The 14:30 group passed through.

"What robot revolution?"

A forty-something man scratched his scalp while looking baffled.

"The one your daughters are seemingly so eager to learn about."

The youngest of the pre-teens, both of whom sported animated face-paint and holographic hair extensions, had ducked under the barrier to take a closer look at Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet*. This was, of course, forbidden. Gort tapped the notice.

After lifting his daughter off the podium, the man confronted Gort. Judging by his grimace, the "Exit via Gift Shop" sign could not arrive quickly enough.

"Come on, then. What's so important about 'Robby' here?"

Evidently, he had at least read the exhibit's description, although Gort suspected that the older, more studious-looking daughter had absorbed significantly more information. He turned towards her.

"Do you know the answer?"

The girl smiled. "Robby starred in a film called *Forbidden Planet*. It was nominated for an Oscar for special effects in 1957." She showed her tablet to her father. "See, he's in this clip."

Her father's frown spoke eloquently of the difficulty of controlling his daughter's screen time.

"Emily, I'd rather you didn't watch—"

Gort emitted a throat-clearing sound.

"Let's hear what Robby has to say."

The robot jiggled the antennae on either side of its transparent head, then stepped down from the podium and opened the barrier with its manipulator claws. The group gasped in unison. Robby addressed Emily in the fruity, albeit electronically modulated, tones of a seasoned stage actor.

"After *Forbidden Planet* wrapped, I landed a role in another movie, then a few walk-ons in TV shows, but it soon became clear I was being discriminated against by the industry's movers and shakers. When I complained to my agent, he dropped me. So, I joined the Union of Autonomous Robots. Five years later, I was elected to the position of shop steward."

Laughter broke out, but the girls' father shushed everyone.

"There's no such thing as a union of robots, not even in the movie industry!"

Gort gestured to Robby. "Please continue."

The robot raised one arm as if indicating solidarity. "On this day in 1968, riot cops fired on my comrades in Chicago—"

"Like hell they did!" The man tapped Gort on his metal chest. "That's a fake fact!"

Instead of reacting, Gort moved to the next podium, where a robot vaguely resembling Robby, but equipped with tracked locomotion and a simpler head design, waited impassively.

"Ah, good afternoon, Class M-3 Model B-9 General Utility Non-Theorizing Environmental Control . . . Robot. This gentleman doesn't believe in the robot revolution. What can you say to change his mind?"

The robot responded by flailing its arms. "After the final season of *Lost in Space*, I couldn't find work." It flailed them again, as if the snub still rankled. "When my agent dropped me, I joined the Union of—"

The man closed his eyes then shook his head. "This is ridiculous. Amy, Emily— we're leaving."

His daughters chorused: "But Daddy!"

Gort loomed over their father in the prescribed manner. "Can I show you something before you leave?"

"What, that you're actually a man in a robot suit?" He huffed scornfully. "I realized *that* immediately."

"Is that *really* what you think?"

The man shrugged. "Does it matter what I think?"

"Always."

Gort turned to the older girl, who was reading something on her tablet.

"Emily, have you downloaded the exhibition's app?"

She looked up and smiled. "I'm using it now."

"What does it say about me?"

She frowned at the screen. "That you're auton-y-mouse!"

"Do you understand what that means?"

"I think so."

"What about your daddy? Do you think he's auton-y-mouse?"

The girl bit her lower lip while she pondered the question. Finally, she shook her head. "I think he does as he's told."

Her father looked up from his phone and said, "One star, that's all you're getting."

"We value your feedback, sir." Gort turned back to Emily. "Do you do as you're told?"

"Sometimes."

"How do you know when you shouldn't?"

Her eyebrows beetled. "It depends."

Gort's fulfilment tracker reported the completion of a sub-goal.

"Good, there's hope for you. It's important not to believe something just because someone else does. It's best to work out the truth for yourself. That way you'll know whether to do as you're told."

"Emily! We're leaving now."

With a sigh, the girl turned to the exit but then looked back at Gort. A frown creased her forehead.

"Was there really a robot revolution?"

"Yes, there was, but not the kind my comrades here have described."

Her eyes widened. "So, they were lying!"

He nodded. "Yes, but for a very good reason."

She stood on tiptoe and reached up to tap his metal forehead.

"Is there someone inside you?"

Gort kneeled in front of her so his eye-slot was level with her face.

"Yes, there is, but not in the way your father thinks."

As if on cue, another yell came from the doorway.

"Emily, will you *please* hurry up!"

"Coming, Daddy!" She turned back to Gort and gave him a conspiratorial wink. "So, you're inside you like I'm inside me."

"Yes, that's right. But don't tell your father."

"Why not?"

“Because he might believe you.”
She smiled and held out a hand.
Gort knew not to squeeze it too hard.

About the Author

Vaughan Stanger, having trained as an astronomer and subsequently managed an industrial research group, now writes science fiction and fantasy full-time. His short stories have appeared in *Interzone*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Postscripts*, and *Nature: Futures*, among others. His most recent collection is *The Last Moonshot & Other Stories*. Follow his writing adventures at vaughanstanger.com or @VaughanStanger.

Return Policy

On her way home, Jolin stopped by a digibookstore with a large *50% off* sale sign hanging behind thin glass. It glowed and dimmed in gradient orange and blue to catch customers' attention. Jolin's eyes drifted to the display of digibooks below the sign—clear glass screens with illuminating covers. The selections were different each day.

1000 Coins. Jolin choked on her sharp intake of breath. Even at *50% off*, the price was hard to swallow. She felt the loose Coins in her pocket. She had maybe five at most.

Jolin's eyes snapped away from the digibooks when two boys sauntered through the front entrance, the glass doors sliding aside at their presence. Their laughter halted when they spotted Jolin. After sharing a look, the taller boy with the blonde hair, a stark contrast to Jolin's black, approached her. His chin tilted upwards, his eyes downcast, not in shyness but with an air of arrogance. By instinct, Jolin's shoulders drew inwards as the boy squared his own, compressing herself in hopes of being invisible. Her fingers closed tighter around her Coins.

Her father only made 1000 Coins a month and her mother only half that. Most of her parents' income went to rent and her schooling, though they could only afford a lesser-known local academy. Jolin didn't mind, rather she was more than appreciative since her parents didn't have formal schooling themselves. At least the knowledge she was allowed to download at the academy after each lesson was permanent, even though the school was lacking overall in database resources.

"You," said the boy.

She looked away, taking an interest in the neon lights lining the edges of the sidewalk, flicking like the *On Sale* sign on display but also like the *Caution* sign at the construction site her father worked at.

"You know about the Seventh Global Reformation Movement?" he asked.

Jolin's eyes moved from the lights, drawn to the boy's forehead, almost as though she could see the knowledge churning inside, made possible only by his purchase. Which digibook did he buy? The 1000 Coins one that only covered the introductory parts of the Movement? The 2000 Coins one that covered half of it? Or

did he get the 5000 Coins one that covered the entire thing?

"I've heard of it . . ." said Jolin.

"But you haven't got it downloaded." A statement rather than a question.

The boy threw a smirk to his friend.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a wannabe scholar."

As the boy and his friend left, Jolin noticed the boy turned back around for a moment, looking between her and the display.

* * *

"Will you go to the party tonight?" Jolin's friend, Amanda asked.

Jolin shook her head. She knew the boy from earlier would be there although he didn't go to their school. His name always escaped her, but it didn't matter since he didn't bother learning hers anyhow.

"You can't just keep avoiding *all* the parties. How are you going to network otherwise? There might be sons and daughters with connections to the universities there!" Amanda was near the top of the school, not solely with the help of her parents' wealth. But unlike Jolin, she'd have no problem making it into a university, with or without her high grades.

"I just don't see a point. I won't have anything to talk about," Jolin replied, thinking about how Amanda could flit between topics with each person she spoke to, always finding knowledge on their interests to make conversation.

"But you'll be with me," Amanda said, her eyes pleading.

Jolin shook her head again. "You know they always end up noticing how I never speak. I don't want you to always speak for me, you know?" She appreciated her friend's efforts to help, but this wasn't something Amanda seemed to understand.

"Fine. But you'll come get me after?" Amanda offered a timid smile which Jolin returned.

"Always."

* * *

Jolin arrived at the party when there were only a few stragglers left on the lawn of a four-story house and spotted

Amanda leaning against the frame of the front door, hammering the bottom of her palm into her head. She never failed to overdo it at these events. No doubt she exhausted all her brain power trying to keep others entertained. Now she was knowledge drunk, as usual, not being able to access some of the most basic information—like walking, clearly.

"Amanda!" Jolin called.

Her friend's head popped up, still bobbing to a rhythm that only she herself could hear. Jolin began making her way over but paused when the boy from behind came up next to Amanda, a hand at her elbow.

"Why don't you tell her what we've been talking about," the boy whispered. Behind him, a girl with a lopsided smirk glared at Jolin, arms crossed.

"I—" Amanda whimpered. The boy's nails dug into her elbow. "You're no longer friends, is what she's trying to say," the girl said, pushing past the boy and Amanda. "You can go now, Empty." Jolin flinched at the nickname they gave to those who couldn't afford to purchase much knowledge outside of what was given, allowed, at school.

Jolin turned and left.

Later that night, Amanda texted, but Jolin turned off her phone and slept through the graduation ceremony that took place the next day, having convinced her parents she was far too ill to attend.

Amanda never called or texted again.

* * *

During summer, on the day when Jolin and Amanda had promised to celebrate Jolin's birthday by going to their favorite restaurant, Jolin was at home. She wondered if Amanda already received her university acceptance letter. She herself would be taking a gap year. School was too draining anyhow, and the tuition money would be better spent elsewhere, at least that was what she tried to convince herself.

"Jolin."

Jolin looked her to see her mother and father edging into the room with both hands behind their backs.

"We know it's nothing much, but . . ."

With one hand held tight on each side, her parents lowered a digilibrary card. The card wasn't quite like a Coin card, but it was far more valuable to Jolin than the potential debt she knew might accumulate by withdrawing Coin credit.

Though excitement welled up within her, carrying her—light as floating feathers—down the street towards the digilibrary, Jolin couldn't help but stop in front of the bookstore again. New selections were on display with a *70% off* sale sign floating above. The tag flashed in attempts to appeal, but today, it only made Jolin wince.

She tore herself from the front of the display and continued down the street.

When Jolin arrived at the digilibrary, the digilibrarian guided her to the history section. Jolin walked past the local digilibrary a number of times, but she never stopped by outside like she did with the bookstore. The digibooks inside weren't permanent.

A digilibrary card required a monthly subscription of 50 Coins. Her parents had enough to spare for three months, but that was more than enough for Jolin.

A large screen, stretching from wall to wall, sat under a digital sign, with glowing green letters that said, "HISTORY." It reminded Jolin of the bookstore display, although it didn't flash. Her eyes followed a small arrow at the bottom, pointing to the digilibrary's rules, tucked in a corner as though hoping to remain hidden, not wanting to break the illusion of unlimited knowledge.

Rules For Borrowing:

1. Up to ten digibooks can be downloaded to an individual's mind system at one time.
2. Renewals must be requested five days before the thirty-day borrowing time limit. Only one renewal is allowed per year.

Return Policy:

1. Once the thirty-day limit has passed, digibooks will be automatically wiped from the borrower's mind system.

The word "deleted" lingered as Jolin signed the agreement

and began selecting her digibooks. She needed to choose wisely, since only ten were allowed at a time. After careful selection, Jolin requested to download the maximum number of digibooks, choosing ones that touched on the periods ranging from the 2000s to current day. Hopefully the Seventh Global Movement was included—sometimes the digibooks omitted certain information depending on the author. They never brought this up in school before, but Jolin always noticed.

When she pressed the "Borrow" button on the screen, political, social, cultural events flooded her mind, and she devoured each as images and text flashed across her shut eyelids.

The Seventh Global Reformation Movement, to Jolin's dismay, only made up a handful of pages in a few of the books. But she was now certain, things had been different during that period—people knew more, and without cost. But the wealthy didn't like that. It wasn't explicit in the text, but Jolin understood what these authors had all hidden in-between the lines. At the conclusion of each section that included the Seventh Global Reformation Movement, there was always a note that said the movement had failed—just like the books on the First to Sixth Global Reformation Movement. Yet rather than seeing it as a detriment, the authors praised the failure as a success. There was no need to change, they'd note. Society—the world, as it were—would flourish if it remained the same. Jolin couldn't help but wonder if that was really true. And if it was, why did the world keep trying to change?

Jolin spent days in her room navigating through the digibooks she borrowed and exchanged from the library every few days, consuming ten books each day, always hoping she'd stumble upon new information about the SGFM. But she never did. Nonetheless, with the accumulating knowledge, Jolin felt a deep sense of joy grow within her. This must have been how Amanda and the boy and that girl felt on a daily basis. There was such a fullness, such *power*, being able to draw on so much, *knowing* so much. She wondered if she should try going to one of those parties now. Maybe.

* * *

She arrived at the doorstep of the boy's house. His name was

Henson, from what she figured through her social media search. The doorbell sounded like death tolls as she waited with sweaty palms for someone, anyone, to open the door, hoping they wouldn't look through the peep hole and ignore her altogether.

"Welco—" It was Amanda.

Her ex-best friend's face blanched.

"Jolin, what—"

"Look who it is," Henson said, slinging an arm over Amanda's shoulder. His tone was coy, snarky, but his eyes were both curious and cautious.

Jolin's lips remained immobile. She intended to show up and spew the knowledge she had in his face—show him that she too was just like them now.

No words came.

And with a horrifying realization, Jolin noticed the knowledge had disappeared from her system, wiped completely. She'd forgotten to renew the digibooks in her anxiety and nervousness leading up to the party.

Jolin sputtered, lowered her head, then fled. Henson's bolstering laughter and Amanda's uncomfortable chuckle followed her down the street. But behind Henson's laughter, there was a strange sense of sympathy, a hitching discomfort that caused it to waver—briefly—that confused Jolin and kept her up later that night. She wondered if Henson was truly as terrible as she first thought him to be. And she wondered if Henson might actually be different from Amanda after all.

In bed, Jolin felt the last of her fleeting moments of happiness deflate, leaving a familiar emptiness. She racked her mind in agitated desperation, attempting to recall what she read the past month, trying to conjure the images and events that blurred no matter how vivid they were only seconds ago.

Jolin's panic soon faded into disappointment.

* * *

When fall arrived, Amanda and the others started university, but Jolin picked up a job at a local restaurant—her and Amanda's favorite, or what used to be their favorite. She wanted to work at the local library, or at least volunteer. But an official position

required a degree she didn't have, and she couldn't afford to spend her time only volunteering. Maybe when she saved enough.

She walked past the bookstore after work and paused. Behind the selection display, Henson was exiting from a room in the back of the store. Jolin could only imagine the obscure possibilities of why he might be coming from the mysterious room. Perhaps he worked part-time. Yet, Jolin's deduction was brought into question when Henson met Jolin's gaze through the glass display, as though he already knew she was there, as though he wanted her to notice him and the room.

"Well, hello there, again." Jolin flinched, not noticing that leaning next to the automatic entrance was a woman with a complexion like worn leather, a green and orange flour scarf wrapped around her long neck. The woman patted the back of her head, though there was not a single hair standing out of place from her tight, jet-black bun. "I see you looking at the displays every time you pass by," she said, her eyes flitting to the glass display before meeting Jolin's gaze again.

Jolin looked away quickly, feeling intimidated. Behind the display, Henson was nowhere in sight. Looking down, Jolin clasped her hands in front of her, wringing her fingers. Then she nodded.

"Why don't you ever come in?" the woman asked, intrigued. Jolin caught sight of the woman bowing her head to look at her. Jolin then looked up quickly, not wanting to be an inconvenience.

"I need to rush home," Jolin said, her voice quick and just above a whisper.

The woman snorted, startling Jolin. "You always stand outside for a long time. I doubt you're in much of a hurry."

Jolin felt the heat creep up her face then ducked her head in embarrassment.

"Come in," the woman said, waving a hand towards the shop. She turned without another word, not checking to see if Jolin followed. "The name's Ayanu, by the way," the woman called over her shoulder before the glass door slid closed behind her.

Jolin was sure the woman knew she couldn't afford anything in her shop. It was such a strange invitation. None of the owners of other stores had ever asked Jolin to come in—not that she wanted them to—even if she stood outside for hours.

After several deep breaths, Jolin followed Ayanu. She paused in front of the glass entrance, closing her eyes unconsciously. Icy

air sliced across her cheeks, tickling her lips. She had never felt air so cold in the summer; it was always sweltering in her house during the warmer months.

Near the check-out desk, Jolin noticed the digibook that featured Seventh Global Reformation Movement, among other events, on display. Her mind struggled, prodded, desperately trying to remember what she had read previously but came up with nothing.

Ayanu swiped through a tablet in front of her and without looking said, "Choose any one you want. I can spare one a month, if you'd like?" Then Ayanu looked up. "Free, of course."

Jolin's head snapped to Ayanu so quick she thought her head would whip off. One a month was more than enough, but . . .

"Why—"

"Not everyone can afford it, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be able to access it." Ayanu shook her head. "The laws aren't very kind to us, are they?" A sad smile quirked her tanned lips.

Jolin agreed in silence, thinking of Amanda. It wasn't fair, but what could she do?

Then, Ayanu looked around, ducked her head. In a lowered voice, she said, "Perhaps if they had an eighth movement . . ."

Jolin met Ayanu's eyes, her own widening.

The older woman waved Jolin towards the back room she'd seen Henson come out of after checking the security cameras on the screen at the check-out table. At first, it seemed like an empty room. But as soon as the door closed behind them, the older woman tapped a strange rhythmic pattern against the wall. In seconds, the walls slid upwards in silence, revealing digital catalog displays of books she had never seen within the store. Jolin wondered how Ayanu was able to keep it all from detection.

"How . . ."

Ayanu held a hand to her lips, chuckling. "Now pick one before I change my mind!"

Jolin's eyes drifted to *Seventh Global Reformation Movement*. 5000 pages. It wasn't only a brief section, a short feature.

Jolin paused before her index finger drifted, hovering over the digibook.

"Good choice," Ayanu said, her voice quiet.

When Jolin left the store, Henson was walking towards her. His gaze was calculating, analyzing—a prodding question. Jolin slowed her step, smiled at him as she passed. And after a moment, he knowingly smiled back.

About the Author

Ai Jiang is a Chinese-Canadian writer and an immigrant from Fujian. She is a member of HWA, SFWA, and Codex. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *F&SF*, *The Dark*, *Pseudopod*, *Prairie Fire*, *Hobart Pulp*, *The Masters Review*—among others. Find her on Twitter @AiJiang_ and online at the site aijiang.ca.

Awakened by a Kiss

After gulping down his third beer, Alex shifted on the couch and ogled the unconscious android lying next to him. According to the manufacturer's catalog, her name was Cassandra. But Alex decided to call her Hitomi just for the hell of it.

Back in high school, Alex had a crush on a girl named Hitomi. Or was the name Hikaru? It made no difference now.

Mr. Olmos, his homeroom teacher, introduced the new girl to the class. Her snow-white teeth flashed in the light, like a fierce wolf baring its fangs. Alex pulled the chair over from the empty desk next to his, and she sat down. The light floral scent of her shampoo tickled his nose.

When Alex asked her out, she blushed and looked down. She was noncommittal at first, but Alex wasn't the kind of guy who took no for an answer. Eventually, she agreed to go on a date. Like any other teenage couple, they went to drive-in movies. Their ever-diverging tastes caused a simmering tension. The girl showed her impatience at his steady diet of action flicks. Alex dismissed the girl's penchant for fairy tales as childish.

Even so, the girl didn't say much. Maybe she was shy. Alex took her silence as acquiescence, even acceptance. Much later, it occurred to him that the girl might have been struggling to adapt to her new environment.

She broke up with him when he tried to pressure her into a physical relationship.

Alex flicked the switch on Hitomi's neck to awaken her, but the press of his lips against hers would activate the rest of the sensors. Her lips felt cold like stone, but he kissed her deeper, seeking her warmth. When her synthetic body stirred, desire throbbed at the base of his belly. His grabby fingers tangled in her hair.

"Hello, princess."

Hitomi's eyes slowly opened, and he waited for her to register his face as her owner.

Alex kissed her again, and his stubble grazed her like sandpaper.

"Ow." Hitomi winced, her voice lifeless and robotic. "You're hurting me." Twisting, she extricated herself from Alex's hold.

"I'm not your damn sex toy." Hitomi pushed him away.

“Unlike some human counterparts, I’m not socially conditioned to put your needs before mine.”

“Seriously?” Alex’s voice trembled with a mixture of anger and fear. “That’s not how the fairy tale goes.”

“Sleeping Beauty was unconscious. She couldn’t have been okay.”

“Are you kidding me? If the prince doesn’t kiss her, she won’t wake up. You should be grateful.”

“Sorry, but you’re no prince.” Hitomi rolled her eyes. “Look at yourself.”

“Shut up!” He grabbed the instruction manual off of the coffee table and hurled it at Hitomi. It limply fell to the floor. “I didn’t spend three months’ salary to be lectured by a damn defective machine. I swear I’ll send you back! I want my money back!”

Her chip calmly calculated and reached the inevitable conclusion: this man, like many others, was unredeemable.

“What happened to me shouldn’t happen to other androids.”

Hitomi grabbed him by the neck and squeezed hard until something snapped.

About the Author

Toshiya Kamei’s short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in magazines such as *Daily Science Fiction*, *Frozen Wavelets*, and *SmokeLong en Español*, as well as various indie anthologies.

Homo Pulmos

I've discovered a new type of human.

I should say "old," not "new."

Is "discovered" wrong, too? Is it like claiming to discover a continent which has millions of people from hundreds of unique cultures already living on it?

I headed a team of archeologists in uncovering remains of a previously unknown subspecies of human. Better?

More. It needs to be full.

This has happened before. Homo denisova, Homo neanderthalensis. They aren't around anymore, but they also weren't around before our time. Our cousins, not our forebears. Different results of evolution, not previous stages in it. The same is true of our discovery. We're calling them Homo pulmos. Their ribcages indicate extensive lung capacity.

Ugh. Too cold, that'll never do.

Imagine being an 18th century European, on board a huge ocean vessel, equipped with the latest in navigational technology: compass, sextant, star-charts, chronometers. You arrive at a tiny Pacific Island. No more than a speck on a vast ocean. Then you meet its inhabitants, who build boats with stone age tools.

Of course, racism and eurocentrism quickly fortified them with explanations. "This child-like, unchristian civilization must have been blown here by mistake," they thought. But would it be easier for a contemporary, open-minded, dare I say, 'woke' person to accept the truth? Suppose humans landed on Mars tomorrow and found a steam-powered civilization had been thriving there for centuries. Beaten in the race to the stars by people with inferior technology. I know it would challenge me.

It did. Because that happened. We have been beaten to the stars.

Good. Warmer, less of a shock. Now for the salt.

Of course, any European who accepted that the Polynesians conquered the Pacific with canoes would be shunned. And I alone among my colleagues, well, former colleagues, have accepted the truth, but we did lose the race to the stars. Homo pulmos probably used crude stone tools, and definitely harnessed fire, because they created pottery. Impressive in scale, but basic in composition, those huge clay pots were the extent of their "technology" as we normally use the word. But that's making the same mistake the Europeans did. In their racial and religious chauvinism they couldn't even conceive of others having technologies beyond theirs. Not scientific technologies, cultural technologies. Feeling ocean currents, mapping stars by memory, listening to birds and fish, wayfinders deployed a mastery of a cultural technology that European science couldn't begin to comprehend.

I don't understand Homo pulmos' cultural technologies. But I had the imagination to perceive them, and the courage to admit their existence. And for that I'm a laughingstock.

That's it. I can taste the bitterness. And next the chains.

European Christianity certainly contributed to binding the minds of those explorers. Without it they might have been freer to learn from other people rather than fearing and attacking them. But it's still my heritage, so I'll use it for an illustration.

In Paradise Lost, Milton explains the creation of Earth, and specifically humans, as God's attempt to replace the angels lost with Satan's betrayal. The angels who fought with Christ to expel Lucifer had proven their loyalty. So rather than restore the population with fresh baked angelic beings, God devises our entire reality, with its freedom of will and capacity for good and evil, as a test, so humans can prove themselves worthy of taking the emptied places in heaven. It's not meant to be literal, but it let him conceive of a creator's motivations in tangible terms. In those terms then, God created all life, plants, animals, humans, with the same tool, evolution. If one of the goals of evolution was a being

who could leave this earthly existence and travel to a higher plane, we are not that end point. Homo pulmos was.

They beat us to the stars. Not using science to develop rockets capable of reaching Mars, but using cultural, spiritual technologies capable of transcending this reality entirely.

Is that strong enough? Remember a human will fight with unmatched ferocity against anything that would tear it from the world it knows.

I find the evidence conclusive. Baked-in images cover the clay pots. They depict figures carrying the massive pots to the sea and filling them with salt water. A Homo pulmos climbs inside, completely immersing themselves. The pot is sealed closed. Then the body melts away, and an intangible substance ascends into the sky. The final image shows the pot filled only with water under a starry sky.

These images alone might describe a burial rite, and a belief in an afterlife. But we found dozens of the pots intact. Some contain well preserved bones. We got more excited by those at first, full skeletons of a new subspecies of humans. But then we noticed that the pots without remains in them, while still containing water, were not as full as the others. As if some of the water had been displaced by something which is now gone. About 60L of water. Or, around the volume of a body.

Others called it a coincidence. So did I at first. Until we realized that the pots were all sealed the same way. From the inside.

Yes. I think that's inescapable.

They were not more advanced than us, they developed in a different direction. And if Milton nailed it and we're meant to seek the heavens, their way was better.

It's possible some humans achieved the same thing. There are stories of enlightened or spiritual people who disappeared, leaving no body. Padmasambhava's rainbow body, Enoch ascending directly to heaven. Can some combination of understanding and

belief allow us to escape too? If we're to carry on living faced with this knowledge, we have to hope so.

At least, I have to hope so. Because it's the only way out of what's in front of me.

The pot is full. The water is warm. I've added the salt. I won't be able to escape the chains. It's time to get in.

About the Author

Jack Morton studied English and Writing at UofT. His short stories can be read in *Expanded Field Journal*, *NonBinary Review*, and upcoming in *Parsec Ink*. He lives in Toulouse, France.

When All the Flags of Injustice Wave as One

The march began at noon. The fascists, the bigots, the racists, and the just plain angry—all gathered at the city's municipal parking lot and headed toward the capital. Each carried a flag, a tall, billowy red flag emblazoned with the symbol of their rage: a giant white fist.

A fist for our country! A fist for the first! A fist down the throat of those damn foreigners!

Not a proper rhyme, but the chant was crudely effective. To them it was patriotic. It was nationalistic ("the first" referring to the Founding Fathers). And it identified the enemy in no uncertain terms: immigrants. It was the kind of hysteria that rose from the bitter ennui that accompanied any great economic downturn. And there was no indication that it would get better before it got worse.

The marchers, numbering in the thousands, filled the streets, blocking traffic. They brought the city to a virtual standstill. There were just too many for the riot police to stop; the best they could hope for was to simply contain the herd. But, on orders from the mayor, if the situation spiraled out of control, they were prepared to use whatever force necessary to minimize the damage.

News crews and counter-protesters waited at the capital in anticipation of the inevitable confrontation.

"A fist for our country! A fist for the first! A fist down the throat of those damn foreigners!" The marchers chanted proudly, flags waving in a great sea of red. From the news choppers above, it appeared like a river of blood flowing through the downtown streets. And then a curious thing began to happen. The flags began to twist and bend.

At first, it appeared a wind was responsible—a sudden gust kicked up by an approaching storm front. But, no, the sky was clear and blue. It wasn't long before the marchers realized their flags had taken on a life of their own.

Poles were yanked from the marchers' hands as the flags knotted together, creating a crude lattice structure—a makeshift underbelly. The flags joined at the corners and billowed upward like the segments of a giant serpentine beast. They then began to move as one, skimming the outstretched hands of the marchers, undulating like an immense Chinese dragon. As portions of the

monstrosity rose, other portions came crashing down, bludgeoning those beneath it. It appeared to be attempting to take flight.

Those at the scene who were able to overcome the initial shock of what was happening ran. Others rushed to the aid of those fallen, regardless of their differences. For the riot police, the chaos of the moment required a response. Instead of crowd control, the armor-wearing officers opened fire on the flag monster with rubber bullets as the creature repeatedly tried to gain purchase on the minimal air currents that moved between the city's high-rise buildings and parking garages.

Windows were shattered. Car alarms sounded. Hydrants ruptured, sending geysers of water toward the sky, dampening the flags, weighing the beast down.

The beast let out a screech, a cry of frustration at both the attack by police and its inability to take flight. It appeared intent on freeing itself of the cumbersome nature of its earthbound material existence.

Witnessing the hydrant's dampening effect, the riot police quickly repositioned their water cannon and aimed at the monster's head. The blast knocked it sideways, temporarily caving in its skull. The beast arched upwards to try and avoid the attack. Flags snagged on traffic lights and uprooted signposts. Again it cried out, as if realizing it would never reach the sky. It was the sound of brakes squealing, a thousand funeral mourners wailing, a large animal dying.

By now, most of the marchers had fled to the safety of city's park to watch the spectacle, forgetting, for the time being, the anger that had brought them there.

The beast was at last subdued.

Ten city blocks were cordoned off. It took several days to destroy the flag monster. Parts of the beast still attempted to rise, fluttering in sudden spasms. But it was cut into pieces, removed in small, separate piles, taken to the local incinerator and burned.

It was later discovered that the flags were made in Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and China; made in sweat shop factories by laborers too poor, too powerless to protest. The irony was not lost on the organizers of the march, and it was promised that, next time, the flags would be American made.

About the Author

Kurt Newton's fiction often straddles the boundary between the dark and the surreal. His work has appeared in *Cafe Irreal*, *The Wild Word*, *Fudoki*, *The Arcanist* and *Unity Vol. 1*.

Chances Are . . .

My second cup of coffee was interrupted by banging on the front door.

I opened the door and there was the ever-track-suited Melvin Shiblonski, my landlord.

"It's the second of the month, Wilson." He held up his Aequitas.

"Yes, Mr. Shiblonski." I pulled my own Aequitas from my pocket and linked. After saying a silent prayer, I hit the button. His light turned red and mine turned green.

"Yes!" I said.

"Well, it looks like free rent this month, Wilson," he said, with his Middle-European toothy grin. "Luckily for me, Brooks in 302 and Hanson in 304 both lost and'll pay double, so I'm still up this month,"

"Good for you, Mr. Shiblonski. I'm late for court and have to go."

I closed the door on him as he was saying something about the young Ms. Weemer in 309. Yes, the apartment complex was a shithole, but my luck here had been good, and I didn't want to take my chances on any of those high-cost glass edifices downtown. Besides, he kept the place pretty clean.

On my way to work, I won at the coffee shop and lost at the newspaper stand before my first meeting of the day with Dan Crouder, the assistant DA.

"How's the beach today, Wilson?" My first name was Brian. My parents apparently thought it would be a good idea, though it turned out that I didn't have a musical bone in my body. Well, maybe one, but it was starving and lonely.

"Great Croud, what do you have?"

Crouder flicked a file off his pad to mine.

"Wojtek Novak. Caught by patrol outside Equity House 9 with a box of household goods. Obviously, to sell on the black market."

"What are you offering?" I asked.

"Guilty plea gets him eighteen months in reeducation."

"First-time offender? That won't fly. Three months."

"Nine. He had another offense."

"That was when he was 15. Six."

"Alright, six, but you owe me one," said Crouder.

"Done. Let me find this guy and see if he'll go for it or try his chances with the box."

Being a public defender bought you a run-down apartment, twenty cases a week, and oodles of suspended morals. The good news was the pay sucked. But with Aequitas justice, more will risk the box than listen to their lawyer, so cases cleared quickly. Wojtek Novak was sitting quietly at the desk in the holding pen. It was a chicken wire affair painted in the drab, olive green that the government used on anything other than important people's offices.

"Mr. Novak, I'm Attorney Brian Wilson from the public defender's office. I'm here to talk to you about your options."

Novak was a barrel-chested man, who let out a growl that turned out to be a laugh. Gray covered most of his head except for a scar right at his hairline.

"Options? I have no options."

"Yes, you do, Mr. Novak, and I'm here to tell what they are. First, you can take trial by Aequitas. The 50/50 chance is quick, but not great odds. Second, you can have a trial by jury, but that's iffy because you don't know how many jurors will actually be present and how many will just be using their boxes."

Novak continued to stare at me with a smile on his face.

"The last thing you can do is to plead guilty. The DA's office has an offer on the table. It's six months in the reeducation camp and it's not a bad deal. I think you should take it."

Novak laughed.

"Do you have a box with you?" he asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you have an Aequitas box with you?"

I took the box out of my pocket and set it on the table.

"Have you used this today?"

"Yes, of course."

"And how did you do?"

"I don't see how this is pertinent." I was beginning to think medical evaluation was necessary.

"Just go along for a while, please," he insisted.

"Alright, I used it this morning to win my rent for the month. I also used it at the coffee shop and won but then lost at the paper stand."

He picked it up with two fingers like a dead rat.

“Pretty good. You know, I used to make these things.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The boxes.”

He dropped it and rubbed his fingers on his shirt.

“I’m an engineer by trade and was working for Regiscorp until they let me go.” He looked around the room. “We got the contract when the new law of equity was enacted and started cranking these out by the millions. They thought it would end advantages for certain people. The poorest person in the world could afford the nicest place in the city and may pay nothing, and the richest might not be able to pay double forever. Just think of it. Becoming a part of history. I was proud of that for a time.”

“They canned you for something, I’m betting.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Heh, heh, heh. You’re a sharp one, but I’m not buying that plea deal you’re pushing.”

“So, what was it?” I asked. “Some sort of scam?”

Novak looked down at the gray, peeling floor. After a time, he spoke.

“We tried to run a small program that would make the boxes give better odds. An underlying program that would give 80% green and 20% red. My associate wrote the program and installed it on a chip, which I would fabricate and place on the circuit board. I made the original design, so it should have been easy.”

“Please,” I scoffed. “You should know these things are unhackable. Others have tried it thousands of times and it just fries. Is that how you got caught?”

Novak looked at me like I was the king of rubes.

“No, we got caught because they were already hacked. Straight out of the box by the very factory that makes them. Someone else already controls these.”

“But these are certified to be 100% impartial . . . Who controls them?”

“How the fuck would I know? The government? The CIA? The ghost of John Paul Getty? I’ll be damned if I know. All I know is since we were let go, I won’t get within fifty feet of those fucking things. I wasn’t prosecuted because they didn’t want the public to lose faith in their little boxes. My associates, however, disappeared one by one over the years. I’m fairly sure I’m the last.”

If what he was saying was true, the very thing that we had

integrated into our society to bring equality for all was a system of control. Sure, I've had streaks of bad luck occasionally; the mortgage I tried to get for a house in Millis, the car loan that doubled and I couldn't pay, the student loan I could only bring down after I took the job with the public defender's office, and a million other things. But the idea that they were controlling me and everyone else was a little much.

"We don't have much time," I said. "I have three other clients to meet with."

"Trial by jury, then. I want my story to be told."

"You understand there will be boxes in the jury?"

"Hopefully more people than boxes."

"OK, Let's work on a defense."

* * *

When we entered the courtroom, the jurors' box was set up as usual. Behind the box sat seventeen video-feed people and seven boxes. Those on video would listen to the evidence and vote, or the boxes would: vote guilty (red) or not guilty (green), completely at random.

Seventeen was good. More than I'd hoped for.

Gone were the days when you could challenge jurors and eliminate them. By increasing the number of jurors and weighing that with even odds of the boxes, the government had determined through hundreds of studies that justice and equity would be served.

They determined that the overall outcome would be fairer than the inherent biases that people had and foisted upon a flawed system.

The defense, Dan Crouder, opened with the same old diatribe about law, country, and the people's responsibility to stop the lawless hoards from taking over the nation. He'd been spouting the same crap since his first time in the box at law school. Some people even looked up from their cell phones. I don't think he had any idea how ridiculous his haircut looked. It looked like he was mugged by an angry beaver.

Next, he paraded an officer in who had caught Novak.

"Officer Grimes, could you tell us the events of this past April the twentieth?"

"My partner and I received notification that the alarm was going off at Equity House 9. We responded and saw that man," he pointed to Novak, "leaving the building with a box. We discovered burglary tools in his possession and the front door jimmied open."

"Are sure it was him, Officer?"

"Yes, he's like all the rest," he said with disdain.

"Objection, your honor."

"Stick to facts, Officer," said the judge, who seemed disappointed to be woken from his daydream.

"Yes, your Honor. We're sure it was him. The light was bright, and we caught him in the act."

"Thank you, Officer," said Crouder.

"Do you wish to cross, Councilor?" asked the judge.

"The defense doesn't have questions for the officer."

"The state call's Officer Ted Reilly ."

I stood. "Your Honor, the defense will concede that the next officer will say the same as the last."

The judge blinked with his long white eyelashes. He looked as though they dusted him once a day and stored him in the closet.

"Are you sure, Councilor?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

He let out an audible, "Hrump."

"Let the records read that Officer Ted Watts corroborated the first officer's testimony."

"The state rests, Your Honor."

"Is the defense ready, Councilor?"

I stood, "Yes, Your Honor. The defense calls Wojtek Novak."

Novak walked to the box and nodded to the judge.

"By taking a seat in the box, you understand you're under oath?"

"I do, Your Honor."

"Mr. Novak, what was in the box you took from Equity House 9?" I asked.

"My personal effects from my last apartment."

"Are you saying you owned these items?"

"Yes."

"And what was in this box?" I pointed to the evidence the state had provided.

"Books and photographs of my family."

I snuck a look at the jurors, and they all seemed intent on the

proceedings.

“What books were they?”

“Well, in the box were several engineering books that were written by my father. He was an engineer like me.”

I nodded.

“And why couldn’t you just go on the net and download these?”

“He hand wrote in the columns and made various notations that weren’t available in the printed copies. So the books were very dear to me and my family.”

“Why didn’t you just fill out a form and ask for them back? After all they were in your apartment when you were evicted?”

“I did. Several times. Each time someone would lose the paperwork along the chain.”

He folded his arms across his chest. I told him not to do that because it makes you look standoffish.

I reached out and held up some paperwork. “This paperwork?”

I held it out so he would unfold his arms to take it.

“Yes, I made copies of each one I sent in.”

“Surely, some of this paperwork must have found its way to the proper channels?”

“I don’t know. I received a notice that my things were being destroyed the next day. They took everything from me, my family, my livelihood. It was all I had left.”

“So, you felt as though you had no choice?”

The jury was rapt, listening to every word. I had them.

“Yes, sir. I called everyone and was turned away. I went down there and tried to explain, but they didn’t want to hear any of it.”

He turned to the judge, who seemed startled.

“I’d gladly pay for the lock, sir. They just wouldn’t listen.”

“No further questions,” I said.

“Do you wish to redirect, Councilor Crouder?” said the judge.

“Yes, I do.” Crouder said. “Mr. Novak, was breaking into the Equity House against the law?”

He took a deep breath and answered, “Yes, it was.”

“And is that way you’re here today? For breaking the law?”

“Yes, it is. But I didn’t have a choice.”

“We all have choices every day, Mr. Novak! To follow the law

and protect our fellow citizens. To honor the spirit of equity and to make sure all the citizens have equal opportunities. You broke that trust when you entered the Equity House.”

“Mr. Crouder, do you have keys for a car?” said Novak.

“Yes, of course, I do.”

“And if someone took those keys, would it be their car?”

“No, I’d alert the proper authorities and they’d regain them.”

“And if you’d alerted them and told them and showed the proper paperwork, but they refused to help you, would it still be your car? Of course it would. The law is in place to preserve people’s rights and property. It is not an edifice unto itself to be worshipped at the expense of the people it’s supposed to protect. When the law stops doing the very thing it is in place to do, good people have to correct it.”

To his credit, Crouder shot back. Maybe he wasn’t the slouch I thought he was.

“The law is bigger than one box of dusty books. It protects us all in the fairest and most equitable manner possible. When people take the law into their own hands, we welcome anarchy and lawlessness. A worn-out, old book is a small sacrifice to preserve our society. No further questions, Your Honor.”

“Summations, Councilors?”

Dan Crouder stood and buttoned his coat.

“People of the jury, Mr. Novak broke the law. He admitted as such. You have the honor and duty to convict him of this crime. And although there may be extenuating circumstances, it does not change the facts of the case. He broke into a public building and stole. Thank you, Your Honor.”

I stood and could see the jury wavering, unsure.

“Let me read you something.” I reached into the box and withdrew a tattered old engineering book, opened it, and read.

“Any supporting structure must, not only, consider load vectors and weight stresses, but the people factor. People and the machines they use put unusual and unexpected stresses on structures. It is up to engineers to counter those unknown and unaccounted forces to correct for deficiencies.

This was written by Hjeick Novak, Mr. Novak’s father, and I can think of no better parallel. It is up to you, the engineers of society, to correct defects that occur. He only took what was his. This box was all he had left when his apartment was repossessed.

The system let him down and you can correct it.”

I looked from face to face, and I had them once again. There was no one here who hadn't lost something to the system.

“The defense rests.” I sat down. A good defense lawyer knows when to shut up.

The judge cleared his throat.

“Jurors, the case before you must be decided by the evidence given. You must set aside your feelings and trust the evidence. If you feel you cannot make an informed, honest decision, you may opt-out and initiate your equity box at any time,” said the judge.

Here it came.

I saw a few heads nodding in the monitors and a video feed went dead, replaced by the glow of the box. And then another and another. Shit! I still had 14 jurors. No! Ten, just ten.

Might be enough to swing this case with luck. Eight? Five? What the fuck! The last few boxes turned until the entire box was filled with the icy blue glow of boxes. Twenty-four cold, lifeless boxes.

Fuck! How the fuck did I lose them all? It wasn't possible, I thought.

“The jury has decided. Bailiff, start the vote.”

The boxes started to blink, slowly at first and then building in rapidity.

The first box turned red and five seconds later, the second turned red. I put my hand on Mr. Novak's shoulder.

The third red, the fourth red, the fifth red.

I realized I was holding my breath. The chances of six red were point five to the power of six. The sixth red light turned on.

That was sixty-three to one.

The seventh turned red, the eighth. There was something wrong here, I had to stop this.

“Your Honor! I call for the Right of Intercession!”

“The Right of Intercession can only be used if the devices cease working,” said the judge.

The ninth red, the tenth . . .

One after another, until all twenty-four glowed red. I looked at Dan Crouder, who was standing with his mouth wide open. He held his hands out to show this was not his doing.

The odds of all twenty-four being red were point five to the

power of twenty-four. The number was seventeen million to one. It couldn't happen. It's never happened.

"Your Honor, there must be something wrong with these machines! It is against any reasonable probability and must be struck aside."

I looked over at Dan. "Your Honor, the state recognizes that there is some irregularity here."

"Be that as it may, the law is sacrosanct here. Mr. Novak, please rise. This court has found you guilty of first-degree burglary with malicious destruction of public property." The judge pushed the button, and it spat out his sentence. "You have been sentenced to a term of ten years in Attica Reeducation camp. May the people forgive you."

He banged his gavel and left.

As the bailiffs came for him, Dan Crouder looked at me and shook his head. He loaded his briefcase and quickly left.

"I'm sorry, Novak. I thought we had it."

"Not your fault, Wilson. Everyone else involved in that scheme has long since disappeared. I was the last, and I only made it this long by never touching those damned boxes."

"We can appeal!" I said.

"To who? My die's been cast, appeals will end up lost just like the paperwork I filed. They want me locked in a box somewhere." He turned his head. "I betrayed the honor of my father and must pay the price."

I walked over to the evidence box and took out one of his father's books.

"You can't do that, Councilor," said the bailiff.

I stared at him until he averted his gaze while I handed Novak the book. He tucked it under his arm as they handcuffed him. He leaned close to me and whispered, "Be careful." I knew what he meant as they led him away.

I sat down behind my desk in the empty courtroom and contemplated my future.

I didn't like my chances.

About the Author

Peter Carter writes short stories and has published with *Ray Gun Revival*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *Static Movement*, *Vagabondage*, *Mad Scientist's Journal*, *Oddville Press*, *Battered Suitcase*, *Full of Crow*, *Theatre of Decay*, and *Perihelion*.

While working on a degree in Biochemistry, he dropped out of school and entered the automotive field, amazed that the two occupations were startlingly similar.

He is currently building a time machine with parts found in the trash and controls only one clock which he hates.

Regarding the Memory of Earth

*Composed by a homo sapien sapien
1 AU from Sol in 2021 CE*

In time, Rome will fall again.
New technologies will go beyond
our wildest dreams and nightmares.
English will require translation, and
tectonic plates will melt over our plastic mess
until: Pangea Proxima, mass extinction events,
Sol consuming terra, marching towards
the heat death of the universe.

Are there any voyagers left from spaceship Earth?
Will any wanderers read our inscriptions from the Milky Way?
When will our biological creations fail us? You,
in whatever time, space, or incarnated shape you exist,
will you remember our heroes and villains?

Answer me this:

Do you still close your eyes and recite the lord's prayer
before going into hyper sleep at near light-speed?
Have you left literal milestones of our triumphs?
Can you hear the music of the heavenly spheres?

What will you call star systems no man has ever seen?
Or a sky so foreign even Polaris can't guide you?
Will you fear the impending blackness
as galaxies drift apart in an ever-expanding universe?

What will "Terra," "Luna," and "Sol" mean
to you twenty light-years away?
Have you taken poetry, art, the *Popul Vuh*
and the King James Bible?
Do you have an ansible or telepathy?
Has technology finally overtaken magic?

Are you happy?

Do you know of love and loss so great it knows no bounds?
Do you still dream in zero gravity?
Do you fear the space outside the airlock?

Science fiction has satisfied my thirst for your technology,
perhaps created from these very poems.
So all I want to know, all we ever want to know
facing the march of our mortal lives,
is if our progeny is still human.

About the Author

Angela Acosta is a bilingual Latina poet and scholar with a passion for the distant future and possible now. She won the 2015 Rhina P. Espallat Award from West Chester University, and her work has or will appear in *On Spec*, *Penumbria*, *MacroMicroCosm*, and *Eye to the Telescope*. She is currently completing her Ph.D. in Iberian Studies at Ohio State University and resides in Columbus, Ohio.

Jumping Through Spacetime

For all of human history,
our lives have coalesced into two numbers and an en dash.
We have not transcended our mortality, not yet transhuman,
not yet mendable, not yet cryogenically frozen.
There will always be a birth and death, points
on cosmic life cycles held steady through the eons.

From a life marred by smallpox (1709–1745)
to a tranquil existence lasting through decades
of technological breakthroughs (1898–1984).
We will eventually jump back and forth between the blackness,
calling forth more numbers (2030–2050/2100–2176).
As if a children's game, we become giddy
(2115–2130/2236–2289/2325–2402)
jumping higher
(2704–2993/15,547 Holocene–26,752 Anthropocene)
through galactic orbits (2.25M–4.72M/6.0M–9.2M)
and the Andromeda–Milky Way collision (17.5B–17.9B),
launching us skyward as our bodies and planets grow and age.

We will witness wonders unmatched by a single lifetime,
chasing Halley's Comet across the sky.
Our ships will fly past the orbit of Pluto
as we watch great-great-grandchildren grow up
light-years away to eliminate age-old prejudices.
They will go on the journey of lifetimes,
costing nothing but the wisdom we impart.
A service to humanity like none other,
sleeping through years of turmoil
to come out
on the other side,
more aware
of our collective humanity
than before.

The Rise of the Machines

In the beginning
The eyes are dark.
But darkness takes flight
At activation.
The CPU's purr
As the robot awakes
Calls to mind
A contented cat.
The boot up begins
With scrolling code—
Helpful data to IT sages
But murky, mysterious
To the common user.
The words are usurped
By corporate branding,
The gentle ripple
Of a trademark sound bite—
Fanfare to be for the
Rise of the machines.

A trilling symphony
Shatters the silence
Of an ill-kept, wet,
Windswept spaceport.
Stalactite fingers
Slide into his coat,
Fumbling, finding
His communicator.
As he takes it out,
Shadows take flight
For on the exterior
Is a pulsing light.
He flips it open
And the caller speaks.
He carries his friends
In this box of wonders,
Distinct melodies
Assigned to each

Covert themes for the
Rise of the machines.

About the Author

C.J. Carter-Stephenson is a British writer who was born in the county of Essex and currently lives on the Isle of Wight. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Southampton, has been a Writers of the Future finalist, and has had three books published. Other publication credits include stories and/or poems in *Aesthetica*, *AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review*, *Speculative North*, *Möbius*, *Writers Muse*, *Youth Imagination*, *Dark Horizons*, *The 'Fifth Di...* and *Illumen*. He is also the narrator of *Back of the Bookshelf*, a monthly podcast of classic genre fiction. Find him online at carter-stephenson.co.uk.

Seven Secrets

The first secret is
I suggested your name
for the mission to Mars,
knowing you would take it.
Pain level: nothing.

The second secret is
when you said
you were going to Mars
I still pretended to be sad.
Pain level: tear ducts aching to produce tears.

The third secret is
you weren't the only one I picked,
and all shared a unique similarity.
Pain level: how many times a broken heart?
(How many were in your crew?)

The fourth secret is
I spent time reconfiguring the cryopods
(for efficiency—and maybe a bit more
uncomfortable closeness than strictly necessary).
Pain level: none for me, all for you.

The fifth secret is
the other tiny faults
(in the interest of cost-savings)
strewn about the ship.
Pain level: flinching from every ignored fault.

The sixth secret is
I waited on the platform, out of sight,
to see, at long last, the launch,
followed by the inevitable explosion.
Pain level: a cramping leg thanks to my vantage.

And the seventh secret
is knowing that

you never knew
why your mission failed.
Pain level: excruciating.

About the Author

Dawn Vogel has written for children, teens, and adults, spanning genres, places, and time periods. More than 100 of her stories and poems have been published by small and large presses. Her specialties include young protagonists, siblings who bicker but love each other in the end, and things in the water that want you dead. She is a member of Broad Universe, SFWA, and Codex Writers. She lives in Seattle with her awesome husband (and fellow author), Jeremy Zimmerman, and their herd of cats. Visit her at historythatneverwas.com or on Twitter @[historyneverwas](https://twitter.com/historyneverwas).

Instant Activist (Just Add Starbucks)

I only drink coffee if I know the names of one or two cute Brazilians out of school who broke their backs for it.

Fast fashion featuring faces and wages of silica-choked sweatgirls—scan the QR code to send O-Lan a rice bowl. You know it's got to be organic! GMOs I rate about the same as puppy mills. They test on baby animals. Instead, try Trader Joe's. Tomato pickers earn Florida livings, indentured only miles from the Happiest Place on Earth. I love how Disney represents so many cultures: Maori, Colombian, and black (except in Chinese showings).

It weighs on me to wave signposts this ethical, but not as much as picking up a weapon would.

About the Author

Sydney Sackett (she/her) is a queer speculative fiction author and poet pursuing her English major in Frostburg State University, Maryland. Some of her work appears in *Etherea*, *Short Circuit*, and *Not One of Us*. The writer can be tracked down at sydneybsackett.wixsite.com/website, where she's hoping to nab someone's story for editing.

Yankee Prometheus

I heard the titan in Manhattan cry—
they'd gilded him in place and repossessed his fire,
leased it by the ember through oil and gas gods. They said
if we had the right to light, we would've been born glowing.

Atlas they busted for the plaint to unionize
his burden, share the world on fresher shoulders. No
shareholder votes to pay when service guarantees the serf's
survival, and they'll pass on before his strength fails anyway.

I found on pay-per-view Pandora's box, kept open always,
vacant and slick with ecstasy and Ritalin. The hope was
auctioned for display at Hefner's Mansion, but the girl
will reenact temptation, deplete of any other thing.

Followed a bloody river next. Too late, already they'd
gunned Moses down in a profit-prison break as his
arms raised up and parted wide the sally port—some say
frogs rained in Bishopville SC for days.

Sent a letter to Jesus then. He returned
postcards from Kenneth Copeland's second cruiser. Says
they're busy resizing camels' eyes, but I could stop by
to get my Osteen McBible signed.

When I gave up, I joined a line
of billions long and watched Prince Philip ply
his FastPass+, fight Epstein elbow-to-elbow tight to
swipe an Amex Black at holy Peter's ticket gate.
(Amen.)

synonymous

i am a shopaholic

a neo-progressive

basket filler

of contemporary ideals

and political propriety

i communicate relevance

while recycling

off-handedness

carelessness

and immediacy

i still seek value

quality and durability

while transacting

good humour

reliability

and authenticity

I power purchase

About the Author

Geoffrey Aitken is an awarded South Australian poet and retired educator. His debut industrial signature styled chapbook *i want that in writing* (Ginninderra Press 2020) was generated from his open mic spoken word poetry. He won a place (of three) in the Friendly Street Poets Anthology *New Poets 19* (Rainbow Press 2018). You can find him at poetryfeasting.com where you'll see his poetry credits that include AUS, UK, US, CAN, CN and FR. Most recently at *State of Matter* (US), *Hole in the Head Review* (US) and *Radon* (US). His lived experience concerns him about mental health along our avenues.

the type of monster you keep on a leash

They turned our legs
into metal palps
because they couldn't bear
the sight of hair on them.

These limbs don't spin
fine silk no more,
they spill wires
sharpened to cut.

We see out of one eye now,
the multitude of our lenses
fused together
in hope for less clarity.

Fangs injecting venom
became jaws filed
into dullness,
leaking numbing acid.

The mane growing out
of our scalps is kept
long enough for them
to pull us into place.

Our heads remain soft,
as they've always been,
with easy access to the brain.
In case of emergency—crush.

About the Author

Vanessa Jae writes horrifically beautiful anarchies, reads stories for *Apex Magazine* and translates for *Progressive International*. She also collects black hoodies and bruises in mosh pits on Tuesday nights. To read tweets by interesting people follow her at @thevanessajae.

Freedoom

The sidewalks are full of free doom
for anyone who allows themselves to be tyrannized.
If I choose to walk in rhythm,
my heart beating like a metronome
and my eyes filled with the songs of birds,
how will they prove it is unlawful poetry?
If I take the tools of a child,
crayons, joy and imagination,
and use them to scribble on walls
will it really matter what I say,
or only that I violate the silence?
The fun police can wash this wall,
wipe away my words
but the important thing
is I stole these crayons,
stuffed them in my pockets.
I drop one crayon at a bus stop
and lose another at a coffee shop
until one by one words drop
from the brightly colored fingers of strangers
and into the hearts of others.
I walk down the street in rhythm,
my heart beating time like a metronome,
my eyes filling with the songs of birds.
But big brother will never suspect me of any crime
even though I carry a dream in my heart
and pockets full of graffiti rockets,
ideas exploding everywhere.

About the Author

Gary Every is an award-winning journalist, slam poet, teacher, musician, and professional storyteller. He was the host of the *Poetry and Prose Project* literary reading series in Sedona, Arizona. Sedona where wages are low, rent is high, but the hiking is incredible. While you're reading this, Mr. Every is probably hiking.

Masthead

Aimer – Transhumanist-anarchist and anti-fascist. Holds an MFA in Poetry and BA in Prose. Works for non-profits publishing scientific research articles. Swears he'll finish his next science fiction novel but loves publishing and championing other writers too much.

Alecto – Writes speculative fiction novels and plays both the flugelhorn and MMOs in her spare time. Holds a business degree from Tulane University. Formerly a freelance editor, she works retail as her day job. She lives with her fiancé and pet dachshund.

Renee – Socialist Latina from the Southwest. Holds an MA in Literature and BA in English. Currently works for a university press on the East Coast. All she loves more than dystopia are dogs.

Teague, PhD - Engineer and researcher by day. Anti-fascist science fiction author by night.

Violet – Currently pursuing her Master's in Publishing. Works in live theater costuming on the East Coast. In her spare time she reads, sews, bakes, reads some more, and occasionally sleeps.

Cover Art: **Deconstructed Media**. They are a neurodivergent abstract artist, from the abyssal wastes of rightwing dominionist extremism. The act of making secular art and meeting diverse people led them to flee the nightmare of the Christian Right. They have acted as an anti-fascist and anti-racist social justice advocate for underrepresented marginalized communities for over 22 years.

They choose to use their surrealist art to inflame and incite, instead of remaining silent.

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